
**From A Shared Table
Yhteisestä pöydästä
Genuine need and the Shared Table Action model**

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Introduction

There is an enormous amount of surplus food in Finland at all levels of food production. At the same time we have lots of queues for bread, which are a huge social political and human problem. Food is wasted when many does not have enough of it. There have been bread queues last 30 years in Finland and they are partly an unavoidable result of the conspicuous consumption of food. The surplus food should preferably be given to people instead of being sent for biofuel or animal feed. The third sector and especially the church have traditionally taken the role of food aid donors.

The work that we are presenting here is located in Vantaa, which in one of the biggest cities in Finland. In Vantaa there are 217,415 inhabitants. Unemployment is 12% and 16.1% of the population are immigrants, which us the highest percentage in Finland. In Vantaa are there seven Lutheran parishes, a central office and 34 deacons. In Finland, 440,000 inhabitants in live under the poverty line (1190€/month) and there are 854 000 people in poverty or at risk of exclusion. We know that more than 20,000 people live under the poverty line in Vantaa. In the Vantaa area we can point out several risk factors: low income level, high rents, low average educational level (32% basic level education, 37,7% middle level education, 30,3 % higher level education). In Vantaa area there are several localities where migration and unemployment is focused on the same area creating areas of exclusion. Income is under 20,000€ per year for 33% inhabitants of Vantaa. 13,500 people were living with a basic income in Vantaa in the year 2016.¹

The ‘Yhteinen pöytä/Shared Table Action Model’, which was founded, funded and is owned by the City of Vantaa and Vantaa Parish Union began in 2012. The City of Vantaa is the only city that has made it possible to organize logistics for the distribution of surplus food on a large scale. The City does not give food aid to people directly but makes it possible in the network by creating an efficient logistical system and supporting community-building capacities in the network.

The main target group in the field of food aid is socially excluded people. We have created an innovative, centralized and efficient way of organizing the delivery of surplus food from food factories, wholesalers and retailers to a large network of food aid distributors (e.g. congregations, NGOs and citizen centers in Vantaa area). In this way this large network can concentrate on their own work for the wellbeing of citizens. The diaconia of Vantaa parishes has an especially large role in developing and coordinating local activities. The network gives away the food aid and organizes community lunches. This sustainable food system includes also welfare influences in

¹ Source for the statistical information:
http://www.vantaa.fi/hallinto_ja_talous/tietoa_vantaasta/tilastot_ja_tutkimukset/muut_tilastot_ja_tietokannat
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health, nutrition, food safety and on society. Eating together is an everyday social action, which can strengthen communities. Equality is an important part of it.

The efficient utilization of surplus food is inevitably also part of the unsustainable surplus problem and makes it easier to forget the fact that first of all surplus food should be ecologically reduced at all levels of food production and distribution. That is why Yhteinen pöytä (Shared Table) also wants to increase discussion of surplus food, its comprehensive reduction and about socially sustainable ways of utilizing it. Yhteinen pöytä seeks to create new kind of food aid; more community and welfare based solutions, high-quality and food safe logistics of surplus food - and in the end, also to make sure that socially excluded people eat safe, nutritious and good food and have a space in this society. Surplus food has become a part of poverty politics in Finland.

At the moment roughly 5000 citizens of Vantaa benefit weekly from Yhteinen pöytä and the surplus food is delivered in the network of 35 places. About 1.5 million kilos of surplus food per year is used more effectively in Vantaa (about 35 000 kilos per week at the moment). About 25 people have a short-term job (6 – 12 months) in logistics each year. There are also about 30 surplus food donor companies in the network. About 30 people each year participate in the accredited Community Building Course. (Porkka & Pentikäinen 2013, Valve 2015)

The aim of co-developing food aid in the network

Yhteinen pöytä represents a quite unique co-operation between private, public, 3rd and 4th sector actors. Development of the food aid system was processed together from the beginning of the concept. The traditional way of giving food aid with bread queues was heavily questioned, through the implementation of community meals with other social activities related to it. Yhteinen pöytä also creates discussions about more empowering actions, for instance through the Community Building Course (CABLE-method) or workshops in the network. The actors in the network are independent. Yhteinen pöytä has criteria for those who want to become a member of the network. Their actions should have something to do with food aid, meal or bed, and be given it to local people for free. The target group has to be mainly people on a low income. Food aid has to be open to everyone in need.

The operational team of Yhteinen pöytä also gives support in some conflictual and competitive situations, which happen quite often in food aid field. We try to reduce hoarding and other negative side effects of the free food system, together with the actors in the network and to create better ways of action. The Community Building Course is organized twice a year and our community deacon is leading it, with the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. Each time people from the network and from our surplus food terminal participate in the course. The terminal and logistics function by using wage subsidized employment under the city government and national rules. The same goals of empowering community building are being applied to the leadership of the logistics center and its employees as are used in the food aid field.

Yhteinen Pöytä has been successful because both of the funders are committed to the work from the executive and political levels down and are keen on hearing how the work proceeds. The work started in 2013 by gathering together the origins of the large

network. Everybody had a say in it from the beginning, contributing their needs and goals, and opinions and wishes are still systematically asked and listened to. Yhteinen pöytä has its own organization between City and the Parish Union, especially crucial is the shared operational team of the main partners, which does most of the coordinating and planning. When it comes to the private sector (shops and factories etc.) our action also meets their needs by getting rid of surplus food for free and giving them a green, ecological image. All the parties should have something to gain and something to give for the common goal. Organizational borders are not seen as the reason to stop working together.

As long as there are people who suffer hunger, they have to be fed in a way or another. It is the job of politicians to create social policy, which would take care of everyone in this country. Until that we need a parallel system, third sector based, which also helps people in need. At least the food aid given cannot be suddenly totally stopped without creating huge personal crisis for many people. The food aid sector in Finland is now forming some structures, quite late in comparison with other European countries. These actors do not necessarily pay as much attention to the community based food aid as Yhteinen pöytä does. Hopefully Yhteinen pöytä can be an example for their policies and actions in the future.

Yhteinen pöytä is lean and agile even though two big public actors own it. At the operational level we are small and flexible enough to make quick moves when needed. The team tries to communicate often enough with each other and the network so that messages can be heard correctly and dealt with quickly. We focus on listening carefully to the network we have, to try to get their voices heard and to attract and commit them and their ideas to the common work. Surplus food is used as a tool in community building and employment. The team sees itself equal to the other actors, not depending on titles or organizations, but focusing on the task in hand, the person themselves or on trying to find the best possible solution together. It is not an easy job and it takes time but sustainable change does not happen otherwise. We are trying to meet people in their own context.

The ultimate goal, the wellbeing of a citizen in receipt of food aid, is not easy to measure. We can only take the people and actors seriously, ask questions, take feedback, gather frequently together in meetings, workshops etc. to co-develop parts of action - and try to change the ways of action accordingly. Yhteinen pöytä is not a finished model and it may not ever be. Action has to change all the time in order to capture the essential issues of the moment.

It is challenging as a team member to balance between genuine social work and facing persons and meeting their challenges, being facilitator in social or group situations and in next hour act as an expert when it comes to changing Finnish way of seeing surplus food utilization or food aid in poverty discussions. All those individual, social, local or societal needs are real and current, sometimes urgent. All roles are needed and in part, this all reflects how new it is in Finland to co-develop food aid and try to create some kind of overall picture of it and the wellbeing of its users.

Shared table - development of diaconia from a sustainable development point of view

The activities of the Yhteinen pöytä may also involve us in looking at diaconia from the perspectives of sustainable development. Diaconia is one of the basic tasks of the Church and of all Christians, which is the starting point for meeting the distress and suffering of the most disadvantaged people and defending their rights. The essence of diaconia is constant change, as society and circumstances change and individual persons change. At the core of diaconia change and the ability to combine experiential and theoretical knowledge in different practices has always been essential. The challenge of diaconia is to defend humanity and life and the possibility that every person must have the right to participate and the opportunities to do so. The strengthening of inclusion should be one of the main core elements of diaconia. Diaconia has to be seen as a prerequisite for creating and defending rights that work in the midst of constant change. The work of the Yhteinen pöytä is about work for change.

At the core of its development are not only ecological issues, but also socially and culturally sustainable development. In diaconia, culturally sustainable development opens views towards issues of a change of action culture and its preconditions, place and meaning. Culturally sustainable development is an activity that promotes the well-being of people and diverse regions, and activities in which many lifestyle and ethnic cultures can survive and develop. Of course, culturally sustainable development also refers to the preservation of regional characteristics and the development of habitats. Culturally sustainable development is complex and can be viewed from both a material and an intangible point of view. Sustainable culture challenges us in any case to look at activities from the point of view of interaction - in what ways are we in contact with both the environment and other people. In diaconia, cultural sustainability is an activity culture in which respect for rights and freedoms, diversity and uniqueness of people is an absolute value. Diaconal work for change - is feasible if we can work in an environment in which the operational culture conveys the respect for human uniqueness, difference and freedom. In diaconia, cultural sustainability implies the transformation of a business culture, in which we do not look at the development of operations from the point of view of one operator, but we create common goals and activities in cooperation with others. In the transformation of the business culture, which Yhteinen pöytä conducts, the structure and working methods have been created so that the development of inclusion is implemented at all levels of governance..

There is no established definition of social sustainability. Social sustainability has, however, been recognized in different definitions, namely that it means the realization of equality, and the ability of people to influence their own lives and the maintenance and strengthening of individual identities of people. (Kautto & Metso, 2008). It is essential to support inclusion and communality and to create measures that strengthen the capacity for action, positive change, and provide a basis for securing inclusion in various everyday activities.

A socially sustainable perspective at the Yhteinen pöytä implies that we find ways of creating practices that look for opportunities all people to participate as fully-fledged

actors, not just as recipients of assistance. By means of socially sustainable development, we mean the pursuit of creating common social capital, the core of which is the building of trust and thus the creation of a common sense of shared experience. Building up respect and reciprocity can at best lead to the disruption of the social and the division as disadvantaged people struggle with low benefits and exclusion. Socially sustainable development means that we see human beings comprehensively and with versatility, not just from a single point of view, but taking seriously the challenging life situations of people. In any case, from the point of view of the deacon, the task is to question, to make phenomena visible and above all to strengthen solidarity between people, to enable them to live together and to work for the creation of sustainable networks. One of the key working tools of the Yhteinen pöytä is CABLE – Community Action Based Learning for Empowerment. (Porkka & Pentikäinen, 2013, Siirto, 2015, Valve 2015). Through this we have seen the empowerment of many people, the strengthening of personal and collective agency and changes in professional orientation. This approach is used with all people in the network, professionals, volunteers, activists and citizens.

Yhteinen pöytä – challenging professional change of diaconia

Yhteinen pöytä has made it possible to examine the diaconal role from the point of view of the professional development of community work. It set a challenge to work out what this means from the diaconal point of view. One of our basic needs is to belong to a community. When the community is working well, its impact on the individual is positive; it creates empowerment, which brings strength through the strengths of its members. This is the basis for the popularity of community work. The social pedagogical approach emerges in situations where it is found that traditional guidance or counseling does not produce results. In society or in its localities, there is a shift of which one character is the creation of groups that take a position in society.

Inequality, lack of the resources for basic needs and loneliness will often expose unhealthy group phenomena. Visibly injurious behavior arises in situations where the people are bullied or a people are socially excluded. There can be a community that produces sickness and even danger around, for example through political radicalization. There are communities where the law of the jungle operates and the strongest persons or groups rule. Often the quality of the community depends on the strongest members of the community, which determines how good or bad it is.

The community that gives space to everyone in a fairly balanced way brings with it opportunities for co-development and organization. The community encourages, gives information. People whose actions or motives at some level understand this will not be a threat. It is based on reciprocity, tolerance and understanding of different situations.

The way of working requires a strong understanding of people and of equal encounter. In the face of uncertainty and incompleteness seemingly endless tolerance is required. This also means the ability to become part of the community. The goal is to create a framework for open, constructive interaction. If necessary, it also gives room to practice as a constructive member. Diaconal workers have to face these challenge in comparison to earlier practice where there was a retreat or a jump to unreflected action.

The challenge is different in different situations, and so the work has to be adjusted. The employed deacon is responsible for being an observer, where by questioning and encouragement the well-being of the community is evaluated collectively. It requires the ability to concentrate on seeing positive elements and encouraging their potential. This creates a platform for a shared trust in growth and decision-making practice in a constructive framework.

Protective structures - the risk of sympathy

A construction site must have handrails at the employer's request, when people are working at high levels on a building in Finland. Similarly, a workplace that constantly sees the most challenging side of life also contains risks. For example to prevent fatigue and cynicism, "fences" needed to protect the workers and key volunteers. The challenge for community work is to continually update self-awareness. The challenge to tolerate incompleteness is continuous. Measuring success requires understanding the overall situation of the service user or the community. The ability to cooperate and be one's self despite all the expectations is essential. Clinging to the need for the old "authority status" occasionally comes from community needs and aspirations and the wish to be governed and not responsible for their own choices.

When the community starts to take responsibility, however, there is a need for minimal, supportive work anticipation of events and follow-up. The process resembles an action study because it includes a continuous assessment of the situation. The employer's understanding of the need for proper support is necessary, so that the employee is able to help service users, without tiring themselves. The work community must understand the risks associated with work and must be able to talk together. The basis of the work community has to be a shared understanding of this working method.

Traditions, threats or opportunities -

"Where do we find the poor that most need us?"

The tradition of counseling and guidance work is strong in diaconia. Believing that the individual can gain the strength for life is central. The acute need for help in social and crisis work can, on this view, be answered with expertise and agility. Such a work method is effective where the counseling is done with respect and in crisis situations. The challenge diaconia faces is that of providing long-term guidance, without a therapeutic perspective, because this includes the risk of dependence. In the traditional perspective, we could say that the service user becomes a loyal service user. Neither of the parties, the helper, and the person assisted has the knowledge of how to break out the situation so that in the worst case, co-dependence becomes chronic.

The community development way of working also challenges the actor's "we-they" attitude. "We" think we are counselors or team-workers intervening in the lives of our others. A scenario arises where the service user's situation is seen at a distance from the workers' own situation **and** creates the idea that "this cannot happen to me". This habitual thinking protects the employee from difficult, compassionate work. When we speak of "the ones who are poor" - we take the distance to the situation. It may be thought that the service user's poor life situation is a result of their own unique

cumulative problems. Consequently, the worker can imagine that “it can’t happen to me”! This functions as a distance taking self-protecting measure and inhibits change

The traditions and culture of social work arise from the work community where action takes place. The position of an employee in an organization affects what kind of work culture is created.. If leadership works effectively, development work capable of meeting the requirements is possible, even if the field is challenging. A weak vision of the goals of the work brings with it a superficial workmanship. There is often a work culture that is only able to respond to acute distress and is unable to plan or develop the work so that the chances of a necessary change will arise in the life of the service user or community..

Diaconia has its own solid traditions and status in the Church of Finland. When the status of diaconia is valued and understood, can result in a worthwhile work programme and outcome. The position of the work community and each worker’s position in it are therefore relevant. The work community should show appreciation for the objectives and this will be directly visible in the work.

What is important is whether or not the work is expected to be valued in church and society and prominent or whether the worker is expected to work in a modest way in the background. If the position of an employee is the same as that of a service user who does not want to hear of a difficult and complicated situation, it is likely that the form of social work will be largely maintained in the way that creates “loyal service users”. There are no real incentives for change.

The challenge is also to face the burden of diaconal and community work that other structures want to protect themselves from. Those responsible for diaconia may not want to hear about the realities, saying to themselves, “Again the deacons raise something heavy and awkward...” In the bigger picture, there are some things in our society that some do not want to be aware of for one reason or another.

Final Remarks

Yhteinen pöytä, the Shared Table is a comprehensive development project with impacts on many levels. The processes of changing the action culture in a large network and also within a heavy hierarchical organization are challenges that we wanted to face. The development of the activity has been built on the challenge that has been demanded to create approaches and models that can be real alternatives to “breadcrumbs” from the table. The second challenge and aim has been to develop activities in which cooperation between different organizations has been possible, and with this, to develop a new kind of professional orientation for the diaconal field. The outcomes of the process are still pending and the mid-term evaluation will take place in the near future. But already, we know that our work not only has urban-level impacts, but also national ones. As a major result of the approach of Shared Table, we have seen newly acting living communities and significant changes in the lives of individual people.

Literature

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