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Research Paper

Scandinavian disability policy: From deinstitutionalisation to non-discrimination and beyond



La politique scandinave du handicap : de la désinstitutionnalisation à la non-discrimination et au-delà

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses recent significant moves in disability policy in two Scandinavian countries, Norway and Sweden. The aim is to outline the Scandinavian twist on ongoing international developments. The analyses are limited to two major reforms: (i) the shift towards community living and full deinstitutionalisation in the 1990s, and (ii) the introduction of social regulation as part of the disability policy system in the first decade after 2000, particularly legislation on non-discrimination and accessibility. Changes during the reform years and beyond are discussed, and current challenges regarding the two significant moves are outlined.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article discute les transformations récentes et profondes de la politique du handicap dans deux pays scandinaves : la Norvège et la Suède. L'objectif est de décrire les particularités de ces deux pays en regard des transformations internationales en cours. Les analyses sont limitées à deux grandes réformes : (i) le programme de désinstitutionnalisation complète entamé dans les années 1990 et

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(ii) l'introduction de normes de régulation sociale dans la politique du handicap, depuis le début des années 2000, en particulier, les législations sur la non-discrimination et l'accessibilité. L'auteur discute les développements qui ont suivi ces deux réformes et les défis actuels auxquels les politiques scandinaves du handicap sont confrontées.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been a set of international developments in disability policies. One is internationalisation itself. International bodies like the UN and EU have developed disability policies that also have affected national agendas. The policy objectives tend to be reframed from a human rights perspective and reiterate the aims of the UN international year for disabled persons (1981) of full participation and equality. The [UN CRPD \(2006\)](#) is particularly important. It addresses a number of themes and life domains, but essentially, principles such as non-discrimination, participation and inclusion in society, equal opportunities and accessibility are at the heart of the policy aims (cf. Article 3). Although most major themes in disability policies tend to be European, Western or international, the aim of this article is to outline the Scandinavian twist, i.e., to discuss how international trends are established as policies and practices in this region.

Disability policies comprise a large set of concrete measures, such as sign language interpretation, assistive technology, allowances for extra costs, parking permissions, sick leave regulations for parents with disabled children, etc. These measures are important as such, and even more so as parts of the complex web that constitutes the overall disability policy. This article, however, is limited to a discussion of two major moves that recently were high on the political agenda in Scandinavia. One is related to services, specifically the living arrangements for people with severe or complex needs who have historically tended to live in institutions. Institutions have been replaced by community living, normalisation and inclusion. The debates and reforms were most clearly spelled out in regard to services for people with intellectual disabilities, which will be the main example. The second topic goes beyond traditional welfare policies and concerns the recent incorporation of social regulation as a new subsystem in Scandinavian disability policies, i.e., the policies on accessibility and non-discrimination.

Scandinavian countries tend to be regarded as fairly similar. In welfare policy terms, they are seen as versions of a rather distinct welfare model ([Esping-Andersen, 1990](#)) where principles such as universalism and equality have strong standing. They all have welfare systems that are regarded as generous, and they rank top among OECD countries on incapacity spending ([OECD, 2016](#)). However, there are a number of differences between the Scandinavian countries; this is not necessarily the case in the overall trends but rather in timing, details and concrete policy measures. This applies, for instance, to policies such as deinstitutionalisation, personal assistance, marketisation and non-discrimination.

The aim of this article, however, is not to address the variation in disability policies between the Scandinavian countries but rather to outline aspects of the general patterns of development. Such an analysis can hardly be conducted without being fairly specific about details that may differ across countries. To avoid becoming lost in variations at the details level, this article will therefore only address two countries, Norway and Sweden, which may be regarded as typical examples within the Scandinavian family.

2. The 1990s–full deinstitutionalisation

Regarding deinstitutionalisation, Scandinavian countries have been in the international avant garde for half a century. Fifty years ago, the concept of normalisation evolved in the region and became the “conceptual banner” for a set of criticisms of long-stay residential institutions. The concept had a vast impact internationally and particularly in the English-speaking Western world ([Emerson, 1992](#)). This was no doubt the most important Scandinavian contribution to the international development of services for people with complex service needs. This concept set the stage for deinstitutionalisation

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