

Polish Residency Report:

Reaching Excluded Groups

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Who did we approach?

- How did we consult: Participatory consultation programme structure

The starting point for choosing the excluded groups for the Residency project was rooted in our experience in working in and researching the Polish context of culture animation and community arts. This experience showed us that the absence or lack of activity of certain groups and communities in the local public life is almost always very complex and can be observed on different levels: participation in politics (elections, consultations etc.), taking basic care of surroundings, participating in local culture institutions.

Our experience also taught us that it is quite difficult to notice the excluded groups in a region, whose cultural and artistic life is really reach, diverse and quite innovative. In this kind of environment, which is the case of Warsaw, the capital city of Poland, this reachness and innovation is in a way covering the fact there are some groups and parts of the city, who do not take part in this cultural life. As it can be seen, this is how the mechanism of exclusion works. The second specificity of Warsaw, that blurs the real image is the fact that some of the areas of the city have been very much stereotyped as excluded, dangerous and poor and probably because of that in the beginning of the 2000 many socio-cultural project was located there. This is the case of Warsaw Praga district, which has focused the public attention for many years. There were many good results of that process, but it must be said that it also made the public awareness forgot about other communities in need.

These experience from our previous projects made us looking for a community in Warsaw, whose members are not very active in local political life, do not cooperate very much with each other, are not very much connected with the place they live, but at the same time is not the most popular excluded area in Warsaw as Praga. The communities considered for this project were the inhabitants of the districts on the outskirts of the centre Warsaw: Rembertów – which used to be an independent town, and now is a „bed room” neighbourhood on the border of the capital city; Białołęka and Bemowo – big neighbourhoods with block of flats, located one hour from the

city centre, Wola – a neighbourhood located close to the city centre, postindustrial area with council housing, working class inhabitants.

- **Training and community interviews**

First step of engaging with excluded groups was a desk research about engagement of local communities in different part of Warsaw: Bemowo, Białołęka, Praga, Wawer, Wola and the outskirts: Rembertów, Legionowo, Marki, Otwock, Żąbki. We went through existing research about community activities in Poland and Warsaw. We consulted the project with different social partners of Warsaw University, having specific knowledge about different neighbourhoods of Warsaw: Muzeum Społeczne, Latający Animatorzy Kultury, Forum Kultury Mazowsze, Grupa Pedagogiki i Animacji Społecznej Praga Północ, Bemowski Ośrodek Kultury, Białołęcki Ośrodek Kultury, Powiatowa Instytucja Kultury w Legionowie. In the period of October 2014 - January 2015 we took part in study visits in the following neighbourhoods and spoke with local inhabitants: Bemowo, Białołęka, Rembertów, Wola. At the same time we were promoting the project in the internet.

After we promote the idea of the project via internet and during meetings, the GPAS – a group of street pedagogues working with children on streets in poor neighbourhoods expressed their interest of participating in the project. Then, they consulted this idea with other people from one of the areas of their activities – Młynów and they expressed their initial interest. Afterwards the Partnership „Młyn na Woli” organised an information meeting, where we presented the idea of the residency in this district to other institutional and non-institutional members of the Partnership. The people present in the meeting declared the interest but wanted to organise wider consultation and they suggested to use for it the mailing list. We agreed the deadline, the mailing gathered even more interest and we decided together that the residency will happen in Młynów. We agreed together on the content of the open call. We have already started and plan to continue taking part in their common activities: mailing communications, monthly gatherings, local events.

- **Record responses for analysis, and include a summary of key emerging themes**

The initial research focused on finding the right community for the project was parallel to finding the host organisation. In other words examining different local institutions, their programme, relationships with local community, level of participatory events, openness for local independent and NGO's initiatives was a part of desk research focused of the engagement of communities. We treated level of community participation in local organisations as a mirror both of their mission and of the level of civic engagement of inhabitants. Since we really wanted to make an impact, we searched for an institution that has almost no experience in engaging the community, but at the same time is able to host the residency from logistic and organisational point of view. Our first choice was quite obvious, because the institution operating at a local level, but at the same time not in a very participatory way is in Poland – a culture house.

In the researched areas we visited three culture houses: Bemowski Ośrodek Kultury (<http://www.artbem.pl>), Białołęcki Ośrodek Kultury (<http://www.bok.waw.pl>), Dom Kultury Rembertów (<http://www.dkrembertow.waw.pl>) and consulted the director of Powiatowa Instytucja Kultury w Legionowie (<https://www.facebook.com/powiatowa.instytucja.kultury>). These meetings showed us some tendency, that either the culture houses are not able to host residency because of different problems with organisation, logistics and human resources or are now changing his general direction towards more participatory module. The second type was interested for us, but it occurs that these culture houses have budget big enough to initiate different projects addressed at local communities on their own. Also, there were not so much interested in the civic engagement factor at this point. We decided that it would be better to find a host organisation that does not have its own money for developing any bigger community project and is more focused on civic engagement.

At this moment we were invited to participate in the meeting of the bottom-up, voluntary Partnership „Młyn na Woli” by one of a member of it:

Grupa Pedagogiki i Animacji Społecznej Praga Północ (<http://gpaspraga.org.pl>), which gathers street pedagogues. The Grupa know already about the project because we consulted with them the choice of excluded community. The Partnership is an initiative involving local government institutions and NGOs working for the benefit of the inhabitants of the area between Okopowa, Leszno, Tyszkiewicza and Młynarska streets.

We have decided to choose finally the Partnership „Młyn na Woli” and drop the initial idea of locating the residency in the Bemowskie Centrum Kultury, because the Partnership much more fitted into our criteria. The Partnership is much more focused on the work with excluded groups and also on the developing of civic engagement of the inhabitants. Also the partnership is based on voluntary activity of its members and without extra money can not develop bigger and serious projects for the inhabitants, whereas Bemowskie Centrum Kultury can develop this kind of project on their own, without extra money.

- **Report of how the excluded group was involved in the Co-creation and management of the project**

The representative of the Culture Animation team, University of Warsaw took part in the monthly meetings of the “Młyn na Woli” Partnership and in their other activities with inhabitants, such as consultation, open gatherings. The content, form and organisational details of the open call was co-created together by the representative of the Culture Animation team and the Partnership. The Partnership was engaged into the process of choosing the artist for residency, by having the access to the applications, taking part in the short-listing, in final interviews and by making the final choice.

The Partnership was addressed as a whole, but also as each concrete member. The representative of the Culture Animation team organised meetings with different actors involved in the Partnership and the inhabitants, discussing with them their needs and expectations connected with the residency.

Finally, the residency was located in one of the courtyards, in the open space, very easily accessed, not exclusive or limited. It helped to contact even

those residents, who most unlikely take part in the activities of different organisations. It is worth to underline, that quite bad stereotypes were connected with this yard, residents dislike its aesthetical side and claim about its safety. A large number of the flats in the buildings around the yard are social housing and one of the buildings is an abandoned old house, used to be used by homeless people and alcohol and drug users. Locating the residency in this yard and introducing very open, democratic form of making decision about the actions, helped to have much more direct access to all of different groups, including passers-by.

All the meetings on the yard had a very open, not pre-defined structure. The project team built a context for effective meeting, making sure that people have a chance to be active and influential in the frame of the idea proposed by the artist. The steps of the whole process were very much dependent on the residents' actions, engagement and suggestions. The final form of all the event was shaped together by the project team and residents.

The project was evaluated together by the project team, residents and the Partnership. After the end of the residency, the Partnership and the residents decided to continue activities in the yard during the whole summer period.

