

Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment e.V. (mine)

Winner of the 2002 Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment.

BEST PRACTICE

(Accredited by UN Habitat Best Practices and Local Leadership Program)

SUMMARY

The Mother Centers International Network is the result of a grassroots women's movement that started in Germany. The concept was developed by a research project of the German Youth Institute (DJI) focussing 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. After publication of this book: *Mothers in the Center - Mother Centers* in 1985 they spread 'like a virus' through peer visits and exchanges throughout Germany and neighboring countries. Following the transition in Central and Eastern Europe, Mother Centers were created from the bottom up as self help initiatives in the Czech and Slovak Republics, in Bulgaria, Russia, Georgia and Bosnia Herzegovina. World wide there are now some 700 mother centers, including Africa and North America.

Mother centers address the needs of women and children and recreate family and neighborhood 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 neighborhoods and community culture. They are melting pots in the community 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. Mother centers are consulted regularly by municipal agencies as well as by local, regional and national governments. They advocate on gender and family issues and have had impact on national legislation and urban planning.

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. Mothers need support in performing this daunting task, which is often not anymore naturally forthcoming through family and community structures in contemporary societies.

In industrialised countries, the experience of motherhood is increasingly marginalised. 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 experience a process of loss of self-confidence when raising children, a task which demands different rhythms and priorities than those constituted by public norms and the labor market. In a world where violence is increasing among youth and children who fail to feel a meaningful connection to society and in societies where old age is decreasingly embedded in traditional care systems, new ways of fostering community are needed.

Mother Centers also apply to the conditions of post-socialist societies in transition. Many women in these societies find themselves at home with

children, due to the increase of unemployment and the reduction of public childcare. The isolation they face, is especially virulent due to the fact that in socialist societies the tradition of community networks was discontinued. Social coherence and inclusion were 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 retreat into depression and apathy. Many Central and East European countries are characterised by a disorientation of social roles and life patterns, concerning poverty, gender relations, and 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 spaces to meet, reorientate themselves and reweave the torn social fabric.

Communities need a place where they can reassemble and relearn to establish confidence in social contacts and trust in building democracy from the bottom up. Mother centers provide such a space.

THE EXAMPLE OF BOSNIA HERZOGOVINA

In Bosnia Herzegovina the war destroyed social and public life. Social security was based on the extended family and collective networks. War has torn apart these networks, destroyed families, neighborhoods and villages, dispelled people from their homes, home towns and communities and created an individualisation process unknown of previously in Bosnian society.

Inter ethnic tensions are supplemented in post war Bosnian society by a social war between 'have and have nots', between people that have profited from the war and those that have lost everything. Practically every woman in Bosnia has a background of family separation or war trauma. The population in cities in Bosnia Herzegovina is almost entirely composed of migrants, those re-migrating from Western Europe 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 completely destroyed. This leaves especially old people and single mothers very vulnerable, without family back-up and support. These groups have the highest rate of poverty and health problems.

In this situation mother centers are a contact point in the community, especially for single mothers and for the elderly. Here they can go and find a listening ear and a helping hand. After an exchange with Germany, mother center initiatives have started in Zavidovici, Sarajewo and in Sanski Most:

"I am alone now, I need to make new ties. I cannot rely anymore on my family or relations. They are no more. For me joining the mother center 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 favorable than 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, including 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 labor market participation for all.

Following a series of exchanges with the German mother centers a self help movement of mother centers has developed in the Czech Republic. Mother centers 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 by a large part of the population as being imposed on them, 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 centers create a possibility for peer learning, for parents to exchange views, experiences and information on parenting.
- Mother centers create a meeting point in the neighborhoods. They break through the often anonymous and isolating structures of residential areas in post socialist societies.
- Mother centers create an opportunity for children to meet and interact with other children.
- Mother centers are a switch board 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. Here they can 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 neighborhood 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 as collective priorities and responsibilities into the community.

In the 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, as well as families from different ethnic backgrounds, regroup to support each other in dealing with the everyday life issues of families and neighborhoods.

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIES

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

Mother centers are self managed. The core of the project is a daily drop-in coffee shop with childcare included. Activities in the centers are paid, usually on an hourly basis whenever possible. It involves 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. There are also trainings to expand skills and help re-enter the labor market, like language courses, computer and job retraining courses. Holistic health services are part of the daily program.

A key strategy responsible for sparking off the mother center 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 centers wrote down their own stories, creating an authentic and

animating book, which was later translated into the Czech language. When other mothers read their 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 center movement is an interesting example of upscaling and transfer of grassroots best practices, through the story telling format and peer learning strategies.

MOBILIZATION OF RESOURCES

Mother centers 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 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 mobilize initial federal funds, as start up support for the first three model centers for the first three years. During this 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 organizations. The argument that it was cheaper to help families help themselves than to pay the high public costs for dysfunctional family socialization.

Over time the success of the centers and their rapid replication, created a momentum towards public funding. This resulted in new legislation and new funding procedures, allowing for mother center funding titles in family and youth welfare programs. This was the result of extensive lobbying of the countless mother center initiatives in communities across the country. Meanwhile, preventive family policy measures that preserve healthy families and neighborhoods, are considered wise investments by western welfare states. Public and private funding for family self help groups is now 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 little or no money for social policies of this kind is available in municipal and state budgets. In these countries the local mother centers, using the same rational, have been successful in acquiring rooms and land from the municipalities and funds from foundations and the private sector.

RESULTS ACHIEVED

Depending on their size and how long they have been working, mother centers reach between 50 and 500 families in their neighborhood. 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 centers 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 centers mean an expansion of their social and physical space and experience.
- For the fathers the centers 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 center enriched the community,
- 47% saw improvements in the infrastructural conditions for families.
- 41% said, that the mother centers changed the neighborhood regarding more social contact and social integration (including acceptance of minority groups).

- 67% of the mother centers affirm that they have taken influence in their community by political actions, and
- in 46% of the cases the mother centers are represented in municipal councils on urban planning and development.

Mother Centers have contributed to a new range of neighborhood services and a new culture of care in the communities; especially quality care for children and elder care. 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 center movement has contributed to the transformation of social institutions and to enabling legislation. They have created an innovative shift in the field of social work and social welfare. A shift 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 rechanneling of resources, from social work programs to go directly into 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 centers, 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 center movement lies in the claiming of public space in the communities. The 'public living room' as the centers call themselves, is a place where every day life experience is acknowledged and valued as expertise. In the centers, women learn to recognize 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. It disconnects grassroots leaders from their communities and from every life. This is one of the main barriers to grassroots women's participation in politics. The mother centers have been successful in involving women in local governance, by creating a support system that keeps women rooted in their communities.

- **VALIDATING MOTHERHOOD**

Focussing on the situation of motherhood has proved to bring women together from very different social and cultural backgrounds. Mother centers 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 centers create social networks that allow for less anonymous neighborhoods 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

centers contribute to creating and sustaining strong neighborhoods 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 both of diversity and of community.

- **EVERY DAY LIFE EXPERTS**

When schools fail, when neighborhoods 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 a high competence in knowing what the built environment should look like, to meet the requirements of the users. In the mother centers these every day life competencies are focussed, consolidated and channeled into community leadership, regarding i.e. public childcare provisions, quality playgrounds, safer traffic conditions, or family friendly urban planning and housing. Mother Centers 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 centers have expanded the range of family services. Professional programs often are alienating, especially in the area of eldercare, because they are delivered in the instrumental context of job-orientation and institutionalization. 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 centers. This creates an animated meeting point in the neighborhood for all generations. It places child and eldercare services in the context of genuine neighborhood relationships and networks.

- **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 parenting families. Mother centers create a community net, also for families at risk, thus counteracting their social exclusion and isolation. Families that can't afford public restaurants or commercial freetime or cultural events, can find community in the centers with their children. The negative spiral of defeat, shame and withdrawal, is counteracted in the non-stigmatising atmosphere of the centers. The mother center culture of friendship and practical support, helps to regain self-confidence and recognise options.

IMPACT

Mother centers have impact on many levels. They influence the quality of parenting and child socialization, as well as the quality of family relations. They revitalize neighborhoods, bring new family services and facilities to the communities, as well as bringing a grassroots partner 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, organizing and negotiation skills, capacity to work in teams, increased willingness to take responsibility, and enhanced communication skills.

Mother centers 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 impact on the communities are manifold. 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 child birth. 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 center." (Czech Republic)

"The more we develop our community in our mother center, the more I have become sensitive to issues in the larger community. For instance in our street we have the problem that the parking lots are often occupied by big cadillacs that do not have the right to park there. We have a system of resident parking in our district. No policeman ever does anything about these cars, that I am sure do not belong here. I think it is some kind of Mafia doing some kind of business. I presume that the police has been bribed. This is not democracy. I very much wish that our society really chooses democracy. 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." (Bulgaria)

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

The mother center idea has spread "like a virus", but implementing and adapting it in local conditions needs coordination and support. Not only because of the lack of funds and resources, but also because of the lack of experience of local authorities in how to support self-help and grassroots activities.

This has led to the creation of the global network: **mine**.

PARTNERSHIPS

The history of the mother center movement, provides an interesting example of successful partnerships between grassroots, academia, professional institutions and government. Locally, the mother centers 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 centers are seen as an important link to the community and are invited to give their views on a wide range of issues including i.e. 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: Pediatricians, psychologists and family counselors often cooperate with the centers. The center is seen by some professionals as an important support system to reintegrate clients into the community. Cooperations with local unemployment departments to help mother center 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 parliament. The Central Government Office has drafted a letter of recommendation, that is sent around to municipalities, recommending mother centers to local authorities.

TRANSFERABILITY

The process of transfer and replication of the mother centers 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 in the mother centers 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 Center International Network, provided a next stage of upscaling and international transfer. The network provides start up support and step by step consultation for mother center initiatives, as well as trainings, study tours and peer learning exchanges among the centers in the region. Activities include translation of start up manuals on how to initiate mother centers, fostering a 'buddy system' between individual centers in different countries and generating donor and marketing activities between the centers. Training themes include leadership support methods, conflict resolution, cooperative enterprises and alternative health care.

Very instrumental in the transfer process of the mother centers were the Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA), a series of grassroots trainings produced and conducted between 1998 and 2001 by the Mother Center International Network, that also focussed 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 centers 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 funders of the German Mother Centers, 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. It was explained why the German funders sponsor and support the mother centers and what political programs they make use of in order to do so. The exchange proved a milestone for the development of the Czech mother center movement:

"The visit with our politicians to Germany, was a very important success in our work. It helped us to persuade our politicians and bureaucrats on all levels of the mother center concept. It gained us 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 others 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 home and afterwards in our respective communities were very enriched by this experience.

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

In summary the main strategies leading to the amazing replication of the mother center model are that they:

- address a 'historical need' in contemporary societies regardless of cultural differences;
- foster strong partnerships between grassroots and professionals;
- generate and disseminate documentation and information in story telling format;
- engage in face to face exchanges, peer learning events and regional and international networking.

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Awards

mine has won the Dubai International Award 2002 for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment.

The Mother Center International Network for Empowerment was awarded the Dubai prize for strengthening the capacity of civil society to revitalise local neighborhoods and revive community life and for the gaining of effective voices by women in decisions affecting their livelihoods.

More at: www.bestpractices.org

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International: www.mine.cc

Germany: www.muetterforum.de

www.muetterzentren-bv.de

The Netherlands: www.moedercentra.nl

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Czech Republic: www.materskacentra.cz

Bosnia: www.redomc.com.ba

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