



LEARNING PARTNERSHIP
Ivolunteer!



Best practice

**Report based on experience
from the Gottin Community Centre,
Municipality of Warnkenhagen**

*Mrs Dr. habil. Heidrun Niemann,
Förderverein Bürgerhaus der Gemeinde Warnkenhagen e. V. / Germany*



Education and Culture DG

Experiences from the Gottin Community Centre, Municipality of Warnkenhagen

Maxim:

"Developing and combining competence - learning in a living and caring municipality"

1. How it all began

In 2000 the municipality of Warnkenhagen made the courageous decision to reconstruct a historic building, used until 1994 as a restaurant, for later use as a community centre. The house was put to its new use on 14.12.2001. However, there was as yet no concept for the organization or arrangement for working in this house, for the design of the approx. 3500 m² of spacious, neglected property or the neglected, dilapidated hall.

Several dedicated residents from the municipality took on this problem. The new phase in the colourful history of the house began on August 8th, 2001 with the foundation of the sponsoring association for the community centre of the Municipality of Warnkenhagen e. V.

2. New objectives are formulated

The sponsoring association has taken on the arrangement of contents and coordination of all plans. In the rules the 26 foundation members decided on the following objectives:

"The organization aims to develop the community centre in Gottin as a centre of social life for the municipality of Warnkenhagen.

The organization wants to give the different age groups and interest groups in the municipality and the region an opportunity for meetings and activity. The community centre should offer not only the framework for events of various types but also create the opportunity for all generations for learning, development and further education far away from urban centres. Teenagers, adults and senior citizens can learn together to use new media or learn to use them to promote the interest in the lifelong acquisition of education.

In addition, there are plans to include opportunities for artistic activity for better entry conditions. The new media should also be used to research the history of the house and region. The organization intends to forge links with other organizations with similar aims to use their experience for individual activity."

The personnel of the organization, made up of joiners, bricklayers, locksmiths, electricians, gardeners, nursery-school teachers, salespeople, restaurateurs, cooks, musicians, doctors, management experts, farmers, teachers and engineers, offered very good prerequisites for the variety of tasks.

Moreover, we were fortunate that some members had years of teaching experience in schools, universities and further education facilities.

The foundation of the organization was hurried and characterized by the call for the start of the project "Learning region central Mecklenburg coast" - part project "Learn in the country", financed by the federal office for education and research in July 2001. We saw the possibility to collaborate in such a project, a unique chance to realize our constitutional aim.

Community centres were and are used in the region as communication facilities. Their conversion to a learning facility which is adapted to the needs and oriented on future education offers available to different target groups and that imparts knowledge to all generations to learn the sustained use of new media, was a challenge.

3. Action competence is required

At first the managers of the organization were quite aware that the available amount of action competence was not sufficient for the management of these processes. The learning process began before the foundation of the organization. It was then necessary to acquire knowledge of the following: What is in the rules?

- How does one hold a foundation meeting?
- What contents must the foundation minutes?
- How does one design forms for membership declarations?
- What documents does one need for the notary, the district court, the tax office?
- How does one organize members' meetings and elections?

Literature research was not enough; we sought and received help from other organizations in the region and consequently avoided time consuming corrections of mistakes. The beginning was achieved. But what should follow? The following questions arose next:

- How can one excite curiosity and interest in participation?
- What do the residents expect from the organization and the centre?
- How can PR work be successfully designed?
- How does one attract funds and donations of material goods?
 - How does one find sponsors
 - Where and how to find and apply for projects
 - How to raise donations
- How to do the accounting and manage promotion funds?

4. Defining the requirements

The requirements of the residents of the municipality on the offers from the centre were known only from individual conversations. It was clear to us that the readiness to learn is not particularly intense in a section of the teenagers and adults in the municipality, which can be explained by the fact that there were few local education offers which made a learning environment possible.

In order to learn more about the expectations of the residents and include them in the planning, intensive research into the needs was inevitable.

We decided in favour of a combination of written interview and individual interview. For the individual interview the questionnaire was regarded as an interview guide.

Questionnaires were distributed to 106 residents in the four areas of the municipality. 64 questionnaires came back. 15% of the residents of the municipality were interviewed with a return quota of 60%. The results of the interviews were an agenda point at a board meeting of the organization and a meeting of the municipality representation. They were published in the announcement sheet of Mecklenburg Schweiz office and made available to all residents of the municipality. We also distributed the questionnaire to the network of the decentralized learning centres.

5. Our forms of PR work

Telephone connection, fax, PC and internet access with electronic mail address aren't a given for many organizations even in 2007. Due to the aforementioned project we had already created these conditions by 2002. It was thus possible for us to:

-
- prepare a flyer for the community centre and association accommodation,
 - design a home page for the community centre (www.buergerhaus-gottin.de),
 - send out invitations with a uniform layout for events.

All events were made known by notices in the areas of the municipality, in the announcement sheet of the Mecklenburg Schweiz office, the Nordkurier and by personal invitations to certain target groups.

Reports on the work of the organization and its cooperation on the different projects were published in the Nordkurier and almost every version of the Mecklenburg Schweiz office announcement sheet.

As broader forms of the PR we used papers and discussion contributions at conferences and meetings, our picture gallery with project results and also the calendar with recipes from the community centre, the chronicle of the organization or menus from large events.

While the PR work was only done by the chairwoman of the organization in the beginning, this task too was later taken over by other members. A workshop on the topic of "Successful PR work " under management of the BilSE institute from Güstrow was very helpful for this.

6. Financing the work of the organization

The financing of the organization work in an empty house without facilities demanded our creativity in all possible ways.

The first consideration was for the municipality to take up the operating costs of the house. Our task lay in and in getting the most possible outside events into the house through extensive PR work to offset the operating costs.

For the acquisition of facilities conducive to learning we had to try various solutions. That would not have been possible from the contributions of €6.00 per annum association member fees.

Our most important financing sources were and are still:

- Money and donations of materials and goods from companies and individuals
- Entrance fees
- Sales proceeds from flea markets
- Applications for donations to the accounting bank
- Project applications to foundations such as
 - the OSPA foundation
 - North German foundation for environment and development (NUE)
 - foundation cooperation
- The European social fund, small projects programme "Local action for social purposes"

These various opportunities enabled us to put together the furnishings of the community centre, a hall in the grounds of the house and to design the entire surroundings so that a closed ensemble with a positive effect resulted for the village, the municipality and also an example for the region. Financing of the personnel expenditures was not possible from these sources; it remains a problem for the organization work.

7. The first steps to the learning facility

The results of the opinion poll were first available in the middle of 2003. Until then short courses were organized to arouse curiosity and interest and help to overcome the existing fear of embarking on something new. Events with different contents for different target groups at different day and week times were in the programme.

The choice was dictated primarily by financial considerations since very little money was available for professional fees.

Nevertheless, we were able to put together and offer a package of different topics from which new enquiries arose in turn. This applies particularly to the introductory course "Women on the net", which was fun but also clarified the difficulties of dealing with the PC and aroused the interest to gradually learn to cope. There is a keen interest in computer courses at the present and they have been offered weekly every year since 2007.

8. Communication, information and learning in the Gottin community centre

Already within the first two years of the organization work different event contents have aroused keen interest in the community centre. These include:

- The garden circle with 51 meetings altogether up to with topics such as:
Roses in our gardens, asparagus – the regal vegetable, birds in our parks and gardens, herbs help healing, mazes and labyrinths, animals and plants of 2006, things worth knowing about rape, excursion to the Dalkendorf biogas plant.
- One day and one week courses, e.g.
Internet use, Word/Excel/Powerpoint and digital image processing, successful PR work, communication, body language and rhetoric, first aid for accidents, personnel and workplace hygiene,
- Courses on health prophylaxis, e.g.
Nordic Walking, back care school, healthy diet
- Lectures at the afternoon chat sessions, e.g.
Keeping pets, healthy diet, cancer, a taboo topic, coronary illnesses, consumer rights, health reform, heating with wood, an ecological alternative, patient care
- Exhibitions painting, graphics and photography
- Concerts by:
Assistant professors and students of the Rostock College of music and theatre and teachers and pupils of the Güstrow District school of music
- Ladies circle in the community centre on topics such as:
Easter and Christmas decorations, type advice, jewellery advice, cosmetics and chiropody, visit to a dairy farm, travel report on Tunisia and Turkey, short yoga course, napkin folding, bees and honey, healthy diet
- Excursions in the region, e.g.
Straussenhof New Heine, Ulrichshusen and Bristow, Schwerin, Waren (Müritz)

Learning offers are a special focus of our work in the village area for children and teenagers. The distance to traditional education providers should be bridged, the access to education and knowledge made easier and the acquisition of knowledge by self-initiative made possible by the use of computer assisted learning facilities. We were particularly concerned to promote the media competence of children and teenagers who are hardly supported due to the social structure of our municipality in the domestic area.

The first project work had already started in the initial phase of the organization work and for most executive board members the first experience in project management.

The first independent projects launched and successfully completed were:

- "Improving media competence by implementation of a computer workshop", sponsored by the Rostock Ostseesparkasse Foundation (September 2002),
- "Youth paints Mecklenburg landscapes", sponsored by the Youth Welfare Department of the Güstrow administrative district (May 2003),

The computer workshop is used especially for enquiries on the Internet for doing homework, application letters and search for teaching job offers.

The second project idea arose on February 21st, 2003 when the 1st. exhibition of painting and graphics, in which some teenagers also took part, was opened in the community centre. They talked with the artist and from this the wish to learn and acquire the ability and skills in painting with instructions developed. The artist took on the workshop; the results were exhibited in Prora in 2003 in the Güstrow administrative district and following that, in Warnkenhagen municipal community centre.

Another special youth project was the making of a sports field (2004/2005) with support from the Rostock Ostseesparkasse Foundation.

In the project "Young and old active in the environmental design of their municipality" (2004/2005), promoted by the North German foundation for environment and development, open land was suitably adapted in the teenagers' and adults' leisure time and new long term fields of learning and interest areas developed. A general deepening of environmental awareness in all generation and the readiness to active influence control on natural and environmental protection should result in the village area. Contents were

- Making of nesting places for cave breeders, the choice of the locations, the location and the observation of the nesting
- A record of trees by roadsides, definition of the types of tree and a reference
- Learning to use natural building materials from the countryside (fields), production of green fences and a pasture fence
- Laying out a herb garden and bee friendly summer flower garden around the community centre

We were honoured with the 1st. prize for this project in the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern environmental competition in 2005/2006

Further projects, continuously linked to education for the participants and were or are sponsored by the European small projects social fund for the "Local action for social purposes" programme.

9. Requisite competence of the protagonists

Sponsored associations serve in community centres in rural areas as providers for the community and the region. Their role must therefore focus on:

- The needs, expectations and awareness of these residents,
- The interests of the operators of the community centre – in this case the community,
- The social conditions.

Apart from the expertise and methodology, the social competence is particularly important the success of these services.

Apart from general knowledge, expert competence means to us professional qualifications (not necessarily university degrees), additional and knowledge specialist skills can be very helpful, together with a modicum of experience in organisation and management.

Methodical competence must come to the fore in formal image, such as behaviour, expression and also through intellectual competence, the ability to solve problems and perform tasks in a comprehensible and convincing way and to demonstrate and explain them.

Most important for our effect is however social competence: I rate the following as paramount:

- Trustworthiness, honesty and a sense of responsibility
- Empathy, willingness to help, patience, kindness, consideration and tolerance,
- Performance, e.g. stamina, energy and critical ability, resolution,, responsibility and team work

We have all these competences at present in the association. We are however aware that they are always linked to persons who are not always available to the association.

Continuity in the work in the absence of supervision

Voluntary work cannot just be bought from the labour market. We now try therefore to,

- Divide the work between several members, including those who are not board members,
- Prepare methodical material in which all our experience is included (e.g. checklists for preparations, implementation and subsequent organisation of the most varied events, questionnaires to define needs, address file, layout for invitations etc.),
- Arrange the work through correct and continued management of the office and bookkeeping,
- Include as many seniors and unemployed in the work as possible, because their available time can be better planned,
- Include young people in association work – but the continuity is not guaranteed as vocational and and further education are no longer available in the village,
- Secure financing at least through part time work.

Essential further education to ensure staff and organisation development

We have attended helpful courses over the last 3 years but we urgently need further training in order to continue our work e.g:

- Project management
- Financing, sponsoring, support
- PR work, marketing
- Problem solving techniques
- Labour regulations

What have we learnt?

- You can only begin such projects once. All enthusiasm is exhausted before a second attempt.
- We should without fail adopt the motto: don't put off for tomorrow what you can do today!
- Do well and tell everybody – PR work is essential.
- Aims are difficult to achieve without an informal network.
- Not to discourage people if things go wrong and praise them when work is well done

10. Summary

At present, our rural areas are characterised in many places by:

- Insufficient communication, information and education possibilities,
- Migration of youth and the attendant unfavourable age distribution,
- A high rate of unemployment and the deterioration of the infrastructure.

From this aspect, the cooperation is gaining increasing meaning between facilities which are effective in the social field. They can organize meetings between the generations, organise daily proximity and community with each other outside family relationships and address anonymity and loneliness. Village community centres and associations play an important role in the rural areas in the creation of a new social culture, communication, information and education.

Here socially useful work outside gainful employment fits an organizational frame and also the single person and helps to form the village community. The development of personal talents and abilities is made possible it and counteracts loneliness with a sensible organisation of time.

Community centres and their associations can with dedicated and informed leadership:

- Create learning, development and further education opportunities far away from urban centers for all generations
- Provide support or create future oriented offers suited to the needs of target groups, which cannot or will not take up comparable offers from urban centres, and make access to education and information easier
- Combine general, political, cultural and professional education with an integral approach

From the point of view of time, stable prerequisites which enable community centres or associations to render a service of a certain quality must be available or be created for it. Crucial therefore are:

- The **active competence of the staff** which results from their technical knowledge, methodical knowledge and social competence
- The **material equipment** of the house, beginning with the outer appearance of the buildings, the functionality, completeness, safety and the technical standard of the equipment, the ambiance of the rooms, the order and cleanness of the rooms, the equipment and the external surfaces
- The **organizational competence** which results from the publicity and the acceptance of the house in the region, the offers suited to the interests of the age distribution, the accessibility by telephone, fax or mail, the accessibility with public or other transport and the opening hours or opportunities for use.

These features form the basis of the **quality of all activities** in these houses. They include aspects important to every service for dealing with the "customers", also their active inclusion in the arrangement of the processes as regards content. They include particularly:

- the acquisition of long-term offers suited to the needs,
- the short-term preparation of additional offers at current to address changing needs,
- The continuity and actuality of the information on offers (through notices in the village, personal invitations, announcements in various newspapers or official announcements and Web sites),

-
- Advice to learners on the conditions for participation and costs of courses, course offers, use of the computer or library,
 - The organisation and evaluation of all events, including timely information to participants in case of difficulties,
 - the use of the "new media" in the education process.

The measurable results are:

- the variety of topics and continuity of the events,
- the number of participants (average, minimal, maximum) and inclusion of different target groups,
- the publication of the results and documentation of the results in chronicle,
- the active cooperation of the association members or inhabitant,
- the number of projects applied for and completed and
- the firm contact with other learning locations.

On this basis a quality comparison is also conceivable between the community centres.

Village community halls with their material equipment and dedicated, well informed approach are a chance scarcely recognised up to now for employees of the 1st labour market to offer their services to target groups who cannot or do not want to take up comparable offers in urban centres. An association can make a contribution in these houses to saving jobs in the 1st labour market.

A sustained support of the rural areas as equal and independent places of residence is encouraged. Moreover, community centres as communication, information and learning locations and the association supporting them can make a contribution to the identification of the citizens with the municipality and the region and offer an incentive to stay in the village and an incentive for the movement of people into the rural areas.