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SOCIAL INCLUSION & HEALTH



Meaningful

peer involvement

among

marginalised groups

Correlation Policy Brief

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Background

Participation and community involvement has become an increasingly important issue in the past years. Many of the recent health and social service reforms include particular regulations, which require the involvement of service users.

Service providers in various countries in Europe and beyond have initiated numerous peer involvement and peer support activities. As a consequence, peers are involved on various levels: in the delivery of services, in health promotion, in HIV/AIDS prevention and last, but not least, on the decision making level – as part of so-called client councils. There are also peer-led activities and peer initiatives, where peers act more independently. Many of these activities are linked to advocacy work.

Considering this, we can assume that peer involvement is important and relevant for all players in the field: the policy makers, the service providers and most importantly the peers themselves.

Although there is evidence, that community involvement contributes to good and effective policy-making and service provision, we need to realise that the concept of peer involvement is still poorly implemented throughout Europe. This is illustrated by a snapshot overview, which was carried out by Correlation in 2010, describing the state of affairs in regard to peer involvement in Europe. This overview, to which 48 organisations from 14 different European countries participated, identified many different forms of peer work as well as target groups. But, it also appeared, that many countries in Europe do not have peer involvement or peer work at all.¹

Very often initiatives are started without decent preparation and with the idea in mind that working with peers cannot be more difficult, than working for them. These assumptions are easily being disproved. The workers on the floor often have difficulties in dealing with the new power relationship, the managers do not support the peer programme sufficiently, the peers do not feel respected and very often there is a lack of resources, training and funding, which finally leads to mistrust and disappointments for everyone.

Peer involvement and peer support should be seen in the context of participation and community involvement. Peer involvement is not just another methodology within health promotion – for which sufficient evidence exists – but is also a question of ethics and mutual respect. One does not talk and decide about others, without including them. This applies for all groups within society, and should particularly be encouraged, when groups are marginalised and excluded from all kind of participation and decision making.

Why are participation, involvement and peer involvement important and what can they achieve?

- The effectiveness and the impact of health policies can increase, when marginalised groups, such as drug users, are involved in the process of policy making. The same applies for the development of health services. There is sufficient evidence that peers 'have a positive result in providing services', because they do have 'inside knowledge' and 'bring credibility and trust' towards an agency². Using this knowledge and expertise will contribute to the development of effective service delivery and policy responses.
- Participation fits the values and ethics of social work and public health³. It is no longer acceptable to talk about specific groups, without talking with them.
- Participation reflects the shift from a more patronizing public health model towards a more democratic and pluralistic model, in which service users are seen as equal partners in the development of health strategies and policies⁴.
- Participation reflects our liberal understanding of being responsible and taking this responsibility. But this also means that we have to create conditions to enable marginalised and vulnerable groups.
- Participation contributes to the empowerment of marginalised groups, building on the capacities and not on the shortcomings. This positive approach emphasizes the principles of community, mutuality and equality⁵.
- Peer involvement is a cost-effective intervention in the field of health promotion and prevention, provided that it is implemented in a decent way.

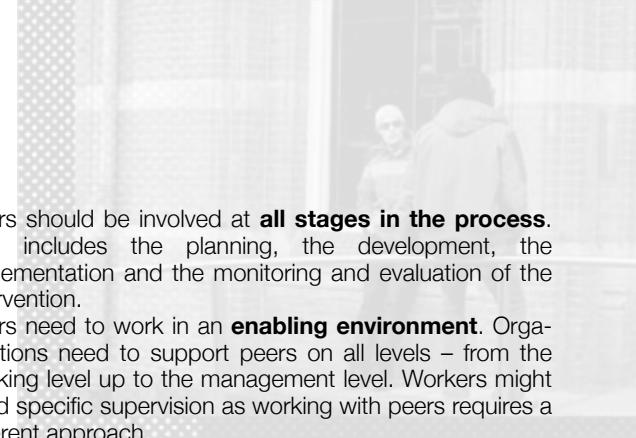
Overall considerations about peer work and peer involvement

On the policy making level:

- Peers have insider knowledge and are the **real experts** on issues, which concern themselves.
- Community members and peers have **great potential**. Their input contributes demonstrably to the effectiveness of services, policies and decision making.
- Investment in peer involvement is essential. **Supportive regulations** and legal requirements are the basic condition. In addition it is necessary to create an **enabling environment**, in which peers feel welcome.
- Having access to **sufficient resources**, such as financial compensation, skill building and training contributes persistently to an environment, which enables peers to participate in a meaningful way.
- Participation processes need to be **transparent**. It should be clear from the very beginning which **role, mandate and status** peers have and how they can influence decisions.
- The principle of **equality and respect** should be leading in the process. Peers should be treated in a non-judgmental way.
- It is helpful to be open and flexible and to leave enough room for input and suggestions to other partners in the participation process. Participation is not only focusing on the outcome, but is above all **a process**.

On the service provision level:

- Peers have **insider knowledge** and can provide service providers with useful and essential information on the target group.
- Peers can contribute to the development of **(cost)effective services**, particularly when it comes to marginalised and underserved groups, such as young people at risk and drug users.
- Peers can **improve the access to services** for marginalised and underserved groups, such as young people at risk and drug users.
- Involving peers in service provision can increase the **credibility of services** and the trust among the target group.
- Involving peers in service provisions requires decent **preparation and patience** and should definitely not be organised ad hoc.

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- Peers should be involved at **all stages in the process**. This includes the planning, the development, the implementation and the monitoring and evaluation of the intervention.
 - Peers need to work in an **enabling environment**. Organisations need to support peers on all levels – from the working level up to the management level. Workers might need specific supervision as working with peers requires a different approach.
 - Having access to **sufficient resources** is essential for the success of the intervention. Not investing in the financial compensation of peers, skill building and training (for both, workers and peers) and supervision might jeopardise peer involvement and frustrate all included partners.
 - **Documenting and evaluating** the work throughout the various stages is essential. It enables services to adapt their work and proves the effectiveness of an intervention to policy makers, other organisations and potential sponsors.
 - Many peer work interventions have been implemented successfully. Before you start any kind of activity, see if you can find additional information on what has been done already in this field. Check, what kind of experience already exists in your country and within Europe. **Learn from existing experience** from others and don't reinvent the wheel! See also www.correlation-net.org

On the level of peers:

- Peers need to be aware of their own **potential and expertise**. To be part of the decision making and the development of services should be an obvious condition for good policy making and service provision.
- The involvement of peers can increase the impact and the effectiveness of services and policies. However, this requires that peers are **included at all stages of the process** and not only at the very end.
- Including peers fits in our current understanding of pluralism, democracy and responsible decision-making. **Nothing about Us, without Us!** Reasons enough to demand meaningful involvement.
- Peers require **reasonable support and resources in order to fulfil their role**. This can include financial compensation, skill building, training and supervision.
- Peers should demand an enabling environment, in which they are treated in an **equal and respectful way**.

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