

Work and Employment for People with mental disabilities – a collaboration between Cape Town and Berlin

Doris Gräber speaks to Donald Vogel

In 2002, a lively exchange between Cape Mental Health Society (CMHS) in Cape Town (South Africa) and different institutions of the disability sector in Berlin, in particular the Nordberliner Werkgemeinschaft (nbw) started. It was brought to live by a personal initiative of Donald Vogel, head of the coordinating office of the child and youth ambulances in Berlin. After four years, the initiators and participants of this exchange project can look back upon some major developments. After the first visits and re-visits during the years of 2003 – 2004 in which broader issues were looked at first, the area of work and employment for people with disabilities was chosen as a central focus point of further exchange activities. Doris Gräber interviewed the initiator of this collaboration project.

Doris Gräber: Where did the strong interest for employment possibilities for people with disabilities [PwD] come from?

Donald Vogel: With the end of Apartheid in South Africa, and even a few years earlier, a process of transformation started within the Cape Mental Health Society (CMHS). I am not talking about the integration of all colours of skin and segments of South African society – this process is mostly over. Moreover there is a process happening, where people look at all aspects of the lives of people with disabilities. Not dissimilar to Germany in the 1950s and 1960s, the biggest problem in South Africa is that not all people with disabilities are integrated into the school system, and the small number of people with disabilities who have some sort of job or income. The number of places in workshops for people with disabilities is also insufficient in South Africa. So the first priority is the initiative to provide some form of daily care and education for all PwD. The second question one needs to ask is the question of what happens after school. How can we provide job opportunities and employment?

D.G.: What is CMHS offering to provide work opportunities for people with disabilities?

D. V.: The protected workshops of CMHS are structured in a similar way to German workshops. There are different life skills groups, training groups and production groups. But they focus on a different target group than in Germany as a result of financial, staff related and other constrictions. CMHS has introduced certain criteria a person with a disability has to fulfil, in order to provide that person with a meaningful programme. The trainees have to be able to make their own way to and from work, have to be clean and have to have a certain minimum work capacity. These are the main points. The focus at the moment is to place trainees (who would be classed as having learning difficulties here in Germany) into the open labour market. It is a group of people who are not far behind people without a disability in terms of their physical work capacity and their mental endurance. For this group of people the pressure is highest to help them out of the protected workshops into the open labour market. To support this, there are plans to open an integration company in the cleaning sector next year. We just had the chair person of the South African National Contract

Cleaning Association visiting. He is a business man committed to corporate social responsibility, and wants to support the founding of this integration company. This link to industry is of uttermost importance for CMHS. That is also the reason why the delegation of CMHS focused on the integration companies and related institutions in their visits to Germany. It seemed to be a logical solution, the missing link that had to be created in the SA system between workshops and the open labour market. On the other hand, qualified staff in the workshops is needed for this to work. In contrast to the workshops of nbw, at CMHS most staff are social workers without a formal education in economics or industrial production. Qualified staff is needed so that the product can be properly quality checked and the services can be effectively sold to businesses.

D.G.: Was a strengthening of the economic awareness of the staff of CMHS also a result of the project?

D.V.: I can best answer that by telling you about the exchange. In 2005, the delegates arrived as social workers with a big heart. They said you have to have the heart to work with people with disabilities and to be able to help them. Here in Germany, they were at an evening of discussion around the subject of loans for people with disabilities in order to start their own business. When a bank representative talked about the solvency of a person with disabilities, one of the South African participants jumped up to say that she thought the wrong people were working with people with disabilities in Germany. Too cold hearted! Following this incident, we arranged a workshop about starting a business in collaboration with the professional consultant of integration companies. This workshop changed the above mentioned participant's mind. She realised how important a sound economical concept for the creation of employment opportunities for PwD is. CMHS in turn realised the value of this realisation upon the participant's return.

D.G.: But there are also efforts by CMHS to place people with disabilities into the open labour market directly.

D.V.: Of course there are many activities running alongside this project in South Africa, for example the programme of the Umsobomvu Youth Fund. The fund provides financial support for young people and for the creation of employment possibilities, as well as for integration projects for people with disabilities. At CMHS this fund finances a project where people are trained to gain the necessary skills to be placed into a position in the open labour market. This project is the first model project of its sort. 600 people with disabilities from CMHS workshops who had applied, were put through an elaborate selection process. 40 trainees were selected and started training. The selection process involved visits to all the families in order to determine whether the social structures existed to support the person with disabilities sufficiently in their quest to survive in the open labour market. This was part of the criteria.

Of the 40 selected participants, 23 were placed in employment during the first phase. The job areas focused on cleaning, assisting with care for children, gardening and assisting with nursing. This project is now being continued with a renewed financial support fund. This project can be compared to the work our vocational training centres for PwD do. From our point of view, the training programme in South Africa has very short training phases, in between 1 and 3 months long, but they are then followed up by intensive support in the search for permanent employment.

D.G.: You mentioned the pressure to place PwD into the open labour market. Where does this pressure come from? Are there economic reasons or is there a ideological base, for example the support of the idea of integrating people with disabilities into society?

D.V.: There is a minimal basic social benefit paid in South Africa which is a little more than 100 Euro per month, but South Africa is, according to German standards, not a "Sozialstaat" [a state system with social support systems]. In this context a job possibility with an income is first and foremost an economic necessity. On the other hand, SA law claims broad based improvements for people with disabilities, which can be seen as constitutional wishful thinking. CMHS saw a strategic link between reality and legal possibilities, in particular in terms of the employment of PwD in connection with the Employment Equity Act (EEA). The EEA promotes black people, women and PwD. These are the three previously disadvantaged groups and there is political pressure to employ people from these groups in private firms and in public administrations.

In short, looking at analysis of the EEA, it becomes clear that white women have benefited from the act the most, because they possessed the necessary qualifications while also possessing the "previously disadvantaged" label. Black people have also benefited from the act. The only group which has not yet benefited are PwD. They are the smallest group within the previously disadvantaged groups and their lobby is not as strong as the other group's. This is also an area where CMHS comes in as a lobby group to fight for the implementation of the EEA in terms of PwD. It is one of CMHS's principle tasks.

D.G.: How does the organisation do lobby work in this context?

D.V.: To talk about everything would take us too far. I am going to give you one example. About half a year ago there was a commission put in place in South Africa, to look at the implementation results of the EEA in the area of disabilities. CMHS invited a German expert of the field to talk to this commission. The commission has agreed to a re-visit in Germany this year. They do not want to and cannot take over the German legislation in full, that would be unrealistic, but they can take inspiration and ideas around the implementation of an equity act and decide if some of the details can be of value for South Africa. It is all about finding answers to questions like: How can we implement a compensatory levy? How can we make sure that firms are paying the correct levies? How can we motivate companies to give contracts to integration companies? In South Africa, in some instances subsidies from the labour department are being paid out, but there are no regional public administrations like the integration offices in Germany.

D.G.: Is the CMHS promoting all PwD or are they – according to their name – looking only after people with mental disabilities?

D.V.: There is a general pressure to provide support to all PwD but of course the focus of CMHS is on people with mental disabilities, so people with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities. As a Mental Health Society they are also offering activities for people without disabilities to keep mentally healthy. Such activities include relaxation and anti-stress programmes. Often, you find this kind of Mental Health movement in English speaking countries where they try to extend the phrase to all sections of the

society. This is beneficial for the positioning of the organisation within the society. And in terms of inclusion one wonders if it is not a disadvantage for an organisation to only focus on one group of people. That is one of the ideas that were picked up during the first visit of the South Africans here in Berlin.

D.G.: You have already mentioned a few aspects how a collaborating partner can benefit from the experiences of the other partner. Are there any concrete ideas or impulses that were taken up, yet?

D.V.: Yes, there are a number of simple examples that I can refer to. I am thinking of one of the South African participants, supervisor in one of the sections in a CMHS workshop. Her main finding after her visit was: "they can do it". And there was a profound change implemented in her workshop after only five days in Germany. Before, the trainees in the workshops had a meal cooked for them during the day. Now they are helping with choosing the menu, cooking and of course with the serving of the meal.

D.G.: So that means that the PwD in South Africa are now given more responsibility by CMHS staff as a result of the exchange with Germany?

D.V.: Our South African partners were amazed by the amount of responsibility PwD have here and how they are being pushed to better themselves. This is one of the messages they were able to take along with them. It is of course a long process of changing one's perception. Still, there is a lot that needs to be done in this field, also in Germany. It is beneficial for both sides to look over each other's shoulder. A second example: when the South African delegation first came to look at workshops in Berlin, they had the feeling they walked into big empty spaces. How can you provide so much space to only so few people? In the space of a German institution the South Africans would have worked with at least twice if not three times the amount of people. This is a result of low technological standards in the South African workshops on the one hand, and the type of work PwD are doing, on the other hand. However, a move away from arts and crafts production which was also typical in Germany in the beginning, to service provision such as laundry or cleaning services becomes noticeable. It is a development that is still in the process over here, because the area of service provision is realised more and more as a superb opportunity to integrate PwD into society.

D.G.: Which aspects can you name that the German side benefits from?

D.V.: The German side benefits for example in the area of how principles are being discussed and defined in writing. In this area I feel some German providers can take another closer look. In the case of sexual harassment for example internal investigation processes are essential. There are very clearly defined procedures to follow at CMHS. They have to be highly transparent in some areas to remain credible internally and externally, and to remain a credible lobby organisation. In the light of HIV/Aids, sexuality is of course a subject of heightened sensibility in South Africa. There is another point where I can see a beneficial exchange of ideas for the German side, which involves the possibilities of raising funds through fundraising. CMHS was subsidised up to 80% until the fall of the Apartheid system, similar to most of our NGOs. Now CMHS has arrived at a percentage of 42% government subsidies. This happened without a direct decrease of budget but through inflation

that ensured the budget became simply worth less. The rest of the finances have to be raised in different ways. In this area NGOs in Germany can still operate in a relatively relaxed fashion by comparison. But I see it as something like a glimpse of the future for us, because the pressure of private funding has increased immensely in Germany.

D.G.: In what ways does CMHS include its people, especially in terms of lobby work? Is there a way of participation for PwD at CMHS? Is there a connection to the DPSA (Disables People South Africa)?

D.V.: There is a forum at CMHS where PwD fulfil an advisory function similar to the board of the "Lebenshilfe". But the members of this forum are not elected as the members of the "Lebenshilfe" board are, they were selected by management with influence of the parents. To me this sounds like a practical semi-democratic process. The main focus is on people who are well articulated. So there is not yet an open election process.

The government commission on the EEA that I mentioned earlier has a member of the DPSA. This member will be visiting Germany this year. He also functions as the main link between CMHS and the SA government commission on EEA.

D.G.: How will the project continue? What are the perspectives at the moment?

D.V.: As a first step I have initiated the signing of a collaboration contract between CMHS and nbw, which is a way to fixate in writing what we want and who is responsible for it. When I will be in Cape Town next time, we will have to talk about a further collaboration agreement if the project is to be continued. Also, I have to negotiate with the Berlin partners if they are willing to support the project for another two years. It would be beneficial to add more funding to the project. That way, it would be possible to exchange higher qualified personnel. But the German side wants to know exactly what the goals and gains are in this case. There are still some imbalances. If one would send staff to SA for a longer period of time any manager would naturally ask him/herself: What are the exact benefits for the South Africans? And what are our benefits? The will is there and also a certain positive attitude towards the subject but the point of financing the whole thing is quickly dividing reality from wishful thinking.

D.G.: thank you very much for the interview.

Background information: CMHS was founded in 1913. Today, it includes two accommodation centres for people with mental disabilities, four day care centres for children and young people with partly severe disabilities, as well as five workshops for PwD. There is also a Centre for adults with psychiatric disabilities where they can find an open programme for social rehabilitation to counteract unemployment, and help with formalities in connection with governmental benefits. Offers are community orientated in terms of the target groups as well as the staff who are mostly from the immediately surrounding communities. During the first short visits from CMHS representatives and staff of various organisations such as the Lebenshilfe, nbw, the Paritätischer Landesverband Berlin, and the Sozialverband VdK, the focus on jobs and employment for PwD was worked out between the collaborating partners. This collaboration is also connected to the national network SAGE Net (South African German Network, www.sage-net.org). Since 2005 exchange programmes, North-

south-projects with ASA (programmes for work and study exchanges overseas) which are financed by InWent, are also linked to the project. Other projects to exchange experts have been financially supported by the Federal Ministry for Women, Old People, Family and Youth.