

13th EUROPEAN RESEARCH CONFERENCE ON HOMELESSNESS
Social and Economic Integration of Homeless People

**Possibilities and Limitations of Participation of
Homeless People as Services Users in Austria**

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Definition

- Participation as “....active and effective involvement of service users in the provision of services as well as in the decision-making processes affecting these services (Schnurr 2001, 1330)

Principle Statements

- processes of empowerment are a precondition for participation
- participation does not exclude the need for support
 - but describes how support should be provided
- service users are full-fledged citizens
- participation should be voluntary
 - consider how people want to be involved
- participation is a matter of power and the transfer of power is the measure of participation
 - participation is only worth having if it has an impact and adds value to the decision-making processes.

consumerist model and empowerment model

- consumerist model:
 - uses consultation and participatory initiatives for decision support, but not decision-making.
 - business-like approach to improve the satisfaction of service users
- empowerment model:
 - requires a transfer of power.
 - amount of power transferred is the measure of participation.

Research design

- homepage analysis (of service providers)
- survey by questionnaire among Austrian service providers
 - n (40) ; 15 responses
- 12 expert interviews

Participation practices in Services for homeless people in Austria

- most common and widespread participation activities:
information and consultation, informal discussion groups
 - which mostly mean no real involvement in decision-making processes
 - consultation happens in the logic of the consumerist model of participation:
 - satisfaction questionnaires, suggestions and complaint boxes → monitoring and evaluating services

- quality standards: 9 service providers
 - internal guidelines, quality manuals, drafts
 - „Quality standards *Assistance to the homeless Upper Austria*“
 - requirements:
 - possibilities for complaints (boxes)
 - satisfaction questionnaires
 - feedback forms
 - documentation of resolutions of tenant meetings

- resident representatives
 - 2 service providers (elected by majority)
 - 1 member of advisory body for local government
- resident-meetings: 13 answers
 - frequency of meetings
 - daily morning round (1 answer)
 - weekly (4 answers)
 - monthly (3 answers)
 - quarterly (1 answer)
 - on request (2 answers)
- street magazin (1)
 - admission of members of editorial board
 - admission of articles
 - participation in conferences

Participation in:

- leisure activities
 - 10 answers
- menu
 - 5 answers
- house rules
 - 4 answers
- selection of personal social worker
 - 3 answers
- co-design of rooms
 - 2 answers
- extent of sanctions
 - 2 answers
 - residents decide more strictly than staff as long as they are not concerned themselves

Barriers, risks, limitations

- basic stereotypes regarding service users and a lack of confidence in their capabilities
- status and behaviour of the service users
 - substance abuse, fragile and vulnerable state and mental health and behavioral disorders
 - Service users may fear a risk attached to criticizing the service and speaking out too loud will have negative impacts on the way you are treated
 - Service users might focus only on the most immediate and pressing problems, and only on their own.

- Fear, that they are labelled and may be reluctant to take part in activities that identify them as having specific problems.
- special users or user groups can become too dominant and alienate others.
- taking over participation
- lack of representativity
- misuse of participation (neoliberal concept of empowerment)
 - as a way of handing over individual responsibility to people to their situation.
 - means to an end by saving costs and saving staff Lacking framework

claims and perspectives

- participation in:
 - management (service users as members of teams, boards, advisory bodies)
 - research
 - education and training
- legal framework
- extra dedicated financial resources

Added Value for service users

- greater rights, responsibilities and resources
- receiving services which are responsive to service users needs
- a budget dedicated to participation
- increased confidence, problem-solving skills, negotiating skills, self-help capacities
- awareness of the process of political and organizational decision-making and funding
- access to wider community social networks

Conclusion

- Participation is a matter of power and the transfer of power is the measure of participation.
 - Where participation is not connected to decision-making it is merely a talking shop and tokenism.
- Participation does not exclude the need for support! It concerns the matter how the support is provided and should increase the autonomy of the service users.