



Handbuch Community Organizing

Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis

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Steve Hughes

Organizing must transform in this moment of »polycrisis«

The figurative and literal map of the world is being shaped by numerous long-term crises, each of which are disruptive on their own. Taken together, these intersecting phenomena are creating national and world-altering dynamics. This era of »polycrisis« has galvanized an ecosystem of scholars and policymakers to think about both the dangers and potential opportunities of this fraught moment in global history.¹ But what is a community organizer to do? Rightly or wrongly, there is a long history of community organizers rejecting grand or global ideological debates (even if they were still acting within an ideological tradition) in favor of »the work«. And that work has usually been defined as the skilled labor of very targeted, very close-to-the-ground leadership identification and development, defining issue campaigns, and doing the kind of concrete base-building »you can count.« At the same time, there is an increasingly shared view that even this kind of »spadework« has fallen into disrepair, leading to calls for an »organizing revival« (for those who want to fix organizing) and, in some corners, a crisis of confidence in the efficacy of community organizing (for those who wish to diminish organizing or divert resources to other kinds of social interventions.)

This essay seeks to briefly trace the origins of »community organizing« as a practice that is highly associated with movement traditions in the United States, but which has – to some degree – been commodified and exported to other parts of the world, including Europe. I look at a recent contribution to the literature on community organizing from a non-US perspective, which traces the ways in which the work of community organizing in the United States underwent a gradual process of professionalization. I will attempt to place that critical perspective in the context of an organizing sector in Europe that is much less professionalized and much less funded than its US counterpart. Finally, I will reflect on new directions for European and US organizing as the practice is growing and new (old) perspectives are being applied to the ongoing evolution of the craft.

To professionalize or not to professionalize?

My own journey into the work of organizing in Europe was an unexpected one.² It was not in my life plan to move to Europe and start doing the work of a community organizer, if for no other reason than my imagination at the time did not allow me to think that I could be doing the kind of highly contextual work I was doing in the United States in some place *other than* the United States.

However, I soon found that a version of US community organizing was already here. In some cases, it seemed to have arrived by some level of happenstance (when a US-trained organizer, like me, moved to a European country for one reason or another). And in other cases, I observed that it seemed to exist as some extension US foreign policy in the form of, for example, US State Department-funded organizer exchanges.³ The latter was certainly true where I had landed in Central and Eastern Europe, where community organizing was an outgrowth of the NGO-led »citizen participation« initiatives which were often funded by Western foundations, and which happened in parallel to the shock-doctrine neoliberal economic reforms and privatizations of the 1990's and 2000's. To observe this is not to fall into a facile critique of US involvement in the region; there are many intelligent civil society actors in all of these

¹ Polycrisis.org. (2025, April 2). <https://polycrisis.org/>

² Hughes, S. (2021, December 24). My evolving role in the European organizing movement. *Medium*. <https://medium.com/@stahughes/my-evolving-role-in-the-european-organizing-movement-51a9609b08c3>

³ Balint, E., & Martin, D. (2022). *Decade of success: 10 years of professional fellows program*. https://glc-teachdemocracy2.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FINAL_Decade-of-Success_compressed.pdf

countries who entered into this work with a sense of agency and awareness of the political dynamics at play.

The point is, however it arrived, »community organizing« was already here when I got to Europe. But it does raise a question of how something so seemingly organic and grassroots (if one is to believe the mythology) can be »exported« so readily? The recent work by French sociologist, Clément Petitjean, in his book, *Occupation: Organizer: A Critical History of Community Organizing in America*, fills in an important understanding of how this could happen. Namely, since its initial definition as a specific kind of community intervention in the first half of the 20th century, community organizing in the United States has undergone a process of gradual professionalization.

In some ways this was a fact hiding in plain sight. After all, the US State Department-funded exchange between organizers in the United States and those of Central and Eastern Europe was called a »professional fellows« program! But this really only names the end-state of an American professionalization process that took many years. It was a process driven both by external factors (i.e. demands from funders and the need to differentiate organizing as something unique in the field of community-based practice) and internal factors (i.e. the desire of organizers to be recognized for the skill inherent in their »invisible« job, as well as to simply meet their basic material needs in order to do the work for the long-haul.)

As I threw myself into building up the field of organizing in Europe, one challenge followed me throughout the process: the *lack* of professionalization of the field here. Whereas funding in the community organizing sector in the United States has increased dramatically in the last 20 years,⁴ the amount of money going into the practice in Europe is relatively miniscule. The job title »community organizer« is barely recognized, let alone overly-professionalized. And this has had a real-world impact on the growth of the field.

I can remember one instance, many years ago now, where my effort to recruit an organizer to take over my role (because an organizer is always trying to »replace themselves«) was thwarted when the promising young organizer decided to leave the field altogether for a »grown-up job« in the commercial sector that would pay the bills. This was a big set-back for an organization with only one very part-time employee (me). And to add insult to injury, not long after this happened, I found myself in a conversation with a program officer at a European foundation in which they explained to me the need to »de-professionalize« the field of community organizing. I am usually slow to anger, but I found myself legitimately mad at this uncritical view – probably read in a donor’s publication – being repeated back to me about the way organizing had lost connection to its grassroots. As someone struggling to will a fledgling organizing organization into existence, who was losing organizers to »real professions«, my only thought at the time was, »we first have to professionalize organizing in Europe before we can talk about de-professionalizing it«.

The crisis comes home

Because of the time difference, I woke up to the shock of Donald Trump’s first election. I had already

⁴ Beckwith, D., Doane, D., Sebaly, B., Sriethorst, A., & Whitman, G. (2019). *Making a way forward: Community organising and the future of democracy in Europe* (S. Hughes, Ed.). Ariadne Network and European Community Organizing Network. https://organizeeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Ariadne_Community-report_AW_V2.pdf

been living in Europe for two years. I was no fan of Hillary Clinton, but I certainly had gone to bed believing the polls that she was ahead, and that it would take a near miracle for Donald Trump to win.

Trump's first election felt like an accident of history, and the social movements of that era (both »The Resistance« and the Movement for Black Lives) felt – to me – like continuations of the story of struggle and progress that many in the US are taught to believe in. But Trump's second election has felt like the pre-mediated dismantling of democracy. Watching the capitulation of US elites in the face of Trump's »shock and awe« second term, has caused many from the United States to join the ranks of people all over the world (and within the US as well) who realize history is not always filled with happy endings. To state this out-loud is not to say I have given up hope. But it is to come (late) to the understanding that real resistance is not fueled by a sense of trying to »return to normalcy«, but rather by setting out into unknown territory – not with a certainty that »it will all work out«, but with a sense that it may not, and that we must still find joy and meaning in each other and in the long-term struggle no matter what.



The People's Action national community organizing network has been a driving force behind the recent efforts to revive the practice of organizing in the United States. (photo credit: People's Action)

The rise of Trump's second term has also sparked an intensification of the efforts that were already underway to reground the practice of community organizing in the United States. For many reasons, including the generational transition of organizational leadership, there has been both a reexamination of the practice, as well as a back-to-basics movement at the level of organizer skills development.⁵ There has also been a thoughtful discussion taking place about some of the fallacies – many of which can only be attributed to the professionalization of the organizing craft in the United States – which have diminished the power and effectiveness of organizers in this new era.⁶

⁵ Jacob, B., & Mumm, J. (2023). *The antidote to authoritarianism: How an organizing revival can build a multiracial pluralistic democracy and an inclusive economy* (T. Wilkins, Ed.). <https://peoplesaction.org/wp-content/uploads/The-Antidote-to-Authoritarianism-EN-2024-1.pdf>

⁶ The Forge. (2024, December 24). *Building resilient organizations - the forge*. <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/building-resilient-organizations/>.

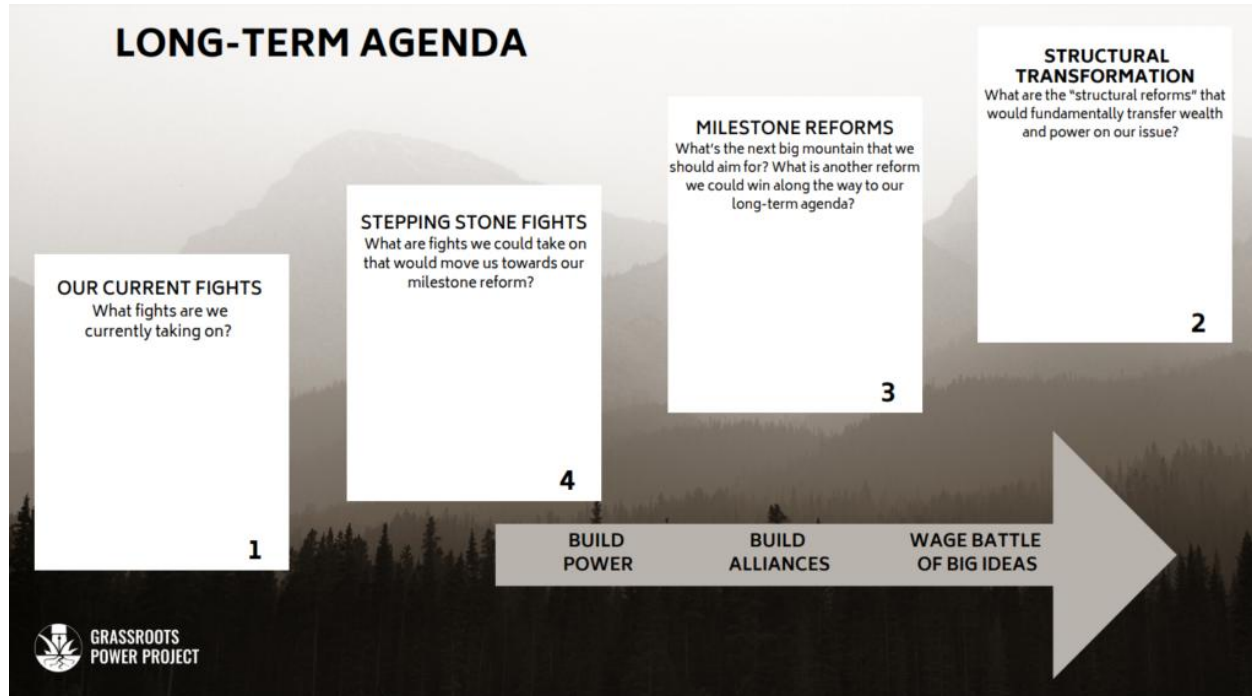
Back to (European) basics

When I look back on my own path into the field of organizing, I see that I am an inheritor of many traditions. As someone trained as a union organizer, I could trace some of this lineage all the way back to the militant organizing of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (as Jane McAlevey did in her well-regarded book, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*.) I can also see the influences that the organizers from the early Industrial Areas Foundation had on my work (one of the first books on organizing I ever read was Saul Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals*). Like many in the US, I was inspired by the examples set by people like Ella Baker and Miles Horton who brought a deep faith in people and a pedagogical practice to their work. And coming of age in the time that I did – the 1990's and 2000's on the West Coast of the United States – I was also influenced by the movement traditions carried north by Latin American organizers fleeing (US-sponsored) wars and economic displacement in the era of neoliberal globalization.

One of the critiques embedded in Clément Petitjean's work is that of the self-professed »anti-ideological« tendencies found in US-organizing. Saul Alinsky, Petitjean points out, claimed to work outside of ideological traditions, but in fact was firmly embedded in a tradition of »militant liberalism«.⁷ And along the way, Alinsky also engaged in his fair share of red-baiting at a time of extreme anti-communist fear and repression taking place in the United States.

So it is notable that in this context there is a resurgence in the United States of interest in some of the European thinkers who have had something to say about how power is built and wielded in society. From a growing interest in Antonio Gramsci's theories of how change actually happens in complex societies, to André Gorz's formulation of »non-reformist reforms« as a way of understanding how the »small, winnable« organizing victories of today could be thought of as stepping stones towards larger structural reforms, to Stuart Hall's theories on how political identities are formed and power blocs are forged – many US organizers are turning to these authors for tools to rethink the practice of community organizing.

⁷ Petitjean, C. (2023). *Occupation: Organizer: A critical history of community organizing in America*. Haymarket Books.



This worksheet is a tool used by the Grassroots Power Project with organizers in the United States to think about their »long term agenda«. It is inspired by André Gorz's idea of »non-reformist reforms«.

This version of a more explicitly ideological kind of organizing has been given shape in the United States by people like Steve Williams, who describes the emergence of a »transformative organizing« approach in his essay, *Demand Everything: Lessons from the Transformative Organizing Model*.⁸ And tools to help US organizers apply some of these concepts have been developed by the Grassroots Power Project,⁹ among others.

Rigor, yes. Rigidity, no.

My most formative years as an organizer were from 2003 - 2004. I had graduated from the university a couple years beforehand, where I had been involved with student organizing. My last year of studies at the university took place the same year as the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization (1999). Since I was doing my studies at The Evergreen State College, a small public university, with a strong activist tradition, and just an hour away from Seattle, I often joke that the organizing I did for that protest was part of my »senior thesis«.

I was living at my parent's house, and my first experience of knocking on doors to do one-on-one conversations happened when I canvassed my neighbors to raise \$700 to pay for materials – materials we applied to building a blockade which we used to shut down the Pike Street entrance of the Seattle Convention Center.

⁸ Williams, S. (2013). *Demand everything: Lessons from the transformative organizing model* (S. Ehmsen & A. Scharenberg, Eds.). Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung. https://rosalux.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/williams_transformative_organizing.pdf

⁹ Grassroots Power Project. (n.d.-b). *Tools Archive - Grassroots Power Project*. <https://grassrootspowerproject.org/toolbox/>.



My first time doing door-to-door organizing was to fundraise from the people in my childhood neighborhood to build this blockade that we used to shut down the WTO meeting in Seattle. (Photo: Rosalinda Noriega)

That protest, like for so many of my generation of activists in the United States, was profoundly transformational. I glimpsed the potential of the power we could build if we achieved a cross-sectoral movement that united the bases of unions and environmental movements, students and workers, US-nationals and internationals, and on and on. As the son of a former Catholic priest, I probably already had some instinct towards finding my vocation, or calling. My near religious experience sitting at the intersection of 6th Ave. and Pike Street on November 30th, 1999, is probably the closest thing I have ever had to that.¹⁰

But like I said, my real story of organizing began a couple years later. After graduating, I worked a while in different jobs to pay my bills, but I really wanted to be an organizer. I got my chance when I was handed a job announcement by a member of the university's Labor Center (where I had interned as a student, and was now on the board). A union was hiring to begin a large-scale organizing campaign in the state. I applied. My interview consisted of attending a weekend training and then going out with an experienced organizer to talk to workers at their homes.

Those first two years of my life with the union formed me into the organizer I am today. We would go out every night and every other weekend to talk to workers at their homes about organizing a union. For the first six months, I went out with a senior organizer every time. And after every conversation with a worker, we would go around the corner and debrief how the conversation went. I was asked to reflect on what

¹⁰ Guilloud, S., & Allen, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Voices from the WTO: An anthology of writings from the people who shut down the World Trade Organization*. <https://www.shutdownwto20.org/what-happened/voices-from-the-wto>.

worked well in that organizing conversation and what I could do better. I was given advice, and sometimes taught hard lessons. Even when I was allowed to go out on my own, the whole organizing team still gathered back at the union hall every night to debrief what we had heard »on the doors«. After that, we would go to the bar for another couple hours where we would blow off steam and hear war stories from older organizers. I developed life-long friends during this period, and I went on to work as a union organizer for a number of years after that.



Priceless training: me (fifth from the right) as a young organizer spending time with veteran organizers and hearing stories from the work.

This day-in-and-day-out training on the fundamentals of organizing was priceless. It can't be taught in any classroom (though I am not one to deny the value of a training or classroom time!) When I think of organizing as a »craft«, I think of this period of my apprenticeship. I was learning how to use my tools, and I was being guided and shaped by people who had been talking to workers, walking picket lines, and doing »the work« for many years before me.

Today when I teach organizing (often in a training or classroom setting) I often draw a simple venn diagram on my flipchart. Organizing is an art and a science. It is something that relies on instinct and is learned by doing (art). It also has a method behind the madness, and this can be taught and learned (science).

Much has been made of the difference between »activism« and »organizing«, and I will not rehash that debate here. But what I will say is that I can recognize an organizer – even if that person has never done a day of formal »organizing« in their lives. Some of the qualities that make for effective organizers are obvious (and discussed in any training curriculum or book on organizing you will read on the subject): they listen, they are curious, they have the focus and discipline to »keep their eyes on the prize« even in the midst of chaos. Some other qualities – less discussed – that I have observed in good organizers are: they are doers, not talkers; they tend towards using questions rather than providing answers; and they have an instinct towards sharing power with other people. Some organizers are more agitational, some are more relational. In other words, some organizers move people forward by challenging and pushing them to take action. While others lean heavily on the quality of relationships, and they bring a not-easy-to-define heart-centered and caring approach to the work. It takes all types, and many in between. And these types usually blend together – even in one person. In short, there is no »one right way« to be an organizer.

All of this is to say, organizing is a highly adaptable approach. As such, its »uses« are varied. I have seen organizing used in an extremely local neighborhood fight to stop the construction of a new busy through-street. I have seen organizing used to build national political parties (something I personally have been doing for the last fifteen years though my work in the US with the Working Families Party). I have seen organizing used to develop »locally rooted, internationally coordinated« responses to the climate crisis.¹¹ Again, organizing is as much a set of skills (a science) as it is a way of being (an art). Doing the work of organizing requires rigor, but rigidly applying it in only one way or in one kind of situation stifles the practice, potentially to the point of killing it.

Thinking of the organizers I have crossed paths with in Europe – many of whom I consider colleagues and friends – I see people who are straddling that gray zone between the art and the science. I think of the organizer who was trained to knock on doors, identifying whatever issue came up in a neighborhood, and then building local campaigns around it. I then think of that same organizer, years later, striving to find a way to expand the boundaries of that work in order to bring an organizing approach into the climate movement or feminist activism. I think of the organizer who played a big role in »introducing« organizing to his country, and who then took the skills and approach learned from that base-building work to apply them to the hybrid practice of online and offline organizing in the national pro-democracy realm. I think of the person who left her role as a »campaigner« at a larger international environmental NGO in order to focus on building local resilience and power in her hometown (and surrounding communities) in the coal mining region of her country.

I think of these people, and many more. They are following their instincts, learning new approaches, transforming their practice, and always focussing on how to organize for the kind of power that is needed to achieve their purpose.

Conclusion: towards transforming organizing

When I was learning the craft of organizing, my team got caught up in a power struggle over who would be named to replace the out-going director of the organizing division of the union. For us, the organizing

¹¹ European Community Organizing Network. (2024, July 22). *Organizing Projects - European Community Organizing Network*. <https://organizeeurope.org/what-we-do/projects/>.

staff, this represented an immediate and very tangible crisis in our working conditions. At one meeting, the crisis spilled over into conflict. One veteran organizer stood up, looked at the manager and said, »whatever, I'm just going to go talk to some workers now«.

As I have thought about that scene over the years, I have always admired that veteran organizer's ability to tune out the crisis and remember what mattered in his job: talking to workers. At the same time, in this era of intersecting and intensifying global crises, we may not have the luxury of saying, »whatever, we are just going to keep organizing, but do it more, harder, faster...«.

Organizing must transform in this moment of »polycrisis«. This is both a rallying cry as much as it is a recognition that organizing is *always* transforming. Because so much of the organizing that made its way to Europe did so in the context of the craft's professionalization in the United States, it was easy to begin talking about organizing as an established »methodology«. It was easy to distill it into a mechanical approach which, depending on who was looking at it, had cachet because it was »from the United States«, or represented an unwelcome imposition for that same reason. However one views it, the fact is that organizing is not static as a practice – neither in Europe nor in the United States.

So where do we go from here? I personally have been involved in several efforts over the years where I have self-consciously encouraged the development of a »European tradition« of community organizing – one that neither feels itself inferior to the traditions in the United States, nor that ignores the important contextual differences between the United States and Europe (or within Europe itself). This has looked like working with organizers via a participatory research project to document and derive lessons from organizing campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Balkans.¹² It has looked like developing a curriculum – again, based on the experiences of organizers in Europe – on how to adapt our organizing and respond to moments of crisis.¹³ And it has included developing training approaches to organizing that »translate organizing« to new environments and political contexts, such as that found in Germany.¹⁴

Whether it is *organizing* that is transforming, or *organizers* that are transforming, I have probably been around long enough to see a bit of the arc that these transformations are on. The effects of the polycrisis are only becoming more acute, and as organizers we must respond. We must be rigorous, but not rigid, in how we do so. We can not just put our heads down into »the work« and pretend that the larger political dynamics and headwinds don't influence us. And we can not unthinkingly embrace the »militant liberalism« of an earlier version of community organizing while at the same time the edifices of the liberal order are crashing down around us. We are the inheritors of powerful and ever-changing traditions of organizing, and we are now called to make it our vocation to transform organizing once again.

¹² Palas, A., Sebály, B., Tikász, G. B., Peric, M., Chmelík, M., Hughes, S., & Hutniczak, W. (2001). *The power of organizing: Stories of community organizing campaigns from across Europe* (S. Hughes & B. Sebály, Eds.). <https://organizeeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Power-of-Organizing-FINAL-English.pdf>

¹³ Serban, A., Tikász, B., Kubik, D., Nowak, I., Tota, M., Bálint, M., Graham, N., Djordjevic, N., Preda, O., Corbin, S., Josette, S., Hughes, S., & Endres, T. (2023). *Organizing in crisis: A curriculum for community organizers* (T. Endres, S. Hughes, & M. Tota, Eds.). <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-YEwwwrO8g86HhOSu5trTaA6X4yZSdJ5/view>

¹⁴ Hughes, S. (2023, March 27). Developing the capacity of community organizers in Germany. *Medium*. <https://stahughes.medium.com/developing-the-organizing-capacity-of-the-german-left-65de2e3bcb60>

Epilogue: the danger of writing it down

Having written this essay, I would be remiss not to provide some self-reflection on my own role in the dynamic that has led to community organizing being fetishized by some, and rejected outright by others, in Europe. I am, as I have already made clear, one of those US-trained organizers who ended up in Europe and set about applying the skills of my profession to the world I newly inhabited. On one level, I am just doing what migrants have always done to influence the organizing tradition in a new country, though I recognize that my »migrant« experience is an incredibly privileged one, and that my US »community organizing« tradition is full of contradictions.

I have seen a bit too much for my own liking of people coming from the United States trying to »sell« organizing (as well as an analogous phenomenon where US election practitioners come to Europe to preach the tactics of US elections – whether they are the tactics that propelled Obama or Bernie to certain heights). This »export business« that has been built around the professionalized organizing sector is both off-putting to me (to say the least) but also something I have directly benefited from. That is a contradiction inside of which I have to live and work. But to the degree that I have some critical distance, the contradiction that needs to be named is that by importing a professionalized practice from the United States, Europe runs the risk of undermining its own domestic capabilities. If nothing else, this is because doing so limits our imagination – the same imagination that organizers have had to use every time, and in every place where they have had to figure out how to organize in a new neighborhood, a new city, or a new country.

I still believe – for practical reasons related to what it actually takes to build and sustain power – that we *should* be talking about what it will take to professionalize organizing in Europe more, not less. Our enemies who are deepening the polycrisis and wielding unjust power over us are *highly* professionalized. It would be naive to think that we can beat them with no infrastructure, no lasting capacity, and no real institutions. Though, in doing so, I would prefer to avoid replicating mistakes of previous efforts to professionalize the organizing craft, and I am highly skeptical of efforts that seek to rigidly lock down or credential the »one way« of doing organizing, when in my experience the art and science of organizing is, and will forever be, a living practice.

In writing all of this down I recognize it can (and maybe will) end up being used by some unprincipled actors to score points in an ongoing – and useless, in my opinion – debate over the »right way« to organize. Sure, we can use this writing in new dogmatic fights over methodology. Or, we can treat this writing, and the writing of others on this ever-evolving work of organizers, as a contribution to developing our organizing praxis – that interplay between our reflections and practice – to strengthen our work, help us build new power, and to, hopefully, meet the moment of crisis in which we find ourselves.

Author

Steve Hughes has nearly three decades of organizing experience in the United States and Europe. He lives in Prague and works on several trans-European and transatlantic organizing initiatives.

E-Mail: stehughes@gmail.com

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Hester Butterfield, Constanze Ziegler Stories from the »Alte Heimat«

How tenants and the Jane Addams Centre (jaz)¹ saved their historic Munich housing estate from demolition: How did the tenants come to sit at the table with the city planning committee every other week? We tell these and other stories here.

1. Brief summary

The tenants of the historic »Alte Heimat« housing estate in Munich's Laim district saved their estate from demolition by forming the AHA-Alte Heimat Arbeitskreis tenants' initiative, which looks after the welfare of all residents and represents their interests and opinions in the press and in politics. Since 2012, they have become a force to be reckoned with.

2. Brief description

Name: Community organizing project in the Alte Heimat housing estate (Munich/Laim)

Location: Kiem-Pauli-Weg 30, 80686 Munich, until 2022 a room in the Laim Senior Citizens' and Service Centre, Kiem-Pauli-Weg 22

Facility: Alte Heimat Treff

Time: 2012–2025

Organizer: Jane Addams Zentrum e.V., Member of FOCO e.V.

Funding: City of Munich – Office for Housing and Migration

Additional funding: Laim District council Committee, Sparkasse München, Selbsthilfe Zentrum München, Coordination Office for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, prize money – Hans Sauer Prize 2022 and Munich Neighbourhood Prize 2023

Target group: Residents of the housing estate

Staff: one part-time position in social work/community organizing, administration and space management, volunteers from the sponsoring organisation, neighbours, occasional freelance staff

Key people/leaders: Tenants in the tenants' initiative »Alte Heimat Arbeitskreis« (AHA), »Großer Kreis« (monthly tenants' meetings), groups of people in the housing estate (e.g. tenants of Thomas-Wimmer-Haus, deaf tenants)

Goals: Tenant participation and involvement in construction decisions and processes through community organizing (special focus on accessibility, strengthening social and neighbourly coexistence, contact point for the neighbourhood organizing)

We, Constanze Ziegler and Hester Butterfield, are community organizers and FOCO members. Here we describe a 13-year-long organizing campaign in Munich – the strategy, the successes and also the stumbling blocks. When we refer to »us« and »we« in the article, we mean the jaz team (Hester Butterfield, Constanze Ziegler and Nghiem Xuan Tuan) and FOCO consultant Paul Cromwell.

Some aspects were typical of such a campaign: researching the neighbourhood, getting to know the tenants, local facilities and businesses, listening, identifying needs, analysing power structures, identifying key figures and committed volunteers and activists from the neighbourhood – all standard practice.

However, you will see that some things were not so typical. For example, the role of REGSAM (Regional Networks for Social Work in Munich)², the supporting association for regional social work commissioned by the City of Munich.

¹ <https://www.jane-addams-zentrum.de/> (accessed 26 May 2025).

² <https://www.regsam.net/> (accessed 26 May 2025).

In 2012, REGSAM asked the Jane Addams Centre e.V. (jaz) to give the residents of the neighbourhood a voice. jaz members were known among REGSAM moderators and at management levels in the city's Office for Housing and Migration for conducting listening processes and advising refugees or neighbourhood residents using the community organizing approach. Local social workers had noticed that the city was planning major changes to the complex, with demolition and new construction under discussion. It soon became clear that the challenge was not so much the survey itself, but rather supporting and advising the tenants, even if their concerns and opinions conflicted with the ideas of some city authorities and decision makers. Without realising it, the social workers in the REGSAM working group initiated a process of activation and self-empowerment, through which the work was embedded in power structures from the outset.

A mandate to survey the wishes and needs of tenants is not the same as empowering the respondents. The department of municipal real estate had already formed an opinion: demolition and new construction would be cheaper and more sustainable than renovation and would even enable genuine accessibility. In retrospect, it is clear to us that we defined our role differently than the administration had imagined. We pursued the goals and concepts of participation, co-determination and empowerment that we as community organizers always strive for.

The role of the tenants' initiative and the responsibility it assumed was and still is decisive. The talents and life experiences of the individual members contributed greatly to its success. As graphic designers, knitters, refugees, stenographers, trade unionists, association members, internet experts, cake bakers, community members, civic activists who shopped and cooked for others, and as intimate connoisseurs of their own neighbourhood – they all brought important skills and insights to the table. It was essential that the AHA members knew their neighbours well and, as should be the case in every neighbourhood, listened to them and brought their issues and concerns to the weekly meetings. In order to work effectively on the issues, it was important that the AHA – like the organizers – were able to receive professional training and advice.

Neither we nor the municipal authorities and politicians, nor even the tenants and social workers on site could have imagined in advance that after more than ten years the estate would still be standing – that the flats and buildings would first be repaired and then gradually renovated, and that none of the older tenants would have to leave the neighbourhood. Everyone who wanted to stay found a place, either in repaired flats or in new buildings, and received both financial and practical support for their move.

In the housing estate, we met people who wanted to form a supportive community and represent the interests of all in dealings with politicians and administrators. In addition, we – the organizers and the neighborhood center – were able to move from a 20m² temporary space in the library of the Senior Citizens' and Service Centre to a brand new 121m² neighborhood centre complete with a café in 2022. Here, residents can meet, exchange ideas, chat and celebrate. Simple repair services are provided there, making tenants more independent, and consultations are held. The members of the AHA tenants' initiative meet here every two weeks to work on issues and organise events; they research the history of the estate, give interviews, meet with members of the state parliament and have written a book together with the neighborhood centre³. They also inspire social work students with the story of their actions and successes.

For the preservation and renewal of the settlement and neighbourhood work, we – jaz, AHA and the organizers – have won two awards.

- Hans Sauer Prize 2022⁴
- Munich Neighbourhood Prize 2023⁵
- The housing association also won an honorary award for the concept and the new face of the housing estate.⁶

³ »Neue, alte Heimat – Porträt einer sozialen Siedlung« - <https://www.jane-addams-zentrum.de/buch-neue-alte-heimat-portraet-einer-sozialen-siedlung/> (accessed on 27 May 2025).

⁴ <https://www.hanssauerstiftung.de/preis/hans-sauer-preis-2022-nebenab-mit-dabei/> (accessed on 27 May 2025).

⁵ See <https://stiftung-daheimimviertel.de/muenchner-nachbarschaftspreis/>.

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ym5o50MvtGM>.

Without AHA, the housing estate residents and their successful fight against the planned demolition, this would not have been possible.

In the following, we describe how around six hundred 50- to 90-year-olds, together with 80 younger people who had sought refuge in Germany, convinced city politicians and planners that their community was valuable and worth saving despite all the challenges and neglect. During the process, the tenants were supported and advised by professional community organizers and an architect, as well as trained by a FOCO consultant. In public meetings, with petitions and in negotiations, they were able to arouse the interest of the city of Munich and, in the resulting joint planning committee, they convinced city councillors, authorities and planners to take an unusual step: instead of investing resources in demolition and new construction and forcing tenants to move out to unfamiliar neighbourhoods, the existing housing estate could be renovated. The community was preserved and, step by step, new barrier-free buildings were constructed, some of them with larger flats. After thirteen years, the concept has been almost completely implemented, no one had to move out, new tenants are moving in and the estate is fresh and inviting.

3. History of the settlement

The Alte Heimat housing estate was built in the early 1960s with donations and municipal subsidies as a place for Munich residents who had been evacuated during the war or whose homes had been destroyed, enabling them to return to Munich. At the time, it was often called the »Fünferl-Siedlung« (five-penny settlement) because it was partly financed by a donation of five pennies per cinema ticket. The settlement, which at the time had around 600 flats for mainly elderly people or people on low incomes, was »getting on in years« in 2011 when REGSAM (Regional Networks for Social Work in Munich)⁷ designated it as a neighbourhood in need of special attention.

Today, the settlement statutes⁸ specify apartments for the following target groups: people in need and the elderly, people with physical and/or mental disabilities and their relatives. Today, many different groups live in the settlement: elderly people, people with limited financial resources, people with reduced mobility and chronic illnesses, people with mental illnesses, people with physical or mental disabilities, deaf people, and families or individuals with a refugee background. To this day, many people who were born or grew up during the war or in the post-war period still live there; for them, the history of the settlement is particularly important.

4. History of organizing – Once upon a time

How did it all get started?

In 2011 and 2012, rumours circulated in the Munich district of Laim and in the press about the future of the Alte Heimat foundation housing estate. The buildings were getting old. GEWOFAG, the largest municipal housing association (now »Münchner Wohnen«), had taken over the administration of the estate from its owner, the department of municipal real estate, in 2011. GEWOFAG had a reputation for being a tough landlord. New instructions for residents were posted in the building entrances. The tenants were unsettled and unrest grew in the estate. The tenants were concerned that the relatively low rents would rise. Reports in the press were alarming. For example, from the newspaper tz⁹:

Munich – What will happen to the Alte Heimat residential neighbourhood in Laim? This question was posed to the city administration by the CSU faction in the city council on Monday. The tz newspaper followed up on the issue. The neighbourhood is now showing its age, and most of its residents are also elderly. Now the Alte Heimat is to be renovated.

"This involves the selective demolition and new construction of buildings," Peter Scheifele, spokesperson for the municipal housing company Gewofag, which manages the neighbourhood, told the tz. "The problem is that the condition of the complex makes it almost impossible to fulfil the foundation's purpose." This purpose is to accommodate elderly and needy Munich residents.

⁷ <https://www.regsam.net/> (accessed 09/2025).

⁸ The statutes can be found in the City of Munich's council information system under meeting document no. 20-26 / V 04879.

⁹ Quote: <https://www.tz.de/muenchen/stadt/muenchen-laim-alte-heimat-siedlung-rathaus-tz-2458499.html>.

"The flats are not barrier-free." For example, the bathrooms are too small and there are no lifts. Scheifele: "The plans are in the early stages, no one has to move out now."

The fact that more than 50 of the 600 flats had been vacant for months – in a city with a high demand for housing – became a political issue. Was this intentional? the tenants wondered. They suspected that »those who do not re-let are planning to vacate and demolish the complex.« This was also how the press interpreted it. In addition to the city council and the department of municipal real estate and the housing association GEWOFAG, employees of social institutions, parishes and the police were also concerned. It became a topic of discussion in specialist working groups. REGSAM declared the »Alte Heimat« estate an area in need of special action.

REGSAM invited neighbourhood organisations to a workshop lasting several days to discuss the future of the estate. Data was collected and concerns were expressed about the impact on older tenants if the estate were to be demolished.

What to do?

The tenants were discussed, but they were not present. REGSAM decided to ask the tenants about their concerns and ideas. This was announced at a summer festival at the »Spenderbrunnen«¹⁰ in the housing estate. So in the summer of 2012, I – Hester Butterfield – was asked as an experienced community organizer to conduct a survey.

This marked the start of an organizing campaign from scratch. I was unfamiliar with the area. Old strategies from my years with the Senior Citizens Coalition in Cleveland, Ohio, seemed like a good starting point: senior citizens there, pensioners in Munich – there could be parallels.

How does it work? First steps

In my years of organizing practice in Cleveland, I always had the words of my first trainer in my ear when I planned the steps for each new campaign. Go out without reservations, get informed, and always look for and find people who want to join forces to make a difference. In order, that means:

- Expressing interest: searching the neighbourhood, identifying key figures such as priests and pharmacists, and also conducting surveys among residents: door to door or, for example, at lunch in senior centres, after Sunday sermons or at parent-teacher meetings.
- Finding and getting to know people who are willing to stand up for their wishes and ideas. We always invited them with this question: »Thank you for this information! Would you come to a meeting to discuss the results of this survey?« My trainer at the time always said, »For a meeting, you need at least three people.« It's not just about gathering opinions and wishes, but about coming together, showing solidarity, discussing and deciding on the next steps, and making a difference.
- Wishes or questions should be formulated at the meeting with the help of the organizer in such a way that when politicians or civil servants are asked during a discussion, it is easy for them to respond positively. How should such a question be formulated? I used to practise this with my trainer. For example, tenants could ask politicians, »Would you raise our concern or question in your parliamentary group?« Or ask government employees, »Would you discuss my concern with your management?« If the answer is YES, that is already the first victory, which leads to the next step. Organizing builds on victories step by step.
- From the social workers of the housing estate in the REGSAM specialist working group, I learned about the history of the estate and a few things about the older tenants and the proportion of people with impairments and disabilities.
- Then the interviews began: students from my community work seminar at KSFH¹¹ joined in, so we were able to distribute flyers everywhere and knock on the doors of many of the 600 flats. After the initial introductory questions, »How are things here? What do you like about it? Or: do you have any concerns about your housing estate?«, it was important to find people who would come to a

¹⁰ The donor fountain was built as a thank you to all private donors for the construction of the settlement.

¹¹ KSFH: Catholic University of Applied Sciences Munich, now KSH: Catholic University.

meeting. In order to create a group of interested parties, we created a contact list with their permission.

- What could be an effective and achievable next step? I knew from experience that if a motion to the city council was approved at the annual citizens Town Hall meeting in the district, the proposer had to receive a response within three months. I suggested to the group that we submit the following motion: We propose the establishment of a planning committee for our housing estate, in which residents should be involved.

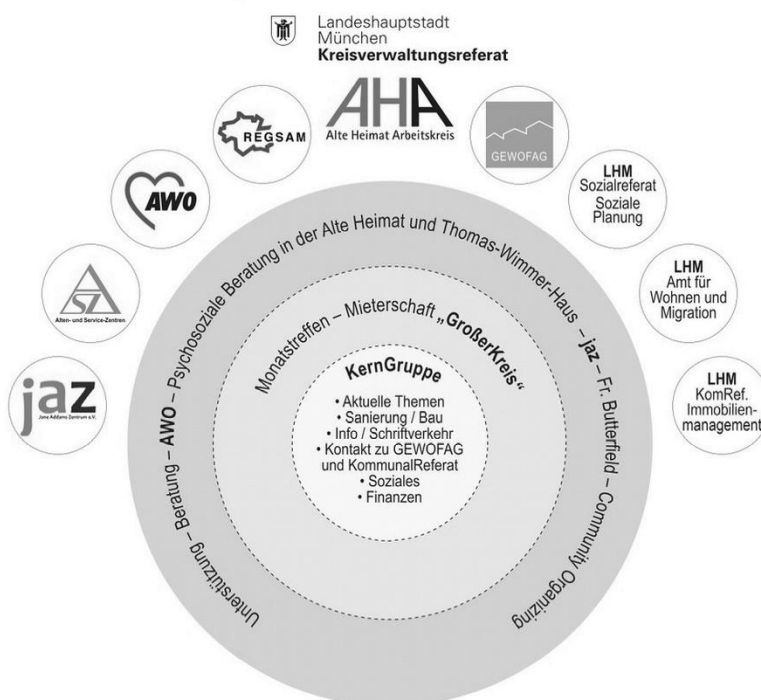
Along the way, I learned more about the neighbourhood and who was eligible for housing there. REGSAM and its specialist working groups were an important source of information. At the end of the door-to-door survey, we always asked, »Would you like to come to the first meeting with other tenants and hear what others who took part in the survey think?« The aim is to find participants for the meeting: they should explain and assert their wishes, not me, not the organizer.

Now it was a matter of turning their wishes into effective demands. I asked myself, who could meet their wishes, affirm their goals? The task of the organizers is to make recommendations based on information and knowledge about the city administration and local politics: who would meet with the tenants and who would have to answer their questions? The organizer should also make suggestions as to which demands could lead to an initial victory and to whom and where these demands should be made. And then discuss the next possible steps with residents, which could lead step by step to the next victories and successes.

At the first meeting of the approximately 30 participating tenants, the participants agreed with the proposal to submit a motion at the annual citizens' town hall meeting of the neighbourhood. The next steps were discussed and tasks were assigned: Who will write the motion? Who will read it out at the meeting? Who will attend? When and where will we meet? Another important question was: Who is eligible to vote? At the residents' meeting, the proposal to apply for a planning committee with tenant participation was unanimously approved and the application was submitted to the city council.

The AHA members created this organisational chart to analyse power structures and presented it to all tenants at their monthly tenants' meeting (called the »Großer Kreis«).

Jubiläumstiftung Alte Heimat und Thomas-Wimmer-Haus



Initial demands and gains – Structures for participation and co-determination

During the three-month waiting period, the group met regularly to plan the next steps and prepare. They conducted their own written survey in the neighbourhood, distributing it to all letterboxes and receiving responses from a third of all households. They discussed who else they could approach with their requests. Who needed to be held accountable? For example, government officials. As an organizer, I knew it was important to maintain momentum and, if possible, to publicise the issue. So I recommended talking to the owner. (At the town hall meeting, their representative had talked about repair measures in the »Alte Heimat«).

The planning group decided to formally constitute itself as the »Alte Heimat Working Group – AHA« and, as AHA, to invite the representative of the the owners – the department of municipal real estate – to a public discussion in the housing estate. In February 2013, 100 residents and the head of the municipal department met in the canteen of the Alten- und Sevicezentrum (ASZ) on the estate grounds. Two members of the AHA led the discussion. At the request of the AHA, the representative brought the housing estate's statutes with him. Local politicians had refused to do so, saying that it was not a public document. Its handover was celebrated as a victory.

Tenants were proud to learn important information about their own housing estate. (It is always rewarding to gain knowledge about something that was previously supposed to be secret.) At the public meeting, participants asked questions about the future of their housing estate. The AHA reported on the results of its own written survey and handed over the documentation to its guest. We had practised questions and demands beforehand. The AHA called for a planning committee with their participation and asked the department head to report this to the municipal representative and get back to them. He promised to pass the motion on. Another victory. This meant they had already incorporated the next step.

When the city council decided on april 18th 2013 to convene the planning committee with the participation of the AHA¹², the AHA itself sat in the balcony of the council chamber and listened. It felt like a great victory. From the summer of 2013 onwards, there was a regular meeting every two weeks. Three representatives of the AHA, including the organizer, were always present, together with planners, architects and representatives from the department of municipal real estate and GEWOFAG. Later, the AHA applied for a grant from the Munich Self- Help Centre to cover the fees for an architect in an advisory role who accompanied the AHA to the regular meetings. The committee was also expanded to include employees from the Office for Housing and Migration, GEWOFAG and the social institutions working in the settlement. This committee initially met every two weeks and later on a monthly basis. During the coronavirus pandemic, the meetings took place via Zoom – jaz enabled the AHA to participate from home during the pandemic, in some cases with borrowed computers.

During the process

We never found out whether the regular meeting participants had expected the AHA representatives to attend regularly and on a long-term basis, or whether they were rather surprised by this. The AHA did not miss a single meeting over the years. They also met with the architect in charge and the project management. During tours of the housing estate, they informed the project management about problems they had noticed, held discussions with the Laim District council and its social committee, and invited the local government representative to public meetings¹³ at the senior citizens' and service centre (ASZ). They always prepared for these discussions with the organizer. Afterwards, they sat down together and evaluated the process, the successes and the failures. They asked themselves whether they had achieved what they had set out to do and what they should pay attention to next time.

Politicians sometimes attended the AHA monthly breakfasts for everyone in the housing estate. The AHA spoke to the press and, together with students from the KSH, organised an exhibition at the ASZ with photos and interviews with tenants about their opinions on »life in the housing estate«.

Over time, the AHA and the organizers were repeatedly surprised at how much we all learned about decision-making processes and topics such as building fabric, the interests of the various authorities

¹² The decision can be found in the City of Munich's council information system under the name of meeting document no. 08-14 / 11669.

¹³ The public meetings soon became their plenary meetings. The AHA soon gave them the name »Großer Kreis« or »Großen Kreis«.

and what was happening in other neighbourhoods. It was a gift to have the advice of an architect with years of experience in politics (he was also a former city councillor and had been involved in urban development processes).

As you can see, the AHA and the tenants were in regular contact with decision-makers in the authorities and in politics. Their understanding of the possibilities for taking action on their own behalf grew. In training sessions with a FOCO trainer, they carried out power analyses and learned who they could effectively submit a proposal to. Public meetings were practised in advance and reflected upon afterwards.

In order to be successful in the long term, strategic preparations with the consultant or organizer were essential. The long-term willingness of AHA members to participate regularly and continuously, to take on key roles and leadership positions in strategic meetings and negotiations, and to assume responsibility for public relations, accounting and financing also played a significant role. They did not view their participation as a one-off event, but wanted to achieve lasting success.

To keep tenants up to date, the AHA invited all tenants to monthly information meetings – a general assembly – which they called the »Großer Kreis« – sometimes with members of the regular meetings and representatives of the housing office.

In the Großer Kreis, tenants voted that two AHA members should represent them in the Jour Fixe, in discussions with the authorities or with the press. The department of municipal real estate commissioned an architect to inspect the structural integrity of all buildings. As these were built from the remains of buildings destroyed by bombs during the war, the structure was not exactly reliable and varied from house to house. When the architect presented his findings to the department of municipal real estate and GEWOFAG during a tour of the estate, we were there as members of the regular meetings and the AHA asked many questions. This meant that we knew very early on which buildings could be preserved and which could not.

In the meantime, the AHA knew from its surveys and discussions what the majority of tenants wanted for the future of their complex: »We don't want demolition. Then we would have to move somewhere unfamiliar for the duration of the construction work and would not be able to support each other. We would not feel comfortable. We are old. By the time the new buildings are finished, many of us will surely be dead. We prefer to continue living here, where we look after each other. And perhaps we would live long and more easily.« The way the AHA presented these statements at the regular meetings and public meetings was very impressive and convincing. It became clear that tenants had a different perspective than professional technicians and civil servants. It was always impressive because the members of the AHA – all between 60 and 90 years old themselves – were able to empathise with this perception very well. We sensed in the regular meetings that those present were looking for solutions.

Over the course of many years, the AHA members came closer and closer to realising their ideas. In the first steps, they gained the support of social workers at the Office for Housing and Migration and then from their boss, Rudolf Stummvoll, head of the office. Later, in a public meeting with the department of municipal real estate, Axel Marquardt, they discussed the historical value of the estate and the situation of its residents, who, as he himself said, »are not on the sunny side of life«. As a long-standing member of the social democratic party he was familiar with the history of the settlement, the vision and the contribution of the first mayor after the war, Thomas Wimmer, SPD. The then head of GEWOFAG also showed interest in the project. The chairman of District council 25 in Laim, Josef Mögele, also SPD, occasionally took part in the regular meetings. The fact that the AHA researched and always upheld this part of the city's history and showed pictures and films at meetings about the fundraising campaign by the people of Munich for the housing estate construction as part of the city's 800th anniversary in the 1950s was perhaps one reason for the success of their demands. As representatives of local politics and the housing association, mayor Dieter Reiter, Local Government Officer Axel Markwardt, Head of the Office for Housing and Migration Rudolf Stummvoll and the spokesperson for the GEWO-FAG management, Dr Klaus-Michael Dengler, each wrote an article for the book, »Neue, alte Heimat, Porträt einer Sozialen Siedlung«.¹⁴

¹⁴ See <https://www.jane-addams-zentrum.de/buch-neue-alte-heimat-portraet-einer-sozialen-siedlung/> (accessed on 26 May 2025).

A 2015 city council resolution stipulated that the settlement should not be demolished and that a maintenance plan should be developed.

The character remains, SZ, 28 February 2016¹⁵

The Alte Heimat housing estate should not become a neighbourhood where rents are barely affordable. The municipal housing association Gewofag and the municipal representative announce careful renovation.

The only thing missing was for the protagonists to embrace each other on stage. That's how ostentatiously the partners presented their mutual "agreement" with their "very special" clientele. Municipal affairs officer Axel Marquardt and representatives of the municipal housing association Gewofag, including its managing director Klaus-Michael Dengler, announced not only the start of the major renovation of the Alte Heimat housing estate in May. They also took the opportunity to praise the culture of communication that has developed between the developers and the tenants. According to Marquardt, the latter are "Munich citizens who are not on the sunny side of life" and therefore depend on being able to afford their homes even after a complete renovation.

It is important to note that the spacious complex in the far east of Laim is a neighbourhood that was once built as a foundation settlement by the city for Munich residents who had been bombed out during the war and has since taken in the needy, the elderly and those with physical and mental disabilities. This is still the case today and has been extended to include people who fled their homes not so long ago. In short, around 1,000 people live here who are either not blessed with money or good health. Citizens, says the local government official, who are afraid that the city will turn their home into a "completely normal housing estate and thus lose affordable rents". However, with its 2015 decision, the city council set the course for preserving the character of the Alte Heimat. "So we will not install golden door handles, but will renovate with a sense of proportion and caution." Once he gets going, Marquardt does not shy away from pathos: "The department of municipal real estate has a patron saint function for the residents."

Two days before the press conference, Gewofag employees and Marquardt had already informed the residents. Around 250 had come. "The mood was very positive," says Götz Keßler. "I attribute this to our very intensive cooperation with the residents' association of the Alte Heimat." He now looks around with undisguised pride: "I believe this is the result of a successful communication process."

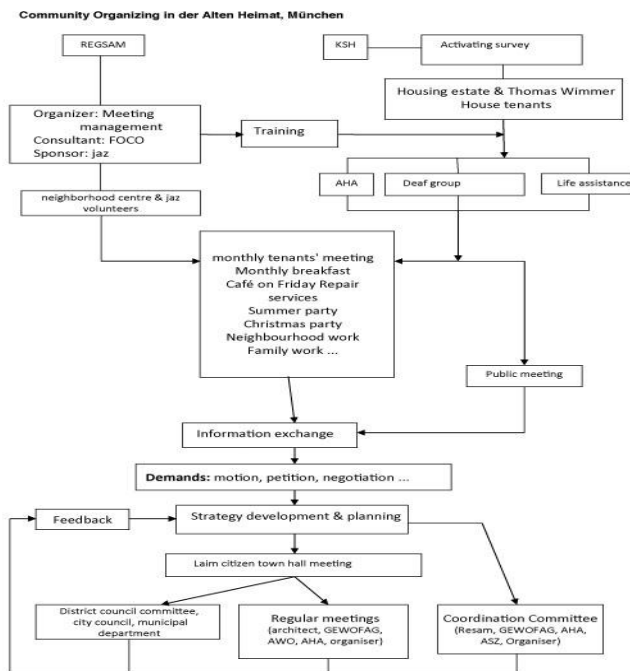
The settlement remains, what happens next?

In addition to the regular meetings, the AHA and the organizers had other sources of information and the opportunity to make demands: in addition to the decision to establish a planning committee, the city decided to maintain the REGSAM coordination committee. The AHA and the organizers became members and were able to negotiate with official representatives there. We could always count on the support of the experts on the committee, which gave us more power. A few years later, REGSAM appointed the director of the neighborhood centre to moderate the committee.

Surveys on a wide variety of topics and wishes in the housing estate were conducted repeatedly, and countless meetings were held to discuss, for example, the latest construction plans, the results of technical inspections of each individual house presented by experts, or the concept for the inner

¹⁵ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/laim-der-charakter-bleibt-1.2884473>.

courtyards, which was decided jointly with the tenants.



Community organizing in Alte Heimat, Munich, © Graphic: Nghiem Xuan Tuan

5. Campaigns

Balconies

We cannot list all the events here. One that had a major impact was the discovery that the balconies were at risk of collapsing. Within a very short time, workmen appeared at the apartment doors and blocked access to the balconies. Tenants contacted the AHA with questions and concerns: »Where am I supposed to hang my laundry now? What about the tables, chairs and boxes that I didn't have time to bring inside? What about my cat?«

People living on the ground floor were also affected, as their small terraces were also closed off to eliminate the danger posed by the balconies above. The AHA continued to prove itself a reliable committee to report problems for problems and responded quickly. Members immediately went through the estate and photographed closed-off balconies and terraces that looked particularly bad: e.g. because they had been boarded up with boards with faded paint from the stock of a former kindergarden. Other photos showed that the elimination of one hazard had created a new one, for example because the escape route from the room of the organisation who supports people with mental disabilities was no longer available due to the closure of the terrace.

The AHA brought the photos of the blocked balconies to the next regular meeting and demanded solutions, in particular a rent reduction for those affected – for two reasons: loss of balcony use and reduced living space. When the property management company hesitated, it was helpful to have the consulting architect on hand: he suggested calling the tenants' association and obtaining comparative values. Just one day before the Christmas break, the rent reduction was calculated and the tenants were informed at short notice.



AHA wins balcony repairs, © Photo: AHA Munich

The construction work took many months and was noisy and unpleasant. Some windows could not be opened and the balconies could still not be used. But the quick clarification and the proposed solutions that their own representative, the AHA, pushed through gave the tenants confidence. There were hardly any further complaints.

GEWOFAG (now Münchner Wohnen) regularly told us that they had never experienced a renovation in a complex without legal proceedings. The Tenants' Centre reports: In this housing estate, it is noticeable »that we talk to each other.« In the event of misunderstandings, the Centre talks to the AHA and »we can then come to an agreement.« The management of the tenants' centre meets several times a year to exchange ideas with the AHA.

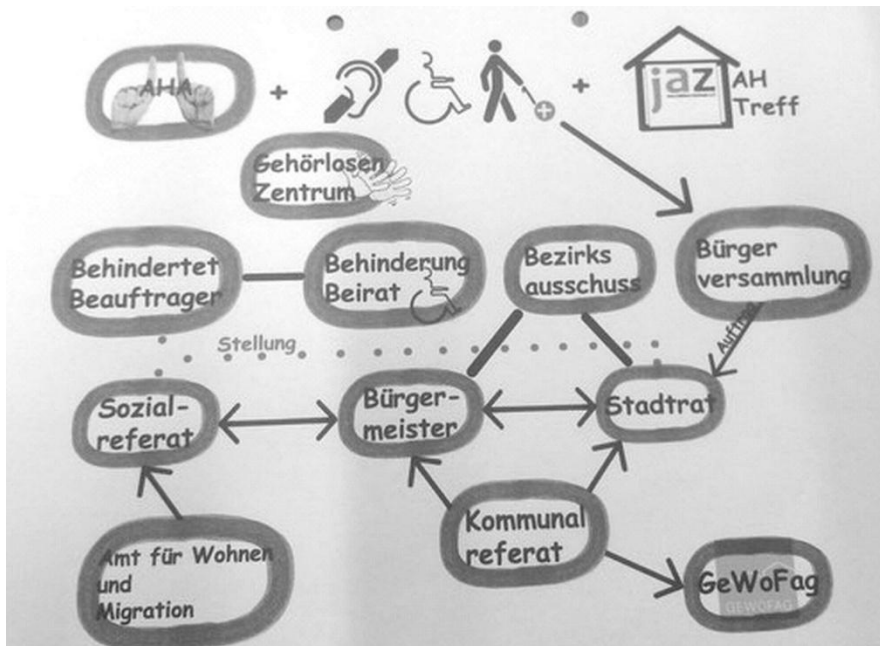
Accessibility and deaf tenants

One issue that has been with us from the beginning and in various ways is accessibility. We learned a lot about it: stories from neighbours, organizing processes and what is really important.

As with any organizing process, the first question was: Who are we talking about? Who lives here? Some of the groups of people in the neighbourhood were connected to social institutions and organisations in the neighbourhood. At the beginning, we knew little about them and their needs. However, through outreach in the neighbourhood in various ways (door-to-door canvassing/activating surveys, written surveys, invitations), we were able to establish contact with tenants who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to participate and represent their interests. People who lived in seclusion in the housing estate. During the first surveys, the organizer knocked on the door of a deaf neighbour, without knowing, of course, that he was deaf. So she didn't know that it was important to ring the doorbell so that the light signal would come on and he would know that someone was at the door. She wondered why he didn't open the door, because she could hear that he was at home. It was only later, when he left the flat, that she realised that he was deaf. A flyer with an invitation to interviews also gave deaf neighbours the opportunity to come forward and ensure that their interests were represented in the interviews. Sign language interpreters were needed for the interviews.

Fortunately, the organizer was in contact with one of her deaf students. Through her, she quickly learned how to request an interpreter and what to look out for during meetings. For example, it is important that there are no tall objects on the table so that eye contact between the sign language interpreter and deaf people is not disrupted. This meant that the deaf neighbours were able to make their own decisions and participate from the outset. A leader quickly emerged within the group, thanks to his interest in various topics, his clear demands for equality, his communicative nature and his relationships with many neighbours. From the outset, the deaf neighbours attended meetings, as did

the interpreters; it was normal. This quickly led to the AHA's willingness to support their »special« demands. First, they applied for funding for the interpreters from the Munich Self-Help Centre. In addition, funds were acquired through the Office for the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Later, the costs were covered by the annual funding for the meeting provided by the neighborhood work programme of the Office for Housing and Migration. The costs were calculated by the deaf tenants during a FOCO training session with Paul Cromwell. They worked out how many meetings there could be in a year: group meetings, monthly tenants' meetings, discussions with politicians and the municipal housing association to identify interests and make demands. This FOCO training also resulted in the graphic below from the group's »leader«.



Networking sketch of the deaf group, © Michael Nauert

The graphic shows that people in wheelchairs and blind people were also included. So there was a willingness and understanding among different people and groups to stand up for issues that affect different groups. This willingness strengthened the community and neighbours learned that it is worthwhile to stand up for issues that do not affect them personally. With each campaign won, the group gains more power, more public contacts and allies, who are then helpful in dealing with the next issue, which in turn affects others. Thanks to this understanding and the attention that deaf people gained, it was no problem for hearing people to wait in the monthly tenants' meeting until everything had been interpreted back and forth.

In the course of the organizing work in the »Alte Heimat«, issues were addressed at various levels; issues that affected only individuals; issues that affected only certain groups in the neighbourhood; and issues that affected the entire neighbourhood. The group of deaf neighbours got involved in neighbourhood issues, as they were naturally affected by them and received information about them, but also in issues that initially only affected them. One of these was the long-standing struggle for video intercom systems.

During the course of the repair work, intercom systems were installed for greater security at the request of all tenants, supported by applications from the institutions in the coordination committee, REGSAM and jaz. However, these cannot be used by deaf people. The support of social workers was particularly important here, as they explained that tenants were increasingly refusing to open their doors during home visits because they did not know who was there and feared fraudsters. They expressed their concerns about the growing isolation of individual tenants. In addition, the new canopies over the building entrances and letterboxes requested by the tenants meant that deaf people were unfortunately no longer able to see who was at the door from their windows. The demand for video intercom systems was therefore put forward.

After initial applications were rejected, the group of deaf people found support in the networks set up by the AHA and the neighborhood centre in the residents' association and through petitions signed by deaf and hearing people. Now the question of financing arose. Initially, the group encountered a lot of resistance and was referred from one office to another. However, an application for support from local politicians was approved, so that part of the necessary funds were made available through a foundation. These applications were also endorsed by GEWOFAG.

Through networking and consultation with other agencies, a possible funding programme for the facilities was found. It turned out that this was not suitable either: on the one hand, the applications were very complicated and required very personal information about the deaf people, which was clearly rejected by the group's spokesperson: »I'm not going to strip naked for equality.« At the same time, it also became clear that the funding for the current year had been used up.

The route via the existing structures had failed, so the deputy mayor, Verena Dietl, was invited to visit the site as a potential decision-maker. As chair of the supervisory board of the housing association that manages the estate, she was able to approve the installation of the video intercom systems. Organizing, in this case talking to decision-makers, brought success. After many setbacks, many consultations and discussions with the help of sign language interpreters, the financing was secured and the video intercom systems were installed shortly afterwards and celebrated with great fanfare.

Through the four-year organizing campaign, which resulted in the great achievement of installing video intercoms, the deaf tenants got to know us better, built trusting relationships and have since come to us with everyday problems, such as minor repairs in their flats, or even with bigger problems – such as recently, when one of their flats was broken into. The jaz volunteer at the neighborhood centre made the flat safe again. He took the opportunity to suggest to them, as an organizer, that they use the meeting rooms as an independent group to discuss new topics, such as deaf allowance and sign language interpreting on television news. He took part in the first constituent discussions. We will see what comes of it.

Families

The group of families – mostly with Afghan roots – who first came to Germany alone as young refugees also have their own issues, whether it's finding accommodation, applying to the employment office or for child benefit, computer skills or preparing their children for German school. These families with a refugee background are the only younger people in the settlement and were therefore very isolated when we started the project, and some of them also encountered xenophobia. This was exacerbated by the normal noise of children. As the only tenants with children who in addition have a migration background, they were sometimes met with mistrust. After an »Afghan evening« featuring cuisine from their homeland, tensions eased. The computer course our team member Tuan offered, was well received and led to other activities such as preparation for the taxi driver's exam and a children's programme. For three years, there was an »Alte Heimat« football team. jaz's years of experience in working with refugees helped us to recognise how cohesion could be encouraged. The mutual trust that developed as a result led to families participating in community cafés and parties and helping with room management and electrical work. The young families also support each other. In March 2025, when FOCO trainers visited the »Alte Heimat«, two of the families came to report on what the neighborhood centre meant to them.

Thomas Wimmer House

The Thomas Wimmer House – named after Mayor Thomas Wimmer – (TWH for short) is located on the outskirts of the settlement and had a reputation in the neighbourhood for being a home for particularly poor people. In fact, the rents were very low (approx. 200 €), the flats had no baths or showers; only shared showers on the ground floor, and the only lift for the six-storey building was old and often out of order. The nearly 100 single apartments were home to people who were at risk of homelessness, had little money, were over 60 and/or had physical limitations.

The installation of a second lift in 2015 was another successful campaign by the AHA. For many elderly and mobility-impaired people, it was impossible to get into their flats or carry their shopping into their flats without it. The application was submitted by the AHA at the residents' meeting and was supported thanks to PR and discussions with the District council. The application was approved and the lift was built. The tenants in the TWH knew each other, helped each other and met regularly in the garden or in the common room. We know from some of the residents how much they enjoyed living in

the TWH, partly because they were able to pay the rent themselves on a small pension or with a job as a cleaner. The affordable living space, the independent life, the estate with its social environment and the community in the Thomas Wimmer House were more than »just living space« for many.

In the course of the renovation work in the estate, it was unclear for a long time what would happen to the building. It became increasingly neglected, the number of vacant flats increased and so did the fears and concerns of the residents. The flats that became vacant had not been re-let since 2019. Every time someone died or moved out, the building became emptier and more eerie. Empty flats and the basement were broken into several times, and the roof was leaking. The situation with the showers and other problems were not resolved as quickly as the lift. It was important to everyone to remain in the estate.

The AHA organised discussions for residents in the building with the department of municipal real estate and with the members of the regular meetings and the district council was also invited. There were always new proposals and various plans for an extension and expansion of the building. An extension was announced in the neighbourhood, which led to protests among the neighbours. For years, there was no result. Together with students and residents of the building, we conducted surveys in the building: »What do you want? To stay in the housing estate? To move closer to your family?« We prepared both the students and the tenants for this: »How do I conduct a one-on-one conversation?« Signatures were also collected to involve the tenants. This was followed by a written report on the surveys and a presentation of the results on site in the housing estate with local politicians. Residents and social institutions had their say. It highlighted the situation in the building and the wishes of the tenants.

Finally, in 2022, the news came that the building would be demolished. Thanks to persistent inquiries and demands by the AHA and the residents of Thomas-Wimmer- Haus to city officials and local politicians, all residents were able to move to another flat in the housing estate (old or new building) and received help with the move. This was a real success after 10 years of discussions, exchanges and demands by the residents, which were presented by the AHA at the regular meetings. After all, it was extremely important for the tenants to stay in the housing estate: they know the area, they know each other and help each other. The community remains intact. Some even find their new flat better than their previous one. A triumph – there are showers or baths where they now live.

The solidarity among residents during actions and discussions on topics at Thomas- Wimmer-Haus was remarkable! The commitment and growing expertise of AHA and the experience of community organizing, including advice from the architect, were decisive. The neighbourhood and the community played a particularly important role in the successful negotiations for and at Thomas Wimmer House. Now the building is being demolished, leaving a large empty space. The new building will be larger, with more flats (with bathrooms) and a mixed occupancy, not just pensioners.

As a result of these campaigns and the relationships that were built, the municipal housing association also approached AHA to discuss issues such as cable TV contracts, district heating, stairwell cleaning, garden and courtyard planting, and restoration of the fountain dedicated to donors; this meant that the residents' opinions were represented and conflicts were largely avoided.

6. Further ingredients for successful organizing

We couldn't predict the range of issues and the outcomes. The solidarity and the feeling of being able to fight back were a relief for the tenants and for us. The communication channels maintained by the AHA were important: for example, the »Große Kreis« (monthly tenants' meeting), to which the AHA invited people every month with flyers in the building entrances. Tenants were able to ask questions directly to guests from the authorities or politics. Sometimes the architect or gardener was there to answer questions or provide information. Sign language interpreters enabled the deaf group to participate regularly. Hearing people quickly learned to respect the extra time required for this. The group supported by the organisation who supports people with mental disabilities also found a place and joined in the discussions. Depending on the topic, between 30 and 70 people attended.

The monthly breakfasts organised by AHA continued to strengthen the community, as did the various celebrations and events offered jointly by AHA and jaz. Pizza or coffee *to go* and the annual fountain festival with a raffle at the beginning of August were particularly popular. These activities were not

classic organizing events, but served to get to know each other better, build trust and enable informal communication. Above all, they were moments of solidarity.

- Since 2011, the settlement and its residents have endured almost uninterrupted noise, uncertainty and contradictory news: continuous noise from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Paths to the underground and bus stops suddenly were blocked, the main route for four years. The rubbish bins are regularly moved and suddenly end up under the kitchen window. The landscape gardeners quit and the courtyards became overgrown.
- On top of that, there was a new administration and new bills, higher utility costs, new cable and television contracts, and satellite dishes were no longer allowed.
- A kindergarden and a daycare centre were newly built and have been in operation for three years.
- Not only are the flats to be demolished, but the senior citizens' and service centre, the main meeting place in the estate for lunch, advice, card games, yoga and much more, is also to be relocated. Statement after statement that the ASZ will be built elsewhere and their beautiful, expensively renovated building will be demolished. There was no reliable news – for 10 years it had been said that it would be demolished soon. The tenants signed a petition stating that it should not be demolished. The mayor replied that the decision had already been made. But the ASZ is still standing!
- For several years, three large rows of houses with around 200 empty flats stood until they were finally demolished and are now being rebuilt.
- The counselling offices of the support services in the estate moved to other buildings almost every year. The magnificent old trees were felled.

The residents of »Alte Heimat« have survived these thirteen years surprisingly well. We dare to say that it was important that the AHA and the neighborhood centre could be relied upon. The fact that the AHA and the organizers took part in the regular meetings and had a source of additional information in regular discussions with the head of the tenants' centre and the project management meant that residents' questions could be answered. The tenants had experienced in the monthly tenants' meeting how the AHA acted as a mouthpiece for everyone. This conveyed a sense of security.

At the same time, the services offered by AHA and neighborhood centre combated isolation. And that strengthened the organizing. There, tenants can discuss the changes, the noise and the uncertainties caused by the change in management. Here, they receive up-to-date information from the regular meetings via AHA.

- People who otherwise hardly ever leave their homes come to the café on Fridays or to the football championship we showed on TV.
- Volunteer activities at or organised by the centre, such as children's birthday parties and children's crafts, help to build community.
- Or help with finding accommodation, especially for families of three to five with a refugee background who have been living in one- to two-room flats for several years.

The neighborhood centre has tools available on loan, and there is usually a jaz volunteer on hand to help with repairs. In our experience, lending tools gives people the opportunity to help and support each other. Solidarity is an important root of community organizing.

- This work created confidence and solidarity. People could rely on the meeting place, jaz and AHA.
- When people come to have their bikes repaired, they often talk about their lives or ask questions.
- Uncomplicated help in everyday life creates relationships and trust, bringing tenants together.
- New tenants looking for help hanging pictures or installing television programmes quickly feel welcome and also come to the café.
- The neighborhood centre offers access to information and solutions to everyday problems, creates contact and direct help,

- The neighborhood centre is a place where different groups can interact and establish contact with us in an uncomplicated manner.

Many people have contributed to the stories and successes told here: the neighbourhood, jazz members, family and friends, and allies from welfare organisations, other social institutions, municipal offices and REGSAM.

Many got involved, unpaid and as a matter of course – THAT'S ORGANIZING!

Here's a new "Alte Heimat"

21 September 2016

The "Alte Heimat" is changing its look: major new construction and renovation projects are planned.

The "Alte Heimat" in Laim is to become a new home. The estate will be renovated and redensified by 2023. Both the district council and the department of municipal real estate have now approved the plans. But not everyone is convinced.

New buildings and extensions will create hundreds of additional flats, and existing buildings will also be expanded and renovated. Everything is scheduled to be completed by 2023, with construction expected to begin in 2018. A residential building with twelve barrier-free flats, a daycare centre and an underground car park will be built on the car park on Hans- Thonauer-Straße. At the same time, two residential buildings with a total of 76 accessible to people with disabilities residential units will be built next to the current Laim Senior Citizens' and Service Centre (ASZ). An integrated neighbourhood centre is also planned there, which will serve as a meeting place and event venue for the residents of the Alte Heimat and as a counterpart to the ASZ-Laim. In the future, this will be relocated to the Westend/Zschokkestraße development area.

There were initial protests from residents against the demolition of the existing ASZ. A motion to preserve it was submitted at the citizen town hall meeting. However, the city rejected this on the grounds that the building would have a negative impact on the character of the park-like inner courtyards "and impair the quality of life in the new building to the east."

At least the citizens were able to achieve one success: the Stifterbrunnen fountain will be preserved. It is to be reinstalled after completion of the construction work on the new neighbourhood square. The fountain commemorates the history of the "Alte Heimat". A foundation was established in 1958 to mark the 800th anniversary of the city of Munich. This enabled Munich residents who had been evacuated during the bombing war to return to the city – to the Alte Heimat neighbourhood.

Many of the buildings there are now in a dilapidated state, and some are being demolished. The housing association GEWOFAG is offering residents comparable flats in new buildings or in other parts of the city. Renovation work is also underway, including the refurbishment of the Thomas Wimmer House. Many elderly people live in the eight- storey building. Until now, most of them did not have their own showers and had to use shared facilities. That is set to change: the flats are being redesigned to create space for individual bathrooms.

Further links

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Authors

Hester Butterfield, former FOCO board member, is co-founder of Jane Addams Zentrum e.V. (jaz) and lecturer at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences Munich (KSH) for community and migration work.

E-Mail: hester.butterfield@googlemail.com

Constanze Ziegler, community organizer and social worker, learned about CO through her work as a jaz colleague in the settlement since 2020. Internship at Virginia Organizing/USA. Active on the FOCO board.

E-Mail: constanzezi@aol.com

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Anne-Marie Marx

How the transition from full-time organizing to »professional volunteering« is bound to succeed. Promoting grassroots democracy by establishing self-organized participation structured

It is one of those warm late summer days this year. Towards evening, 25 members of the neighbourhood association »Malstatt gemeinsam stark e.V.« (MaGS for short) meet in the shady neighbourhood garden for their annual general meeting. Not only do all the board members take turns reporting on their main areas of work over the past year. Some association members also use photos to describe their activities and successes, as well as the challenges they faced: from the regular flea markets, rickshaw rides with senior citizens and the opening of the centre for neighbourhood educational programs to the snails that put the motivation of the neighbourhood gardeners to the test this summer. The efforts to ban heavy duty transit traffic through Lebacher Straße (a major through road), which have now been going on for over nine years, were also frustrating. However, everyone is enthusiastic about the diverse activities surrounding the »Malstatt lebt demokratisch« (Malstatt lives democratically) campaign. On the occasion of the local and European elections in the spring, MaGS initiated and coordinated a local democracy network: the fantastic Kickoff workshop with suggestions for creative ideas for action, the neighbourhood breakfast and, above all, the democracy festival with over 500 visitors at Hambacher Platz were absolute highlights for everyone. Many emphasise how motivating it is and how much fun it is to be active in a community with so many committed people.

At MaGS events such as the one just described, I am always equally amazed and impressed by the lively civil society activities that have developed in MaGS since its foundation. From 2012/2013, I had the opportunity to work as a community organizer on an urban development project to establish the district association »Malstatt gemeinsam stark – MaGS e.V.« (Malstatt Strong Together – MaGS e.V.) as a self-sustaining citizens' organisation in Saarbrücken-Malstatt. Since then, numerous committed individuals have clearly made the structure of the neighbourhood association their own and filled it with life and content. They continue to run the association with great success and with a diversity of topics that I couldn't imagine before at the time. In doing so, they have succeeded in establishing MaGS as an influential voice in the Malstatt district of Saarbrücken.¹

In my opinion, the experiences from Malstatt can encourage other neighbourhoods and communities. In addition to implementing specific projects, the main aim is to create an environment in which people can actively participate and work together to achieve sustainable, positive development in their neighbourhood. In this article, I would therefore like to show how this has been achieved in Malstatt, based on the idea of establishing a self-sustaining citizens' organisation: What is special about the MaGS neighbourhood association? Why is self-organized participation successful here? Why do people get involved here? What does it take to build a permanently effective citizens' organisation?

First, I would like to take a closer look at the process of the development phase and the factors that led to the successful establishment of the structure. In the second part, I will discuss the transition from full-time organizing to the assumption of responsibility by committed volunteers by interviewing the first chairperson of MaGS.

1. Factors for success in the development phase

In 2012, the Malstatt District Office (SBM) – a community work institution of the Diakonisches Werk an der Saar gGmbH (DWS) – already had a wide range of experience with community organizing (CO). In particular, the success in preserving the Wilhelm Meyer Bridge² in 2008 had convinced the employees and district stakeholders of the CO concept. Subsequently, however, it became apparent that, in addition

¹ For more details, see: <https://www.66mags.de/newpage> (accessed on 10 April 2015).

² <https://www.buergergesellschaft.de/praxishilfen/community-organizing/beispiele-aus-der-praxis/buero-fuer-selbstorganisation-und-beteiligung/projektbeschreibung/> (accessed on 11 April 2025).

to the range of tasks involved in community work (GWA), it was not easy to consistently push ahead with the fourth and decisive step in CO – the establishment of self-sustaining structures.

We were disappointed, but fortunately a colleague transferred to the city of Saarbrücken as a social planner. He had the opportunity to apply for funding from the Federal Ministry of Transport, Building and Urban Development (BMVBS) for the project: »Malstatt strong together. Bottom up! – Office for Self-Organisation and Participation in Malstatt«³ – in order to establish a citizen's self-organisation in Malstatt.

Administration and politics support the use of the Community Organizing action plan

In 2009/10, the city administration of LHS developed an initial district development concept for Malstatt⁴ in coordination with community work and other organisations and individuals from Malstatt. In it the »establishment of a self-sustaining residents' organisation« had already been formulated as a flagship project under »implementation of community organizing«. With the urban development project »Grüne Insel Kirchberg« (Green Island Kirchberg)⁵, participation in the district had undergone a further boost in quality.

The »Malstatt gemeinsam stark. Bottom-up!« project aimed to bring together, intensify and consolidate the various participation processes. To this end, community organizing was to be consistently applied as an action concept in all four phases – listening / researching / problem solving / organisational development. The project application explicitly formulated the concrete steps to be taken and set deadlines for them, the target being the establishment of a citizen selforganisation for the permanent representation and organisation of district interests by the end of the project in September 2013. The Social Affairs Department of the City of Saarbrücken acted as sponsor for the project »Bottom up«, together with Diakonisches Werk an der Saar gGmbH as the implementing partner.

The activities were constructively accompanied and supported by a steering committee comprising various municipal authorities, including the city planning office, the immigration and integration office, the parks and forestry office, and others. In this respect, the Bottom-up project was embedded in corresponding, integrated district development measures. Particularly during on-site meetings with citizens and officials from the administration and politics, bottom-up and top-down municipal activities demonstrated good synergies and, at times, surprisingly rapid success.

The establishment of a citizens' organisation as a specific project goal

The basic prerequisite for the successful establishment of MaGS was simply that the main objective of the »Bottom-up« funding project was to establish an independent citizens' organisation for self-determined neighbourhood development and as an effective representation of interests from the bottom up. Of course, not every goal is achieved. But our practical experience in community-based social work had shown that it is crucial to set clear objectives and to provide the necessary personnel and time capacities, our efforts regularly stalled after the third organizing step – Problem solving. That is why the organisational development had fallen by the wayside until now.

In previous years, both full-time GWA staff and other local stakeholders – such as the citizen's campaign for cleanliness in Malstatt, pastors from both church communities and residents involved in various citizens' forums – had experienced that funding programmes come and go, that full-time staff come and go, and that, as a result, participation and networking structures regularly have to be rebuilt from scratch. In this respect, after the Grüne Insel Kirchberg project, many stakeholders expressed the desire to

³ https://www.nationale-stadtentwicklungspolitik.de/NSP/SharedDocs/Projekte/NSPProjekte/Soziale_Stadt/Selbstorganisation_Malstatt.html (accessed on 11 April 2025).

⁴ <https://www.saarbruecken.de/media/download-532873475177e> (The Green Island Kirchberg), p. 46 (accessed 11 April 2025).

⁵ https://www.nationale-stadtentwicklungspolitik.de/NSP/SharedDocs/Projekte/NSPProjekte/Soziale_Stadt/Grüne_Insel_Kirchberg_Saarbruecken.html (accessed 11 April 2025).

establish a structure of self-organized participation in Malstatt that would be sustainable and would not collapse again when funding ended and staff changed.

Added to this was our assessment that Malstatt lacked a political force that adequately represented the interests of the people who live here and gave them a voice. At that time, there were hardly any city councillors from Malstatt on the city council who were available to local people as contact persons for problems or concerns and who saw themselves as representatives of their living conditions. This lack of political representation was a strong motivating factor in establishing a structure for self-organized participation.

Regular professional support for the process of activation and self-organisation

Community organizing is a very specific concept for action that requires structured and goal-oriented work. In this respect, it was essential for the success of the project that full-time and volunteer staff were able to receive regular advice and training from the experienced organizer and co-trainer Paul Cromwell throughout the entire duration of the project.

Paul Cromwell visited Malstatt regularly every six to eight weeks. In intensive coaching sessions, he taught me, as the organizer in charge, how to apply the steps of organizing in practice. Strategic considerations about the next steps were closely coordinated with the project sponsor. In a large number of one-on-one conversations, I experienced firsthand how important it is for me to build a personal relationship with people, as someone they know and trust. Listening to people and learning about their own interests as topics for organizing became central to my work: What motivates them? What annoys them? What are they willing to get involved in? And, as a die-hard social worker, I had to repeatedly take a step back and consistently practise the central principle of organising, which is »not to do anything for people, but to do everything to motivate and empower them to do it themselves«.⁶

Every time Paul Cromwell visited, joint training and planning meetings were held with volunteers. With his unique personality, characterised by friendliness, humour and a sincere interest in people, he managed to inspire the participants with the ideas of CO. He taught everyone the specific steps involved in CO and together we planned the next steps. At each subsequent meeting, the plans were evaluated, priorities were set and the next milestones were established – and all this was always done with a great deal of fun.

Paul's reports of the success of similar projects elsewhere and how people there had managed to improve their living conditions had a contagious and motivating effect, encouraging people to try something similar in Malstatt. Some of the participants, intrigued by the local workshops, subsequently took part in various training courses and exchange meetings lasting several days for Germanspeaking and European CO projects, organized by Forum Community Organizing e.V. (FOCO)⁷ 8 and the European Community Organizing Network (ECON)⁸, e.g. in Berlin, Bucharest and Katowice. Mutual visits to similar civic organisations took place. The participants benefited enormously from this exchange with activists elsewhere. Reports of successes, challenges and actions were always found to be very encouraging.

To build an organisational structure is crucial

The first three steps of an organizing process were carried out in the manner described above by January 2013. At a large meeting, the individual action groups presented the issues they had identified to the mayor, who was present, and the specific concerns were subsequently successfully addressed. At the same time, we suggested to the activists that they set up their own working group with the aim of finding out how they could build their own structure that would be effective in the long term. Encouraged by their

⁶ For more information on the differences between community work and community organizing, see: <https://www.buergergesellschaft.de/mitentscheiden/methoden-verfahren/methoden-und-verfahren-der-buergerbeteiligung-von-a-bis-z/community-organizing/praxisbeispiel-malstatt-gemeinsam-stark> (accessed on 11 April 2025).

⁷ <https://www.fo-co.info/> (accessed 11 April 2025).

⁸ <https://organizeeurope.org/> (accessed 11 April 2025).

successes to date, a so-called structure group was formed, which from that moment on worked independently, parallel to the action groups working on content.

Examples of other organizing groups were researched, and proposals for statutes were drafted and discussed. In particular, however, it was considered important to enshrine values of mutual cooperation, such as trust and respect, as the basis for future work in the neighbourhood in a preamble to the statutes. Everyone was determined to take the step of establishing a structure.

In October 2013 – right after the end of funding of the »Bottom-up« organizing project⁹ – the time had come: at a meeting attended by over 20 people, the founding of MaGS, including its statutes and board of directors, was decided – initially, however, only as an unregistered association (n.e.V.) in order to gain initial experience with the independent structure. This marked a key step towards establishing self-determined participation in the sense of self-empowerment. Two years later, the association was entered in the register of associations as an e.V., not least so that it could collect donations and apply for small grants from the city.

Finding the right People

But the fact that people are actually willing to take personal responsibility for the process became clear when Siegfried Gress, one of the MaGS activists – who was elected MaGS's first chairman a few months later – came into my office one day in the summer of 2013 and asked me: »Show me how organizing works!« That was the impetus for me to begin transferring responsibility from full-time organizers to volunteers.

Siegfried Gress had joined the group of activists during the course of the organizing project. He was annoyed that the municipal parks department had cut down an old lime tree on the square in front of his house. The project seemed like a suitable way for him to protest against this – and ultimately, he was able to get a new lime tree planted in the same spot a few months later. I subsequently accompanied and supported him and others in gradually taking on leadership roles in MaGS themselves – from preparing meetings, chairing discussions and taking minutes to strategically planning the next steps.

A FOCO training course on fundraising in Malstatt in October 2013 convinced the MaGS activists present how important it would be for a group like theirs to have their own money and thus be able to act independently of sponsors, politicians or administrators. They learned to overcome their shyness about asking neighbours and local businesses for money and introduced membership fees. They became increasingly proud of their financial independence and of being able to finance their own posters and similar items.

Initial successes encourage

The first major issue arose: how to acquire funding of »Soziale Stadt« (a national program to support disadvantaged neighbourhoods) to Malstatt. A network coordinated by MaGS with two churches and two community work projects began to work towards this goal. Siegfried Gress and others from the MaGS board subsequently held various political background discussions on the topic. The group continued to receive advice and support from me, now back as an employee of GWA, albeit with less time on my part.

Years earlier, there had already been a »Soziale Stadt« initiative by professional social workers – unfortunately without success. This time, however, under the leadership of MaGS, the idea developed into MaGS's first major success story. With events such as the planning workshop »Malstatt neu/anders denken« (March 2014), citizens made their voices heard in politics and administration with the demand that the district fundamentally needed funding. As a result of concerted lobbying by residents and relevant actors in the district, the state capital of Saarbrücken finally registered the district for the »Soziale Stadt« urban development programme. Since then, more than 12 million euros in funding have been invested in a

⁹ <https://www.buergergesellschaft.de/praxishilfen/community-organizing/beispiele-aus-der-praxis/office-for-self-organisation-and-participation> (accessed 11 April 2025).

wide variety of urban development projects in Malstatt. The stakeholders clearly proved to be very effective – »not least because they included, and still include, people who have political and communication skills and are able to integrate different people«.¹⁰

2. Interview with Guido Vogel-Latz about his work in the district association (from 2014)

We now learn what exactly this political and communicative skill of the MaGS actors, as formulated in the above quotation, consists of in a conversation I had with the first chairman of MaGS, Guido Vogel-Latz¹¹, in the summer of 2024. In this interview, he describes his view of the beginnings of MaGS and how, in the eleven years since its foundation, MaGS has succeeded in creating a vibrant civil society in Malstatt through community engagement and the establishment of networking structures.

A. Marx: Guido, you got to know the district association in 2013 in the context of the political background discussions that MaGS held with the Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Green Party) city council faction, among others, on the subject of the »Soziale Stadt«. Afterwards, you often said that you were very impressed by how MaGS appeared in your Bündnis 90/Die Grünen city council faction. What was so special about this group for you? What prompted you to get involved in the district association after your city council mandate ended?

G. Vogel-Latz: Ha, I thought, they're special, they're funny. There was this mixture of naivety, but at the same time the feeling that there was a certain concept behind it, that it was about a big idea and the topic of the »Soziale Stadt«. In 2014, we travelled to Neunkirchen to visit the »Soziale Stadt« project and, among other things, visited the neighbourhood garden. There was a group of 12-13 people who had been mobilised by the neighbourhood manager. It was clear that these participatory structures are attractive because they represent an ideal of participation, of »citizens getting involved«. And I am very familiar with this from what I had already done in youth work structures in previous years, but in the context of a city or district, it was of course a new challenge. That sparked my ambition a little, and I thought, I want to do something like that. It will also fit in well with Malstatt. Above all, however, I saw it as a wide, uncultivated field. At first, the association was largely just an idea of what it could become, which was not unimportant at the time. It wasn't clearly defined. There were lots of good ideas.

A. Marx: Parallel to the demand for a social city, there was the problem of vacant shops. At the time, I thought it was very courageous of the board to say that we would tackle the issue and rent a vacant shop for three months. You like to describe the temporary use of a vacant shop in »Lebacher Street« in Malstatt as the emotional start of MaGS. What exactly do you mean by that?

G. Vogel-Latz: I think the time was right for it. There were vacant premises. There were always at least 15-16 people actively involved in the tours on the subject. And then people like the artist Steffi Westermayer joined in and said, »I'll be present and keep the space available for interested citizens – every day for three months«. There was the »Leerstandsverein« (Vacancy Association) in Saarbrücken, which meant that a structure was already in place to some extent. And then it was also a bit of a coincidence that I happened to know the owner of the shop, and she very kindly said, »I'll let you use the premises.« Then we still had to give it a try. In this case, it was very important to me that the board unanimously agreed to it, so that everyone was on board and committed. And that's when, I believe, the association began to emancipate itself in order to reach the next level.

A. Marx: You often talk about things having to »resonate«. What do you mean by that?

G. Vogel-Latz: There has to be resonance. It's a kind of intuition, the moment you bring up a topic or simply throw out a keyword in the association that doesn't fall on deaf ears, that something comes back... an interest, a comment, that people who also find it interesting come together. That means that there is vibration in the sense of resonance, something that seems to have a certain relevance for people, and

¹⁰ Quote: Schmitz/Schröder, p. 403.

¹¹ Guido Vogel-Latz has been on the board of the neighbourhood association as vice-chairman since July 2014 and as chairman since February 2020.

therefore probably also for the district. Those are sometimes the big resonances, most of the time it's just a small resonance. The big resonance in 2015 was definitely the Town Hall meeting on vacant shops. There we voted to demand a ban on lorries in Lebacher Straße, among other things, and the topic was the only item that had no dissenting votes, i.e. 100% approval. Sometimes it's just small conversations where I pick up on something that's interesting about the topic, e.g. flea markets, which we should revisit. The key is always to take ideas on board and either listen carefully or take concrete action yourself. But it has to be a two-way interaction. Sometimes that means »creative stealing«. It sometimes sounds as if I'm such a creative mind. No, I just listen sometimes and pick up on things that people have said: that would be interesting. And then a lot of things are often decided in the small details, not in the big speech, but in the question of how to implement it in detail afterwards so that it is successful for the association.¹² And then, parallel to the »Soziale Stadt« initiative, the issue of heavy goods traffic on Lebacher Straße arose. This was already a major issue for us, and one where we achieved success relatively quickly: a 30 km/h speed limit and protective lanes for cyclists were introduced just two years later. So even if it wasn't what we actually wanted – namely to ban heavy goods transit traffic through the street – it showed that the association is effective, influential and powerful. And that has already helped to increase membership from 20 to 50 or 60.

A. Marx: In organizing, there is always talk of the importance of self-interest, i.e. the issues that are successfully addressed, but also of the importance of relationships, of the fact that relationships between people must be right. I think MaGS has achieved a good balance in this respect. There is a good sense of cohesion that also pays off in the long term.

G. Vogel-Latz: That reminds me of that typical Malstatt lament: »Everything is always so bad, bad, bad!« That was already very dominant when I joined the board. I found it remarkable that even active people first consider why something can't be done. Not because it wasn't realistic... But it's not good for morale or for group cohesion to always focus on what can't be done. What feels so comfortable and looks so neat and tidy is ultimately also discipline. That not everyone puts their own feelings completely at the centre of attention. But I think we've already overcome the fact that it doesn't work that way.

A. Marx: Why was it so important to you at the time to work against this »bad, bad, bad« attitude?

G. Vogel-Latz: It comes from enjoying my work. It's also a certain kind of »professional« volunteerism. I take volunteerism very seriously. And when I take it seriously, I try to block out anything that gets in the way of enjoying my work. If I want to make a group happy with success, I first have to engage in a bit of »self-fulfilling prophecy« by looking at what I would like to see and not what is there. Reality is always totally frustrating. Take the issue of rubbish, for example. You can get yourself all worked up about it, then people go their separate ways and everyone agrees that things are so bad in Malstatt. Because the streets are littered again a week after the rubbish campaign. The crucial point is that we are not changing Malstatt first, which is a fallacy. The first step is to change ourselves, to change our perspective, both individually and as a group. The group changes its attitude and that has an effect. This is important because it means that we take a different approach to the issues. If we want to bring about long-term change, we have to look at where the levers for change are. So the focus must be on enabling change, not on making it impossible. And ultimately, I know this from Christian youth work. For me, it has something to do with faith. The beginning of all thoughts is faith, not knowledge. I don't know what tomorrow will bring, I can only hope that it will be good. It is hope that drives us forward. We can fail at any time. But ultimately, it is this hope that things will turn out well. And we have to approach this professionally. That's why I talk about »professional« volunteering. We have to take this seriously. It doesn't come (only) through prayer, it comes through action.

¹² Thanks to its financial independence, the association was able to rent a vacant shop in Malstatt from February to May 2015 and – with the support of artist Steffi Westermayer – successfully draw attention to the problem of vacant properties in the district with a remarkable mix of exhibitions, performances and politics. https://igkulturwien.net/fileadmin/userfiles/pressespiegel_scans/SH112-lemm-leerstand.pdf (accessed 11 April 2025).

A. Marx: In its more than 10 years of existence, MaGS can look back on an impressive list of successes – covering an enormous range of topics. How important is it to be able to make a concrete difference in the neighbourhood? In your opinion, how important are successes for your work?

G. Vogel-Latz: It's not possible without them. But I wouldn't overestimate their importance either. I believe that just having a group where people work well together and simply have a good time developing ideas together is already an effective force. It's always a question of how you define success for yourself. For example, I think it's really important to have E-Mail distribution lists where you can remind people of what you've achieved. And achieving something also means meeting regularly and bringing people together who didn't know each other before. These are also successes that may have more of an internal impact, but they form the basis for external successes. You can only do this with people who are largely in agreement. So there are internal and external successes, and they have to be connected. In a workshop held to mark the association's 10th anniversary, participants cited not only impressive successes but also obstacles, such as the fact that politics is tough and that political decision-making processes and bureaucratic procedures often take too long. MaGS has not allowed itself to be discouraged by all this, but has continued to pursue difficult issues. For example, the district association has been fighting for a ban on transit lorries for almost 10 years.

A. Marx: Why is it so difficult to achieve anything substantial in this case?

G. Vogel-Latz: Taking Lebacher Straße as an example, it has to be said that it wasn't a problem with the city's politics that the ban on lorries hasn't been implemented yet. That was something we managed to achieve, so that afterwards everyone in the City said that lorries had to be banned from Lebacher Straße. But now we are entering spheres where it is not just about the city. And that is where we realise our limitations once again. As a neighbourhood association, we have certain limitations per se. And that is where we have to adapt to the circumstances again and continue to communicate. That is why the conversation with the Prime Minister (PM) this summer during her visit to Malstatt was absolutely fantastic. This brought completely different players into the picture, who formulated the issue very differently from their point of view and suddenly talked to the PM about it, completely authentically, which I think will also have an effect. ... so it goes on and on. For me, this is more of an incentive to say: take a breather or two, then let's get going again. It was the same with the education workshop. You have to hope and keep going, and at some point the deciders have caught on at last.¹³

In the example of the educational workshop, at a time when the project seemed to be falling into political oblivion, MaGS succeeded in generating sufficient public pressure through a letter-writing campaign. The neighbourhood association thus ensured that the Bildungswerkstatt project was realised after all. This and similar actions prompted MaGS's cooperation partners to describe MaGS as »really good dogged campaigners with a penchant for success« or »alert citizens« on the occasion of its 10th anniversary. That's the advantage of being a neighbourhood association, because we're not materially dependent on institutions. We're able to move forward with very little baggage, which is extremely important for focusing on our core tasks and pursuing our political interests. And it is similar now with the network »Malstatt lebt demokratisch« (Malstatt lives democratically).¹⁴ As an association, we are already the main driving force behind this process of promoting democracy. We have not made the AfD smaller, which was a nice but unrealistic goal.

Above all, the kick-off workshop¹⁵ awakened many forces and provided completely new impulse. We said we would continue to network in the district, get to know each other better and take appropriate measures. We implemented these measures 100%: 12,000 neighbourhood newspapers were printed and distributed, a Democracy festival was held, breakfast was served on Hambacher Platz – so everything worked out.

¹³ https://www.saarbruecken.de/bildung/bildungswerkstatt_kirchberg (accessed 11 April 2025).

¹⁴ <https://www.66mags.de/soziales/insieme>.

¹⁵ <https://community-saar.de/2024/05/03/malstatt-lebt-demokratisch/>.

We were able to submit the application for funding, establish structures, etc., but we could only do all this because we ourselves have reliable structures, because we can refer to a board that meets regularly. A voluntary structure like this, which is resilient, has many advantages: you are self-sufficient, you are serious, you are predictable. And I think some people were quite impressed that it worked so well. The fact that we have been doing this for years is ultimately a major factor in our success, this predictability that is inherent in it. Overall, there is an awareness that MaGS is a huge opportunity, also for the district.

A. Marx: Many associations complain that they cannot find volunteers. MaGS now has almost 140 members, many of whom are actively involved. You obviously manage to find good people who want to get involved. How do you do that? In your experience, what qualities do people need, both individually and collectively, to be able to actually solve specific problems in the neighbourhood?

G. Vogel-Latz: I think it has something to do with curiosity, and also with enjoying networking. It also has a lot to do with the fact that MaGS is an association, but I would rather say that this association is a networking initiative with the necessary legal structures. The core, the self-image of the association, is more about the idea of networking. The »Molschder Muli« cargo bike and the rickshaw are typical examples of this. They enable people with similar ideas to get to know each other. People who are interested in mobility and cycling. These are topics that appeal to people who have a certain idea of activity or who you can also reach with it. The fact that we rented out cargo bikes was subsequently supported by the city and led to an incredible network. Because the people who rent the bikes from the association tell others about it and talk to other people with similar ideas. But ultimately, you have to approach people, take the risk and, to a certain extent, step out of your comfort zone. Actively reaching out is the key. These are often post-material ideas that play a role. It's often the newcomers to the neighbourhood who network via social media and sometimes get to know each other. And I think that's what sets us apart to a certain extent. Malstatt is not a middle-class neighbourhood in that sense. Malstatt has middle-class elements, but also a strong migrant population and a strong working-class population. What we do is give this middle-class milieu a sense of community where these people can get to know each other, network with each other and thus stabilise this sense of community, because there is so much middle class here. People live relatively far apart, but through this networking, they get to know each other. They know that there is a milieu that is capable of being active and also of moving things forward – an environment where they feel comfortable. And you need media that simplify networking. And then you need to offer forms of action that are not too large to deter people, but also large enough that they are attractive. And you need two, three, four, five positively »crazy« people to join in. And so far, it's worked. Interestingly, there are now more people getting involved as part of the democracy campaign. And what's new is that structures are actually becoming more established, working groups are becoming more established, where I no longer set the pace alone, but where others say, »I'll take the lead and I'll do it«. And you still have to accompany and coordinate that. But it has taken on a different quality. Take the flea market group or the gardening group, for example: these are groups of three or four people who – in cooperation with the board – work largely independently. They are accompanied and supported, but that's all. The distribution of roles is changing. I am still very much needed, but in a completely different function.

A. Marx: That brings me to the question of your personal motivation: you have a demanding job as a vocational school teacher, you have a family. Where do you personally find the strength for this? What does it give you? It doesn't feel like you have to torment yourself.

G. Vogel-Latz: That's exactly it: basically, it's fun. I'm lucky that I know what comes easily to me, what's good for me and what's good for others too. It always looks so easy and carefree. But ultimately, it's all hard work. It's a biographical story of success and failure. I've hit a brick wall often enough. I probably have a basic mental predisposition to always get back up and keep going. I think you need to be a certain type of person who doesn't get frustrated easily, who enjoys being part of a community and working on a project. That's perhaps the crucial point, which is also important in today's world: you don't have to torment yourself when you get involved in society if you combine it with what you enjoy doing anyway. Everyone should do what comes easily to them.

A. Marx: Is there a topic you would like to say something more about?

G. Vogel-Latz: I have just been discussing with a few people in the association how we can focus more clearly on our core values, our guiding principle of thinking globally and acting locally. Very little in the neighbourhood association happens by chance, without a political or thematic context. These are all big issues, sustainability issues, justice, peace issues, which are reflected in the neighbourhood. All these big ideas can be implemented very nicely in the neighbourhood and bring them to life in an exemplary way. This has something to do with Molschder Muli, it has something to do with the waste problem, flea markets have something to do with the recycling topic. These are all issues that ultimately have a strong impact on sustainability, and what we do is already moving in that direction in terms of content.

A. Marx: ...right up to the topic of democracy. The district is the level where all this can be practised. How do I behave towards my neighbours on a small scale and how do I act on a larger scale?

G. Vogel-Latz: That's why it works so well in Malstatt, because Malstatt is the world. The world meets in Malstatt; Malstatt is the world, with 150 nations living here. As I said, you can also take a holiday in Malstatt on the Saarbahn18. You rarely get so many foreign cultures together in one place. And I believe this is an incredible challenge but also an enormous potential that we all draw strength from. Then there are ups and downs, but you just have to keep working on the issues in the district. I meet so many people who say: we're doing something, things are happening – and that's a very good basis for the next 10 years.

The official part of the general meeting is coming to an end. The board was quickly elected, all previous members are continuing, and individual responsibilities have been transferred from older to younger people. And the finances are also in order: donations last year were higher than ever before. It is slowly getting dark and pleasantly mild, with sausages and cheese sizzling on the barbecue. The evening draws to a close with sparkling wine, beer and a nice film on the open-air screen. Once again, it was fun and energising. On the way home, I am once again full of admiration for how MaGS always manages to create this positive, motivating atmosphere in which participants feel comfortable and actively contribute. Despite setbacks and new challenges, they imaginatively counter the current rather pessimistic mood and anti-democratic tendencies in society. They stick to their issues, wrestle with each other to find good solutions and work together to move the neighbourhood forward. Perhaps as in Saul Alinsky's quote on democracy as a process: »Democracy is a vibrant, living sweep of hope and progress which constantly strives for the fulfillment of its objective in life - the search for truth, justice, and the dignity of man.«¹⁶

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www.66mags.de

Author

Anne-Marie Marx is a trained trainer in community organising, diversity and social justice, and a member of the Forum Community Organizing (FOCO).

E-Mail: marxann1957@gmail.com

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Alima Matko

Community organizing as a method in community health promotion

Community organizing can be described as an approach that strives for a very high degree of participation. Like community health promotion, it is oriented towards the concerns and issues of citizens. Since 1987, Styria vitalis has been implementing health promotion in a community setting as part of the »Gesunde Gemeinde« (Healthy Community) network in Styria (Austria). Strengthening social relationships and networking with local structures – such as local associations and institutions – play an essential role in supporting communities. After all, health is created where we spend our daily lives. When people are given the opportunity to help shape their personal environment according to their own ideas, it promotes their well-being and has a positive effect on their health. Since 2015, community organizing has been used specifically as a method of health promotion in Austria. Styria vitalis gained its first experience in the project »FuN – Family-Supportive Neighbourhood in Kapfenberg« (2015–2017)¹. This was followed by the projects »Neighbourhood Living Together« (2018–2020)² and »We for each other« (2022–2024)³.

Community organizing in the context of health promotion and neighbourhoods

Involving citizens in the planning and implementation of health-promoting activities is one of the central demands of the World Health Organisation (WHO) Ottawa Charter from 1986. Community organizing in the context of health promotion means that residents develop a joint language for their concerns and stand up for a cause together. Rosenbrock and Hartung (2012) understand participation »as involvement in decisions that affect one's own lifestyle and one's own social, economic and political situation, and thus always one's own health as well«. Accordingly, in community organizing, the citizens involved decide for themselves which activities contribute to the solution. This participatory approach leads to long-term solutions that are embedded in the respective social context. Community organizing is an emancipatory process (bottom up) because it enables citizens to challenge local political power structures. Feeling that one's interests are taken care of in the community not only strengthens each individual, but also creates a sense of belonging, which in turn has a positive effect on health. A good neighbourhood has been proven to have a positive effect on health. The neighbourhood setting is therefore well suited for health-promoting and primary preventive activities⁴. Neighbourhoods are characterised by geographical proximity, social interaction, but also cultural and social diversity.

Ideally, a neighbourhood network can develop that forms naturally through shared problems or similar social situations and is supported by neighbours taking responsibility. However, in order to create a stable and sustainable network, it is often necessary to have external actors provide impetus, especially in structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods⁵. People who are well integrated into community life and have friends, neighbours or relatives they can rely on are less likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease than people who are lonely⁶. Community organizing can contribute to good neighbourly relations in communities in the long term because the method encourages citizens to get involved in their immediate living environment and participate in public life.

Community organizing processes in Styria based on two practical examples

FuN – Family Supportive Neighbourhood in Kapfenberg (2015–2017)

Styria vitalis first implemented the community organizing method in 2015 in the project »FuN – Family Supportive Neighbourhood in Kapfenberg« in cooperation with ISGS Drehscheibe Kapfenberg⁷. The city of Kapfenberg is a small industrial town with just under 22,000 inhabitants. The focus was on promoting a strong neighborhood and jointly creation of liveable conditions for pregnant women and families with small children. Community organizing helped to encourage the various levels of a community – civil society, business, institutions, associations and politics – to work together.

¹ Styria vitalis 2024a.

² Styria vitalis 2024b.

³ Styria vitalis 2024c.

⁴ Richter/Wächter, 2009, p. 65.

⁵ Richter/Wächter, 2009, p. 64.

⁶ Hämmig, 2016.

⁷ The Integrated Social and Health District Kapfenberg – ISGS Drehscheibe for short – is a central information point in the social and health sector and offers health-promoting and social services for the population of the municipalities of Kapfenberg and St. Marein im Mürtal (Austria).

Activating conversations

In a first step, families with young children (up to 3 years of age) and representatives of various organizations and associations were interviewed in so-called »activating discussions« about the needs and challenges of parents with young children. In line with the snowball principle, at the end of each interview, the interviewees were asked if they could refer us to another person for an interview. A total of 119 discussions were held. The aim of these discussions was to identify the interests and needs of families with young children and to analyze their support requirements. The activating discussions also served to build a pressure group and recruit committed individuals for future core groups. For this purpose guidelines were developed, the results of the discussions were summarized and, at the end, evaluated together with all participants according to key topics. Based on the evaluation, five key topics that were mentioned most frequently were identified:

- The creation of a family-friendly environment in Kapfenberg
- Adapting the framework conditions of childcare facilities
- Creating networking opportunities and meeting places for parents with small children
- Improving playground design for young children
- Optimizing offers for families and providing better information about existing services in Kapfenberg

These five topics were presented in a subsequent step at a meeting (FuN Festival).

Meeting: FuN Festival

To make participation attractive for families with young children, a location was chosen that was well suited for young children. The event was designed to be family-friendly. The more than 50 adult participants with their approximately 30 children were able to vote on the topics that should be pursued further with the participation of interested parties. Parents were given two stickers and experts one sticker to give parents' votes greater weight. The topics that received the most votes were networking opportunities/meeting places for parents and making Kapfenberg more family-friendly. In addition, 15 people agreed to participate in the implementation of the topics.

FuN Café

We launched the FuN Café right at the start of the activating survey: every Wednesday morning, the ISGS opened its premises for an informal meeting of parents with young children. Space, coffee and cake were provided free of charge. Once a month, there was a topic-specific input from experts (e.g. nutrition, development, dental health, education). Parents could ask questions, discuss and exchange ideas. The FuN Café proved to be an ideal complement to the empowering conversations: participants in the café were recruited as discussion partners, and conversely, we invited interviewees to the café. Many mothers became regular visitors, allowing us to stay in continuous contact.

Core group meetings

A total of 21 core group meetings took place between June 2016 and February 2017. At the core group meetings on the topic of »Meeting place and networking«, the parents worked on developing the concept for the Family Living Room (FaWoZi). The parents conducted research by visiting other indoor facilities for families with small children. They discussed the needs that an indoor meeting place should fulfill. It became clear that it should not be a self-managed space, but rather that an employee should supervise the meeting place in order to ensure its long-term existence. The search for suitable premises then began, as did the process of finding a name and designing a logo. The core group »Family-friendly environment« created a digital map providing an overview of playgrounds in Kapfenberg. As the group was small, with only five members – including two from institutions – it proved difficult to systematically address this extensive topic. Despite attempts to recruit additional members via flyers and calls for participation in the Facebook group, there was no response. It was therefore decided to complete the map and then merge the groups.

Community Organizing Workshop

In October 2016, a CO workshop on community organizing was held for residents (parents) and project staff. The aim was to revisit the method, deepen knowledge and reflect on how the team was doing with the implementation of the individual steps. The experiences gained in working with the core groups were also an important part of this meeting. The results of the workshop included plans for a

new meeting to recruit more people and push forward the decision on financing the meeting place (by local politicians and administration). Furthermore, the decision was made to dissolve the smaller of the two core groups, »Family-friendly environment Kapfenberg«, due to the low number of participants and the high complexity, and to offer those involved the opportunity to participate in the other core group.

Arguments for the family living room

After the core group on the topic of »Meeting Place and Networking« decided that there should be a meeting place in Kapfenberg called the »Family Living Room« (FaWoZi), the parents and project staff set out to find suitable premises. In order to convince the municipality of the necessity of the meeting place, a call was made to all Kapfenberg residents to collect arguments in favour of a meeting place. Together with the parents of the core group, 65 statements were collected and presented to the municipality during negotiations on financing.

Negotiations on financing with the municipality

The stakeholder analysis with the core group made it clear that the municipality of Kapfenberg was the central point of contact for financing the family living room. Together, the group developed a presentation on the desired framework conditions and the benefits of the FaWoZi for the municipality. In September 2016, the parents informed the mayor and other representatives of the municipality about the concept of the meeting place, including the budget planning. The results were presented at a meeting with all relevant decision-makers, including the city administrator, the finance councillor, the social affairs councillor and the head of the »Citizens' Office and Social Services« department. As none of the mothers wanted to take on the role of spokesperson, the project management and the ISGS management represented the group. To illustrate the parents' perspective, a folder containing the 65 arguments collected was presented – as a symbolic greeting from all parents to the administration and politicians. The folder underlined the importance of the meeting place for the parents and demonstrated the strong commitment of the population to the project. Initially, the local authority questioned the necessity of the meeting place and delayed the decision on funding. To increase the pressure, the parents (as a result of the CO workshop) scheduled another meeting and invited the mayor to announce the decision on funding directly to those present.

Second meeting

The second meeting was attended by 35 visitors, including parents, multipliers and representatives of the local authority. The results of the work with the core groups were presented there. A father from the core group on the topic of »family-friendly Environment« presented the playground map, and two mothers from the core group on »meeting places and networking« presented the concept of the planned family living room. The local authority sent the head of the »Citizens' Office and Social Services« department to represent the mayor, who, after the presentation of the results, officially announced that the local authority would cover the costs of the family living room staff, but not the costs of renting a room. Instead, the local authority proposed integrating the family living room into the first floor of the ISGS Kapfenberg. Some parents were initially somewhat disappointed that there would be no separate premises for the meeting place. Over time, however, it became increasingly clear that integrating the FaWoZi into the ISGS Drehscheibe made perfect sense, as the existing structures could be put to good use. In order to inform parents, but also to generate commitment on the part of the municipality, a press release was issued about the upcoming opening of the FaWoZi.

Design of the family living room at the ISGS

In January 2017, the renovation of the first floor of the ISGS Drehscheibe began. Prior to this, a meeting was held with an interior designer, parents from the core group and project staff. During this meeting, plans were made regarding which furniture and play equipment would be suitable for small children and desired. During the meetings, the parents considered what needs the FaWoZi should fulfil for parents (e.g. seating, coffee machine). Individual members of the core group took on research tasks and appointments with suppliers and assisted with the renovation. Furniture such as sofas for seating was sourced by the parents via an online marketplace or purchased second-hand from a furniture exchange in Kapfenberg. In addition, the ISGS advertised the staff position for the family living room and conducted interviews with seven applicants. The choice fell on a kindergarten teacher and a mother from the core group with social pedagogy training. In July 2017, the completed website www.familienwohnzimmer.at went online, which was designed by a mother from the core group.

Opening of the FamilienWohnZimmer: press conference and carnival party

On 27 February 2017, a press conference was held with representatives of the municipality to announce the upcoming opening of the FamilienWohnZimmer. The concept of the newly created meeting place was presented by the parents involved and those responsible for the project. Immediately afterwards, a carnival party for families with small children was held in the FamilienWohnZimmer to mark the opening. The parents from the core groups and everyone involved in the creation of the centre celebrated the opening together.

The FamilienWohnZimmer (FaWoZi) opens its doors

FaWoZi is a meeting place for pregnant women and families with small children (aged 0–3), offering space for children to crawl, play and climb, as well as room for parents to relax and chat. Admission for adults is €2, while children enter free of charge. People on low incomes can apply for an »Aktiv Card« in Kapfenberg, which entitles them to pay just €1 admission. In addition, playgroups, free lectures, courses, workshops and discussion groups on topics related to pregnancy and young children are organized. The parental education programmes are designed so that parents can bring their children along if necessary. The Family Living Room still exists today and continues to be run by a mother who has been involved since the beginning. Over time, the services offered to parents have expanded and changed – always with the aim of connecting parents in the community and providing them with good support during the early years of family life.

FuN Family Festival

To mark the end of the project, the FuN team organised a FuN breakfast on Kapfenberg's main square. All citizens were invited, and the topic of neighbourhood was once again brought to the fore. An event with a children's programme in a public space was a concern that was repeatedly mentioned in the activating discussions. This festival was a public celebration of the successful completion of the project.

Living together in the neighbourhood (2018–2020)

»Living together as neighbours« started in 2018 in Lieboch, which was on place of the project »Health community«. Lieboch is a growing community with approx. 5,000 inhabitants and is located in the so-called affluent suburbs of the Styrian capital Graz. The CO process was intended to reach disadvantaged groups, in particular residents of the then newly built asylum seekers' home. The aim was to strengthen social cohesion and a sense of community in the municipality. The cooperation partner was the ZEBRA association, which contributed its expertise in advising and supporting refugees. In order to raise awareness of the project in the community and attract interested parties, targeted investments were made in public relations at the outset. The following activities were implemented for this purpose:

- Round table with key figures, project presentations at associations, in existing groups and in the local council
- Creation of a postcard with neighbourhood scenes from Lieboch as information about the project which was sent to all households
- Media reports in the community newspaper, regional media and on Facebook
- Participation in public events such as the Liebocher Health Days.

The diverse public relations work paid off: many people recognized the postcard during the empowering discussions, which made it easier to start conversations – even during door-to-door discussions. The reports in the community newspaper signalled the community's support, while visibility in the local media strengthened the commitment of active residents and raised awareness.

Empowering conversations

Using a discussion guide developed by the project team, three listeners conducted a total of 90 activating conversations with citizens and key figures from Lieboch to find out how the neighbourhood in Lieboch functions, what challenges there were and what ideas there were for promoting neighbourly relations. Conversation partners were found using the snowball system. It was important to us to meet people of all ages, men and women, from different regions of the town, and people with and without a migrant background. In addition to the pre-arranged appointments, the listeners went out to knock on doors and spontaneously seek out conversation partners. Both methods have advantages: in the case

of the pre-arranged appointments, the interviewees had already thought about the questions and set aside time for them. There was enough time to explain the project and document the topics and ideas. The door-to-door conversations reached people who might not otherwise have participated. Here, too, the postcards were an important starting point for conversation. However, it is much more difficult to present the project in a short time and stimulate a discourse on the topic of neighbourhood. As a result, there were significantly fewer topics and ideas in the conversations.

Integration of asylum seekers

At the time of the project implementation, the majority of the residents of the refugee accommodation had been living in Lieboch for almost two years. At the beginning, there was scepticism, as previous projects had had no effect on the residents. Regular visits and discussions with the manager of the accommodation were therefore essential for building trust between the project team and the asylum seekers. An initial joint meeting aroused interest. We were then able to hold empowering discussions with the help of interpreters. Both the group meetings and the activating discussions were accompanied by interpreters who had previously been introduced to the CO method.

Everyone found this approach positive. Even those who already spoke German well found it enriching and rewarding, as it allowed them to express themselves in a more nuanced way in their native language. It became apparent that it was very unusual for the asylum seekers to be asked about their personal wishes – especially on the subject of neighbourhood. Rather, it became clear that they had very specific concerns due to their uncertain living situation. It therefore seemed sensible to us to start our own coordination process at the accommodation facility as soon as possible and to prioritize the chosen topic so that their concerns would not be lost in the context of a larger, public event. This led to the concept of language tandems, which offer opportunities to speak German in everyday life and thus improve language skills. This proposal was presented at the public meeting (neighbourhood breakfast), where interested Lieboch residents were invited to participate as tandem partners in the future.

Meeting (neighbourhood breakfast)

The invitation to the neighbourhood breakfast was sent out to all residents of Lieboch by post. In addition, all members of the interest group (those who were already in contact with the project) received a personal invitation by email and postcard. 80 people attended the meeting.

After a buffet breakfast, the central topics of the activating survey were presented and each adult present was able to award two stickers to the topics they would like to see implemented. The following topics were available to choose from:

- More togetherness – less coexistence: Creating meeting places in public spaces/strengthening exchange between newcomers and long-time residents
- Focus on young People: Public meeting places and events for young people
- Green instead of Grey: Creating green spaces and ensuring that existing green spaces are not sealed off
- Friendly transport for all: Noise and pollution from the town's main road

The topics »More togetherness – less side-by-side« and »Green instead of grey« were selected at the meeting. People who would like to participate in the implementation in the future were able to add their names to a list. In addition, interested parties were found for the »language tandems«.

The breakfast format had the advantage of motivating residents to participate in a low-threshold manner and enabling intensive networking; it also made it easier for asylum seekers to attend. The disadvantage was that the transition from the informal part with food and casual conversation to the formal part with the presentation of the survey results had to be enforced. Maintaining attention required clear moderation and a willingness to concentrate on the part of the participants so that everyone could listen.

Core group work language tandems

The language tandem group emerged from working with people from refugee accommodation. Together with the asylum seekers, we worked out what their specific needs were (speaking German) and how these could be met. The language tandem approach meant that it was not only the German speakers who gave something, but both people in the tandem contributed to the relationship. For

example, the asylum seekers were able to contribute their language skills or other knowledge (e.g. cooking) in return.

While some language tandems were/are actively exchanging knowledge, it proved difficult for those tandems where the asylum seekers had little knowledge of German. Therefore, in autumn 2019, we started monthly group meetings on various topics, where the focus was on activities and even those with poorer German skills could participate. This group established itself over time and continues to exist in 2025 with the support of ZEBRA in the municipality of Lieboch. In this way, a sustainable structure was created through the project.

More togetherness – less side-by-side

Over time, 28 people participated in the group. The membership changed repeatedly, with new people joining because they had heard about the group's work, while others withdrew because they did not have enough time or had moved away. Up to 14 people took part in the individual meetings. In addition, there were people who participated in the implementation of the activities but did not want to be involved in the planning. The participants developed the idea of »Begegnungsbankerl« (meeting benches), which were to be set up at various locations in Lieboch. To secure funding for the benches, four members of the group negotiated with the mayor. The mayor assured them that benches would be provided by the building yard. We were able to secure the Lebenshilfe workshop as a partner, as well as the »Lieboch Activities Group« – a group of senior citizens who meet every two weeks for joint activities.

As a result, people with disabilities and older people participated in the design of the benches. While the members worked together to organize individual benches (sanding, priming, opening ceremony), small groups designed one or two benches each. Neighbours and interested groups were recruited for this, and they often participated in the opening ceremony as well. Some of the people then also joined the core group. At the celebrations for the opening of a new bench, new people from the regional neighbourhood were reached and, in some cases, encouraged to get involved. The group meetings were used to reflect on the openings, plan the next benches and organise public relations work. In addition to the highly visible benches, it was particularly motivating for the members of the group to present their work in the newspaper. Over time, more and more residents of Lieboch approached the members of the core group with requests for additional locations for a meeting bench. Since 2019, 24 meeting benches have been installed throughout the town.

Green instead of grey

The group initially consisted of seven people, some of whom were also involved in the »More togetherness, less side-by-side« group, which meant that at the beginning of the planning and design of the meeting benches, the work of the »Green instead of grey« group was temporarily put on hold and everyone worked together on the meeting benches. After a few months, however, the group resumed work on its original topic. The first goal was to find more people to join the cause. The group therefore decided to revisit the method of motivational conversations. The members received training in the method and jointly developed a discussion guide. People from Lieboch who were interested in the topic were specifically approached. Six members of the group conducted 30 discussions and developed new ideas. Together with the project staff, the results were evaluated and prepared for voting. At the second neighbourhood breakfast, all visitors were able to vote on which of the topics they would like to implement:

- A public orchard
- Creating/maintaining a flower meadow
- More trees in public spaces in Lieboch

New people were encouraged to join the group, which grew in size. The group then developed proposals for more trees in Lieboch and presented the concept to the mayor and the Environment Committee. The municipality clarified the possibility of planting an area in the retention basin and the group then planned the implementation. A joint planting festival with interested citizens was planned and implemented. In addition to maintaining and expanding the orchard meadow, the group carried out awareness-raising activities such as an orchard meadow festival with kindergarten and school children and joint neophyte control.

Residents of the asylum accommodation continue to be regularly involved in both the practical design of the benches and the maintenance of the orchard meadow (as of 2025). In the meantime, some of the people who have been granted asylum have settled permanently in the community and regularly take part in and help organize the group's events. The community organizing method has thus proven to be a good way of reaching asylum seekers and involving them in shaping their place of residence together with other residents.

Learning experiences from practice

Learning through practical implementation: organizers learn the method not only theoretically, but also in practical application. In addition to theoretical instruction, continuous process support is important in order to regularly reflect on one's own role. Support from experienced organizers was essential in this regard. We were supported by Paul Cromwell/FOCO in both processes, which enabled us to deepen our knowledge of the interplay between theory and practice. The learning experiences we had already gained were directly incorporated into the second process. Teaching methods to residents: In addition to training the organizers, it is essential to pass on the method to the residents. Regular work meetings, at which new people join, help to keep the process alive. This allows residents to reflect on their own steps and apply the method independently of the organizers' support. This was clearly demonstrated by the sustainability of the two processes: while the FaWoZi group disbanded after the end of the project, an active citizens' group still exists in Lieboch years later and continues to engage with new issues.

Encouraging and empowering residents: Supporting the core groups requires the right balance of moderation and encouragement. In Kapfenberg, employees initially took over the negotiations, which reduced the pressure on the political representatives. Only when the parents themselves became more visible was it possible to achieve a result. This learning experience was integrated into the second process: the residents of Lieboch were specifically prepared and encouraged to conduct negotiations independently. From the outset, care was taken to ensure that the group understood that this was a long-term issue – regardless of the end of the project. The group members themselves took responsibility for organizing and implementing the meetings (planning, moderation, minutes, goal tracking). This promoted the long-term existence of the group.

Human resources and group size: The method requires a sufficient number of active participants. If the groups are too small, it may be advisable to start a new listening process or to merge groups in order to work on the issues together step by step.

Consider long-term group structure from the outset: The establishment of a long-term active citizen group must be considered from the outset. In the FuN process, the focus was strongly on achieving a common goal without working on long-term group structures in parallel. Once the goal was achieved, the group disbanded, mainly because many mothers returned to work and had less time available. In the process in Lieboch (NZL), on the other hand, attention was paid early on to establishing stable structures and formulating long-term goals.

Sensitivity to disadvantaged groups: Activating disadvantaged target groups requires sensitivity to their realities of life and adaptation of the framework conditions: language, meeting place, time, etc. While the FuN project mainly reached people from the middle class, NZL succeeded in activating a greater variety of groups. This was made possible by targeted outreach, the use of interpreters, employees with a migrant background and personal invitations.

Conclusion

It has been shown that community organizing in municipalities can make a lasting contribution to strengthening community life because the method empowers citizens to get involved in their immediate living environment and participate in public life. They experience the opportunity to find a common language for their concerns and to stand up for their common cause: this creates a sense of belonging. Feeling that one's interests are taken care of in the community in turn strengthens each individual.

Community organizing as a method of health promotion offers a promising perspective for bringing about sustainable and effective change in a community setting. Strengthening the sense of

community, promoting participation and empowerment creates a basis for long-term, locally anchored solutions. Community organizing can make a significant contribution here.⁸

Author

Alima Matko is a psychologist with additional training in coaching, case management and community organizing. She has many years of experience as a project manager and systemic consultant.

E-Mail: Alima.Matko@styriavitalis.at

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⁸ The experiences gained have been recorded in a handbook, which can be downloaded digitally.
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Bernadett Sebály

The transformative potential of community organizing and its challenges – The case of Living Gyál, Hungary

Organizing affects politics. It involves marginalized constituencies in shaping the political decisions that affect their lives. But organizers do not start with coordinating big rallies or marches. They begin with people. Organizers help directly impacted people regain political agency and build organizations in which they can develop skills to take collective action and represent their shared interests in the public arena. With the focus on people and their immediate interests, however, organizers may easily lock themselves into isolated localized fights and lose sight of larger struggles. The aim of this article is to encourage organizers to see their fights as part of broader injustices and connect them to the vision of economic, environmental and social justice.

Historically, community organizing has not lacked radical social critique. It was exactly the opposite: organizing has often been a prominent strategy in ideological struggles from labor rights movements in Europe to organizing for Black liberation in the United States. These larger struggles always have localized fronts, such as workplaces, churches, or neighborhoods. Organizers fused local organizing struggles together to create a larger social critique and vision and the scale of power necessary to achieve the desired change. Over the last decades, from being a revolutionary strategy, organizing became a profession and the followers of the practice built a sector with – more or less – established funding streams (Beckwith et al. 2019). Even though building progressive grassroots and worker power as part of larger social movements has a long indigenous history in Europe dating back to the pre–World War I period, the scope of community organizing has overall shrank and drifted away from radical social critique. The “realist” organizing canon that has had a huge influence on how people in Europe teach and practice organizing has locked organizers into isolated localized fights.

Realist vs. transformative approach to organizing

The »realist« or »pragmatic« approach, often associated with the iconic organizer Saul Alinsky, aims to confront unequal power structures, reinvigorate politicalness, and contribute to general welfare (Coles 2006, Inouye 2022). As part of this tradition, organizing has often been taught as a process, a set of steps which, if followed, will contribute to public goods and revitalize democracy. Organizers apply a generic formula to forge relationships among people, agitate them into action based on their shared interest, develop leaders, and build organizational structures through which directly impacted people can act collectively and represent themselves in the public arena. Anyone who organized has experienced the power of this process. However, unless organizing is inherently connected to a radical critique of social and economic arrangements, this process may end up boxing organizers into localized fights and decoupling organizing from significant larger struggles (DeFilippis, Fisher and Shragge 2010). For example, organizers may work around the lack of trash containers to eliminate garbage piles without problematizing the ineffective allocation of funds to elevate low-income or segregated communities. They may fight against the closing of one kindergarten without addressing the lack of access to quality education nationwide. Organizers may focus on local (or small) fights with the hope that they boost people’s confidence to take on larger, more significant issues, but the gap often proves to be unbridgeable.

The transformative approach to organizing is a critique of this flaw – it fine tunes the formula by what it is missing. By bringing values and politics back in, transformative organizing emphasizes radical analysis and advances an ambitious agenda in opposition to oppressive social and economic structures. It illuminates the deep-seated power imbalance between ordinary people and the political and business elites, and aims at the radical restructuring of power relations along the axes of exclusion such as class, race, gender or disability (Mann 2010, Maruschke 2014). Certainly, communities, whether they form at

workplaces, schools, neighborhoods or churches, are the basic building blocks of the organizing process. However, social problems experienced by locally rooted communities are always the manifestation of a broader injustice. When organizers help leaders see their personal or communal suffering as a localized version of a larger political problem, they build bridges and reinforce the interconnectedness horizontally – between various communities, issues and even constituencies – and vertically – between local and national (or even global) social-political struggles.

To move forward the field of community organizing, this interconnectedness should be made explicit. Unless organizers build this bridge between local and larger struggles, organizing will remain marginal. In the next section, I will provide an example of how to make a localized fight part of a larger struggle. Then, based on the lessons learned from the case, I will offer a framework that marks the three levels of organizing that connects local work to the vision of long-term structural changes.

How to connect missing street lights to national politics

Andrea Homoki grew up in Gyál, a town in Hungary. Gyál has a population of over 22,000 and is in the metro area of the capital, Budapest. In 2016, Andrea decided to build a community organization in her town. She applied for the organizing grant of the Hungarian Environmental Foundation, an intermediary of the donor Porticus. Mentorship to organizers came through the Civil College Foundation. The author of this article was Andrea's mentor during the first two years of her organizing, 2016-2018.

Andrea was well aware of Hungary's democratic crisis under Viktor Orbán's illiberal government. She had been active in memory politics struggles for two years before she started organizing in Gyál. She was a leader in a voluntary group, Living Memorial, which protested against the installation of a statue of the German occupation in 1944, which according to many denied the responsibility of the Hungarian state in the Holocaust. Living Memorial occupied the public space around the statue in Budapest to prevent the inauguration of the memorial and made the occupation permanent by erecting a counter-memorial of the personal relics of fellow-Hungarians and holding several hundreds of discussion circles to protect the counter-memorial in the next few years.

Andrea had to realize quickly that in Gyál most people were not interested in Hungary's acute political issues in a way she was. When Andrea conducted a listening process, the lack of appropriate street lighting was flagged as the primary issue by about 300 residents. Even though the town did a significant overhaul of public lights in 2015, street lighting became worse than it had been before. The new, energy saving lights replaced the old ones but the company did not install enough of them and the streets got darker. A new community organization, named Living Gyál (in Hungarian: Eleven Gyál), emerged during the listening process and started a research action to find out who installed the lights. Members, together with Andrea, soon found that the contractor was a company called Elios, belonging to the son-in-law of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Elios, which carried out the overhaul of street lighting in 35 Hungarian towns and cities, including the Fidesz-led Gyál, was in the middle of a vast corruption scandal under investigation by the Hungarian police and the EU's anti-corruption agency (Vorák 2015).

Living Gyál members decided to work on both the quality of street lighting and the corruption dimension, connecting their local struggle to a national issue. While the group's primary goal was to achieve that the city council replaces the missing public lights, they also contributed to exposing the corruption scandal.



A banner of Living Gyál hung in one of the streets of Gyál says, »650 street lights are missing!« Source: Living Gyál

Over two years of campaigning, Living Gyál created a database that identified all the missing street lights by their location and handed it to the mayor. They conducted a survey among residents, collected 1,600 signatures for a petition, and reported accidents resulting from the darkness in the streets. They requested a professional opinion from a street lighting expert to underscore their statements. They did street performances and hung banners. They turned their photos of dark streets into postcards and organized an exhibit in front of the city hall. They spoke at public hearings and organized candidate forums in the run-up to the elections.



A member of Living Gyál, Krisztina Jakab, shares the organization's demands at a public hearing in the city hall while another member shows visual evidence of the inadequately implemented street lighting project. Source: Living Gyál

They took the mayor, a member of the governing Fidesz-KDNP party, on a walking tour to show him the scale of the problem. They also made it to the national media and built alliances with other movement actors. On the corruption front, they requested that the city council publish the contract between Elios and the municipality. They sued the municipality to provide access to the project expenses in the agreement. In 2018, when the Hungarian authorities terminated the legal process against Elios, a Living Gyál member spoke at a demonstration in Budapest. They were also active in the national pro-democracy, anti-government protests in 2017.



Candidate forum organized by Living Gyál in the run-up to the 2018 general elections. Source: Living Gyál

On both campaign fronts, they achieved significant initial victories. In 2020, one year after the municipal elections and after much pressure, the still Fidesz-led city council unanimously voted for installing the 650 missing street lights and published a timetable of the installation. The legal process against the city council was also successful, and the organization could publicize the expenses of the compromised project. Thus, Living Gyál was able to connect a local issue, lousy street lighting, to a national issue, a dysfunctional, corrupt economy.

However, winning is usually a long-term process with many challenges along the way that are sometimes bigger than us. In this case, it was a worldwide catastrophe that provided the initial loophole for the Gyál administration to evade its commitment – and Living Gyál to lose focus. In 2020, a new coronavirus swept the world and took its toll on many areas of our lives. In Gyál, it allowed the city council to gain time and protract the planning process of the installation of the missing lights for three years. Living Gyál acted in good faith – and spiraled into an endless set of negotiations. In the meantime, Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, triggering a prolonged energy crisis. COVID-19 and the energy crisis created enough opportunities for the municipal administration to finally drop the installation ironically referencing the importance of energy saving.

The three levels where organizers (should) operate

The story of Gyál beautifully makes the case for the fact that we do not live in a singular community. Our life takes place in »nested communities« – families, neighborhoods, cities, regions, countries etc. – that are all dependent on each other (Hunter 2018). As a result, a local community can become the site and localized version of a larger campaign that demonstrates what is at stake in the city, in the country or sometimes, in the world. To take advantage of this potential – and prevent potential failures – organizers should keep in mind the following three levels of organizing.

At the *micro level*, organizers create an organizational space where directly impacted people can acquire the skills to participate, overcome internalized disprivilege, and increase self-confidence and the capacity to construct collective political preferences (Cornwall and Coelho 2007). In these organizations – just like in Living Gyál – people recognize their agency to mold their future and develop a more positive self-concept. Organizers create this organizational space through intentional personal conversations (one-on-ones) and by uncovering people's individual stories and examining them in light of others. Thus, at the micro level, *organizers build basic units of representation*, such as grassroots teams that meet regularly, and enhance people's personal and collective ability to act.

Local communities, however, are often weak on their own. Their collective power can amplify when they align their action with others. At this *meso level*, they can connect locally organized units across space, institutions, issues or constituencies and integrate them into a larger organizational unit or network. In this »vertical dimension of communities«, a community is »still spatially and locally rooted but federated and fused through the social and political construction of ever larger communities of interest and identification« (Hunter 2018:13). At this level, organizers also build relationships with other types of actors, such as advocacy organizations, digital mobilizers, service organizations, or even parties and funders; in the case of Living Gyál, these were the pro-democracy groups. These interactions also shape how community organizations will be able to use strategic opportunities to achieve their goals. At the meso level, therefore, *organizers facilitate the coalescence of actors*, both by connecting structures and resources and adopting a common frame of messaging.

The nuances and trajectory of these organizing processes depend heavily on the particular socio-cultural and economic conditions of the place where the organizing takes place. This *macro level* of power and opportunity structures determines the outcome of collective social struggles at the micro and meso level. In other words, what happens in national (or global) politics will define the opportunities for social change – as we saw with COVID-19 in the case of Living Gyál. Living Gyál exemplifies that it is not easy to navigate this macro terrain. But when organizing is grounded in analysis, organizers may be able to turn the – positive or negative – turn of events to their advantage. In Gyál, the following could have been a possible approach. In Hungary, the pandemic exposed low healthcare capacity and corruption scandals related to the procurement of ventilators (Transparency 2023). If local elected officials in Gyál aim to sustain cohesion on their turf during a pandemic, the #1 step is to fix a project they messed up. How can the people of Gyál expect that the municipal administration will handle a public health crisis faithfully if elected officials allowed their town to become complicit in corruption linked to a public safety issue, adequate street lighting? As a result, at the macro level, by using their resources strategically, organizers work for a grounded vision and provide meaning to evolving political opportunities at the time of an opening.

Concluding thoughts

Organizers do not start with coordinating big rallies or marches. They begin with people. They build an organizational space in which directly impacted people can increase their self-confidence, develop skills to take collective action and represent shared interests in the public arena. With the focus on people and their experience and immediate interests, organizers may easily lock themselves into isolated localized fights and lose sight of larger struggles and the political economy of the country where they work. Therefore, this article has pointed out the importance of connecting local and larger struggles to unleash the transformative potential of organizing.

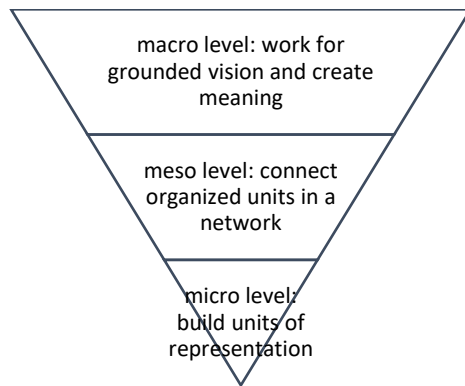


Figure 1: The micro, meso and macro levels of organizing. Source: author.

The figure above demonstrates how micro, meso and macro levels work for organizers. In sum, at the micro level, organizers create organizations where affected people can enhance personal and collective ability to act. At the meso level, organizers connect already organized units and integrate them into a larger organizational unit or network. At the macro level, organizers look into political and social structures to have a grounded vision and be able to give meaning to evolving political opportunities.

If organizers work and coordinate along these lines, their efforts may achieve that people from multiple communities feel part of a stronger, bigger and more diverse »we«, and are able to demonstrate what is at stake in their communities without losing sight of broader economic, environmental and social injustices that shape their lives.

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Author

Bernadett Sebály holds a PhD in Political Science from CEU. Her field of research is the policy impact of social movements and the effectiveness of movement strategies. She is on the board of the European Community Organizing Network (ECON) and a member of the editorial team of the Community Organizing Journal.

E-Mail: sebaly.bernadett@gmail.com

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