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Mother Centre International Network /AG International, Stuttgart Germany

Award Winning

New for 2002

Categories:

Gender Equity and Equality:

- empowerment
- gender roles and responsibilities
- gender specific needs
- removing barriers to equity

Children and Youth:

- community support programmes
- education and vocational training (including day care and after school care)
- health and nutrition
- legislation/advocacy

Civic Engagement and Cultural Vitality:

- community participation
- social and cultural vitality

Level of Activity: Regional (international)

Ecosystem: Continental

Summary

'The Mother Centres International Network' initiative was started by grassroots women's movement in Germany as a consequence of a research project at the German Youth Institute in Munich. The first three model Mother Centres were funded by the German Government Department for Family Affairs. After publication of the Book, "Mothers in the Center - Mother Centres" in 1985, the mother Centres spread "like a virus" due to peer visits and exchanges throughout Germany and neighbouring countries. Following the transition in Central and Eastern Europe Mother Centres were created using bottom up approach, as self-help initiatives in the Czech and Slovak Republics, in Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia and Bosnia Herzegovina. Worldwide there are now 700 mother centres including those in Africa and North America.

Mother centres address the needs of women and children, bring together families and recreate neighbourhood structures in the community, where modernisation in the West and totalitarian systems and war in the East, have destroyed them. They empower mothers and create new channels for female participation and leadership in communities and local governance. They are an innovative model on how to strengthen civil society and democracy by revitalising neighbourhoods and community culture. They are meeting points for women of diverse class and ethnic backgrounds to meet and join forces to deal with everyday life issues, to create community services and to rechannel resources to the grassroots level.

Municipal agencies as well as local, regional and national governments consult Mother centres

regularly. They advocate for gender and family issues and have had impact on national legislation and urban planning.

Narrative

SITUATION BEFORE THE INITIATIVE BEGAN

Despite new levels of technology and global connection the human condition remains unchanged. At the grassroots level, a child needs sustained nurturance and stable relationships while mothers need support in performing this daunting task, which no longer is naturally forthcoming through family and community structures in contemporary societies.

In industrialised countries the experience of motherhood is increasingly marginalised and the mother-child relationship is experienced under conditions of isolation. Children experience decreasing access to peer contacts and to public spaces due to the increase of single child families and increasingly dangerous urban environments. Young mothers often lose self-confidence when raising children, yet the public norms and the labor market demand different rhythms and priorities. New ways of fostering community are needed because violence is increasing among youth and in children who fail to feel a meaningful connection to society and in societies where old age is decreasingly embedded in traditional care systems.

Mother Centres also apply to the conditions of post-socialist societies, which are in transition. Many women in these societies, due to the increase in unemployment and the reduction of public childcare find themselves at home with children. The isolation they face is especially virulent due to the fact that in socialist societies the tradition of community networks was discontinued and social coherence and inclusion was mainly regulated by the workplace. In Central and Eastern Europe the role of civil society has been systematically dismantled and family and neighborhood networks destroyed. Unemployment, war trauma and unprecedented poverty often leads to disorientation and these women often retreat into depression and apathy. Many Central and East European countries are characterised by disorientated views of social roles and life patterns, poverty, gender relations, religious and ethnic traditions. When systems that previously safeguarded social integration and cohesion like full employment, the extended family or village networks break down, people need new places to meet, re-orientate themselves and reweave the torn social fabric. Communities need a place where they can reassemble and relearn how to establish confidence in social contacts and trust in building democracy using the bottom up approach. Mother Centres provide such a place.

THE EXAMPLE OF BOSNIA HERZEGOWINA

In Bosnia Herzegovina the war destroyed both social and public life. Social security was based on the extended family and collective networks. The war tore apart these networks, destroyed families, neighbourhoods and villages, dispelled people from their homes, home towns and communities and created an individualistic environment previously unknown in Bosnian society.

Inter ethnic tensions are supplemented in post war Bosnian society by a social war between "have and have-nots", between people who profited from the war and those who lost everything. Practically every woman in Bosnia has a background of family separation or war trauma.

The population of cities in Bosnia Herzegovina is almost entirely composed of migrants, those re-migrating from Germany as well as refugees from other parts of the former Yugoslavia, who had to leave their homes during and after the war. The unemployment rate is high, in some areas over 90%. Social structures have been destroyed completely. This leaves everyone, especially old people and single mothers, very vulnerable and without family back-up and support. These groups have the highest rate of poverty and health problems.

In this situation Mother Centres are a contact point in the community, especially for single mothers and for the elderly. This is where they can turn to and find a listening ear and a helping hand. Due to exchanges throughout Germany Mother Centre initiatives have started in other places like Zavidovici, Sarajewo and in Sanski.

Some people have been quoted saying;

"I am alone now, I need to make new ties. I cannot rely anymore on my family or relations because they are no more. Joining the Mother Centre initiative is a way to create a new family"

"With this project we are creating both job opportunities for women as well as support and services for the most vulnerable groups in society. We create an interface in the community for groups with different ethnic backgrounds. We have learned that we need to reweave social networks just as much as we need to rebuild the houses and infrastructure of our cities, which have been destroyed."

THE EXAMPLE OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The economic conditions in the Czech Republic are somewhat more favourable than those in other post-socialist countries. The rate of unemployment is lower, the housing situation better and the health care system more stable. The majority of mothers in the Czech Republic make use of the parental leave scheme, which is provided for four years and which includes a small monthly family payment. Staying at home on parental leave while the children are small is considered by many as a conscious decision against the devaluation of the family under the communist regime and against the socialist uniform role model of full labour market participation for all.

Following a series of exchanges with the German Mother Centres a self-help movement of Mother Centres has developed in the Czech Republic. Mother Centres are attractive to women in the Czech Republic for a variety of reasons:

- After the experience of the "collectivisation" of child rearing under communism, which in the Czech Republic was seen as being imposed on, there is a keen interest on the part of parents to consciously take charge of parenting themselves and to influence the way their children grow up in today's society. Mother Centres create a possibility for peer learning, for parents to exchange views, experiences and information on parenting.
- Mother Centres create a meeting point in the neighbourhoods, breaking through the often anonymous and isolating structures of residential areas in post-socialist societies.
- Mother Centres create an opportunity for children to meet and interact with other children.
- Mother Centres are a switchboard for information, skills, support and resources for every day life and survival issues.
- They create a structure and platform for families to identify and voice their problems and to engage in active advocacy for family and community issues, making sure that their interests are not neglected in the process of new economics and new governance.

ESTABLISHMENT OF PRIORITIES

In countries of the North like Germany, the Mother Centers challenge the marginalisation of motherhood by creating new forms of neighbourhood relations and adapting the "it takes a village to raise children" concept to industrialised societies. Caring for children, the elderly, the sick and the handicapped is reintegrated into the community as collective priorities and responsibilities.

In post socialist societies of Central and Eastern Europe the mother centers focus on rebuilding family relations, neighborhoods and communities. In the centers young and old, migrants and expatriates, and families from different ethnic backgrounds regroup to support each other in dealing with the everyday life issues of families and neighborhoods.

The Mother Center concept was developed by a research project of the German Youth Institute (DJI) in Germany focusing on the conditions of parenting in contemporary societies. The German Federal Government Department of Family Affairs funded 3 initial model centers and the publication of a book documenting their experiences, strategies and lessons. The book created a self help movement in Germany that spread through peer learning and peer exchanges to neighboring countries in Western and later in Central and Eastern Europe.

FORMULATION OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

Mother Centres differ from the usual social work deficit- oriented approach, "You have a problem. Come to us, the experts, for help". The Mother Centre approach is the other way around: "You are have, at least, one good thing. Come to the Mother Centre and contribute it to the community."

Mother Centres are self-managed. The core of the project is a daily drop-in coffee shop with childcare included. Activities in the centres are paid, usually on an hourly basis, and involve projects that help lower expenses for families and that support families in their everyday chores as well as in times of crisis. They include services like second hand shop, hair cutting, midday meals, toy library, sewing classes, repair services as well as trainings to expand skills and help re-enter the labour market like language courses, computer and job retraining courses. Holistic health services are part of the daily program. Activities in the centres are remunerated whenever possible.

A key strategy responsible for sparking off the Mother Centre movement was that the DJI team did not publish their research results as an academic book but facilitated a process where the women involved in the first three Mother Centres wrote down their own stories, creating an authentic book, which was later translated into the Czech language. When other mothers read these accounts they felt inspired and encouraged to replicate this for themselves. Written by community women the book conveyed two basic messages to grassroots women's groups across Germany and beyond: "This is it!" and: "We can do that too!" The Mother Centre movement is an interesting example of up scaling and transfer of grassroots best practices through the story telling format and peer learning strategies.

MOBILISATION OF RESOURCES

Mother Centres as self managed spaces in the community were a new concept when introduced to German family and youth welfare policy in the beginning of the eighties. As a result of a research project of DJI, a federally funded research institute that regularly consults the government on its family and youth policies, the DJI team was able to mobilise initial federal funds as start up support for the first three model centres for the first three years, during which time further support by public and private municipal and regional funding was secured. During this process the concept of preventive family policy measures was developed and presented to municipalities as well as private welfare organisations, arguing that it was cheaper to help families help themselves than to pay the high public costs for dysfunctional family socialisation. Over time the success of the centres and their rapid replication created a momentum towards public funding that resulted in new legislation and new funding procedures allowing for Mother Centre funding titles in family and youth welfare programs. This was the result of extensive lobbying of the countless Mother Centre initiatives in communities across the country. Preventive family policy measures that preserve healthy families and neighbourhoods are considered wise investments by western welfare states and public and private funding for family self help groups are available in countries like Germany, Austria and Holland. In Central and Eastern Europe public funds are more difficult to attain, mainly due to the fact that there is little or no money allocated for social policies of this kind in municipal and state budgets. In these countries the local Mother Centres, using the same rationale, have been successful in acquiring rooms and land from the municipalities and funds from foundations and the private sector.

RESULTS ACHIEVED

Depending on size and how long they have been working, Mother Centres reach between 50 and 500 families in their neighbourhood. The experience often changes the lives of the women involved and their families profoundly. In a DJI study the following replies were received to the question what effects the Mother Centres have on the participants:

70% learned more tolerance, 58% said they learned to participate and raise their voices, 55% answered that they learned to cope with every day life with more calm and confidence.

For the children the centres mean an expansion of their social and physical space and experience. For the fathers the centres often involve a challenge to traditional family roles and the sharing of

responsibilities, a challenge that 67% of the fathers in the study regarded positively.

80% of the respondents felt that the Mother Centre enriched the community, 47% saw improvements in the infrastructure conditions for families and 41% said, that the mother centres changed the neighbourhood regarding more social contact and social integration (including acceptance of minority groups).

67% of the Mother Centres affirm that they have taken part in their community by political actions and in 46% of the cases in the Mother Centres are represented in municipal councils on urban planning and development.

Mother Centres have contributed to a new range of neighbourhood services and a new culture of care in the communities especially quality care for children and elderly. They have also proven to be successful with training and job re-entry programs as well as creating new businesses and income generating opportunities.

SUSTAINABILITY

The Mother Centre movement has contributed to the transformation of social institutions and enabling of the legislation. They have created an innovative shift in the field of social work and social welfare from mothers and families as clients of professional programs to self-help and empowerment as active participants in local planning and decision-making, thus counteracting the social exclusion of an important group in society.

The greatest success proved to be the re-channeling of resources from social work programs to the hands of grassroots women's groups. In the case of Germany this change in public policy has resulted in the reform of the German Youth Welfare Legislation that now includes a paragraph on funding for family self help initiatives. With the Mother Centres a grassroots women's voice has emerged in local governance, creating more gender equity in public decision-making.

LESSONS LEARNED

CLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE

The power of the Mother Centre movement lies in the claiming of public space in the communities, the "public living room" as the centres call themselves, a place where every day life experience is acknowledged and valued as expertise. In the centres, women learn to recognise and pool their skills and resources and to support each other in developing their leadership potential.

PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Participation in public decision making for grassroots women often involves entering an intimidating and alienating culture that disconnects grassroots leaders from their communities and from every day life. This is one of the main barriers to grassroots women's participation in politics. The Mother Centres have been successful in involving women in local governance by creating a support system that keeps women rooted in their communities.

VALIDATING MOTHERHOOD

Focusing on the situation of motherhood has proved to bring women from very different social and cultural backgrounds together, including women from middle class as well as working class backgrounds, single as well as married mothers, local as well as migrant families. Common to all these groups is the need to be acknowledged and empowered by the experience of motherhood and to join forces to improve the lives of children and families.

ENRICHMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS AND SOCIAL COHESION

Mother Centres create social networks that allow for less anonymous neighbourhoods and more tolerance and social peace in the communities. Healthy neighbourhoods are an important element for the social integration and democratic functioning of societies. Anonymous environments and isolation are key elements leading to violence and racism. The Mother Centres contribute to creating and

sustaining strong neighbourhoods by providing an open, safe and caring place for families from all walks of life.

Networking at city, regional, national and international levels brings mothers from different cultures together, further building a sense of diversity and of community.

EVERY DAY LIFE EXPERTS

When schools fail, when neighbourhoods fall apart or are unsafe, when refugees are to be welcomed and integrated, it is most often women who mobilise the community to find solutions. Community women also often have competence in knowing what the built environment should be like in order to meet the requirements of the users. In the Mother Centres these every day life competencies are focused on, consolidated and channeled into community leadership, regarding public childcare provisions, quality playgrounds, safer traffic conditions, or family friendly urban planning and housing. Mother Centres have created a platform for the issues of parenting and for community interests to be linked to national campaigns and policies in the interest of a family and child friendly society and environment.

CLOSE TO HOME SERVICES

Mother Centres have expanded the range of family services. Services like pick-up and escort services for children and elderly, janitor and maintenance services, meal and shopping services have been developed in the setting of the Mother Centres, creating an conducive meeting point in the neighbourhood for all generations and placing child and eldercare services in the context of genuine neighbourhood relationships and networks. Professional programs often are alienating, especially in the area of caring for the elderly because they are delivered in the instrumental context of job-orientation and institutionalisation.

REDUCTION OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Having children is the biggest risk for poverty in Europe. Every 6th child in Germany is on welfare; half of these children live in single parent families. Mother Centres also create a community network for families at risk thus counteracting their social exclusion and isolation. Families that can't afford going to public restaurants or commercial free-time or cultural events, can find community life in the centres with their children. The negative spiral of defeat, shame and withdrawal is counteracted in the non-stigmatising atmosphere of the centres. The Mother Centre culture of friendship and practical support helps to regain self-confidence and recognise options available for them.

IMPACT

Mother Centres have impact on many levels. They influence the quality of parenting and child socialisation as well as the quality of family relations. They revitalise neighbourhoods, bring new family services and facilities to the communities, as well as bringing grassroots partners to local governance.

On the individual level dimensions gained include support in conflict and crisis situations, employment perspectives, more self-confidence, vitality and improved gender equity. Capacities gained include improved stress resistance, organising and negotiation skills, capacity to work in teams, increased willingness to take responsibility, and enhanced communication skills.

Mother Centres have a positive impact on improving family relations, especially when the fathers take part in the family events in the evenings and on weekends, which occurs for 70% of the families. Informal peer counseling and role modeling, i.e. on how to survive with very little means, as well as references to professional services where needed are further gains.

The Mother Centres have a great impact on the communities. Following are two concrete examples.

"We became active in our local hospital, challenging the notion that there is only one right posture for giving birth. Now women have more choices concerning childbirth. We also have made it possible for women to stay overnight with their children, who are in hospital. All this was an effect of discussions we had in a group on women and health in our centre." (Czech MC)

"The more we develop our community in our Mother Centre the more I have become sensitive to issues in the larger community. For instance in our streets we have the problem that big Cadillac's often occupy the parking lots yet that do not have the right to park there since we have a system of resident parking in our district. The policemen don't do anything about these cars which do not belong there. It could be it is some kind of mafia doing some kind of business. I presume that the police have been bribed. This is not democracy. I wish that our society really had democracy and that we do not get used to such forms of corruption. We have filed a complaint to our local police. It is important that they realise that citizens are aware of what is going on and that they will not be passive onlookers." (MC Bulgaria)

Women from Mother Centres have run for parent councils in kindergarten and schools, supported election campaigns and also run for city council seats themselves.

PARTNERSHIPS

The history of the Mother Centre movement provides an interesting example of successful partnerships between grassroots, academia, professional institutions and government.

Locally, the Mother Centres are involved in various consultations, round-tables and planning boards with regional and local government and municipal departments. In some cases they hold seats in city councils. The Mother Centres are seen as an important link to the community and are invited to give their views on a wide range of issues including the role of the family in a civil society, the reform of the school system as well as the prevention of criminality.

Partnerships have also been developed with other players in society such as pediatricians, psychologists and family counselors often cooperate with the centres. The centre is seen by some professionals as an important support system to reintegrate clients into the community. Cooperations with local unemployment departments to help Mother Centre women find jobs as well as to design education and retraining programs are further areas of fruitful partnerships.

In the Czech Republic sustainable partnerships have been built on national level with the Ministry for Social Affairs, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Department of Human Rights and Gender Equality as well as with parliamentarians from different parties, including the vice president of the Czech parliament. The Central Government Office has drafted a letter of recommendation that is sent around to municipalities, recommending Mother Centres to local authorities.

TRANSFERABILITY

The process of transfer and replication of the Mother Centres into Central and Eastern Europe has been supported by the migration and remigration movements caused both by the break down of socialism and by the wars in the region. Refugee families found Mother Centres a "home away from home" as well as a "home to take home" when returning to their countries of origin. The creation of the Mother Centre International Network provided a next stage of upscaling and international transfer of the initiative. The network provides start up support and step by step consultation for Mother Centre initiatives, as well as trainings, study tours and peer learning exchanges among the centres in the region. Activities include translation of start up manuals on how to initiate Mother Centres, fostering a "buddy system" between individual centres in different countries and generating donor and marketing activities between the centres. Training themes include leadership support methods, conflict resolution, cooperative enterprises and alternative health care. Very instrumental in the transfer process of the Mother Centres were the Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA), a series of grassroots trainings produced and conducted between 1998 and 2001 by the Mother Centre International Network, that also focused on developing a format for partner dialogues with mainstream partners. Face to face exchanges prove to be a very powerful tool for the replication and transfer of grassroots best practices as the following example may illustrate:

A group representing 14 Czech Mother Centres and 6 departments of the local and national Czech government were hosted in 1999 by their counterparts in the German region of Baden Wuerttemberg. This visit included round table conversations with the founders of the German Mother Centres including local and regional government as well as foundations and sponsors from the private sector. In these round tables issues of political and financial support from the local administration were

addressed, explaining why the German founders sponsor and support the Mother Centres and what political programs they make use of in order to do so. The exchange helped a lot in the development of the Czech Mother Centre movement, as seen below:

"The visit with our politicians to Germany was very important in the success of our work. It helped us to persuade our politicians and bureaucrats to support all levels of the Mother Centre concept and we gained a lot of political support. It was a new experience to go on a study trip together. It was a wonderful opportunity to see and understand each other's point of view. The questions and reactions to the different examples in Germany varied sometimes a great deal between us. The debates we had not only in the official meetings, but also in the bus, at home and afterwards in our respective communities were very enriching a regards the initiative.

Generally, we saw that despite the differences between the two countries we have very much in common. The situation of mothers in industrialised societies seems to be very much the same, independent of social, economic, national and cultural differences. This gives us a lot of strength and confidence that we are facing real issues in our societies which are important and need to be raised and that we are not alone."

In summary the main strategies leading to the amazing replication of the Mother Centre model are that they:

- Â· Address a "historical need" in contemporary societies regardless of cultural differences
- Â· Foster strong partnerships between grassroots and professionals
- Â· Generate and disseminate documentation and information in story telling format
- Â· Engage in face to face exchanges, peer learning events and regional and international networking.

Key Dates

1976 Research Project at DJI that resulted in concept of Mother Centers

1980 First Model Mother Centers in Germany

1990-92 Transfer of Mother Centers to Holland, Austria, Switzerland, Italy and Czech Republic

1993 Creation of Mother Centers International Network/AG International

2001 700 Mother Centers Worldwide (Germany: 400 , Western Europe: 100 , Eastern Europe: 140 , North America: 55 , Other: 5)

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Type of Partner Support: Financial Support

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Type of Partner Support: Financial Support

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Year	Total Budget	Government	GROOTS	Bosch/SSB	Mother Centers
2000	\$ 150 000	65%	15%	Â	20%
2001	\$ 85 000	25%	25%	5%	45%
2002	\$ 125 000	20%	30%	40%	10%