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Engagement Motivates Generations

Impulses of the conference

„Engagement Motivates Generations“

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Getting people involved: exploiting potential and ensuring participation

A living democracy is shaped by active citizens. Their social, cultural and political commitment helps define their living conditions and develop concepts for future society.

In the last ten years, the amount of voluntary work performed by senior citizens has increased substantially. Nevertheless, voluntary activities cannot be taken for granted. Social commitment research and players in the field agree that the willingness to get involved in the community is largely determined by the question whether real participation is possible.

Participation through involvement

For many people, everyday life is dominated by responsibilities and constraints. In contrast, exerting influence through voluntary commitment and establishing something meaningful in society under one's own steam is an enriching experience. Civic engagement gets things moving: People help each other, they bring about change and inspire others to act themselves. They give courage to those who feel powerless.

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IMPULSES

The experience of making a personal contribution towards the advancement of society, maintaining social contacts and experiencing companionship also raises motivation in other spheres of activity. In many cases, individual commitment covers several fields of action in civil society.

Senior citizens assume responsibility in a variety of roles: They promote the interests of their own generation, get involved in cross-generational projects and provide practical assistance to children and young adults.

Their involvement advances integration in a pluralistic society in which many different interests have to be reconciled. Through their active participation in society, they articulate their wishes and concerns in a public forum. Their commitment counteracts ignorance and misinformation. They want to be heard.

Success motivates

Through their voluntary work, committed senior citizens also want to break down social prejudice and show that old age can be more than “taking without giving”. Nevertheless, civic engagement is not synonymous with unselfish altruism. Volunteers do not just work for others free of charge, they experience first-hand the effect, success and satisfaction that arises from their actions. Self-serving interests may enter into a fruitful alliance with the will to right social wrongs.

Those who get involved do so for personal reasons: The act of doing good is beneficial to the actor. It promotes good health. Being needed is also a good preparation for the future. In performing voluntary work, senior citizens in particular can draw on extensive experience from their professional and family lives.

Putting your heart and soul into something is a rewarding personal experience. The enjoyment volunteers get out of their activities is a crucial factor. Gratifying social commitment transcends selfishness

and competitiveness. It means being part of a team and acquiring meaning while remaining in charge of oneself. Taking things in one's own hands. Having aspirations and becoming involved in shaping the social fabric, participating in current developments and contributing towards positive change.

Positive commitment reflects all these levels: It creates meaning, is valued at the social level and provides room for self-realisation. It ensures that all sections of the population are involved and exploits the population's potential for shaping society on a democratic basis.

Appreciation as currency

Civic engagement requires responsibility and acknowledgement. The personal idealism that drives people to expose themselves to ever-changing situations and embark on new courses requires feedback that confers value on such activities.

Participation in shaping society is also defined by material and immaterial framework conditions. People must be able to “afford” voluntary work, both financially and in terms of time. Full compensation of the expenses incurred, e.g. telephone, travel or training, is paid in very few cases.

A culture of acknowledgement reflects the variety of voluntary activities: It offers material assistance, such as expense refunds, offers training opportunities, ensures that a mutual exchange takes place and acknowledges the “results” achieved by the volunteers, namely the assistance they have provided and good deeds they have done.

Social engagement in flux – demands on organisations and local authorities

Civic engagement leads to significant change. Local authorities, churches and associations have long been aware of the fact that they cannot do without voluntary work. Social engagement is in flux: The manifold challenges arising from a society under-



going significant demographic change demand new fields of activity, new forms of cooperation and new structures adapted to suit these developments, in short: a new culture of cooperation between volunteers and institutions.

Local authorities adopt new approaches

Given the importance of our future tasks, there is no room for competitiveness. Institutions' ability to adhere to the status quo should not be underestimated, nor should their justified fears of losing power and official positions. Nevertheless, more and more local authorities are adjusting their hierarchical structures and are asking citizens to become involved.

They see themselves as committed local authorities focusing on the local interests for voluntary work. They pool resources and promote cooperation, form hubs for networks and provide material and conceptual support.

Staff units for civic engagement have been established at the management level while master plans for voluntary activities list the infrastructure of rooms, forms of acknowledgement, training options and possible fields of involvement available to volunteers.

Action must be taken where the activation and organisation of citizens' involvement has not yet been recognised as a responsibility of the local authority, while other cities and local authorities are establishing and supporting visible and efficient contact points. The encouragement and support of civic engagement should be rooted in the local authorities' organisational structures. This can either take the form of a central unit for social commitment or of various coordination units within the existing departments that help reduce red tape.

Promotion of social engagement as a future challenge

With its fresh link to local fields of activity, community organising is raising public interest. Citizens

are joining together in interdenominational citizens' platforms that are politically and financially independent.

New alliances are forged, business and local authority action groups seek contact with each other. Estate agencies and local senior citizens and family offices work together to create new neighbourhoods. Processes are supported by coaching.

Community organising draws on resources at all levels to ensure that its effects are sustainable. Activities are discussed at round tables, district conferences and other local forums. This allows volunteers to establish and control networks in the social neighbourhood, avoid duplication and coordinate processes without restricting the diversity of services offered.

Productive participation of citizens in current needs planning requires open communication and cooperation.



tion between local authorities, organisations and individuals. This communication should be based on verifiable information that is understandable to outsiders.

Where aims and target groups adopted by action groups, institutions or associations overlap, officials and volunteers can create synergies through transparency. Collectivity as a positive experience – fellow campaigners are working for the same aim.

Catalyst for social processes

Socially committed citizens act as catalyst for social processes. Mutual exchange between officials and volunteers provides a valuable stimulus for the identification and activation of interested citizens.

Negotiation processes need high-quality support and should involve varied social milieus. Intercultural access allows everybody to get involved. This discourse releases energy for activities and shows a large potential for social innovation: Differences are overcome where diverse people commit themselves to jointly work for the common good. Civic participation helps shape a positive future.

De-democratisation arises when political decisions are made in a non-transparent manner or if those concerned are indifferent to the issues at hand. The involvement of responsible citizens can effectively counteract such tendencies. Players inform the public of existing social wrongs, suggest solutions and demand that the elected officers act in a responsible manner.

Senior citizens should regularly contact their political representatives to enquire as to the extent to which activities and offers to talk about the concerns of the older third of society are taken into account in the planning process. The active participation of senior citizens is a valuable pillar of society.

Shaping the community

The financial situation of the local communities is severely restricting their room for manoeuvre. Voluntary services are being cut or outsourced. This

presents citizens with new challenges which are met in the context of an open process in which citizens' empowerment strategies will not support new forms of democracy unless all decisions are made on a transparent and accessible basis.

Within this process, local authorities as neutral actors play a central role in identifying the needs of the various sections of the population and including these in the joint discussion. This needs analysis and the reflection and discussion of fair distribution in the face of scarce resources should be carried out with reference to the individual local communities. Projects based on local joint agreements reflect the local authority's appreciation of its active citizens.

Local forums at the district or neighbourhood level create an environment that invites people to make a positive contribution. Citizens' acceptance of political decisions is commensurate with the degree to which they are heard by the authorities. Volunteer parliaments with their own budgets need to manage the use of their funds in a responsible manner.

Communicative interfaces in the dialogue between local authorities and citizens are of crucial importance. Local authorities should consider how they could make better use of their staff's potential when staff members retire and become active in the voluntary sector.

Organisations are also called upon to promote community organising. They are important vehicles of civic commitment and have the power to provide substantial support to volunteers.

Proven examples of neighbourhood centres should be taken up and introduced in other neighbourhoods. Senior citizens' offices should be set up and promoted as catalysts for an innovative work with elderly people. Here, as in other areas, volunteers should take an active part from the beginning rather than having decisions handed down to them.

In the future, voluntary activities will have to extend to new fields: Property owners' associations, for example,



could attempt to revitalise neighbourhoods and new local needs-based approaches could emerge. Personal contact, for example with immigrants or senior citizens, is indispensable where no family ties exist and other services have not yet been established.

Innovative local authorities and organisations

When creating opportunities for civic engagement, local authorities and organisations should take notice of voluntary work in all its diversity even outside their own structural boundaries. This also includes autonomous forms. Conflicts arising from dissimilar efficiency and performance criteria should not be mired in the juxtaposition of non-binding voluntary work and professional officialdom.

Dialogue based on contact and exchange rather than rigid self portrayal helps overcome patronising behaviour through cooperative participation. Official and unofficial sides swapping chairs with each other is also a helpful tool.

The acceptance of voluntary work depends on finding common ground with those concerned. Organisations should develop further structures for those in need of help and should internalise and implement an enabling culture. Volunteers with highly developed emotional intelligence allow associations to give important impulses regarding the future development of organisations.

Such development does not necessarily have to be “new”. To exploit their existing potential, organisations must first assess which structures can still be used, expanded and perhaps developed. The “old” voluntary work concept and its reliable representation rules will remain in demand in the future.

Strategies for participation

Aside from the right to participate, real participation also requires the right opportunities. This involves motivational publicity work as well as support and facilitation of exchange processes. Volunteers joining

to form a network need to be clear about organisational requirements and the context in which they perform their activities.

It is one of the central responsibilities of local authorities and organisations to support self-assurance in the voluntary sector. This creates a sustainable basis for enabling structures. Social commitment by all generations can be promoted via local authority contact points or via “social commitment officers”, either at the local or the national level. Far from conflicting with self-determination in the voluntary sector, professional support actually gives it a boost.

Today, volunteers are involved in a plethora of different participation models: Roundtables in the neighbourhood, markets of opportunities at large events, World Cafés at conferences, local volunteering fairs, volunteer exchanges and information events provide ideas and facilitate the exchange of experience between volunteers and those who would like to become involved. They inspire people to volunteer by demonstrating how participation can shape public concerns and social community.

Motivation, qualification, guidance

Local authorities, institutions and organisations should support volunteers in the exercise of their social commitment. Attendant publicity work brings news of projects to the public and suggests possible fields of activity for civic engagement.

Volunteer exchanges provide information on lines of action and inspire potential volunteers to become involved. Existing qualification processes can be supplemented with new formats (e.g. a “social certification system” for volunteers). Educational leave should also contain elements of reflection and dialogue, providing participants with personal and social skills. Joint training programmes for officials and volunteers can provide opportunities for a change in perspective and create mutual understanding.

Social cohesion is based on civic engagement. It is characterised by openness, respect and interaction. By revealing their motives, participants inform others of their wishes and needs as well as impart values.

Mutual dialogue facilitates social participation. This process should be subject to qualified guidance. It should begin with an outline specifying which people may be willing to be asked via a respectful invitation and which information is required. Attentive and humorous guidance should accompany exchanges, while joint agreements to continue working together ensure the continuity of the dialogue. The implementation of the decisions taken should be supported and, if possible, the process evaluated for quality assurance purposes. It is a central responsibility of effective guidance to ensure that results are clearly presented to sponsors and those in charge as well as to political decision-makers. These aims also apply to cross-generational exchange, an area in which it is all the more important to focus on the various target groups and address them specifically.

Social engagement gets things moving – generations are shaping the future

Today's society is responsible for the social and cultural foundations of future generations. Not an easy task considering that we are on the verge of a profound transformation.

Society on the verge of transformation

Today, the traditional nuclear family stands side-by-side with a range of different ways of life. The number of single-person households is increasing. The ageing society is speeding up this trend.

A high degree of mobility is expected of both students and employees. Personal relationships are interrupted and have to be re-established. Migration, whether caused by labour market policies or humanitarian reasons, is becoming a central policy area in the immigrant nation.

Society is becoming more diversified, social milieus are disintegrating. In the absence of the multigenerational family, generations no longer have any opportunities to exchange opinions. The young and the elderly experience similar problems, for example the labour market situation and the associated financial risks regarding future planning, on an individual basis and at different times.

Understanding through interaction

New channels of communication are required. Dialogue sparks interest and expresses acceptance. It takes time and the ability to listen to get to know people and ideas.

This results in open-minded interaction without any competition between different values and consumption patterns. Simple everyday courtesies have a snowball effect on social cohesion.

People have different aims and wishes, but also different abilities. The concerns of old and young people may differ. Dialogue characterised by openness and honesty does not shy away from problems while seeking to mediate interests. Democratic influence may guarantee cooperation among generations in all areas of life via such intergenerational lobbyism.

Establishment of social networks

With multi-generation families ceasing to exist as a consequence of demographic developments and the mobility requirements of modern society, social networks are becoming increasingly important to the individual.

Helping individuals to cope with their tasks and solve their problems is not the only assistance networks provide. Self-help is always based on individuals first doing something good for themselves or facilitating the exchange of information and experience between those concerned.

Social commitment is based on interaction. Voluntary activities always include the option of re-establi-



shing interpersonal relationships on an intergenerational, intercultural basis and across all different milieus, building bridges between the young and the old.

Numerous sponsorship projects consider this dialogue among generations as an opportunity to develop new social relationships. At the same time, different perceptions of failure and success may also lead to mutual understanding.

Neighbourhoods and social places of learning

Hand in hand with the emergence of new family types, “elective affinities in the immediate social environment”, such as those represented by the Kolping families in the last 150 years, are gaining importance. Educational initiatives, such as senior citizens’ academies and self-organised groups as part of the “between work and retirement” network, also have the potential to become a “second family”. Joint activities, maintaining or establishing new relationships, all this counteracts the experience of loss and loneliness in old age.

Places where voluntary activities take place are places of lifelong learning. Learning processes develop dynamically where people overcome problems through action and develop solutions on an emancipated basis. Out-of-school places of learning, such as associations and projects, provide adolescents and young adults with support and orientation in defining their own identity in a society dominated by constant change.

A joint interest in finding fast solutions for problems and making a change strengthens social competence. Children should make these positive experiences at an early stage with both kindergartens and schools integrating lessons in social learning.

Local neighbourhoods are perfect places to mobilise people’s civic engagement and cooperation. Roundtables and community conferences setting up networks for various citizens’ initiatives provide the necessary organisational room for target setting and process planning.

Established social commitment structures should be used on a cross-generational basis and should be made accessible to those who have so far been excluded. Volunteers performing neighbourhood work help promote comprehensive social interaction.

Building bridges through projects

Just like all other citizens, senior citizens should be involved in planning as well as being consulted as to their wishes and ideas at an early stage. School students participating in social commitment projects in their social environment have an opportunity to gain practical experience in participation and democratic involvement. School authorities and managements are called upon to provide time off, financial means and a positive culture of acknowledgement.

Dealing with subjects such as dementia provides younger people with a glimpse of other spheres of life. Future issues such as climate change and use of resources whose consequences will have a significant effect on future living conditions should be discussed today at the cross-generational level. This will promote greater understanding of the problems faced by future generations. Sponsorship and mentoring programmes are helpful when it comes to young people’s educational CVs and labour market prospects.

Competitions such as “the most cooperative school” or “the friendliest neighbourhood street” can motivate people of all generations to take up voluntary work. A model programme entitled “old for young for old” could provide specific assistance for projects based on the idea of different generations working for each other. Nevertheless, this should not lead to a “duty” to participate in volunteer projects. Social relationships need space to develop just as dialogue between generations needs time to establish itself.

Social and cultural exchange

Neighbourhood events promote cultural exchange beyond the garden fence. Intercultural projects al-

low people with various religious backgrounds and cultures to discuss their values and customs. Projects such as the homeless choirs in Hamburg, Berlin and Vienna are evidence of the fact that social commitment brings together people from varied backgrounds and that social barriers are not insurmountable.

Multifaceted social movements are also characterised by the fact that people from all different social strata join forces to solve an important problem. Exchange leads to public awareness, solutions emerge. Extra-parliamentary political activities also represent a form of commitment within and for civic society.

A sustainable society must aim to solve current problems and needs in a responsible manner that takes the interests of future generations into account. An environment that promotes dialogue and mindfulness raises our quality of life, releases creative potential and facilitates the shaping of a socially just, culturally open and inclusive society for all generations.

The conference “Engagement motivates generations” took place in Hamburg, Germany, in May 2011 in the context of the European Year of Volunteering. The German National Association of Senior Citizens’ Organizations (BAGSO), the German National Association for Senior Citizens’ Agencies and the Koerber Foundation joined efforts to organise the conference.

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