
WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Empowering rural communities

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Across the European Union, the population in rural areas is on average older than in urban areas. Population numbers will slowly decline over the next ten years, which results in an increase in demand for care and less caregivers. Combined with poor accessibility, underdeveloped infrastructure, a lack of diverse employment opportunities and limited access to services, this trend makes organising integrated care in rural settings even more difficult compared to urban settings. One of the solutions people in rural communities act upon is forming empowered communities for the purpose of strengthening co-reliance or collective self-reliance. Empowerment means people having power and control over their own lives, and people get the support they need. This makes it a joint task with professionals as a part of organising integrated care.

Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives and communities. It implies community ownership and (collective) action that explicitly aims at social and political change. Community development considers community members to be experts in their lives and communities, and values community knowledge and wisdom. It is not determined from outside the community but grows/emerges from within the community. Initiating and sustaining local change processes depend to a great extent on non-political, independent local leaders. They are the real gamechangers.

To help community members and local leaders, we developed a compass on local empowerment with the SBEEurope (rural community alliance). The compass brings together four areas for action to empower the community: inclusion and participation, access to information, capacity of local organizations and professionalism of empowering actors. The underlying principle is that in taking action in these areas community capitals should be considered. Communities actively looking to the future can use these community capitals to measure current resources and identify the potential for improvements. Researchers have listed seven types of community capital that can be used as a gauge of how community resources are being used: natural, build, financial, social, human, political and cultural capital. The basic principle is that every community has these, but that the strength lies in the good use of these capitals. For example, if a community wants to enhance inclusion and participation, they can organise meetings, but they can also invest in spaces like a Village Hall (build capital). Through strengthening the build capital, meeting each other can grow (social capital).

In the workshop we want to give the participants insight into the compass on local empowerment and explore different ways professionals and local leaders can empower communities. After an introduction of the compass and the community capitals framework (together with local leaders

from SBEEurope), we challenge participants to bring in their local initiatives. In small group discussions they can develop and discuss strategies and actions. This workshop is especially interesting for local leaders in (rural) care initiatives, and professionals working with local communities.