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Social Work as Guide to Refugee Integration – from needs to individual planning programs

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This paper deals with the public efforts toward the integration of refugees and asylum seekers during the Reception Phase. In doing so we have on the one hand an evaluative approach of existing practices, and on the other hand, we look at general premises of possible citizenship and at citizenship as an outcome of this introductory process. [1] I take a different point of departure. Refugee integration can be seen in various perspectives; from a systemic point of view, or from an individual management point of view. Along these lines, there are several approaches, many of them fruitful and interesting. However, I would like to emphasize the interactive nature between "the newcomer" and the welfare state.

Social politics in general and social politics to refugees in particular

The Norwegian welfare state has gone through a long process of developing welfare legislation, administering welfare services, and assessing standards of acceptable living for its citizens. In our recent history, we have had strong elements of trade union democracy and labour party government with strong emphasis on equal distribution of resources and access to resources. This development has fuelled the mobilisation of marginalized groups and female liberation. Marginalized groups could make claims to the welfare state. The welfare state responded by developing expertise on these groups, trying to meet their needs, and recognizing them as democratic agents. As a response to this, there was a strong ideology during the 80s that could be called "*Secure living conditions for all"* (NOU 1993:17).

This meant that whoever you are – old, young, disabled, drug addict or a psychiatric patient – you should have the right to live a so-called "normal life". This includes having your own flat, equal access to resources like education and

[1] For further elaboration of refugee policy, see Stortingsmelding 17 (2000-2001).

training, medical attention if needed, and the right to democratic participation. This concept of a standard for living conditions could easily lead to a concept of normality and the notion that everybody has to be similar to anyone else in order to be normal. This has since been referred to as normalisation debate of the 80s (Askheim 2003).

This brought about a new critique, raised by patient groups and organisations of the disabled. “We do not want to be normal, we want the right to be who we are, and we do not want to be referred to as a social category”. This was a reaction against standardisation of welfare services, category generalisation, and system level efficiency, and it introduced a more individual orientation of welfare services. As a parallel process, a market orientation and consumerist ideology have entered the scene of the welfare state during the 90s, and the two processes have mutually contributed towards a stronger individualism on many levels. One measure used to implement this individualism, has been to introduce an “individual planning scheme” in welfare bureaucracy. The prime ideal of this scheme is that every recipient of welfare services should take part in constructing their own individual welfare plan. The aim of this is to enhance ownership and empowerment, and make the person responsible for the realisation of his or her plan. In addition to the responsibility each person has, several public agents – teachers, rehabilitators, psychologists, nurses – are committed to the realisation of individual plans. Hence, there are several agents surrounding each recipient, who are supposed to perform their fragmented role toward goals accepted by all parties involved in an individual plan (Sosial og Helsedirektoratet 2001).

Refugees as recipients of welfare services

This scheme also applies to refugees as recipients of welfare services. Previously, under the scheme of normalisation, recipients of welfare services were seen as deviants from “normality”, a view strongly influenced by a functionalist paradigm. Deviants could in this perspective be seen as a disease in the system, which had to be treated. In order to find the right treatment, the main approach of social work, would be to define problems and assess needs. Assessing needs could in some sense be used as a kind of social diagnosis. For refugees, this kind of diagnosing and problem assessment; would, in the early phases of refugee settlement in the 80s, mean a particular focus on language and culture. Language and culture could be seen as both the diagnosis and the cure. Their own language and culture would be seen as the obstacle, and to learn the Norwegian language and culture as the reward. This led to a development of interpreter services and language training, as well as cultural understanding programs. With the escalation of existing wars in many areas in the beginning of the 90s, attention was also drawn to the psychological implications of war, escape, torture, crisis, and traumatic events. This enforced the social diagnostic approach, where refugees automatically were

made into social clients, based on the Act of Social Care from 1964. This law was changed in 1991, as a reaction to the notion of care and cure that was prominent in the previous act. This legislative change promoted rights more than needs, and focused more on the quality of services than on individual need. However, for the refugees as a recipient group in particular, there was a need for a new legislation, to distinguish them from other recipient groups and to avoid the automatic routines of a client status in society. [2] In 2003 the Introduction Law was announced, and it stated that every *newcomer* refugee has the right and duty to participate in introduction programs, and economic support would be conditioned upon this participation. Introduction programs consist of language training, work practice, information about society, site visits, group sessions etc. Participation in these programs is supposed to function as a normal job with regular working hours, salary instead of welfare benefits, and clear goals of achievement. The goals should be stated in the previously mentioned individual plan, and the plan should be a commitment for individuals, as well as the agencies around them (NOU 2001:20).

During the social-political process from the 1980s up to now, one perspective was apparent: the previous focus on the treatment and cure for individuals turned out to be very costly and demanding for society. So was the strategy of the *secure living conditions for all* – strategy. Welfare costs had to be reduced, categorisation and standardisation had to be revised, and in the 2000s, we are gradually opening up for "the self-defined welfare scheme". The keywords here are self-defined quality of life, client participation, and individual plans.

Refugee responses to the individual planning scheme

In the following, I would like to focus on some of the refugee responses to individual planning schemes. In 2001, I did a study for the Department of Immigration, Western Branch, where I looked at the settlement process of Somali refugees in small communities (Ihle 2001). The study included interviews with the various local welfare agents dealing with refugees, and the refugees themselves in the same communities.

During this study, we could detect four major responses to individual planning schemes:

[2] This process is also emphasized in Stortingsmelding 17 (1996-97).

1. Complete submission
"I am a refugee; you know what is best for me".
2. Short-sighted time horizon
"I do not need a plan, I want a job tomorrow".
3. Calculative pragmatism
"Make your plan OK - but how much money do I get?
4. Basic scepticism
"What kind of plan….what is the hidden agenda? What is planned for me that I do not know?

From these responses, we could see that the rationality of individual planning in this formal sense seemed unfamiliar to the refugees. This unfamiliarity had to do with three different factors. First of all, what I define as the "planning in the Insh Allah-perspective".

- "It is not up to me to decide my tomorrow, only Allah will decide".
- "I do not control circumstances, what I plan today will look different tomorrow".
- "If I get an opportunity today, I have to take it, it might not be there tomorrow".

These are not only an expression of religious fatalism, but also an experience from a permanent war situation, where you may build a house today, and it turns out to be burned tomorrow. You may make a deal with somebody, and the person is killed the following hour. These kinds of experiences leave no room for long term planning. There is a question of escape and run in the moment, in order to save your life. The only way to secure control of circumstances is to have allies and network, or money to get out of situations. Being in a new situation in a new country, with no money, and no network, creates extreme vulnerability. This vulnerability leaves the basis for scepticism, not knowing whom to trust.

Basically, what this should tell us is that planning is in essence contextual. You plan according to the limitations or the framework of the immediate context around you. If you want to move forward in the desert you use a camel. If you want to move in New York, you take the underground. However, when you come to Norway, and you do not know your whereabouts, you are asked to make an individual plan for yourself. How can you make a plan if you do not know the context?

Context for planning – Maslow's pyramid of needs

One can ask whether individual planning works and is understood differently depending on which context you are situated in. One way to systematize our

concepts of contexts would be to use Maslow's pyramid of needs. (Maslow 1989) If you are in a war situation where you are exposed to disasters and threats and unable to fulfil your basic needs, what would the concept of planning be? Planning in this threatening situation probably means the consideration of survival opportunities within moments, in a do-or-die perspective. There is no time for long-term consideration, no time to consider alternative losses and gains, and most likely no time to negotiate options. But if you are in societal context in which basic needs seem to be covered, and life threatening events are not part of your everyday experience, your concept of planning will be more in the area of self-realisation, self-fulfilment, and social recognition. I will illustrate with an example from the study. A Somali family was settled in a small municipality in the Western Region. The family got welfare services – a house, social support, school and kindergarten for the children, adult language training, health services, interpreters and so on. They had all the services assumed to be necessary to cover their needs, and on this basis, they could start planning their future. Some time after, the family left for Oslo without notifying the municipal services, to live together with another family in a 3-room flat in a congested environment, planning to take up unregistered jobs in the city. The long-term integration project over years did not suit them.

To understand this we might use a social constructionist point of view. People plan on the basis of what they perceive as social reality for themselves. This social reality is constructed repeatedly through interaction – as Berger and Luckmann puts it, through externalisation, objectification, and internalisation. (Berger & Luckmann 2000) [3] The refugee has gone through the process of internalising meaning in his or her original context, and his or her interpretation of terms and structures is based on that context. When a new context applies – by being a newcomer in a Norwegian municipality – the person will use his or her inherent construction of reality to understand and to manage the new situation. In the case of the family that moved, what was being offered to them did not correspond to their own construction of what a good life is supposed to be, and hence they rejected it.

[3] For simplified elaboration, see Hutchinson & Oltedal (2003).

Individual versus collective identification

The previously mentioned development towards a stronger individualisation of welfare services also applies to refugees in the Reception Phase. The welfare agents approach the *newcomers* as individuals, and enter into planning with them as individuals. The agents would see the individuals as being at the beginning of a long chain of expectations. "First you take classes in the Norwegian language, then you participate in site visits, then you enter information groups, then you enter work practises – naturally the agents expectations will have to do with what is offered by the municipal services in question. In our study, we found that the refugees, who were our respondents, were unfamiliar with the individual orientation of what had been offered to them. The agents complained of weak participation and low motivation in their programs, and the refugees themselves expressed that the only thing that interested them was the money they wanted to transfer to their families in Somalia or to pay off old debts. Family reunion was their prime concern, and without family and network, individual progress seemed less important. What seemed to be apparent was a collectivist identification, where they saw themselves as representatives of larger networks. Whatever resources they got access to, whether educational, economic, or material, could easily be transferred to the networks they were part of.[4] This was expressed as a strong, existential obligation, connected to life and death issues for close relatives, and thus made learning Norwegian and taking part in programs less important.

As mentioned above, the agents identified the refugees as being at the beginning of a long-term integration process – a long chain of expectations. In response, the refugees saw themselves as finally having reached the end of what they had expected and fought for. In the war situation, they were hoping to find a secure place. They managed to fight their way – through demanding blood-sweat-and-tears struggle, only to end up in an asylum centre in Norway. In the asylum centre they built sky-high expectations of what life they would get as soon as they got settled in a municipality; a process which took longer and longer. When they finally get to a municipality, and really had made it, a new mountain rises up before them. The mountain of an individual plan that will take them years to fulfil.

The process of what has been mentioned here can be presented in the following table.

[4] For further elaboration of individualist-collectivist positions, see Skytte (2001).

Interaction between welfare agent and refugee

	Welfare agent	**Refugee**
Perspective	Individual identification	Collectivist identification
Process	Beginning long chain of expectations	The end of a long chain of expectations
Motivation	Programs and schemes	Existential obligation
Effect	**TOTALLY DIFFERENT FOCUS**	

The effect of this process is a situation where the two parties have a totally different view of the situation. One can either try to conceptualise the complexities, and use it as a basis for interpretative exchange, or one can say that a goal is set outside the interaction itself. Maybe the way Introduction Programs usually work is for them to be fixed in advance, even though they have an ideal intention of being able to adapt to individual preferences. If that is the case, naturally motivation and participation will be low. To avoid this, the program has been made compulsory in order for the refugee to have financial support. One is yet to see how this works out for different groups.

Revision of the individual planning scheme

My intention here is not to take away the importance of introduction programs and the use of individual planning schemes. My intention is to highlight some of the complexities involved. The basic challenge is not to make good programs and constructive schemes. The basic challenge is rather to enter into a kind of pedagogic practice where joining different focuses, negotiating, and constructing meaning becomes the essence of interaction. The belief in tomorrow has to be reconstructed, in order to plan. The second challenge is to reduce the structural obstacles on the system level, so that the goals of individual plans can actually be achieved. If a refugee wants to become a teacher, and obtains the necessary qualifications to be a teacher, and is not given a job in the other end, a plan has no value. That is why there is now also a political emphasis on inclusion and participation (Stortingsmelding 49, 2003-2004). Thus, the third challenge then is to create a motivation for this inclusion – it is not a given fact that a newcomer actually wishes to include him or herself in what is suggested for him/her to be included in. In order to motivate individuals for inclusion and citizenship, inclusion practices have to be demonstrated, pedagogic practices have to be more interactive and process- oriented, and goals of individual planning have to be related to interaction processes, where goals are set according to stages according to which persons define themselves. Introduction programs give room for this

development. However, the notion of program refers to standardised procedures and standardised levels of achievement rather than "tailoring" measures to individuals that can be continuously renegotiated and redefined. It is the continuous renegotiation and redefinition of goals – painful as it might be – that gives room for enhanced ownership and self-responsibility.

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