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Kristel Driessens & Vicky Lyssens-Danneboom. **Involving
Service Users in Social Work Education, Research
and Policy: A Comparative European Analysis.**

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BOOKS

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A BOOK TO KEEP ON WALKING

*So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep
walking.* (Eduardo Galeano, 1993)

In 2013, the UN-rapporteur on Extreme poverty
and human rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda, issued a
report on participation of people living in poverty, in
which she clearly explains how poverty is manifested.

"Poverty manifests itself in many ways, but at its
core is an inability to participate or influence the
decisions that profoundly affect one's life, while
decisions are made by powerful actors that neither
understand the situation of people living in poverty
nor necessarily have their interests at heart."

(Sepúlveda Carmona, 2013).



The recently published book *Involving Service Users in Social Work Education, Research and Policy: A Comparative European Analysis*, composed and edited by Flemish lecturer-researchers Kristel Driessens and Vicky Lyssens-Danneboom, is about influence and understanding, but also about dignity and rights. Participation of service users is at the core of the book. Participation is key, not just to overcome situations that keep them stuck in poverty, but also to influence narratives and decisions. This is done by building common understandings in a context in which mutual ignorance is more the rule than the exception. The mutual ignorance of people living in precarious situations on the one hand and policymakers and social professionals on the other, is brilliantly described in Chapter 4: "It concerns ignorance of each other's living situations, each other's feelings and expectations, each other's values and norms and each other's thinking patterns and solution/ survival strategies".

An easy-to-read book with a clear structure

An impressive and inspiring multiannual research project forms the basis of the book. The transnational project named *Service Users Involvement in Social Work Education and Research* has been conducted by the Karel de Grote University of Applied Sciences in Antwerp, Belgium, in cooperation with the School of Social Work of the Lund University, Sweden and the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands.

As much as 39 service users, lecturers and researchers from 22 (academic) institutions in nine European countries, describe their respective experiences and models in cooperating with service users: cooperation in tandem, Living Library, inspiring conversations, joint workshops, the production of educational activities, co-creation of platforms, community of development, etcetera. For each presented initiative, they explain the origins, the development, how it works, from which value framework it departs and what its added value is from the different perspectives (student, lecturer, user).

This book is specially aimed at lecturers and researchers. The structure of the book is really helpful as the different models and experiences give them a complete perspective not just on the inclusion of social service users but also on the main conflicts and ethical dilemmas that may arise. In Part I the collaborative models in social work education are addressed, Part II focusses on collaborative models in research and policy. The book closes with three outstanding reflective chapters on barriers and facilitators of service users' involvement in social work education and research (Chapter 17), the ethical issues concerning the involvement of service users as co-researchers

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and co-educators (Chapter 18), and service users' involvement as a contribution to societal transformation and social justice (Chapter 19).

A book that deals with dignity

As it has been said, this book deals with rights and dignity. It addresses that service users are wrongly depicted as mere benefit recipients or stigmatised and punished, depending on the patronizing or punitive tendency of social policies. They should not be portrayed in lectures or research in a tokenistic way, as passive and voiceless subjects. Nor should their needs and contexts be interpreted by academic experts in an unrealistic way.

In order to transform this situation, and based on the Global Definition of Social Work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), the participation of experts by experience is essential. This is not to be understood as a graceful concession of the establishment, but as a way to exercise human rights. As it is said in chapter 17: "The inclusion of experts by experience in the development of society and its services is both a political issue and – as mentioned before – an issue of human rights."

This is precisely what this book intends. To show the advancements in the inclusion of service users with honesty and humility, by introducing different collaborative models that have been put in practice in education, research and policy as the main tangible result of the research project.

Five strengths and one (very minor) weakness

One of the strengths of the book is the enhanced comparison of the different experiences with the involvement of service users. It provides an interesting and inspiring insight in the state of the art in higher social work education in Europe. The second one is the fact that users have been involved throughout the entire research process and development of the book until its final stage: the writing of the chapters. The third one is the importance of the three reflective chapters that describe in depth the main uncertainties that still have to be addressed. The fourth strength of the book is its honesty and humility as facts and results are presented as they are. Difficulties, conflicts and obstacles are explained and this is really to be appreciated. The fifth strength is that each model brings with it, its own evaluation.

As the book is the result of a common project finished shortly before the Covid-19 pandemic – by luck, the research was done before the various lockdowns started – no reference is made to how

the pandemic might affect the future development of these models. This understandable omission is the only (very minor) weakness I could discern.

A challenging book... to keep on walking

The book is challenging and raises uncomfortable truths about the invisible difficulties and obstacles that appear when a real involvement of service users is present in teaching, intervening, designing and researching. For example, resistances may arise from a clash of different aims and objectives between researchers or lecturers and service users. Particularly when service users are fully involved as co-researcher and co-lecturer up until the time when the results of the research are published in a book or journal. In this context of collaboration it is inevitable that conflicts arise and therefore some kind of training seems necessary. Not only for users who in many cases are not familiarized with these fields of collaboration, but also for academics and practitioners who are not accustomed to work with users in a common ground.

The text is very honest. It does not hide any difficulty, quite on the contrary. It clearly stands the benefits of these kind of collaborations for students, researchers and lecturers, but also acknowledges how fragile this kind of collaboration is and how necessary it is to have a strong supportive structure in academia. Personally, I think this is not enough. Also, a big change in mentality and awareness must come about in academics and practitioners. This won't always be easy.

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