

CIRCLES OF SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND AUTISM IN INDIA AND THE EU

Developing qualification modules for person-centred community inclusion networks with vulnerable individuals



**A project in Germany, India, and Britain 2004 – 2006
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Lead partner:

Dortmund University of Applied Sciences, Dortmund, Germany

Operational partners:

Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India

NYSASDRI, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India

Bolton Institute of Higher Education, Bolton, UK

Transnational co-ordination partner:

Klaus Novy Institut, Cologne, Germany

“I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.” Mahatma Gandhi

Circles of support for community inclusion

Both in India and in the European Union, vulnerable individuals are in danger of exclusion or excluded from community and neighbourhood. Official declarations call for equal opportunities, full social and economic participation and empowerment of people with different support needs. But processes of social change place communities under severe tension, and the most vulnerable members of society come under the threat of exclusion. Although the specific characteristics of these tensions vary considerably in the EU and India, there is nevertheless in both regions a search for ways to facilitate and promote the cohesive and inclusive qualities of communities. We need to address these aspirations. One way is through strengthening the informal support networks in local communities, empowering their members better to include their more vulnerable members. The idea of ‘circles of support’ is an approach we are promoting in this European-Indian project.

What is a circle of support?

A circle of support is a group of people who meet together regularly to help an individual (the ‘focus person’) accomplish his or her personal goals in life. The circle acts as a community around that person who, for one reason or another, is unable to achieve his or her aspirations independently. The members of the circle of support, who may include family, friends and other community members, are usually not paid for their involvement. A circle properly facilitated is empowering to all of the individuals involved (not just the focus person) and, unlike many human service systems, does not reinforce dependence.

A circle can support a focus person

- in everyday matters - assistance in activities of daily life,
- in working life - assistance in economic activity and employment,
- in social life - assistance in interpersonal and social relations.

New rays of hope on how we train professionals and lay experts

Human services are coming more and more to focus on tapping and developing the resources of local communities – a changed role from providers to facilitators. This creates new challenges and at the same time poses new dangers. University curricula need on the one hand to train professionals in community facilitation and empowerment skills, while at the same time sharpening their critical awareness of the ambivalence of these developments in human services. This project seeks to contribute to this end.

The history of the project

The present project builds on previous meetings of the partners at international conferences, exchange visits and formal co-operation agreements signed between the partners concerned. The first discussions took place between Professor Evemarie Knust-Potter of Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Sabita Swain of NYSASDRI in 1999, at the time of the International Community Education Association (ICEA) world conference in Oxford. Following several exchange visits, the partners submitted a project proposal to the European Commission, which was approved early in 2004.

Project timetable

The project runs for 24 months from January 2004. The key meetings are six-monthly:

- 29 April - 1 May 2004, Bhubaneswar, India: First internal workshop of the partners
- 11-13 October 2004, Dortmund, Germany: First public conference, first think tank meeting, second internal workshop
- March 2005, Bhubaneswar, India: Third internal workshop
- October 2005, Bolton, England: Fourth internal workshop
- January 2006, Bhubaneswar, India: Second public conference, second think tank meeting, fifth internal workshop

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'Circles of support' press conference on 1st May 2004 in Bhubaneswar. From right to left: Thetis Titsidou (European Commission), Evemarie Knust-Potter (Dortmund University of Applied Sciences), Navin Kikabhai (Bolton Institute), Sarang Samal (NYSASDRI)