Speaking for the Homeless : Opportunities, Strengths and Dilemmas of a User Organisation

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❯ **Abstract_** *In Denmark a national organisation of homeless people (SAND) was formed in 2001. Its existence improves the opportunities for democratic participation by homeless people, who are normally excluded from the spheres of decision making. SAND has gained a formal platform of participation. Recognised by the authorities as a serious and reliable organisation, it has acquired the legitimacy to participate and to seek to influence local and national homeless policies. It also provides homeless people with an opportunity to raise demands and concerns directly with social workers at hostels for the homeless. SAND is an example of how an organisation of people with limited resources is able to emerge and consolidate. The case also pinpoints how ongoing challenges (such as lack of resources, stability and continuity among participants) pose a challenge to the democratic ambition of forming a truly representative organisation. This paper argues that interest organisations of marginalised groups need support from external actors (state or others) to survive because of their structural weaknesses, limited resources and transience. Moreover, programmes of capacity building may enable the survival and consolidation of this type of organisation.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Homelessness ; User organisations ; Social movement organisations, participation, welfare state.*

Introduction

> SAND is a user organisation for the homeless or the formerly homeless in Denmark.
> We speak the case of those who otherwise have nobody to speak their case. We
> provide a social and political platform for marginalised people, and actively
> support the establishment of tenants' councils in all hostels for the homeless.[1]

Homeless people have limited opportunities to influence social policies. Belonging
to a minority group in a welfare society and facing a number of personal problems,
homeless people often lack both the resources and the capacity to unite and gain
access to the media or circles of decision making.

Studies of homeless social movement organisations[2] in the United States show that
these organisations often: are locally based, city-level phenomena (even while
gaining national attention through coordinated protests); have problems main-
taining a viable structure; and emerge and act in repressive environments where
they face a number of attempts at delegitimising their very existence (Cress and
Snow, 2000; Williams, 2005). However, in Denmark, a national organisation of
homeless people (SAND) formed in 2001 has since gradually gained more legiti-
macy, increased its annual budget and employed professionals to speak in the
interests of homeless people. This paper briefly outlines some of main lessons to
be learned from the first eight years of SAND's existence and some of the chal-
lenges facing the organisation.

SAND is the national organisation of homeless people in Denmark, organised by
and for homeless people. The organisation is unique in the sense that only people
who are or have been homeless are members, though staff members of the secre-
tariat have not, themselves, been homeless. SAND seeks to act as the mouthpiece
for all homeless people in the country. The organisation consists primarily of people
who are currently staying at hostels for the homeless (which are called section 110
accommodation residences in Denmark) or people who were homeless at an earlier
stage of their lives.

In a structure that resembles that of a traditional trade union, SAND aims to have a
representative at each hostel for the homeless and has regional councils and a
national committee. This structure ensures that it is represented both regionally and
nationally and may enter into dialogue and raise claims with local authorities and
government bodies. SAND is deeply committed to maintaining cooperation and

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[1]   From SAND's website: www.sandudvalg.dk/Service/UK.

[2]   In the literature, these organisations are often called social movement organisations. However,
      the terms that are normally applied in Denmark when speaking of organisations formed by client
      groups of the social service system are 'user organisation' and 'interest organisation' and these
      terms will be used interchangeably when speaking of SAND in this paper.

constructive dialogue with the authorities, and its democratic ambition is further reflected in the representative structure of the organisation, in the internal processes of decision making and in the education of its activists.

The overall aim of SAND is to seek to counteract the causes and consequences of homelessness. In its mission statement, the organisation stresses that it cooperates with the relevant organisations and authorities to ensure sufficient assistance for homeless people and other excluded groups. In addition SAND strives to ensure acceptable conditions at hostels for homeless people. SAND is financed and also actively supported by the national authorities.

From Local and Specific Initiatives to a National Organisation

The formation of SAND followed a number of local initiatives that together increased belief in the opportunities that could be created by a user organisation (Anker, 2008). The initiatives grew out of local grievances and attempts to increase awareness of homelessness in Denmark. Local radio-stations for homeless people, produced by social workers and homeless people, street newspapers for homeless people, exhibitions focusing on homelessness, and other local initiatives created awareness of the need for a national user organisation. Specific and local initiatives created the opportunity for activists to play a concrete role in transforming individual experiences and grievances into a collective public expression.

A number of key people and events provide the very specific background for the emergence of SAND (Anker, 2008); however, the importance of four broad dimensions is emphasised here:

- Different, and to some extent opposed, ideological currents increased the interest in user involvement in the 1990s; neoliberal ideas concerned with free choice for service users combined with democratic concerns for participation and empowerment. The two different ideological currents ensured broad political consensus around the ambition to improve user involvement in social work. The ideological climate was thus favourable for the emergence of a user organisation of homeless people.

- The institutional structure of the Danish welfare state is relatively open so that it is possible for interest organisations to emerge and there are relatively good opportunities for collective actors to make their voices heard. Authorities' strategies with regard to interest organisations in Denmark are normally integrative and cooperative and follow a long tradition of involving organisations in the political–administrative process (Torpe, 2003, pp.42–43). When officially recognised, associations often receive public financial support. Sympathy for user organisations is also

inscribed in the legal framework: the Social Service Act stipulates that service users from municipalities must be given the opportunity to influence the organisation of service provision. Moreover, hostel residents have the right to organise and elect representatives (Socialministeriet, 1998, p.165).

• Alliances between central actors in the field ensured support and resources from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Non-users often have a strong involvement in the formation of user movements (Crossley, 1999, p.657), and the formation of SAND was inspired and supported by progressive professionals; these 'non-users' were themselves inspired by ideas of user involvement, empowerment, democracy and social capital, and a critical concern for socially excluded people. Their thinking and influence was essential in the development not only of the organisation but also of the legal rights to form user organisations. Supporting the user initiatives, these actors promoted the ideas of user organisations within the Ministry of Social Affairs, which gave financial support to develop the organisation.

• The existence of a group of homeless people who were willing and able to take up the challenge to form a user organisation is also important. Without activists who are able to speak up, formulate visions and gain recognition for the organisation, SAND would not have attained the position it has today.

Combining Visions: Local and National Perspectives

Although a series of specific initiatives (homeless radio, street newspaper etc.) led to the formation of SAND, the organisation is today influenced strongly by its ambition to be a democratic and representative organisation of homeless people. Activists are recruited when they stay at a hostel for the homeless, which means that it is basically users or former users of these that make up the membership of SAND. This is reflected in the profile of the typical member: approximately two-thirds are men, mostly between the ages of thirty-five and sixty, and many have experienced some kind of 'social de-route' such as divorce, unemployment or problems with alcohol, possibly followed or accompanied by psychological problems.[3] However, very few persons from ethnic minorities are members of SAND, although these account for an increasing proportion of the users of homeless hostels. People sleeping rough are another category not integrated as activists on boards and committees around the country. The queries and interests of those who

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[3] This description is not based on a formal membership record, but rather on observations from participation in meetings and general assemblies in SAND.

stay at homeless hostels dominate the work of SAND, which explains why in its first years of existence SAND concentrated to a large degree on ensuring decent conditions for homeless people at the hostels.

The user councils and the elected spokespeople at the hostels form the backbone of the organisation. Their most important daily task is to serve as representatives of the homeless, presenting and forwarding problems, dissatisfaction and new ideas to the director and staff of the hostels. The problems experienced at hostels for the homeless are then occasionally dealt with by SAND on a regional or national basis. In this way SAND has addressed how hostels deal with the use of drugs or alcohol, the obligations of residents at specific hostels to become involved in work-related activities, and the issue of ensuring that people who are thrown out of hostels due to conflicts are still treated decently and informed properly about their rights.[4]

In personal interviews, SAND activists tend to describe themselves and their ideas of SAND in two different ways. For one group, the main priority of the association's work is the efforts at the local level. It is at the local level that they feel recognised and successful as activists. This group is primarily concerned with social activities that are carried out by local associations, such as bingo, pool, excursions and so on. Discussions among these activists often concern the food and rations served at hostels and how rules are implemented, including questions around why some people are not confronted with consequent sanctions when breaking the rules. They are also concerned with how the staff treat homeless people and what the rights and responsibilities of homeless people are during their stay there. The formation of an association of homeless people thus provides a channel for critique of, and reactions to, discriminatory practices – and perceptions of practices – in the field. In short, it entails a call for recognition and decent treatment in everyday life as it is experienced by homeless people coming into contact with the system.

For another group of activists, the main aim is to create a national and politically important association. These activists hope to see the organisation strengthened and they struggle to improve conditions for the most marginalised segments of the population. A former president of SAND expressed the ambition in this way:

> The aim of SAND is to do our best to help create a mouthpiece for the ones who are not able to speak themselves. That those who feel like shit, those at the bottom, the addicts, the ones who scream and shout so that no one wants to listen to them… That these people have a proper voice, which the system will take seriously. So, SAND must be respected for its opinions and as an advocate

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4   The concern of homeless social movement organisations with shelter policies can also be seen in Williams (2005). The situation at treatment facilities for drug users has led to the setting up of a similar organisation for drug users (Anker, 2006).

for the poor, the excluded and the vulnerable. And that is what SAND is supposed to do… The main task is to draw attention to those who are not well, and who should have better conditions. It is quite easy to become the mouthpiece of those who are not able themselves. (personal interview)

SAND is still (as any collective actor) in the middle of the process of defining itself and its aims. Most important in this process are the attempts to combine and link the experiences and concerns of individual activists with the broader and more general conditions of homelessness. So far, SAND has been able to incorporate the different personal interests of activists, and to combine both a social and more local emphasis with a broader national (and to some extent international) political dimension. The combination of the two is essential to interest organisations, and it is one of the most important strengths of SAND.

Recognition

SAND, like other interest organisations in the field of health and social policy, seeks to construct the conditions of homelessness as a genuine social problem (Spector and Kitsuse, 2001 ; Henriksen et al., 2001). The public side of this work can be seen at conferences and in the media, while another part of the work takes place in more delimited political and administrative networks through participation in councils and commissions. In this way, SAND is quite similar to other and more established interest organisations in the social policy field (Henriksen et al., 2001).

The national authorities recognise SAND as a legitimate interest organisation for the homeless. When new legislation or initiatives are being created, information/ documents are circulated to SAND for consideration, and SAND also provides input into the NAPs/inclusion process. More differentiated responses to SAND have been observed at hostels, which are not always open to changing their specific methods of intervention for homeless people (Ramsbøl et al., 2007).

A recent example that illustrates that SAND is taken seriously and recognised in the field is the pilot, The Homelessness Strategy – a strategy to reduce homeless-ness in Denmark. The Minister of Social Welfare invited SAND, together with repre-sentatives from the political parties and the eight municipalities, to a meeting in the ministry to question and comment on the strategy. The Homelessness Strategy is still in its initial phase, with eight municipalities working on specific homeless plans defined according to four overall goals : to bring the number of rough sleepers to zero, to ensure that there are no young people in hostels, to ensure that people do not stay more than three or four months in hostels as after that time a proper housing solution should be available, and to create a situation whereby accom-modation is available for all those leaving prisons or hospitals.

Afterwards, SAND decided that its annual thematic seminar should be dedicated to discussing and gaining influence over the national strategy for preventing and combating homelessness. Representatives from the eight municipalities were thus invited to the seminar to discuss local homeless plans. At the seminar, representatives from local authorities met and discussed the details of local authority plans with activists from the regional SAND committees. Both activists and representatives from local authorities described the meeting as a great success because it provided the opportunity to meet and to share views and understandings of homelessness from a local perspective.[5]

The seminar thus appeared to strengthen the focus on user participation in the municipalities, while also giving local SAND committees a focus for discussion and involvement. This example demonstrates how the institutional structure of the Danish welfare state provides good opportunities for user organisations to gain influence. Moreover, it shows that the user organisation is recognised and taken seriously by the authorities. Activists in the organisation are encouraged by this recognition as they see and feel that they are being invited to take part in decision-making processes.

Transience Threatens Organisational Continuity

The image of organised, enduring associations of leaders and followers pursuing deliberately chosen strategies in opposition to others (Buechler, 2000, p.156) does not apply to organisations of homeless people. The constant challenges facing such organisations are related to homeless people's unstable lives and limited capabilities, combined with the fact that to most people homelessness is a temporary experience, in contrast to, for example, user organisations of people with disabilities.

In Denmark staying at a hostel for the homeless is temporary. In other words, activists who are recruited at hostels should – within a few months – make the move to more permanent accommodation. Some activists also leave SAND when they are no longer homeless. Others use SAND as a social network and a meaningful activity in a period during which they try to build a new life under a new set of circumstances.

Managerial and organisational skills are limited among homeless people (Cress and Snow, 1996). Participants often have limited personal resources due to their struggle to survive under difficult living conditions while also facing different personal problems. Organisational work is thus usually the domain of a small number of active persons. When few people are actively engaged in the organisational proce-

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5   Based on personal conversations with representatives from local authorities and with SAND activists.

dures of associations, it becomes more difficult to establish and sustain democratic procedures and practices, and to control the management of assets. This phenomenon has often been experienced in local SAND organisations, where problems have arisen after the withdrawal of charismatic local leaders or when assets have disappeared due to insufficient internal controls and procedures for the management of assets. Local organisations thus occasionally disappear when activists retire or when internal matters make it too difficult to continue.

Essentially, the constant flow of people in and out of the state of homelessness constitutes a structural challenge for organisations that are made up of homeless people. It limits the possibility of ensuring organisational stability and continuity, which is necessary to form an organisation that can enter into dialogue and negotiations with the authorities. It also represents a challenge for democratic procedures. It is thus interesting that SAND has been able to consolidate itself as a reliable and stable organisation in the field. What are the reasons behind this success, and are there any lessons to be learned from SAND?

Strategies to Ensure Continuity

As a way of dealing with the problem of the constant flow of people moving in and out of a state of homelessness, and thus also moving in and out of the organisation, SAND has adopted a number of specific mechanisms. While these mechanisms help to increase the stability of a fragile organisation, some of them also create dilemmas or latent conflict.

First, SAND has defined the organisation as being not only for people who are currently homeless, but also for people who were previously homeless. In this way SAND seeks to gain increased stability among activists by ensuring that they do not have to leave the organisation when they are no longer homeless. This mechanism increases incentives for activists to become involved as they will be able to stay in the organisation for a longer time. It also makes it possible to build a career as a homeless activist within the organisation. By facilitating a structure wherein a number of experienced people continue to sit on various local committees, on the board of SAND and in working groups, this mechanism appears to have played a vital role for SAND. However, it can also create tension and internal criticisms where homeless people feel that the activists are too distant from the reality of homeless people in the hostels or on the streets. When activists remain in the organisation for a long time, they also risk losing credibility vis-à-vis homeless people due to the close relationship that tends to evolve with representatives of the system.

Second, to ensure that new homeless people are recruited, SAND continually seeks to engage new activists at the hostels. Hostel users are invited to the regional meetings of SAND, and local committees are asked to send new activists to give them an understanding of the organisation. At the regional meetings, participants share experiences and individuals begin to see themselves not only as persons with individual problems, but also as persons with common problems, who can join a group with shared interests and ideas. However, the recruitment and education of new activists is costly and requires a vast amount of resources and energy. Also, activists in SAND sometimes find it hard to contact hostels for the homeless seeking to engage new activists, and new activists occasionally find it difficult to become fully integrated in the circle of more experienced activists. These are some of the main organisational problems in creating unity and continuity among people who are defined by transience and a lack of stability.

Third, SAND runs capacity-building programmes every semester for both new and experienced activists. These programmes serve as additional incentives for activists as they are an opportunity to learn new skills. Most importantly, however, the programmes increase continuity and stability in SAND. Through ongoing training seminars, activists gather and learn how to run an organisation, how to run a meeting, how to gain access to the media and so on. Experiences garnered from SAND's first years of existence are shared in these seminars with the new activists, ensuring that a collective understanding of SAND is created and maintained in the organisation. Moreover, the seminars provide a space in which homeless people are able to make contacts, create new networks and develop a sense of sharing a collective identity (Melucci, 1996).

Fourth, SAND employs people without a user background to ensure continuity and stability in the organisation. These staff members take care of, for example, administrative and organisational matters and practical arrangements for meetings and activities. Importantly, they ensure that it is always possible for others to get in contact with SAND. However, this professionalisation of the organisation forms a barrier to developing a homeless organisation that is completely owned by homeless people themselves. Within SAND, there is a strong commitment to ensuring that it is the members of the board that act as spokespersons for SAND in public. The role of those employed in the secretariat is thus that of 'civil servants', while the board makes decisions about aims and strategies. On occasion tensions arise between the board and the staff if decisions are made which have not been approved by the board. On a day-to-day basis, staff members are often told – through jokes and rude humour – that they have to work hard for the money they earn and that they must behave if they want to keep their jobs. In this way, informal control regulates the relation between the paid employees and the homeless activists in SAND.

It is obvious that manipulation can take place when employees have been in the organisation much longer than most of the activists. But in the case of SAND, field-work data[6] show that activists widely respect and accept the role of non-users. It is also the case that employees perceive their role as being concerned with ensuring and improving democratic practices and user influence in SAND.

Given the structural barriers facing homeless people's organisations, a lot of work is required to develop and maintain an organisational structure that facilitates democratic ambition in the most effective way possible. Indeed one might ask whether a traditional representative interest organisation (which matches the institutional structure of the welfare state and which follows the rules of associated democracy) is the most obvious way to administer a user organisation for homeless people. In Denmark this has been the solution, simply because it is the traditional way of influencing social policy in a rather regulated welfare state, where almost every client group also runs an interest organisation. In countries with different structures and mechanisms of interest mediation, more informal, ad hoc and horizontal forms of organisation could be better alternatives, especially where the state is not open to this kind of user organisation.

Important Lessons

The emergence of SAND shows that it is possible to develop new fora and arenas for the participation of some of the most marginalised, dispersed and isolated groups in society, especially if they are supported by progressive professionals and central authorities. However, SAND also illustrates the difficulties of forming and stabilising organisations of homeless people because of the temporary character of homelessness and the continual flow of activists. The lesson seems to be that while it is possible to form and maintain an interest organisation of homeless people, it takes resources, dedicated effort and ongoing programmes of capacity building.

It takes resources to organise marginalised groups

Resources are needed if homeless people are to succeed in the formation of formal, enduring interest organisations which are recognised by the authorities as trustworthy entities, and which have the capacity to take part in the decision-making procedures of the welfare state. It is important to acknowledge that if traditional interest organisations depend on resources to succeed, an interest organisation of homeless people needs perhaps even more resources to overcome the structural hindrances and the limited administrative capacity of its members.

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6   The field work included observations at meetings and gatherings and qualitative interviews with activists in SAND over a period of three years (2003–2006), see Anker (2008).

Programmes of capacity building are essential

Homeless people often lack experience of organisational work and therefore cannot be expected to form a well-functioning organisation without training or support. If this kind of organisation is to survive, there must be an ongoing programme of capacity building to improve homeless people's skills in forming and running an organisation. This could be seen as empowerment at an organisational level, which may also provide the individual participants with new insights and capabilities as they gain new skills and opportunities. Having well-functioning programmes of capacity building may help such organisations to consolidate and grow in spite of the challenges they invariably face.

Organisations (run by and for the) homeless can make a difference

Interest organisations of homeless people are important both politically and socially. Politically, the case of SAND indicates that interest organisations of homeless people can gain access to the policy-making process and influence the planning and imple-mentation of policies. Moreover, the existence of an interest organisation for the homeless increases the public focus on, and awareness of, homelessness as a social problem. Socially, an organisation like SAND offers a space where former and currently homeless people can meet, exchange experiences and create new bonds and networks. In this way an organisation of homeless people can support the indi-vidual activist in creating new bonds, networks, structure and meaning in his or her life. Organisations of homeless people may thus also contribute to increasing social capital and to ensuring the inclusion and recognition of marginalised groups.

Conclusion

Homelessness is often related to situations of isolation, loneliness and exclusion. For the individual, the failure to get or live in an ordinary dwelling is often experi-enced as a personal failure and an individual problem. The user organisation attempts to change this situation by providing a space for the exchange of personal experiences and for the formation of a collective understanding of, and response to, homelessness. In this sense, one of the most important aspects of the organisa-tion is in fact its ability to enable, and to serve as a catalyst for, the establishment of interpersonal relations among the members.

Homeless people's organisations face many of the same dilemmas as any other organisation that seeks to represent publicly a group of citizens. They must decide on strategies, aims, how to obtain resources, who to cooperate with and so on. In addition, however, they face some specific challenges related to a lack of resources

and dependence upon social service agencies or hostels for the homeless (Williams, 2005, p.497). This may limit the range of strategic options available, as well as the ability to ensure stability, continuity and representativeness in an organisation.

It should be mentioned that other forms of organisation are also possible. One might imagine, for example, that more horizontal, ad hoc, protest-oriented and locally based movements (as suggested by Piven and Cloward, 1979) would better fit the transience that characterises the situation of homeless people. Even so, the case of SAND tends to support US studies indicating that it is often co-operation and representation, and not conflict and mobilisation, that are aspired to by homeless social movement organisations (Williams, 2005; Cress and Snow, 2000).

SAND illustrates that in a welfare state with a relatively open and facilitating institutional structure, homeless people may be able to form and sustain a viable organisation. With programmes of capacity building, with support and resources from the state or other friendly actors, and with employed staff, an organisation of homeless people may be able to consolidate itself as a reliable and recognised interest organisation in the field.

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