

The **mine** program



*Facilitating a quality leap for the
Mother Center Movement*

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I. Summary

Issues/Vision

Some of the major challenges of contemporary societies include an increasingly individualised and aging society as well as increasingly multicultural populations. While family, kin and neighborhood networks are thinning out, the question of social cohesion and social values needs to be re-framed under contemporary conditions. How to live together in social peace and harmony, how to generate social care and responsibility and how to rebuild the social fabric in diverse, conflict-torn and pluralistic societies are issues underlying many of the current concerns around the isolation, alienation and anonymity of communities, the increase of violence, the re-emergence of fundamentalism, the non-engagement of youth and the lack of a pro-active civil society. How to connect with, communicate and understand each other in an increasingly fragmented and polarised society seems to be on everyone's mind, while nobody seems to know how to really do it.

Mother Centers approach these issues by starting with women and children and by organizing on a community level. The **mine** network supports the linking of the Mother Center experiences from local to global as well as from global to local in an effort to bridge grassroots and mainstream cultures in the process of creating social peace, bottom up participation and sustainable communities.

Background Mother Centers

Mother Centers are self-managed public spaces in the neighborhood, where mothers and their children meet on a daily basis. The atmosphere is informal. You join by having a cup of coffee in the coffee shop or by a visit to the Mother Center second hand store. Childcare is offered on a drop-in basis for all ages throughout the opening hours of the center. Mother Centers are based on participation. Depending on their size and how long they have been operating, Mother Centers reach between 50 and 500 families in the neighborhood. In Mother Centers women are supported to join forces to improve the life of their families and communities, connect with families from different social and cultural backgrounds, claim public space and acknowledgment for their everyday life expertise, fight poverty and social exclusion and participate in local governance. Mother Centers generate support systems in conflict and crisis situations. They create employment and access to the labor market. For children the centers create an expansion of their social and physical space and experience.

To date more than 750 Mother Centers exist worldwide. Mother Centers seem to answer a historic need. They recreate family and neighborhood structures where they have been weakened by modernization, (Western Europe, North America), by socialist regimes (Czech Republic, Bulgaria), by war (Bosnia, Rwanda), by poverty and aids (Kenya) or by migration (Philippines). Mother Centers represent another kind of globalisation, a globalisation from the ground. This has created the need for a global network: **mine**.

Background mine

The Mother Centers International Network (**mine**) connects and supports the over 800 Mother Centers currently existing in 15 countries. (www.mine.cc). The network stands for a world that places social cohesion and community building at the base of development, re-integrates the culture of care into public life and recognizes the central role of women in peace building and development. The background of the movement and **mine** are described in part II.

Mother Centers are self help initiatives that spring up 'like mushrooms after rain' . That, however, does not happen automatically. Just like mushrooms have almost invisible seeds and networks of roots, self help movements require nurturing and networking. The ideas have to be brought across, and the initiators and grassroots leaders need training and coaching in order to be able to get going and to be a capable partner to donor organizations. The **mine** program is targeted at filling this gap.

Objectives

The force of the Mother Center movement lies in three distinguishing qualities. They are so simple that they are often taken for granted and remain invisible. The objective of the **mine** program is to bring out and reinforce these qualities, and use them as a development force:

- Mother Centers follow a holistic approach to mobilizing women, they take the female lifestyle (taking care of all simultaneously) as starting point for organizing.
- In (post) war situations motherhood is a neutral and constructive force that has large potential for peace building and reconciliation.
- Women dealing with care giving need a political voice, a 'mothering perspective' needs to be integrated into local, national and global policy making.

These three objectives are described in part III.

Activities

- Start-up support for Mother Centers
- Peer learning and trainings
- Support of networking and self organization at regional or national level
- Documentation and evaluation, extracting results and translation to policy recommendations
- Stimulating the use of lessons learned for advocacy

These working methods and activities are described in part IV.

II. The mine Story

IIa. Mother Centers

Mother Centers are local grassroots initiatives that run self-managed public spaces in the neighborhood. They are places where mothers can focus on their needs and interests, exchange knowledge and experiences with peers, receive and generate mutual support in child-rearing tasks, engage in capacity building and further education, and initiate family support services like childcare, eldercare, healthcare, hot meals for children, laundry, janitor of other household services.

Mother Centers are based on participation. The core of any center is a daily drop-in coffee shop with childcare included. Activities involve projects that help lower expenses for families and that support families in their parenting tasks and everyday chores as well as in times of crisis. Most centers have activities like second hand shop, toy library, holistic health services or skills trainings to enter the labor market like language courses, computer and job retraining. Advocacy groups on issues like children's environmental diseases, single parenting or family friendly urban facilities are part of the self-organising that happens in Mother Centers.

Mother Centers are a switchboard of information and exchange, a place where issues and talents can become visible. Everything that happens in the community can be discussed there on a daily basis. Anything that needs immediate attention or response can be attended to collectively. There is openness, fluidity and transparency of decision making. Everyone is welcome in the center, and can participate and be part of it. Things do not happen behind closed doors, or by invitation alone, but 'in public', in the 'public living room'.

Children are a welcome and regular part of Mother Centers, and Mother Centers run many programs for children. They are, however, not the center of interest. Activities in the Mother Centers evolve around the interests and needs of the mothers. This creates public space that is shared by adults and children and a different kind of childcare than in most programs.

Bridging the gap between private and public

The rapid spreading of the Mother Center movement shows a historic need for community support and a widening of the social space in regard to family and parenting tasks. Mother Centers provide a bridging function between private and public, between the informal and the formal. The neighborhood networks generated by Mother Centers create qualities of 'a village in the city'. Opportunities to spread care-giving tasks for children as well as for the elderly over a larger group arise, thus both providing support to care-givers as well as maintaining the quality of family like care.

Opening up nuclear family structures to local support networks in the neighborhood brings a shift towards more collective responsibility and organisation of reproductive tasks as well as a re-integration of care into public life. Public space in the context of family and neighborhood networks stays personal. At the same time it gives access to public recognition and visibility. Mother Centers as local meeting spaces for families and children in the neighborhood have been called 'public living rooms', as a way to describe this quality. Children experience an introduction and integration into public life in a protected environment. Mother Centers create intermediation and buffer zones for many of the challenges of contemporary society like individualisation, alienation, isolation and clientisation. They are based on self-management and participation, following the motto that everybody is good at at least one thing which they can contribute to the center and to the community.

Benefits:

Mother Centers:

- * Offer direct and non bureaucratic assistance in crisis situations and emergencies
- * Create a safety net for families at risk
- * Empower women and contribute to gender equality
- * Increase the domestic involvement and participation of fathers
- * Support the reintegration of women into further education and the labor market
- * Support the reconciliation of work and family
- * Create alternatives to institutional eldercare
- * Support the social integration of youth
- * Promote children's and family health
- * Strengthen tolerance and democratic attitudes in civil society
- * Revitalise neighborhoods and local culture
- * Bring together citizens of diverse class and ethnic backgrounds
- * Create a platform for unused talents and skills to enter society
- * Bring marginalised and excluded groups into social participation
- * Develop leadership potential in the community
- * Create income generating opportunities
- * Create a rich reservoir for informal learning
- * Make the knowledge and expertise of everyday life operational for development
- * Develop institutional literacy among grassroots groups
- * Generate innovations in professional and institutional programs
- * Are incubators for new ideas and local problem solving

The Mother Centers Success Formula

The success of the Mother Centers on the ground is based on a set of principles that work together to create basic innovations and social change:

- * Mother Centers are a grassroots self-help movement. The centers are self managed. Mothers are 'the experts' in the centers. Their everyday life experience is acknowledged as expertise. Professionals have a supportive role and engage in equitable partnerships.
- * The approach of the centers is resource, not problem oriented. Women are not approached by asking them to define their problems. Instead they are asked to define what skills and resources they have to contribute to community building and community solutions.
- * Mother Centers claim physical public space, 'a public room of their own' (slightly adapting the imagery of Virginia Woolfe). They are not harbored in rooms of other organisations for limited periods of time. The women dispose of and self manage the rooms full time.
- * Work in the Mother Centers is remunerated and it is spread among the participants. Voluntary work is additional, not a substitute for paid work. Usually for every paid hour in the centers an extra hour of voluntary work is generated.
- * Children are welcome, but the focus is on the interests and needs of the mothers.
- * Mother Centers function more family like than like institutions. The 'corporate culture' is personal and adapted to family rhythms. It follows women's ways of learning, and women's ways of doing things.
- * Mother Centers function on the basis of collective leadership and a culture of leadership support. Learning to work together is a major focus. Conflicts are not avoided but part of it.
- * Mother Centers are melting pots in the community for women of diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity is celebrated and integration and peace building methods are an integral part of the daily programs.
- * The expertise of mothers of dealing with care work and the everyday life of communities is entered into advocacy, local governance and policy making.
- * Mother Centers also claim reflective space. Taking time out for peer learning exchanges as well as for regular seminars to reflect on the daily experiences, the lessons learned, and the way forward are an integral part their functioning.

I Ib. The mine network – catalyzing, linking, up-scaling

History

Mother Centers were initiated by a research project that provided the self-reflective space, initial spark and technical support needed to create a grassroots movement. The initial study that resulted in the concept of Mother Centers was designed around the question: What do families themselves consider support for their situation?

Main results showed that parents were looking for recognition and acknowledgement in their taking responsibility for and everyday coping with parenting. They were looking for peer learning and peer support, they wanted to learn from each other. They did not want professionals to 'talk down' to them or put them into the role of pupils. Institutional settings that look like school and require disciplined time schedules proved not to fit family rhythms. They proved to be a high threshold, especially for low income families, whose status often is due to not making it in the education system. Women wanted to have spaces where they could go with their children and not have to organize them away in order to participate in public life. And last but not least family budgets are tight, family women need ways to supplement the family income in ways that are combinable with their family obligations.

Careful listening led to bringing out the authentic voices of families and framing the issues according to their own understanding and self interpretation versus preconceived professional ideas about them. A resource oriented approach helped identify the capacities of families themselves in regard to contributing to the solutions for the issues they were raising. The Mother Center concept resulted out of listening to families and putting together their views and visions into a concept and a model that created enabling conditions for self organisation and self help.

The Mother Centers spread from three model centers, sponsored for 3 years by the German Family Ministry to a nation-wide and later international movement. This happened through the publication of a book that told the stories of the first three centers in a story book format in their own words, through peer exchanges and study visits, many lectures, articles, start-up trainings and countless local negotiations with municipalities and local authorities. Self organisation, the building up of Mother Center networks, regionally, nationally and internationally as well as linking to other global grassroots women's networks were crucial elements in this process. Financial and human resources limited the spreading of the movement mainly to Europe, including Central and Eastern Europe. Although Mother Centers have also been taken up for instance in the slums of Nairobi or by the aboriginal First Nation population in Vancouver, Canada, these initiatives have remained singular and have not resulted in the spreading of the centers throughout the whole country.

To be successful in different parts of the world, the Mother Center concept needs adjustment to local conditions. Local centers need the support of larger networks. Local authorities often lack experience in partnering with grassroots initiatives. For these reasons **mine** was founded in 2000 as an international network. It is registered in Stuttgart, Germany.

Functions of networking

The added value and contributions of the Mother Center networks to the local Mother Centers as well as the movement in general are manifold and include:

- * Organising peer learning workshops to collectively learn from experience
- * Harvesting the knowledge by asking the right questions
- * Identifying the innovative elements that make the Mother Centers work
- * Helping to name, claim, analyse and conceptualise the Mother Center experience
- * Spreading the word, both in verbal and written form
- * Linking grassroots perspectives to mainstream debates

- * Opening doors and contacts for the grassroots groups
- * Supporting local negotiations and advocacy
- * Developing support structures for leadership development and conflict resolution.
- * Creating partnerships to mainstream partners and linking the skills of grassroots women and mainstream actors
- * Making use of institutional resources and credibility for the support of Mother Centers
- * Understanding and making visible the global dimensions of the situation of mothers and families
- * Defining shared concerns of mothers and families as well as strategies for action
- * Linking the Mother Center movement to like-minded groups and movements
- * Creating international opportunities for Mother Centers to portray their work and voice their concerns
- * Supporting innovations and further development in Mother Centers
- * Enhancing the scope of local Mother Centers through horizontal and vertical linkages.

Where we stand now

Since winning the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment in 2002¹ **mine** has received many requests for support to start up Mother Centers in countries as diverse as Sudan, Nepal, India, Ethiopia, Albania, Iraq and Burundi. As an organization operating on a voluntary basis, **mine** has not been able to respond adequately to these requests. **mine** can only function if the decision making, programming and planning is carried by the grassroots leaders, but if implementation is not dependent on their non-existent extra time. **mine** has received a grant from Cordaid to develop a strategic plan for organizational development to operate on a more professional basis to realize its objectives, guarantee continuity and make a qualitative leap in global organizing and global advocacy. The following program, therefore, demonstrates the potential of **mine**, a potential which still needs to find core support.

¹ **mine** has been certified as Best Practice by UN Habitat and won the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment in 2002 (see www.bestpractices.org)

III. Objectives of the **mine** Program

Before all, the objective is NOT to run the program. We don't do projects, we initiate them, we support self organization and networking. The board members of **mine** have all done this in the past, which is the reason why the movement has grown to its actual size. They did so however more or less in their 'spare time', on the side. Objective is now to bring out the strength of the network, 'the spinning of the gold of the Mother Center movement' in a more organized and professional way, in order to be more efficient and reach further. Stretching the existing (human) resources at the present state of development of the network and its ambitions is not productive any more. Giving start-up support to Mother Centers in Burundi for example simply costs more than doing so in Austria, while at the same time the capacity of the women there to jointly raise the money is lower.

IIIa Mother Centers as organizing force for women

Holistic Approach

Mothers world-wide have a similar lifestyle of taking care of very different activities and responsibilities simultaneously. Successful projects for women take these multiple roles into account and allow for the combining of women's activities in all aspects of their lives. The Mother Centers go one step further and approach the diversity of tasks that are characteristic of the lives of mothers as a wealth of expertise and a starting point for organizing.

Public Living Rooms

A Mother Center, like a home, has all services, leisure, contact and education facilities that families need, combined under one roof. And like a home the door is open at all times. This implies that parents and children can pursue their needs more freely; mothers do not become servants of the schedules and locations of the places where they and their children are required to go. Space is left for own needs in a setting that simultaneously is good for the children.

Lowering the threshold for civic action

Mother Centers create public space that works by the logic of a private home. This quality is needed in our increasingly specialized society. It is a quality that appeals to women of all walks of life, it is recognizable and familiar regardless of social or economic status. The threshold is so low that women from a very secluded background can participate without fear of having to give up their identity. As such the Mother Centers can function as an organizing and mobilizing force for women also in areas where women and women's perspectives are traditionally excluded from public life, like in Arab countries.

The unspectacular innovation

The actual innovation of the Mother Center is so unspectacular that it is often overlooked. The strength is in the holistic approach, the combination of multiple aspects, whereas the success is often ascribed to one successful element. This can lead to neglecting the original approach. Reinforcement of the principles and the holistic approach is therefore often needed also after the concept has been successfully adopted. This can be organized through peer learning exchanges and through self-reflection and training seminars. Consulting, coaching and monitoring are important elements of a 'maintenance program' accompanying the development of local Mother Centers.

Sudan Project

Local Contact:

Afkar Osman and Aisha Adam Sidi, leaders of the Sudan Women's Development Association approached **mine** during the World Urban Forum in Barcelona in September 2004 and asked for technical support in integrating the Mother Center model into their local work.

Added Value: The Sudan Women's Development Association offers awareness and capacity building, training courses in advocacy, marketing and management skills, as well as support in the creation of saving and credit programs and small businesses for women's groups throughout North Sudan. Afkar Osman and Aisha Sidi saw the Mother Center model as enhancing their work by offering a holistic and integrated approach addressing all aspects of women's identities and integrating all aspects of women's lives in one space and one approach that includes women's responsibilities for children and families.

Goals and Project Description:

Mother Centers in Sudan aim at coordinating and linking the various activities of the Sudan Women's Development Associations 'under one roof', thus enhancing the social cohesion and empowerment of the women involved. By creating a Mother Center, childcare and children's programs as well as information and education on family related issues can be combined with the on-going activities of awareness building, advocacy and income generation.

Project Plan: The project involves:

- Translation of Mother Center materials into the local language
- Visit of members of the **mine** network to Sudan Women's Development Associations to present the Mother Center model and consult on its applicability in the local context
- Mother Center trainings and exchange visits to other Mother Centers
- Implementation of Mother Center concept
- Evaluation and documentation

Partners: Both the local branch of ITDG as well as ITDG headquarters in the United Kingdom have expressed interest in partnering in this project.

Situation 2007: No financing has been secured.

IIIb Mother Centers as first steps in reconstruction and peace-building

In (post) war situations motherhood is a neutral and constructive force that has large potential for peace building and reconciliation. (Iraq, Burundi, Bosnia)

The effects of war on civil society include personal and collective trauma, poverty, a break down of family, kin and neighborhood networks due to massive dislocation of the population, and a disorientation of social roles and life patterns, that can include gender relations, as well as religious and ethnic traditions. When systems that previously safeguarded social integration and social cohesion break down, people need new spaces to meet, re-orient themselves and reweave the torn social fabric. Communities need a place where they can heal, reassemble and relearn to establish confidence and trust in social contacts. Mother Centers provide such a space. They recreate social networks on a community and neighborhood level.

Healthy neighborhoods are an important element for the reconstruction of war torn societies. Anonymous environments and isolation are key elements leading to violence. The Mother Centers contribute to creating and sustaining strong neighborhoods by providing an open, safe and caring place for individuals and families from all walks of life. The negative spiral of defeat, shame and withdrawal is counteracted in the non-stigmatizing atmosphere of the centers. The Mother Center culture of friendship and practical support helps to regain self-confidence and recognise and reorganise options for rebuilding life and rebuilding community.

Mother Centers recognise the important role women play in this process and offer physical and organisational space for involving women in reconstruction and redevelopment. Reconciliation is a very difficult process. It is often the women who make the first steps, who reconnect on the basis of reorganising everyday life. By providing space for women to come together and create their own solutions the community as a whole benefits.

Burundi project

Local Contact: Two grassroots women networks in Burundi have expressed keen interest in Mother Centers: Association des Femmes pour la Paix and Reseau Grenouille.

Added Value: The concept fits to the situation where a formal negotiation process has been started, without the conditions for the follow-up by civil society forces having been put in place. Safety has deteriorated to the point that the fragile civil society depends mainly on upper class people. Safe women friendly space is a currently lacking precondition for people who lack resources like money, transport or childcare, to be able to become active. In the long run the project addresses several key issues. Solving injustice and exclusion in issues of land use and land ownership means solving a major root cause of the conflict. Stimulating urbanization and non-agricultural income generation possibilities is a major instrument in preventing new conflict.

Goals and Project Description:

The goal of this project is the reinforcement of grassroots women's reconstruction capacity, through the implementation of Mother Centers and through linking women's groups. An organizational network will be built up on the basis of micro scale income generating projects in the field of reconstruction and rehabilitation of basic economic functions. The model will also be spread through a knowledge exchange program with Rwanda.

The network serves as a basis for knowledge exchange and communication between previously separated groups of the population. In a later phase the network in its width and strength is envisioned to be able to facilitate urbanization efforts on a larger scale. Simultaneously the transfer of expertise and best practices on reconciliation, community building, economic empowerment and local governance is foreseen between Burundi and the international community, through horizontal peer learning and cross-sectoral partnerships.

Project Plan: The project involves:

- Creating a Mother Center in Bujumbura run mainly by internally displaced persons from other regions
- Training of the initial group by partners from the Mother Center network
- The center will function as an incubator for community organisers who will be initiators of reconstruction activities in the secondary towns of the country
- Strategies to release the self-help potential of participants and to operate as a collective
- Start-up support for four regional Mother Centers in secondary towns
- Strengthening the survival capacity of both returning refugees and internally displaced persons as well as the social context in which they return, through the financing of micro initiatives of mixed groups
- Documentation and transfer into both modern media and policy implication through a network of 'cultural translators' the UM, or United Mothers.

Partners: Marieke van Geldermalsen has elaborated a video vision about the Rwandese process called: Reconstruction is Reconciliation with Francoise Ngendahayo, the present Minister of Solidarity, Gender, Reintegration and Resettlement of Displaced Persons and Repatriates of Burundi, who has expressed her interest as well as her intent to support the project. AFER, the Association of business women of Rwanda are interested in collaborating and giving content input.

Situation 2007: No financing has been secured.

IIIc Raising the political voice of women dealing with care-giving

Raising the political voice of women dealing with care giving is the third objective in order to integrate a mothering perspective into politics.

Mothers who deal with children on a daily basis learn much about what an environment must look like in order not to destroy the vitality, creativity, autonomy and confidence of children. Because of their daily experience with children they are well aware of the consequences of policies in fields like transport, architecture, urban development and infrastructure on the lives of children.

Mother centers provide spaces for the voice and expertise of those dealing with the concrete aspects of everyday life in families and communities to form and enter into local governance. Their expertise is not based on professionalism, but on practical involvement in care-giving. Making this expertise visible, re-owning it collectively and channeling it into advocacy and decision making, is an important part of the agenda of the Mother Centers movement.

The local centers are involved in many aspects of local governance in their communities, ranging from municipal childcare programs, the design of playgrounds and safety in urban environments, family and youth support programs, poverty in single headed families to environmental health issues, the public transport system, housing and the development of residential areas. In many instances they are instrumental in creating municipal programs that are more flexible and responsive to the needs of families. The Mother Center networks focus on creating new channels of participation for the voice of community women to be included in public decision making.

Mother Center Conference in Slovakia

Local Contact: The idea for a Mother Center conference was developed by the Union of Slovak Mother Centers who approached **mine** with the suggestion to partner in conducting an international Mother Center Conference in 2006 in the Slovak Republic on the theme: "How do we want to raise our children?"

Added Value: In contemporary societies the issue of how to raise children is no longer self evident, does not go without saying. Traditional kin networks are dissolving and many young parents find themselves struggling with issues of how to bridge traditional and modern values, how to keep up with their children, what to pass on to their children and how to participate in and influence public childcare and education in kindergartens and schools. The Mother Center Conference is a bottom up approach to redefining child socialization and child-rearing through parental self reflection, peer exchange and peer learning.

Goals and Project Description:

The international conference is to be preceded by local, regional and national debates and dialogs in the Mother Centers on defining the issues parents are struggling with as well as the goals and values they are striving for in raising their children. The international conference will focus on extracting common values as well as common issues of parenting throughout social and cultural settings as diverse as the conditions for parents and children in countries like Bosnia, Kenya, Sudan, Germany, Iraq, Turkey, Burundi and the Czech and Slovak Republics. This will support parents in their parenting skills by sharpening their vision, encourage them to raise and define issues for collective and international advocacy for family and child friendly societies as well as contribute to dialog, understanding and peace building across cultural, ethnic and religious divides.

The local, national and regional conferences will be organised by the local Mother Centers and the regional and national Mother Center networks. The international conference will bring together representatives of the existing Mother Centers in Germany, Holland, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Bosnia, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Canada, USA, Turkey, Rwanda and Kenya, as well as from the Mother Center initiatives from Burundi, Iraq, Nepal, Ethiopia, Albania and Sudan.

Project Plan: The project involves:

- Local, regional and national dialogs of women participating in Mother Centers on the theme: How do we want to raise our children?
- Documentation and translation of these dialogs
- Organisation of international Mother Center conference on theme: How do we want to raise our children?
- Documentation of international conference and production of products on different levels: including publication of popular book on the subject, video on cross cultural dialoging, lessons learned and policy papers as advocacy tools

Partners: The Bernhard van Leer Foundation has expressed interest in sponsoring the local costs of the conference in the Slovak Republic.

Situation 2007: The conference took place in 2006 and was a huge success, see chapter V.

IV. Activities

The objectives of the **mine** program are executed through a number of projects in very different settings and countries. They do have several elements in common. All projects are in a very early stage and get coaching till they have enough strength to continue on their own as self-help projects. The set of activities that are at the core of the **mine** approach is described in this chapter.

Underlying the **mine** approach is the objective to enhance the political clout and negotiating powers of grassroots women, to increase their visibility, influence and recognition and to broaden the base of support for their issues and their work. While grassroots practices are local, their learning and growth, as well as their impact needs to be global. As institutions increasingly de-link grassroots knowledge from development, there is a need for a collective and linked response. By documenting and owning their knowledge, by exchanging and linking across cities, countries and regions, by leveraging multiple sites of decision making, grassroots women's movements become global players while staying rooted in the local.

IVa Start-up support for Mother Centers

Each country where Mother Centers are active represents a place where at some point in time one or more of the **mine** leaders visited and sparked off the interest of local women. This process consists of clearly defined steps that can be up-scaled and duplicated if approached in a systematic way.

The annual **mine** networking and board meeting 2004 in the Mother Center Bos & Lommer in Amsterdam decided that it was time to respond and support the spreading of Mother Centers in countries of the South. At present Nepal, Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Russia, Bolivia, Ghana, Poland and Argentina are some of the countries where groups have voiced interest in the Mother Center approach.

A basic requirement to start up a Mother Center is a group of initiators with a wide network on grassroots level. Interest and support from authorities and influential people is a second element. Mother Center activists need to meet face to face with these groups to tell the story and spark off local interest, followed by a back and forth process of questions and answers to shape the general concept to size and adapt it to the local conditions. What elements of the Mother Center concept are especially relevant to the local setting and circumstances and what elements need to be adapted or reinforced? On the base of this knowledge the initiators get trained by people from **mine**. This could imply that we go there and do it locally, but a regional training seminar involving several countries can work as well.

The initiative phase, as well as the definition and preparation phases are the 'core business' of the **mine** network. During the definition phase the input from the local group increases and they are supported to define their own steps. The **mine** activities in this phase involve translating, adapting and creating materials fit to the local situation, as well as coaching and support for the fundraising activities of the group.

IVb Peer learning and trainings

The start-up support for new Mother Centers always involves training in the basic concept of Mother Centers. This ideally takes the shape of peer learning since this is the most powerful kind of learning for grassroots groups. Peer learning is a strategy, that consciously formats the natural learning that happens in informal exchanges and informal settings. In everyday life, most people learn most easily and voluntarily from discussing things with their family, friends or their peers: those who can provide the required information and skills out of their own experience.

Research has shown that 70% of the knowledge people actually use and implement in their lives is generated outside of formal learning structures in informal settings. Learning tends to be more successful, when instructions are given by peers rather than by experts. Peers are more likely to use understandable language and to relate the information given to an experiential level. Peer learning is a very effective learning strategy.

An in-built advantage of peer learning is also, that learning happens in both directions. When articulating your own experience in order to explain it to others, you become more conscious of your own learning as well as of your own knowledge gaps. Peer learning thus both supports the exploration, consolidation and ownership of knowledge gained, as well as stimulating further knowledge quest and knowledge generation. As such it is well suited both for the introduction of new groups to the concept of Mother Centers as well as for the process of regular reflection to reinforce and deepen the understanding of the basic elements of innovation involved (see section IIIa).

Learning, exchanging and thus growing as a network can be described as the life force of the Mother Center movement. A new format of peer learning, the Grassroots Women International Academy or GWIA (see www.GWIA.net) has been developed by the founder of mine and been pioneered in cooperation with the National Association of German Mother Centers to systemize this process. It is foreseen that in the consolidation and growth of **mine**, GWIA will follow suit.²

IVc Support of the organization of national or regional networking

Because national or regional organizing of Mother Centers has happened in most places where more than 50 Centers are active, it appears to be a natural process. It is not. Mother Centers are rather local in their orientation. Most participants highly appreciate a wider networking process but do not start it off by themselves. The funding by the Bernard van Leer Foundation for instance that enabled the Czech and Slovakian networks to professionalize was brokered by **mine**.

Money is not the sole factor determining networking, though at a certain point –as was the case with the Czech and Slovakian networks- continuation of growth at a purely voluntary level is not possible. As important is to facilitate the contacts and give coaching in the actual organizing strategies, in translating lessons learned from local projects to policy recommendations.

Networking is never a goal in itself, but a powerful instrument that is used in many ways by **mine**. Stimulating local networking from the start of new Mother Centers in a country is therefore an important way to consolidate and duplicate the activities of the network.

² GWIA is stakeholded by the Stichting Nest! that administers the GWIA website and has published the GWIA Handbook. GWIA has won the 2006 Dubai award for the transfer of best practices granted by the UN Habitat Best Practices and Local Leadership Program.

IVd Translating action to policy recommendations

Like networking, the documentation, evaluation and transfer of the knowledge gained on the ground into policy recommendations is something Mother Centers engage in but usually do not start up on their own.

In mainstream knowledge building systems grassroots expertise and know-how most often is lacking. Grassroots groups often are already practicing solutions, where academia and policy makers are debating theories. By excluding grassroots women and ignoring, under-resourcing, distorting or diluting their practices, a wealth of highly needed expertise is wasted. Many academic, institutional and political arrangements manage to overlook and abstract from what is really happening on the ground. This is quite amazing, considering the fact that it is there, that all knowledge needs to be implemented. And it is there where the ultimate answer and test to ideas and theories, the validation if they apply or not, is to be found.

A major obstacle to incorporating grassroots knowledge and know-how into public decision making lies in the fact that they often stay local. Much of grassroots wisdom is held in places so disperse, it is difficult for others to access, thus entering the channels of public decision making very insufficiently. The Mother Center pioneered GWIA methodology stimulates a process where grassroots groups engage in translating their practical knowledge into something that can be used in education and policy. Each of the **mine** projects includes an evaluation and reflection process to harvest the lessons learned in a way that guarantees ownership of the groups over the produced knowledge.

IVe Stimulating advocacy

Translating the experiences of the Mother Centers into policy recommendations implies the use of these recommendations for advocacy. This requires strong stimulation from the networks to ensure that conferences and networking events continue beyond the events themselves. Rather than a project oriented management of events, this approach requires a process focussed stimulation of the use of the outcomes of Mother Center events and projects for advocacy.

Strong continuous presence of the networks can facilitate such a process as well as a focus on building constructive partnerships with other stakeholders in society. Only by creating a framework for peer learning and networking and by building partnerships across sectors can the momentum be built to make real impact, to turn around top down procedures into bottom up processes, to reallocate resources to reach the grassroots level and to engender decision making.

An important part of advocacy consists of a process of systematic analysis and strategy building in regard to mainstream political processes. Understanding the issues and challenges that are better dealt with in partnerships, defining when partnerships work and what roles partners can play in sustaining and up-scaling grassroots practices, carrying forward lessons learned from each phase to the next, linking the innovative components across issues and sectors as well as re-examining the parameters of social policies constitute elements of programmatic and innovative thinking required to stimulate and underwrite social change.

To this end the **mine** network engages in programmatic activities that “develop the talk to the walk”, that put a language to the new thinking evolving from grassroots practices on the ground.

Fundamentalist movements build on the fact that people are looking for ways to quiet their uneasiness around the falling apart of traditional structures of social cohesion and community. Traditional structures and values answer to a need for safety and community, a social unit you can rely on. Progressive forces tend to support an independence and individualistic model that does not provide answers to the fundamental issues of interdependency of the human race and the planet.

The Mother Center movement is developing an alternative to these two approaches, by creating conditions for a balance between the contemporary values of individualism with socially responsible and reliable networks. Mother Centers put the values of care into a modern context and stimulate social cohesion and mutual responsibility to develop in a community setting, based on choice and diversity, and in a climate of tolerance and respect. Mother Centers develop reliable neighborhood networks that extend beyond family and clan structures to include social units and networks based on common interests and preferences. As such they reclaim family values and incorporate new visions of family and community.

The practice of Mother Centers has the potential of developing a political theory on the issues of care and care work in contemporary societies.

V. Mine Campaigns and Projects

The mine How do we want to raise our children International Campaign

The idea for this campaign came from the Union of Slovak Mother Centers. In contemporary societies the question of how to raise children is no longer self evident. Traditional kin networks are dissolving and many young parents find themselves struggling with issues of how to bridge traditional and modern values, how to keep up with their children, what to pass on to their children, and how to participate in and influence public childcare and education in kindergartens and schools. This campaign aims to stimulate a dialog process as a bottom up approach to redefining child socialization and child-rearing through parental self reflection, peer exchange and a peer learning process. Discussion groups have been formed in 19 countries on parenting and family policy issues follow a common format with monthly questionnaires.

A first harvest and evaluation of the campaign is undertaken at the International Conference How do we want to raise our Children 17-20 November in Bratislava.

This campaign is supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Cordaid, EQUAL, Slovenska Sportelna, Ministry of Transportation, Posts and Telecommunication, Slovak Telecom, and GROOTS International and is coordinated by Monika Jaeckel.

Guinness Record in Pram Pushing

„Pram Pushing“ is a Europe wide Mother Center action day to call for more family friendly cities. It was created as a publicity by the Union of Slovak Mother Centers who set a first Guinness Record on Mothers Day in 2004 as a way to raise awareness for the needs of parents and children in urban environments. Since then the event has been repeated every year. In 2005 108 prams were pushed in Slovakia. In 2006 **mine** up-scaled the event to an international level involving 18 locations in 7 countries inside its network.

2 120 prams were pushed simultaneously inside one hour on a one mile walk by Mother Center participants from Austria, Bosnia, Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia, The Netherlands and Tyrol, Italy.

The Stuttgart organiser Muetterforum Baden Wuerttemberg complimented the action with participants pushing prams not containing children but life size posters stating some of the reasons why many prams stay empty in current society: the lack of compatibility of work and family, the isolation of mothers, the poverty risk of single parents, the lack of welcoming structures in public life for children and families.

This campaign is coordinated by Elena Bakosova.

Mother Centers Dissemination Study

Mother Centers originated in Germany in the early eighties and have since spread into 15 countries. Currently there are over 800 Mother Centers world-wide. The spreading of the Mother Center model was not the result of a structured initiative or program, but happened through a process of peer learning and self-organization. What makes the Mother Center dissemination experience especially interesting is the fact that the concept and model has spread to countries with very diverse cultural, socio-economic, ethnic and religious backgrounds.

The Bernard van Leer foundation has commissioned **mine** to undertake a study aiming at tracing the ways and channels through which the dissemination of Mother Centers happen.

Mother Centers in Roma Communities

Spolu International Foundation Netherlands is partnering with **mine** in a pilot project to explore the potential of the Mother Center model as a way to mobilise women in Roma communities and to strengthen the Roma movement in Central and Eastern Europe.

In this project **mine** is training and consulting Mother Center initiatives in Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia.

mine trainers in this project are: Andrea Laux, Anja Lasch and Karin Paulsen-Zenke from Germany, Elena Kasiakova and Gabika Dunajcikova from Slovakia and Senada Dzankic from Bosnia.

Mother Centered Development

This project is funded by Cordaid, Netherlands, and has three main objectives that are intertwined:

The overall objective is to promote, reinforce and spread the women led local development model of Mother Centers in Europe. This is implemented through developing tools and building capacity for linking and learning on women centred development across borders. The second objective aims at the empowerment of Roma women. This is implemented through trainings and coaching of Mother Center initiatives in Slovakia and Bulgaria. The third objective is to develop a common political action platform between the existing and starting Mother Centers in Europe.

mine trainers in this project are: Márie Olahová, Jana Gregusova, Gabika Dunajcikova and Eva Fiedlerova from Slovakia and Andrea Laux from Germany.

Skills Audit for Mother Centers

mine is partnering with LCO Netherlands in developing a skills audit for Dutch Mother Centers (Competenciebalans). This project is specifically aimed at migrant women in the Dutch Mother Center. The skills audit is an instrument to reflect and document skills and competencies gained through informal learning. Following a biographical approach participants compile their personal skills profile and develop further life plans based on their strengths and resources. A Competenciebalans handbook has been put together, which will form the basis for trainings of Mother Centers in The Netherlands.

Mother Center Impact

mine is currently partnering with the Union of Slovak Mother Centers and the Union of Czech Mother Centers to develop and conduct studies on the impact of Mother Centers on mothers and children as well as the overall society. The studies are being supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation as well as the Charles University in Prague.

Mother Centers in Bosnia

mine partnered with the Muetterforum Baden Wuerttemberg in a project funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation, Germany to spread Mother Centers in Bosnia. 3 Mother Centers were supported for 3 years in getting started. A documentation of the Bosnian experiences is available.

Not the chicken, not the Egg, but the Nest!

From 2003-2005 **mine** conducted a feasibility study, commissioned by the Dutch Ministry for Housing and the Environment, focussing on integrating the social and the physical into city planning and engaging the community as an asset for urban development. In this study the concept of Mother Centers was up-scaled to the level of city planning and the development of whole neighbourhoods and settlements.

For more information see: www.nest.cc

Trainings and Exchanges

Between 2001 and 2006 **mine** has conducted a series of trainings in Bosnia Bulgaria and the Czech Republic in partnership with the Muetterforum Baden Wuerttemberg on the Leadership Support Process and on the basic concept of Mother Centers. These trainings were supported by GROOTS, by the Heidehof Stiftung Stuttgart and by the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Several exchanges were conducted in the same time period in cooperation with the Slovak, Czech and Baden Wuerttemberg Mother Center networks between Mother Centers in Bosnia, Germany and the Czech and Slovak Republic. These exchanges were sponsored by GROOTS International.

An exchange of Foundations and Funders supporting the Mother Center movement was organized in cooperation with the Muetterforum Baden Wuerttemberg at the Robert Bosch Foundation headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany.

Documentations and Publications

mine has been commissioned to document several activities at local level. Publications that are available (see **mine** website www.mine.cc) include:

- "Hot Money" – The Savings and Credit Group in Stuttgart Germany (supported by the German Family Ministry) in German
- "Mothers in the Center – Mother Centers" THE (original) Mother Center book (translated from German by Gabrielle Bryant, Monika Jaeckel and Andrea Laux and supported by GROOTS)
- New Partnerships for a New Millennium – The Intergenerational House Stuttgart West (supported by GROOTS) in English and German
- Local Governance from the Bottom up – Bringing the Habitat Agenda home, supported by the Huairou Commission in English
- Family Policy not for but WITH Families – The Local to Local Dialog Stuttgart (a partnership project with WomanSpirit, St. Louis, USA, supported by the Sister Cities Program Stuttgart) in German

mine newsletter and networking meetings

The **mine** newsletter comes out once or twice a year. Copies can be downloaded on the **mine** website. (www.mine.cc)

mine networking meetings are conducted once a year, each time in a different country. The meeting in 2005 was conducted in Sarajevo, Bosnia, the 2006 meeting in Den Haag, Netherlands.