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Organizing homeless people: Exploring the emergence of a user organization in Denmark

Abstract

People who are homeless belong to some of the most vulnerable, dispersed and disorganized groups in welfare societies. Yet in 2001, a national interest organization of homeless people was formed for the first time in Denmark. This article identifies the processes that facilitated the formation of the organization. It focuses on the importance of ideological and institutional conditions and changes, and it stresses the importance of alliances between progressive actors in the field and in the political-administrative system, in addition to the presence of dedicated activists among people who are or have been homeless. The analysis may thus serve as a case of inspiration for activists and professionals who want to improve homeless people's opportunities for participation in other national settings.

Key words: homelessness, interest organization, social movements, user participation, welfare state

Against all odds?

People who are homeless are traditionally perceived as some of the most vulnerable and isolated groups in society with limited control over the organization of their lives. The conditions of homeless people tend to limit their opportunities to engage in and seek to influence social policies. Vranken proposes that homeless people may be compared to nomads who are monads and this obviously influences their opportunities to organize and to start social movements (1999: 343). In spite of facing a number of difficulties, an interest organization of homeless people was actually formed in Denmark in 2001. This article seeks to explore, how and why a user organization of homeless

people, against all odds, was able to emerge and reach a certain degree of consolidation.

Homelessness is a multifaceted phenomenon and definitions often tend to reflect particular national institutional arrangements (Anderson, 2003), which serve operational aims but which easily obscure the complexity of homelessness as a social problem. Often the term 'homelessness' refers not only to a lack of space – a shelter – but also the absence of social relations (Brandt, 1999: 525; Edgar et al., 1999: 2–3; Tosi, 1996: 89) which provide the individual with a sense of belonging. Homelessness thus refers to just *one* dimension of social exclusion of a group of people who often confront a number of different but interrelated social, economic, physical and psychological problems (Brandt, 1992).

This article focuses specifically on the attempts to establish and consolidate the national user organization for the homeless in Denmark, SAND (*SAmmenslutningen af Næruvalg i Danmark*). The organization primarily organizes one category of the group of people who are often referred to as the homeless. The typology of homelessness and housing exclusion, developed by the European Observatory on Homelessness (established through the European Federation of Homelessness non-governmental organizations – FEANTSA), can help to clarify this. The European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) classifies homeless people in four different categories according to their living situation: 1) rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind), 2) houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter), 3) living in insecure housing (threatened with exclusion for different reasons), 4) living in inadequate housing (in caravans, illegal campsites etc.) (see Edgar and Mert, 2005: 16).

SAND is primarily formed by people who belong to the category of houselessness, mentioned above. The organization unites people who are presently houseless (people who are staying at a temporary accommodation) or who have passed through a situation of houselessness at an earlier stage in their lives. Like a traditional trade union, the organization is meant to have a representative at all the places where homeless people stay or receive some kind of services. The organization has both regional councils and a national committee, which ensure that SAND is represented both regionally and nationally.

The study is based on observations made at meetings and gatherings and qualitative interviews with activists in SAND over a period of three years (2003–6). The majority of the interviewees were active in

SAND's committee, and in regional councils, but a few were also elected representatives at a shelter. The selection of interviewees took place after participation in meetings and activities which opened the possibility for more informal conversations. Most of the activists that were interviewed had participated in the organization for some time. In total, 20 activists at different levels of the organizations were interviewed for 1–2 hours each. Moreover nine key actors in the field were interviewed (staff at shelters, civil servants in municipalities, in the Ministry of Social Affairs, etc.). Interviews were informed by an interview guide but took place as relatively open conversations. They were transcribed in full length. Interviewees are not named so as to ensure anonymity of the activists.

The analysis is also informed by participation in almost 20 meetings in the organization: board meetings, regional council meetings, national gatherings, internal courses and general assemblies. It additionally relies on information from documents, minutes, mission statements etc. from SAND.

Explaining the formation of collective actors

Before going into the more specific analysis of SAND, I will briefly comment on the character of the organization. Rucht (1996) makes an analytical distinction between different kinds of movement structures, which will be useful for understanding SAND. He identifies three elementary types of mobilizing agents that are designed to promote collective interest in modern democratic societies. These types are social movements, interest groups, and political parties. In Rucht's understanding, social movements tend to follow a grass-roots model of organization, characterized by a relatively loose, informal, and decentralized structure, with an emphasis on radical protest politics. The interest group is characterized by an emphasis on influencing policies (via lobbying for instance), and a reliance on formal organization. Finally, the political party emphasizes the electoral process, party politics and it relies on formal organization (Rucht, 1996: 187–8). If we place SAND in this analytical framework, it seems most appropriate to categorize it as an interest organization or a social movement organization (Zald and McCarthy, 1987).

Exploring the combination of factors that facilitate the formation of social movements and social movement organizations is one of the

most central and enduring challenges of social movement theory (Crossley, 2002; McAdam et al., 1996: 7). I do not argue that it is possible to develop a complete list of all factors that influence the formation of a user organization of homeless people. Nor do I argue that one specific factor is more important than the others. In this respect, I follow Nick Crossley's application of Smelser's value-added model to explain collective action. Smelser provides a list of conditions which he argues are important for the emergence of social movements (Smelser, 1962: 15–7). The model is linguistically inspired by economics and called a value-added model; this emphasizes that different stages in a process of production add further value to the final product (Crossley, 2002: 42–3). Applied to the study of collective action, this means that different dimensions or factors *in combination* increase the possibility of collective action. I do not share Smelser's structural functionalistic approach, and, moreover, the specific dimensions are apparently also better suited to explaining the outbreak of protests than the emergence of a user organization. Yet my analytical point is simply that it is important to look at a number of different but inter-related dynamics which, taken together, contribute to explaining how and why an interest organization of homeless people was able to emerge.

More specifically, I point to four important dimensions that all contribute to explaining the emergence of SAND. These are: 1) different, and to some extent even opposed, ideological currents that increase the interest in user involvement; 2) an institutional structure which is open so that it is possible for interest organizations to emerge; 3) alliances between central actors in the field which ensure support and resources from the Ministry of Social Affairs; and 4) the existence of a group of homeless people who were willing and able to take up the challenge to form a user organization.

These dimensions aim at providing a heuristic interpretation of why SAND emerged. The dimensions are linked to the history of the organization, which is crucial for understanding the character, the organization's definition of itself, aims, strategies, and dilemmas today. To anticipate one of the observations from this study, SAND defines its relationship to the state as one of co-operation rather than conflict. This, I will claim, is a natural consequence of the history of the organization, which did not emerge from the after-effects of a conflict, but rather from encouragement, support and openness by the state and professionals in the field.

The background

In Denmark, homelessness is a relatively regulated and institutionalized phenomenon (Brandt, 1999: 510). Specific places and institutions (earlier poor houses and later specific institutions), called section 110-accommodations, have been established to provide temporary accommodation to socially excluded people. Local authorities are legally committed to providing temporary solutions for people without a permanent place to live, if no other possibilities are available. In 2004, the shelters had 2540 beds and during the year approximately 7350 people stayed at a shelter for at least one night (many for longer or repeated periods) (Ankestyrelsen, 2005). The number of people who actually sleep rough (without a shelter of any kind) is not known but an expert in the field estimates that it is approximately 100–400 people (personal interview). A lot of critical comments could be made concerning the procedures for estimating the number of homeless people and how these are related to the social construction of social problems. The official statistics thus tell very little about the housing market, lack of housing, and the existence or lack of affordable and adequate housing for low-income groups. People staying with family and friends, people in prisons, in hospitals and other types of institutions are not included either. What is important to understand concerning the emergence and character of SAND, however, is that the central institutional locus for handling homelessness is the different forms of temporary housing (which I refer to as shelters). This is also reflected in the structure, aims and strategies of SAND.

It is thus no coincidence that the initiatives to organize homeless people emerged at the shelters. Until the 1980s and 1990s, the shelters for the homeless were basically constructed as total institutions (Goffman, 1968) where the inmates were disciplined to follow the rules, the daily routines and the internal hierarchical order of the institution (Beldring and Leth, 2004: 8). Partly as a result of the critique by disabled and anti-psychiatry movements, a general process of de-institutionalization of the social and health care system in the 1960s also opened up the possibility for changes at the institutions for the homeless some years later.

Since 1976, the residents at the institutions for homeless people have had a right to organize and to express themselves on themes related to their life at the institutions even if it seldom happened in

practice (Beldring and Leth, 2004: 7–9). The first initiative to form a broader co-ordinated network of homeless people was taken in the city of Århus in 1995, when a team of social workers started a radio project for socially excluded people. Finding a lot of discontent at the institutions, the team encouraged people to organize and eventually, democratically elected resident councils were organized at all the institutions in the city (Cant, 2001). Moreover, a regional council was formed to influence local and regional authorities, local actions were organized to call attention to the problem of homelessness, and one activist even became a candidate at the regional elections.

SAND: The homeless' own organization

The overall aim of SAND is to seek to counteract the causes and the consequences of homelessness. In its mission statement, the organization stresses that it co-operates with relevant organizations and authorities to ensure sufficient assistance and help to homeless people and other excluded groups. Moreover, SAND strives to ensure acceptable conditions at the shelters and other places for homeless people. It forms user councils and seeks to ensure election of representatives at the shelters. Additionally, SAND seeks to strengthen and improve the voluntary work of homeless people through programmes of capacity building of representatives and activists.

The mission statement indicates that SAND does not define itself as a protest organization but rather an organization concerned with co-operation, which emphasizes voluntary work and self-help initiatives. SAND does not challenge the overall strategies and services for people who are homeless and it generally approves of and supports the public efforts in the field. One of the former board members emphasizes the importance of dialogue and co-operation:

The dialogue shouldn't be destroyed by going to the barricades and waving flags and shouting slogans. . . . It's the dialogue which is important . . . with the politicians at the different levels. 'Cause we have to behave like politicians and to put forward our arguments . . . – We have some alternative solutions but we don't make ultimatums.

The mission statement also refers to SAND's role in improving the understanding of homeless people's lives and conditions in society.

SAND has the ambition of becoming the mouthpiece of socially vulnerable citizens and opposing any form of discrimination. It wants to paint a broader and more positive image of the homeless, as people with lives and dreams, capacities and resources. An activist who participated in the formation of SAND explains:

It was also important to make the problems in the field visible, not just to politicians and principals at the shelters . . . It was just as important that the population got to know that we were not just a bunch of meths drinkers and drug addicts, that we were citizens. Citizens with citizens' rights . . .

SAND has defined six specific policy areas that are emphasized as important to the lives and conditions of people who experience homelessness: 1) social policy; 2) addiction and treatment; 3) labour market policy; 4) housing and urban development policy; 5) legal rights; and 6) action plans. These policy areas call attention to some of the structural mechanisms that cause homelessness. Moreover, they call attention to dimensions of the present social policy strategies which are experienced as problematic, for example, the labour market orientation of social policies, ceilings on social assistance benefits, and difficulties with finding adequate housing for low-income groups.

In public speeches and presentations SAND calls itself the homeless people's own interest organization. The little word 'own' is worth remarking on. Well-established interest organizations do not need to emphasize that they represent the group they claim to speak for. The formulation indicates three things. First, it signals that the organization is relatively new and still struggling to gain recognition as a legitimate interest organization of homeless people. Gaining recognition is a prerequisite for any collective actor (Hobson, 2003; Melucci, 1996: 71). Essentially, SAND has to gain acceptance and respect from the main actors in the field to survive as a genuine representative of the voices of homeless people in Denmark.

Second, the need to emphasize that it is homeless people themselves who own and run the organization, indicates how the organization also seeks to oppose stereotyped images of the homeless as weak and excluded people who are unable to run an organization by themselves.

Finally, the authority and legitimacy of SAND is precisely contained in the fact that it is driven by people with lay experience of

homelessness. This presence of lay experience in the organization brings a particular kind of expertise (Allsop et al., 2004: 745), which provides the organization with the image of being more authentic than other actors and organizations in the field.

SAND is still a relatively new organization. The mission statement and the specific policy areas mark an attempt to create a coherent and offensive strategy, through which the organization can claim rights and gain recognition. SAND aims at improving the integration of homeless people in society and it sees itself and its role as one of co-operation, rather than confrontation and protest. This has to be seen in relation to the processes that led to its formation. Before exploring this, a few words on the organizational structure are needed.

Democratic ambitions

As pointed out by Rucht, the organizational structure of a movement or an interest organization cannot be seen independently from its larger environment (1996: 188). The structural setting of an organization tends to shape its form and activities. SAND recruits activists when they stay at a shelter. Accordingly, two thirds of the activists are men and most of these are in their 40s and 50s. Many have experienced some kind of social de-route such as divorce, unemployment, too much alcohol, etc.

It is the queries of the people who stay at the shelters which dominate the work of SAND and this is reflected in SAND's emphasis on ensuring decent conditions for the homeless at the shelters. The user councils and the elected spokesmen at the shelters form the backbone of the organization. The most important daily task of these is to serve as representatives of the homeless, to present and forward problems, dissatisfaction and new ideas to the director and staff of the shelters. The dilemmas experienced at the shelters are then occasionally addressed by SAND regionally or nationally. SAND has for example addressed the shelters' way of dealing with use of drugs or alcohol, obligations of residents at specific shelters to be involved in work-related activities, and how to ensure that people who are thrown out from the shelters (because of conflicts) are still treated decently and informed properly about their rights. These issues have emerged as specific problems at the shelters, which have then been discussed at

regional or national meetings in SAND. To open further dialogue, SAND organized regional discussion forums where invited staff from the shelters and local authorities met to discuss dilemmas and practices at the shelters with representatives from SAND.

SAND forms regional councils to ensure geographical representation from all regions in the country to be able to go into dialogue with and raise claims towards local or regional authorities. This structure of SAND is influenced by an ambition to form a democratic and representative organization. It is entailed in the strategy of co-operation and dialogue, it is reflected in the organizational structure, in the processes of decision-making, and in education of activists.

Managerial skills and organizational abilities are often limited among homeless people (Cress and Snow, 1996: 1098–9). In order to enable and educate the homeless to run and participate actively and democratically in the organization, a programme of capacity building is offered to new activists and representatives. This is organized as a number of seminars each semester with invited lecturers and workshops.

The organization invests a lot of effort and resources in the formal democratic structure. The ambition of uniting and ensuring representation from the entire country means that interregional meetings are held every second month having between 20 and 30 participants. Once a year, two representatives from all shelters are invited to a national conference with invited speakers, entertainment etc.

Many activists thus spend a significant part of their time on travelling to meetings around the country. The meetings take up a lot of energy, but they also provide a space, where interaction between homeless people is made possible. The meetings deal with many different organizational matters but they also include an ambition of sharing information on the local situation in different parts of the country. This interaction enables the participants to create new understandings of themselves, and to see the problems related to homelessness in a broader social and political perspective. The meetings lead to increased interaction among the homeless at the shelters and they provide participants with new inputs and inspiration. They provide an important space for the development of collective identity (Melucci, 1996).

Why does a user organization of homeless people emerge?

Homeless people's interest organizations do not emerge in a vacuum. They are facilitated by a number of interrelated social and political processes which provide a space or opportunities for these organizations to emerge. In this section, I seek to identify some of the most important ideological and institutional patterns, which enabled specific actors and alliances to facilitate, to create and to consolidate SAND.

Different ideological currents and increased focus on user involvement

The emergence of SAND is enabled by an increased weight on participatory and democratic schemes in the ideologies and discourses of social welfare. Principles of decentralization, self-help, user participation, empowerment, and the voice of users of social services have gradually been implemented and integrated as tools and strategies in social work during the last few decades.

The introduction of these principles is not limited to Denmark, and they may arguably be seen as specific forms and techniques of liberal democratic governance (Cruikshank, 1999; Dean, 1995). The new technologies of citizenship and governance do not remove power imbalances and injustices in social work (Cruikshank, 1999; Mik-Meyer and Järvinen, 2003). But they do apparently open new paths of action for until recently dispersed, silent and excluded groups.

The increased interest in user participation in social welfare followed from a critique of what was termed a paternalistic and bureaucratic welfare state. Ideologically, this critique of the welfare state originated from different and opposed positions but they shared a concern for increased decentralization, community solutions and local autonomy (Hegland, 1994, 1997a). The details of the critique cannot be discussed here, what is interesting, however, is that it opened two trends in the public sector, which developed almost simultaneously: on the one hand, attempts to ensure an increased democratization and de-institutionalization of welfare state institutions; on the other hand, there were attempts to modernize the public sector.

The processes of democratization, decentralization and de-institutionalization were carried out through various waves of decentralization in Denmark (Hegland, 1997a). Municipal reforms in the 1970s thus transferred responsibility and competence from central to local authorities. Moreover, user involvement increased in many public institutions with the formation of councils for elderly people, primary school boards, boards in kindergartens etc. (Krogstrup, 1997).

The changes in the institutional landscape were strengthened further through collective action and grass-roots organization which emerged from the initiatives in the wake of new social movements and activist groups of the late 1960s. Many of these involved the creation of new practices and experiments (Melucci, 1989: 74–6; Martin, 2001: 365). New forms of participation and democracy were developed in horizontal organizational structures and with less authoritative forms of management. The cognitive praxis of the self-organized activities (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991) influenced a number of different fields; e.g. education, research, environment, gender, sexuality and also social work. Inspired by ideas of more horizontal forms of organization, actors often explicitly sought to decrease the barriers between professionals, users and clients in alternative consultancies, tenants' houses and activities, women's projects, etc. (Hegland, 1997b: 8). In this way, an alternative culture thrived, experimented and developed new bottom-up initiatives often in opposition to, but also allied with the administrative and political institutional structures.

At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, the ideology of user involvement was strengthened by another trend, which was related to neo-liberal ideologies: namely an increased market orientation in the public sector with the introduction of management oriented methods and techniques. User involvement in this perspective was more concerned with efficiency and profitability than with participatory experiments. This perspective perceives the individual as a consumer – a user – who bears the primary responsibility for his or her life situation but whom must also have certain possibilities to choose from and influence the services of the welfare state. Moreover, users were still more frequently directly involved in evaluations of public programmes; user involvement was increasingly seen as a measure or guarantee of quality and efficiency (Krogstrup, 1997).

My argument is that these two different ideologies and trends tended to coalesce into a shared concern for user involvement providing the ideological justification and space for the emergence of an interest organization of the homeless: on the one hand, a consumerist philosophy, inspired by neo-liberal ideas and new public management (Croft and Beresford, 1996: 186), and on the other hand, a democratic concern and tradition of decentralization and user involvement which to a certain extent forms part of Danish political culture and was strengthened by new social movements. User involvement was supported by both right- and left-wing actors, and this fact may also explain the broad political consensus behind the authorities' active involvement in the formation of SAND.

A facilitating institutional structure

The specific institutional structure of the state and the welfare system and the degree of openness to claims raised by challengers are also crucial for understanding the emergence of interest organizations (Jenkins and Klandermans, 1995; Kriesi, 2004; Tarrow, 1994). Kriesi (2004: 70–1) argues that the degree of openness of the political system is related to the centralization of power. A decentralized institutional structure is normally rather permeable because it provides many points of access and decision-making. On the other hand, a decentralized institutional structure limits the power of central authorities and may hinder challengers from using the state to institutionalize major changes (Jenkins, 1995: 17; Kitschelt, 1986). Moreover, the strategies or procedures that are employed by the members of the political system when they are dealing with challengers differ in different countries. Strategies may be either exclusive (repressive, confrontational, polarizing) or integrative (facilitative, co-operative, assimilative) and are often related to a long tradition of a given country (Kriesi, 1995: 173–9; 2004: 78).

The institutional structure of the state provides the necessary infrastructure which interest organizations can approach and seek influence through. Yet what is equally important is how the specific actors who make the institutional structure work (in ministries, regions, municipalities) actually perform in relation to new interest organizations. The different actors and institutions (e.g. government bureaucracies, service providers (like shelters), political parties, and the media) play

an important role because they are able to confer agency on certain actors by recognizing them as spokespersons for the group they claim to represent (Hobson, 2003: 6).

The process of decentralization generally transferred power from central to local authorities. Today, the implementation of social policies is basically a local affair, even if the overall aims and means are defined by central authorities. The central authorities contribute to financing (and may put pressure on local authorities) through state block grants, and through the definition of minimum standards, legal guaranties etc. Local authorities, on the other hand, hold the responsibility for establishing services for children, elderly, disabled and homeless people.

Generally, this institutional structure provides relatively good opportunities for collective actors to make their voices heard. Authorities' strategies towards interest organizations in Denmark are normally integrative and co-operative and follow a long tradition of involving organizations in the political-administrative process (Torpe, 2003: 42–3). Groups of disabled people have been represented by an umbrella organization, the Danish Council of Organisations of the Disabled (*DSI*) since 1934 and an interest organization for the elderly was formed in 1986. Various interest organizations also exist in the field of mental health. When officially recognized, associations often receive public financial support.

Yet, in a decentralized institutional structure, the more affluent and powerful groups may easily come to dominate local struggles over priorities and allocation of resources. With strong interest organizations in the field, the most excluded groups risk being ignored locally because they are not able to speak through the formal channels of interest mediation and organized representation (Hegland, 1997a: 125).

In the mid 1990s the visibility of homeless people, mentally ill and other socially excluded groups in the streets increased (Brandt, 1999: 511; Hegland, 1997a: 125–6). Some of the actors, who later participated in the process of forming SAND became increasingly aware of the need for an interest organization of the homeless. Owing to the processes of decentralization, central authorities had lost influence on local policy implementation. This situation opened the formation of alliances between the top (the Ministry of Social Affairs) and the bottom (local actors, progressive professionals and social workers) to ensure resources and initiatives which could favour the most excluded groups (Hegland, 1997a: 136).

Through pilots and new development pools the Ministry of Social Affairs could allocate resources to facilitating the formation of a user organization among the homeless. Since 1999, the Ministry of Social Affairs has funded a knowledge-centre which focuses on homelessness and social work. This centre has supported and facilitated the user organization of homeless people.

The Ministry of Social Affairs thus became one of the most important allies in the process of forming an interest organization of homeless people. Different Ministers of Social Affairs and civil servants in the Ministry strongly supported the idea of creating an organization of homeless people partly to provide an improved platform for advancing policies for the most vulnerable groups in society.

The sympathy for user organizations was also inscribed in the legal framework. The Social Service Act 112 from 1998 stipulates that users of services from municipalities must have the opportunity to gain influence on the organization and use of service provisions. Moreover, the residents at the shelters have a right to organize and elect representatives (Socialministeriet, 1998: 165). Different actors in the field played an active role in the preparation and formulation of this legal framework.

Presence of allies – support from non-users

The presence of influential allies constitutes one of the dimensions that form part of political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1994: 88) and is important to understand in the emergence of SAND. Non-users often have a strong involvement in the formation of user movements (Crossley, 1999: 657). Crossley (1999) shows that the mental health users' movement emerged partly because of changes in the mental health field, but also because of general activism and radicalism of the left and the middle classes in the 1970s. He argues that social workers and psychologists had interests in challenging the medical hegemony in the field and correspondingly, they played an important role in encouraging, inspiring and educating mental health users to form a union.

A similar argument is applicable to the field of homelessness, where progressive professionals inspired and supported the formation of SAND. These 'non-users' were inspired by ideas of user involvement,

empowerment, democracy, social capital, and a critical concern for socially excluded people. Their thinking and influence were essential in the development of not only the organization but also the legal rights to form user organizations.

Particularly, an inspector and a principal at two of the largest institutions for the homeless had access to direct negotiations with the Ministry of Social Affairs and to important policy networks. They were thus able to forward views and ideas directly to the central authorities, increasing the official support for user involvement and eventually user organization in the field.

The former principal of an institution for homeless people explains that he and his colleague first saw the ideology of user participation as a strategy of co-optation:

We discussed a lot these issues which were circulated to us from the regional and local authorities on user involvement and user influence . . . we both thought that it was only nice words, without any real importance . . . only declarations of intent . . . [We] thought that it could be seen as a strategy adopted by the power-holders to keep these people quiet. (*Ejvind Mortensen*)

Against this background, the two actors decided to work for improvement in the conditions for user participation among the homeless. A conference on socially vulnerable people, organized by the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1995 is mentioned as the turning point because it increased the beliefs in the opportunities and importance of a user organization. The inspector and the principal invited two homeless people to speak at the conference.

Until the mid 1990s, homeless people staying at an institution were not eligible for public income support (welfare payments like pensions, social assistance etc.). Income support was paid directly to the institution and the homeless only received pocket money from the institution. The two homeless spokespersons called this practice discriminatory because it devalued the homeless as inferior, second-class citizens. They demanded that homeless people should be treated like citizens. The policy makers who were present at the conference immediately promised to change the practice.

This event was important to the development of SAND because it spurred further action. The experience encouraged the activists and

the two external key actors to continue because they now believed that the initiative could succeed. The story was later reproduced in interviews and pamphlets which tell the history of the user organization (Beldring and Leth, 2004). It is framed as one of the first victories and examples of how homeless people began to gain political influence. The story, in other words, comes to play an important role in the organization's understanding of itself.

As participants in the working groups that worked to reform the social laws in the mid 1990s, the inspector and the principal also influenced the concrete formulations of the Social Service Act, which stipulates the right to organize in user councils. Later the inspector, Aksel Beldring served as a consultant for the user organization, and at the institutions they supported the development of user councils:

We, at the institution supported them, providing rooms they could use, taking care of their economic arrangements, and also having one colleague who helped to co-ordinate and so on (*Ejvind Mortensen*).

But the formation of SAND was also facilitated by an increased focus on homelessness during the past few decades, which has increased the public and political interest in the issue (Brandt, 1999: 511; Vranken, 1999: 332). Particularly important in this respect is a homeless magazine, the street paper *Hus Forbi* (literal meaning 'Not My Problem' or 'Wrong Address'), which was formed in 1996 (Beldring and Leth, 2004: 13). The magazine addresses issues of homelessness and is sold in the streets by homeless people. The street paper supplements the efforts of SAND because it increases the public awareness of homelessness, providing alternative images of homelessness.

SAND and *Hus Forbi* do not have a very close relationship but they form part of the same field of contention (Crossley, 2005). It could be argued that they even form part of an emerging movement which seeks to advance interests and more dignified images of homeless people in society. Collective actors in a particular field often profit from the existence of other collective actors, because they expand or create opportunities for others (Tarrow, 1996: 59). Thus even if SAND is often more focused on internal organizational matters and formal interest representation in the networks of governance and policy making, *Hus Forbi* ensures that homeless-related issues always remain visible to the public. The existence of the street paper thus increases the space of legitimacy for the interest organization.

The presence of dedicated and skilled homeless people

Until this point, I have argued that the emergence of SAND was facilitated by changes in ideologies, by a facilitative institutional structure, and by specific alliances between progressive professionals and policy makers in the field. All this indicates that the interest organization was created from above. However, without the presence of able and dedicated homeless people who took responsibility in the process, SAND would not have emerged and gained recognition.

The consultants who served as midwives for the organization admit that it is rather a creation from above than a self-organized initiative from below. One of the consultants gives explicit credit to the radio project:

[The guy from the radio project] started the user organisation, without doubt . . . and then there were some of the homeless . . . who were very interested, and who had a lot of ideas. These people were very articulate and able to speak up at meetings. They ensured that they gained a voice and they were also able to point out, what had to be done . . . (*Aksel Beldring*)

But even if external actors or professionals in the field played an important role in the formation of the organization, the self-understanding among the activists points in another direction: to the activists, SAND was created by the homeless themselves. They acknowledge the importance of the external actors and consultants in the process, yet they feel that SAND emerged because of their own efforts.

Question: Is this organisation a creation from above . . . ?

Interviewee: Well, that is the question . . . but then I'll say NO . . . it's just as much created from below . . . I could have chosen to do a lot of other things; [I could have been] . . . drinking with my friends in the neighbourhood instead of going to all these stupid meetings . . . – if you look at the construction and the structure [of SAND], and how everything emerged . . . well, in Århus, we created all this ourselves.

My point in mentioning this is not to question the self-perception by pointing at a more correct or true interpretation. Yet, to the

activists, there is no doubt, and this is what is most important, because it signals how the history of the organization has been adopted to fit a collective understanding of themselves as able and capable homeless activists. The two homeless people who spoke up for the first time at a public meeting made a difference and it is this transformation from passive clients to active agents which is perceived as really important to the homeless' attempt to create their own interest organization. Thus even if the organization in many ways was facilitated from above, the activists feel that they have the ownership of SAND.

Impact and challenges

According to Giugni and Passy new social movements may intervene in the political process in two ways: by 'challenging existing or proposed policies or by helping to elaborate and enforce government policies' (1998: 82). SAND occasionally criticizes and questions specific dimensions of welfare policies and how these affect the lives of socially excluded people and cause homelessness and social exclusion. Through active participation in public acts (e.g. the national day of homelessness or public meetings that call attention to social exclusion), SAND also strengthens the public focus on homelessness and its related problems. Nevertheless, SAND's main intervention in the political process is related to elaboration and enforcement of government policies.

The formation of resident councils at the shelters is an example of this. In seeking to form resident councils at the shelters, SAND ensures that the legal right to organize is also – where possible – implemented in practice. Moreover, the formation of user councils and education of representatives at the shelters imply that low standards, restrictive practices or unprofessional treatment will be questioned. In this way, SAND serves a control function, which is important and useful to the central authorities to control and regulate the decentralized services for homeless people.

The national authorities recognize SAND as a legitimate interest organization of the homeless. The dominant discourses and ideologies of user involvement provide the organization with authority and legitimacy in the field as the (institutionalized) expression of lay experience and expertise. When new legislation or initiatives are taken up, things are circulated to SAND for consideration, and

SAND also participates in the process of formulating the National Action Plan on poverty and social exclusion. The emergence of SAND shows that it is possible to develop new forms and arenas for participation of some of the most marginalized, dispersed and isolated groups in society, especially if they are supported by progressive professionals and central authorities.

Yet SAND also has another very important role which is not limited to its political voice and impact: the organization opens up the possibility for new personal experiences for the activists who become involved. Participation provides activists with new friends, skills, knowledge and competences which they gain from programmes of capacity building and interaction in the organizational activities. Activists achieve a new sense of personal worth, solidarity and belonging in the networks of the organization.

One of the dilemmas of the organization is related to the fact that the constituency often experiences rather chaotic life situations, which may limit resources and energy to participate. SAND thus constantly has to work to ensure a sufficient number of activists because the activists' degree of activity varies according to changes in their lives. Internal personal conflicts occasionally lead to withdrawal, yet moreover, both improvements and deterioration of activists' life situation may have the same outcome. To ensure a certain level of continuity in the organization, SAND has employed a national secretary. With financial support from the state, SAND has thus been able to consolidate its existence and position in the field, as the homeless' own interest organization.

Conclusion

It is striking that a national user organization for the homeless in Denmark has been established and has been able to consolidate its existence and position in the field. Homeless people often face a complex mixture of social problems which may limit their opportunities to engage in interest organizations. To form and ensure the survival of an organization of homeless people is in itself an important achievement.

A combination of factors and processes in the Danish welfare state played together and provided opportunities for the emergence of

SAND. First, ideologically, a new concern for participatory practices grew up in the field of social welfare in the 1980s and 1990s together with an increased focus on homelessness. These developments fertilized the ground for the initiatives to develop an interest organization for the homeless. Even if different political rationalities were behind them, the ideological trends also ensured broad political consensus for the strategy. Second, the institutional structure of the Danish welfare state provides relatively good opportunities for the emergence of new interest organizations. In this particular case, the Ministry of Social Affairs played an important role because it provided resources and support but also because it ensured that the right to establish user councils was inscribed in the social legislation. Third, influential allies in the field, progressive social workers and leaders of institutions for the homeless, inspired and supported the emergence of SAND. These non-users opened access to important policy networks and formed an informal alliance between the top (the Ministry) and the bottom which facilitated the process. They helped to create space and legitimacy for homeless people's interest representation while also increasing the beliefs in the *raison d'être* of a user organization. Finally, in the context of a facilitating opportunity structure, SAND emerged because skilled and dedicated people among the homeless were able to transform the opportunities into a specific user organization. Programmes of capacity building opened up the possibility for interaction between homeless people from different parts of the country and facilitated the development of shared collective understandings of the problems faced by people staying at the shelters for the homeless.

All in all, this case study serves as an exemplary illustration of the conditions which may facilitate the emergence and consolidation of an interest organization of marginalized groups. The emergence of SAND is important because it provides homeless people with a formal voice and a legitimate right to participate in and seek influence on local and national policies on homelessness. Moreover, the history of SAND may serve as a point of inspiration for professionals and homeless people who want to improve homeless people's opportunities or participation in other national settings.

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