

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS. REPORT ON THE 19TH CEFEC CONFERENCE (SEVILLE 19-21 OCTOBER 2006)

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INTRODUCTION

Concern regarding the employment of individuals with severe mental disorders appears to be on the increase in countries around us, visible both in the areas of mental health and social care and, to a lesser degree, in employment policies for individuals and collectives experiencing problems in this area. However it would be true to say that this concern is at present more apparent in theory than in any practical influences it may have on the majority of the potential beneficiaries.

Recently 'discovered', as are many other areas of relevance in the social and health care of individuals with these types of problems, from within the fields of psychosocial rehabilitation movements, today employment emerges as a key area for ensuring that these people are able to remain in the community as active citizens and not merely as the receivers of palliative care tinged with rejection and exclusion.

The multiple functions that productive activity and employment are able to play in the lives of the individuals belonging to this collective and accumulated evidence concerning their capacity to improve the personal and social functionality, autonomy and "quality of life" of many of these individuals makes employment a basic objective of rehabilitation programmes.

But, in addition and at the same time, the role assumed by employment in our societies as a basis for true citizenship, in providing financial independence and social recognition, in addition to the particular difficulties experienced by the majority of individuals with severe mental disorders, is reflected by high rates of unemployment¹. This makes these individuals into a collective which, in societies aiming to base themselves on "Welfare State" models, must become the objective of specific employment programmes and policies.

As we have stated on other occasions²⁻⁴ these two visions are complementary and form part of the perspective of community mental health care, understood as a technological paradigm which stresses the treatment of these individuals as citizens. These people, beyond their illnesses, disabilities and symptoms, experience difficulties in exercising their basic rights for which multiple measures, health or other, are required from the networks of services aimed at rehabilitation and recovery. Moreover, this implies their active individual and group participation in the process.

The development of measures and programmes aimed at promoting the employment of these people continues to be minimal in Spain; the relatively recent appearance of certain awareness coexists with a huge vacuum in many, if not the majority, of our regions (Autonomous Communities). In addition, we are confronted with controversies, often poorly formulated, regarding the strategy or strategies to follow. These difficulties are aggravated by a lack of opportunities for professional exchange and co-ordination beyond those permitted by certain general professional organizations (AEN y FEARP). In fact, almost all of the organisations which have tried to do something in this respect seem to have chosen their own path and most are experiencing theoretical and practical difficulties in incorporating other contributions. Moreover, discussion is limited by certain stereotypes with respect to certain interesting strategies such as that of Social Firms⁵⁻⁷ (constrained in Spain by the figure of "Special employment centres"), supported employment⁸ or vocational rehabilitation programmes⁹. Contact with groups from other countries is also rare, often limited by language barriers.

In this context, the recent 19th CEFEC Conference provided an opportunity to review certain aspects, to learn about national and European experiences and to explore the "permeability" of an organisation which may be useful in this respect. Although additional information can be found on the FAISEM¹⁰ and CEFEC¹¹ web sites, in addition to the forthcoming publication of the Conference material, we have prepared a brief summary of the conference to offer more information to readers of our journal.

WHAT IS CEFEC?¹¹

CEFEC is non governmental organisation of European scope which groups together different organisations promoting the employment of people with disabilities, preferably through the development of "social firms". The name stands for: *Confederation of European social Firms, Employment initiatives and social Cooperatives*.

Although the name does not indicate so, the majority of the members direct their action preferably or almost exclusively to individuals with mental illnesses. This has, in recent years, created certain "tension" between members who aim to place the emphasis on Social Firms and those who show preference for this collective, which gave rise to the organisation 19

years ago. Today CEFEC is the only organisation on a European level to show concern for these types of programmes.

At present there are 24 organisations from 15 different countries, the majority of which (except Switzerland) are members of the European Union. The organisation is a confederation with an Executive Committee with a representative from each country, a Secretariat and a Chairperson of a rotating nature (the country organising the annual conference assumes the chairpersonship in the year preceding the conference)

The organisation has passed through different stages, playing a significant role in the Horizon Initiative of the European Social Fund, although since this has come to an end, it has experienced a period of reduced relevance and vitality. In fact, while the above-mentioned debate on the emphasis on the collective (individuals with mental illnesses) or on the method (social firms) is taking place, another element has come into play, concerning the convenience (need / possibility) of maintaining a permanent structure. This structure would have the capacity for presence and dialogue with European institutions, while also providing technical support to local groups, or of restricting its role to little more than an annual meeting or Conference, as a space for exchange and debate, in addition to the web page and a much reduced technical secretariat. The first option, considered desirable by many of us, involves organisational and financial effort which currently appears difficult without significant growth in the member organisations.

Although at certain points in the history of CEFEC, there have been other member organisations with different personalities and groups participating in common activities, at present the only Spanish member of CEFEC is *Iniciativas de Empleo Andaluzas Sociedad Anónima* (IDEA SA), a founder of the Social Firms developed by FAISEM in Andalusia^{7,12}. Therefore we have taken on the role of representing Spain on the Executive Committee and, in the year prior to the conference, the Chairpersonship.

THE SEVILLE CONFERENCE

In the context of the above debate, the proposal to hold the 19th Conference in Seville in 2006 was approved at the annual assembly in Slovenia in 2005. It includes a programme focussing on the analysis and discussion of the specific difficulties of individuals with severe mental health problems, including the exploration of other strategies in addition to that of Social Firms.

The Conference was held in Seville from 19 to 21 October at the seat of the Andalusian Business Confederation and was attended by 257 people from 15 countries (14 European countries and Israel). Representatives from Spain included participants from 8 Autonomous Communities and naturally, a significant proportion from Andalusia, including mental health professionals representing both the health care sector and social support programmes, together with employees and businessmen and women from

social firms and the promoters of other employment initiatives for people with mental disorders.

We would like to mention three of the more relevant topics concerning the Conference:

1. Institutional relevance, which, on the one hand enables the measurement of the role accorded to this field by different institutions, also establishes and strengthens levels of dialogue useful for the subsequent development of employment programmes. In this respect, the participation should be noted, at different points in the Conference (both during the opening ceremony and in the technical programme) of authorities from the Regional Office for Employment (Vice-Councillor for Employment, due to illness of the Councillor, and the Director General for the Promotion of Employment), the Secretary General of the Andalusian Business Confederation (which, moreover offered their headquarters for the meeting), senior representatives from the major Andalusian Trade Unions (the Secretary General of the UGT and the Assistant to the Secretary General of the CCOO) and the Deputy Director of the Mental health programme of the Andalusian Health Service. In addition, also present were a representative from the General Directorate for Employment, social affairs and equality of the European Commission, and other national and international participants.
2. The general theoretical presentations helping to establish the interest, difficulties and strategies to be considered to improve the employment of individuals with severe mental disorders, in line with the presentation summary. In this respect, special mention should be given to the presentations of Geoff Shepherd, well-known by those professionals interested in subjects concerning rehabilitation and community care in mental health, and Erwin Seyfried, lecturer from the Free University of Berlin, who has been closely linked to CEFEC for a long time. Both speakers emphasised the benefits of integrating employment programmes into the framework of community and intersectorial care of persons with severe mental disorders, in addition to the need for multiple co-ordinated strategies incorporating the development of social firms but without losing sight of supported employment programmes. And also, the presentation given by Sally Reynolds, a representative from the United Kingdom, about an interesting methodology for the evaluation of quality in social firms.
3. The information and exchange of experiences was perhaps one of the most important aspects of the CEFEC meetings. It enables practical information of use to be obtained and provided at different levels. In addition to the reports from the countries present at the conference, round tables and workshops provided an opportunity to learn about and discuss aspects such as intersectorial co-operation and the association of rehabilitation and employment programmes, Spanish and European experiences of social firms and other employment strategies for this group of individuals and the need for co-ordinated research in the different member countries of the CEFEC. Worthy of

special mention is the workshop for workers from social firms, enabling direct discussion with the users of this type of programme among other subjects, one step further towards direct self-organisation of this collective.

The official Assembly, in addition to reflecting the current situation of CEFEC (utility of the organisation but need for organisational and financial stimulus to enable, as mentioned above, an increase in their capacity for presence, dialogue and technical assessment) approved, among other items, the location and central theme of the 20th Conference. This will take place, from 11 to 13 October 2007, in the Austrian city of Linz and is to take a more general approach, not specifically directed at individuals with mental health problems, concerning the future of the employment market under the slogan "New work, new culture". A general subject also concerning the individuals with this type of problem, the specificness of which will, as is usual, find its own spaces at the Conference. These will include a significant report concerning research, on the basis of a proposal received from the Austrian group, the discussion of which started in Seville and which we briefly mention below.

SOME SUBJECTS MATTERS FOR THE FUTURE

To sum up I would like to emphasise some subjects, which in addition to being covered at the Conference, I feel are of special interest to the future and which concern all those interested in improving the quality and quantity of employment in Spain for people with severe mental disorders.

The first is related to the professional debate concerning the different strategies useful for obtaining this objective, taking advantage not only of our limited local experience but also the growing body of international knowledge and experience in this respect^{3,13,14} In contrast to reductionist visions, current opinion appears to stress the need for combined strategies associating the different types of programme (vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, social firms, etc.) as the most reasonable path for confronting the specific characteristics of this collective. More specifically, in Spain, there seems to be a need to agree on the applicability of supported employment programmes in a very different context to that of the United States¹⁵, especially at a time when state regulation of these programmes appears imminent; Or even to agree on the convenience of overcoming the debatable legal role of the Special Employment Centres for developing a different regulatory system which promotes true Social Firms, thus overriding what remains of protected employment (real or imaginary) in many SEC in Spain; Or concerning the role of vocational rehabilitation programmes as a complement rather than an alternative to such strategies.

All this has much to do with the need to promote common research projects on these different points, on the one hand testing employment support strategies and on the other hand, comparing social firms in different territorial contexts, in Spain and in the European Union, as a step prior to assessing their effectiveness as an employment strategy for our collective. In addition it would develop common indicators to enable us to compare the

different programmes and contexts. In this respect, we have already mentioned the research project on Social Firms in different EU countries, on which CEFEC is working. Although only at a descriptive stage, it will facilitate the exchange of reasonably uniform and useful information.

Above all, this has much to do with the need to find opportunities for co-ordination between the different individuals and groups involved in this field. In this respect, discussions were held in Seville on the possibility of using CEFEC as a common space, complementary to our current Associations. This would allow us to more thoroughly improve relationships with other European groups, while also supporting the core groups interested in the possibilities of employment for people with severe mental disorders.

We must continue to reflect upon and discuss these aspects on, among other places, the pages of our Journal.

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