

# Denmark – a good life for all?



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## 1. Introduction

Internationally Denmark is known as a welfare society, marked by a high degree of equality in living conditions. The equality is financed by high public taxation giving a basis to welfare services, usually and to a great extent delivered by public institutions. Among other things this goes for free access to culture, education and training, health, social services, etc. In a formula the public institutions should offer services to the Danish population aiming at every citizen's possibility of living a good life in security and progress – what ever event might happen.

This ideal picture of the Danish society has been scratched during the last years. Several surveys are pointing at an increasing inequality related to different social segments' access to the societal resources (economy, labour, education and health). The National Council on Socially Exposed (a government committee) has documented that the living conditions of i.e. drug addicts, psychosocial impaired, homeless and further more are worsened. The National Union of Social Pedagogues (around 34.000 members and organizing nearly 90% of social workers/social pedagogues in Denmark) has concluded based on research that humans with handicaps are suffering under living conditions that are worse than the average. In Parliament more politicians have stressed that the inequality of today corresponds with the level of the early 1960's. It seems that a number of indicators points at lower living conditions for some citizens in Denmark.

Prolonging this general approach our contribution will focus upon the public efforts directed at citizens with handicaps, especially citizens with great and lasting physical and psychological reductions of capabilities. Seen from the perspective of equality of opportunity and of rights these humans need a broad support from public institutions in order to reach living conditions which are comparable to those of the majority.

## 2. Principles of Danish policy for handicapped people

Since the start of 1990'es Danish policy on this matter has been built upon principles of equal treatment and equal opportunity aiming at a society for all enabling the individuals to get equal influence and equal participation in the societal community. Though the principles are not legally binding, but based upon a decision of Parliament and the Standard Rules of UNO 1993 on equal opportunities for handicapped. The principles are interpreted by guidance of the Ministries. Reading the guidance you will find 4 principles: the environmental-related concept of handicaps, solidarity, sector responsibility, and compensation.

- The concept of handicap stems from conceptual decisions of UNO – The Standard Rules (1993) and The Convention on Handicap (2006) – and is understood as a loss or a reduction of opportunities to participate equally. The reduction of capability is the “hard” fact (related to the person) to which are added “soft” experiences (related to the environment). Reductions are to be interpreted as lacking expectations and/or prejudices concerning handicapped citizens, as reduced rights compared to other citizens, as lacking access to modern habitation, education, treatment of health services, culture, etc.
- Solidarity means that each and everyone is responsible for his neighbour, and that persons in need receive the necessary services aiming at regenerating the former quality of life. The responsibility mentioned was until recently implemented by public institutions. Today that responsibility has been moved from society to individuals and/or families, except for the handicapped who are still backed up by a majority of

the population. In spite of the general support this field has only limited political interest which leads to challenging the principle in the midst of political priorities.

- The principle of sector responsibility means that public sectors offering services and products are responsible of meeting the citizens' or clients' needs. Therefore, this responsibility "rules" not only the social sector, but all sectors. The principle has never been implemented in Denmark, meaning that handicapped people are not treated as other citizens.
- The principle of compensation implies that handicapped people are to be compensated for the consequences of their reduced capabilities. This principle is under hard pressure today, and evidence seems to point at rather big differences in municipal and regional administration of the principle.

One might conclude that the four principles are signs of goodwill, but also that handicapped people are neither equally treated nor enjoying equal rights compared with other citizens. The outcome seems to be an increased inequality, and combined with the enormous, ongoing structural changes of the public sector this pattern might be even strengthened.

### **3. Reform of structures – the first reform of the public sector: new municipalities and regions**

On January 1st 2007 the then 254 municipalities were reduced to 98, and 13 counties to 5 regions. The decision was taken by a very narrow parliamentary majority in June 2004, although the responsible Minister kept talking about "the greatest reform in our lifetime".

The reform implies that the regions are responsible for hospitals, parts of the public traffic, and some very specialized social institutions. The responsibility on social services delivered to handicapped as a whole is now situated at municipality level. The reform opened for municipal decision whether or not to take over responsibility for former county organized special institutions for children, private homes for adult handicapped etc.; most of the municipalities decided to meet the challenges, resulting in that just about 1/5 of those institutions are now in the hands of the new regions.

This seems quite simple, but has nothing to do with a tempest in a teacup, since the reform was carried out under unusual conditions, partly as an outcome of taxation stop and a reduced freedom of financial activity of the municipalities. The purpose was to get public institutions in shape to create and deliver cheaper, better and more individualised services to the citizens and to produce and deliver the services under increased democratic control and increased societal influence (Petersen (Ed.) 2007).

During the discussions of Parliament the target group of this article was by and large absent. The important themes became hospitals, elderly people, and the free choice of services. This meant that the municipalities have taken over the responsibility of such citizens and institutions without having knowledge of the needs of the target group or the demands on professionalism and resources.

Nowadays the institutions and services offered by the municipalities are run on market like conditions, implying that these services are competing with those of day care institutions, schools about resources in a reduced municipal economy. The municipalities were in principle compensated in advance of the extra costs bound for the services, but nevertheless many municipalities have been forced to reduce their costs ([www.socialkortet.dk](http://www.socialkortet.dk)).

Which implications concerning the quality of the services this might involve is at least for the moment being pure guesswork, but Olsen & Rieper (2007) point at the fact that the whole future of the field is surrounded by pretty much insecurity. The municipalities launched their takeover as an outstanding opportunity to develop the services. Market-like competition as well as the idea of evidence based practices and measurement of effects might not be the best

tool to develop comparable conditions for handicapped people. Some recent “scandals” in social institutions have shown a picture not worthy of imitation.

Just to mention a horrifying example: a Danish Television Company made “hidden camera” at an institution for handicapped people showing that the social pedagogues did not invest their time during their working hours in interaction with their clients or users, but rather used their time on private matters (looking television, ordering gifts from net shops, etc. When they did have contacts or relations with the users, then it seemed to have very less in common with pedagogical activities. The personal used to neglect, humiliate or punish the users. The broadcasting raised a public debate comparing the institutional work with that of a KZ-Camp in Hitler Germany, underlining the need for pedagogical ethics, pedagogical interventions and support directed at the users, etc. As a consequence of the scandal the Ministry of Social Affairs appointed a working committee to recommend how to avoid such mal functions from the side of professionally educated pedagogues.

Since the most discussed scandal (dated February 2007) the Danish government has signed the new convention of handicap, improved by UNO (Council on Human Rights). The convention does not improve new rights, but underlines that handicapped people should enjoy equal rights with other people on self determination, respect of integrity, dignity as well as the right to become a part of the societal community. This fact is still a well-kept secret – except for exclusive circles. A follow up on the official signing did not yet occur neither as an outcome of the latest scandals nor very systematically in the work of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

#### **4. Quality Reform – the second reform of the public sector**

In August 2006 the Government announced the need for increased quality of the public sector and (earlier mentioned in SocMag) did launch the process leading to a reform under the banner of “Better Service for Citizens” (August 2007). The content of the reform is a product of participation of workers of the public sector as well as different groups of interest within the field (employers, experts, companies, etc.).

Originally the reform should be cost neutral, which showed to be not possible. The whole subject changed into questions of education, wages, and prestige of public servants. In June 2007 the Government made a tripartite agreement with municipalities and regions (Kommunernes Landsforening – Local Government DK- and Danske Regioner), the National Union of Trade Unions (Landsorganisationen I Danmark), the Central Organisation of Danish Academicians (Akademikernes Centralorganisation) and The Council of Public and Private Servants (FTF). Due to the agreement a number of quite large sums were prepared for the further development and modernisation of public institutions, for further education of the personal and for training of institutional managers. This has not been agreed upon in every detail, and insecurity remains whether and to what extent people with handicaps might get “a piece of the cake”. The competition in the field itself as well as related to other fields marked by more political favour explains the outcomes.

Which are the intentions, and what is going to be the outcome? In August 2007 the Government published the reform of the public sector: Better Welfare and More Job Satisfaction – the Strategy of the Government aiming at High Quality of the Public Sector. “The purpose of the reform is to guarantee continuing renewal and development of the quality of day care institutions, institutions of elderly people and hospitals”. The total reform consists of 180 initiatives framing high quality of the public sector. Its content is divided into 8 smaller reforms: Consumer in centre; attractive working places marked by responsibility and professional development; reform of management (competent, professional, and visible managers) in order to develop innovation within institutions; Solid local self determination –

de-bureaucratization; More hands for presence and care plus Investment in the welfare of the future.

In spite of the broad public discussion on the above mentioned scandals the reform seems to be totally unaffected by the question of handicapped people. As already stated this area is a non-favoured field of politicians which means that the reform by no means is embracing disadvantaged people. In the framework of the Law on Social Service it has been mentioned that the whole purpose concerning handicapped might be changed. First – for the sake of the individuals opportunities and capabilities; second – for the sake of a better coherence between the many authorities involved (among other things a continuous person that follows the person in need due to reduction of capabilities).

When the quality reform does not embrace handicapped people, then there might be suspicion beyond doubt that those people are not appreciated. But first of all it is symptomatic for the missing favour which this field has suffered from. One might add that the reform itself does not involve this sort of problems, since they are put on the agenda of a special working group in the Ministry of Social Affairs.

### **5. The working group**

In September 2007 the working group finished its work by disseminating a report: “Ways to a good life in your own home” (Not yet released October 2007 on the homepage of the Ministry as expected). The report consists of a number of recommendations plus a discussion on the rights of handicapped. In spite of the fact that institutions for handicapped were abolished or phased out nearly 10 years ago, the report problematizes the fact that private homes of handicapped people continuously are named and understood as institutions: “This depends on the fact that it has been difficult to change the character of the ‘residential homes’, among other things the basic understanding of the personal, the handicapped and the environment to characterize such homes as institutions. This understanding is thereby reflected in many such arrangements” (our translation; Report, p. 4).

The report points at a number of milestones or bearings on which circumstances might be of importance in the life of the individual and his/her opportunities to live a good life in his/her own right. Those are concerned with self determination and influence; challenges; safety, confidence and spontaneity; communication and broadness plus culture at work, professionalism and political favour. The milestones are divided into 5 special areas of attention and intervention:

- National campaign to develop focus of the population and a catalogue on methods, ethics and values in residential homes;
- Developmental work in order to experience new ways of arranging the support to and the education of tenants in the field of citizen competencies;
- Composition of a codex for good management and identification of needs for further education plus establishing a goal directed education;
- Identification of needs for development of competencies for personal, funds set aside for supplementary training and for development of competencies in the job.

Many of these activities demand a rather extensive sum of money. Whether the Minister of Social Affairs has the will and/or the opportunity to compete for such means, is insecure and at the same time it is insecure which initiatives the Minister will use as a follow up on the Report above mentioned. The general picture is that handicapped are a ‘forgotten’ or ‘overseen’ subject of public discussion – due to the fact that the overwhelming focus goes for children and their families, schools, elderly people, and waiting times before admission to a hospital or medical treatment.

## 6. The Parliamentary Debate

The Government as well as the opposition succeeded in debating the general perspective of the coming year without even mentioning inequalities in living conditions of people with different forms of handicaps. In spite of more scandals and the work of the working group of the Ministry of Social Affairs such hard facts weren't even mentioned. A very fresh research outcome at the School of Education (DUE) in Copenhagen points at the Danish position as a most lousy nation to take care of handicapped people which eventually means that the handicapped are creating a parallel society to the official one.

The outcome of that new research is well known. The target group of this contribution lives in a parallel society, hasn't got any political attention or favour, and suffers from bad living conditions. Many members of the group exclusively relates to "the normal world" via family or professionals. Evidence on how many of the 36.000 handicapped living a parallel life is not available. A qualified guess summarizes about 20.000 – comparable to the population of a minor municipality in Denmark – one of 98. Surprising? Perhaps not since many myths are still surviving concerning handicapped citizens. They are not like us; of course we should provide for them, but not in a way that will be too expensive; they should not have any rights since they are not producing or even capable of learning anything of value.

The conclusion sounds: there is much will, but not much action in order to develop equality of rights.

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