

# User Participation and Empowerment Toolkit

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Eurodiaconia is a **dynamic**, Europe wide **community** of organisations founded in the **Christian faith** and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of **solidarity, equality** and **justice**. As the **leading network of Diaconia in Europe**, we connect organisations, institutions and churches providing **social and health services and education** on a Christian value base in over 30 European countries.

We bring members together to **share practices, impact social policy** and **reflect on Diaconia in Europe today**.

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## Introduction:

# Better social services through empowered users

Social services aim to help persons facing vulnerability or marginalization. Many social service users, therefore, are confronted with individual or social barriers to lead independent lives, fully integrate into society and play an active role as citizens. Diaconal organizations firmly believe that each person has unique qualities that should be nurtured in order to achieve personal growth and fulfil individuals' full potential. For this reason, social services are instrumental to filling the gaps that may arise along an individual's life and putting them back on track, restoring their dignity, ensuring adequate quality of life and enabling the development of his capacities.

However, the reverse argument is also true. Service users' skills and capabilities, together with their individual experience of service provision, are also key to render social services better. From this perspective, empowering service users also constitutes an investment that yields positive returns for providers and users alike. On the one hand, the quality of services and their ability to match more precisely users' needs and expectations will be enhanced by empowered users. On the other hand, a more important role of users in the design and process of service provision increases their ownership and, moreover, will sparkle a virtuous circle leading to further pro-user service outcomes. A positive attitude towards user participation is ultimately an enabling factor leading to more effective outcomes. In other words, believing in users' capabilities is both a precondition and an instrumental element for successful service interventions built under co-creation between users and providers.

Empowerment, therefore, constitutes a process enabling people to increase control over their

lives, to oversee the factors and decisions that shape their lives, to increase their resources and qualities and to build capacities to gain access, partners, networks, a voice, in order to gain control<sup>1</sup>.

This toolkit updates previous Eurodiaconia messages stressing the importance of user participation and empowerment for quality social services. Over the last years, profound changes have transformed significantly the framework in which social services are funded and the way in which their quality and effectiveness assessed. The European Commission's call for a Renewed Social Agenda, which set the basic policy framework for social innovation, explicitly mentioned that opportunity, access and solidarity principles are propelled by empowerment and responsibility, and identified these two dimensions as key drivers of social policy modernization<sup>2</sup>. In the view of Eurodiaconia, the development of channels through which users can voice their views on service provision is critical to quality outcomes<sup>3</sup>. As a result of this, Eurodiaconia believes that user empowerment should be further mainstreamed into diaconal service provision and, following this, be strongly emphasised as an asset in the dialogue between service providers and other stakeholders –in particular, contracting authorities–.

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1 United Nations Social Development Network, Empowerment: what does it mean to you?, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2013.

2 Renewed Social Agenda: Opportunities, access and solidarity in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe, COM (2008) 412 final

3 In fact, this document must be read in parallel to Eurodiaconia's updated *Principles for Quality Diaconal Social Services*, December 2015.

## Towards cooperative user participation

The traditional top-down relationship between public authorities in charge of designing social services, providers and recipients has become obsolete. New social governance structures, together with an increased demand of users to share control and responsibility over the organization and delivery of social services have transformed the institutional framework of social service provision over the last years. New technologies and the associated opportunities for a digital governance of services have also played an enabling role, giving way to users' participation and tending towards an 'open system' context<sup>4</sup>.

However, favourable as the context may be, significant hurdles to effective user participation in social service provision are still in place. In this respect, the separation of the stages of planning, design, financing and delivery of services, which adds to the split between contracting authorities and service providers adds complexity to users' effective involvement across the full continuum of service intervention.

In addition to this, user participation may not necessarily bring the desired quality outcomes immediately. Whereas sharing the raw views of users on an individual basis may already prove a useful channel of participation and mutual learning, users need to have a prior, collective understanding of their own rights, skills, needs and rational service expectations in order to take full advantage of users' participation. Only under an adequate environment where empowerment is effectively nurtured –before, during and after the experience of service– will user

participation constitute a transformative driver with positive outcomes for all.

While recognizing the potential benefits of 'informed' user empowerment, it is important at the same time to have a rational understanding of its limits as well. In this way, user participation needs to strike the right balance between enabling people to take full control over their lives, on the one hand, and allowing professional criteria to prevail when necessary, on the other. Whenever conflict arises, it is essential that dialogue channels are used in order to bring conflicting views towards a consensus. It is, therefore, necessary that empowerment encourages partnerships that render social services effective and more qualifiable and not to antagonistic relationships which are likely to result in net losses for users, providers and practitioners.

User empowerment requires additional efforts from all parts involved and social service providers may, for instance, perceive it as time consuming and resource intensive, diverting from the 'core' mission of service delivery. Concerns have also been raised that bringing in more participants in the process of planning and delivering services will not necessarily lead to a consensus, making it more difficult for professionals to act according to their professional needs. Even when the crucial importance of user participation is acknowledged, its implementation may encounter some difficulties at the practical level. For instance, involving users with cognitive impairments has some challenges associated which may be only partially overcome by the equally complex involvement of users' families or friends. However, social service providers should still be able to recognize the gains in quality brought by user involvement and, also, the cost saving opportunities associated to working in close cooperation with final users.

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4 Stephen P. Osborne and Kirsty Strokosch, 'It takes two to tango? Understanding the co-production of public services by integrating the services management and public administration perspectives', *British Journal of Management*, 24, 2013, S31-S47.

Comprehensive user participation needs to be neatly distinguished from 'consumerist' perspectives where users' freedom of choice is viewed as a necessary and sufficient condition to challenge providers' dominance and improve users' well-being. Such narrow understanding views users as agents with freedom of choice but without control over available choices. In addition to constituting a partial approach, consumerist perspectives only have a limited impact on users' wellbeing because they tend to reproduce existing inequalities. In this way, users with lower incomes, lower education levels and extended family obligations are less likely to have access to information and use their right to choose in an effective manner<sup>5</sup>.

This only stresses the need for enabling tools and environments for user involvement to effectively translate into quality social services. Such enabling approach should start by guaranteeing better and more equitable access to social services and continue until the evaluation stage.

In the light of the multi-faceted meaning of empowerment, this toolkit does not aim to provide a univocal definition of the concept or have a prescriptive function. On the contrary, the document should be read as a starting point for a better understanding of the different dimensions of user empowerment, a subsequent exploration of opportunities to implement user participation in diaconal social services and a call for dialogue among the different parties involved.

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5 With this regard, it is worth noting that recent evaluation of user choice policies in countries like the UK tend to mirror existing social inequalities; Marianna Fotaki, 'Towards developing new partnerships in public services: users as consumers, citizens and/or co-producers in health and social care in England and Sweden', *Public Administration*, 89, 3, 2011, pp. 933-55

## What do we mean by empowerment?

- Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing an individual to think, behave, take action and control decisions in an autonomous way.
- Empowerment is also a state of feeling entitled to believe in one's own magnitude and to take control of one's own destiny.
- The meaning of empowerment is multi-faceted and may relate to ideas of power, participation, capability, autonomy, choice and freedom.
- Empowerment is a process that is similar to a path or journey, one that develops as we work through it.
- Empowerment is a pro-active concept that encourages an active and initiative-taking approach to life. The individual process implies the will to influence the environment on all levels: it begins with a sense of faith in one's own strength, advances to activity in inter-personal domains, and continues towards advocacy for social change.
- Whereas an enabling framework is also needed, empowerment is first supported by individuals' skills, resources, confidence and awareness of their rights. Self-reflection and personal growth helps building a solid bridge to community connectedness and social change.

## Empowerment of social service users

- Social service users may draw important gains from empowerment and participation in as much as they are usually facing economic insecurity, physical and emotional stress, and physical or psychological deterioration.
- Empowerment is also key to overcome stereotypes, stigmatization, as well as discrimination sometimes faced by social service users.
- User empowerment does not mean unlimited license, but a responsible exercise of rights.
- Informed users may acquire an insider perspective that improves the understanding of service provision and identifies its challenges at the practice level. As a result, cooperative relationships should be established, allowing for net quality gains in service provision for users, providers, practitioners and society at large.
- Such knowledge may also extend to notions of cost. In this case, a transparent sharing of information on the value and cost of services may promote cost-sensible behaviour among users and, resulting from this, more sustainable services.

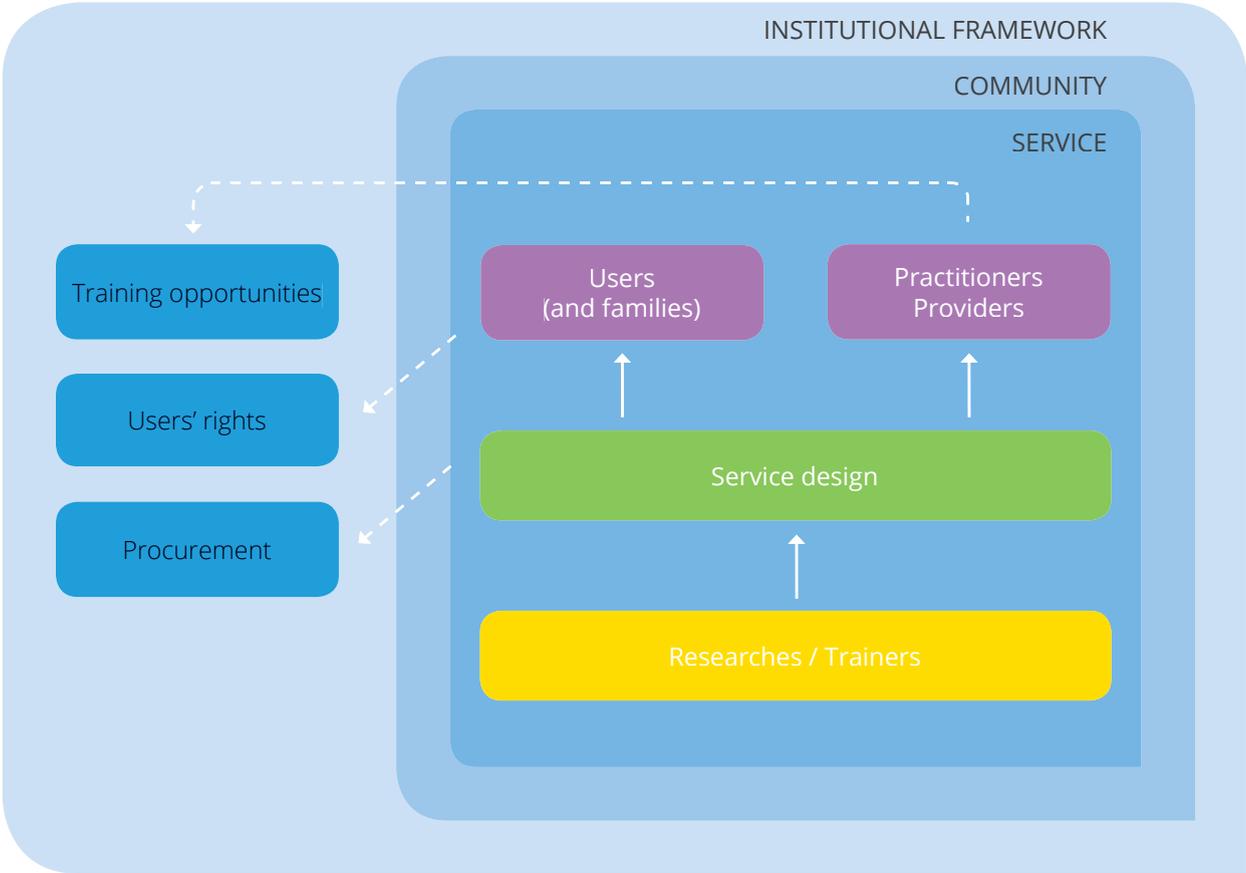
## Enabling institutional environment

- Stakeholders have the responsibility to create an environment which helps foster the ability and desire of users to act in empowered ways.
- In contrast to the strong emphasis on self-help and the diminished role of professional assistance which is sometimes used in partial empowerment approaches, effective empowerment should stress the role of external agents that enable change.
- User empowerment and participation is very tightly connected to the community and to a reliable, continuous institutional context at large. Empowerment is, by definition, a social process because it occurs in relationship to others.
- Since empowerment is usually set in motion by persons with self-awareness of their rights, etc., social capital is key to promote the adequate climate, institutional context and resources that enable people to achieve greater confidence and autonomy.
- Contracting authorities should be especially sensible to user participation and take into account this key dimension of quality into procurement. Ensuring that user participation is mainstreamed into the provision of social services should be reflected in a positive assessment of bids and be recognized as a key criteria to identify the 'most economically advantageous' tenders.

## Enabling environment at the service place

- The service environment should encourage, build and reward taking into account users' views, as well as the willingness to learn from them.
- Users must be able to communicate their needs effectively to practitioners, ensuring that their voices are listened to, acted upon or taken into consideration, at least. Users must be offered simple ways to communicate their needs or, alternatively, empathetic questions should be asked to them. If standard channels cannot deliver, a specific framework of discussion and reasoning between the practitioner and the user should be settled.
- User empowerment should be framed within an overall quality principles system that encompasses the overall provision of social services.
- Understanding empowerment as a zero-sum game, as something that you get at the expense of someone else, is not the right approach. Cooperation and mutual trust usually yield positive results for all, especially at the service level, where users' experience is instrumental to outcomes.
- Also, social service providers may benefit from a unified voice which, notwithstanding an equally desirable individual approach to service provision, avoids the pitfall of atomized users' interests.

**Figure 1.** The different layers of an enabling environment for user empowerment



Source: own elaboration

# Guiding principles of the Relationship between Users and Professionals

## Preconditions and climate for user empowerment

- Better, more reliable and more equitable access to service provision is the best guarantee that an adequate environment for user empowerment exists.
- Service structure and design may influence user participation. A flexible organizational structure, informal climates and professional autonomy for professionals are suitable to achieve empowerment goals. On the contrary, rigid structures, strong procedurisation and hierarchical approaches to practice will discourage empowerment and participation.
- Good relationships are usually at the foundation of better communications, fluent dialogue and improved performance. The quickest, most effective way of building relationships is by getting to know users personally and by establishing and keeping a professional closeness towards them.

## The ties between users, practitioners and beyond<sup>6</sup>

- In certain contexts, service staff and users are already inextricably bound in service provision, leading to effective co-creation. The experience of service is shaped in a very important way by the expectations of the user, their active role on the service delivery process and their experience of process and service-relevant facts.

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6 Relies heavily on Elisheva Sadan (2004 [1997]): 'Empowerment: definitions and meanings', in *Empowerment and community planning*, pp. 73-136, [http://www.mpow.org/elisheva\\_sadan\\_empowerment.pdf](http://www.mpow.org/elisheva_sadan_empowerment.pdf)

- Cooperation between social service providers and users is essential to the empowerment process. Users bring a distinctive knowledge about their lives and their own point of view about their problems, and providers (practitioners) bring specialized knowledge that stems from formal training and work experience with people suffering from the same problems. Through this connection, users are not seen as responsible for their problems, but as co-responsible for the solutions.
- User participation should have a place in the training and education of practitioners<sup>7</sup>. User-led training, together with figures like 'user trainers' should be promoted at the service level.
- User involvement in research is also of key importance.

## Users

- Users must be informed of their rights and of services available, with special attention given to users with impaired abilities to inform themselves.
- Informing users is not enough. Efforts must be taken to ensure users' ability to express their views through the establishment of appropriate communication channels. Ad hoc channels will be made available to users with difficulties to communicate verbally.

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7 Peter Beresford, 'Theory and practice of user involvement in research. Making the connection with public policy and practice', in Lesley Howes and Ian Hulatt (eds.), *Involving Service Users In Health and Social Care Research*, 2005, London, Routledge, pp. 6-17

- Services will support users' involvement in making a positive contribution to community life: activities and exchange of experiences with the local community will be facilitated; services should also welcome and provide a space for users' meetings.
  - Services should not only deal with the empowerment of users as clients. They should also encourage empowerment outside service facilities, recognizing the latter as instrumental for the effectiveness of social intervention (social networking, community activity, etc.).
  - User participation should exist at all stages of social service provision, including evaluation. In fact, user participation itself should also be evaluated, this evaluation should be accompanied by experienced users as well. In this case, evaluation should be envisaged from a positive and constructive perspective, creating the right incentives for stronger user involvement in the future. Evaluation techniques and messages discouraging user participation should be avoided in every case. If there are special committees accompanying social services (e.g. in hospitals, job centres) users should have a regular mandate in such kind of monitoring committees.
- *Sensitizer*: Users require self-knowledge before acting upon their challenges. In the role of sensitizer, professionals should promote opportunities for users to understand themselves and the service environment.
  - *Teacher/trainer*: Professionals should find suitable ways of helping people of acquiring information, knowledge and skills and hope based upon facts. This process, in turn, allows the professional to learn from users themselves what their preferred solutions are and what they need to know.
  - *Coordinator and networker*: professionals should be committed to shaping the environment in a way that connects and integrates the various services with an positive impact on users' lives.
  - *Advocate*: professionals should be leading advocacy for change of the conditions that have a bad influence on the social and emotional circumstances of users. However, the professional must observe that his responsibility as a leader does not result in taking control of people's lives. He or she should rather be an institutional companion.

## Practitioners

- A professional committed to empowering users will help them to perceive themselves as capable of bringing change to their own context and to other people.
- In his or her capacity, empowered and empowering professionals may act as:
  - *Resource consultant*: the professional uses his knowledge about resource systems and his own expertise in using them, making this information available to the user.
  - *Model*: the practitioner should serve as a model of collaborative behaviour and dialogue by showing, more than telling.
  - *Formulator of values*: daily practice should be a space for establishing the values that guide the relationship with users. Agreed values should be sensible to users' needs and feelings, as well as their spiritual and cultural background.

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