Circles of support in India and the EU – introducing the project

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Towards person-centred community inclusion networks
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Dear colleagues and friends, I am very happy that you are here. When I look around me it makes me very sure that all our efforts and work to prepare the conference have been a good investment. I want to thank everybody in the team, the faculty and the university for making this conference possible. Thanks to the Rectorate and the Department of Social Studies, for their encouragements and support, and to our Rector for the provision of co-finance which has made this conference possible. And I would like to thank the project members and students who have done a lot of work and involved a lot of enthusiasm to prepare the conference.

Before I tell you about our project some pre-words on organisational issues.

This conference is in English, which is not so easy for me and the German partners, because I, unlike the other partners in the project, have not been brought up with the English language. So things are more difficult for me. In our Dortmund COS programme we have to manage in two languages, German in our day-to-day work and English in the transnational work and meetings.

In the evening at six thirty there will be a snack and some drinks. There will be chances of exchanging information, socialising and having fun. For the evening we are expecting more guests who would have difficulties to follow an English spoken conference. In an informal way in the evening, language barriers can be easily freed. The evening will be so to speak an English language barrier-free evening where everybody supports everybody to understand each other.

There are people with red dots on their name tags. They are Dortmund COS-team-members who are very happy to help you if you have any questions.

You will have noticed the cameras on your tables. Please don't hesitate to use them. You will find information on the tables about the use of the cameras and there will be some students who will inform you more about this idea of visual communication. It would be very nice to have a range of photos at the end of the conference.

Thomas Strenge, our lecturer for visual communication, also asked me to inform you about an event at lunchtime. There will be a photograph of all of us creating the COS Logo in the three colours orange, yellow and blue. That will take place after Prof Kedar´s paper before lunch.

A few words about our banner. It was hand made in Orissa for the first workshop last April and we brought it to Germany for this conference. And it will travel from meeting to meeting. The banner is a symbol for the message: We all are different but have similar value systems and visions for a more human future,

Genesis of the COS project

Now let me say a few words about the history of our project "Circles of Support in India and the EU".
When I sat together with the Vice chancellor and the colleagues of Utkal university in 2002 and signed the letter of intent between our two universities I really didn't imagine that we would come to a real Indo-European cooperation project so soon.

Over the last twenty years I have been fortunate in the course of my work to make transnational links with a wide variety of practitioners and academics from a number of European countries and the USA. During that time we have had also lots of visits from students and colleagues from England (Joe Whittaker), Denmark (Bent Vandborg Sørensen) and Sweden (Lennarth Anderssen) - And with students we returned the visits and started an intensive exchange programme.

But only in the last few years have these contacts been enriched by links with countries of the South, especially India. These exchanges I started in 1999 at the world conference of the International Community Education Association in Oxford. There I met members of NYSASDRI, which has now become one of the Cooperation Partners in this project. At that time I set up a network in the ICEA on 'Disability and diversity in the community'. Some members of our advisory board here today are also members at the network.

The first reciprocal visits between Germany and India started then. In the year 2000 the Indian colleagues came to Dortmund and participated in one of my inclusion seminars with students and people with different abilities.

And in 2001 I went to India and we decided to organise a student exchange programme and to work together on questions of inclusion and supporting programmes in the community for and with disabled persons. I was glad of the chance to meet faculty members from all three Universities in Bhubaneswar. Meeting Prof. Asha Hans at that time and talking about diversity and equality, themes which are central to the work of both of us, is an event that remains particularly in my memory.

In the same year, on the invitation of Prof. Jürgen Zimmer, another member of our advisory board, I also attended a think tank in Chang Mai, preparing a workshop for the world conference of community education in New Delhi which was planned to take place in 2003. (We planned a network meeting for that conference. However, the whole conference was cancelled after a year´s preparation and the registration of over 1000 participants, because of the impending Iraq war.), At the Chang Mai think tank I was very lucky to meet Jagdish Shah, president of the Indian community education association and Prof. Haribau Kedar, former vice chancellor of Nagpur University, both of whom have also joined our advisory board. Prof. Kedar will talk after Prof. Zimmer from the Free University Berlin.

When the chance arose to bid for a project in the EU-India Economic Cross Cultural Programme, this seemed to be exactly the right opportunity at the right time to consolidate the network built up so far. What had been up to then informal dialogue, exchange and networking between the partners could achieve, via this project, a more structured and systematic framework.

In the summer of 2003, instead of sweating in the sun, swotting in front of the computer and internet and telephone was on the agenda. To draft the application, Joe Whittaker from Bolton Institute came especially from England and with the core team of Joe and Philip Potter and Sarang Samal from India and me we developed our proposal. Without Philip as an expert on project acquisition and evaluation and a diplomat by blood from his childhood socialisation and without Joe who not only teaches inclusion at his university but lives it, and without Sarang, who co-ordinated the communication with Utkal University, this project would never have taken place.

Mission of the COS project

So now I would like to say a bit about our project. What is our project, and what is its theoretical basis.

Our task together was to work out a common project which would meet the interests of people with the label disabled, academics and practitioners from very different cultures. But at the same time we did not want the project to be too diffuse. We wanted it to have a practical orientation linking academic training and practical work in the field of human social services. And of course we needed it to pick up current theoretical debates and practical developments.

That is why I was very glad to find common ground with the other operational partners around contemporary debates on **inclusion** and **diversity,** and that is why we chose circles of support. Circles of support COS are working towards building inclusive neighbourhoods and communities and addresses the exclusion that certain members of society experience.

What is a circle of support? A circle of support is a group of people who meet together regularly to help a vulnerable individual accomplish his or her personal goals in life, which cannot be achieved independently.. A Circle generally consist of one vulnerable person (focus person) and 2 to 5 support persons.

The members of COS include the person with support needs, who we call the focus person. He or she is the primus inter pares. The other COS members can be made up of quite a mix of people including family members, neighbours, friends and students (as is the case in the Dortmund model). The members of the circle of support may include a facilitator. The success of a circle depends greatly on well trained facilitators. The facilitators role is to find out with the focus person, what his hopes are, to encourage him or her to dream and clarify his vision for the future and whom he would like to have as circle members to assist him with this. Facilitators support the circles at the beginning and are involved, later, whenever necessary.

A circle properly facilitated is empowering to all of the individuals involved and does not reinforce dependence. A circle can support a person in a lot of different ways, for example in everyday matters, in working life, and in social relations. This is a main focus of our COS groups with people with autism.

COS will support the focus person to build bridges and make connection with the community and vice versa, support community members to make connections and overcome prejudices. Our grounding principle is a social-systemic approach. Inclusion is central to the whole idea of COS. Inclusiveness in our understanding means that everyone belongs and everyone contributes – not **regardless of** but **because of** their different abilities.

COS don't have any formal structure of individual planning, therapeutic or educational groups. The special characteristics of the circles are the **informal character and relationships** involved. But the facilitator provides the minimal

structure needed to keep the COS going and prevent them from falling apart, providing contacts to further local and professional links, if necessary.

I know that Mandy Neville, also a member of our advisory board from Circles Network, a well developed voluntary organization with a lot of experiences in the UK will talk about circles in detail tomorrow. I am happy and looking forward to that.

Theoretical basis of the project: Inclusion and diversity

What are the theoretical principles and dimensions COS is based on ?

A circle of support …
- Is in its theoretical orientation based on the **normalization**, **Community based** Rehabilitation and **inclusion** principles.
- Is community based, that means based in real life situations not in artificial or therapeutic settings
- promotes self-determination, empowerment and age-appropriateness
- Requires a rethinking of professional value systems: the person with the label disabled as the focus partner in a process and relationship of interdependence, with an own role on the interface between professionalism and voluntarism).
- Finally, COS can be understood as basic strategies for the initiation of changes in the consciousness and behaviour of the public.

This are ambitious objectives. All goals start with the first step. Usually (**here I can speak especially from Germany)** the first step **too often** starts from the top. And…..It is difficult to walk in the air. So for the first step we have to start on the ground, at the grass root level. That is why we start at the micro-level with COS and think about all the implications.
I want to make the point that my description of the path we have taken to reach the values and strategies of inclusion and diversity is a path that has been taken in the West. I can only talk about this from the perspective of my cultures, and even though in our various long and fruitful discussion we realised that different cultures may share many of the same aspirations towards inclusion and diversity, each will have reached this similar point by a very different historical path. In India I saw a lot of inclusion in the communities. I was impressed by a lot of situations and adaptations which were done to include people for example in the work situation in a village crafts-workshop. But I often heard that this took place because of the non-existence of special institutions.

Normalisation and inclusion

It is not the right place and time now, to talk about the traditional and new normalization-debates in detail. So I will restrict myself to a few words on this point.

Over time the guiding principles of working with people with different abilities have changed. We could say the normalisation principle can be understood as a reform concept, a paradigm shift in the theoretical and practical work with people with different abilities. While traditional approaches can be characterized as deficit-oriented and dominated by professionals, that is to say top-down, new approaches are more emancipatory and could be termed more as self-determined, bottom-up initiatives. This normalisation discussion has been an important debate in the West.

I am not the right person to talk about the **community based rehabilitation** programmes (CBR) in India. In India, the Community based rehabilitation movement has developed similar value orientations as the normalization and inclusion movement in the West. There is a broad consensus around this value orientation but there are many difficulties in putting these orientations into practice **within traditional structures of service delivery**….and that is the same in both cultures. The movement from professional and structural power and determination towards consumer empowerment and interdependence is long and never ending one. Empowerment and self determination is not a goal but a way of thinking and acting.

COS and activities in the local community

Traditionally, human service agencies have often and in many ways created barriers to community participation and social relationships. Special institutions and special skills were built as instruments to help people with assistance needs and to often in reality became more and more instruments of power and suppression and stigmatization.

This is where the new movement comes in: The particularities of this new movement are the following
♦ focusing and facilitating of self-determination and empowerment
♦ acting and participating in everyday life and the environment of the people concerned, and
♦ calling into question which actions and conditions help to build up a positive self image and which are more identity-reducing.

Here we have reached another a turning point: we enter new paths. COS are founded on the **discovery of abilities and potentials of the people in focus** themselves and also on abilities and potentials in the communities.

Self-determination and empowerment means the realization of one´s own strengths and power and rights.
In contrast to expert-oriented interventions, empowerment starts with the abilities of individuals and groups for self-organization and self-determination of their own lifestyles. The principal goals are not self-adaptation, but rather **self determination**; **not integration** (which means that people have to be segregated before) but **inclusion** and the **appreciation of difference**. Difference not in the understanding of making the world more chaotic but making the world richer and giving each other more variety of life and experiences. Here the COS have a very important role to play.

The professional as facilitator and the COS members

The staff working in the framework of inclusion and community participation and so with in COS groups need additional and different skills and knowledge than what has been traditionally expected of them. Changes in the working conditions and the professional roles and value systems have to be recognized. **This fact has important consequences for how we in universities design and reform our human sciences curricula**. The challenge is to open our Universities of applied sciences really to the community: both the local community and the global community. What can we learn from each other, from Indian universities and communities, where inclusion is naturally there but often without any links to professional knowledge or from Western situations where professional knowledge has been developed but often leading towards exclusion from the natural communities and towards artificial communities and artificial supporting networks.

I can't here talk about the whole complexity of the change in all working situations. Here I would like to focus on the role of a facilitator of a COS group: as a networker and bridge builder between different local actors.

The change could be described as:
♦ from duality in artificial situations to plurality in natural situations
Traditionally interactions were dual (or bilateral) between the client and the professional.
In the community, interactions become plural: interactions with the total mix of people of a circle of support. The possibilities of social encounters are not dual and limited but plural and diverse.

♦ from dominance to interdependence:

Traditional training for work with people with support needs was based on the assumption that professionals had to take a lead role and power and had to take all necessary decisions themselves.

Now we are recognizing that we can learn a lot from people with assistance needs and their perception of the world, and from their own understanding of what they need. We can develop dialogical relationships and communication as equal partners when we learn to listen and understand each other.

♦ from the planned and plannable to the unplanned and unplannable:

If the community is really to be included in the life of the focus person, the kinds of interactions and the contents of the work of the facilitators need to be changed. For them and for the focus person and other COS members this means extending individual and social actions and locating learning processes in real situations in the community - in contrast to artificially constructed situations (therapeutic laboratories) in segregated institutions.

The community: recognizing interdependence and diversity

Community Education has to be understood as a mutual / reciprocal learning process. That also means that we not only have to work in the community but also with community members. If people with disabilities are seldom present in the public, society, because of this absence, has little or no chance to change prejudices and overcome avoidance strategies and fear of contact. If people are more present and present with COS as role models, avoidance strategies and fear of contact needn't be the only coping strategies for a new situation. Community members experience natural ways of coping and perceive the fun that COS groups can have in community activities but also experience ways of dealing with challenging behaviour. COS groups can do a lot to relax the atmosphere and defuse potential conflicts. Even if they make mistakes it relaxes the atmosphere because everybody can learn out of the mistakes.

Here it is important and necessary to initiate contact and consciousness-raising and reflection processes. Political declarations, such as the international year of the disabled or the year of the volunteer might be important starts but than then difficult everyday processes start and they are small. They take place on the markets, the little or big shops, in the street, in the bus, That is, where the COS groups are. Not on glossy paper but on the sometimes muddy real earth.

♦ new forms of relations with the community:

The COS paradigm moves away from the purely charity-oriented public relations, which very often are connected with a lack of dignity in the presentation of the people concerned. People with support needs are very often

presented as special persons, who live in special situations, being taken with special buses to special schools and special workshops and are dependent on special donations. Who wants to identify with this description??....

♦ facilitating the change of public attitudes:
Important tasks for the present are to initiate public inclusion. Also Community education has an important role to play here: Community education, understood as a action-oriented intervention, which includes interaction and shared activities and experiences in real situations. This approach focuses on the importance of people talking and acting for themselves. People being involved in community activities as customers in shops at the hairdresser and the health club, as participants at the concert or football game, or art session with a local artist or in the work situation in the local café or supermarket or library. etc.

♦ recognising interdependence and diversity:
For people with assistance needs a life in anonymous, life worlds, in which each individual in isolation just looks after himself, is not possible. People have a need for assistance and this can be combined with social interactions and human encounters and relationships. And there are people in the community who are open for it and are even thankful for it. We have made experiences with the whole continuum of public reactions from very rejecting to very participating and open ones. We have to be prepared and open for all sorts of human encounters. We all are more confronted with our individual fear of getting rejected and the need overcome this.
This means it is necessary to realize that segregation of people in marginalized positions means a restriction in variety of humanity. Segregation produces an artificial homogeneity instead of a natural diversity.

COS is a mini step towards inclusion and diversity. And cannot all be achieved from one day to the next. COS is a beginning but it is a very movement which needs lots of time and energy and stamina from all sides. This also means to rediscover slowness. Perhaps in our society of hectic and speed a new paradigm, a paradigm which can shift our view of the world a little.

Thank you
Dunjabad
Danke schön

I would like to introduce the next speakers:
Prof Jürgen Zimmer – professor and former head of Intercultural studies at the Free University of Berlin, and past President of the International Community Education Association, Developer of the Situation approach in Germany and the world. Jürgen introduced me to Asia.

and Prof. Haribhau Kedar, former vice chancellor, Nagpur University, India. Haribhau has given lots of shape to many world organizations and I was very lucky to meet him at the think tank in Chiang Mai. I appreciate Haribhau very much, his intellect, his humanity and his humour. Without him our project wouldn't be were it now is. I am very thankful for that.