

Monika Jaeckel/Marieke van Geldermalsen- Jaeckel

The economic bottlenecks of the Mother Center Movement

Mother Centers have mainly spread in countries where regional and local government support them, either through access to rent free space and/or through funding titles in programs concerning preventive social inclusion and family policies. This is the case for instance in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy (Tirol), The Netherlands, the Slovak and the Czech Republics. It is however not the case in countries like Bulgaria, Bosnia, Rwanda, or Cameroon, where there is no local government funding available. Consequently Mother Centers have not spread in these countries, but remain single initiatives.

In social welfare countries like The Netherlands or Germany there is a process of cut backs in social funding which has also resulted in cutbacks for the Mother Center programs.

Networking work is very difficult to get funded by governmental funds. The German and Dutch national and regional Mother Center networks are seriously struggling with this issue. The Slovak and Czech Mother Center networks have received initial networking funding from foundations (Bernard van Leer foundation), but this program is also running out in 2-3 years.

The overall international network **mine** that connects the Mother Centers in 20 countries has not been able to find any donors or sponsors to create basic staff for coordination. The overhead gained from running international projects is minimal and does not sustain the organisation.

Invisibility of services

Public funding tends to make the services provided in Mother Centers and their networks invisible which adds to the fragility of their already precariously patch-worked economic and financial basis. It is presumed that –like in their own structures- overhead and management is sustained from some other continuous budget, that it simply is there. In many cases the Mother Center movement is sustained by an enormous investment of voluntary human resources, mainly of the founder generation, which is often on the edge of burn-out and difficult to sustain in the following generations.

The grassroots knowledge contributed through participation in governance procedures is given for free, which contributes to its lack of influence as well as makes it vulnerable to exploitation by professional counselling companies, who more often than not are the ones who turn it into a commodity and make money from it. There are countless examples in the Mother Center movement, where the grassroots know how is accessed through democratic participatory consultation processes, while the follow up contracts are given to professional consultants. The more the Mother Centers have become successful in local governance and participation in decision making, the poorer they have become, since the time and resources they spend in these decision making processes is not remunerated. This creates unequal partnerships, since the counterpart partners in these governance processes do this in general as part of their paid jobs.

Therefore we would like to explore the economics of grassroots practices and the services they provide as well as the economics of governance procedures they engage in.

– 2 –

How to finance the “public living room” in Mother Centers, the part that makes the qualitative difference in the services delivered?

What makes the quality of the services delivered in the Mother Centers different, is that they are developed in a neighborhood context as part of organising daily life collectively and in community. They do not have a purely professional intent, they are embedded in neighborhood networks and relations that give them a personal quality. These relations are created in the “public living room” of the Mother Centers, a daily non stop “drop in” café, an informal meeting space, where people come and can find an open ear to whatever is happening in their lives at that moment. Here all activities in the Mother Center come together. It is where the initiative and the capacity to take things into your own hands and to organise collectively is generated, the creativity of community problem solving is developed.

This core quality of the Mother Centers is what advertisers tend to suggest as coming with a certain product, be it insurance or margarine. It is a crucial quality, centering around “being related” and “being home” . It is hard to pin down but recognised universally.

This part is key and core and the heart of the Mother Center and the way it works, but it cannot be easily framed in terms of a “service”.

Nevertheless it requires resourcing in order to function. In the public funding of the Mother Centers there has always been a problem in getting the “public living room” resourced and funded. “Projects” like language courses for migrants, childcare for working parents, babysitter referral, home visiting of seniors have been able to receive funding, but not the open community meeting space as such, that the centers provide. A lot of human resources, go into creating this open meeting space, making it a warm, welcoming and accessible space, as well as a place that generates self help and self organising. The element that is the ‘unique selling point’ does not sell.

How to make these human resources, this work visible and resourceable?

Mother Centers as a Business?

The services provided in the Mother Centers are very time intensive and are offered to their participants and communities, which are mainly low income to middle class families. They include:

- Childcare services
- Eldercare services
- Family/neighborhood services like janitor services, hot lunches for school children, second hand shop,
- Health, cosmetic and wellbeing services like yoga classes, haircutting

These services are “home like” and delivered in a neighborhood setting and in the context of neighborhood relationships, which makes them very time intensive. This also constitutes their quality and their “market niche”. In atmosphere, price and quality they provide a middle ground between home and business. The attractive thing about them is that they combine the best of both worlds. They have the “personal involvement quality” that is lacking in the professional and institutional services in the same areas. This is

– 3 –

very much what is appreciated in the Mother Center services. Contradictionally however, this quality is expected to come with an even lower price. Care giving and caring is expected to come for free when in the context of family and neighborhood relationships.

This is part of the patriarchal political paradigm of the public/private split (labor market/productive work versus reproductive/unpaid work), but it is also because part of the “charm” of the neighborhood movements is that they develop non-monetary reciprocal services structures, with everybody contributing and benefiting. These are about more than about money. They are ways that people give and take while bonding, while building solidarity, while caring for each other. The whole field of voluntary work functions because people are getting something other than money out of it (emotional rewards, self definition, self determination, freedom, solidarity etc)

In the Mother Center movement we talk about two currencies involved in the Mother Center activities and community. One is money, the other is care/attention/affection/emotional nurturing. We created the term “paid voluntary work” to capture this. (we have a German term that captures it better: Zuwendung, but doesn´t translate well)

Example Bosnia

Mother Centers tend to spread much less in countries too poor to have public welfare policies and programs. In Germany, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic for instance the fact that these countries provide extensive parental leave policies and that welfare policies on municipal level provide the initiatives with rent free space. In Bosnia for instance this is not the case.

Therefore we have been forced to look for other options to resource Mother Centers. We included market experts to examine the market possibilities. They quite clearly and cruelly said that services like second hand shop, production of handicrafts and such had no chance on the market. Childcare and eldercare services and the renting out of space (bed and breakfast in tourist areas) were seen as the most profitable options that could generate some overhead to resource the Mother Centers, while services like language courses, aerobic courses, hair-cutting could generate some extra (pocket) money for individual women, but not really create full scale paid jobs. None of this could create enough income, however, to pay for the (high) rent of space in Bosnia.

As having space of their own is key to the functioning of Mother Centers, their sustainability in Bosnia is dependent on finding donors to provide for this. In one case a foundation invested in real estate and bought rooms for the Mother Center. In the other cases the centers are negotiating to get local and international funding to pay for the rent.

The centers in Bosnia have received start up support from the Robert Bosch Foundation for three years, which has now ended. One center has received an apartment bought by the German Heidehof Stiftung, which will become their property after 10 years if the Mother Center is still functioning then. With their income generating activities so far the Bosnian Mother Centers are able to pay for the utilities (heating, electricity) and for some small honorariums for the active women. But in no way are the profits enough to give sustainability neither to the women and their families nor to the Centers.

– 4 –

Quality versus market orientation

This question on quality versus market orientation addresses the other side of the coin. A lot of the personal/relationship quality of services tends to get lost because of market orientation and the cost effective mentality and rationalisation that (traditionally) goes with it. As said what determines the added value of the service is exactly the hard to grasp 'homely' quality that is difficult to combine with a market orientation; your morning tea does not taste as nice if served with a bill, however small.

In terms of our grassroots movements it is also about how to keep the movement quality of our practices. They should not only be about delivering services, but also about creating neighborhoods, social cohesion and community, and about creating political contingencies that take initiative and action to improve their living and their environment. Where is the economical match for this? In what way is the market interested in this and supports this? Or does market orientation mean a shift away from these priorities and what gets lost in the process?

Who is the market client for general benefits for society?

What is true on the level of the individual client goes even stronger on a collective level. The most valuable contribution of the mother centers is hard to grasp, it is noticed only when it is lost, and it is therefore very difficult to sell.

We have put together a brochure (in German) describing the benefits society has from Mother Centers. They include the improving of the quality of family relations, socialisation and child upbringing, the generation of tolerance and democracy capabilities (social peace), social inclusion and empowerment of single mothers and families at risk , integration of migrants, preventive health care for families and children, reduction of family poverty, strengthening of civil society, development and tapping of (unused) education and talent reserves, integration of youth, promotion of gender equality and support of work life balance, counteracting demographic trends (drop of child birth, aging society), creation of conditions for humane aging, neighborhood and community development.

How do these effects and benefits find a market? They go beyond benefits for individual clients and customers (although some services on individual/customer level might be created on dimensions like improving family relations, supporting the work life balance and the quality of child upbringing, support for the integration of migrants like language courses, but the scope is limited). What are the links to the corporate world?

How to finance the networking, handholding, and R&D services of the Mother Center networks? (Making the movement sustainable)

Mother Centers have spread through peer to peer exchanges and through the setting up of regional, national and international networks. The networks function when there is enough bottom up ownership involved to generate enough voluntary engagement of the grassroots groups (this works mainly at the level of the regional networks) and/or when there is public funding to hire core staffing. (which is in a limited manner the case for the Baden Wuerttemberg and National German Mother Center networks).

Creating ownership and funding networking on a larger than regional scale is difficult. The mother centers are by nature locally oriented, little international awareness and ownership exists. For the international network no funding has been achieved, despite all serious efforts and the question of sustainability is pressing. It is difficult to generate voluntary work from the local Mother Centers (the jump from local to global is too big) and the voluntary work coming in from the regional and national networks is limited as their human resources tend to be tied up in managing their own local, regional and national networks and projects.

Networking on international level needs more resourcing than local and regional networks since the time and money involved for simple things like international meetings is much higher and cannot be managed with own resources. For similar reasons the whole process of creating bottom up ownership of the network is something that requires resourcing, a primary investment.

Where do these resources come from? What is the economic/monetary value of networking, in what way is can it be made visible and “marketable”? Who pays for the “overhead” of coordination, consulting, development of new ideas and projects, when it is hard to convince network members to pay for this and when no public funding, donors or grant givers seem to be interested in the networking and advocacy dimension of grassroots movements?

Being born in Germany the existing base for the international network is North based. This makes resources from foundations difficult. An added problem is that the expenses in the North simply are high, member fees or project overhead could never cover them.

What are services the international network could develop that would be more “marketable” and could generate enough profit to pay for the R&D, coordination and hand-holding overhead, while making use of the available expertise. (Business consultancy has not been our expertise. We are movement developers, creators of informal learning, designers of social solutions, not business and marketing experts).

The Economics of Governance

Mother Centers as other grassroots groups engage in many services for the municipality that are often not named, taken for granted (by both). The underlying attitude from both sides, is that the municipality is 'giving' something, an open ear and welcoming attitude, and the mother centers are the ones 'asking' to be heard, to be involved. In reality the demand is on the end of the municipality and the mother centers are the supply side. The informal childcare provided by family and neighborhood networks is one example of their services, but also waste reduction, spreading information, promoting and monitoring municipal services, creating and linking to constituencies, giving legitimacy, feed back on what works and what does not are others. When engaging in governance and decision making the task here is to frame it not only as co-designing and co-management of municipal services, so not only in political participation terms, but also in economic terms.

We first need a good analysis and listing of what these services are and what is the knowledge involved. But then the issue is: How do you charge for social capital? What is the price of the knowledge grassroots women's groups have through their informal and formal networks? How do you make these marketable? How do you develop contracts that not only acknowledge ownership in political but also in economical terms? What is it grassroots groups have that institutions and governmental agencies don't have and how to define this as a (marketable) service?