A better perspective on work

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Good morning all. My name is Selle van der Woude. I'm an independent researcher, specializing in the employment of young adults with disabilities.

A professional distance is inherent in doing (good) research. At the same time, I feel very committed to their deeply felt desire to participate in society.

Look, this is what I get energy from. And I'm sure this also applies to all of you here in the room. People at work for whom that isn't obvious. Them having fun, doing a great job.

For these and other people having a job isn't obvious because they, for example, experience problems in social interaction, they need more time to learn new tasks, they do not speak the language well or they experience problems at home.

In the Netherlands these people are nowadays referred to as 'people in a vulnerable position'. By definition, it's about people with an increased risk of being unemployed, or not participating in education. More in general, a risk of being 'inactive'.

Just to be sure: it's not only about people who *are* not in education or employment, the so called NEETs. It's also about working people with a higher risk becoming a NEET.

The key question today is *what is needed for these people in a vulnerable position, to bring about a better perspective on work?*

Peter and Hannah asked me to discuss this question from different angles. With pleasure!

I'd like to discuss the following aspects:

- What makes their position vulnerable? Before we discuss what is needed to improve their position on the labor market, a better understanding is needed of the factors which hinder or foster their employment.
- After that, I will discuss some of the components of current approaches which do foster the employment of these people. So to say, I will speak about: 'what works'.

Also, I will try to specifically address the three focus groups of this seminar:
1. Young adults not in education, employment nor training, the NEETs;
2. Adults with mild intellectual disabilities;
3. Adults with limited basic skills, as limited reading skills or digital skills.

The term 'focus group' might be a bit misleading: we talk about lots of people in Europe (EU):
1. NEETS: an estimated 14 million (15-29 years old]
2. People with mild intellectual disabilities: at least 2.5 million based on the small definition (IQ 50-70), but far more when we take into account the people with an IQ of 70-85 who do need support to participate.
3. And 70 million Europeans lack adequate reading and writing skills, and even more have poor numeracy and digital skills.

Of course, these groups do overlap, but still…

Also important to mention that the differences between countries are considerable, as you see in the charts.

A better understanding of their vulnerable position

So, what makes their position vulnerable? A wide range of factors can contribute to this vulnerability. We, as society, tend to focus on personal factors. And, in particular, on the possible disabilities of these people. The latter is not strange: our brain tends to focus on what is different, on what deviates from the norm.

> Take a look at this photo….. Whether you like it or not, one of the first things, perhaps *the* first, what your brain detects is the wheelchair. Isn't it? If you would meet this woman more frequently, her name is Linda, the wheelchair would fade into the background more and more, and her personality would come to the fore.

> And then this photo. Please take a look. Your brain immediately detects the abnormalities in the face of the lady on the right. Your brain probably concludes she has Down syndrome. And with the Down syndrome comes the intellectual disability. For the record: the other girl also has an intellectual disability.

Simply because the disorders attract our attention, they already influence the participation of these people. Not always in a negative way, though. We all know the examples in which someone's disorder is an advantage, as this video shows with a wink.

The exception proves the rule. Disorders, like autism or intellectual disabilities, often affect participation. According to data of Eurofound, people declaring of suffering some kind of disability are 40 percent more likely to become NEET compared to others.

Other more intrapersonal factors matter too, and mostly matter more. For example, people with a more positive attitude towards work do have better chances to being employed, including through their greater willingness to make concessions. Other intrapersonal factors that influence the perspective on work are for example the self-image, the self-efficacy, the locus of control and someone's lifestyle.

Disorders can affect certain of these intrapersonal factors. For example, due to the limited capacity for self-reflection, people with mild intellectual disabilities often overestimate their own capabilities. It is not for nothing that this focus group is under-represented in voluntary aid. At the same time, the environment often tends to overestimate their possibilities because their limitations are often not visible, or because they know how to camouflage them well. Overestimation can result in experiences of failure, frustrations, a negative self-image. In recent years we studied the perspective on work of young people with intellectual disabilities AND behavioral problems. Although most of the stories of these young people are not new to me, still they touch me. Stories of young people who have been so damaged by persistent experiences of failure, and who have therefore such a low self-esteem, that they throw in the towel with the slightest setback. Often the dynamics are like you see in this 'low self-esteem circle'.

So, disorders and more intrapersonal factors do matter. However, in the case of the perspective on work, the factors with the greatest predictive value are environment-related. An environment that supports rather than hinders is above all 'what makes the difference'. Like I once read in an EU-policy statement regarding the participation of people with disabilities: *"Very often it is the environment that is disabling rather than the nature of the disability itself."* That's the reason why I prefer to speak of 'people in a vulnerable position' instead of 'vulnerable people'. They are not vulnerable, their position is vulnerable. Language is meaningful!

The barriers that these people encounter need to be overcome by society as a whole, by us. That's also the key message of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), I hope you all heard of. Therefore, I would like to focus on these environment related factors in the rest of my speech. We now do not have the time to fully discuss all relevant environmental factors, but let me discuss some of them:

Several environment related factors with a high predictive value for the chance of work, are related to the social context. Social context means the partner, parents, friends, and so on. Some years ago the University of Groningen found out that, for young people with disabilities, the factor with the greatest predictive value was the employment or unemployment of parents. Like you see in the head of this article: adult children of benefit recipients are more likely to also receive benefits themselves.

Also, the existence of problems in the social context can negatively influence the perspective on work. For example, in Europe, young people who suffered the divorce of their parents are 30% more likely to become NEET [Eurofound]. The divorce of parents is an example of what we call an 'Adverse Childhood Experience' (ACE). Other examples of ACEs are (repeated) physical abuse, emotional neglect, growing up in a family with a problem drinker or a psychiatric, chronically depressed family member. Scientists found out that ACEs influence the structure and functioning of the brain, and therefore may have an impact on someone's perspective on education and work. Dear Peter, Hannah, within the Erasmus+ program you speak about 'people with disadvantaged backgrounds'. if that applies to a group, then that is true for this group.

The stories of people in a vulnerable position are not always that heartbreaking. Sometimes the stories are about the loving embrace of parents which also can hinder the further growth of the young adults with disabilities. Parents' concerns with regard to their child can cause parents to go more for safety in their behavior than to strengthen their child's self-reliance and maximum participation. This protective attitude often goes together with an underestimation of the possibilities of the own child. Like a mum told me*: "Yes, we as parents but also her brothers and sisters are all very caring for her. I find it very difficult to let her go a bit more and prefer to arrange everything for her."* These behavioral patterns of parents have grown so much over the years; many parents are not aware of this. It is not easy for parents and young people to break through these behavioral patterns. Often it is necessary for the young people to come from under the wings of their parents and to broaden their social networks to develop further.

Sometimes the vulnerability can also be temporarily and, for example, be associated with a period of economic headwind. In a recent study of young adults between 23 and 27 years old we came across a large group of young adults who had interrupted their education in good economic times to go to work, to make money. When the crisis came, they were the first to be fired. What we saw then was that many of these young adults yet wanted to get a degree but were unable to start their vocational education. Many factors appeared to play a role. What touched me the most were the stories of those who were genuinely interested in going back to school, but did not feel encouraged and supported. The most important problem is that these person's approach is often one-dimensional: it is only about school, only about work or benefits. In reality, these young people have to deal with issues in different areas of life and there are often additional problems such as debts, housing problems, lack of income, psychological or physical problems.

Talked about limited access to further education: what particularly concerns me is that in regard to young people with intellectual disabilities, in the Netherlands the school career often ends around the age of 18, after leaving secondary special education. Lifelong learning - that we talk about so much - but apparently not for these young people. Where brothers and sisters go to college, their school career ends. It's a real shame. Especially when we realize that they develop at a slower pace than young people 'without' disabilities, and that they therefore need more time and investment to develop their full potential.

So, the perspective on work is also about the opportunities that society offers people who are different from the norm. In the field of education, but also in the labor market. A typical example of an environment-related factor that hinders labor participation is the discrimination in het labor market. Mystery call research commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs & Employment in the Netherlands showed that 40% of temp agencies were willing to discriminate on order. For example, if the client wanted no Turkish or Moroccan people that wish was simply carried out.

A last environment-related factor I want to mention is the fragmented system of services and the lack of coordination, which is more or less the case in all European countries. Last year I attended a peer review in Croatia. There was a common sense that this really hinders the participation of these people. I am therefore glad you here are committed to creating a more integral and person-centered approach.

In conclusion, there is a wide range of factors that can contribute to the vulnerable position of these people: possible disabilities, intrapersonal factors like a negative self-image and environment-related factors. Like you see in the famous ICF-model. What is most important to remember is that the factors with the greatest predictive value are environment-related.

What works?

How can we foster their employment? What works?

It is clear from the foregoing how diverse these focus groups are and that customization is therefore a key concept. Customization is an often used and therefore worn concept. What we are talking about here is a new, more radical form of customization in which it is not primarily about making the system more flexible, but about doing what is needed for an individual.

Having said that, I would like to discuss some general findings of 'what works'.

In my personal opinion, it starts with recognizing the relevance of environmental factors. We will be more effective if we do not seek the causes and solutions for the non-participation of these people directly and exclusively in the limitations of these people, but first of all in the characteristics of the context.

For example, earlier in my speech I told you about how the loving embrace of parents can hinder the development of their children and how difficult it is to change these patterns. Current research into a three-year development program for young adults with intellectual disabilities, indicates that they can become much more independent. One of the active components of this program is that the students leave their parents' house and live, work and learn on a campus. Becoming more independent goes hand in hand with a stated growth in quality of life. Not only the quality of life of the students themselves, but also the quality of life of their parents and siblings.

Some of the people in a vulnerable position just missed the love and positive communication of parents. For many of them, professionals are their social capital. Therefore, it is really important that they develop trust in professionals. For this there must be genuine attention to who they are and what is going on in their lives. It requires an approach from professionals which I would flag as 'Appreciative Inquiry', in which they also show more of themselves. It is precisely because of this that the young person's confidence in the professional grows and thus his or her influence. Really, they don't need a professional who knows best what to do. They need genuine attention for who they are and what is going on in their lives.

Last year I interviewed some professionals who are quite successful in their approach of the NEETs in their city. *"The fact that we knock on the door gives the youngsters the feeling that they are worth it … The message is not: you must. But: Can I do something for you? … We are not coming to check, we are showing that we care for them … Not condemn, but acknowledge, appreciate and respect. That is how you keep him or her in the pilot's seat."*

But also with regard to people with less serious, complex problems, such as with some of the adults with limited basic skills, it is important to connect with the personal situation and learning objectives. One person might have the desire to be able to come along in the field of computerization at work, another has the desire to be able to read and guide his or her child at school or to participate in the management of the sports club. Achieving a level set by official bodies (like a diploma at some level) often has no purpose for this group. They want to achieve their own goals in a way that fits their own daily lives.

One of the intrapersonal factors that have a great influence on the chance of work is, as discussed, the self-image. Recent research into the employment of young adults with mild intellectual disabilities and behavioral problems has revealed a number of active components in promoting a positive and at the same time realistic self-image. One is the sincere belief of professionals in the possibilities of these people: that these people are learnable and are able to grow and change within their capabilities, sometimes proving to be more capable than previously thought possible.

In addition, it is important that the statement "you can do something!" is really meant by the professionals.

Furthermore, we see that positive reinforcement can contribute significantly to a more positive self-image and to more self-confidence. By expressing confidence in advance, having success experiences and by complimenting afterwards, the belief in one's ability is strengthened. By starting from the possibilities, the severity and extent of the limitation becomes of secondary importance, as a result of which these people feel more secure and can therefore create the opportunity for themselves to develop further. It is the joint task of the person in a vulnerable position, his or her professionals and other stakeholders to discover what his or her talents are and to take these as a starting point to overcome problems in often small steps.

Successful professionals are, at the same time, not blind to the limitations of these people. Acceptance of the limitations, not only by the people in a vulnerable position themselves but also by the professionals, is important. This prevents, for example, young people with behavioral problems from being rejected for their behavior. Like a professional told me: "*The sometimes terrible tempers of these young people, it comes with them.*" Undesirable behavior is discussed and investigated; with a particular focus on what can help the young person. Sometimes it is possible to teach young people to react differently in such situations. But that is not always possible. Then it can be more effective to think about how as much as possible can be prevented from ending up in such difficult situations for young people. Once again, change the context...

Of course it is also important to work on the demand side of the labor market. We already discussed the approach aimed at reducing discrimination. In addition, employers' surveys repeatedly show that employers, including those with a positive attitude towards these focus groups, often have difficulty imagining what these people can do within their own company. In recent years, a lot of experience has been gained with Inclusive Job Design. You may know it as 'jobcarving'. Business processes are redesigned and tasks split off, so that higher-skilled personnel can be better deployed for the work for which they have been trained. Simple tasks are combined into one or more positions suitable for people with disabilities. Bottom line is that many of the people in a vulnerable position cannot be matched 1 on 1 with regular functions, and that it is much more effective to create suitable work. When the match is made, it remains important to support the employer and the employee. Proximity is a key concept here.

In the Netherlands, social partners and politicians have agreed that 125,000 jobs will be created for people with disabilities in a period of approximately 10 years. It is striking that we see that private businesses amply achieve the goals, but the government and education are lagging behind. The cabinet is now threatening governments and education with the implementation of the Quotum Act, which would mean that they have to pay a fine for each vacant workplace. We have to see. Quota, we see them in various European countries. The effect varies. In Finland, employees receive additional financial support when more than 30 percent or their staff are persons with disabilities. This idea of rewarding I like more.

Last but not least: to really foster the employment of these focus groups, a person-centered, integrated approach is needed in which all areas of life are taken into account, aimed at participation in a broad sense. It is clear that this type of solution must be realized at the regional or local level. And that these focus groups should have an important position in the development and implementation of these solutions.

One of the final conclusions of the peer review in Croatia, was that if we want to empower these civilians, we also need to empower the actors around these people. How? Give regional actors a clear objective, some starting points and budget, and invite them to come up with proposals. And that's exactly the purpose of this seminar, isn't it? I wish you a meaningful and pleasant seminar.