



Meeting report

Diaconia in urban areas

9th & 10th of November 2015 in Dusseldorf, Germany

On the 9th and 10th of November, Eurodiaconia held an exploratory meeting on diaconia in urban areas, discussing challenges and chances of providing social services in the city. The meeting was hosted by Diakonie Dusseldorf in Dusseldorf, Germany.

Theresa Schlage, Policy, Projects and Research Officer of Eurodiaconia, welcomed the participants and presented the agenda of the meeting. Thorsten Nolting, minister and chairman at Diakonie Dusseldorf, welcomed the guests with greetings from the superintendent and led a time of devotion. Afterwards, he opened the meeting by presenting the work of Diakonie Dusseldorf.

Thorsten Nolting, Diakonie Dusseldorf

Thorsten Nolting started off by explaining the history of the Bergerkirche, the church where the meeting took place, and its use as an office space for social innovation and projects. He continued by presenting the main areas of work of Diakonie Dusseldorf, stressing that the provision of services for refugees has recently become one of the main priorities. About 3,000 refugees were in contact with Diakonie Dusseldorf at that time, receiving help with searching for schools and jobs as well as going to the doctor. The biggest challenge in that regard was the rapidly growing number of refugees, which was not easy to handle with a limited amount of resources. Next to supporting refugees, Diakonie Dusseldorf runs different social projects and institutions, such as kindergartens, schools and care centers for elderly people. Here, another challenge was the integration of handicapped people. They usually live in closed houses and thus apart from society. Therefore, special initiatives are run by Diakonie Dusseldorf which aim at putting them into normal life situations again.

Dorte Andersen, Arbejde adler - Dansk Diakoniråd

Dorte Andersen presented a project of the organisation 'Arbejde Adler' which focuses on assisting homeless people to leave the streets for better options. The work of the organisation is based on the core believe that people should be given work and not charity, calling for a labour market that grants work for everyone. The organisation runs several institutions which support homeless who face several other issues as well, such as illness or drug addiction. One of these institutions is a temporary housing possibility for people who cannot live alone again after a hospital stay. It offers a rehabilitation service in cooperation with the municipality as well as cultural and social activities. The patients are supposed to stay no longer than 12 weeks after their hospital stay and should then be redirected to a living possibility by the municipality. However, in reality the patients stay longer, on average up to 12 months, as many are not ready to leave due to a mix of different problems. Next to illness, they are often facing addiction problems, a lack of social networks, little formal education, signs of dementia, malnutrition and others. These circumstances require approaches going beyond rehabilitation services, which the organisation can however not offer due to limited resources and capacity. Another challenge is the lack of attention given to those homeless people as most diaconal actors and institutions





mainly help the more visible homeless people who live in the city centres or in the central stations. This leads to decreased support for the hospitalised homeless and lacking willingness of other actors to cooperate and support initiatives aimed at helping this target group.

Julio David Garcia Justamante, Nueva Vida/ Diaconia Espana

Julio David Garcia Justamante first of all presented the situation in Spain, stating that the crisis in Spain has led to increased unemployment and social emergencies. Nueva Vida runs different projects to support people in need, such as homeless, children, unemployed and jail inhabitants. For the latter, an integrated employment programme has been launched in cooperation with businesses. It consists of 200 hours training courses and 100 hours business practice, helping them to be guided back into society and to regain control of their lives. Furthermore, a housing possibility for religious and psychological support is offered, providing a place to escape violence and to have a rest.

Per Kristian Hilden, Oslo Church City Mission

Per Kristian Hilden introduced the work of the City Mission Oslo which is active in many social fields such as elderly care, poverty reduction, volunteering centres and actions against human trafficking. He stresses the emergence of the working poor in Europe as a specific challenge, especially with regard to migrant workers who often live in inadequate basic conditions. Referring to a publication of Guy Standing, he talks of this newly emerging migrant group as the precariat, a word composed of the terms 'proletariat' and 'precarious'. This group is defined by working under insecure conditions, often short-term contracts, who have few options for work and hardly receive social security benefits. In Norway, the tendency for people falling into the precariat is still very low, and the few who might fall under this categorization are often (undocumented) migrants. Norwegian people are not used to people living in poor conditions as they have a strong social security system, some hold the attitude that if people are hungry, it is because they spend their money otherwise. Support for people such as undocumented migrants who fall out of the social security system is therefore limited.

Massimo Long, Diaconia Valdese

Massimo Long presented a project of the Valdesian Church for refugees in Turin. The organisation, co-funded by Otto per Mille, runs a counselling centre as well as language and active citizenship courses for refugees. The counselling centre offers breakfast and interviews every Thursday and is volunteer-based. During the courses, volunteers offer language training with an exam at the end and advice on how to be involved in social life. Furthermore, a social point was recently opened which provides a space for meeting and exchange of migrants and refugees. It is open to several associations as well which help refugees with translating school documents, for example.

Tobias Rohleder, Diakonie Deutschland

Tobias Rohleder started by stressing the need for critical observation of urban areas as well as related projects and shared some of his observations, for example that cities are anonymous and commercialised, and that diaconia can use this knowledge by raising money in shopping malls or using creative space to bring people together. He continued by presenting Diakonie Deutschland's work on the topic, including the project "We are all neighbours", an initiative of churches to connect people in communities, or the initiative "Kirche findet Stadt", a project where the role of churches in the development of urban areas is discussed and knowledge is exchanged.



Study Visit

At the beginning of the second day, the study visit took place which allowed the participants to see different social services sites of Diakonie Dusseldorf. As a first step, the Diakonie Campus was visited which hosts different social services at one place, including a kindergarten, an elderly care home, a counselling centre, a care home for people with disabilities and a refugee shelter. Around 300 people are employed on this campus, which also hosts a church where people can gather to pray. Thorsten Nolting led the participants into the church where he presented the history of the building and the division of social services on the campus. Subsequently, the head of social workers working in refugee homes of Diakonie Dusseldorf presented his work, explaining the advice and consultation services they provide for refugees regarding financial matters, schools and others.

After having presented the Diakonie Campus, Nolting showed the participants a social shop run by Diakonie Dusseldorf. This shop has a double social effect as it on the one hand hires people with disabilities, providing them with a contract and employment benefits, and on the other hand sells products for low prices so that people in poverty are able to afford them. Everyone is allowed to buy goods at the shop, disadvantaged people however get a discount card of 30% on top of the cheap prices. As a next step, the group passed by a refugee block in Dusseldorf where about 200 accepted refugees are living. The blocks are simple living commodities which were built fast, yet they provide basic facilities and are located at the heart of the city where establishing connections to the host community is easier than in disconnected areas. Furthermore, the group walked by a shelter for girls and women run by Diakonie Dusseldorf where children and young women can find shelter and live together.

The next destination was a homelessness centre. The centre offers shelter, bathroom installations and food to homeless people in exchange of a small symbolic amount, as well as computers and internet connection so that people can look for housing and jobs. Furthermore, homeless people can take part in social activities, such as a photo project where cameras are provided so that homeless can capture their lives. The results are exhibited throughout the buildings of the shelter home. As a last step, Nolting led the participants to a social café located in a church where cheap food and drinks are offered to all people. Moreover, it serves as a meeting point for the community.

Presentation Dirk Geldof

Dirk Geldof from the University of Antwerp presented his research on challenges in urban areas. He first of all discussed his concept of 'superdiversity' which describes the growing number of different ethnicities in communities. According to Geldof, the 21st century is the age of superdiversity, which has its roots in the foregoing century where West European states attracted foreign workers in large numbers. The highest concentration of diverse ethnicities living together can be found in metropolises, some of which he also calls 'majority minority' cities. These cities are characterized by the fact that there is no clear ethnic majority, but that the majority of inhabitants is made up of different minorities. This situation is going to even increase in most cities as children born by minorities will grow up and give birth to children with diverse backgrounds as well. Next to the actual number of people from a different ethnic background living in one city, Geldof also sees an increase in the number of different ethnicities represented by those people. Whereas back in the 20th century, most countries were able to identify the most common foreigner groups living on their territory, such as Italians and Spanish or Moroccan and Turkish people, nowadays the mix of ethnicities represented in one country is too diverse to reduce it to a few.

The challenges Geldof sees in these developments are among others the growing need for intercultural and linguistic skills of people working with citizens in first line, such as teachers, police men, doctors and social workers. Furthermore, an increasing number of undocumented migrants might lead to poverty and social exclusion, as the access to services is restricted which also exacerbates the work for social service providers. Another major challenge is related to the question of identity: people of the host community might seek distance



to foreigners, creating a 'we' versus 'them' atmosphere. This is linked to general questions of whether assimilation or integration of foreigners is favoured, also from the perspective of the migrants. In conclusion, Geldof said that superdiversity is neither a good nor a bad concept, but that it is simply the reality of Europe today, with the outcome depending on the way society deals with this development. For the future, he projected two scenarios: The first is characterized by fear and polarization, where migrants are considered as a threat and poverty among minorities is increasing. The second scenario is characterized by hope and empowerment, where multiple identities are recognized by society and minorities are emancipated.

Group work

In the final group work, the participants discussed the outcomes of the diaconia in urban areas meeting. A majority stressed the usefulness of exchanging knowledge on the situation in different European countries, especially on the systems and strategies in handling social services in urban areas. However, it was also mentioned that the topic of urban areas is extremely broad which made it hard to go into depth during the discussions. For future network meetings, it was stressed that study visits are highly appreciated, as well as the discussion of innovative ways to enable trans-border cooperation.

After the group work, Theresa closed the meeting by thanking Diakonie Dusseldorf for hosting and the participants for attending and contributing to the meeting.