



Brussels, 12 June 2009

**CAPACITY-BUILDING SEMINAR FOR MHE MEMBERS:
EMPOWERMENT IN THE MENTAL HEALTH FIELD!**

REPORT

On 12 June 2009, Mental Health Europe (MHE) hosted a capacity building seminar for its member organisations. The seminar, with the title "Empowerment in the Mental Health Field!" took place in Brussels as a key activity of the MHE work programme supported by PROGRESS, the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity.

The meeting was facilitated by Jo Lucas from Kastanjia Consulting, UK and MHE member. Malgorzata Kmita, MHE President, opened the event and welcomed the participants. She thanked the MHE secretariat for organising the meeting and presented the agenda of the day as well as the speakers. Malgorzata Kmita explained the objectives of the event and the meaning of empowerment as a core issue for mental health policies that can take place only if solidarity, partnership and collaboration are there.

Following Malgorzata Kmita's opening speech, a presentation of the WHO-EC partnership project on User Empowerment was given by Anja Baumann, World Health Organisation – Regional Office for Europe. After an introduction on the project background, Anja Baumann provided the audience with an overview of its key objectives, main activities and outcomes as well as future developments. Main objective of the project, in which MHE is represented in the advisory board by Malgorzata Kmita, is to support Member States to improve their strategies and actions for users and carers' empowerment. As Anja Baumann stressed, empowerment strategies in this context mean "challenging control and social injustice, through political, social and psychological processes that uncover the mechanisms of control, the institutional or structural barriers, the cultural norms and social biases, and therefore enable people to challenge internalized oppression and to develop new representations of reality." The advisory board met already twice since the start of the project and is currently working on the development of further indicators, the detection of success and failure factors for the implementation of empowerment actions, the identification of action examples and the preparation of the Leadership Workshop 2010. Anja Baumann concluded her presentation by saying that "empowerment is not a destination, but a journey".

A fruitful discussion with the floor followed. Participants were invited to offer their comments and suggestions. Some MHE members stressed that one of the key difficulties for translating EU level projects into concrete actions at the local level is the frequent lack of preparation of the professionals working at the local level. This is due to the fact that quite often the general understanding of "empowerment" and "participation" is different. Moreover, in many countries of the European region there is neither knowledge about nor initiatives of user movements. Reaching the local level and engaging the users is still a big concern for many member states, especially the Eastern Europe ones. In reply to these remarks, Anja Baumann stated that one of the aims of the project is to reach the local level through exchange and presentation of good practices that will help influencing

governments and implementing actions. Furthermore, the Leadership Workshop 2010 will likely take place in one Eastern European country in order to involve and reach those regions where user movements are still lacking.

The following presentation was given by Erik Olsen, representative of the European Network of (ex) Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (ENUSP), who addressed the issue of empowerment from the users' perspective. Erik Olsen started his presentation by giving a working definition of empowerment (Judy Chamberlain, *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal* Spring 1997). He talked about empowerment in the user movement as a key concept at the basis of the users' vision and work, and suggested that a list of best practices of user-run alternatives is set up alongside other projects. Empowerment has to focus on building up the user's capacity to combat discrimination, oppression, inequalities, stigma and exclusion experienced by the people living with mental health problems. This can be achieved through capacity building, as "the process by which individuals, organisations, institutions and societies develop abilities (individually and collectively) to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives." In his presentation, Erik Olsen presented a user-led project developed in Copenhagen and focusing on empowerment. Aim of this project is to give people hope back and improve their coping skills and competencies. Key principles of the project are recovery, empowerment, development and competence. Finally, Erik Olsen presented the quality and quantity indicators relevant to empowerment and stressed the importance of empowering user organisations by making them strong enough to run their own psychosocial rehabilitation services and much more.

In the following presentation, Andreas Schwab, Director of Pro Mente Akademie (Pro Mente Academy), focused on the issue of empowerment of professionals. After giving an overview of Pro Mente Austria and Pro Mente Akademie's history and experience in the field of empowerment of professionals, he highlighted the current activities at Pro Mente Akademie in this area. At present, Pro Mente Akademie is focusing on the question of education and would like to further develop the issue of legal education. Moreover, the Akademie plans to develop more set-ups of accredited education settings and to establish new partnerships.

After Andreas Schwab's presentation, the floor was opened for discussion and input by the MHE members. Particularly, the issue of collaboration between users and carers seemed to be a high subject of concern for some members. This collaboration was understood as necessary to empower users as well as professionals. Paternalistic help is not to be a priority for empowering people because it does not make people work in an equal way. In a users and carers' partnership, both partners should gain something from the discussion with each other. The question of direct payments for people with mental health problems was raised as well as it was stressed that this can give users some power towards professionals. Erik Olsen emphasized the fact that empowerment is not a "frozen" process and that there is no real and unique model of empowerment in Europe as it was shown by different interventions during the debate.

The afternoon session dealt with the "Empowerment of politicians/ policy-makers" and the experiences of MHE members in lobbying mental health issues towards them. In the first presentation of this session, Jan Van Speybroeck from the Flemish Association for Mental Health focused on the experience of his association in empowering politicians. Since 1998, the Flemish Association for Mental Health has organised six sessions for policy makers in several mental health services in the Flanders' region. The purpose of that kind of session was to lobby politicians in catching the correct picture of mental health which should be kept in mind and understood in national or local policies. Jan Van Speybroeck explained that these sessions are more and more targeting mental health issues. Politicians are "confronted" with concrete cases so that can better understand those problems faced by people living with mental health problems. Some clear tips were given to politicians during these trainings in order to address mental health issues in an efficient way.

The next presentation was given by Vicki Nash from MIND, England & Wales. Her presentation highlighted MIND's work to lobby and campaign at national level. She explained how the organisation is working in the British political context. Vicki Nash gave some explanations about the political system in The UK and its repartition of competences. She explained the related MIND lobbying

strategies towards different target groups at various levels. Despite health being a devolved issue, the House of Commons has to remain the primary target for lobbying. It seems that one fourth of the Members of the British Parliament is exposed to mental health problems but there are still taboos about it. A particularity in The UK is the work of QUANGOS, that are "quasi autonomous non governmental organizations", which are the result of downsizing the government. They are independent but aligned to government departments. Vicki Nash presented some successful lobbying activities of MIND and she explained the current challenges in England and Wales in the field of mental health, including the impact of the financial recession on the situation of people with mental health problems.

The following presentation of the session was given by Menelaos Theodoroulakis, President of the Coordination Committee of the ARGOS Network, Greece. After presenting the ARGOS network, he underlined the role of the organisation and its aims. In particular, he addressed the Greek situation in the mental health field. Greece experienced a serious crisis in its mental health system in 2008, mainly because of budget cuts for NGO funding as well as in mental health services budgets themselves. Menelaos Theodoroulakis explained how the ARGOS Network was involved in the crisis management and how ARGOS contacted the national ombudsman to alert on the situation of mental health services. Finally, the crisis alert went up to EU institutions and some actions have been undertaken by the Greek government to end the crisis. ARGOS is lobbying at several levels including international level and local level, using the media and other NGOs, and by contacting key actors interested in the field as well as participating in meetings organised by national or local authorities.

An interesting discussion among participants followed these latest three presentations and focused on the questions of lobbying at national level and how this activity could be undertaken according to the situation of the country addressed. Awareness-raising as well as help for the community to stop the wide spread stigma are to be encouraged as they are important tools for lobbying politicians at national level. A strategy is needed for lobbying national governments on key mental health issues. Available resources are an important point of the strategy as they can determine which actions could be undertaken, even if sometimes sending lobbying letters does not cost so much. Furthermore, the media have to be included in the lobbying strategies.

In the following, Pino Pino from the Italian Association for Mental Health (AISME), gave a presentation on "Associations, services and local governments – some experiences in Florence". He explained the Italian health system and focused on the Mental Health system's reform of 1978 that led to a move towards deinstitutionalization and that is since then decentralised to the 20 Italian regions. A growth of number of mental health associations could be observed in the 1990's. The cornerstone of the reform is the Health Trust under which all territorial and hospital services are operating, with the exception of some big university hospitals. Pino Pini talked also about the specific situation in Tuscany, where the community health services are administered by the so-called "Health Society". AISME as association for mental health in Tuscany was able to establish regular contacts with the local municipalities and the services. For example, there is a common involvement in activities related to the World Mental Health Day, the creation of community health bonds and many ongoing projects. The "Joint Experiences and local mental health systems" project for instance, which began in 2002, aims at establishing international exchange of experiences among education-research programs with the objective to establish structured collaboration among mental health associations, services and local municipalities.

Jan Pfeiffer from the Czech Republic and member of the EU's Children's High Level Group, gave the following presentation. He spoke about his experiences with lobbying in the Eastern European countries. The culture of lobbying and the way of using "power" is different in Eastern Europe in comparison to Western European states because of the influence of the Communist experience and the communist education system. Jan Pfeiffer stressed that it will take another generation to change the attitudes of the population. He also reminded everyone of the use of "cage beds", i.e. when mentally ill patients, in particular children, in social care institutions in some countries including the Czech Republic were kept in cage beds and which has become a symbol of oppression of mental health patients. In order to denounce this abuse of human rights, several initiatives were taken by

NGOs and other actors to campaign against the cage beds. Even the British author J.K. Rowling intervened and the BBC reported on it. Talking about the EU, Jan Pfeiffer furthermore experienced that at European level the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy (DG Regio) is increasingly open to reflect about the possible impacts of investments in infrastructure on health policies. In this sense, DG Regio's awareness could be raised towards the fact that extensive reforms of big psychiatric hospitals countervail the move towards a deinstitutionalization of care structures.

The participants then engaged in a discussion about diverse issues. For instance, there is a concern for a law project in Italy that is under way to ease the procedures for compulsory treatments, which is against the patients' right to self-determination. Furthermore, the importance of peer reviews at European level, a mechanism that allows an exchange of best practices in a specialized theme, was emphasized with particular attention to the mental health field. The participants expressed how important is the fact that nowadays it is possible to talk about the empowerment of mental health service users. This wouldn't have been so easy only 5-10 years ago, therefore a big accomplishment has already been achieved.

In the closing session of the capacity-building seminar, Jo Lucas raised the questions of what has been learnt by the participants during the seminar and how these findings will influence their future actions. She pointed out that alliances and partnership between organisations at equal level are important and that the financial aspect plays a crucial role. Empowerment has to be worked on at the political as well as the individual level at the same time.

Jo Lucas' closing remark was followed by a vivid discussion by the participants. It was pointed out that empowerment should be worked on alongside other stakeholders such as disability groups, organisations dealing with social exclusion, human rights etc. It is important to be complementary with these organisations and not to compete between each other. Another aspect that was raised during the discussion was that empowerment should be aligned with human rights, therewith strengthening the user's autonomy and control. Not only mental health service users should be empowered, but also their families and carers. Moreover, mental health promotion and the prevention of mental health problems play a crucial role.

The term empowerment should not be seen as contradiction to working in partnership between the different levels. Furthermore, one should be aware that a transition period for the implementation of new programmes and concepts may be required in the sense of "evolution, not revolution". This is in particular the case in countries where mental health patients are still confronted with aggressive behaviour. Empowerment is a long process and "one has to fight for the power", whereas the power should be based on insights and values. Positive developments have taken place in the last years, like the WHO's strategy for more user involvement. Still, a general problem in this process is often the lack of funding, for example for setting up a user's organisation.

On behalf of Mental Health Europe, Malgorzata Kmita thanked all the speakers, the moderator and the participants for the excellent contributions and the fruitful and active discussion.

*Mental Health Europe,
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