Cultural self-help centre

Activities of self-help groups at cultural institutions

Cultural self-help centre (KCS – Kulturalne Centrum Samopomocy) is a model of cooperation between cultural institutions and grassroot self-help groups. The innovation addresses the needs of an increasingly individualised and polarised society facing numerous crises and consequently not getting an opportunity to experience them together and to share that experience with others.

First of all, a self-help group allows for minimising solitude when facing problems, provides mutual support but it also creates an opportunity for taking matters into one's own hands and for not being dependent on external help exclusively. Such a model of action chiefly helps keep the sense of subjectivity, without excluding professional support or maybe even facilitating it.

Who is the innovation is targeted at?

The innovation is targeted at widely understood sensitive groups, such as:

- individuals facing health problems (with disabilities, affected by diseases and mental disorders, addictions) and their families,

- ethnic and religious minorities, with special focus on individuals with refugee or migrant experience,

- groups facing social problems (e.g., single parents, widows and widowers, unemployed individuals, pupils who do not do particularly well at school),

- groups at the risk of discrimination due to age, gender or sexual orientation,

- self-help groups active in the local community (citizen patrols, individuals responsible for cleaning housing estates, urban or eco activists),

- poor groups, not having means to achieve their social and developmental goals.

Who can implement the innovation?

Cultural self-help centres can function by:

- community centres,
- libraries,
- local activity centres or neighbour centres,
- existing self-help centres.

What problems does the innovation address?

A cultural self-help centre is an attempt to practically confront problems, such as:

- **sense of solitude and the lack of support among sensitive individuals,** the lack of a community in which they can openly discuss their problems and develop in various areas,

- **the lack of sufficient resources** (particularly housing) and **capabilities** among individuals from sensitive groups, necessary to efficiently run self-help group meetings,
- **no or insufficient solutions** at cultural institutions targeted at sensitive individuals, persons with special needs. A cultural self-help centre can be a good way for a given institution to extend the scope of its activities and reach new groups.

How to implement the innovation at your end, step by step?

The implementation process of the innovation at a cultural institution covers several stages. What matters here the most is the team's will to implement it. It is manifested by opening doors and pointing to ways in

which sensitive groups and individuals at risk of exclusion can reach it to utilise its resources and its cultural programme.

Stage 1. Preparation of the cultural institution

This stage is made of two main elements:

a) Rooting and the context of the idea of self-help

Before an institution starts implementing the innovation, it should familiarise itself with applicable legal acts, e.g., the act on accessibility featuring the definition of individuals with special needs. Many local governments have employed their own strategies at various levels, or have prepared other purposive documents related to accessibility, anti-discriminatory activities or support for groups at risk of exclusion. Such documents can justify activities related to the initiation of a KCS in a given institution. If the first activities bring the assumed results, the functioning of a cultural self-help centre can be permanently incorporated into its strategy and mission.

b) Preparation of the team and resources

The experience resulting from testing the innovation shows that it should be organised in the following manner:

- It should start from a comprehensive initial **conversation with the institution's team**, devoted to the objectives and values of the cultural self-help centre, its link to existing programmes and to incorporating it into the existing structure of the institution. Such a conversation can take place during a meeting of the entire team, either separate or devoted to discussing other issues as well. It is important to explain the significance of the decision made and the potential resulting from supporting self-help groups to the team members. It is also a good idea to gather their ideas to prepare the institution for such activities in the best possible way.

- It is also necessary to conduct an **in-depth analysis of existing resources and opportunities** and make the decision on the scale of support (for instance, how many self-help groups a given institution can admit, what form of support it prefers). The following elements are necessary to support the setup of a self-help group:
    - venue – a convenient, non-connecting space for meetings, e.g., a well-lit room or a workshop hall,
    - equipment, including a flipchart, chairs, table, office supplies,
    - optionally also refreshments, e.g., water and water cups, coffee machine, electric kettle, coffee, tea, biscuits.

- **Appointing cultural self-help centre animators.**

  Following the analysis of resources, it is necessary to appoint an adequate number of KCS animators among the team members or to hire someone new. The role of an animation cannot be something done 'on the fly' but it must be a daily professional responsibility.

An animator should be internally motivated to support self-help groups – it cannot be a professional task only. Experience with facilitating meetings, group or workshop work will be highly appreciated. It is also necessary to ensure regular supervisions for animators. Even though self-help groups are not of therapeutic nature, many difficult threads might still be brought up during sessions or there might be many conflict situations within groups which an animator should help resolve.

Stage 2. Inauguration of the cultural self-help centre

Once a cultural institution has been prepared, it is possible to move on to another stage, namely the creation of a KCS, which is made of the following three elements:

a) A search for local partners (allies) to implement the self-help centre programme

Cooperation with other entities is highly likely to facilitate recruitment and will have positive impact on the functioning of the KCS. Depending on needs and diagnosed problems, these partners can include social organisations, welfare centres, healthcare institutions, or organisations supporting refugees.

In this part, one should focus on sending information on planned activities along with the invitation to cooperation (for instance, via support from specialists and professionals representing various areas of expertise).

b) KCS animator training

If a cultural self-help centre is to operate properly, it is necessary to appropriately prepare its animators. Here are some examples of training topics:

- theoretical knowledge on self-help, moderation, group processes,
- workshops on practical skills, run by professionals, e.g., therapists or experts, based on their expertise (experienced members ofself-help groups).

c) Recruitment and initiation of self-help groups

When everything is ready to 'open the doors' for the first self-help groups, it is the time for effective recruitment and reaching KCS addressees via:

- Existing organised self-help groups, support groups for individuals at risk of exclusion,
- Individuals from sensitive groups in crisis or looking for community developmental activities, potentially interested in organising such a group,
- Institutional partners, for instance self-help groups meeting at welfare centres.

Stage 3. Operation of a cultural self-help centre

Depending on the institution's resources and the needs or the maturity level of a self-help group, a KSC can function according to one of four operational models. In reality, these models obviously overlap, and probably no KCS will work according to one model only.

- **Model 1. Open doors** – we limit our role to providing space with the function of a night watchman (coffee, tea, minor administrative support). The space should be neutral, friendly and safe to organise meetings.
- **Model 2. Support culture** – we ensure assistance in the establishment and development of self-help groups at an early stage or in the long-term perspective. Institutions running a KCS can offer support in the form of:

- assistance in establishing the group and helping group leaders reach individuals in a similar situation (promotion and recruitment),
- sharing knowledge (e.g., training on the basics of self-help group development, meeting moderation) and strengthening the sense of agency,
- animation of the first meeting, help in setting goals, terms and contract for the group.

- **Model 3. Cultural support** – this is the key element of cultural self-help centre. It can assume different forms, depending on resources that an institution has at its disposal:

  - participation of group members in the current cultural programmes run by the institution, proposing and informing on the programme offered by the institution,

  - offering various art therapy classes (depending on the institution's resources, run by either own or external instructors and coaches),

    – supporting the organisation of trips outside the institution that the KCS operates within (depending on resources, informing on interesting events, pointing out to venues, organising group tickets in cooperation with other institutions of culture),

    – the group reports the need to participate in cultural events, sets the direction, is encouraged to do so by an animator representing the institution's team.

■ **Model 4. Co-creation of the cultural programme by groups** – this model is true for established and efficiently working groups that have the motivation and resources to work on the outside. Here an important role of an institution is to give the group an opportunity to co-create cultural events, to create art, to prepare workshops open to a wider audience.

What is particularly noteworthy?

The following aspects should be kept in mind in the first place when implementing a cultural self-help centre:

- ensuring safe and comfortable **space** for self-help group meetings,

- appointing **the right individuals to play the role of an animator**; it is very important for such individuals to really feel the idea of self-help and see the sense of it,

- arranging **a part time job for the work of an animator** – working at KCS cannot be done 'on the fly', it has to be a clearly specified proportion of the FTE –½ of the FTE for one or two employees should suffice,

- providing regular **support to animators**,

- determining **clear self-help group functioning principles** within the KCS together with participants.

The success of the tested innovation was driven by several factors:

- **stress on activation and self-organisation** of 'sensitive groups' (including individuals at risk of social exclusion) **and effectively encouraging them to participate in culture**,

- **proper competencies and high engagement among animators** in running self-help groups,

- successful ' instillment' of the idea of **self-help, community and grassroots initiatives** in group participants.

One should also bear in mind difficulties and concerns related to establishing and running a KCS that were revealed at the innovation testing stage, such as:

- **difficulties related to establishing the right method of cooperation between animators and their groups**, resulting

mostly from high diversity of such groups and the types of problems their participants are confronted with,

- **proper description of group functioning and operational guidelines**, particularly in relation to groups of people with mental health disorders; animators were initially afraid they would not cope due to the lack of sufficient competencies, but the evaluation shows that once the operation terms and regulations of the group are determined, animators' difficulties and fears related to the lack of proper competencies disappear,

- **adding new individuals to the group after its establishment**, which is a challenge for both the group members and the animator – when the group integrates and starts slowly implementing its ideas in line with pre-set and pre-defined rules, the introduction of new individuals to the group might disturb its dynamics and often forces participants to set the group rules anew.

Does it work? How does the innovation help its beneficiaries?

The test of the innovation has demonstrated its functionality and positive effects:

- **it reduces the sense of solitude** – nearly all participants by the end of the innovation test stressed they felt less lonely than prior to joining the group;

- **it allows for obtaining resources (especially a venue) and skills needed to run self-help meetings:**
  - during the innovation test, the first group meetings took place at a venue provided by an animator, but were run without their participation,

- – one third of groups became self-sufficient, but at the same time, less than half of participants surveyed felt confident enough to organise a new self-help group on their own – this result might still be considered a satisfactory rate, given short duration of these groups and the fact that regardless of circumstances, not everyone feels comfortable in the role of an organiser;

- a self-help group for refugees: allows for **gaining the 'starting point' to build social relations in the exile**; during testing we could witness the first relationships established thanks to the group and continued outside of it.

How much does it cost?

Apart from arranging a venue, establishing and running cultural self-help centre requires means on the following:

- animators' work – depending on the proportion of the FTE and rates assumed from ca PLN 1,800 gross (¼ FTE) to PLN 3,600 gross (½ FTE) monthly,

- a single training for an animator – PLN 400–800 depending on the intensity of the session,

- supervision sessions for animators and possibly also for group leaders (PLN 250–300 per hour),

- workshops, cultural events or group projects (additionally) – these costs are difficult to estimate, they are determined to a large extent by the context and needs of a given self-help group; at the time being (2023) it is not more than PLN 700 per event.

It is important that some activities can be carried out in cooperation with partners, whose resources can be utilised at least partially.

Who are the authors of the innovation?

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For more information see the guide on the implementation on the cultural self-help centre available on www.inkubatorpomyslow.org.pl and https://www.kcs.info.pl/.

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