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**Introduction**

Citizen and user participation and active citizenship are seen by many scholars as growing tendencies in contemporary democratic societies (e.g. Johansson and Hvinden 2007, Evers and Guillemard 2013). The promotion of citizen and user involvement in welfare services has emerged as a part of the mainstream policy agenda in social and health care-oriented organizations and has also become a key part of governments' efforts aimed at developing more participatory forms of governance (Matthies & Uggerhoj 2014). Given its growing significance in many countries, service user participation can be seen as a global phenomenon assuming high priority in many current government policy initiatives. In that sense, participation includes a changing understanding of active citizenship

in contemporary societies that is coming to the forefront of political concerns and social policies. An especially important factor in this change is to understand how participation reconfigures citizenship rights and duties with active citizenship involvement and how it changes patterns of equality and inequality in society. (Närhi & Kokkonen 2014.)

The aim of our research project "The role of welfare services in participative citizenship of marginalized citizens" (2011 – 2014), funded by the Academy of Finland, was to identify factors enabling or hindering participative citizenship on the part of the most non-participative citizens in the field of welfare services (Unemployed men under the age of 30 years are typical representatives of this group in Finland). The key issue that we have tried to investigate was: what is the role of welfare services in promoting active, participative citizenship on the part of marginalized citizens?

In asking this research question, we focused on three different types of data: first, undertaking textual analysis of governmental programs and strategy papers from two ministries responsible for social and labor market issues in Finland (i.e. the policy level). Second, we carried out focus group interviews of young adult service users and "street-level practitioners", such as social workers, youth workers, etc., who closely interacted with young adults (the ground level of services). The third data set was received through the next phases of the research using participatory action research (PAR) carried out with marginalized young adults, local authorities and street-level practitioners from social and employment services. The goal was to develop better structured and more participatory services and promote the better engagement of young unemployed adults in social services and welfare provision in general.

This article is based on the results of our research and highlights some of the recent trends observed in Finland—one of the most socially-oriented market economies in the European Union.

## **Main results**

Based on our research we came to the conclusion that the key strategic papers of both of the above-mentioned ministries promote different kinds of active citizenship, and embrace different places of participation, taking as a general yardstick how productive an individual citizen could be considered for society from the perspective of the national economy. It might even be argued that this kind of discourse based on understanding participation as a productive citizen is often seen as the only way for citizens to participate in society, and is an example of the Finnish way of top-down decision-making, typical of the rhetoric of the Finnish elite. We argue that this type of argumentation cannot but advance policies leading to inequality in society and impose limits on citizens' participation and inclusion, especially with regard to the rights and duties of marginalized citizens. We therefore believe that participation and active citizenship can be used either as a tool for creating a more democratic society or, where misused, as a model of neo-liberal governance.

The new participatory and active labor and social policies not only promote the rights of citizens in general but could often enhance the position of marginalized citizens in precarious situations. This means that the individualization of social problems and treating vulnerable citizens in a standardized manner, providing only limited assistance linked to personal needs, should be avoided. Unfortunately, in practice, the implementations of such policies may even strengthen the negative experiences of marginalized segments of the population. Based on our research, we argue that, from the perspective of Finnish governance, active and participatory citizenship for marginalized citizens is defined as the individual's obligation to be active in the labor market rather than to be an active member and actively take part in decision-making in society.

Based on focus group interviews, embracing both unemployed young adults and social work practitioners who shared their experiences, strict guidelines for participation in the labor market can only increase the faceless power of bureaucratic control. It also became obvious that standardized practices of welfare services provision are promoting passive forms of citizenship, making access to

services more restricted. The pressure of bureaucratic decisions at the management level deprive both young unemployed and service providers of opportunities to introduce changes in the welfare system.

The existing system of welfare services in Finland defines participation from a consumerist perspective rather than through an understanding of participation as a democratic tool to promote equality, participation and voice, including with regard to welfare services. Still, based on our participatory action research (PAR), we argue that possibilities for change in welfare services exist, coming from new alliances, finding shared interests and promoting capacity-development and embracing young adult services users, street-level practitioners and local authorities.

The PAR process in our research lasted two years, and the main actors were local unemployed young adults, who have been the key users of social and employment services. The building of an action group of young adults was not easy and took several months. When their agenda emerged, it was clear that they wanted to present their concerns to decision-makers, describing their life situations, and eventually to achieve improvements in the welfare services, especially social and employment services. During this phase of the research, the goal was to initiate and promote several activities organized by young adults, for example, participatory workshops, where it was possible to organize the discussions and come up with ideas regarding improvements in the welfare services. The participants shot two videos about "Life in a jungle of social security", which were shown and debated in discussion forums and panels arranged among the stakeholders – the unemployed, ground-level practitioners, welfare managers and politicians, in order to create more intensive interaction and joint awareness about the realities on the ground. Group of young adults also prepared guide leaflets with assessments of the welfare system, using social media such as Facebook to inform other youth about their agenda. Additionally, young unemployed were interviewed in local and national media (radio, TV, newspapers) to present their views and visited the Parliament of Finland, where they discussed their agenda with members of Parliament.

The suggestions aimed at improving welfare services included the following aspects:

- Change attitudes: marginalized citizens should not be seen only as an economic burden but as unique individuals who have human dignity;
- A need to simplify the social security "jungle" and legislation;
- Users of services should be better informed about their rights and duties, as well as about the availability of services;
- Closer collaboration between bureaus/agencies at the municipal level is a must;
- It is desirable to have one service center online, instead of several services, which should be "a place where one can ask anything";
- The focus should be put on individual life situations and timely individualized services;
- Taking service users seriously and respectfully, where services embracing "more heart" and a "from human to human" attitude are not mere slogans;
- Meeting service providers "face to face" and encourage a "walking beside me" attitude.

## **Conclusions**

Participatory policies have their roots in ideals of equality, which, in their turn, promote participatory democracy, strengthening also democratic governance and social inclusion. However, in practice, participatory policies, including active labor and social policies (so called "activation policies") are often implemented as a part of broader welfare state reforms undertaken under neoclassical prescriptions -- through budget cuts and austerity policies. When the points of view of service users and marginalized citizens in vulnerable situations are borne in mind, social rights become more conditional. Participatory policies treat different groups of people differently. For the middle class, participation means security, welfare and access to culture, but for the marginalized groups of people, such as unemployed young people, participation may be interpreted not only as a right but also as an obligation to be active and productive citizens, taking into consideration the demands of the national economy.

We believe that in real life situations, welfare service provision plays a crucial role in either strengthening or weakening active and participatory citizenship. If the aim is really to support the genuine participation and involvement of youth, including the unemployed, and to encourage active citizenship, the welfare system should encourage trust and recognition towards service users, respectfully and taking seriously their perspectives, knowledge and experiences about the services they get. Strengthening active citizenship should also involve a real division of power between the service users and the welfare services. Only a feeling of acceptance by society provides a firm ground for active participation to take root.

Our research demonstrates that there is a strong need for joint efforts and collaboration regarding the above issues, including public discussion and the sharing of different kinds of knowledge about welfare services. Establishing new alliances, collaboration and raising public awareness may eventually bring about the desired changes in the welfare service system.

According to our research, the participation track offered by the welfare services in Finland is mostly based on the idea of participation from above, rather than taking into consideration the perspectives of service users. Still, in spite of the hurdles established by the bureaucratic system, practitioners should try to use participative strategies creatively, working with their service users to find best solutions. In that type of 'intelligent adaptation', in which practitioners use the complexity of the system in favor of their service users, service users become knowledge producers and partners in developing services.

Finally encouraging participation is itself an emancipatory and empowering policy line, but it has to be promoted in a way that strengthens social rights instead of creating new obligations for marginalized groups of people. Growing levels of poverty and exclusion make it clear that the right to participate is an issue and a value in itself, especially for those who are in the most immediate danger of becoming marginalized. That is important in the context of political and civil rights, as well

as economic, social and cultural rights; all human rights are interconnected and have human dignity at their core. The tasks of participatory policies should be connected to preserve the social agency of all citizens: every agency in society is precious in its own right.

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***The opinions expressed in the article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect views of ICSW Management Committee***

➤ ***Are pensions a luxury?***

Older persons worldwide constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in society, facing numerous risks stemming from old age, including such economic challenges as reduced income streams or even a complete loss of income. Retirement income support in the form of pension is seen in many countries as a traditional way to reduce old-age vulnerabilities and to support the well-being of retirees. However, according to a new policy study released by the ILO<sup>1</sup> and based on data that covers public expenditure on social security in 178 countries, nearly half (48 per cent) of all people over pensionable age do not receive a pension. Moreover, for many older persons who do receive a pension, pension levels are inadequate and do not allow them to obtain income security. As result, the majority of the world's older women and men simply cannot retire, regardless of their age, and have to continue working as long as they can, not to mention that their pay is often poor and precarious conditions are widespread.

According to the authors of the policy paper, the existing gap should be filled to a large extent by an expansion of non-contributory pensions ("social pensions"). In that light, recent efforts undertaken at the national level have been aimed at expanding the coverage of contributory pension schemes, coupled with establishing non-contributory social pensions to guarantee at least basic income security in old age for all. More than 45 countries have reached 90 per cent pension coverage and more than 20 developing countries have achieved or nearly achieved universal pension coverage.

Providing a global overview of the organization of pension systems, their coverage and benefits, the report notes that public expenditures on pensions range from 0-2 per cent of GDP in low-income countries, to 11 per cent of GDP in the higher-income countries of Western Europe. The world average amount spent on pensions for older persons is 3.3 per cent.

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1 Social protection for older persons: Key policy trends and statistics, ILO, Geneva, 2014

Pensioners in most developing countries receive very low benefits, but the adequacy of pensions in the context of adequate income replacement is an issue that goes beyond the developing world. Quite often, countries undergoing fiscal consolidation chose pension systems as an easy target for finding extra funds and cost savings, choosing such means as raising the retirement age, reducing benefits, stopping indexation or increasing contribution rates. The authors of the report underscore that such adjustments are undermining the adequacy of pension systems, dealing a blow to their ability to prevent old-age poverty. The reduction of social protection benefits, seen today in many high-income countries, has led to reduced access to quality public services. Together with persistent unemployment, lower wages and higher taxes, those steps “have contributed to increases in poverty or social exclusion, now affecting 123 million people in the European Union, or 24 per cent of the population” ( p.xiii)

According to the report, a number of countries—such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Hungary, Kazakhstan and Poland—are reversing the earlier privatizations of pension systems undertaken in the 1980’s and 1990s. The main reasons are the high cost of such systems and their inability to expand pension coverage. These processes of the “unprivatization” or renationalization of pensions aim to reduce the fiscal costs of the earlier funded systems and to improve pension coverage and old-age income security.

Calling for the expansion of social protection in pursuit of dignity, inclusive development and social justice, the report links those objectives to access on the part of older women and men to social services, including health care and long-term care. Social protection is also seen as a key element for promoting human development and political stability at the national level.

For more details, please go to: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_310211.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_310211.pdf)

➤ ***Data Revolution for Sustainable Development***

The Independent Advisory Expert Group on the “Data Revolution for Sustainable Development” convened its first meeting on 26 September 2014 at UN Headquarters. Established in August 2014, the Group will advise the Secretary-General of the UN on measures required to close data gaps and strengthen national statistical capacities. The Group is also expected to study new opportunities linked to innovation, technical progress and the surge of new public and private data providers to support and complement conventional statistical systems and strengthen accountability at the global, regional and national levels.

Outlining the scope of future activities, the Expert Group meeting participants underscored the power of open data in achieving a meaningful and positive change, as well as the importance of harnessing the potential of new technologies for transparency and accountability and for driving sustainable development efforts. When data relevant in the MDG context are presented only at the regional level and are missing at the local level, it is very difficult to undertake more focused efforts aimed at poverty eradication. To achieve progress on the sustainable development goals (SDGs), there is an obvious need to distribute data on the community level as well. Moreover, to make data a real agent for change, it is essential not only to collect and analyze data scientifically but also to package data in an appropriate way that is accessible to scholars and society at large.

The Advisory Group will provide input into the Secretary-General's synthesis report on the SDGs, contributing specifically to the chapter on the accountability framework. The preparation of the above report was requested by Member States ahead of the intergovernmental negotiations leading to the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda.

For more information please go to:

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48594#.VC6rNvldUIQ>

➤ ***Useful resources and links.***

A recently released publication, “*The Role of Social Security in Respecting and Protecting the Dignity of Lone Mothers in South Africa: Final Report*”, prepared by a team comprising Gemma Wright, Michael Noble, Phakama Ntshongwana, David Neves and Helen Barnes (Oxford: Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy, University of Oxford, 2014), has been designed to highlight the role that social security currently plays in relation to people’s sense of dignity. Specifically, the authors intended to explore whether social assistance, as a financial transfer to low income people, serves to help to protect and respect dignity of single mothers, or conversely whether there are ways in which the country’s social security arrangements serve to undermine people’s dignity.

For further details, please go to: [http://www.plaas.org.za/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/LM%20Policy\\_Brief\\_3.pdf](http://www.plaas.org.za/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/LM%20Policy_Brief_3.pdf)

➤ ***Employment and Skills Strategies in the United States (2014).***

The report, written by Randal W. Eberts and published by OECD as part of *Reviews on Local Job Creation Series*, focuses on the range of institutions and bodies involved in workforce and skills development in two states—California and Michigan. In-depth fieldwork covers two local Workforce Investment Boards in each state. The report presents a number of recommendations and actions to promote job creation at the federal, state and local levels.

For more details: [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/employment-and-skills-strategies-in-the-united-states\\_9789264209398-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/employment-and-skills-strategies-in-the-united-states_9789264209398-en)

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