

## **Presentation**

### **Political participation for persons with an intellectual disability across Flanders, Belgium.**

*- Our New Future -*

Our New Future (ONT) is a self-advocacy movement for people with an intellectual disability (ID). Self-advocates of Our New Future explore the possibilities and barriers to participate in local and regional political meetings. They activate advisors in the local community and prepare them for giving support to a person in a meeting. Self-advocates identify existing barriers to their political participation. They document their individual experiences in cooperation with the advisors and show how the process is progressing systematically. Self-advocates and advisors work both on accessibility of the intellectually disabled in the political process and on tools to support the councils or policy bodies and advisors to better provide support for their participation. Through booklets, a film, a game and other public materials, ONT is raising the political awareness of persons with an ID while also raising awareness of their desire to participate among the local and Flemish councils or policy bodies.

*“We want to make decisions or want to participate in making those decisions. In that way we keep control over our own life. We find it important that people listen to us as well.”*

—Stan, participant, Our New Future

Research (Goethals & Van Hove, 2011) showed that no people with an ID were participating politically in Flanders, and there was a profound interest in addressing this shortcoming. The Flemish governmental organization for Equal Opportunities wanted to involve people with an ID in decisions concerning their lives and their environment, and urged ONT to do

something with the results of their research. ONT then identified 10 people with an ID who had a powerful desire to participate in the policy of their own city. During the first year, however, it became clear that there was a mismatch between the desires of the persons and the expectations of participation (vocabulary, long hours that would undermine the focus, the need for a lot of preparation, difficult subject matter, etc.), and that more had to be done.

ONT set out to evaluate the proper level of support for people with an ID: Where did they want to participate? How could they enter the process? What was necessary in order for them to follow the meetings? Once entered into the process, it was very important to follow them to see how their participation could be improved. ONT collected stories of people with an ID in order to dispel prejudices and stereotypes concerning their political participation. At the same time, self-advocates identified thresholds that people with an ID and their environments encounter. ONT offers concrete tools and information addressing both the strengths and weaknesses of participation for people with an ID wishing to participate in policy making, for policy makers, and for professionals and organizations who work with people with intellectual disabilities.

People with an intellectual disability, who have participated in the project, have grown in confidence and have developed a stronger self-image. This at first appeared to be a slow and challenging process but – taking into account the strength that people with an intellectual disability have demonstrated – effective and long-term development is in sight. It has also been noticed that policy participation is an individual process, different for each person. The whole process demands personalized support for every person with an intellectual disability from his or her ONT advisor and from the councils or policy bodies where they participate.

## **References**

Goethals, T., Van Hove, G. (2011). Politieke participatie van personen met een verstandelijke beperking. Onderzoeksrapport voor de Cel Gelijke Kansen, Vlaamse Regering.