

RESEARCH

REPORTS

RECOMMENDATIONS

DOMINIKA CIEŚLIKOWSKA

EXIT/ENTRANCE REPORT

LESSONS LEARNT FROM ME-YOU-WE WORKSHOPS AND SOCIAL ACTIONS



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I. THE AIM OF THE EXIT/ENTRANCE REPORT

In the Exit/Entrance Report we present findings from the workshops, social actions and lessons learned during the course of the Empowering Communities in Europe project. Let our social experiments be the inspiration for any others who would like to foster a more welcoming, mutually understanding and caring attitude between locals, migrants and refugees and help us to meet together in peace.

We believe that our experiences and ideas, along with the project's message of intercultural dialogue and inclusive communities, may be disseminated further after the project's completion by all people who care about our mutual understanding and fruitful relations.

II. THE GIVE ME VOICE RESEARCH - BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR CHOOSING THE DIRECTIONS AND FOCUSES OF FURTHER ACTIVITY

As the initial Give Me Voice Research has shown, the countries chosen for the project (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) share some similarities in their social attitudes towards the issue of migration. It has been found that the 2015 crisis had a major impact on attitudes to the admission of refugees and migrants in the CEE⁷. The topic became politicized. A shift to a policy of non-admission and resistance to calls in favour of accepting immigrants has appeared. Generally speaking the fundamental division between “them and us” shapes the intergroup relations between established residents and newcomers. Anxiety over admission is as high in capitals as outside. People are afraid for their security and they show fear of the unknown. They predict the incompatibility of their respective cultures and competition over welfare entitlements, especially as they believe in a “mass” influx. A lack of knowledge, education, and personal contact between locals and migrants and refugees lets the mass media's message (especially concerning reports of terrorist acts) spread and obscure the reality of the situation. On the other hand, it was discovered that residents living around admission centres have a more positive attitude towards migrants as individuals but are still anxious about them as a group. Also past experience of integration success helps to reduce concerns (in Bulgaria and Croatia). These findings not only justify the organization of educational events and social actions, but also give hints for actions that may result in more successful

outcomes. Therefore, a group of trained facilitators invited, inspired and supported participants of the Me-You-We Activities (workshops and social actions) to undertake some of these activities.

III. LESSON LEARNT FROM THE ME-YOU-WE WORKSHOPS

1. PEOPLE WHO CARE ARE EVERYWHERE

To follow: The Me-You-We Workshops based on the British Council's Active Citizens methodology, delivered by the facilitators in all the projects' locations, have shown that in each of the countries there are people who care about refugees and migrants and would like to build better relations. In all locations people involved in social and civic activism were recruited.

To bear in mind: On the other hand, the recruitment process in many localities has shown that it is also a challenge to find bigger groups of people who would like to get involved at one time (in some localities, e.g. Croatia and Hungary, the initial recruitment process has failed and has had to be repeated). The people who care seem to be in a minority (in some localities, for example Hungary, such people are really scared to show empathy and interest in migrant issues). The activities undertaken within the project have shown that there are some hints to be followed:

- plan for small groups of participants,
- repeat workshops at different times and in different localities,
- involve existing local organizations to help in recruitment.

“I was thrilled with the group, I felt free, with no fear, members of the group were intrinsically motivated, which could be seen throughout the activities.” (Participant, Croatia)

2. MOST PROBABLE PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

To follow: In most of the countries young people (students, young activists and teachers) were more likely to become participants, with the exception of one of the Polish locations where a community of active seniors became involved. It has been shown that it was fruitful and successful to organize as diverse groups as possible, preferably with migrants'/refugees' representatives as regular participants and facilitators.

Most of the participants were highly motivated in developing their knowledge and experience in building bridges between the majority and people with a migrant background, and they wanted to spread alternative messages to that of non-admission widely advocated after 2015.

It is worth arranging for these kinds of people to meet together and helping them to establish networks. They probably need support, empowerment and inspiration as much from the facilitators as from the other participants. It is important to show them, as a minority, that there are more of them and that their voices might be heard and / or strengthened. Strengthening the young migrant leaders (e.g. among the Czech participants) seems also to be an important achievement within the project.

To bear in mind: Despite the fact that most potential participants of the workshops are often involved and experienced in social activities on integration, diversity and migrant issues, it does not mean that they are free from assumptions, prejudices, unfair judgement, unequal treatment, or a post-colonial way of thinking based on hierarchy and a division between “Us” and “Them”. Having good intentions does not mean that you do no harm. That is why the activities need ongoing reflection to be smart, truly participatory, inclusive and based on equal treatment.

It is also important to find people less convinced and less involved in active citizenship, from the less predictable social groups (like in some locations artists, film makers, seniors and others). This was possible within the project due to more dedicated recruitment and not relying on typical NGO recruitment channels.

“I will be the change!” (Participant, Croatia)

3. IMPACT OF THE CHOSEN METHODOLOGY

To follow: The workshop methodology (the British Council’s Active Citizens approach) has been underlined in all the locations as a very effective way of working with people. Three factors seemed to be responsible for the success of the chosen approach: participants identified the combination of (1) self-reflection, (2) theoretical concepts and (3) putting their knowledge into direct **practice as the roots of the successful learning experience.**

To bear in mind: The methodology is process oriented and assumes participants have reasonable amount of time and energy to commit to the project. This might be a challenge given the speed of modern life, especially for people who are already socially involved activists, with their time limitations.

It also became a barrier for those who have no experience of civic activism. Therefore, smaller groups than initially predicted were established in some of the locations to make sure that only highly motivated people took part in the workshops. Their role to cascade and disseminate the message through social actions requires more involvement and therefore the declaration of the commitment of their own time helps in the selection process and increases the likelihood that the project's effects will be long-lasting.

“It’s hard to single out just one great thing about the workshop because it was a great training session as a whole and it helped me to learn how to organize and guide a group.” (Participant, Croatia)

“The greatest experience for me was carrying out the community research. I could communicate with the locals; listen to them and hear their stories. I am glad about this experience.” (Participant, Czech Republic)

„An important topic covered comprehensively and through different perspectives.” (Participant, Croatia)

“During the workshop I learnt much more than at the University in three years.” (Participant, Slovakia)

“The Workshops strengthened my knowledge of the process of developing and implementing social projects and thanks to new acquaintances I got a huge dose of inspiration and new energy.” (Participant, Poland)

“I expected a very theoretical seminar, I am glad it was not the case”. (Participant, Czech Republic)

“The methods are very praiseworthy; an excellent ratio of theory, personal experiences, activities and breaks.” (Participant, Croatia)

“This was a very interesting experience for me and I learned a lot of new things about myself and my role in the group and society.” (Participant, Poland)

4. THE PROJECT'S MIGRATION FOCUS

To follow: The project addresses topical, difficult and the socially dangerous issue of the perception of migrants and refugees and their ability to integrate within the local communities after the 2015 crisis. The research conducted identified the main concerns and shifts in opinion and proved the importance of taking action against a rising wave of intolerance and non-acceptance. Therefore, the specified focus and profile of the projects seemed to be rational and justified.

To bear in mind: The idea of focusing on the given topic (“MIGRATION”) somehow contradicts the basic assumptions of the Active Citizens methodology, according to which it is better if the issues to be addressed are derived from the communities themselves. It happened that even though participants had decided to take part in the project to deliver Social Actions dedicated to migrants and refugees, in the process of reflection on their own communities, they discovered some issues that seemed to be more important for their communities, which they wanted to tackle. The solution for such a concern might be finding out the Social Actions’ ideas combining different focuses, incorporating migrant/ international/ global issues into the identified aspects of interest.

IV. SOCIAL ACTIONS AS FURTHER INSPIRATIONS

The participants of the Me-You-We Workshops conducted the Social Actions:

- to create opportunities for direct contact and real encounters,
- to bring each other closer together, in order to support mutual understanding,
- to fight against prejudices and destroy myths,
- to discuss, exchange and offer alternative sources of information,
- to introduce different people to each other,
- to learn and develop better understanding of the migration process and integration dynamics,
- to appreciate, empower and support counter-messages and caring people.

The activities undertaken have shown that it is worth following such rules as the following:

- work with the local communities and their leaders;
- involve migrants themselves and listen to their perspective, needs and pains;
- get in touch with multipliers and influencers within the community, like teachers and other influential people;
- choose actions directly driven by the community interests and address local people’s needs;
- adjust the language and try to work and distribute materials in local languages (not only English);
- find out not only what does not work, but also what works and base your activity on that;
- use the important local days in the calendar to celebrate diversity and raise interest in specific issues (1st June – International Children’s

Day, 8th March – International Women’s Day, 20th June – World Refugee Day and other International Days established for example by the UN – check for more: <http://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/international-days/>);

- offer the participants in the Social Actions help with preparation, explanation and facilitation of the encounter (do not count only on the contact itself but help people to get involved in it and let them reflect on and understand the process);
- communicate intensively with the organizers of the Social Actions after the workshops to encourage, support and help them;
- get people (the organizers and participants in the Social Actions) involved in the preparation phase, make them responsible for the process and its results;
- find support in the form of the partnership with and / or patronage of the local authorities, the Local Government; international bodies such as the Council of Europe; local, regional and national media and other influential and important stakeholders;
- start to plan the Social Action early, from the beginning of your involvement in the project; build plans step-by-step, designing them from different angles to give yourself time to think, go deeper and be more specific;
- promote positive messages and experiences;
- decide the scope and target group (intimate or wide) and rethink both the advantages and disadvantages.

Different types of Social Actions were undertaken, such as:

1. CREATING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES:

a) working with the school community/ within the school context directly on migration issues by different types of learning arrangements (different levels of education – from kindergarten to college and university students):

Delivering interactive workshops specifically on the migration and integration issues (Medical high school in Osijek, Croatia; Un hommage à “Be the Change”, Lepoglava, Croatia; Tina Ujevića high school, Kutina, Croatia).



Conducting informative sessions run by the migrants themselves – using a story telling, personal experience approach. The sessions were introduced during the international mobility program, in which teachers and students from six countries participated, which extended the target group and scope of the Social Action (Bucharest, Romania).



Preparing the educational materials to be used by teachers in classes with students of mixed/ international backgrounds: selection of international stories/ books and the instructions and “worksheets” including words in the different languages and games for kids focusing on diversity (Czech Republic).

Conducting a series of seven Social Actions under the name “Week of Communion” to bridge the differences between students, to encourage friendship and fellowship and to familiarize themselves with and connect with their newly arrived classmates who are asylum seekers living in the local reception centre (School Velimir Vidrić, Kutina, Croatia). It is worth underlining that friendship was the core concept to be explored by art, sport, creativity, and culinary activities. Some permanent results of the activities have been established: The Student Council agreed on Rules of Friendship, and a Welcome Pack, consisting of a DIY picture book and a map for students from a migrant background attending the school, were prepared by the students themselves.



b) meeting with the school representatives and other target groups/ publics outside the school context, directly and non-directly on migration issues, by different types of meeting arrangements:

Conducting a Drama Workshop – Theatre of the Oppressed (City Library Ogulin, Croatia).



Created a geocache containing fairy tales from different countries so that anyone can find it and take some of the fairy tales home (Czech Republic).

Open lectures such as “Refugees - stories from real life - representations, challenges, myths and reality”, “Balkan route - Tovarnik, Opatovac and Slavonski Brod - report from the field”, “Human rights” at the local library open to the public, especially adults from the local community (City Library Ogulin, Croatia).



“Friendly stories” – a nationwide initiative which aimed to promote tolerance and acceptance of other cultures using arts and creativity; in the form of a drawing competition (stories about international friendship) conducted on Facebook, with the following products: a collection of children’s picture stories, certificates for participants, an online book and an exhibition for further dissemination. Partnership and collaboration with Caritas, refugee centres, schools and NGOs across the country. The project was launched on 1st June, International Children’s Day; it received wide national, local and online media coverage (Burgas, Bulgaria).



2. CREATING ENCOUNTER OPPORTUNITIES:

a) within a smaller, dedicated community:

Organizing a multicultural knitting workshop to encourage networking of activists, migrants and Polish women who are professionally active around a noble goal – supporting premature babies from hospitals across Poland. The meeting opened people up to the realities of life in Poland and to the interesting ideas of activists, but also generated new ideas for joint activities in the city (Warsaw, Poland).



Organizing culinary events, workshops, shows and exchanges. Cooking, eating and celebrating is a starting point for getting to know each other, facilitating dialogue, and letting people talk about any issue they found interesting (whether or not that includes peoples' cultural backgrounds). (Community Cooking in Szeged Waldorf School, Hungary; Be-Cool-inary, Burgas, Bulgaria).



b) open to the public / broad spread:

“We sail the same boat” happening: initiating debate and encounters in a public space on the day of the national elections in the main pedestrian street, under the title “We sail the same boat - so let us speak about it in the meantime”, which is a well-known Hungarian proverb, meaning that we all have the same problems and difficulties, and we are all aiming to reach the same destination. Activists talked with passers-by about the divisions in politics and society. Altogether, the action was addressed to a few hundred citizens (Szeged, Hungary).



Reading club – Greenoteca: an abandoned public space was rearranged and transformed with children, to make somewhere children of different backgrounds (with three migrants from Senegal as a starting point) meet weekly and read different books. Let children read, spend quality time and learn new things. Supported by the FB page “Creative readers/ Cititori creative,” where posts with photos and stories from the reading sessions are published regularly (Curtea de Arges, Romania).



“A Town at a River” project is thought as a meta project integrating initiatives, people, ideas involving issues concerning refugee community in Bialystok as new citizens of the city. Two events were held in scope of the project: Art craft workshop organised by the senior community of the University of the Third Age and an intercultural meeting of the senior community of the University of the Third Age and Chechen refugee women with their families (Bialystok, Poland).



3. CREATING EMPOWERMENT OPPORTUNITIES:

Celebrating Women's Day by offering the appreciation and respect represented by a flower to women, especially migrants, and workers whose work is often dangerous, dirty and demeaning (check: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TmiuyLIRmPc>) (Czech Republic)



Organizing a cricket match as an opportunity for Slovakian and Indian students to meet and get to know each other. The organizer saw the impact of the event as an empowering force for the community of Indian students. They appreciated the extraordinary opportunity to play the game and were open to other events in the future (Košice, Slovakia)



V. FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

It seems that activities dedicated to schools (students, teachers and whole communities) and / or focused on creating educational opportunities are the most popular and probably more easy to put into practice. It is worth continuing in this direction, filling the cognitive gap and shaping peoples' mentality, both at schools and outside the institutional context. On the other hand, identifying other, less popular target groups and important communities, where the integration messages might be passed on successfully, is strongly recommended.



Creating space for being together, exchanging ideas, building personal contacts and relations seems to also be a very welcome direction for social actions that enhance the possibilities for more effective integration. There is a whole range of other possibilities to make people meet and interact with each other, both in smaller and wider forums. It is important to create the opportunities for intergroup and interpersonal cooperation, instead of competition.

Among other factors for effective integration, apart from having a safe space to interact and having knowledge and mutual understanding, there is the following important one: people have to value each other and feel empowered. Therefore, we strongly recommend continuing and developing the ideas practiced within the Empowering Communities in Europe project but also being creative in finding other ways to support, empower and positively strengthen each party involved in the mutual integration process.

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