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The De-Novo Association: The Summer
Theatre Action

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Research context

This article is a case study – part of a larger project developed under the auspices of the *Instytut Studiów Zaawansowanych* (Institute for Advanced Study) in Warsaw, within the programme *Kultura i Rozwój* (“Culture and Development”). The goal of the project has been to promote and analyse informal grassroots cultural activities in an effort to better understand their influence on economic and social development. Observations were grouped into five categories: subjectivity (individual creativity, individual resources, private property); communality (interaction, communication, collaboration, confidence, mutual practice, exchange, respect for individuality, focus on diversity, shared resources, common ownership); participation (mechanisms of organisation, collaborative decision making, co-management, inclusivity, accessibility, openness, responsibility towards stakeholders and respect for alternative positions); sustainability (sources and mechanisms of financing, institutionalisation, social and ecological responsibility) and reflexivity. We examined our findings for insights into the dynamics of five basic areas: resource allocation, redistribution, inclusion, innovation and cooperation, and decision-making. The final aim of the project is to construct a set of actionable recommendations for cultural policymakers.

This case study comprised observations and participant-observations in July 2014, including interviews with leaders and participants of the summer action in Dynów.

A Coincidence

In 2003 a group of artists in Dynów, a small town in the Subcarpathian region of southeast Poland, began an unusual tradition. The Informal De-Novo Group, as they were called, invited residents to participate in a series of outdoor performances. The *spiritus movens* of the festival included Magdalena Miklasz (actress and director with familial ties to Dynów) and Ewa Woźniak (stage and costume designer). The driving force for these women and their supporting artists was the need to do something for the local community, stimulating the creativity of Dynów’s residents and providing them with an opportunity to experience art.

The *idée fixe* of the festival’s founders was that it had to be fundamentally collaborative. Therefore, their preparations engaged a wide array of professional and amateur artists, as well as those with no prior experience in cultural productions. Participants included local

residents, businessmen, families, and students from secondary school and university.

The success of this initiative and the high level of local engagement inspired organisers to make an annual tradition out of the festival. In 2007, they institutionalised the practice through the establishment of the De-Novo Association, which sought funding for further opportunities in collaborative cultural production. This was more of an effect than a cause of the project's stability, however. The prime guarantee for the festival's continued success, as indicated by its members, was and remains the good will of its participants and their shared sense of responsibility for achieving common goals.

The performances in Dynów are created in a space not designed for such purposes, at the station of a narrow-gauge railway. In principle, each year there is a one-time mass mobilisation and everything is created from scratch. Everyone works for their proverbial board and keep. Because of scarce funds and insufficient accommodations, visiting participants live mainly in school buildings, willingly renouncing comforts and privacy.

The Association has no budget – this is by and large a non-profit action. The sum required to mount the festival comes to around 20,000 złoty (about 4,600 euro). It is difficult to estimate a precise total, since most activities are based on non-financial support. Most of the money spent each year goes toward hiring a professional firm to operate sound and lighting, buying some set elements, and food (only ingredients, since participants cook for themselves). The main source of funding comes from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage's grant programmes and support from local businesses. Some members of the community choose to donate as well, although most offer support through non-financial means—volunteering, participating, and organising alongside the De-Novo Association.

The production is developed over the course of each July and ends with three performances open to the public. Throughout the festival, other events are organised including concerts, theatre soirées, and dance parties with guest performances by artists not directly involved in creating the production.

The lack of funding, infrastructure, technical and organisational support contrasts sharply with the commitment of participants and, most of all, with the exceedingly high calibre of the performances themselves. The results are impressive: thousands of viewers, great reviews, and a brand embedded in the consciousness of theatre circles.

The performances are the tangible objective of these activities. A much more important, non-tangible objective is to promote the personal and social development of the local community through their engagement with the De-Novo Association and its annual festival.

It is difficult to say precisely how many people are engaged in preparing performances, as there is no definite structure or framework. We estimate the number to be around 80 on average. The team is composed of leaders, numerous artists, and a group of residents at various levels of engagement. The action is informally organised, and participants are wary of any effort to codify membership. Certain tasks are formally assigned to particular persons only when absolutely necessary – for example, when writing grant applications. The Association has a board, but it seems that neither participants nor board members themselves

regard this bureaucratic apparatus as especially important. In a community with little or no social hierarchy, respect and trust become the decisive components of effective leadership. The foundation of the De-Novo Association does not lie in formal regulations, but rather in a sense of shared responsibility and collective will toward a common goal.

The result of these efforts has been amazing. Each year, this group of people creates an extraordinary, large-scale, open air performance, which enthuses both audiences and critics. In spite of the semi-professional character of the project, Dynów is widely acknowledged as one of Poland's most significant cultural events. To date, the action has staged several well-known works, including *Fiddler on the Roof*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Book of Paradise*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, as well as original productions typically rooted in the specific aspects of the local community. These latter include *Łestern*, a play set in a small town not so unlike Dynów, with a plot revolving around the lives and concerns of its inhabitants.

Context, Relations and Restrictions, Influence

The absence of formalised structure and the wide variety of people engaged in this initiative result in a situation in which attempts to classify the stakeholders of the organisation may result in oversimplification. Bearing this in mind, four principal groups closely related to developing the productions may be distinguished.

The first group includes participants directly involved in preparing the performances: artists, local residents, supporters, guests from outside of Dynów. Most regard participation in this project an excellent form of actively spending their free time. However, many participants also find other deeper meanings in these activities. Magda Miklasz, the initiator and leader of the action, builds a certain artistic identity on it, distinguishing her from other directors. Artists and creators, and those aspiring to these roles, regard their involvement in the productions as an important source of new experience, developing their skills and practice. Many participants are also motivated by the prestige of participating in a high-profile artistic project. Almost unlimited openness to creativity, tolerance and large margins of error, and an attractive if specifically quasi-theatrical space create excellent opportunities for artistic experiment.

Annual meetings in Dynów are primarily a very natural, unforced yet intense form of activities in the sphere of personal development. Meetings, conversations and resulting inspirations, and most importantly the energy flowing from common activities are most frequently indicated in interviews with participants as the reason for participation. Coming to Dynów is often regarded by respondents as the turning point in their lives. Some declared that, thanks to this action, they had more life opportunities, wider horizons, different views of reality. Some also declared that participation in this initiative determined their choice of path in life, helped in overcoming personal problems, influenced their interests. For many participants, it was also an important moment in their professional lives – it determined their choices of career or enabled contacts to be established that influenced career development.

Another group of stakeholders includes members of the local community not directly involved with artistic activities but supporting the action financially, non-financially, mentally, and in other ways. Research conducted within the framework of this case study was strictly qualitative,

so it would be difficult to determine the percentage of residents supporting, rejecting or ignoring this initiative. Observations and conducted interviews have not revealed any negative attitudes towards the action.

This results from several factors. First, the activities of the Association influence the town's attractiveness and offer an excellent form of entertainment. Residents can participate in performance preparations, and develop existing interests or only admire the results. Each action is accompanied by many other events: concerts, performances, theatre soirées and dances, film screenings free of charge. Artists and artistic groups offering guest performances as accompanying events usually perform for free or for reimbursement of travel costs. The majority come to Dynów motivated by friendships and social life, but still treat it as a form of promoting their art. The particular circumstances and a characteristic audience composed mainly of people who do not usually attend cultural events create opportunities to test oneself, verify artistic ideas and create a sincere, authentic dialogue with the audience. Many accompanying events have a very high level of artistic quality. If not for the Dynów Association, this kind of entertainment would be unavailable to most residents. The action is also a source of measurable material benefits, stimulating the growth of sales in local shops, hotels, bars, etc.

Invitation for participation in the project is open to everyone, and to residents from so-called marginalised groups, especially senior citizens and the unemployed. They are not, however, approached in any particular way, but rather treated as any other resident. According to Magda Miklasz, this enables stigmatisation typical of programmes aimed directly at certain groups to be avoided.

A very important element in relations between the Association and its environment, but also the most problematic, is cooperation with local authorities. The cooperation takes place at several levels. The interests of stakeholders represented by local and state authorities are mostly formal; these are recognized and must be respected. In order to apply for funding from public grants, the Association needs to fit into the grant-programme frameworks, which is not always consistent with the essence of the action and, therefore, sometimes impedes the regular implementation of its objectives. In participant opinions, financing action from projects forces artificial formalisation and stifles spontaneity. Moreover, rigid conditions of receiving grants results in a situation in which the De-Novo Association has to undertake activities only partly consistent with its objectives. In consequence, its regular course of developing the production is disturbed and, according to action participants, their time is wasted. The excessive bureaucracy related to applying for grants and processing them, requiring time and competencies not always possessed by people involved in the project, is also a problem. Finding someone willing to go through this process can prove very difficult.

The first partner representing the authorities is the Miejski Ośrodek Kultury [MOK, Municipal Cultural Centre], and this partnership has been managed by Aneta Pepaś, the action coordinator for the Association since 2007. Pepaś applied for this position out of the need to secure the relationship between the Association and the local administration. Moreover, because she took this position, the initiative can count on considerable support, for example in terms of barter exchange. MOK as institution has certain resources and can make these available throughout the year in exchange for helping in production preparations.

The De-Novo Association, as a non-governmental organisation, has no fixed assets and without the assistance of MOK would have limited possibilities.

Another key partner is the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, but the ministry does not support activities of the De-Novo Association in the form in which they are conducted, only subsidising activities such as summer education of children and youth. This requires organising additional theatre workshops for the youngest action participants.

The closest and most complex relationship exists between the Association and the local authorities. Municipal authorities support the De-Novo Association project with a small grant (in 2015, it was a 4,000 zloty, around 900 euro, the highest sum awarded to the Association by the local authorities) and allows it to use school facilities for accommodation of participants. The Starostwo Powiatowe [District Authority Office] provides the venue at the narrow-gauge railway station (in close cooperation with the local authorities) for rehearsals and performances.

Based on observation and conducted interviews, however, it must be stated that the attitude of local authorities towards the initiative is yet another example of bureaucratic administration which has little in common with either management of the public sphere and (even less) with developing local cultural policies. The mayor appreciates the activities at the station, because he regards them as an attraction for residents and an element of promoting the town. He does not see or understand either the exceptional nature of this project or its potential. In his opinion from an interview with this author, the Association's activities hold as much importance for the city as any other non-governmental organisation. It should be noted that the official Dynów website mentions among its attractions cultural activities of residents: the mixed choir, wind ensemble, cabaret, the Dynowianie folk band, an amateur theatre company, various artistic groups in primary and secondary schools. Important cultural events mentioned on the town website include the Pogórze Dynowskie Days and the Regional Competitions of Christmas Carols and Pastorals and of Patriotic Poetry. There is nothing about actions organised by the De-Novo Association or artists engaged in its activities.

The town allows the use of school facilities for accommodations. Each year, this requires a new application, and until the last moment there is no guarantee that the Association will be able to accommodate participants there – which poses a major logistical problem in the views of a large number of participants. The District Authority Office provides the narrow-gauge railway station as a venue, but sanitary conditions are deplorable. There is only one toilet – too readily described as a 'hole in the ground' – with water from hoses if it is demanded, and constant problems with trash collection. Moreover, plans for modernization of the narrow-gauge railway are being developed. Some consultations are conducted, but the District Authority Office has not declared its preferences for the character of this space after renovation and its future remains unannounced.

It should come as no surprise that after over a decade of conducting this action, the attitude of local authorities is regarded by participants as disrespectful. The specific attitude of the District Authority Office seems to pose the greatest risk for the stability and development of the Association's project. It deprives the artists of energy – instead of focusing on the essence of their activities, they have to deal with onerous

organisational issues, which should be the responsibilities of the local authorities. In the view of Association co-founder Ewa Woźniak:

I am tired with these organisational issues and the fact that there is no toilet, there is no water, and every time we have to fight for it [...]. There are some things that, when they are hard, they teach you something. But the hardships here already taught me enough, I don't need it to teach me something any longer, it only burdens me. This [resolving these issues] would raise the quality of our work, because these issues are so irritating now.

Magda Miklasz specifies the benefit to the Association 'if I felt that this town wants this. If they would call and ask: Magda, when are you going to begin the project [this year], we want to organise your accommodations. This would be amazing'.

The attitude of local authorities and the single-year span of financial aid determined by the public-grant programme impose the restrictive conditions of regarding the Association's action as a project while only planning for it in the short-term context, which carries certain risks. First, despite the long history of its activities, in terms of an independent artistic and social undertaking, these circumstances do not encourage the organisers to think strategically or with long-term perspectives instead, they have to struggle for each production. Second, such conditions inflict negative influence on motivation of the leaders, who when faced with ongoing lack of security openly talk about resigning from the action. Third, they are fundamentally inconsistent with values towards which the action is oriented, which are shaped on the long-term basis. I have in mind in this regard creativity, trust, accruing social capital, innovativeness and personal development.

The final group of stakeholders – to some extent identical with that comprising Dynów residents – are the audience for the outdoor performances. Interestingly, the interviewed participants never mentioned the performance audiences as the receivers of the action. Perhaps this results from the great interest in the performances, which would suggest that there is no need for promotional activities when there are so many other tasks. Moreover, more interest would generate serious logistical problems. It seems, however, that this proves that performance as such is not the main objective of the action. For all people involved in this project, the most important things happen during preparations: the creative process, building a community, personal development, common action and rest. The presentation is treated only as a culmination of the work.

The main way of communication with residents who are not personally involved in preparing the performance is active direct contact, which requires personal engagement, time, activity, conversations and often an individual approach. It is not just a way of communication, but most of all a method of establishing relationships, activation and overcoming passivity. According to the organisers, promoting the event outside Dynów is much simpler. People attending from outside of Dynów are usually interested in theatre and look for all relevant information themselves. It is enough to publish information about the action on the relevant theatre portals and it will reach certain audiences. The organisers also try to ensure the presence of theatre critics during performances, motivated by continuing concern with maintaining the professional character of the project.

Observation of these actions creates the sense that they work by way of gravity, which force is focused by such values as friendship, openness, tolerance, creativity, the sense of community, activity, creation and joy.

Innovative Actions

The Association's initiative is distinguished most importantly by the boundless creative potential stimulated by its leaders, the director Miklasz and the set designer Woźniak. Participants performing in the production – professionals and amateurs alike – create characters they then play, taking active and creative part in preparing the set and costumes. They are not left alone, however, but work under the attentive supervision of professionals. They can rely on natural and unforced professional assistance – for example, no one instructed participants how costumes they were preparing should look, but in the room in which these costumes were being made, an entire wall covered with picture could inspire their own ensembles.

The people directly involved in preparing the production constitute a specific community, internally diversified in all respects. Along with creating natural conditions for intergenerational integration, this diversification is one of the significant advantages of the action, especially in terms of its artistic potential. Various competencies impose a particular mode of cooperation and require much creativity. In a professional theatre, the director's vision shapes a framework and links various activities into a logical entirety. Here, much more important to the Association's approach is using natural predispositions, skills and creativity of each individual performing in the production. 'It is about getting it out, not about being perfect,' Miklasz says. 'The whole idea is to use something, which is not perfect. The potential these people have...to squeeze it out of them.'

Participants not only have the right to propose their own solutions, they are openly encouraged to do so. Such an attitude results in blurring the difference between creator and performer, and all participants feel to a certain extent co-authors of this undertaking. This, in turn, has direct impact on their sense of responsibility for tasks they were given and co-responsibility for the entire process.

This approach plays a significant role in the development of social capital, which had been indicated by the Council of Ministers in 2012 as one of the main areas of meeting objectives of medium- and long-term national development strategies. The main condition for creating the production is cooperation of many people. This initiative is open to everyone willing to participate. This imposes the acceptance of rules of tolerance and mutual respect as boundary conditions for the success of the endeavour. Otherwise, conflicts could arise and effective work on the production could become impeded.

Because of the common goal – preparing the production – the responsibility for achieving it is shared among all engaged individuals, regardless of age, experience or social position. Each participant entrusted with any kind of task, from the simplest ones such as showing up at the rehearsal on time to complex ones such as preparing dinner for a large group or settling a public grant, is granted confidence from the start. To a large extent this results from necessity because, first, there are no formal contracts so honesty and belief in it are the only guarantees for fulfilling the task, and second, the scope of the action is so wide that the

responsibility has to be shared among individuals – no one would be able to control it entirely alone.

During the preparations of the production everything is based on co-operation and mutual assistance. One could get the impression that participant engagement is not only a foundation for success but a general, if unspoken, objective of the entire action. Generating a production does not have to require the effort of so many people. With modest financial investment, some tasks could be performed by external companies, which would probably fulfil them much faster and more efficiently. However, the crucial point of this initiative is not its effectiveness, understood in economic terms, but rather in terms of a community. Outsourcing would automatically deprive participants in the action the opportunity to fulfil their duties. Aneta Pepaś says ‘This works because many people help us. We always consider [that if] the possibility that an outside company would be hired to do anything, these fifteen people coming here and willing to do it for free would not come.’

There is a certain conflict between social capital and capital understood in economic terms and social capital. The former has been a priority for participants in the action. This initiative is non-profit and its success largely depends on it. This attitude is not antagonistic towards market mechanisms but they are firmly and intentionally depreciated, nevertheless. If the necessity would arise to raise funds through selling products or services, such activities could be undertaken, but this seems highly unlikely.

Anyone can participate in the production and anyone has the freedom of expression in their most comfortable dimension. Professional actors have a wide array of means and abilities, but working with amateurs has certain limitations – sometimes major ones. The confrontation between professionals and amateurs results in developing many artistically interesting ideas, because no one fully grasps the rules and abilities of their partners on stage. It also encourages a constant exchange of thoughts and experiences; it creates a space for dialogue and mutual inspirations.

The atmosphere prevailing during the action has a significant role in creating openness to innovate ideas. All people participating in preparations are volunteers: they participate because they want to. They are not forced to be creative and innovative if they don't feel like it or – as is often the case – they might lack the courage. They can just be there, observe and grow at their own pace. The prevailing atmosphere of openness, acceptance and great kindness, however, establishes very fertile ground for creativity by minimizing all pressures resulting from risks related to it. A large margin of freedom and acceptance for error fosters a space free of fear to undertake innovative and sometimes even risky activities. It functions as a self-propelling machine: someone creates, others observe, join or start creating by themselves, drawing on the experiences of others and allowing them to draw on theirs in return.

The search for innovative solutions is also fostered by a space totally unfitted for such actions, and the lack of funding. Everything has had to be built and invented from the start. On one hand, it is quite a logistical challenge, but on the other, this difficult and in some way unobvious space has a major influence on imagination, inducing a search for innovative solutions.

Creating everything ‘from scratch’ stimulates not only creativity in the artistic sense but also creativity as understood in terms of

entrepreneurship: an ability to face challenges and solve problems encountered in the process. Insufficient funds and shared responsibility for implementation of this undertaking impose on participants the necessity to perform tasks which they had never previously experienced, and consequently encourage them to take risks and develop new skills. It inspires the feeling of self-efficacy, uniqueness and self-confidence. Everyone has a deep awareness of the fact that if they want to achieve something, they can only do it if they work together in a group, in cooperation based on trust, openness and tolerance. It has been emphasised often that all these qualities influence everyday life significantly, and the activities of participants beyond the action.

A certain informal community has formed around this project. Some engage regularly, others only incidentally. There is a certain rotation, but nevertheless the grassroots, communal character of this undertaking secures the functioning of the entire project. The action always functions as an open community. Participants are not selected in relation to tasks that need to be fulfilled, but create a diverse community. This approach has resulted in creating a system responsive to changes in its environment and adjusting to them, a system which values these changes instead of treating them as risks. Thereby, the De-Novo Association meets substantive conditions for regarding it as the learning organisation, capable of self-knowledge, development and introducing changes based on experience. This organisation comprehensively implements the five disciplines indicated by Peter Senge as indispensable for development and success in liquid modernity:

1. personal mastery (continually clarifying and deepening the vision of each participant and focusing on their energies and ideas)
2. mental models (the capacity to change or even reject a course of action in favor of the common good and the final effect)
3. building shared vision
4. team learning (through ongoing dialogue and common decisions)
5. and systems thinking¹ (as the capacity to perceive an organization as a complete system, by the leaders and by participants as well).

Recommendations

Development can be defined by introducing changes to five basic mechanisms or social processes: resource allocation, redistribution, inclusion, innovation and cooperation and decision-making. In the case of De-Novo Association, it would seem that the most characteristic and distinct change was noticeable in the area of innovation, in the form of activities changing the current ways of satisfying needs at the level of individuals and relationships between them. However, there is also a discernible impact on other areas, especially resource allocation and redistribution, based largely on creativity and non-financial mechanisms.

The most important pro-development resources generated during the De-Novo Association's action include fulfilling individual needs – that is, gaining new experiences and skills, establishing professional and personal contacts, opportunity to experiment and create, searching for inspirations, solving personal problems, widening the scope of interests

1 Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

– cooperative contribution to community and shaping social capital, promoting such attitudes as activeness, creativity and entrepreneurship, as well as influence on the quality of urban space and participatory model of management. Performances prepared during the action also have a high artistic quality, which makes this undertaking worth the name of an exceptional theatrical event.

Organisation of such multi-participant, open-air production in Dynów is clearly an original initiative. Everything depends on people who participate in it – on their talents, creativity, personalities, personal contacts and relationships. Therefore, it would be impossible to standardize these activities or their exact replication. However, the general rules of cooperation related to artistic and organisational issues or values holding together activities can become an excellent source of inspiration. The uniqueness of this undertaking does not preclude its significance interpreted from the point of view of searching for organisational solutions important for widely understood culture, as well as social and economic development.

All values created during the action result from activity of the artists and their need for relations with local community. At the same time, thanks to the conscious attitude of its initiators, this project remains outside any formalised structure, despite its decade-long history. One fundamental conclusion comes to mind in relation to these remarks: activities of local authorities in the area of shaping and implementing cultural policies should be directed towards stimulating artistic creativity through direct support of artists and their actions in the local community. This entails going beyond institutional framework, recognising and defining the needs and designing formulas guaranteeing optimal conditions for creativity, cooperation, dialogue, interactions between artists and viewers, residents and public space.

It seems that currently this support could be implemented in two ways:

First, through supporting artists:

a) in the form of an expanded scholarship system, which would make obtaining funds easier, without the complicated competition procedure. Artistic creativity would be less constrained by bureaucracy

b) in the form of developing mechanisms in the social-security system which would allow artists and creations to function outside cultural institutions. Such solutions have been implemented in other EU countries, and the lack of a defined status for artists in Poland seems to be a gross negligence.

The second area of activities should be supporting non-governmental organisations by promoting long-term projects or to secure an own contribution instead of the current policy favouring short-term and immediate solutions. In the case of the Association in Dynów the guarantee of financial stability, even at a very modest level, in the long-term perspective could change the organisers' way of thinking about their undertaking and make its production much easier. It would probably also contribute to the innovative character of the project.

The last and, indeed, the key recommendation would be to change the attitude of public administration, which should appreciate such initiatives. Local authorities should be made aware of the value of activities conducted at the micro-level, at the expense of lowering the predominance of spectacular events and bloated institutions. It is worth noting that these current tendencies have brought about many negative consequences. Instead of promoting culture and development, investments supported by external funding including that of the EU has become a threat. Their maintenance consumes most of the budget, therefore limiting support for other citizen, cultural and social activities.

The proposed recommendations surely do not exhaust to list of ways by which pro-development cultural activities could be supported, and even in the current institutional and legal system, many other relevant solutions certainly could be found. Most importantly, they have to be grounded in the idea that culture is first and foremost created by people, and public policies should not consist of defining objectives but rather of contributing to optimal conditions for creation, dialogue and cooperation.

Translated by Monika Bokiniec

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ABSTRACT

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The De-Novo Association: The Summer Theatre Action

This paper presents an individual case study conducted as part of the research project *Kultura i Rozwój* (“Culture and Development”) in the Institute for Advanced Study in Warsaw. The main objective of the project was to study citizens’ grassroots cultural initiatives expressing their aspirations for fulfilling individual and/or community goals. The study focused on the activities of the De-Novo Association, which organised a series of collaborative outdoor performances in Dynów in July 2014. Data from the events were grouped into five categories: subjectivity, community, participation, persistence, and self-reflection. Our observations were geared toward charting the dynamics of five basic areas: resource allocation, redistribution, inclusion, innovation and cooperation, and decision-making.

The most important personal and social outcomes of the initiative include: fulfilling individual needs, fostering cooperative contribution to community, shaping social capital, promoting creativity and entrepreneurship, and improving the quality of urban space through the participatory model of management.