



European Charter

The Missing Link: increasing social inclusion by engaging experts by experience: European Charter.

1. Need for experts by experience.

Social exclusion has been found to be a persistent problem in practice. But it is society that produces social exclusion. Structural mechanisms of exclusion are responsible for the fact that people who are socially excluded are deprived of their basic rights and lose grip on their own lives and on social decision processes.

The idea of an expert by experience in social exclusion is a response to the need of a missing link. A missing link between the policy makers and aid providers of all the services with which the socially excluded come into contact, on the one hand, and the excluded persons themselves, on the other hand. The lack of this link is, to a certain extent, the reason why this exclusion persists. Our on the other hand point of view is that the function of experts by training is complementary to that of the experts by experience with whom they co-operate.

The key element consists of the fundamental difference between the position of an excluded person, who is forced to live in long-term exclusion and that of the organisations and participants in policy making, who are not familiar with this social experience nor with the harsh reality of life in exclusion in all its aspects, particularly the sense of shame and humiliation due to the fact that the excluded have no control over their own lives. Another element is that it is necessary to change society's view of a different way of life or deviant behaviour, which sometimes results in the right answer to the wrong question.

The third element is the knowledge that experts by experience have gained by the lived experience with social and healthcare systems and the experience of coping with exclusion, mental distress, poverty, etc. This must be seen as an alternative, though equally important, knowledge to the academic body of knowledge.

This kind of knowledge indicates a need, in all areas of society, to involve people who can rely on their own exclusion experiences, who understand the logic behind the survival strategies they have developed, and who are able to communicate this logic to others.

Experts by experience prove essential links in all sectors that the excluded have to deal with and which, in fact, cover all areas of life: education, legal system, health care, employment, welfare, child care, culture, housing and social services. The contribution of experts by experience towards policy-making is also essential in all these areas of life and at all government levels. The contribution of experts by experience must be regarded as equally important as the contribution of experts by training. But we have questions about how this can be carried out in practice.



2. *Need for training.*

People who are socially excluded have experience in exclusion. But in order to have the capacity to apply their experiences, they need training.

Trained experts by experience in social exclusion are people who have personally experienced exclusion, who have coped with this experience and extended it to a broader experience in exclusion. They have acquired attitudes, skills and knowledge through their training in order to apply the extended exclusion experience professionally in all areas of the struggle against social exclusion.

Training gives them the support and skills to carry out their tasks and functions: people in exclusion must acquire the necessary insights, attitudes and skills to be able to work as an expert by experience in their required field. Training must also include sufficient time for the trainees to undergo and deal with the necessary process of their own exclusion experiences through the analysis of their own life stories. They thus get the opportunity to reflect on and examine their own histories and own solutions. Furthermore, they are given the opportunity to share their experiences, to learn from others and develop a broader understanding. This enables them to turn individual experiences into general analyses and ways to help others to find their own solutions.

3. *Values linked with this approach.*

Values that sustain the expert by experience approach also constitute the most essential values for the fundamental struggle against exclusion:

- Belief in the strength of those involved;
- Acknowledgment of the need of a question-oriented, inward and integral approach to the situation.
- Belief that everybody can learn and grow.

Furthermore, the approach is underpinned by a number of values that can also be very meaningful to a society that is geared towards truly living together without exclusion, such as:

- acknowledgement of the fundamental need for respectful and equal interpersonal relationships, enabling each individual to be regarded as a complete person with their own recognised responsibilities;
- the importance of a direct style of communication without the use of concealing strategies and, if necessary, a confrontational approach that respects the equality of all partners;
- respect for the autonomy of the people involved as well as their shared responsibilities, even in problematic situations;
- the strength of solidarity;
- the importance of experience as a source of knowledge and learning;
- the value of a committed, intuitive and reflective approach;
- respect for diversity.

4. Experts by experience: nowadays.

Experts by experience nowadays play an important role in facilitating participation in society for all kind of groups who are excluded. Social exclusion is a problem for people living in poverty, for people with psychiatric backgrounds or drug-abuse and addiction problems, and also for groups of immigrants. It is also a problem for a society that wants to be one that provides general well-being for all.

In this project we assume that members of these groups are open to the inclusion of their peers in a variety of ways and in professional jobs. Creating jobs for experts by experiences as inclusion workers raises the chances of inclusion and improves the ways that people from these different groups participate in society. An expert by experience who is working as an 'inclusion worker' needs specialised training for that as well as a special job description. The organization where they find work needs organizational and cultural changes. Employing experts by experience raises the employment rate among groups who usually have great difficulties to find jobs.

Courses and training programmes for these experts already exist in various countries. For example, there's the programme of De Link in Belgium, de TOED in the Netherlands, the EX-IN programme in Germany, and programmes in Portugal, Hungary and Bulgaria.

In these countries, experts by experience are working in a variety of paid and unpaid jobs in a professional way. Jobs and job descriptions are being formulated and developed. Many social, educational and health services are interested in employing experts by experience. Further development of these professions is a priority and it is urgent that a number of these professional experts by experience get the opportunity to transfer their knowledge in training programmes and schools. This programme has been developed to strengthen, broaden and increase these developments in order to achieve this end.

5. The Missing Link Programme

The project consists of four parts: preparation, training, employment and evaluation. The objectives arise from the needs and knowledge of all partners.

- **Preparation:** a description of the definition of experts by experience and social inclusion, training programmes, job profile and places where they are employed, their level?? of education?? and position in workplaces. It describes the highest common factor of all partners' projects.
- **Training**
 - Develop 'train the trainer' programmes for experts by experience (EE), experts by training and those working in tandem.
 - Develop a tool with 'examples of tandem working' in real work situations. This tool has two aims. It is an instrument to stimulate reflection about working in tandem and the effects of their interventions on the improved situation of the excluded persons. This tool is also an instrument to stimulate reflection about the complementary roles of the experts by experience and the experts by training who work in tandem. It also provides more knowledge about the complementarity of both functions.
 - Work on the 'life stories' of the EE's is a crucial element in their learning process. We develop a tool for improving the learning process in the field of the 'life stories'.



This tool creates a personal evaluation instrument for the trainees so that they have the possibility to follow their own growth and empowerment.

- Share experiences between trainees and working in tandem. We therefore develop exchange programmes between partners.
- **Employment**
 - Create a methodology to address employers. This methodology consists of different steps and activities: a description of the method, a formulation of guidelines, trial periods with a new employer and evaluation.
 - Seek and describe the organizational preconditions and the necessary organizational changes for the employment of the EE's.
 - Create on-the-job training programmes for EE's within the scope of HRM. human resource management???
- **Evaluation methods**
 - Develop special research instruments for describing results for the evaluation of the training programme, training and effects on social inclusion.
 - Describe the foundation of this approach and underlying knowledge.

6. Further perspectives in Europe.

This pilot project could result in new co-operation with a wider range of partnerships on the level of European institutions with regard to the approach of engaging experts by experience and experts by training as social inclusion workers.