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Freakcasters: Kirsi Konola – Inklusion leben statt verwalten

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Freakcasters - Menschen, Geschichten, Leidenschaften.

Herzlich willkommen zu einer neuen Folge von Freakcasters – Menschen, Geschichten und Leidenschaften, sagt Udo Seelhofer. In dieser Folge sprechen wir mit Kirsi Konola, der Geschäftsführerin der finnischen Tukena-Stiftung, einer der wichtigsten Organisationen in Finnland, wenn es um Unterstützung, Selbstbestimmung und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von Menschen mit Behinderung geht. Tukena entwickelt individuelle Unterstützungsangebote für Menschen mit Behinderungen und ihre Familien und setzt sich konsequent für ein menschenrechtsbasiertes Verständnis von Betreuung und Inklusion ein. Konola engagiert sich seit Jahren dafür, dass Inklusion nicht nur ein Schlagwort bleibt, sondern konkret gelebt wird. In Strukturen, in der Politik und im Alltag. Warum ihr das so wichtig ist und was echte Teilhabe bedeutet, besprechen wir jetzt. Das Gespräch wurde in Englisch geführt.

Mrs. Konola, what can you tell us about your professional career? And what motivated you to work so hard for the rights of people with disabilities?

I have done all my career in disability sector and actually also in the same organization in Tukena. It was a bit of a coincidence how I ended up there when I did my master thesis and so on in the university there. And I didn't know anything about the sector basically when I ended up there, but I got so fascinated about it and I really found my motivation and inspiration what I want to do there already when I was quite young. So I have done a lot of different kind of things in the field.

What exactly is Tukena?

Tukena is a value-based organization founded by families in 1992 because families wanted to have other kind of options for their children than institutions to live and so on. So since that, we have been promoting rights of people to live in communities, providing services for them there. And also for families, we have a lot of respite care services and so on for families. We work all over Finland, everywhere there, in all welfare counties. We employ around 1,200 people and provide services for a large scale of people. Our people who we support usually have quite high support needs, and also families have very different kind of situations. So we are a value-based organization active in whole Finland.

You are known for your strategic and value-based leadership. What does this mean in concrete terms in your day-to-day work at Tukena and the EASPD?

I think the values of organizations I work for are very important to me and I want to live up with them. I want to be connected and committed to them. I want to see them, what they mean in my life and in the organization's structures and so on. And I try always keep that as a vision or aim of everything we do.

I'm quite, I think that the vision comes when you are sensitive what people really want and then you combine that to your experience and structures and so on. But you have to really be aware and listen carefully, families, people with disabilities and so on. And then it comes there, the right direction where you are going. And then to do it, I think the organizational structures need to be thought so that people feel committed to the aims of the organization. They have a room to express themselves and to feel part of the larger community so that they don't, because quite easily, I think it comes that people get very narrow-minded, let's say, and they operate with the tasks they have in every day. But I think what we should do is to encourage people to look at the bigger picture and feel the connection in the larger community, let's say, if it's the working community or what they do and so on.

You encourage people to work more interdisciplinary. Is that right?

Yes, I think so. I think so. Yes. And I think that's the word. And to think that strategy is something actually what we do every day. It's not something we have in the paper or on the wall of the management or so on. But I think it's our kind of duty as leaders to make it so, let's say, tangible that people really feel that what's their role in the organization to make it happen. And I think that goes both for the employers and for the people we work for, that it must be quite clear with our visions.

So it's not only a job. It's not just a job, is it?

No, no, no. It's not like that. I'm very grateful for it because I feel that I have become who I am with that. It has been very important to me as a personal growth and so on. And it's a very big part of my life in every sense. I wouldn't call it lifestyle, but it's part of me in a way.

And yeah, it has been, we have, as Tukena, we have been changing as an organization quite a bit, a lot. We have been growing a lot during the years and all the time going forward. So it feels like it's been possible to grow for myself and the organization a little bit at the same path in a way.

What are the main objectives currently being pursued by the EASPD and which initiatives are particularly important to you personally?

Yes, also in EASPD, we are just started to make our new strategy for the coming years. We started with the new board and so on end of last year. I'm very excited about it. It's an organization I have been very active already like 15 years. So I'm very fond of that also. It's the same as Tukena in Finland. I am very committed to its values and so on. And I'm really looking forward to the coming years. And what we are like focusing, of course, is how to make UNCRPD the real in services and how our members can promote it in their everyday service provision. And of course, also in the policy level, umbrellas and so on. So how can we in a way, also challenging times, create hope, I think, for the people and what kind of role service providers have in that. I think that's something we are. I would say that's the main issue at the moment. Of course, it's a lot of policy issues and so on, but that's something I feel that I am there for.

How do the members support and promote this in their day-to-day lives?

The EASPD's work, you mean? Oh, there is a lot of different kind of ways. I think it's for the members, EASPD, it represents around 20,000 service providers around Europe. And of course, it's sort of different kind of ways how they are connected to EASPD. And we are all the time trying to find out different kind of ways to do it. But in, I think it's for meaning of EASPD for...

Just a second ... Sorry!

No worries. Meaning is, I think that's a source of information. I think it, and then it's the source of connections. Members value a lot I think that through EASPD, they get to know a lot of other kinds of organizations from who are working with the same aims and so on around Europe. Of course, projects are important. Many organizations want to be part of European projects and get funding for their activities through that. So I think it's very different. It can be very different, but I think information, knowledge, development, to know what's happening, getting support also to the policy, especially in Eastern European countries, I think it's definitely one of the main issues that members get support in their policy work at the national level, from Europe, yeah, a lot of things.

How does the EASPD work with other organizations in particular and countries to promote inclusion for people with disabilities?

Really a lot in Brussels. EASPD is very active and valued member of different networks around social services and different organizations doing work in Brussels. So everything is basically happening with other organizations in Brussels and nationally. So a lot. Of course, EASPD is very clear also about its role that we are not representing People with disabilities, we represent service providers and we are listening very carefully what people themselves, organizations who represent people and families are saying and we are collaborating a lot with them and also a lot of other stakeholders, depending on country also. But Brussels, it's very wide connections and everything happens basically in networks.

What differences and challenges do you see in the various European countries in regard of inclusion and support services?

Yeah, the realities are very different, of course, from country to country. Nordic countries are very different. The structures there compared to the South and then, of course, also the way people live and the economic finances and so on, they vary a lot. But I think also that there is a lot of similarities in terms of ... Indeed, also the challenge is that no country is ready with inclusion or how we promote USCRPD. Of course, the structures, resources and things like that are different, but really how people themselves are in the core of change how we are structuring the services and delivering them. I think that's something all of us have to think about and challenge ourselves all the time and try to find much more rooted solutions for that. But then, of course, for the colleagues, for example, in Eastern Europe, there is massive issues around resources and institutions and so on, which are, of course, also an issue everywhere. At the moment, there is a lot of, I wouldn't say threats, but issues around NGOs and what's the role of NGOs in different countries. It's also in Finland at the moment, a big issue you how the finances of NGOs is going. So there is a lot of similarities and let's say the atmosphere of Europe is there everywhere in a bit to the same direction. But of course, the history and the structures in some countries, there is, for example, very light or not so much legislative frameworks, for example. In some countries, they are very well developed.

That's, for example, it creates a lot of different kind of realities. But also, then again, I do think that a lot about inclusion also happens in communities and how people are part of them and how we make it possible. And that's something what is very much common challenge for all.

You mentioned that the finances are a challenge. Why is that so?

Yeah. In Finland, if I speak about Finland, because that's, of course, something I know best, but there is a lot of different, same kind of roads in different parts of Europe at the moment. But in Finland, it comes from very different ways that the people's, let's say people themselves and families are in a... bit tight position in a way that the finances of NGOs is cut. And in Finland, we have had this very good social innovation that the funding from slot machines, you know, the lottery kind of goes to the social healthcare NGOs. And now there is big cuts, one third of that funding is cut from the beginning of next year and that reflects a lot to the whole sector in Finland and at the same time the welfare counties are responsible of paying the services and there is a lot of pressure to cut that funding also

all the time so it's different ways happening but yeah. I still believe that there is what we can do, even if at the moment the challenges are going to that direction.

The Tukena Foundation offers customized services. Can you give an example of how such a customized approach is implemented in everyday life?

We try and we are very committed to support our staff so that they can feel that they can do a good job with the people. You know, I think it's a starting point very much that the connection between people who support, who are there to support the people and people themselves and their families is good. As I told you, we are founded by families. So I think that the big characteristic for our work is that we work very closely with the family also.

When a person moves to our services, for example, lives in a service and we support him or her, we take into account still the whole family structure so that families can be involved and so on. And service is designed and planned together with the person and the family. And we try to make it possible that everybody can live the kind of life they want in our service. That's our idea.

And of course, we try to support our staff a lot to do that. And that's something we get a lot of feedback from our staff when we ask how they like to work for us. Also, always the very big positive thing is that people feel that they can do their work so that they feel it's valuable and so on. So I think that's the starting point for really listen to persons, give opportunity to that and give the room because they are usually quite simple things what make people feel that they are really running their own life and leading the kind of life they want.

What projects of the Tukena Foundation do have a particular impact on you?

I think it was a very important time when we did the deinstitutionalization. It's a difficult word, so I say DI. And I think when we were very much involved in that, people moved from institutions to our community services and so on. And it was very powerful to see how it changed people's lives, really, even if it was also, even if they were, families were quite pleased and so were also institutions and so on. Still, the move, it was really like people started to communicate or it's really big issue. So it was something, it was really concrete to see how it can change people's lives. And it was something which had had very big effect on me also personally.

How?

Because I knew, somehow I knew that that's something I will do, I want to do for the coming years. And it's still, unfortunately, it's still very, very accurate because now the tendencies are towards bigger institutions again and so on. So we need to lead and try to lead things to that, give example and lead by example and demonstrate by doing what we can still do.

What would you like to see in the next five to 10 years in the area of inclusion, both in Finland and at their European level?

Yes, I would like to see that people's views on their lives are respected and they are taken so that people themselves and services, that we are able to together create kind of systems which are supportive to the rights of people and really that we will see that the fantastic goals of UNCRPD are real and we are able to enable that. And I think that we will take a lot of steps and also even if it's at the moment not so easy and there is also like I told things going backwards a little bit, I still think that the disability movement and collaboration with the service providers and other networks, I think we can create hope and good examples for the future and coming years.

Mrs. Konola, thank you very much for your time.

Thank you.

Das war Freakcasters - Menschengeschichten und Leidenschaften für heute. Wenn euch dieser Podcast gefallen hat, dann empfiehlt ihn weiter und erzählt euren Freunden und eurer Familie von ihm. Außerdem freuen wir uns über eine gute Bewertung auf der Podcast-App eurer Wahl. Dann bleibt mir nur noch mich zu verabschieden: Ciao und bis zum nächsten Mal, sagt Udo Seelhofer.