

Allotment gardeners and social responsibility

1998 celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights. Article 24 of the International Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has a right to leisure and recreation".

In the present time of high unemployment, early retirement and increasing cuts into the social network, too many citizens are experiencing problems on how to productively use their enforced leisure time. Others are experiencing increased integration problems. The latter arrive as immigrants or re-settlers into a totally foreign environment, often without sufficient knowledge of the national language. Others, on the other hand, suddenly find themselves as foreigners in a totally unfamiliar cultural circle and do not know how to approach their closest neighbours.

Young families residing in urban conglomerations are often enough forced to live and raise their children in gigantic hostile housing estates, with no option of spending weekends out in the green spaces with their children or even being able to take the odd holiday. Children's playgrounds often lie amidst concrete deserts. Boredom, frustration and increasingly violent behaviour are often the consequences. Single parent families, singles and handicapped people are therefore often excluded from society and complain against their fate.

The life expectancy of the general population is constantly on the increase. The number of senior citizens of the total population is rising incessantly. Since these people mostly still benefit from functional skills, they often feel a void in their life and do not really know what sense to attribute to the autumn of their life.

Superficiality and coldness generally qualify the image of today's society. Loneliness in the midst of a crowd of people is the consequence for many. In addition, financial hardship excludes many citizens from social contact possibilities right from the outset. Economic and social decline are too often the results.

Whereas the income-secure and strong population groups loudly voice their consumer needs, the low-income earners on the other hand seem to be silent. This situation requires the intervention of social policies. Possibilities must be found to show realistic alternatives for the population groups concerned. The International Office for Land Plots and Gardens, as the umbrella organization for more than 3 million European families of allotment gardeners, offers its help and co-operation. This brochure shows ways and methods which offer many citizens the chance to take a turn in a seemingly hopeless situation. The allotment garden is obviously not a one-stop cure, but offers a significant escape for many from a situation of emptiness and loneliness.

The allotment garden communities in more than 40.000 allotment garden associations of Europe deliver the daily proof that social exclusion is not an inevitable fate. The allotment garden community is a community of like-minded people; their common starting-point is contact with nature. The conversion of this may be diverse, but it is always a source for stimulation and a starting-point for promoting better understanding among people.

The activities performed in the allotment garden are very varied. The success of manual work is visible. Even those who have left their professional lives prematurely get a chance to make use of their professional skills with practical work in their own garden or by participating in community work. In committee work, the garden lover can contribute

with his or her professional skills by doing office work or being active in a workshop. This gives them the obvious impression that they are still needed and ensures that social contact does not get lost. The feeling of self-worth can be maintained even after the loss of a job.

For immigrant families, foreign citizens and others with integration problems, the allotment garden associations provide the ideal opportunity for making social contacts. The overcoming of language barriers is just as natural as the arising mutual learning. Community work towards the care and maintenance of the establishment along with neighbourly help sees the exchange of experiences, which benefits everyone.

Finally, the allotment garden offers a compensation for deficits in the living area. The common enjoyment of fresh air, other families' company, the joint witnessing nature as it grows and blossoms, the unaffected play possibilities for children without a risk of danger all carry a not to be underestimated meaning for young families.

The following examples serve the purpose of pointing out how many diverse facets community life within the garden allotment association offers. They show that the allotment garden phenomenon is capable of developing into a significant integration force.

Without the material and moral support from policies and management, the prosperous working of the allotment garden organization is often difficult to defend, also in the context of social policies when faced with the greedy desire for property sites and planning intentions of the councils. It is the aim of this brochure to raise the awareness and necessary support for this.

Rolf Neuser

Member of the executive board of the German Allotment and Leisure Garden Federation

A lived responsibility

The allotment garden phenomenon in all the towns of Europe has always been characterised by encouraging solidarity within a society and promoting ecological and social responsibility. Hardship and consternation as a result of social developments or changes have led to the fact that social activities are a natural part of the allotment gardeners who form a mutually supportive group.

Today in particular spiritual unions are more important than ever in order to sensibly respond to social decline and the various groups of society, as for instance foreigners, senior citizens, the unemployed, single parents, children and families.

In a time where a considerable number of people have lost their jobs and others can expect to lose theirs, the allotment garden and the fellowship in these associations offer a wide range of activities and responsibilities, which benefit both the directly concerned allotment gardener as well as others.

In the Netherlands more and more associations offer the possibility that people, other than amateur gardeners, can make use of the allotment area. People in the neighbourhood are invited to take a stroll along the gardens. During this small "voyage of discovery" they can enjoy seeing all the crops, flowers and butterflies and hear the songs of the birds and the humming of the bees. Sometimes these visitors and amateur gardeners can meet each other in the club-room.

We are all the same

The association head of the "Happy Garden Friends" in Bremen, married to his wife Tüley for 28 years, has lived in Germany since 1969 or Hasan Sendo from Bosnia, member of the allotment and leisure garden association of Skovly in Nyborg lives in Danmark since 1992.

"We belong here", say these foreign allotment gardeners, "and we want to lead our lives here together with all the other citizens!" The members of these associations include, beside the national leisure gardeners, a great number of foreign nationals. They all want to get on together because "daily problems don't know any nationalities". Upon visiting the "Happy Garden Friends", in Germany, the association of Skovly in Danmark or the associations of Dreux or Nîmes in France, of Oudenaarde in Belgium, of Hollerich or Dudelange in Luxembourg, or many other associations throughout Europe it becomes obvious that integration is not an empty word, but is practised among like-minded allotment gardeners.

Good neighbourly relations do not stop here, they go beyond the garden fence and include the neighbouring residential areas and children, who play and tumble around the open spaces.

Resignation does not count

"Being unemployed, the allotment garden holds more significance for me now than before. People no longer communicate with one another, unless you happen to bump into an old friend on the street. Everyone has got their own worries and it is therefore all the more important to occupy oneself sensibly during any unwanted spare time. On one hand the allotment garden constitutes somewhat of an escape zone, but in reality it is so much more than that. The activity in the allotment garden allows me to think about my future and my occupation with nature. That way one does not run the risk of sinking into resignation or sitting exclusively in front of the television all day long, or even hitting the bottle" say the concerned eg. in Switzerland, Danmark, Great-Britain, Poland, Germany, Belgium, France, Norway or elsewhere.

Handicapped - so what?

A 600m² allotment garden directly on the way to the association house looks as though it is an incredibly industrious garden- and vegetable lovers have cultivated their plots with great enthusiasm. Red cabbage, kohlrabi, zucchinis, salad and carrots, beautifully manicured lawn and expertly pruned fruit trees substantiate this assessment. Far from it. The plots are not being cared for by an overly zealous allotment garden couple, but by 25 to 30 members belonging to a mentally or otherwise handicapped group of people. This initiative launched by the local allotment garden association has received a high level of acceptance and support and that not just from its members.

Both sides express enthusiasm and the desire to see this idea imitated as much as possible elsewhere. "It is important to belong and to have a task to perform", says one person concerned who, on behalf of the other members, is already passionately describing future plans and activities. So the greenhouse will be renovated shortly and a small greenhouse will be built, so that vegetables can be given preference to. This and other projects in Germany, Danmark, Great-Britain and the Netherlands offer the opportunity to chat to neighbours, to exchange experiences and to participate in the association life of allotment gardeners.

In France the allotment and leisure garden association in Tourcoing has put a garden plot at the disposal of the association for blind persons "Papillon Blanc" or the association of Dugny (near Paris) has put a plot at the disposal of handicapped persons of the IMC Alternance movement. Other French leisure gardeners receive on their site people that have to stay overnight in a nearby hospital.

Similarly to the above mentioned examples often individual handicapped persons in Norway are full member of the leisure garden associations. They cultivate their plot amongst of the other leisure gardeners who help them if necessary. The Polish leisure gardeners are also active in this area. Following to the motto: "Allotment gardens without barriers" in many allotment sites the paths have been adapted to the purposes of the handicapped, plots have been surelevated and the playgrounds have been transformed. In addition social events and small holidays are organised for the handicapped, specific technical help and help with the gardening is given to them, help is offered when buying and mending the special gardening tools, to enumerate only some of the activities of the Polish allotment gardeners.

Showing solidarity

Several fates hide behind the all too sober figures describing the constantly high unemployment trend over the last few years. Statistics, however, do not even attempt to delve into the consternation of these people, many of them garden lovers, who all too often resign themselves to their fate, thereby causing their social decline. The name of the game here is for the association board to show one's colours and to demonstrate some solidarity to those concerned.

With the help of an obvious appeal to the social conscience of the allotment gardeners, the regional Rhineland association has called upon its members to adopt a pro-active stance and to approach those unemployed people, who often have been active in the association for many years.

With the motto of "approach the allotment gardener and offer him eg. payments by instalment", aims at giving all forms of support which may contribute towards saving the allotment garden and supporting the community. The idea is to fill the involuntarily allocated spare time of the unemployed allotment gardener in a sensible way, and what better place than in an allotment garden and in an association among allotment gardeners.

The acceptance on a broad level justifies this initiative of the regional association. The feedback, and not just from within the ranks, is exclusively positive, because other associations are also following suit.

In Poland in 1999 5% of the allotment gardeners were unemployed through no choice of their own. The Federation is trying to directly help these unemployed people and tries to use their technical skills for the benefit of all the allotment gardeners. During social events and at the occasion of the Day of the Garden the allotment gardeners provide additional garden products to the unemployed and invite them to events organised for the affiliated allotment gardeners.

In Austria the National Federation of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners has created a social fund in order to help allotment and leisure gardeners that are in a situation of great financial difficulties eg. that are unable to pay the annual rent or the contributions necessary for the creation of new infrastructures. This fund is financed by the central federation, banks and insurances.

Similar examples exist as well in the other federations affiliated to the International Office as eg. in Belgium and in France.

Help without limits

The partnership of the town Magdeburg with UNICEF, the United Nations children's fund, caused the allotment gardeners of that town to also participate. They organized a donation. Moreover all allotment gardeners were brought closer to the interests, duties and projects of the UNICEF. The board of the local association was of the opinion that: "If 35000 children die every day before they even get to see their fifth birthday, because they hunger without any help or purely cannot afford simple medical help, then it is the duty of a family-related organization to help". The donations are to contribute towards three practical projects: "School instead of work for 2500 children" in Brazil, "Education for girls" in Nepal and "Help for Children's home vaccinations" in Georgia. The Magdeburg Allotment Gardeners have reached their ambitious aim, as further advertisement for the campaign within the framework of community and children festivities had been organized. A certain number of leisure garden associations in Luxembourg help suffering children by giving yearly regularly important sums to specific institutions or organizations as for example "SOS children's villages" or "A heart for children suffering from cancer". In addition the Luxembourg leisure gardeners support other national charity associations with the income from social events.

In Poland the allotment garden association of eg. Ploch and Opole support the society of the friends of the children. Other allotment garden associations financially support children's homes and institutions for handicapped children. So thanks to the support of the regional allotment garden association in Bydgoszcz to enable the necessary renovations to be made in the local children's home. Additionally, the allotment gardeners offer every year throughout the country several tons of fruit and vegetables to children's homes.

New perspective on life

Health reasons led a skilled horticulturist and landscape gardener T. to refrain from performing tasks involving heavy physical efforts. "After vain attempts at finding another job, I felt useless and was scared of declining in both the economic and social senses, as I was always used to combining future perspectives with work."

In the meantime, as head of ABM projects of the Bremen association, T. supervises two groups of 11 people who carry out environmentally significant projects in the area of allotment gardens. He is particularly successful in compiling new experiences, which lie in his new field of expertise. On the one hand, T. is able to motivate and guide his helpers, which can extend to personal help with financial, health or family problems; on the other hand, the term allotment garden phenomenon is no longer an empty word thanks to his work with various allotment gardeners, instead it is the synonym for meaningful work, contacts and acceptance!

This example applies without any restrictions to Danmark, Norway, Sweden, France and Poland.

Senior happiness

To provide a green meeting point for "grey lions" who are no longer able to manage a garden on their own, but do not want to stand on the sidewalk, was the aim behind the idea of allowing autonomous groups to integrate with the association community of Saxony. Of course, initially reservations had to be ironed out and rules to be drawn up. The main concerns were on the one hand the preservation of personal interests and on

the other hand the integration of the group with the community and with the activities of the allotment gardeners. What was initially accepted somewhat hesitantly now comes naturally. The glance over the garden fence into neighbouring allotment gardens, the common joy at witnessing nature blossom and grow and the readiness to communicate on both sides has contributed towards the "grey lions" and the "green gardeners" building one world, one community.

The leisure garden associations in Norway, Poland, Sweden or Switzerland invite spontaneously or at the occasion of the Day of the Garden residents of elderly peoples homes to come to their gardens and offer them a meal or coffee and cake. In this way they give a possibility to these persons to spend an agreeable day among them and in a nice natural surrounding.

The National Federation of Allotment Gardeners in Austria via the association "Schreber und Muttergarten" offers smaller plots with smaller shelters to elderly leisure gardeners and helps them doing the gardening, so that they can remain a member of the association as long as they wish.

The Polish allotment gardeners help elderly people to lay out their garden plot and give them adequate gardening advice. In co-operation with the Polish social aid committee they offer every year a two week holiday in their allotment garden sites, together with a cultural program, to ten thousand elderly persons. These people benefit from full medical care as well as three daily meals offered by the organisers. The accommodation is organised in the associative homes owned by the allotment gardeners' communities. In addition the elderly people get free fruit and vegetables from the plots of the site where they spend their holidays.

The homes of the associations are very suitable for other events: meetings of elderly people's clubs, lectures, balls, musical events and so on.

The Belgian leisure garden associations try as well with many different activities to integrate elderly people in their associative communities and so to avoid their loneliness.

Small gardeners today - allotment gardeners tomorrow

The "House of the Happy Kids" is a Potsdam children's home. It is also the aim of allotment gardeners to provide children with a happy daily life. This was the thought behind the Potsdam association drawing up a sponsorship contract with the children's home in question in 1995. These are the achievements of the association: In 1996 the association financed toys. The funds for this were raised at a cake bazaar. The allotment gardeners from Potsdam baked cakes and sold them to the public during an exhibition of the city's allotment garden movement.

In 1997 the association financed a small greenhouse, which was erected on the children's home ground. This came along with the necessary garden tools. "But who tells us how to use such a greenhouse properly, how to plant which plants where?" "Why does this have to be done like this and that like that?" "Who will tell us what to do?", were frequently asked questions by both children and teachers. The association secured an allotment garden expert who is now a regular visitor at the children's home, to answer the questions asked by knowledge thirsty little gardeners. Any repairs or maintenance jobs are carried out by the allotment gardeners of the neighbouring allotment garden. The second growing season can rely on further material and moral support for the project from the regional association. Why? Very simple! First of all one can say with certainty that some of the children who have grown their own tomatoes and cucumbers in this children's home will manage their own allotment garden one day. Where does this secure knowledge stem from?

The associations of Mondorf and Ulflingen in Luxembourg or the association "Gartenfreunde Ottakring" in Vienna as well as associations in France and Sweden or associations in the provinces of East Flanders and Limbourg in Belgium have projects on schoolgardens or try by other activities to sensitize children for nature and gardening. In Norway the leisure gardeners invite school children to visit their associations and garden sites in order to pass on to these children their love and respect for the garden and nature.

In Great-Britain there are associations who provide a plot on which children can garden. The Polish leisure gardeners create playgrounds for children on their sites eg. in the region of Bydgoszcz in the 233 leisure garden sites you will find 146 playgrounds. They enable children from less fortunate families to spend holidays in the allotment gardens eg. in the allotment garden site "Dolinaka" in Koziencice or in the allotment gardens in Opole. Also, in the allotment gardens in Kielce Polish children from Ukraina, Bielorrussia and Kasachstan can have a rest. They co-operate with schools in order to sensitize children for the natural cycles and gardening and lay out garden plots as school gardens destined for the use of school children. In the region of Katowice alone such courses were organised in 61 allotment garden sites.

The Dutch allotment areas are necessary public gardens in urban regions, where townfolk can get in contact (again) with nature. Many associations offer the children in the neighbourhood a welcome place to play their games, eg. in a recreation-ground.

Social responsibility

Some Berlin allotment gardeners also managed to see beyond their own four walls and act accordingly. Using the opportunity of well-visited Christmas bazaars over previous years, the takings from the last festivity were donated to homeless people housing in a Reinickendorfer Red Cross emergency accommodation centre. But this was not all. Encouraged by the approval of its own members, the association made an invitation to those concerned to demonstrate some personal understanding and compassion. Despite being well received, the free catering was nevertheless not the most significant part for the guests. The change of scene and conversation with others was the actual highlight of the day and made the get together a special occasion for both parties. It is without question that contact with the German Red Cross institution and the homeless people involved shall be maintained.

In Switzerland nearly every association organizes a "Day of the Flower". The aim is to make bunches with the flowers offered by the leisure gardeners and to present them to old and ill persons of the neighbourhood, in elderly people's homes and hospitals. Meanwhile this has become a tradition for more than 10 years.

In Luxembourg many allotment garden associations remit annually important cheques to social organizations as eg. to the Red Cross for social projects in under-developed countries and to the organization: Doctors without borders. A growing number of leisure garden associations in the Netherlands are inviting every year people from nursing-homes or elderly people's homes for a relaxing afternoon with tea and pastry's, and of course they are shown around the gardens. If necessary, the amateur gardeners help pushing the wheelchairs. These afternoons are a nice diversion that is highly appreciated by the aged people and the staff. Everybody gets a nice bouquet afterwards.

In Austria the women sections within the leisure garden associations are extremely busy. They prepare during their meetings small flower presents, flower bunches etc. and offer them for Eastern and Christmas etc. to people in elderly people's homes.

Similar activities are carried out in Norway, Sweden and in the other federations affiliated to the International Office.

In Poland the members of the allotment garden federation offer garden products to hospitals, elderly peoples homes and children institutions.

Single allotment gardeners (especially elderly people) are invited in Poland to social events in the associations eg. camp fire, musical events, even by choirs of leisure gardeners. Small receptions take place for Easter, Christmas, the day of elderly people, as well as the woman's day. In the region of Szczecin eg. such events are organised year by year in 45 allotment garden sites.

Examples such as the above can be endlessly cited and document the extensive social understanding of the garden lovers and the political potential of the allotment garden community, which works both on the inside and outside. Whoever wants to carry social responsibilities must not simply talk but act! Garden lovers prove this through the diversity of their activities, which characterise the allotment garden phenomenon throughout Europe and make it a forum for anyone who thinks and feels alike.

We extend you a warm welcome!