

Monika Jaeckel**The crisis of a self help movement – a political paradox****Contrast between political rhetoric and experience on the ground – the example of Mother Centers**

The current political climate is favorable to the development and strengthening of civic participation and self help approaches. There is a whole wave of conferences, debates, and new programs focusing on civic participation, empowerment, and integration, often related to urban renewal and the integration/inclusion of poor neighborhoods and often targeted at migrants and women. There is a call for new forms of participation, new methods, neighborhood based approaches etc. The project and new programs carousel is currently going round at high speed.

The Mother Center movement, a grassroots self help movement, that has spread “like wildfire” into 20 countries on a peer learning and bottom up basis has already since many years been successfully putting into practice many of the things the current political rhetoric is propagating. This should be the time where the movement is experiencing a boost of political and financial support and recognition. Paradoxically, the contrary is the case. In Holland and elsewhere the Mother Center movement is receiving less support and recognition and regional, national and international MC networks are having a hard time getting any support at all.

The situation in the Netherlands

With the cut backs in social welfare many Mother Centers have closed down in Holland in the past years. Their dependency on the welfare organizations have made them very vulnerable to the politics and priorities of the welfare institutions, who under economic pressure have engaged in centralization and fusion creating big organizations with a lot of bureaucracy and focus on economic survival of their own institution. The fusion of LCO to Movisie has resulted in the break down of the Dutch Mother Center network. The Mother Center movement is becoming less visible than before and losing priority on the political agenda of the welfare organizations. It seems more profitable to “invent” a “new project” than to invest in what has proven to work already.

The women from the Dutch Mother Center network see the need to create an independent network, however they depend on the welfare network to help them with this, a paradox and vicious circle they seem not to be able to transcend.

The international situation

The Mother Center movement that originated 25 years ago in Germany has meanwhile spread to 20 countries (see www.mine.cc/files/wildfire.pdf)¹. To harvest this amazing “spontaneous” transfer of a best practice the Mother Center International Network **mine** was formed as an independent self help network. Mine has conducted several international projects and campaigns (see www.mine.cc), however despite vigorous fundraising efforts has not managed to obtain core funding. The vicious circle here is that in order to be able to seriously fundraise you need paid staff. Our experience shows that the fundraising that can be done on a voluntary basis is very limited in its success. In order to get funds you need to have funds. This limits the extent to which the enormous potential of the Mother Center movement can become productive for social change. Whilst the support of self help and the strengthening of civil society commands current political rhetoric, nobody seems to be seriously interested in sustaining existent best practices and investing in their self organizing capacity.

¹ The document “Spreading like Wildfire” is a report of a study commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation to capture the experience of the spontaneous development of Mother Centers to an international movement.

The Dilemma

Social projects cannot survive without public or private support. Efforts to run Mother Centers on a commercial and self sustaining basis have only been successful in the context of affluent middle class neighborhoods. Like private kindergartens, Mother Centers who take commercially based prices for their daily services can only cater to an elite population. In order to receive public support grassroots groups need to be accepted as direct and independent partners of social services and social change. Whilst the "political talk" is about bottom up participation, public funding and programs are channeled through the big welfare organizations, who show no interest in supporting grassroots self representation.

The private sector, - and in our experience also private foundations - are not willing to fill this gap. They expect Mother Centers to be run like "social enterprises" on the basis of "business plans" and with long term economic self sufficiency. Whilst Mother Centers do include quite a lot of income generating activity, they cannot run commercially if they want to stay open to the average and low income part of the population.

Despite the enormous success Mother Centers have on the ground, they often do not get much public attention. The media tends to focus on "sex, crime and scandal" . Mother Centers in these terms are "unspectacular" in their daily support of the everyday coping of families and in their contribution to integration and social cohesion of neighborhoods. What makes the news is when things go wrong, not what holds neighborhoods together on a daily basis.

We need new partnerships and creative ways out – call for ambassadors

We are in need of new ways and partners to create visibility and public attention for what Mother Centers mean and contribute to society and for the structural paradoxes and dilemmas the Mother Centers are currently facing.