

On Participation and Being an Expert by Experience at No Fixed Abode NGO

Besides promoting the interests of the homeless, the aim of No Fixed Abode (VVA ry) is to ensure possibilities for participation for the homeless on local, national and international levels. Participation has always been one of the main principles of the organisation. Homelessness is not an individual's characteristic, it is a matter of circumstances that may be changed.

“Participation has, first of all, clarified the understanding of the ideas of peer support and experts by experience. They are pretty much the same thing. As participation plays such a strong role at VVA ry it has opened new possibilities for how peer support workers and experts by experience are able to work and it has to do with how VVA ry has encouraged participation, that you have always been able to participate.”

Jenni, Expert by experience

Since the wrapping up of the programme to eradicate long-term homelessness on a national level in Finland, a follow-up programme was planned for the prevention of homelessness through participation, empowerment, integration and the normalisation of living. The programme incorporates the participation of experts by experience, the homeless and those under the threat of homelessness on all levels (planning, implementation and evaluation). VVA ry was asked to participate in the programme during the preparatory stage on the establishment of participation and expertise by experience. VVA ry's expertise in low-threshold and participatory programmes, as well as their expert by experience training were unique in Finland.

The voice and experience of the homeless have been taken into account in planning services for the homeless during VVA ry's programme based on expertise by experience. The experts by experience hired for the programme have gathered grass-roots level information for local homelessness services. Together with local former homeless persons they participated in planning programmes and residences. When those who use services are involved in planning them they meet people's needs better. The services become efficient, which is also cost effective. Work is work-based learning, and in the No Fixed

Adobe NGO project, the worker is an equal member in the work community. The working method is linked to the NGO's participation principle: it is built from the inside, it is a process that concerns the person as a whole - and as such, it is more demanding and slower.

“In our organisation, I see participation being essential [...] and what we actually aim at offering our customers, and everyone, is that those who use our services could work for *Vepa* (Peer Support and Volunteering Center for Homeless) and they could visit our *Vartiosaari facilities* (a villa and summer resort for homeless located on an island), in the same manner that residents in supported housing can be involved. [...] not everything has to be gone through, but if we could, somehow, figure out when it is the right time for a person to make the right choices and if we could involve the person more with their choices, instead of planning something behind their back.”

Jenni, Expert by experience

Foremostly, being an expert by experience, is being on someone's side and being a real person to them, through sharing knowledge, experiences, feelings and reflecting and applying every-day procedures on a larger scale: those who share the same experiences, the service providers and society. Being an expert by experience becomes a strength and a method of producing qualitative information. It is a path to having an alternative effect and a tool for working.

Expertise by experience is a prism that allows for seeing the complexity of situations in all their hues. It is also a richness and a skill that keeps the mind aware and unbiased. It allows for the participant to enter an area somewhere-in-between where a chance opens up to see how the service system is developing and how it reflects on its users. The work of an expert by experience offers the chance to operate bilaterally and inter-sectorially.