User involvement and empowerment among asylum seekers in Norwegian reception centres

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A considerable amount of literature has been published on conditions in reception centres for asylum seekers. The previous studies show that the life of residents in the centres is characterised by uncertainty, passivity, powerlessness and gradual disqualification. Drawing from data collected from asylum seekers and service providers in Norwegian reception centres, this article examines the tools used to counteract these processes. The article maintains that organised activities as language courses and user involvement in the form of cooperative councils have an impact on empowerment of asylum seekers. However, user motivation for participation and involvement in these arrangements is undermined, due to residents’ responses on factors which operate both at the structural and relational level. The findings and questions raised in the article have wider implications for social work with asylum seekers in other European countries, as well as for current efforts being made by EU countries to regulate reception conditions for asylum seekers. Among other things, the authors relate their findings to reception standards as defined in the EU Directive on Reception conditions for asylum seekers.

Key words: asylum seekers, empowerment, language training, cooperation councils, Norway
Introduction

In Norway, as in most European countries, asylum seekers are accommodated in reception centres. As at 2009, there are around 100 reception centres for asylum seekers in Norway that provide accommodation to approximately 17,000 residents. According to Norwegian authorities, the residents in reception centres should experience the asylum period as a period of qualification for successful integration or as preparation for possible return to the home country. However, several studies have indicated that residents in reception centres experience uncertainty, powerlessness and gradual disqualification (Brekke 2004; Knudsen 2005; Berg et al. 2005). In order to prevent such outcomes, service providers in reception centres are expected to organise various activity programmes, and empowerment and integration related activities for residents in the centres (Brekke 2004; Berg et al. 2005; Odysseus 2006).

This article explores which forms of social work and service delivery approaches are used in Norwegian reception centres in order to counteract the negative aspects of life experienced by residents and to prepare them for life outside. The article also indicates some of the major factors that undermine the quality and continuity of empowerment and qualification oriented endeavours.

Findings presented in the article may relate to current efforts being made by EU countries in order to regulate reception conditions for asylum seekers. In 2003 the EU countries agreed on a set of rules aimed at regulating reception conditions in EU member states. The Directive on Reception Conditions for asylum seekers focuses on information

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1 The number of asylum seekers and reception centres has increased in last two years, and is still increasing. In 2008 around 40 new reception centres were established.
given to asylum seekers, their access to health care, employment and education opportunities, with an emphasis on vulnerable groups, etc. The directive also includes an article on residents’ levels of influence and involvement. Although not an EU member, Norway has, in many ways, a reception system for asylum seekers comparable with systems in member state countries (Brekke and Vevstad 2007). Furthermore, with regard to the Directives’ article on user involvement, the Norwegian regulation and practice is ahead of their European neighbours (ibid). During the last decade, Norway has accumulated significant experience about initiatives relevant to the empowerment of residents, as well as exploring the likely consequences of restrictive measures imposed on empowerment related initiatives. Drawing from extensive data collected in Norwegian reception centres that the authors have compiled over the last ten years, the article explores long-term experiences with different empowerment related initiatives. These experiences may represent a valuable input in further European endeavours for the regulation of reception conditions for asylum seekers.

There is a vast body of contemporary research on empowerment and social work practice in which the distinction is made between different means used to combat disqualification and exclusion of users (Kemshall and Littlechild 2000; Adams 2003; Miley et al. 2007). Among other things, the contemporary literature distinguishes between user participation and involvement in skills-increasing programmes and service, and user involvement in decision-making organs (Barnes and Wistow 1994; Kemshall and Littlechild 2000; Sheppard 2006). Empowerment is also often linked to increased skills and access to formal and informal decision making which changes power relations between the providers of the service and users (Adams 2003; Sheppard 2006). These insights are used as a theoretical foundation for this article.
Perspectives on life in reception centres for asylum seekers

In the last two decades, there has been a lot of research undertaken on asylum seekers and refugees in terms of their experiences of life in exile and life in reception centres (Brekke 2001, Mastheneos and Ioannindi 2002; Korac 2003; Valenta 2009). Challenges of life in exile, such as problems relating to discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation of asylum seekers and refugees are some of themes that fall within the scope of these studies.

Several of these studies concluded that reception centres contribute to a growth in social client numbers, and fail to promote independence and self-sufficiency among asylum seekers and refugees (Solheim 1990; Slavnic 2000; Brekke 2004). Such studies help to explain residents’ passivity, powerlessness and disqualification in reception centres across a range of indicators. Korac (2001, 2003), who compared refugee responses at a reception system in Italy with responses taken from a Netherlands, demonstrated that public reception systems, such as those found in the Netherlands, have a wide range of disadvantages. According to Korac, although the Netherlands provides more assistance to asylum seekers than Italy, the absence of a planned reception system in Italy compelled refugees to draw on their personal resources and create their own self-reception system. Within this framework, asylum seekers and refugees are not offered “any dependent role, that of victims or of traumatized/sick persons” (Korac 2001: 24). There are certain similarities between the findings in Korac’s study and those of Solheim and Berg (Solheim 1990; Berg 1990). These two researchers were among the first to express concern about disqualification tendencies in Norwegian reception centres. Solhem, for instance, suggests that Norwegian reception centres are overregulated institutions which promote passivity and dependence among residents, and argues that it is not
easy to ensure that asylum seekers avoid long term dependency on cash benefits and other forms of assistance. According to Berg (1990), the Norwegian reception system provides different types of assistance to residents, but from the point of arrival, residents are treated as clients and largely denied opportunities to contribute using their own initiative. These studies corroborate the findings of Knudsen’s study on the reception of Vietnamese boat refugees in Norway (Knudsen 1984, 2005). Knudsen focused on relations and interactions between Vietnamese residents and service providers in reception centres and found that service providers appear as the active part, and residents as the passive part, in daily encounters in reception centres. According to Knudsen, residents in reception centres in Norway are placed in minority position where service providers have power to define their situation, and where residents have restricted opportunities to draw on their own culture, rules and values (Knudsen 2005).2

Another contribution in the field is made by Brekke (2004), who analysed experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Sweden with a focus on opportunities for empowerment of residents in Swedish reception centres. Brekke argues that waiting for results of asylum application may promote passivity and ambivalences among residents, which he links to the ambivalence embedded in asylum policies of the reception countries (See also Slavnic 2000). According to Brekke, it is difficult to work with the empowerment of asylum seekers within a framework of restrictive asylum policy, primarily concerned with “securing the quality of what is offered does not become an attraction in itself” (Brekke 2004: 47). It is also suggested that quality reduction in reception conditions is used as a tool in regulating arrivals (Brekke 2004; Brekke and Vevstad 2007).

These studies are of particular relevance to this article. Even so, the main aim of this article is not to explore further what causes disqualification and passivity among asylum

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2 Several studies describe the lives of residents in reception centres in Sweden, Norway and Danmark. These studies also indicate that their lives are characterised by waiting, uncertainty and passivity (Schwartz 1998; Ålund 1998; Slavnic 2000; Brekke 2004).
seekers in reception centres. Rather, the intention of this paper is to outline and explore the means used to combat passivity and foster independence and self-help among residents. Very little was found in the literature on the question of what may be done in order to combat disqualification of residents in reception centres, but the contemporary literature on social work with weak groups teaches us that aforementioned disqualification, passivity and lack of influence may be reduced through empowerment, participation and involvement of users in their own use of service (Adams 2003; Miley et al. 2007). Empowerment here is associated with the process of obtaining opportunities for self-sufficiency, and “the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals” (Adams 2003: 8). Discussing user involvement and participation in social care, Kemshall and Littlechild (2000) argue that a range of different services, such as residential provision, access to information and access to learning skills may, and should, be offered with a view to promoting independence and self-sufficiency. In line with these perspectives this article analyses efforts aimed at increasing residents’ self-sufficiency, involvement and integration capacity. The first question addressed in the analysis will be: what types of initiatives are pivotal in achieving empowerment of residents? Another question is: what are the major obstacles to increased participation and involvement of residents?

Methods and sample

Findings in this article are primarily based on interviews with asylum seekers, service providers in reception centres, and civil servants in the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration (UDI). In other words, the data are drawn from respondents of varying

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3 The reception centres in Norway are managed by local municipalities, NGOs and private entrepreneurs, but the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) has lead responsibility for the reception system.
backgrounds and positions in the reception system. The main intention here is to provide variation in respondents’ perspectives and experiences. Another important intention with this article is to explore how changes in reception conditions that occur over a longer period of time are experienced by the actors involved. In order to achieve this aim, the paper combines data gathered from three time intervals. In 1998-2001, seven reception centres were visited, and in each centre 20 asylum seekers were interviewed. In 2004-2005 six reception centres were visited, and 60 residents and service providers were interviewed. In the same period, we carried out a survey among 81 reception centres. The survey was directed towards managers of reception centres. The interviews and survey focused on several issues, all of which were connected with varying aspects of reception conditions and the issue of empowerment. Among other things, the interview guideline questions, which formed the basis of the questionnaire surveys, focused on the relationships and communication between actors involved in daily interactions in reception centres. Questions also focused on resident participation and involvement in skills increasing activities, and participation and involvement in cooperation councils. An attempt was also made to explore the responses of respondents on changes in reception conditions, as well as determining what undermine residents’ motivation for participation in different empowerment related initiatives. In 2008-2009 additional interviews were conducted with 12 interviews with service providers in reception centres. Here, the intention was to update our findings, and indicate recent changes in reception systems. An interpreter was used in most interviews with asylum seekers. In most situations, we gathered data through face-to-face interviews with respondents. However, sometimes we preferred to use focus group interviews and meetings, with an expectation that respondents, when placed in a group situation, would engage in discussions with each other. We have had

4 At the time, there were 113 reception centres in Norway.
5 The size of Norwegian system is in continuous change where the number of reception centres is continuously adjusted to the number of newly arriving asylum seekers. Furthermore, reception conditions also change. For example, in 2002, the authorities denied asylum seekers access to Norwegian language training. This right was restored in 2007.
positive experiences with this kind of exploration, especially in situations where interpreters were not required.

**Empowerment through user influence: outcomes and challenges**

Identifying key themes in empowerment, literature in the field (Adams 1996; Kemshall and Littlechild 2000) includes a concern both for users’ influence in decision making processes, and the methods by which social workers seek to enhance the power of those who lack it. In order to improve service quality or enhance users’ control, users may be involved, as Kemshall and Littlechild (2000) proposed, in care planning, advisory or management groups and delivery (Barnes and Wistow 1994; Kemshall and Littlechild 2000). Some of these aspects of empowerment processes are also addressed in the EU Directive on Reception Conditions for asylum seekers (Baldaccini 2005). The Directive encourages member states to “involve applicants in managing material resources and non-material aspects of life in the centre through advisory board or council of representing residents”. However, it is added that such forms of resident involvement while desirable, are optional. In practice, this means that each member state may decide whether they will require from their reception centres to develop such forms of resident involvement or not. The last evaluation of reception conditions in the EU shows that the majority of European countries have shown a lack of interest in involving residents in collective decision making (Odysseus 2006). The evaluation also shows that few European countries have developed strategies that may increase user influence in the reception centres.

Unlike most other European countries, Norway has a set of formalised regulations that bestows a right of influence upon residents in reception centres. According to Norwegian Requirement Specifications on the management of reception centres, residents in reception

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6 See Reception Conditions for asylum seekers, Article 14.6.
centres have to be involved in the management of the centre through the cooperation council. Norwegian regulations also give detailed instructions about the functioning of cooperation councils. According to these instructions, each centre is required to secure user influence on decisions of direct relevance to residents.

Findings from this study indicate that Norwegian reception centres invest considerable efforts in order to establish and maintain cooperation councils, and that these councils are involved in a wide range of reception centre activities, such as: organisation and implementation of social activities; implementation of information programmes; organisation of various parties and excursions. During our visits in reception centres, it was found that cooperation councils also had responsibility for the management and maintenance of material resources in the centre (i.e. activity rooms, TV, internet, kitchens, various items of sport equipment, first aid kits, etc). All these responsibilities seemed to reduce feelings of residents’ dependence on centre staff. Even so, both social workers in the reception centres and residents expressed several concerns regarding the work of cooperation councils. Employees in the reception centres often emphasised that one should not exaggerate the impact of the role played by cooperation councils. Findings from this study indicate that in spite of residents’ active involvement in daily decisions about service provision in the centre, most residents still feel that they have no influence over central aspects of their life (for example, asylum application outcomes, length of stay with resultant feelings of insecurity, etc). As one social worker said:

The asylum case, insecurity about the future, and experience of waiting is what occupies their minds, and what makes them feel that they have lost control over their life. We cannot help them with things that really matter for them. It is difficult to work with empowerment within such a framework.
According to Kemshall and Littlechild (2000), empowerment related initiatives may easily overlook and neglect users’ own power struggles over matters that really concern them, as indirectly implied by the respondent above. The major challenges for users and service providers is that a user’s unfortunate situation is typically linked to structural forces outside the sphere of influence of both social workers and users (Adams 2003; Miley et al. 2007). The frustration of social workers is also linked to the fact, as Adams (2003) points out, that social workers are often not in a position to simply give users power because social workers themselves are constrained by the laws and organisational frameworks which form the basis of their practice (Adams 2003). Indeed, service providers in the Norwegian reception system have only a limited set of options to draw on for transferring power to residents since the basis of their practice is constrained by regulations imposed by the Norwegian directorate of immigration (UDI). Even where the work of cooperation councils does contribute to turning the role of service providers into that of “facilitators” (Adams 2003) in respect of a range of different services, as shown above, the weakness remains, that these forms of empowerment are restricted to what residents consider as insignificant aspects of their daily lives. Nevertheless, the majority of managers and social workers we met in reception centres argued that it is better to have the cooperation council than to not have it, even given its inherent weaknesses. The importance of such forms for user involvement was also confirmed in our survey: 79% of respondents in the sample thought that cooperation councils are important for securing residents’ influence on centre management, while 95% saw it as an important tool for increasing the empowerment of residents.

The outcomes and challenges on the relational level
According to reception centre managers, when people active in the council leave the centre, it often puts the council back at starting point, and establishing a new board of members is not an easy process. On this point, the findings are consistent with those of Brekke and Vevstad (2007). According to Brekke and Vevstad (2007) it is often difficult to establish and maintain the cooperation council due to high turnover rates in many centres and the councils are usually fragile, and depend upon a few individuals. Interestingly, our data further identified two additional dimensions that may explain the lack of motivation for involvement in cooperation councils. The first dimension may be related to factors outlined in the previous section, such as residents’ lack of influence over central aspects of their lives (see also the next section). The second dimension operates at the relational level. Previous studies have implied that the dynamic of social interaction within resident groups in reception centre involves a multiplicity of relationships and perspectives (Valenta 2001; Knudsen 2005). Indeed, in the resident sample group we could distinguish between: different ethnic groups, between single residents and families, between residents with different formal status, between applicants who felt their prospects for gaining asylum status were good, and those who were highly anxious about their future, etc. Thus, different categories of residents have different perspectives, needs and interests and for residents involved in cooperation councils (with their mandate to represent all residents in the centre) it is not always easy to reconcile the differing interests of different groups. Therefore, residents in cooperation councils are often exposed to criticism from different resident groups for lacking objectivity.

Interviews with residents revealed a division in perspectives on cooperation councils according to whether a resident was directly involved in the council’s work or not. Residents who were members of a cooperation council typically represented the most positive attitudes towards the council:
It is difficult to ask for help all the time…However, things have changed since I became involved in the cooperation council… Employees remember your name, and ask you for help and advice. You feel that they respect you…

Another resident who also is active in the cooperation council said:

Residents can speak with our representatives in the council instead of going to employees each time when they have a problem… When the council address the problem then residents do not need to go to the office as individuals…Through the council, we also have the opportunity for friendly interaction with other residents and employees.

As the accounts presented above imply, participation in the cooperation council may lead to formal and informal decision making, increase residents’ self-respect, and contribute to changes in power relations between the providers of the service and residents. All these elements are identified in the literature as important dimensions of the empowerment process (Adams 1996; Guttierrez et al. 2000; Miley et al. 2007). The problem seems to be that such positive experiences are not shared by all residents in reception centres. Several residents we met expressed the feeling there were two categories of residents in the centres: those who have close contact with employees in the reception centre and have their place in cooperation council, and “the rest of the residents”. We also met residents who were not active in the cooperation council, but who had negative perceptions of those who were active. These individuals accused representatives in the cooperation councils of being opportunists who were primarily thinking about improving their own position. These accusations should be interpreted with caution since we do not have any data to test their validity. At the same time, it was indicated in several interviews that due to such accusations representatives in the council often give up their position. Although representatives may, through participation in
the council, improve their relations with employees in reception centres, and regain self-respect through participation in decision making, there is an ever present risk of being accused of corruption, opportunism and “for not being one of us.” Therefore, positions in resident councils are not popular among residents. According to employees in all reception centres we have met, it is difficult to find new representatives who are willing to take up a place in the council and expose themselves to role conflicts and accusations from other residents. Therefore, the cooperation councils are usually very unstable in most reception centres. Even so, the majority of reception centre representatives we met thought that the cooperation councils had an important contribution in terms of: ensuring quality across a range of different services, promoting independence, and facilitating user control over the design and delivery of various activities intended to make waiting time spent in reception centres more bearable.

**The empowerment on communicational level: Norwegian language training**

The most common strategy in Norwegian reception centres regarding empowerment of residents is to take the residents out of passivity through social activities, such as sport/hobby related activities and language courses. The stories of the respondents, including residents and service providers in the centres, indicate that organised activities, such as Norwegian language training and information programmes have a pivotal impact on resident involvement in service provision and participation in various arenas of mainstream society. It was argued that through participation in these activities, residents increased their language skills and their knowledge about Norwegian society, which in turn enabled them to interact with people both inside and outside the reception centre. The following account illustrates certain dimensions of that experience:
When I arrived here I was dependant on compatriots who could translate for me … I found several topics in information programmes and Norwegian courses as very important and relevant to my life in a reception centre and in Norway in general… In addition, through attending information programmes and Norwegian courses and reading I was able to occupy myself with something (Iraqi Women).

It is not news that the acquisition of skills and information may help people to regain control over their lives (Kemshall and Littlechild 2000; Berg et al. 2005; Sheppard 2006). The literature reminds us that acquisition of skills and information may also be related to aspects of empowerment that involve increased access to power (Lukes 1974; Sheppard 2006). Indeed, our findings show that through acquisition of language skills, residents gradually altered the balance of power within the relationship mix at reception centres, and beyond it. Residents who had learned Norwegian stated that they could more actively, and with greater independence from reception centre service providers, become involved in activities related to their asylum case: this included tasks such as contacting the lawyer and civil servants assigned to the case. Furthermore, in daily interactions with reception centre service providers, residents who had learned Norwegian were frequently asked to take on the role of translator between service providers and newly arrived asylum seekers when professional interpreters were unavailable. In other words, through acquiring language skills, these individuals were able to become involved in what Sheppard (2006) calls “partnerships” with service providers, where users’ competences and skills are recognised. The respondent below describes his feelings in situations where service providers have formed an automatic dependence on receiving his assistance:
They often ask me to translate for them…if I say I do not have time, they try to explain to me how important it is for them having me there. I feel important in such situations…at least for the moment our relationship is inverted (Iraqi men).

Beresford and Croft (1993) imply that the process of empowerment includes processes that make it “possible for people to exercise power and have more control over their lives” (Beresford and Croft 1993: 50). The view of Kemshall and Littlechild is that this process will lead to “transfer–empowerment” or higher degrees of self-help, “which ultimately result in changing the power balance in the relationships with others” (Kemshall and Littlechild 2000:20). The similar process of we may indicate in quotation presented above. This respondent’s account illustrates how acquired skills (in his case Norwegian language skills combined with his proficiency in the Arabic language and Kurdish dialects) led to his participation and involvement in service provision. This involvement in turn contributed to a redefinition of the relationship balance between himself and service provider through reshaping the inherent asymmetry in the service provider/resident relationship.

As in most other European countries, asylum seekers in Norway are granted the right to formal access to the labour market and vocational training, a right whose minimum standards are defined by the EU Directive on Reception Conditions. In last ten years, Norwegian authorities have gradually increased formal access to the labour market for asylum seekers, and most applicants are entitled to a work permit a short time after arrival. However, according to our respondents, very few asylum seekers actually manage to find employment. Therefore, the major long-lasting activity left for adult residents in Norwegian reception centres are the courses that provide language training and information about Norwegian society. Residents in Norwegian reception centres have the right to attend Norwegian

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7 Several other studies imply that asylum seekers have problems with finding work in receiving countries (Charlaff et al. 2004; Archer et al. 2005; Brekke and Vevstad 2007)
language courses while they are waiting for a decision. Today, language training is provided two or three times every week until 250 hours of language training has been received. However, between 2003 and 2007 residents who were awaiting a decision lost their right to attend Norwegian language classes. In what follows, the consequences of the decision to reduce residents’ access to Norwegian language training are outlined and analysed.

Restricting access to Norwegian language training

Brekke and Vevstad (2007) imply that reception conditions are sometimes used as a tool to regulate arrivals. Indeed, in 2002, the number of arrivals to Norway reached a new record of 18,000 asylum seekers. In order to reduce the influx of asylum seekers the Norwegian authorities introduced restrictions on family reunification, and the right of residents to participate in Norwegian education courses (Brekke and Vevstad 2007). Results based on data collected in reception centres in this period indicate that reduction in access to language training severely reduced reception conditions and undermined work with empowerment of residents. The following quotation, from a social worker in one of the centres, is highly representative:

As you know, UDI officials still use to visit us in order to evaluate our work. During the last visit, the representatives from the Norwegian Directorate for Immigration asked us about what activities we offer to our residents in order to motivate them. Two residents who are active in the cooperation council were invited to the meeting. They said that all these social activities are less important to them than attendance at Norwegian classes…I have to agree.

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8 There are several other examples that indicate that reception conditions are used as a tool in regulating/reducing the number of arrivals. For example, in 2009, the number of arrivals to Norway again increased which lead to proposals about reducing asylum seekers access to work.
The informant’s statement also fits well with the survey we conducted at 81 reception centres during the period when asylum seekers lost their right to attend Norwegian classes. As a part of the survey, managers in reception centres were asked which factors hindered their efforts to create a good psycho-social environment in their reception centre. Responses included: the length of waiting time, lack of Norwegian language courses, a bad economy, insufficient health care, etc. A “lack of language courses” and “the length of waiting time” were identified as greatest obstacles to achieving a good psychosocial environment. Restrictions on attending Norwegian language classes have, according to respondents, had negative effects on residents in several ways. According to survey respondents, the lack of access to language training resulted in the following: It contributed to increases in passivity among residents (according to 91% of the centres); had a negative influence on residents’ mental health (75% of centres); and increased communication problems/language barriers between service providers and residents (69% centres).

Qualitative interviews with service providers in the reception centres provided us with additional perspectives on the impacts of imposed restrictions on language training. Interviewees implied that imposed restrictions on attending Norwegian language courses undermined the participation and empowerment of residents in at least three ways. Firstly, Norwegian language skills were viewed as a major precondition for resident self-sufficiency in everyday life. For example, interviewees thought that residents were even more dependent on interpreters in communication with the providers of social services in the centre and elsewhere. Secondly, by losing the right to attend courses, residents lost the major meaningful activity that provided at least some structure to their otherwise monotonous and empty daily life.

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9 Almost all reception centres (94 % in the sample) stated that the length of waiting time hinders service providers when trying to create a good psycho-social environment in reception centres. 81 % of reception centres thought the lack of Norwegian language courses was among the central factors that hinder them to make good psycho-social environment in the reception centre.
lives. Thirdly, it was indicated in interviews that the lack of access to Norwegian language training also undermined opportunities for cooperation between different nationalities in the centres which in turn undermined access to collective decision making within the framework of cooperation councils. For the majority of non-English speaking residents, the Norwegian language was the lingua franca which made communication between the different ethnic groups possible. The last problem is also illustrated in the following account, and is taken from a resident who was interviewed in 2004:

There are communication barriers between residents since we do not have a common language, and there are communication barriers between residents and employees in the centre...When conflict arises we cannot explain, and conflicts may arise due to trivial things. Than we withdraw to the group we belong to...We are lacking a common medium.

If we take in consideration the aforementioned negative impacts, it is not so difficult to understand that restrictions on Norwegian language training was one of the major concerns addressed by employees and residents during interviews conducted in 2004-2005. Fortunately, a few years after this restriction had been imposed, the Norwegian authorities changed their policy and re-launched the language courses. It should be emphasised that the Norwegian experience at that point had clear relevance for work on regulating common reception standards in other countries. The practices regarding rights to receive state-funded language training differ greatly among EU countries, and countries continually change their practices. In many European countries, asylum seekers still have no, or restricted, access to language training.\footnote{See the last EQUAL report \url{http://ec.europa.eu/employement/social/equal/}} The language training for adults is not explicitly addressed in the EU’s Directive on Reception Conditions. As indicated above, results of this study strongly suggest that organised vocational programmes, such as the one for language training, have important
effects on reception conditions. On that point, the Norwegian experience should be taken into consideration in any further discussions on whether these activities should be included in future directives, (i.e. with the aim of laying down minimum standards).

**Empowerment, social structure and resident agency**

It should be emphasised that providing access to empowering related activities, will not automatically lead to increase in user participation. It is not only just a question of providing such types of important opportunities: residents also need to be sufficiently motivated to make use of them. Our findings suggest that the lack of participation and low motivation among residents is one of the major challenges social workers in reception centres face when working towards empowerment of residents. Kemshall and Littlechild remind us that patterns of user participation “must be understood by reference to the structural context in which they occur” (Kemshall and Littlechild 2000:13). According to several respondents, concerns about asylum applications reduce motivation to participate in such activities. As one social worker in the reception centre said:

> It is not easy to motivate people to participate when they are frequently reminded there a sizeable possibility that their application will be rejected and that they will be deported from the country. It is not unusual that residents ask us why we want to teach them about Norway or teach them the Norwegian language when they will be sent back anyway.

Respondents’ accounts may be explained by the work of Rees (1991) who states that objectives and the means of empowerment must incorporate an understanding of ways in
which a user’s interests are defined by the system in ways that work against them (Rees 1991; Kemshall and Littlechild 2000). Indeed, a prevalent perspective among residents was one of being unwelcome in Norway and that “the system” was against them. Within such a framework, implementation of empowerment related activities intended to increase residents’ feelings of having control over their own life may, in certain cases, result in the opposite outcome.

User participation may under unfavourable structural conditions even perpetuate feeling of powerlessness. For example, in order to secure resident participation in Norwegian language courses and various information programmes, Norwegian authorities have decided that these activities should be compulsory. According to regulations for reception centres, absences from Norwegian language training should be sanctioned with penalties in the form of reductions in cash benefits. According to several residents, these procedures increased their feeling of being in institution, and being treated like children. One resident said:

We have to participate in Norwegian courses and information programmes…We are adults, but they force us to attend school as children…Many of us do not attend these programmes regularly. People are absent from classes, and only start to attend when service providers withdraw cash benefits.

The stance described by the last respondent may be seen as a certain type of “secondary adjustment” where residents attempt to regain control over their lives without a direct confrontation with employees (Goffman 1961). However, this strategy undermined their participation and involvement in empowerment related programmes. At this point it is important to emphasise that different residents’ ways of coping with life in reception centre differs. Some refugees, take the fatalist stance, give up, and become depressed. Residents in this category were in the state which Barber (1991) would call the state of the “learned helplessness.” Barber (1991) describes learned helplessness as the state of mind in which
people are unable to see the point in engaging in the task of gaining control and power (see also Adams 2003). According to Barber “the helpless individual will virtually give up and lie down (Barber 1991: 33). Our respondents in reception centres stated that some residents were never absent from Norwegian courses and information programmes, but they showed no interest for lectures. Service providers indicated that only reason for residents’ attendance seemed to be their concern that absences from Norwegian language training would be sanctioned in the form of reductions in cash benefits:

They attend Norwegian courses and information programmes because they are afraid of sanction, or have no energy to fight our rules. They are not absent from classes, but this is only physical presence. They attend school without seeing the point and still do that. In their case, the participation cannot lead to empowerment. For some residents would fighting the rules be better sign of empowerment.

Respondent indicates that what sometimes appears as high degree of user participation and involvement, in reality is another form of passivity, conformity and “learned helplessness”. Findings also indicate that what sometimes appears as behaviour outcomes which, on the surface, appear to vindicate government policy, are in reality - another form of “secondary adjustment”. But unlike cases of “secondary adjustments” we described above where the resident opposes participation, there are cases of “secondary adjustment” where the residents engaged in integration related programmes. These findings are in line with several other studies on asylum seekers and refugees in Sweden and Norway (Slavnic, Brekke 2001, 2004) which show that asylum seekers with high uncertainty levels about the likely result of their asylum application may, through user involvement, try to integrate, or use “anchoring strategies” in order to strengthen their connection to the receiving country and, in this way, make it more difficult for authorities to send them back should their application fail. According to respondents, both employees in reception centres and asylum seekers, such
uncertainty levels may also motivate residents in reception centres to participate in activities
such as Norwegian language courses, information programmes, resident councils, etc.

But the stance of “learned helplessness” and “secondary adjustments” is not representative
for all residents. Our findings suggest that some residents in reception centres may also adopt
a more positive stance to the various activities and programmes on offer, in order to “make
the best of the situation”, while they are awaiting the result of their application. This category
comprised, in the main, of asylum seekers with expectations of permanent settlement status in
Norway (i.e. asylum seekers who belonged to ethnic groups who, in the period in question,
usually received a positive outcome on their asylum application). These individuals were,
according to our respondents, more optimistic about their future prospects in Norway which
also had positive effects on their inclination to participate in offered activities and
programmes.

**Conclusion**

This article focused on social work with empowerment of residents in Norwegian reception
centres. A distinction was made between empowerment via participation in activities aimed at
increasing residents’ skills, and empowerment through involvement in management of the
centre by way of resident council. The study findings strongly suggest that participation in
Norwegian language training is the most important factor which contributes to user
involvement, independence and empowerment of asylum seekers. The Norwegian experience
teaches us that reducing the right to language learning may lead to a severe undermining of
reception conditions. Further, evidence put forward in this article indicates that resident
involvement through cooperation councils can make an important contribution to
empowerment of residents. All of these factors seem to contribute in reducing negative aspects of life in reception centres. However, it is also argued that employees and residents engaged in the organisation and implementation of these initiatives have not only regarded them as opportunities, but also as a variety of challenges. The obstacles that hamper residents’ involvement and codetermination, in empowerment-related social work with residents, may come from at least two sources. The first type of obstacle is related to external factors such as restrictive asylum policies, and attempts to regulate arrivals through reception conditions. The second type of challenge that creates problems in terms of empowerment of residents may be related to the residents’ own responses which occur within the defined structural frameworks, as well as to the dynamic and nature of social relationships in the reception centre. Findings presented in this article may provide an important contribution to social work with residents through indicating the challenges and realistic aims for receiving countries in their endeavours to combat disqualification among asylum seekers. The EU is working towards establishing a Common European Asylum System. An important part of that effort is the Directive on Reception Conditions, which defines standards on how asylum seekers are to be treated while their application is being processed. The findings of this article have direct relevance to the recent discussions on reception conditions in other European countries, including the current efforts to create common standards for reception conditions in Europe. Some of the articles in the Directive focus on work with empowerment of residents such as the article on vocational training and the article on resident council. However, although the EU Directive on reception conditions defines minimum standards for resident conditions in most areas, it unfortunately does not regulate sufficiently well enough in terms of language training and residence involvement. At the same time, work in these areas seems to be neglected in many European countries.11 With reference to the Norwegian experience this article has shown the

11 See the last EQUAL report http://ec.europa.eu/employment/social/equal/
need for further discussion on whether language training and resident involvement could more appropriately be addressed by adopting a more precise and committed policy approach in the EU Directive on reception conditions.

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