

INDEPENDENCE: A WAY OF LIFE

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INDEPENDENT LIVING

In an open society all citizens have a right to an independent life. A right to decide on their lifestyle for themselves. In practice, this right implies that each individual should be enabled to make the most of his or her capabilities and that a range of assistive apparatus should be identified which, together with a policy of selective positive discrimination, can offset any disadvantages. This is one way whereby our society will be able to ensure genuine equality of opportunity". (Aguirre J.L.)

Every democratic society guarantees the rights of individuals to dignity and self. This applies equally to accommodation, leisure, work, choice of career, practice of religion, sexuality and lifestyle in general. Disabled people requiring a high level of care and assistance in their daily lives are often deprived of all these options. In instances where the individual requires a high level of support, the preferred 'solution' of charitable organizations, medical and welfare officers is almost invariably institutionalization. (Osterwitz, I)

The arguments in favour of such a solution are almost always overwhelmingly medical and financial. The disabled person is rarely seriously consulted on his or her own preferences.

THE CONCEPT OF

INDEPENDENT LIVING

One often hears the statement that severely disabled people are unable to lead an independent life, that they are dependent on assistance and therefore, that self-determination is impossible.

It was during the late sixties in the United States that young people with a variety of disabilities got together to protest against clinical living conditions of residential care, and against other disadvantages encountered by them in practically every other sphere of their lives. The founders of this movement were not people with mild disabilities. On the contrary, they were people needing a relatively high level of personal assistance in their everyday lives.

This was the beginning of what we know today as the Independent Living Movement. The key demands of this movements focus on the right of persons with disabilities:

- To express their own needs.
- to live an independent life outside the confines of an institution
- self determination
- control over assistive systems

- assistance and involvement in decision making on all issues relating to disability policy.

Adolf Ratzka of Sweden stated that the aim of disability policy must be to give disabled people, individually and collectively, more social institutions and, above all, setting the agenda.

This is a new approach to disability. The Independent Living perspective asserts that, primarily, the problem of disability lies not with the person affected, but with the psychological and physical barriers constructed by society and rigid support structures it often sees as the answer to all the disabled persons needs'.

THE AIMS

In Malta individuals with disability have now begun to make their voices heard. The Fondazzjoni Hajja Independenti (Foundation for Independent Living), in seeking to further the cause of persons with disability with the following aims in mind:

1. Independent living
2. Awareness
3. Knowledge of assistive technology.
4. Transport

1. Independent Living

The chief aim of FHI is, and will remain, to give persons with disability the opportunity to live their lives independently. This

means giving them the choices of where and how to live: with their parents, or carer, or in their own home. A Personal Assistance Service will enable severely disabled persons to free themselves of the constant fear of institutionalization. And centrally located, suitably designed apartments will add a further bonus to physically disabled individuals who chose to live on their own.

2. Awareness

The Maltese people are well known of their readiness to be of assistance. Another widely recognized characteristic is their generosity with both time and money. These are sterling qualities, but not sufficient if disability is to be tackled seriously and systematically as a social issue.

FHI is trying to reduce this aspect of the problem. This is being done by radio and television talk shows, by articles in the press, and by public manifestations.

3. Assistive Technology

In order to make persons with disability more aware of the beneficial impact which different equipment and new technology may have on their lives, FHI has set up its new premises. These premises will effectively act as a resource centre where any individual who is interested will find documentation on:

- Assistive technology available locally and internationally
- Architectural requirements, building and accessory details for business enterprises, advice on how such apparatus are used, and an opportunity to inspect and try out a sample range of products, prior to purchase.

4. Transport

In 1994, FHI, together with the Kummissjoni Nazzjonali Persuni b'Disabilta (National Commission Persons with a disability), founded Fundazzjoni Transport għall-Hajja Indipendenti to promote a door-to-door transport service. This has now become well established. Currently 32 persons with disability are using the service for work and educational purposes. This service is available to all disabled persons registered with the Kummissjoni Nazzjonali Persuni b'Disabilta.

LOOKING AHEAD

Since the aims of the foundation are to promote and provide for the independent living in the community of persons with a physical disability, the foundation is looking ahead to achieve this by aiming to provide suitable accommodation as an alternative to institutionalization for these persons with disabilities.

One such project could be to construct various residential units developed as part

of a complex with the necessary back up areas. It's implementation some day would be greatly beneficial as a back up to the quality of life.

For further details about the Fundazzjoni Hajja Indipendenti Contact Ms. Connie Camilleri "Centru Hajja Indipendenti" Balzan Valley Road Balzan.

REFERENCES

- Aguirre J.L. -Councillor, Basque Autonomous Community, Spain
- Osterwitz I. - Chairman. Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Hilfa fur Behinderte, V. Dusseldorf.

SYMPOSIUM IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CURRICULA, POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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**For further details:
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