

## STIGMA AND ADVOCACY

We tend to organise individuals and social worlds according to simplified images – stereotypes – in order to deal with the vast quantities and the great diversity of people, groups and territories we encounter. When those stereotypes are constituted by negative attributes, there is a great probability that stigma will emerge.

Stigma is a symbolic production that generates and/or reinforces material disadvantages. It can relate to the body and its physical problems, to individual character flaws, and to social attributes like ethnicity, religion or nationality. Given that stigma increases existing exclusion and marginalization, people, groups and territories subject to stigmatisation find it even more difficult to overcome their disadvantaged situation. Marginality, then, is not simply a material condition resulting from a relegated social position; it is also a relegated status.

Society deals with stigma both in benevolent ways, namely through social intervention and several kinds of social support, but also – and significantly – through rejection, exclusion, and relegation. While a romanticised vision of society may find that the struggles for equality and human rights have produced good results, a closer look at social life in general and at the labour market in particular shows that stigmatisation still exists. Indeed, vulnerable people are still seen – in part at least – as incapable or problematic. This is a major challenge for work integration programmes, as clients and other potential partners will fear that vulnerable, marginalised, disabled people will not be capable of professional work. Indeed, experience shows that stigma and discrimination of people from marginalised groups stimulates growing barriers to labour integration. These barriers result both from employers' and common cultural attitudes and expectations.

Therefore, it is necessary to question the simplistic nature of stereotypes in order to overcome the prejudices that lead to stigmatisation. This must be done on least at two levels:

- Employers must recognize the abilities and potential of employing vulnerable individuals
- The general public has to shift perceptions in relation to work integration programmes in order to motivate public policy change

There must be continuous efforts to educate, change attitudes and reduce stigma. Successful reintegration methodologies require a continuous work of advocacy among the various agents and organizations involved (employers, social services, consumers, other local actors). Indeed, work integration programmes' activities should have as a background the questions that participants ask themselves, as participants engage in a critical analysis of their practices and representations, and question their relationships between themselves, other agencies and the State. This is crucial in promoting a major change in the way intervention is carried out: not only target group participants need to be actively engaged in the programme's development and implementation, but all participants need to be actively engaged with each other. Fighting stigma must begin from the inside of the work integration programme.

Furthermore, another main challenge is to learn how to attract media and the general public. This entails finding a social consensus with regard to work integration programmes for stigmatised groups. It must be made clear that it is worthwhile to create programmes which, while not providing

immediate reintegration, offer participants a meaningful structure for their everyday life and require some degree of effort from them.

Advocacy strategies to counteract stigma include:

- Public relations, in order to draw a different image of the target group (this kind of initiatives benefits from involving someone who has a good credit in society)
- The good quality of products and services delivered by the work integration programme (this is probably the best possible marketing)
- Inviting clients/employers/stakeholders to see by themselves with who they work with and how they work