e-Participation and Immigrants: An Interview with Edward Andersson, Deputy Director of Involve

Interview by İtir Akdoğan, Department of Social Research, Media and Communication Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

IJEP: Can you tell us about the background and the standpoint of Involve?

Mr. Andersson: Involve as an organization was founded because we felt that there were severe failures in the participation field. We felt there was a need for a not for profit and values driven organization dedicated to engagement in general. As an organization we straddle theory and practice; we incorporate elements of a think tank and elements of a practical consultancy. Our specialism is engaging citizens, service users and communities in decisions and services. We do not have a specific issue focus; we look at issues ranging from global climate change to local crime. Our purpose is to bring together thinkers, doers and decision makers to improve the way that we engage citizens.

IJEP: How do you think participation empowers people?

Mr. Andersson: A common criticism is that current participation is very government centric. There is an element of truth in this criticism; empowerment is seen by some civil servants as something done to people. People are seen to be powerless until government 'shares' power. I believe that it is possible for people to affect change from the bottom up without government interventions, for example through campaigns and activism. Change is possible, but this way of working is time consuming and requires much dedication. Government led participation opportunities are key for many individuals or groups who, for whatever reason, are unable to mobilize themselves. For participation to be empowering it needs to be meaningful. Much engagement today is meaningless, tokenistic and pre-determined.

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