

FROM PROTECTION TO PARTICIPATION: ENABLING CO- PLANNING IN THE 'HOOD' PROJECT

The Erasmus+ "HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue" project challenges traditional approaches to homelessness by prioritising participation over protection. The project focuses on Enabling Co-planning, beneficiaries are empowered to envision a 'happier future' and chart their own paths. This approach fosters autonomy and cooperative problem-solving. It involves transforming organisational practices to redistribute power and avoid paternalistic treatment of those in homelessness. While effective on a personal level, the article acknowledges that broader policy changes are vital to combat homelessness and marginalisation effectively.



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HOMELESS'S OPEN DIALOGUE

The Erasmus+ project 'HOOD Homeless's Open Dialogue' (Project No. 2020-1-IT02-KA204-079491) started with a question we asked ourselves three years ago: do our projects really put people experiencing homelessness at the centre? or, does our desire to protect these individuals lead us to exclude them from participating in the decisions which shape their lives?

From this uncertainty arose the three-year HOOD project, now nearing its conclusion. The HOOD partnership comprises two academic partners: the University of Turin, specifically the Di.VI Study Center (for Rights and Independent Life), and CESIS, Centro de Estudos e Intervenção Social of Lisbon; and four operational partners: the Greek NGO Klimaka; Projekt UDENFOR, a Copenhagen-based NGO; Sant Joan De Déu Serveis Socials Barcelona, a large Catalan organisation; and the Italian Ufficio Pio Foundation, the project leader. Moreover, HOOD has four associate partners: FEANTSA, Fio.PSD (the Italian Federation of Organizations for Homeless People), the Spanish HOGAR Sí, and the Humanities Department of the University of Trieste.

This group – diverse in nationality, size, and manner of intervention – has been working together for three years to re-conceptualise educational planning with people experiencing homelessness, to create paths of empowerment and participation for them. In this article we will reflect on people experiencing homelessness' participation in both the *helping relationship* and in educational planning, starting from the HOOD experience.

MOVING BEYOND 'PROTECTIVE' PLANNING

Thanks to the HOOD project, we developed a greater awareness of our way of working – of the features, limits, and potential of our respective organisations – and reflected more deeply on our educational and relational practices. We realised that the 'personalised' educational plans we developed were often constructed from a predefined set of options - a limited menu from which people could choose, but not escape. Furthermore, despite our dedication to the principle of placing beneficiaries at the centre of our projects, we felt the professional obligation to 'guide, evaluate and judge' their paths and choices. This is the traditional 'protective' educational approach: it assumes that we, as social workers, have a better vision than the beneficiaries do of their situation, choices, and the paths they should follow, and so we should assume the responsibility of guiding their decisions. This approach poses a big problem: an educational path designed by a social worker intent on 'protecting' the individual from potential risks cannot become a path of empowerment. We do not deny the effectiveness and importance of planning of this kind, but we need to underline that it has a different aim than empowering people with a sense of self-determination.



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Unsurprisingly, we discovered that homeless people themselves were used to this ‘protective’ approach. On the one hand, they often internalised the implicit duty to accept any type of proposal coming from social services, regardless of their real wishes. In fact, many services expect and positively evaluate a ‘compliant’ attitude, considering it an expression of willingness, while in our re-evaluation of the training process, ‘compliance’ has increasingly appeared to us as a surrender of decision-making power by the beneficiary. On the other hand, we have also seen that some people anticipate this type of approach: most homeless people expect a solution to be quickly proposed and they rely on the social worker to decide for them, in a disempowering framework. Moving beyond this model of a supportive relationship and taking a different direction requires significant effort on the part of everyone involved.

ENABLING CO-PLANNING AND DIALOGIC PRACTICES

The Enabling Co-planning approach was created by the research group of the DiVI Study Center of the University of Turin as a strategy for working with people with disabilities. The UNITO team drew inspiration from the Open Dialogue approach developed by the Finnish psychologist Jaakko Seikkula in the field of mental health and adapted its dialogic practices for pedagogical settings. Enabling Co-planning therefore offers a model of educational planning that is aimed at restoring power to the beneficiaries of the helping relationship, with the goal of enabling them to participate fully in citizenship, unhindered by forms of segregation, and to develop their potential.

Compared to a 'protective' approach, Enabling Co-planning re-centres our activity as social workers: we have discovered that the main work to be done is not on the beneficiaries, but on ourselves, our educational practices, our intervention spaces, and our organisations. The basic assumption we share is that none of the parties involved in the helping relationship has a complete vision of the situation: understanding and analysing is necessarily a cooperative venture.

Building on this foundation, we begin co-planning a path with each person experiencing homelessness by making a specific request: 'Imagine yourself happy five years from now.' We do not ask the beneficiary to imagine a plausible future, but a happy, desirable future. It's a question people in homelessness rarely hear, and it arouses a range of responses. Some react with wonder and enthusiasm, others need time – even days – to respond, while still others are wary and full of resistance. As social workers we have learned to listen to people's dreams without guiding, evaluating, or judging; we also welcome dreams that seem impossible or absurd.

This is because the dream performs a double function in Enabling Co-planning. First, it becomes an 'engine': the beneficiary's awareness that the goal is their own vision of a happy future propels them along the path, step by step. Secondly, the dream is a 'rudder' controlled by the beneficiary, a reminder that we have entrusted the choice of the goal of the educational path to them, and they ultimately steer the course. As social workers we accompany people on their chosen path: we help each person to imagine the steps that can lead to that happy future, we identify resources that will support those steps, and we map the person's social network to enhance the potential of their connections and relationships.

While each person's dream is the guiding element here, achieving the dream is not the core of Enabling Co-planning. What is important is the process of working toward a goal, which becomes truly empowering if it enables the person to discover, learn, and choose. If the dream is unattainable – as often happens – it is vital that the social worker does not step in to provide a 'reality check'; rather, reality itself will deliver the news while offering a learning opportunity as compensation. We have found that when we support the beneficiaries in the face of these small and large disappointments, they autonomously decide how to re-orient their objectives in directions that are more suitable and accessible.

To build this kind of enabling relationship, a constant redistribution of power is necessary. To allow people to express and follow their desires while trusting us, we must recognise and eliminate all the elements in the helping relationship that take power away from the individual. These elements range from places – agencies and offices whose names impose a category on the beneficiary, desks that mark hierarchies of power – to the language we use. The jargon of social work creates distance and deprives people who are not fluent in it of the ability to define and tell their own stories. Even the caseworker's file can be transformed from a symbol of power into a tool of empowerment: we have learned to share with individuals everything we write about them. Moreover, we have learned how to redistribute power through organisational practices: for example, we try to always invite people to network meetings that concern them, and when this is not possible, we agree with them beforehand on what we will say at the meeting, becoming a spokesperson who voices the beneficiary's wishes. It is vital to recognise that this type of engagement requires the involvement of the entire organisation in which we work. It is not enough to change our practices and mindset as individual professionals; the context in which we operate must support the transition from a logic of protection to one of participation.

CONCLUSIONS

The path of maximising participation which we have described in this article is an ongoing process which has personally transformed us and continues to challenge us. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise how this type of work clashes with the realities of a world in which homeless people are too often profoundly marginalised – a fact which makes the pursuit of every dream very complex. The approach we have developed focuses on the level of the helping relationship, and it is a potent device which gives power back to people, making them the designers of their own paths. However, this operation cannot be separated from the broader work carried out on the political level, including policymaking aimed at multiplying accessible and safe housing, forms of income, and spaces for care, sociality, and relationships within our societies. To keep walking in this direction, it is important that we too, as social workers, continue to nourish the dream of a better, more inclusive, and equal future for our organisations and for the societies we inhabit and build daily.

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