

## **ESPAnet 2010 –PUBLIC FUTURES**

### **Freedom as the organizer of spontaneous elderly clubs. What kind of consequences for future services for elderly people?**

The paper examines the role of freedom and independence as a special social need of elderly living in their homes. It explores the consequences it has for future service provision. State controlled and financed social services regardless the status of their provider fail to provide the freedom which is necessary for still-independent elderly people in their late 70s and 80s. Institutionalized day-care centers in Budapest, while successful in meal-on-wheel services are less successful in providing activities and “organising” social life for the elderly. I argue that the problems stem from a misconception regarding state roles and responsibilities. Public services should be much more responsive to spontaneous social activities and should build on them, rather than duplicating and competing with existing structures.

Services for the elderly put increasing burdens on state and private financial assets while they have limited success in organizing social life and providing meaningful social contacts for the elderly. While social contacts are an integral part of good mental health of the elderly, providing them through state institutions and services mount difficulties. At the same time self-governing social “clubs” flourish in certain physical and social settings. Third places (Oldenburg, 1989), such as run-down cafés and market halls provide gathering places where elderly people can find companionship and remedy from solitude; these are places where friendships can be established, mental health maintained and connection to the society exercised. On the other hand many of the elderly people denounce institutions and organized services for the lack of freedom, which prevails in them.

Is it possible to strengthen already existing and self-responsible communities of elderly people in order to strengthen the efficiency of public services? While taking into account self-organised public groups into elderly policy does the notion of public diminishes or rather strengthens? What kind of consequences does it have for future day care services for elderly people? In this case financial constrains correspond to the expectations of elderly people to be more reliant on existing social structures. Providing subsidiary services at third places, rather than maintaining separate social institutions, would respond to the needs of the elderly and at the same time they would be more effective and financially sustainable. However this would mean that new aspects of social life, such as geographical locations and spatial planning – hardly ever taken into account in Hungarian service management – should be introduced for more efficient service use.

29<sup>th</sup> March, 2010.

Zsuzsanna Kravalik