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Citizen network: advancing inclusion for all

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Citizen Network: advancing inclusion for all

Abstract

The ideal of inclusion offers a hopeful vision of how human beings can live together in a spirit of justice and mutual respect. It has had a powerful impact on the imagination of many and it has inspired important innovations and social change. However, there are also many negative forces at work in modern society that take us away from inclusion. Citizen Network is an emerging movement that seeks to advance inclusion through global cooperation and by challenging everyone to act like a citizen. The organisation is still at an early stage, but there are promising signs that it could offer a different way to tackle injustice, confront major challenges and reveal better ways for diverse people to live together as equals.

Das Ideal der Inklusion bietet eine hoffnungsvolle Vision, wie Menschen im Geiste der Gerechtigkeit und des gegenseitigen Respekts zusammenleben können. Es hat die Vorstellungskraft vieler Menschen stark beeinflusst und wichtige Innovationen und soziale Veränderungen angestoßen. Allerdings sind in der modernen Gesellschaft auch viele negative Kräfte am Werk, die uns davon abhalten den Weg der Inklusion konsequent zu beschreiten. Citizen Network ist eine aufstrebende Bewegung, welche durch globale Zusammenarbeit und gezielte Aufforderung an alle, als Bürger*innen zu agieren, das Ideal der Inklusion voranbringen will. Als Organisation befindet sie sich noch in einem Pionierstadium, aber deuten bereits viele Anzeichen darauf hin, dass sie einen neuen Weg bieten könnte, um Ungerechtigkeiten zu bekämpfen, große Herausforderungen zu bewältigen und bessere Wege für ein gleichberechtigtes Zusammenleben unterschiedlicher Menschen aufzuzeigen.

1 Introduction

The ideal of inclusion emerged as a positive ideal, counterposed to the dark history of eugenics, institutionalisation and oppression that swallowed up the lives of many people with disabilities, particularly in the Western world. Advocates of inclusion have proposed a different vision for human life that draws attention to the value of diversity, the absolute equality of all human beings and the need to focus on relationships and community as the means to realise better lives for everyone. These ideas

are particularly associated with a connected community of thinkers we might think of as leaders of the Inclusion Movement, in particular: John O'Brien, Judith Snow, Marsha Forest, Jack Pearpoint and Beth Mount. Many of the most positive initiatives today have drawn inspiration from their thinking and practices, which include the development of inclusive education, person-centred planning, self-directed support, supported living and supported employment (O'Brien & Mount 2015).

However, it is clear that current social structures and services for people with disabilities fall a long way short of promoting inclusion. There is a high degree of institutionalisation, even within community services. The idea that we should welcome diversity and diverse abilities is not fully realised, and is in reverse in some areas. This problem does not seem too distinct from other injustices such as racism, sexism, inequality and the active scapegoating of people in poverty, migrants, people with different ethnic backgrounds or diverse sexual identities.

Are we retreating from the ideal of inclusion? Is the ideal of inclusion only really relevant within a narrow world of human services and social policy? Or alternatively, could the ideal of inclusion inspire us to find more energy, to advance social justice and protect the natural world? Perhaps we have only just begun to discover the power of inclusion.

One possibility, which is what this chapter explores, is that at the intersection of these tough and challenging questions is a hopeful possibility. Perhaps we can move towards inclusion more effectively if we think of inclusion as something that is important to everyone. Perhaps we can challenge ourselves to work in the spirit of inclusion to tackle the severe challenges ahead of us. Perhaps we will be stronger and more effective if we can bring together the diverse gifts of all human beings and find better ways to cooperate to solve our shared problems.

So, the central question that arises out of this possibility is *how, in practical terms, can we build a global cooperative movement in order to create a world where everyone matters*. This is the question that a new organisation, Citizen Network, is trying to answer as it begins to test new actions and structures to meet this challenge. In this chapter I will explore the idea of inclusion and its close relationship with the idea of citizenship. I will also propose that the idea of inclusion also offers us a methodology to help us confront some of the major challenges we face in a new and more productive way. I will then outline the emergence of Citizen Network as a new kind of response to these challenges, the creation of a space for citizenship, and outline some of the patterns of action that seem productive and hopeful.

2 Inclusion beyond the mainstream

It is tempting to define inclusion as equivalent to our right to access the mainstream and enjoy an ordinary life. But that definition is inadequate and it makes the idea of inclusion only directly relevant to those who are obviously excluded.

But if we look more deeply at the ideal of inclusion it speaks to more universal values and it relates directly to the challenges all human beings face. We can all ask ourselves whether we are living lives of meaning, sharing our gifts and contributing to the community. We can all ask ourselves whether we are living a life of citizenship, whether we are genuinely welcoming others into community and creating inclusive communities for all. The ideal of inclusion offers a very powerful and attractive vision of justice that goes beyond our right to access the mainstream life (O'Brien & Blessing 2011). In fact, if some of us are excluded from the mainstream, then the mainstream itself is the problem.

A community is not an object, it is a way of being for those who are its members. This means that an inclusive community must be a community that welcomes those who are at risk of exclusion and ensures that all its members can develop their potential within the community. Thus, an inclusive community is a community of people who think and act like citizens, people who have a responsibility to one another, and to the places where they live. Such a community acts, not from pity or charity, but from a desire to benefit from the gifts that each one of us brings.

The ideal of inclusion also asks us to look again at the systems and structures within which we live. If we are citizens, then why don't we cooperate more instead of competing? If we all have a right to support, then why don't we all have a right to a decent income or a basic income? In the face of existential threats, like climate change, why don't we all share a responsibility to act urgently to respond to it? The ideal of inclusion is not the description of an end-state; it is a call for citizenship, for each of us to take our own responsibility seriously, both for ourselves, to each other and for the common good. In contrast to many theories of social justice (such as liberalism or utilitarianism) the ideal of inclusion is not a final specification of the ideal society. Inclusion demands that we are all actively involved in creating the communities that we need. It is an ideal that respects the finite, fragile and creative dimensions of the human condition and asks us to constantly strive to welcome each other into community.

3 The path of citizenship

In fact, the ideal of inclusion has always gone hand-in-hand with the notion of citizenship (Duffy 2010; O'Brien & Blessing 2011). If an inclusive community is what we are trying to create then we need to be the people who enact this community. The quality of our community is determined by the quality of our citizenship.

One approach to thinking about citizenship is the *Keys to Citizenship* model which was developed to provide a framework for understanding the practical process of

becoming a citizen: being seen as both a free and unique individual and also an equal and valued member of the community (Duffy 2003; Duffy & Perez 2014). The *Keys to Citizenship* compliments O'Brien's framework of the *Five Accomplishments* and focuses on finding practical solutions to the multiple challenges we face in building a life of citizenship (O'Brien 2018):

1. *Meaning* – How to build a life of meaning for ourselves and find the path that makes sense of our gifts.
2. *Freedom* – How to shape and control our own life and build the relationships around ourselves to support our freedom and self-expression.
3. *Money* – How to obtain the resources necessary to pursue our path and move towards our goals.
4. *Help* – How to help each other create the conditions for personal growth and contribution.
5. *Home* – How to create a home for ourselves alongside neighbours and family.
6. *Life* – How to bring our gifts to the community to make a meaningful and valued contribution.
7. *Love* – How to form and sustain relationships of love and belonging.

This framework offers a pathway to citizenship that is designed to be entirely universal, applicable in most imaginable contexts, and to reflect the deepest and most universal aspects of our humanity. This framework provides both a way of thinking about our own life and our wider social responsibilities. It is an emancipatory conception of citizenship: we become a citizen by acting as a citizen. We can work to bring the *Keys to Citizenship* into our own lives and we can work alongside others to help them to be citizens too. In order to do this, we do not need to be granted our citizenship by the state or by some other higher authority. The power to be a citizen and to welcome others into citizenship is available to all of us, if we choose to recognise it.

4 The challenge ahead

Of course, considerable progress towards inclusion has taken place. Policies, expectations and social systems are more positive than they were in the past. There are also similar patterns of progress in social attitudes to gender, ethnicity, ability and sexuality. However, such progress is uneven and slow. For example, in the UK it took 30 years for large hospitals to be closed (Brend 2008). Self-directed support has taken over 50 years to develop (O'Brien & Duffy 2009). Many people's lives remain highly constrained and impoverished and the true value of the people with intellectual disabilities is not widely recognised. Genuine change takes time; but there is also a danger that we accept the slow rate of change as inevitable.

Even more concerning is the development of vicious regressive forces that may push us backwards. In many countries, social services are not working towards inclusion and new forms institutionalisation are emerging (Jackson 2017). There are also disturbing eugenic forces that seek to eliminate people with intellectual disabilities from the world, like the increasing use of tests and abortion for people with Down Syndrome (Reinders et al. 2019).

It is probably not accidental that resistance to inclusion is growing alongside other negative forces. Compare the climate crisis, where there is growing environmental and atmospheric damage and where government policies are proving utterly inadequate (Helm 2020). Inequality is a growing problem in many countries and the achievements of post-war welfare states in mitigating injustice now seem under threat (Benstead 2019). We have even seen the emergence of anti-democratic rhetoric and policies from mainstream political parties in developed countries like the UK and the USA (Osborne 2021).

There seems to be a real danger that we will not respond with sufficient urgency to these challenges. Perhaps an optimistic faith in the ‘arc of history’ will delude us and make us complicit with our own failure. The alternative is to ask whether there might not be a better way. Perhaps on the third horizon, seemingly out of reach, there are ways to increase the pace of progressive social change (Baghai et al. 2000).

Standard models of change tend to be hierarchical and often involves three levels: the micro-level of people and families; meso-level of civil society and the macro-level of government. Change is possible at all three levels, but often change agents seek to change policy or law in order to change civil society and individual behaviour. This strategy for achieving policy change requires citizens to work patiently upwards, perhaps developing local solutions to a problem, then trying to influence civil society and finally using the pressure of campaigning or party politics to bring about the desired change. The paradoxical assumption of this model is that we must work to change the system so that the system can work its change upon us.

For example, to bring about the necessary pressure for deinstitutionalisation it was necessary to first show that there were community-based alternatives to long-stay institutions and then to organise self-advocates and others to speak up against the injustice of the institutions. When new policies are agreed, there is then a lengthy period of implementation of the policy often having to confront significant resistance. Often these policies also involve compromises which can degrade earlier achievements. Concepts like supported living – supporting people to have homes of their own – can easily become distorted when state-sanctioned definitions appropriate the language, but water-down the principles (Duffy 2013).

In hierarchical societies, where power over resources and legislation is concentrated in the hands of a few, it is natural that change follows this hierarchical pattern. However, this model is also inherently conservative. In fact, in the case of people with intellectual disabilities this pattern of change-making tends to reinforce the

dominant and problematic assumption that people's lives are to be shaped by services and those services and policies defined from above; thus the strategy risks prolonging the dominant pattern of the first horizon. Hierarchical thinking about power can encourage hierarchal norms and this process tends to exclude ordinary people from participation in the process of achieving justice.

Hierarchical societies are also subject to negative pressures and temptations and not all demands are treated equally; it is often the most negative forces that exert the greatest influence. For example, the owners of private residential care facilities can use their money to buy more direct influence on policy than people with intellectual disabilities; oil companies have more influence than environmentalists; the poor cannot afford to lobby for justice. Inequalities persist because those with advantages entrench their advantages.

Civil society can play an important role in amplifying the voice of citizens and communities and putting the political system under pressure. However civil society can also become a conservative force. Different groups compete for resources and attention, and often they need to minimise their demands to engage politicians and to keep funders or key constituents on board. There is always the danger that the organisations or agents that are supposed to bring about change in the system become complicit in maintaining that system, even in the face of serious failures of human rights or environmental catastrophe.

In practice only a small minority of people have the will or patience to pursue their reasonable demands by conventional means. Even when the system creates space for debate the agenda is usually so controlled that the possibility of meaningful change narrows to zero and participation in the existing process is exhausting and often fruitless. Politics becomes an elite sport and people don't feel that deeper citizenship and engagement is possible.

5 Inclusion as method

However, it is encouraging to note that the Inclusion Movement already offers us some very practical examples of a different approach for achieving justice. For example, person-centred planning was developed, not as a tool for governments or services, but as a tool for families and citizens themselves (O'Brien 2021). Innovations such as these were seeded, shared and promoted as practical approaches to advancing deeper citizenship without the need to seek permission from the state or its agents. In the same way, ideas like supported living, supported employment, inclusive education and self-directed support were developed as tools for immediate action, not as policy proposals that required approval.

This is perhaps because inclusion does not just offer a vision of the future, it also indicates the way, or at least the spirit, within which that vision should be ad-

vanced. As we have seen, a movement for inclusion must also be a movement of citizens, and it must be organised to make it easier for people to act like citizens at every stage. Freedom, creativity and the space to act and to innovate are essential aspects of inclusion.

The movement for inclusion must also be inclusive. This may seem obvious, but it is in fact far more challenging than it seems. The Inclusion Movement started by focusing on one excluded group, people with intellectual disabilities. But the movement has always faced a dual challenge. First, it is not easy to know how to include others, particularly people with different abilities or interests, and there is often a danger that while we talk about inclusion we actually still exclude people by our actions. Second, there are also other excluded groups or groups who face serious and systemic disadvantage such as indigenous people in colonised countries, people with health problems, people in poverty, people excluded because of gender or sexual identity, immigrants, black people in racist societies. And this is just to scratch the surface. Diversity is a positive value for the Inclusion Movement; but the reality of exclusion, prejudice and systemic disadvantage shows that this value is still not widely shared. However, the challenge of making inclusion meaningful is also an opportunity. If I see my exclusion as an injustice that can and should be addressed, maybe I can also see the common ground I share with someone who is excluded for some different reason. Of course, facing exclusion doesn't automatically make you less subject to social prejudices. But, if we can reach across these divides we can start to make common cause with others who face similar injustices. The ideal of inclusion – for everybody – opens the door to a social movement that includes everyone.

This work must also be co-operative. People must enjoy working together, sharing resources and seeking mutual benefit. Competition must seem either irrelevant or playful, because everyone's talents would be important. A movement for inclusion must constantly be adjusting to leave space for others, connecting people into more powerful forms and seeking to distribute the benefits of collaboration fairly and sustainably.

Finally, a movement for inclusion must exist to reverse the forces that create exclusion. This means not just advancing deinstitutionalisation and the service systems and cultures that directly devalue people with intellectual disabilities, but also addressing the forces that harm and divide all of us. This is not possible without addressing colonialism, economic exclusion and poverty, racism and the causes of mental illness and environmental destruction. So, putting these methodological aspects of inclusion together we might identify a series of challenges:

1. To provide a radical and hopeful vision of the future.
2. To invite and support more people into deeper citizenship.
3. To seek change by inquisitive, creative and evolving patterns.
4. To welcome the contribution of those most likely to be excluded.
5. To foster collaboration, cooperation and peer support.

It was in the hope of addressing at least some of these challenges that the idea of Citizen Network was created with this mission:

“Citizen Network exists to help create a world where we believe and act as if everyone, every single person, matters.” (Citizen Network 2021)

6 A space for citizens

It is far too early to describe Citizen Network as a fully mature innovation; however there have already been a series of important developments and the logic of Citizen Network is becoming clearer. Increasingly Citizen Network is envisioned, not as a typical organisation, campaign or project, but rather as a space where citizens can come together to create the changes necessary for a better world (Hofstetter 2021).

This idea of creating a citizen space for innovation, networking, peer support and cooperation seems ideally suited to the Inclusion Movement’s ideals. Useful inspiration can be taken from the role played by the Agora in ancient Athens, which was the main public space for a citizen of Athens, a place which helped weave together the different elements that led to the amazing social, political and artistic creativity that flourished during the three hundred years of Athenian democracy (Duffy 2021b).

In the Agora the Athenians could find teachers and those sharing new ideas. There were festivals, temples (and adjacent to these the theatres) where Athenians celebrated their shared community life. There was a political dimension with places for planning, discussion and decision-making and also places for mustering people in readiness for action. There was also an important economic dimension with market spaces for buying and selling and establishing fair weights and measures. Interestingly the decline of democracy in Athens went together with the gradual destruction of the Agora as an open and flexible space and with a ban on economic activity (Camp 2001).

If we examine the pattern of activities that have begun to emerge from within the Citizen Network community we can identify five different kinds of activities, that we can envisage as occupying five zones in a virtual Citizen Network Agora:

1. Communication – hosting and distributing information, research and stories;
2. Connection – connecting, networking and enabling peer support;
3. Change – inspiring active programmes, campaigns and efforts to achieve social change;
4. Creation – supporting activity, arts, media production and celebration;
5. Cooperation – business development, economic activity, sales and income generation.

In what follows I will outline the nature of these five zones within the Agora by referring to real functions that are emerging in the development of Citizen Network.

6.1 Communication

Citizen Network began its life as a project of the Centre for Welfare Reform, which was a think tank based in Sheffield, in the North of England. The philosophy of the Centre was to encourage social change by making it as easy as possible for people to share good ideas, inspire others and to challenge injustice. It encouraged independent researchers, campaigners and innovators to use its website to share their work and to support wider social change. One of its most important functions has been to host research which would otherwise struggle to find a publisher. For example, it has published numerous reports on the abuse of human rights for disabled people by the UK Government; work on chronic illness that challenged the veracity of well-established researchers and numerous criticisms of social policy developments that are in conflict with the values of inclusion (Faulkner 2016; Hale 2019; O'Brien 2015). By the end of 2021 it had published over 1,400 items and made these free for use. At the start of 2022 the Centre for Welfare Reform changed its name to Citizen Network Research and it now coordinates communications across the whole network. How to further this development, particularly in languages other than English, is now a key challenge.

6.2 Connection

What made the Centre a rather unusual think tank was the assumption that good ideas and innovations were often already present in community, but what is lacking is support for the people who champion them. Hence its objective was to foster a community of practice and fellowship around these ideas; and so the Centre created the concept of a Fellow of the Centre in order to lend weight to the contribution of thinkers, activists and campaigners who might otherwise be more easily ignored. The Centre has also been very active in support other kinds of peer support. One its first major publications *Women at the Centre* describes how peer support for women facing extreme forms of social injustice can be a powerful liberating tool (Duffy & Hyde 2011). The Centre has also worked closely with People Focused Group Doncaster and developed research methodologies to help illuminate the hidden value of peer support and community action (Duffy 2021a).

Building on these ideas, one of the first innovations of Citizen Network was, at its launch in 2016, to create a simple system for encouraging people and groups to become members of Citizen Network and then to share information about members through an online map. The assumption was that if people need help then it

may be useful if they can connect with people with shared experiences. In addition to the map Citizen Network has established a framework to bring together a range of different people in different roles: researchers, coordinators, ambassadors, programme leads. These roles create opportunities for peer support, recruitment, facilitation and connection.

6.3 Change

As well as sharing information about important social innovations and social problems, the Centre and Citizen Network have played an important role in fostering the development of several networks that seek to advance the development of key social innovations. For instance, Citizen Network has been critical in establishing the global Self-Directed Support (SDS) Network to share learning about better models for organising disability supports. Although self-directed funding models started in 1965 the process of their development has not been rapid (Duffy 2018). Resistance to change is considerable and there has also been very little learning across boundaries and very little coherent organisation to drive the global movement for self-directed support. Reform efforts in one locality or country often happen without any reference to previous learning and there is very little sense of collective momentum for change. At the end of 2021 the SDS Network connected key organisations in 12 countries in Europe, North America and Australasia and it shares learning and helps to define best practice.

Another important initiative has been work to advance Universal Basic Income (UBI) a reform of tax and social security systems that means that every single person would have their own independent and secure income. This is a strategy to tackle poverty, insecurity and the multiple forms of dependency and control created by the current economic system (Standing 2017). Citizen Network co-founded the UBI Lab Network in Sheffield, England in 2017, and it was designed to grow virally by enabling people to create their own UBI Lab, in their own community. The network operates by sharing expertise and by sharing a brand that can be quickly adopted and used by small groups, increasing their visibility and legitimacy. There are now 45 UBI Labs in 10 different countries and the network has already had a considerable impact on public policy in the UK.

There are several other networks and projects focused on social change that are hosted or supported by Citizen Network, including work on neighbourhood democracy and democratic reform. One of the benefits of this kind of multi-focused network of networks is that it can help reveal important interconnections which can help build solidarity and deeper understanding. There are significant potential links between self-directed support and basic income that may help create common cause. Focusing on neighbourhood democracy is also a doorway to think about inclusion for people with disabilities. There are also important lessons in the methodology of change-making which can be shared between different networks.

6.4 Creation

Another critical aspect of citizenship is our shared capacity to be creative. Not only is our creativity a universal gift of all human beings, it is also something which can reach beyond competing theories and agendas and can touch people at a deeper level.

One key partner for Citizen Network has been Opus Independents, an organisation in Sheffield that has pioneered a range of creative community actions including a community magazine and a major independent festival of political debate: The Festival of Debate. Inspired by this work, Citizen Network launched its CitizenFest in 2019. This was a festival to celebrate human diversity and equality, in Glasgow, Scotland. This event brought together disability activists with a range of other groups: people with mental health problems, migrants, LGBTQIA+ activists, artists and thinkers. In 2021 the CitizenFest movement had spread to include LA, Helsinki, Sheffield and Toronto. The CitizenFest approach is also reflected in the development of Citizen Network TV, which is a video based community media channel which hosts many different groups to share content and work together to grow a shared audience.

6.5 Cooperation

Behind all of this interconnected activity lies an important challenge and opportunity. Although digital technology has opened up new possibilities of networking and citizen action there are still costs to this work. These are not just economic costs, but there are also costs in time, spirit and identity. So, Citizen Network needs to find ways to sustain the necessary infrastructure, but also to welcome and support those who join Citizen Network.

Practical cooperation is likely to be critical to solving this problem. Cooperation enables diverse groups to share both gifts and needs and can encourage fair exchange and mutual support. There have already been some promising developments and in the future Citizen Network may be able to use its significant scale to create multiple benefits for its members.

7 Values and governance

Currently the central values of Citizen Network are expressed in the form of three principles:

1. Equality – We are all equal and worthy of respect.
2. Diversity – We are all different and our differences are good.
3. Community – We can combine our different gifts by working together as equal citizens.

In addition to these five zones described above Citizen Network will need to ensure that the values of inclusion are central to all its work and to combine this with a suitable form of democratic governance. Initially Citizen Network was a project of the Centre for Welfare Reform. In 2019 members of Citizen Network met and agreed to establish Citizen Network as a cooperative. In 2020 Citizen Network Osk was registered in Helsinki, Finland as a global, non-profit cooperative. In 2021 it was agreed that the Centre for Welfare Reform would change its name to Citizen Network Research and become one of the members of the coop, with a responsibility for managing the website and communications. In 2022 more individuals and groups were invited into formal membership of the coop and this will provide a democratic structure for accountability.

8 Conclusion

Whether Citizen Network can become a truly global cooperative movement to create a world where everyone matters remains to be seen. There are significant practical, managerial and economic challenges ahead. Moreover, while there are good reasons to believe that an open space that supports the five functions of the Agora will be productive of positive social change this, on its own, is insufficient to ensure that the value of inclusion will be nurtured. People with disabilities, or people from other disadvantaged groups, need to be active in leading change, rather than simply being included as tokens of inclusion. Citizen Network will need to continue to find practical pathways for inclusion for those who are at greatest risk of exclusion.

There are also natural limits to the current developments. Citizen Network began in a particular place and it has been built by people with particular passions and interests; it is bound to have its own character, culture and limitations. There are other important movements like those campaigning against climate change and species extinction, or those fighting racism or colonialism. Citizen Network cannot claim to speak for all groups or reflect all experiences; but hopefully it will be one space where citizen action can become stronger and where bridges between these different movements can be built.

The central challenge is to ensure that the people who are experiencing exclusion, disadvantage and prejudice can find a space, allies and a voice within Citizen Network. For this is the great opportunity and the great challenge. Inclusion means everyone is welcome; everyone has gifts that they can share. Citizenship means that we are responsible for making the most of our own gifts and inviting others into membership. There is no hierarchy; there is no need to wait for permission. We simply need to wake up to the potential that lies within us all. The power we can unlock, if we work together, is the power we need to tackle the problems of our time to create a world where everyone matters.

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