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A Historical Overview of Disability Issues from the 1960's and onwards in Sweden

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During the 1960s pedagogical ideas began to break through in Sweden. The *Normalisation principle* became important for the development of new environmental circumstances disabled people.

In the 1960s integration ambitions became evident. The *Normalisation principle* was during this time formulated very concretely by Bengt Nirje. The principle implies that disabled people are to live a life as normal as possible. The characteristic features of the principle were the importance of having experience of time for the whole year as well for each day, normal routines for performing activities, and being in a variety of environmental contexts. Further the principle emphasised the importance of respecting each person's choices and wishes. Having normal economic and physical environmental standards are also factors that were implied in the *Normalisation principle*.

Legislation from 1967 included ideas from the *Normalisation principle*. That act was in regard to social care of persons with learning disabilities. It was founded on the idea that they were to be provided care from other forms of residence than institutions. Hospitals and nursing homes started to close down from this time on. Group homes for children and adults as well as day centres were introduced. This act from 1967 also included accessibility issues.

Karl Grunewald, a medical counsellor in the National Social Welfare Board, has been a very important person when the institutions were closing down. He participated in a lot of governmental investigations and committees. Grunewald wrote the following words in 1969:

“It is equally important that the person with a learning disability is adapted to the society as the society is

adapted to him, i.e. that the person himself is seen upon a balanced and objective manner and that he is accepted the way he is. Everyone that works with the person with a learning disability will need to have the ambition to get outsiders to accept that person.” (author’s translation)

Interpreting the *Normalisation principle* with an environmentally related focus has been a cornerstone in social policy in the Nordic countries. It has contributed to develop a better social policy for persons with disabilities. For the last 30 years Vilhelm Ekensteen has been one of the leading debaters and authorities within movement of handicap organisations in Sweden. He himself has impaired sight and a physical disability. Ekensteen has written several essays, he has discussed with politicians and been involved in governmental investigations and been lecturing frequently.

Ekensteen played, together with the Anti-handicap movement, a very important role in the 1960s. Ekensteen stood on the barricades and fought for the rights of disabled people in 1968. That year the first debate was published as well, and the debate was intensified. Ekensteen sharply criticised the insufficient resources of the society.

The radical opposing movement Anti-handicap played an important role for the ideological direction in the coming years. Anti-handicap demanded equal rights and justice and the members demanded that the society was to adjust fully to the official social care. All forms of morally inspired charities were criticised for having insufficient resources. Handicap could be abolished through society changes.

The name Anti-handicap denoted the central idea that disability is not an individual physical attribute, but describes a social pattern. Today, this view has gained favour in

Swedish disability politics, but during the 1960s it was assumed as something fairly radical.

In the first place, the capitalistic society's way of manipulating the economy through competition in the labour market was to be blamed. The capitalistic society prevented people from creating an equal society.

Ekensteen viewed the importance of the technical means as something that would improve people's life situation. Not only would the technique give disabled people more possibilities to live a normal life, but also to contribute to an individual independence.

Anti-handicap's moulding of public opinion was given a break-through in the current discussion and in the years to come would give rise to an environmentally related handicap concept. The change of ideology that was fought for was to remove issues related to handicap from the traditionally narrow medical view and put them in the debate within society. Clear demands were raised that disabled people were to be seen upon as citizens and not as disabled. Any segregation was opposed and equality in the different areas of life, such as education, work, residential environment, communications and leisure activities was demanded.

The individual freedom for the disabled person to choose for himself either to go to the cinema or to the pub as he himself preferred, was the idea that the movement Anti-handicap valued as the highest. Ekensteen gave the following formulation:

"The arm that the helping person is asked to stretch out in order to assist is to be seen upon as the disabled person's own arm, not the helping person's." (author's translation)

The disabled person would himself decide for his own care and needs as well as act as his own employer. This idea was realised in 1994 in *The Assistance Benefit Act* and in *The Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments*.

In 1976 the Swedish Government Official Report, *Culture for All*, was published. Here the environmentally related handicap concept was important. This concept means that handicap is not viewed as a characteristic of a person, but as something that arises when an inaccessible environment confronts a person with a functional impairment. The report emphasised that cultural equality has the same significance as economic and social equality. Handicap would not be connected to the individual according to that report, but instead the difficulties by physical or psychological reasons a person can meet in their daily living.

The World Health Organisation came up with the environmentally related handicap concept in 1980. When comparing that definition with the Swedish one in *Culture for All*, there are significant similarities.

The law from 1985 is a rights law, i.e. the state recognises the individuals right to assistance and support, and this must be fulfilled by society. The legislation prescribed different types of services that persons with learning disabilities were entitled to.

During the 1990s more Swedish Official Government reports were published. One report was called *Handicap, Welfare, Justice*. Self-determination and influence, accessibility, participation, continuity and a holistic view became the bearing principles in this report, as in the later report A

Society for All. Self-determination and autonomy entails defending the right to integrity. There is a need to extend influence to different levels and areas of interest, such as exercising citizenship. Accessibility has physical and social dimensions. Participation should be considered as active participation in society and includes citizen's rights and duties for disabled people. Continuity means that the support and service the disabled people receive should not be changed unless the persons have decided so. The holistic view means that the persons should not be seen as objects and that the whole situation needs to be considered when support and service are planned and implemented.

The equal value of all humans was the point of departure for this report. It encompasses a proposal for widening the range of persons included in the legislation. This was realised in *The Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments*.

The Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments is a rights law and was legislated in 1994. This law stipulates that activities in line with the law shall "promote equality in living conditions and full participation in the life of the community". In 1996 the municipalities in Sweden took over most of the responsibilities outlined in this law.

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