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Spreading like Wildfire

The Development of Mother Centers into a Global Movement



Results of the Study

The Elements of Spontaneous Dissemination of Social Practice

The Experience of the Mother Centers

Commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation
The Netherlands 2007

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SPREADING LIKE WILDFIRE is a publication of the Mother Center International Network (mine). mine connects and supports the over 850 Mother Centers currently existing in twenty countries. (www.mine.cc). The network stands for a world that places social cohesion and community building at the base of development, re-integrates the culture of care into public life and recognizes the central role of women in peace building and development.

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Table of Contents

I. Background	5	A place to learn	26
The Result of a Successful Partnership between Grassroots and Academia	7	A place to become active in society	27
Claiming A Public Place for Families	7	A place to realise dreams and visions	27
An Expression of the Desire for Community	8	III. Strategies of Dissemination	29
II. What makes Mother Centers Unique	11	The Book	31
A place of easy access	13	Face to Face Exchanges	32
A place to be as you are	13	Training	33
A place to be with your children	13	Internet	33
A place to find community	14	Media	34
A caring place	15	Pioneers	34
A place to feel at home	16	Claiming Space	35
A safe place	16	IV. The Creation of Networks	37
A place to find support	16	Stronger Together	40
A place of recognition and assistance for parenting	17	Cohesion and Trust Building	42
A place for diversity	18	Naming the Process	43
A place for equality	19	V. Country Profiles	45
A place to contribute talents	19	Canada	48
A place to bring everything under one roof	19	Bosnia	49
A place to create family services	20	Czech Republic and Slovakia	50
A place to create neighbourhood	20	The Netherlands	50
A place to be seen and appreciated	20	Germany	51
A place to take ownership and responsibility	23		
A place that responds to immediate needs	23		
A place to share values	24		
A place to develop and create your future	25		

VI. Successes	53	VIII. Ways Forward	81
Empowering Women and Children	55	Visions	83
Supporting Healthy Families	56	A Shift of Values	83
Creating Neighborhoods	56	Mother Centers in every Community	83
Strengthening Civil Society	57	Mother Centers as Universities of Parenthood	83
Partnering in Local Governance	58	Multigenerational Mother Centers	83
Entering Bottom-up Knowledge into Society	59	Funding	84
Creating Family Friendly Societies	59	Public Funding	84
		Core Funding	84
VII. Challenges	63	The Economics of Participation	85
Organisational Development	65	Securing Space	87
Communication and Group Dynamics	65	Sustainable Relationships	88
Paving your own Path	66	Professionalisation	88
Bottom-up Participation	66	Strategies for Sustainability	91
New Generations	68	The Alumni Idea	92
Keeping the Mother Center Culture Alive	69	Social Enterprises	92
Job Mentality	71	Defining the Impact	93
Developing Standards	71	Knowledge Building	94
Paid Voluntary Work	72	Partnerships	95
Swimming against the Mainstream	75		
Shifting existing Power Systems	75	IX. Contacts	97
Public Recognition	76		
Not a Project	77		
Finances and Fundraising	78		
Grassroots Ownership	79		

I. Background

The first three Mother Centers were founded in Germany, as a model project funded by the German Federal Family Ministry. Within two decades they have spread into twenty countries. Currently there are over 850 Mother Centers worldwide, linked by regional, national and international Mother Center networks¹.

What is remarkable about this development is that it has been a spontaneous process. There has been no governmental or NGO program through which Mother Centers have been disseminated. It has happened 'by itself', as the result of self help and of peer learning.

This study, commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation sets out to examine the factors behind this process. How does the transfer of knowledge happen at grassroots level? What makes Mother Centers a movement? What are the secrets of their success? What can be learned from this process? ➤

¹ : Mother Centers currently exist in Argentina, Austria, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Guatemala, Italy, Liechtenstein, Kenya, Nepal, The Netherlands, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Slovakia, Switzerland and The USA.

Mother Centers national network meeting, Czech Republic.



The study has been conducted as a qualitative study in several phases. In the first phase 35 in-depth interviews were conducted with initiators of Mother Centers and Mother Center networks in Bosnia, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, The Netherlands and Slovakia following a questionnaire previously sent to the country's networks. The interviews were conducted between February and June 2006 as individual and as group interviews.

Participants were selected by the national and regional networks, as well as the local Mother Centers. A first analysis of the interviews was presented to the Mother Center network at the International Conference: *How do we want to raise our children?* held in Bratislava end of November 2006. In a second phase comments and feedback to the first analysis of the material were gathered and integrated into the final text.

The results of the study are presented in the authentic voices of the women interviewed. This follows the experience of the original Mother Center book which played a major role in spreading Mother Centers and creating the movement. The book was published as a story book, told in the words of the women participating in the first centers. This made it easy for readers to identify with their peers and the idea. In this publication the same approach is taken to safeguard grassroots ownership of the rich harvesting of experience and knowledge generated by a movement that has spread bottom up on the basis of self help.

Birthday party at Mother Center *Redo* Sarajevo, Bosnia.



The Result of a Successful Partnership between Grassroots and Academia

Academia has played a pivotal role in the creation and dissemination of Mother Centers. The concept of Mother Centers was developed by researchers at the German Youth Institute in Munich. The fact that it developed into a grassroots self-help movement was due to the fact that methods of action research were applied and that ways of practising equitable partnership between grassroots groups and their academic partners were explored.

The idea of Mother Centers started with a process of careful listening to and bringing out the authentic voices and ideas of parents and families. Issues were framed according to the understanding and self interpretation of families themselves, versus preconceived professional ideas about them. With this research approach, the issues became visible that families were raising themselves, as did their solutions.

An important element involved shifting from the usual 'deficit orientation' (families have problems and need professional help) to a 'resource orientation', that identifies the resources and capacities of the groups concerned as well as the enabling conditions under which these capacities can be activated and made productive for society. Families have skills and competencies. What they need are enabling structures to apply their capabilities.

A further element that contributed to grassroots ownership of the research process consisted of creating reflective space for the participants of Mother Centers to reflect on what was happening in their centers and to extract the implications and lessons learned and document their experience in a story-telling format.

The research team was also a valuable partner by supporting negotiations with local authorities with academic evidence and by identifying allies for the Mother Center concept from universities, the media, ministries, foundations, international grassroots organisations and other stakeholders.

Claiming A Public Place for Families

Mother Centers are local grassroots initiatives that run self-managed public meeting spaces in the neighborhood. These are places where mothers and their children meet on a daily basis, can focus on their

needs and interests, exchange knowledge and experiences with peers, receive and generate mutual support in child-rearing tasks, engage in capacity building and further education, and initiate family support services like childcare, eldercare, healthcare, hot meals for school children, laundry, janitors or other household services.

Mother Centers are based on self help and participation following the motto that everybody is good at least one thing which they can contribute to the center and to the community. The atmosphere is informal, the centers operate on a drop in basis. Activities involve projects that help lower expenses for families and that support families in their parenting tasks and everyday chores as well as in times of crisis. Most centers run projects like a second hand shop, a toy library, holistic health services or skills training such as language courses, computer courses and job retraining. Advocacy groups on issues like children's environmental diseases, single parenting or family friendly urban facilities are part of what happens in Mother Centers.

Mother Centers are local switchboards of information and exchange, a place where issues and talents can become visible. Everything that happens in the community can be discussed there on a daily basis. Anything that needs immediate attention or response can be attended to collectively. There is openness, fluidity and transparency of decision making. Everyone is welcome in the center, and can participate and be part of it. Things do not happen behind closed doors, or by invitation alone, but 'in public', in the 'public living room'.

Children are a welcome and regular part of Mother Centers, and Mother Centers run many programs for children. At the same time, however, the focus is on the mothers. Activities also revolve around the interests and needs of the mothers. This creates public space that is shared by adults and children and a different kind of childcare than in most programs.

You can join a Mother Center by having a cup of coffee in the coffee shop or by a visit to the Mother Center's second hand store. Childcare is offered on a drop-in basis for all ages during the opening hours of the center. Depending on their size and how long they have been operating, Mother Centers reach between 50 and 1000 families in the neighborhood.

In Mother Centers women are supported to join forces to improve the lives of their families and communities, connect with families from different social and cultural backgrounds, gain acknowledgment for their everyday life expertise, fight poverty and social exclusion and participate in local governance. Mother Centers generate peer support systems in conflict and crisis situations. They create employment and access to the labor market. For children the centers create an expansion of their social and physical space and experience. They experience an introduction and integration into public life in a protected environment.

An Expression of the Desire for Community

Mother Centers seem to be contagious, they generate a spontaneous response. The spreading of the Mother Center concept is described by many as a form of "recognition" of an idea and vision that already exists inside. The concept taps into a deeper knowing, something is touched and resonates within, and the picture immediately becomes alive. Mother Centers seem to be understood spontaneously because they relate to a deep knowing and yearning for community.

Conservative forces in society often respond to the longing for community, with traditional and somewhat outdated concepts, which often gives the impression of trying to turn back the clock. Mother Centers relate to the need for community in a modern way. Putting the values of community and care into a modern context means developing conditions for social bonding and social responsibility to develop freely, and based on choice, not based on moral rules or family obligations. The task is to create the conditions to balance today's individualistic lifestyle, against social responsibility and socially reliable networks. Family needs to be defined in a wide and culturally diverse way, socially reliable networks need to extend beyond family and clan structures to include social units and networks based on common interests and preferences.

For a sustainable future, family and community solutions are needed that work for women, who are increasingly developing an awareness of their right to equality and in many cases are also increasingly having fewer children; as well as for children and youths, who are increasingly becoming dysfunctional in urban settings.

Opening up nuclear family structures to local support networks in the neighborhood brings a shift towards more of a collective responsibility and organisation of reproductive tasks, towards 'community parenting'. Mother Centers are paving new ways for community that translate easily to contemporary conditions of care giving.

How to live together in social peace and harmony, how to generate social care and responsibility and how to rebuild the social fabric in diverse, conflict-torn, pluralistic societies are issues underlying many of the current concerns around the isolation, alienation and anonymity of communities, the increase of violence, the re-emergence of fundamentalism, the non-engagement of youth and the lack of a pro-active civil society.

Mother Centers are an answer to the weakening of social ties, family, kin and neighbourhood networks in many different social, cultural and historical settings. Mother Centers are being self-created all over the world by women who see the need for community support for the everyday task of raising children. They reinvent family and kinship under contemporary conditions by creating extended family structures in the context of neighbourhood and community. They create buffer zones for many of the challenges of contemporary society such as individualisation, alienation, isolation and clientelisation.

“ I experience Mother Centers as a movement, because they spread easily, by word of mouth, from woman to woman. (Bosnia)

Through the current demographic trend, with the decline of births and the ageing population, the public is waking up to the fact that mothers need other forms of support. It is like nature, when it is almost gone, people are beginning to realise that things need to change. Mother Centers are playing a historic role in this. The fact that they have spread spontaneously shows that they are responding to a historic need. (Germany) ”

“ What made it different was that we really felt listened to, recognized and appreciated for our own knowledge and expertise. Often professionals and academics only think they have things to teach us, and nothing to learn from us. But what was also important was the way the researchers helped us put together our ideas into a model and concept and link our perspectives to mainstream debates. A lot happened because we were asked the right questions and our answers were translated to the right forums. (Germany)

The job of the partners is to put it into context, figure out how it can be funded, talk about how it relates to the bigger picture, whereas the real learning can only occur between the Mother Center women themselves. (Canada) ”

“ To me every time it is magic. Always nice smiling faces, I feel it is my place, even if I am in a center in another town, another country. I feel welcome, part of the family. No one puts pressure on me. I feel at home. (Bosnia)

As I was leaving the hotel where I attended the conference this young woman came up to me and said, ‘have you heard about the Aboriginal Mother Center?’, and she handed me this beautiful brochure. And she stood there for 5 minutes, shyly, telling me about the plans for the center. I thought, wow, this is a great idea. It was so simple, a way of life for her and her child, it was eloquent, I could just see this center in my head and knew that it was what we were always talking about, I could see that it would work. The vision was immediately there. (Canada)

The energy that came over me after I read the article about Mother Centers has been with me all these years. (Slovakia)

I always knew I needed some-thing different than what was offered in these single mother programs. And when I heard about the Mother Centers I immediately knew that was it, that was what I was looking for. (Germany)

I first heard about the Mother Center concept when I took this job, which was in 2000. I’d never ever heard of the concept before, although I was a community worker in a big city. My first thought - I was not a mother then, I was a single free going missile - so my initial thoughts were, who are the women who find this necessary?. It sounded very old fashioned to me. This is out dated. How can it be that this is still necessary? But the first time I went to the Mother Center I was completely overwhelmed. In a few

seconds it was completely clear to me that this was it. The way the women flourish inside the center, the way it appeals to everyone's talents, it is very democratic. And the atmosphere is so relaxed and easy going, it was immediately a feeling of coming home. From that moment on I was infected. (Netherlands)

When I run the basics course in our center, where we explain the basic elements of the Mother Center concept to new visitors, I always get the feeling that the women are absorbing every word, it is like a deep yearning is being fulfilled. And they always want to become members immediately, they want to join, and this at a time where nobody becomes a member anywhere any more. Something very universal happens there. (Germany)

And then the penny dropped, and I thought my god, this is it. This is an amazing concept. I liked the concept, I liked the name, that the space was open, it was bringing women out of isolation and creating their own space and having ownership of the space. The sense of self help, and that these were women who were down and out. The sense of pulling oneself up by the boot straps that came through. Then I got more information from the other Mother Centers, I got the bug. And the other women in my community said, this is something we have always dreamed of." (Canada)

Even people from the outside feel it. When our mayor visited us, he later said that the afternoon felt like a healing. You tap into a kind of longing. (Germany)

Even in the contemporary world that operates on certain principles, it is possible to create another, alternative world. You can operate without the principle of material exchange. Women get something in the Mother Center, but it is not money, it is not only money. This is the strongest benefit. That is what caused the idea of Mother Centers to spread so quickly. (Czech Republic)

I was in the youthful anarchist scene, and my old comrades often ask me now, what I am doing. And I try to explain and what I notice works is when I can touch the longing that people have of a different way of living together. It has become too difficult to have a positive approach to life, because everybody is complaining, with the economy going down the drain and all. But in the Mother Center we are oriented towards the future, we create a basis for our future, we live what we are wishing for and that seems to be contagious. We touch on wishes that many have, and we can allow our wishes and our visions, they are mirrored in the way we go about our daily chores in the centers. So many of my friends now say, I want that too, or many old people in the neighbourhood say, why didn't we have this 40 years ago? That would have helped me so much: And can we join too? If you set the seed of longing, then the plant can grow, if you water it. (Germany) ””

II. What makes Mother Centers Unique

Some of the major challenges of contemporary societies include an increasingly individualised and aging society as well as increasingly multicultural populations. While family, kin and neighborhood networks are thinning out, the question of social cohesion and social values needs to be re-framed under contemporary conditions

What makes the approach of Mother Centers unique is that they provide a unique blending of public and private, the formal and informal. They reintroduce the culture of care into public life. They create public space that feels private. Public space in the context of family and neighbourhood networks stays personal. At the same time it gives access to public recognition and visibility. This unique Mother Center blend has often been described by the term ‘public living rooms.’

Mother Centers combine many elements that make them increasingly attractive not only to mothers with small children, but also to youth as well as seniors. Many of the Mother Centers are evolving into multi-generational centers, offering a mix of private and public care to all age groups, that maintains a family-like quality while providing support, relief and back up also to the care-givers.

This chapter sets out to describe and spell out in the words of the participants the elements that make Mother Centers unique, a ‘home away from home,’ a ‘village in the city,’ a community.

Idl Fitr (end of Ramadan) party at Mother Center Stuttgart, Germany.



Childcare room at Aboriginal Mother Center Vancouver, Canada.



A place of easy access

“It is easily accessible, you just drop in. It is not so special-ised, whatever is going on in your life, you can find a listening ear here, you do not have to define yourself with something specific. (Slovakia)

The women feel more comfortable here. You don't have to prove yourself, adapt to any kind of expectations. There are other organisations in our community, but they don't address our needs as mothers. There is the friendship center, but they don't have a drop-in area, they have a gym, an employment area, a certain program, and you have to be signed up for it, it goes for 12 weeks, that kind of thing. There is another aboriginal organisation, but you have to be abused in order to access their services, and not all of our women are abused. There are a lot of moms here that go to school or work, and they come here when they are done with their school or work, just to hang out, to let their kids play. (Canada) ”

A place to be as you are

“The Mother Center was a place where I met people that were real, not the people who are professionally nice, who have the role of being officially helpful. The social workers you always think, who are they in reality? And when they are impersonally friendly and helpful, that does not really ring true to me. In the Mother Centers you meet regular people, they are real. It is not always friendly, but you know that is not a problem, we all grow in the process. The permanent but formal politeness and cordiality of public spaces does not radiate warmth, but in the Mother Centers you feel real, you feel accepted, you feel at home. (Germany)

Women here feel comfortable saying, 'you know when I had my nervous breakdown last year'. We all know she had a nervous breakdown, we understand that, we still accept her. Women can go away, drop out, and they can come back again and feel welcome. (Canada) ”

A place to be with your children

“I moved from a smaller community to the city with a 2 week old and became homeless, that is how I started out. Seeing the center, it appealed to me, because I did not know anyone down here, I was isolated and seeing a place like this where I would feel comfortable, I would be able to make friends, my son would have a safe place to play, I would be able to get tips from other moms on parenting skills and such. I saw that that was happening there. I could understand it just from looking. The children were happy and safe. There wasn't really another place where I could play with my son, at other programs there wasn't space for him to play with other children. Or if I wanted to take more training or go to school, there wasn't really a place where I could do that, and still take him along. The Mothers Center felt more supportive, where I would follow through. (Canada)

As a mother, if you have children it is normal to stay at home. Then you are a home-maker, and if you are going to an exhibition or theatre with children, people look at you as if to say, what are you doing here with your wild children, stay at home and take care of your children, that is your duty. And I did not like that. (Slovakia)

I don't need to give up my own private little circle, taking care of my own, being there for them and still being able to be part of public life. (Canada)

My daughter, she has gained an extended family here. (Bosnia)

As a young mom I never liked to go to the community center. All the other moms that I hung out with, all the teen moms, we were really isolated, we hung out in each others homes and in the shopping mall, in the café there, there was a group of us, we could have created our own Mother Center and that would have been more empowering than the mall. (Canada)

One week my daughter was ill and it was horrible, like being a tiger in a cage. After 3 days she wanted to go out, she put on her shoes, she felt like she was in a cage too, she was calling for her friends, she wanted to see them. She needed the Mother Center. (Slovakia)

At our concerts and events we are not a place with strict discipline, the families know when they come, the children can feel free here, it is interesting both for the little ones and the older ones. When the city organises an event it is usually for school kids, it is never for the whole range of ages, for the whole family. (Slovakia)

It is good for children to have friends and come together before kindergarten. And for us, since we did not know anybody, we were new, we needed a place. (Czech Republic)

”

A place to find community

“ We are pretty big now. Starting from a small office with a great idea, to a few years later we are a huge building, we have a kitchen, a children's room, a factory, a lot of people come here from the community, they will just come here and sit at the computers, it does not mean they come here for something, they just come to hang out, they want a cup of coffee and chat with each other and see their buddies and laugh, and hear all the gossip. (Canada)

Mother Centers stand for friendship, exchange of experience, support not only in the group, but in the whole community. (Bosnia)

I walked in and never wanted to leave. All these kids sitting on the sofa, it is so different from any place I had ever been, staff all smiley, and you couldn't tell who is a volunteer, who is staff, it felt very much like home. I am in a cubicle in my office, I don't have any windows, I don't talk to anybody, that is why I come out to the community, just to talk to women and children and uncles and grandmas, and here I can just do that any time of the day. (Canada)

For me the Mother Center has become extended family, I have only one child, I always wanted more child-ren, but the other children did not want to come into the world, so the Mother Center was a chance for me to experience this larger family. (Germany)

We never leave a woman alone, with nothing. We even help with washing hair in the hairdressing salon, if the hairdresser is under pressure. If a woman starts a new activity, she knows she is supported. Then she dares to do more, she feels more confident. (Bosnia)

You are totally accepted for what you are, there is lots going on, children playing in one corner, it is a peer group family idea. Nobody is excluded, everybody is included, whoever they are, whatever age, color, whatever. (Netherlands)

Just being able to meet someone on the street and just saying hello, because society is so individualised, saying hello is a big major event. Nobody says hello anymore. It helps to get to know your neighbourhood and not feel so anonymous. (Netherlands)

I think it speaks to a very deep need for community. In most cities what is going on now is the opposite of community. It brings moms and kids together, and there is this underlying gut need to connect, to children, to grandparents and to a sense of community, of home, the public living room idea, you are allowing people to belong. When people see a group of people with a sense of belonging, they want that too. (Canada) ”

A caring place

“ *For myself I have gone through changes throughout the years, there were times where I was confused, and I was supported here by the women and the management. They understand how it is to be a single mother. I have been homeless twice over the last few years, because of high rent costs. I lost my dad last year and I went right back to work thinking I should keep myself busy, and actually I crashed, and throughout a whole month period I kept missing days and coming in late and just distancing myself from everybody. Any other place they would have fired me, and here they looked at the underlying issue and said: I want you to take a break for a while, take care of yourself, rest and then come back, but first take care of yourself. So that's what happened, I took three months off, I took care of myself, figured out what my path was, took time to grieve. Then I am back. That is what is different. They care. It is like family. We all take care of each other's children. Right now a co-worker is picking up my son from school. It is special; it is creating an extended family. I see that too with the mothers who come to the center, I see them do that too. They are helping each other with each other's children too. Or someone is sick, and another will say, so and so does not have any food at home, can I bring her something. (Canada)*

People care about each other, they have fights, that is natural, but we have developed a culture where we try to support each other to get over it, because we do not want to lose community because of one stupid thing. It is natural to gossip, but we create a culture here, we work with each other to not have it separate us. (Germany) ”

A place to feel at home

“ We have divorced women, they think they are alone with the problem, but in the group they can exchange experiences and not feel alone, no matter whether you are rich or poor, coloured or not, the issues you deal with when you are divorced are the same. Problems with small children are similar. I am alone here in the Netherlands. When I came to the Netherlands I had to leave my family behind. My children were small, I felt very isolated. The Mother Center is a second home. (The Netherlands)

In Mother Centers people are more open. In other projects that is not the case, who are you to have ideas, wishes. It is a family like atmosphere, and that is totally different. (Germany) ”

A safe place

“ The reason we don't need all these rules is that the visitors get how much of a family and community it is here. They feel the safety for themselves and their children. And we tell them to ask if they need anything. Don't steal. Once people realise they are treated like a human being, I am being given choices. And it has never been that way before, it was always, you are no good, get out. Everywhere else there are so many rules, and here they see, we learn from our mistakes, and people feel that. We also work with the sex trade workers and say, this is your center. But if somebody is getting a blow job or shooting up in the parking lot in front of the house, we tell them, do not do that here. A staff person or a volunteer, will go down there in pairs, and just say, excuse me this is a family center, there are children here, could you please go somewhere else. And 99% of the time they will say, I am sorry, I did not know that, and you will not see them doing something like that again. It gets to be known that this is a family zone, a safe zone. They are happy, that there is one space in their neighborhood that is safe. There is a longing for this in their own hearts. (Canada)

For women it is not easy to get out of the home. Where can they go? The Mother Center is a place they can go, where they feel safe, and also the husbands know the women are safe. (Bosnia) ”

A place to find support

“ This week there was a terrible story of a battered woman. To know there is a place where you can talk about these things, where you can get help, that is very important and it really helps. Just to know that there is somewhere you can go to address anything that is going on when you need support. (The Netherlands)

When my son was chronically ill and I did not really know what the problem was, I was at the end of my wits. I did not know what to do. In the center I found someone who knew of a similar case and gave me the address of a doctor, who indeed found out what was wrong and helped my son to get well again. (Germany) ”

A place of recognition and assistance for parenting

“ *In the Mother Center women can be parents who are not acknowledged in that role anywhere else. If you have an addiction, or psychological problems, or you are poor or maybe just a little eccentric, you are not taken seriously as a parent. Here they are seen as parents just like anyone else and can share their concerns as well as their joys as parents. (Germany)*

The Mother Center is a place where children are valued and respected. A basic value here is honouring our child-ren. (Czech Republic)

Our people have left their communities, gone to the big cities, have no relatives; you are out there on your own. Part of the residential schools was that parents were not allowed to be parents, things were not passed down from parents to their children. So in the Aboriginal Mother Center we support parents in being parents, in learning about our traditions of parenting. We don't want to lose the traditional parenting skills. Also the fathers are involved. They come to the center too. (Canada)

Here you can learn games to play with children to engage them, so that they are active, not sitting in front of the TV. How to activate children without expensive toys. Or how to prepare healthy meals for the children. We have gathered a lot of knowledge about these areas. How to accept the individuality of children. (Slovakia)

For instance sometimes you get the feeling, that it is important for the child and the mother to have a bit of space from each other, that they have gotten stuck in their relationship. You have to be able to confront a mother with this. In our center everybody takes responsibility for all children, not only for their own. Everybody is aware of all children, they belong to us all. We support their self confidence. That they are encouraged to believe in themselves. That they understand yes and no. That they learn to respect agreements. (Germany)

We look at children as they are, to see where they need support. We look after them and support them individually. Some children have not experienced sitting at a table and eating together in their families. The children experience the joy of sitting together at the table in the center. It is then often the children who tell their mothers. We sit at the table to eat. Come, sit with us. This has an enormous effect. Then they also start to sit at the table at home. (Germany)

Sometimes what we do to support the mothers, is to mirror what is happening in their interactions. Just mirroring it back to them, what happened the last half hour. That often creates a lot of learning and the mothers are struck, touched and moved by what they see when they are mirrored, how little they sometimes actually listen to their children, and hear what they say. (Germany)

Fathers also participate and they support us, they see that their wife is active, she is not only the woman that waits for him at home. They get more interested in child raising. (Czech Republic) ”

A place for diversity

“ We don't exclude anybody, that is what makes us different and unique. Whether you have money or not. If you don't have money, you can put your child in our child-care without paying. You do not need to feel ashamed if you are poor. If you wear a scarf for religious reasons, you can keep it on. If you have difficult children, they can be with us. We do awareness raising, so that difficult children are accepted too, and the mothers are not made to feel unwelcome. (Germany)

I always marvel at the different kinds of people in the center. I would have never gotten to meet all these kinds of people, such a wild mixture, and it does not matter at all. Go to any other parent education program and you will only meet nice middle class parents who have the newest fashion in prams. In the Mother Center it does not matter if you are migrant or German, if you have regular opinions or unusual ones. It is all a part of it, and it makes the place so interesting. I asked some of the women from ethnic minorities why they like to be in the Mother Center and they answered because here they don't feel like a minority. They just feel like anyone else. (Germany)

Because we have a lot of sex trade workers in this area, there are some that come in to eat lunch or dinner. We do not turn them away. They need to eat and have a rest too. Sometimes they will just want somebody to talk to. That is ok. When we have new families here and they see the ladies of the night come in, if they are a bit off by that, we will talk to them and say, they are part of the community too, they live here. After a while everybody just gets used to each other. We do have to do sensitivity training for center participants so they will accept the women working in the sex trade. Public opinion always thinks of them as being dirty, being dishonest, and here they are part of the community. You see a prostitute who has fallen asleep on the sofa, because it is the only place where she can get some sleep, and no one bats an eye, and the young people see that, they say, she is not hurting me, she is not bad. (Canada)

Mother Centers are the only place where women from different cultures come together, speak, work, and raise their children together. That is issue number one now in the Netherlands, how to integrate migrants, how to keep the social peace. Here it is happening. (The Netherlands)

Our center is the only place in town where families with different religious and ethnic backgrounds come together and it is not an issue, everybody is a part of the center, we welcome everyone. In our school there are different classes for each group. Our society after the war has become even more separated. But in the Mother Center we do not think like that and we have participants from all the communities. (Bosnia) ”

A place for equality

“ I am treated equally and have equal rights like everyone else. Nobody defines or interprets me. You can come as a person without ideas and plans and there is room for you to develop your own ideas and plans. In other groups people talk about their clients or their bosses. We don't have either of them. Of course we do have certain decision making procedures, but it is not hierarchical, there is not a top and bottom structure. In other projects and groups this is very different. (Germany)

We do not have a hierarchy. Nobody thinks that as management I will not be expected to do the cleaning. We all chip in, just like in a family, whatever is needed is done and shared by all. Everybody should be treated equally. You can't tell who is staff and who is a mom that comes every day. (Canada)

It is very important the way we treat each other. I showed my true self from the beginning. I was transparent about money. I openly showed the team what my situation was. You have to play with open cards, then trust grows between the women. (Bosnia)

”

A place to contribute talents

“ The second day after I visited the Mother Center I started to get to work. Nobody asked me if I was capable, if I had any knowledge, they just let me do it. And I did not even know the language properly. My children in the beginning did not speak any German, but still we just participated. (Germany)

Other organisations in our town are based on humanitarian help, you go there for help. It is only receiving, not giving. Our center is different, you give and you take, that is different. (Bosnia)

There is room for experimentation. You can live all your talents and qualities. (Slovakia)

It is important to stay open to contributions by new women. And to be sensitive and intuitive towards women, to understand that they would like to participate and to open the doors for them and pave the way. There are endless opportunities, everyone can add something to what is already there. This attitude is very important. (Germany) ”

A place with everything under one roof

“ Many organisations are created around one activity. In Mother Centers you have many organisations rolled into one. Women and families can find different things in the one place. They can come to the café, leave the children in the childcare, read a book and see that the hairdresser is free and have their hair done, or do aerobics. You can do so many different things in this one location.” (Bosnia)

The center developed into an intergenerational center. The youngsters started coming in in the afternoons and asking if there was anything for them, older people from the neighbourhood came for the hot lunches, and to have company. More and more it has become a place for all generations. Everything under one roof. (Germany) ”

A place to create family services

“ We just started doing what was necessary. We created more flexible childcare, vacation programs for children and families, healthy meals for school kids; a lot of things that were needed to support families.” (Germany)

In our community, childcare is very expensive and not very good. We became very popular because we offered something for children: we support them, have attractive activities and we also prepare them for school. These are very important opportunities for our children. (Bosnia) ”

A place to create neighbourhood

“ Our neighbours all know us., We ask the local stores for donations at Christmas. We had an incident where we did not get funding for 3 months, and we had a huge demonstration. That is why the bus drivers know us; the women were marching up and down the streets. (Canada)

People did not know each other in the community. Many families had recently moved to town. I did not know anybody when we moved here. In the Mother Center I met many people and now when I go in the street I meet people I know. (Slovakia) ”

A place to be seen and appreciated

“ The women feel needed. There are things they do here everyday to support the center. And we reinforce that, we are always telling people: ‘Thank you. It is such an awesome job you are doing. People have commented how well you answer the phone. This place looks awesome.’ We take time to appreciate women. They have often gone through a lot of things in their lives and they deserve respect and appreciation. (Canada).

When new women come you need to inspire them, to involve them. They get given a small task, and after one week they are in our team. And they are communicating and chatting with us after midnight on the internet. And we are creating family. We are becoming friends, we are creating a trusting atmosphere. (Slovakia)

I encourage them, I also tell women they can do things in their own time, they need not do it every day, they can contribute what they can, and slowly it grows and they feel comfortable, they can contribute, but are not under stress. (Czech Republic) ”

Lunch at Mother Center Stuttgart, Germany.



Move the Pram - Move the World, International Mother Centers Action Day 2006 in Nijmegen, The Netherlands.



Visitors from Peru at Aboriginal Mother Center Vancouver, Canada.



Girl's fashion show at Mother Center *Klub Prima* in Sanski Most, Bosnia.



Mother Center Reutlingen, Germany.



Childcare room Mother Center Petrzalka Babatko, Slovakia.



A place to take ownership and responsibility

“To participate in the Mother Center you do not need to have any qualifications or certificates. You can do whatever you feel up to and capable of. That way you feel it is your place, you immediately feel part of it, you are in the center of it. You don't need to struggle or fight for it, you are part of it. It is yours.” (Germany)

You do what is important to you and you are your own boss. That is what I love in the Mother Center. I feel like a free woman there. I like it because there is no director and no strong leader, it gives me a lot of space to develop my own ideas. I can decide if I want to participate or not, I am not forced into any commitment. I can decide, I can choose whether I want to do something or not, nobody asks me, why didn't you do that? (Slovakia)

We call it self help. You are doing something to improve your own situation, but are doing it together with others, and you have ownership over what is happening. It is not somebody doing it for you. You are deciding just as much as the others who are involved. You decide the level of participation yourself. (Germany)

Women need to know that they are responsible for their actions. In the childcare there are 3 women and they have to have good communication between them, so that it is a success for the women and for the center. If they do not work well together, the Mother Center will not have a good reputation. The women understand that it is up to them. They know that they are responsible for their part. Everyone needs to know this. If a woman is not like that, she will not last long in the center. It is the way the center works. Everyone supports a part of the structure and the roof is on top. If one part shakes, then the whole structure begins to shake. (Bosnia)

When you let people develop their own ideas, they also develop responsibilities. If you have one idea, you get other ideas. The activities in our center were developed by the participants and they took the initiative and the responsibility for them. (Bosnia)

It is only because there is a team, that everyone can belong and feel a sense of belonging. A Mother Center can only survive if there are enough women who think in terms of 'we', who are identified with the whole and who take responsibility for the whole, who are not just worried about themselves.” (Czech Republic) ”

A place to respond to immediate needs

“The welfare organisation that was our sponsor did not understand how we were able to change our program from one week to another, to react to an emergency in the community, that we opened our mini kindergarten within one week, without funds. We simply did it. We put an announcement in the paper and started. A big organisation like our sponsor can not act with our speed. In the Mother Center you lose your fear. You are not afraid of anything. You just do what needs to be done. (Germany)

We see the needs at the grassroots level and we act. We do something. While other institutions write a proposal first, and then do something if the funding goes through.

A place to share values

“Just simple human values, that is what happens in the center, to listen to everyone's stories, to try to understand and to help. That everyone is welcomed. If you don't feel well, someone will bring you a coffee, if you have a need or a problem, some woman will spend some time with you, just simple things.” (Bosnia)

I want my son to grow up and see what I am doing. I take him to meetings. He does not have to do what I do, but I want him to see and experience community. I am not really big on religion, I did not grow up with culture, it is not a big part of my life. I want to put across to him that you can help each other in the community. As long as he is kind to others, not materialistic, remembers where he comes from and which community he is part of. (Canada)

It is a place to share visions. For me the vision is to participate in civil society and to spend your time with purpose. (Czech Republic).

It is important to us to transmit the values of getting along with each other. We try to deal with fights immediately by getting the women involved in the same room to hear what is going on from both sides, and then have them talk about what they think the real problem is and what they think the solution would be. We can't have fighting in here, so you need to talk about it right away. And if you force them and you make them talk about it and you find out that one thing was bothering one person and a totally different thing was bothering the other, you get down to the truth of the matter. And they look at each other and say, well actually that is stupid. When you put their issues back to them like that. It is important, it forces the person to take responsibility, rather than somebody else saying, this is what you should do. It forces people to look at themselves. And if there are children involved we point back and say, you need to apologise, because your children need to learn that, you need to show them not to fight. In our tradition, that is what we are taught, to treat people with respect and if you are wrong, you apologise and say that you were wrong. These generations here have been missing big pieces while they were growing up, without having aunts and uncles explaining these behaviours and values to them. (Canada)

And to lobby for more family values. I am not afraid to say this anymore, I don't care if they think I am old fashioned. I think that Mother Centers are a basic requirement in society to regain those values and to re-establish them. We can be an example to society. We can establish society in the Mother Center the way women do it, and that is what we can show the wider society. And we do want to have an influence, because the way things are going now is destructive. The polarisation, aggression, the violence, the gaps between rich and poor, young and old, everything is polarised. In the Mother Center it is based on what do we have in common, what is the same. Mother Centers are a model in this respect. (The Netherlands)

In our center we try to make sure there is no gossip or bad mouthing of each other. Even if you have a conflict, you stay together, you do not separate, you work it through together. And we also show that you can do a lot with little money, that not everything needs to cost a lot. And that there are no differences, whether you have a high education or a lot of money or not, we are all equal here and there are no hierarchies,

foreigners are integrated, and there are no boundaries, no matter what ethnic background you have or what country you come from. (Germany) ”

A place to develop and create your future

“ My assistant cook used to go to a different center in the east downtown, then she found out about the Mother Center and she loved it here and she volunteers here. She is very quiet and shy and unsure, does not want to step on any toes. But from day to day you can see her confidence grow. Now she is able to talk to a lot of people, you see women bloom here.” (Canada)

Usually you have gone through this process yourself, you started here as a volunteer, and worked up into a staff position, so you learned how to do that, and you know how the staff guided you and how you took it to the next level. Ok I've done that, I can do this now. These transferable skills are recognised here, which is why it is so successful here, more than in other places that only go by credentials on a piece of paper. If a member of staff is in an unsuitable position, you figure that out fast, so we move people around a lot. Or they go to school and come back. Those are the ones who really understand, they go out and see the world and learn more, but they come back, and they understand the way it works here. (Canada)

It is a place where I can learn, or where I can make mistakes, but also where I can become really good at something, for example in the political arena. (Slovakia)

Mother Centers are a society in miniature. So when women come there they feel, ok I am a part of the society and I have an effect on it. If you look at normal society, everything is so far away and the steps that you take seem very big, but your influence seems negligible. And that makes Mother Centers different. It gives you a way to feel different about yourself and the role you can play in society. You can take little steps that also work in the larger society. You have something that is public. It is not just your family you are influencing, you are influencing something public, but it has a scale that is close enough to home that you feel safe, that you feel you can do it. (The Netherlands)

Women have learnt a lot of new skills and are able to work. We have been able to move women from welfare to work without forcing them, so they have been able to build self esteem and feel good about themselves and take steps for their future. (Canada)

The same women who were housewives 5 years ago are now able to speak their mind, defend themselves, and know what they want. (Czech Republic)

It makes the women realise that they are good at many things, that they can earn with those things. For example the women here do not realise that they can make money from cleaning houses, making lunches, renting their rooms, because they have done that all their lives but only for their families. They now realise they can start doing that to earn money. (Bosnia) ”

A place to learn

“It is amazing, I can be an actor in our theatre group, I can be the manager of our Christmas party, I can be an accountant, I can be a lawyer, everything in the Mother Center. I do not want to go back to work after maternity leave. I want to stay here. I was a very good secretary before, but now if I go back, I will not be afraid to choose the work I want to do. Now I have more opportunities, because in the Mother Center we had the chance to show what we can do. I knew I was a good secretary, but I did not know that I knew how to write an article. I did not know that I knew how to create a website. I did not know I could lead a group. I did not know that I was not afraid to negotiate with the mayor, that I could talk to sponsors, to very important people. I have more self confidence. My friends who stay at home, they have nothing to do, only cooking and changing diapers. (Slovakia)

In other projects there is a hierarchy. There is a barrier between professional and client, giver and taker, expert and non expert. When you don't have that barrier there is another quality. It makes different relationships. They may also be a professional, but it is not the first thing you know about each other. You know she is a mother, but if she is a doctor or a psychiatrist, or a painter, it is not her primary role. The first role is to be mother, and for mothers who come from a low social level, this is important, because they don't feel a distance and that way they can learn from others in a natural way. This is the key difference. (Germany)

We are a team, everyone has talents. I am good at starting things, others are good at finishing, you need this. We have learned to work in teams. We have gotten a lot of confidence and courage. We have learned that we can do things, that things can happen. We learned to communicate on an emotional basis. It is good to train this kind of communication. (Czech Republic)

Life in the Mother Center has taught me many things a university would not have taught me. Communication with the women, with important people, with the media. When I went to the first TV interview I was shy, but now I know how to do it. We all have learned a lot about communication, management, and marketing, a lot of the areas that are part of a Mother Center. It is an extremely important phase of my life. (Germany)

Yesterday we had a meeting with a psychologist. And she was very impressed with the group's cohesion. The debate was on children's tantrums and how to deal with them, and she was impressed at the way the women were reflecting on their experiences and the way the group supported each other in being honest and open. And also with the wealth of suggestions and ideas that the different women had developed and shared in this debate. We teach each other so much here. (Slovakia) ”

A place to become active in society

“ It is a copy of the wider society. You can train yourself for all the issues out there in a safe environment. And in the center, in the small society” you see the effects of your actions: And afterwards you also feel confident enough to take bigger steps, to go out into the larger environment. (The Netherlands)

Many women are not happy with the hospitals and the way they are treated by doctors. We invite doctors into the centers and have dialogs with them and here the women ask all the questions they wouldn't dare to ask during consultations. And we started making a list of what should be changed in hospitals and now we are doing a campaign on these issues. (Slovakia)

There is another kind of culture now in our town, because we organised cultural events for the children; performances and concerts for children and whole families. And there were a lot of people coming. So now it is easier to participate in public events in our town and take your children along. (Slovakia)

I understood a lot about the welfare system through being a welfare mother. I always opened my experiences up to the group. So now we can fight for changes politically. From my personal experience it has gone to a level of political advocacy and analysis. It is not only my interest, but I can fight for benefits and rights of many women. (Germany) ”

A place to realise dreams & visions

“ I have contact with people on a scale that I never thought I would have access to. When I email with the whole world on campaigns we are doing, it connects me to the world. Without education or a professional career, this is like a dream come true. (Slovakia)

In the Mother Center we can make the world like we want it to be outside. We can shape the environment the way we want it to be for children. We can learn how to deal with conflicts in a constructive way. We can share our resources with each other equally. That what we would like from a society, we can make it happen in the Mother Center. We can realise our visions and our dreams. That is why for me it is also my political home. (Germany) ”

III. Strategies of Dissemination

Mother Centers spread through peer learning and peer sharing. News about the Mother Center idea is spread through word of mouth as well as by the media. Often it only takes a little spark such as an article in a magazine or a programme on television for the seed to be planted. Examples of how initiatives for Mother Centers were born include women getting into a conversation with each other in the pediatrician's waiting room, a group of friends in a housing estate hearing about the idea, or a message on the announcement board of the local supermarket.

The next step is learning more about the concept by asking for more information from existing Mother Centers and very often by visiting one in the area and seeing the idea in practice. The Mother Center book, which published the stories of the women who built up the first three Mother Centers in Germany, played a very important role in spreading the idea and inspiring new initiatives. For the more recent Mother Centers the internet is becoming an increasingly important channel of information and exchange.

The Mother Center movement developed through a process of peer networking and learning from each other. Issues that are key for centers to get started and survive, such as how to register as an official entity, look for rooms, write proposals, or get funding, are passed on from center to center.

Kitchen crew at Aboriginal Mother Center Vancouver, Canada.



When ten or twenty Mother Centers have been founded in a region or a country, the process develops into the creation of a Mother Center network that takes on the task of spreading information and giving start-up support in a more organised manner. The following text pulls out and highlights the key steps and elements involved in this dissemination process as described by the parties involved.

2: The book *Mothers in the Center, Mother Centers* was first published in German as a story book containing the authentic stories and voices of the women involved in building up the first three model Mother Centers in Germany. It played an important role in creating the movement. Women who read it had two crucial reactions: "This is it!" and "We can do this too". The book was first translated into Czech and later into English and played a key role in spreading the movement in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as well as internationally.

Move the Pram - Move the World International Mother Centers Action Day 2006 in Bratislava, Slovakia.



“I read the book the first night. It was easy to understand because it contained the stories of the women involved. It was easy to imagine what it is all about. You could learn directly from the experiences of other women, from their lives. (Bosnia)

The book was what made it happen. It said how you can get into contact with other Mother Centers, there were addresses you could contact, it was all very uncomplicated and unthreatening. You already had the feeling you were a part of it, just by reading the stories and hearing about the experiences. (Germany)

We translated the Mother Center book and had it published in Czech. The publisher said since we had 4 pages free, didn't we have some pictures or something that we could include. And I said I don't really have pictures, but I had our first project proposal and said maybe that could be there as an example. I had not noticed but my phone number was at the end of that proposal. And many people called me after that. I asked how they had found my number and they said it was in the book. (Czech Republic)

On the internet I found information on how to make the official registration, the statutes and by laws and so on, but the actual things in the center, opening hours, what prices to set, not to buy junk food, I got these kind of practical details from the book. (Slovakia)

I always read the book for inspiration when there are difficulties. You find lots of stories about troubles other centers were experiencing, how to get out of the troubles, and how to discuss and find solutions. You don't feel so alone, you find ideas and encouragement. I could tell my women, listen we are not the only ones who have problems, our problems are even written about in the book, so we can solve this. (Bosnia)

I never learned German properly, so reading the book was difficult. But I read it slowly, I read it like a novel, slowly, bit by bit. And I looked through brochures of Mother Centers and every center did things differently, and I got a lot of ideas from them. Our life here is different than from other countries, but still we found a lot of ideas from these books and brochures. I often take the book and leaf through it and I always find something that gives me a new idea. It is very helpful. You might have forgotten something, and when you read the book you see what you can do, that you already have capacities. Sometimes you do not know what you know, but when I read the book I see, oh I have done that, I can do this. It gives confirmation. The book is written in very simple language. It is easy to understand. (Bosnia)

The stories in the book resonate with our experiences. It is inspiring, because it shows the vision, what you can reach, what is obtainable with Mother Centers, how you can develop further. (The Netherlands)

The book helped us in our negotiations for funding. Without that kind of legitimacy, it would have been more difficult. To be able to show that it is a concept that is being funded elsewhere was powerful. We don't need to reinvent it, we are upsizing what has already been proven. We could not have done it without that, we couldn't have done it alone. (Canada)

I have the book at home, whenever there was a mother who was interested, I sent them the book, and they always found the book motivating. It was very important that we had this book. (Slovakia)

The book was very helpful. It made sure that the Mother Center is made the right way. The methodology was interesting, the atmosphere, and the mood of the book was very inspiring. The book also gave mega doses of energy. (Slovakia) ”

Face to Face Exchanges

“ *When I was in Germany and I saw the women and the children and I saw the empowerment, what they could do and how they succeeded over there, I thought, we can do that too! (The Netherlands)*

It makes it all quicker. When they see a Mother Center they can feel it. It is all so obvious. (Bosnia)

In the beginning it was very important for me to speak to women who had also started Mother Centers, it strengthened me against the doubts at home. (The Netherlands)

I got the opportunity to visit Germany and the Czech Republic and see what the Mother Centers there were like. Each one was different, specific to the needs of that community and those moms. I kind of went there a bit scared and not knowing what to expect, I had just turned 21, leaving my baby at home, who was not even a year old. I did not know anything about these countries either, just kind of went there blind. But then you saw the centers and you felt at home. Little pieces of each center we saw were inspiring, the way the women were with their children, the way they were also helping each other in furthering their education and life skills. I remember they were saying, if a child misses a few days, a bunch of women would go to the family and see if they were ok and what they needed, that was good too, that they took care of each other and watched out for each other in that way. Seeing the education part for both child and parents, and seeing the open space and the businesses, and that while one mom was running the business, another was watching her child, just next door, so taking ideas from all of those centers, was great for our community. (Canada)

Hearing about it was like, oh that is a great idea, and good luck with it. It sounded like a nice idea, but actually seeing it, and seeing how different they are. Then I thought, we CAN do this, and we can do it our way. It gave confidence. (Canada)

You do not only learn when you visit the other centers, you also learn when others visit you. Often I was involved in explaining the center to other women who came to visit. In these exchanges I learned to define what it was we wanted to reach. When you explain it to others you have to think more clearly about your own vision. To be able to answer questions you need to understand it first. (Slovakia)

It is different when you have to explain it to others. I did it many times with the local council, and you really learn to capture the important points, which make other people understand it. (The Netherlands)

We will learn from each other and share ideas that we have. For example, the Bosnian Centers with their gardens and their flowers. We talked about that, we wanted to do an indoor garden. We live in the city. Couldn't we make a garden in the park? We could put flowers in the park, there are no flowers, there is nothing. The mothers could take pots back home, and if they have a little patio, they could make their own little garden. Within a movement, we can support each other, we are all mothers, and I see a connection across the whole movement. (Canada) ””

Training

”” Some women from the Prague Mothers had been to Munich and visited Mother Centers. We wanted to bring the idea home. We organised a training session with the initiators from Germany. We invited a wide range of women who we thought would be interested and we also announced it in the papers. About 25-30 women came, it was a big mixture. We also organised childcare and there were about 10 children there. This was the start of the Mother Centers in the Czech Republic. (Czech Republic)

We did seminars on how to start Mother Centers. We invited women to these seminars and they could see that all conditions are different and so peer learning happens. We could share our experiences and answer many questions to many groups at the same time. (Slovakia)

It is also not bad to have a training session in the city where you want to start the Mother Center. That gives the opportunity to explain everything to many women and to adjust to the actual situation and context. (Slovakia) ””

Internet

”” Also we emailed a lot between the centers that we had visited,. The internet played a big role in communication. I look at the Network's website a lot. We ask about issues like accounting, we communicate regularly. (Slovakia)

I felt immediately what it is, but I read a lot on the website. That was a great source of information. (Czech Republic).

Internet is not very costly, and it is quick, so information can spread quickly. I can do it from home, the child can be with me, I don't have to travel. We communicate with the network but also within our group. If a woman has a problem with breast feeding, she can send an email to the web, and we answer. (Slovakia)

We have a mailing list that we call the Tuesday letter, which we send electronically twice a month. We send them information about possibilities to apply for grants or info on seminars, and important events. (Czech Republic)

That day, when my child went to sleep I looked up the internet and found out some mail contacts to mothers from Mother Centers. I started writing to them, and found

out some basic information. But I wanted a Mother Center nearby. I put up my own ad. Three mothers reacted to my email. The subject of the email was, should we put up a Mother Center in the old city? Then a few days later, we met and we found out that we are neighbours. We started brainstorming, and every night when the children slept we were on email with each other. We were more focused by email than when we were meeting, because then we were with the children. Everything we could organise and do in the beginning we did by email. (Slovakia) ”

Media

“ In the beginning it was word of mouth. It helped a lot that there was a store front. People came by and saw us, and what was happening there. Some came in and asked what we were doing, and through these people and word of mouth, new women, people we did not know, came in. It was difficult to get any news in the media, something that is not a horror story did not make the news. The response was always, this is not news for the media. But there was a small TV reportage about us and at the end they showed a meeting in the Mother Center and after that program so many people called and asked about the Mother Center and said that they wanted one for their town. So it is not true what the media says, that Mother Centers are not news. So slowly through different coverage in the media women heard about Mother Centers. (Czech Republic)

An article was published about us in a magazine, and after that we got almost an avalanche of responses and requests for more information. That started it all. (Slovakia) ”

Pioneers

“ Mother Centers spread through the inspiration and dedication of visionaries and pioneers. Behind every Mother Center initiative there is usually one or more pioneers who carry the vision, and have a lot of courage, confidence and dedication. They also have the capacity to inspire other women and convince funders, local government and other partners. Often it is also an important element to have the support and the back up of the husband and the family (Bosnia)

I totally believed in the concept. That gave me the confidence and courage to do it. I had the feeling that this was exactly what my town was lacking. I immediately saw a Mother Center in our city in my mind. And then we just ploughed through to make it happen. (Czech Republic)

You need good communication skills, both with those who come into the center and those in the local council. You need empathy, to understand what others want and how they can understand things. You need some people to take this role. (Slovakia)

The woman who brought the Mother Center to our country was a promoter and missionary. You could not get on a train, tram or bus with her without her talking to some woman about Mother Centers. No matter whether she was working or she was

on holiday, she talked to women everywhere she went, in Nicaragua she talked about Mother Centers. She just got everybody interested. (The Netherlands)

We formed a group of mothers, and we made friends. There was a group of 3 who began to work together, and became good friends. It helped us, having the same idea and sharing the work. The assurance came that I was not alone, but I also had the strong belief that I wanted this. And I like fighting, I like to have a challenge. It gives me strength. I like to show that something is possible. It gives me adrenaline. Other people do bungee jumping, I do projects. (Slovakia)

It needs a certain willingness to put in your own resources to start something like this, and it needs a husband who understands that. My husband does half of the things I should do at home and he never says a word about it. He has to cook and do the homework with the children when I go out, but he understands that I need this. (Slovakia)

The qualities of a pioneer are that you first have to totally convince everyone of the idea, you need to be patient and also have a husband that is supportive. The family has to take it as something that is not only something for the woman, but something for the whole family. The whole family has to take the project on. There are women who do it against the will of their family, but that always gives a lot of problems. Then you need also people that support the pioneer. The women in the first center were a support for me. (Czech Republic)

You need a lot of energy. You have to carry a lot on your shoulders. You need a lot of motivation to start up a Mother Center. You need to be in love with the concept. You need to have the stamina to withstand the challenges. The biggest challenge is to find rooms. You need a lot of will. You need to be able to put in a lot of dedication. (Bosnia)

It took quite a long time to find the right people to get and keep the thing going. There was a while where it was hard to find the people with the right kind of skills. (Canada) ”

Claiming Space

“ *When you find the space it all gets going. Then things start moving, you evolve from a small group of friends meeting at each others houses to a public entity. You attract attention and you start really developing your ideas and your energy and mobilizing your resources. If you can't find space, you can't start a Mother Center. The idea can only come to life and spread if it is possible to access public space. (Germany)*

When I came back from Germany I spread the information to people who were doing integration projects. Everyone liked the idea, but this was a big project, and we were too small. It was when we got the funding to rent the space, that I knew we could start. (The Netherlands)

I tried getting space from the city hall twice, the second time they told us we could

look for unused space that belongs to the city and then you can come to us and we can talk about it. So we did, and we found an old nursery that was not being used anymore. It was part of a big kindergarten and we went to the mayor and he told us he could rent it to us for 10 crowns per month, so a symbolic price, but we needed to renovate it ourselves. He said we could have that, but not to expect any money from him. They paid heating and electricity as part of the kindergarten. The rooms were very old and rundown, so it was a lot of work. I applied for funds for developing civic society from several foundations and found money for renovating the space. But we renovated for almost a year and there was a lot of voluntary work also involved. But we had rooms. And that was when it all really started. (Czech Republic)

In the beginning we were lucky. We were offered rooms in the kindergarten that were not being used. But then we starting getting successful and the kindergarten director felt threatened and cancelled this arrangement. We were out on the streets again. Without the support from the German foundations we would not have been able to continue, the whole thing would have died. (Bosnia)

We asked the town council if they had any space and they said no. We had an idea to try a place which is quite ugly, an old fire station where they used to keep the fire engines, which is used sometimes. They allowed us to be there for the initial meetings, but there were also the meetings of the communist party, and the gypsy community met to dance there, and we were in between. Often the rooms were messy, there was no carpet, everything was ugly, and not suitable for children. So we looked for other solutions. I worked in the library, and we asked the librarian for a small room on the ground floor, 4x4 meters, they did not need it. The librarian had 4 children, so she understood us, and gave us this room for free. You have to be very inventive and creative with such small rooms, but at least we can meet. (Czech Republic)

We negotiated with our city for almost a year before we managed to get our space. Several of the women in the original group had given up by then, and it was only a small core of us who were determined that persevered. Once we had the rooms, things developed easily and many women joined. (Germany)

Actually, a little miracle happened. When we went to the kindergarten, we found an enlightened psychiatrist. It was not a normal kindergarten, but a kindergarten for handicapped children, and we went to ask for space there, and he was not afraid of mothers and children and he decided to give us rent-free rooms. It was the first place we tried and it worked right away. It was opposite our house, and we just tried it out. (Czech Republic)

I actually started thinking in political terms when we were renovating our rooms. Now we had a space of our own, which we owned, which could not be taken away from us. Now we were a group to reckon with in our town. Now we were visible, and we could start voicing our opinions. As an association that owns property we are taken much more seriously by our municipality, and also by the public at large. Without our space nobody would talk about us, our ideas would not be heard, would not spread. Even the media is more interested because there is a place where they can take photographs or film. And other groups from other towns visit us and are interested in us and the Mother Center concept because we have a place to show. Somehow by having our rooms, we exist. (Bosnia) ”

IV. The Creation of Networks

The spreading of Mother Centers was supported by the creation of regional, national and international networks. Networking is an important element to enable Mother Centers to gain influence in society. The development of the Mother Center movement is marked by the creation of regional, national and international Mother Center networks.

Mother Center networks contribute to the local Mother Centers as well as to the movement at large, both internally as well as externally in many ways and through various services and activities. One of the main activities involves organising peer learning workshops to collectively learn from each other's experience and to spread innovations developed in the network. An important part involves developing internal structures to support leadership development and conflict resolution within the centers and the movement.

Another important role the networks fulfil is in helping to analyse and conceptualise the Mother Center experience, identifying the innovative elements and the essentials that make them work and guarantee their quality.

At the mayor's office in Sarajevo, Bosnia.



Through taking up contact and exchanging experiences between the Mother Centers worldwide an understanding of the global dimensions of motherhood is developing within the Mother Center networks, and the situation of children and families is becoming visible internationally. Networking supports the linking of like minded groups and the defining of shared concerns as well as strategies for change.

The networks spread the news about Mother Centers in both verbal and written form. They link the experiences and perspectives on families and their environment, as they are developed in the everyday life of the centers, to mainstream debates and developments, and they broker partnerships to other stakeholders. They also take on an important role in advocacy and enhancing the influence of families, both by supporting the local centers in their negotiations with local authorities as well as by creating regional, national and international agendas and campaigns. The networks create nationwide and international opportunities for Mother Centers to portray their work and voice their concerns.

This section portrays the added value developed by the Mother Center networks and networking, the synergy created, and the way the whole becomes more than the sum of its parts.

Children's bathroom at Multigenerational Mother Center Stuttgart, Germany.



“ At some point there comes the time where you need to structure the process, where you say, ‘it is a strength, a force, that there are many centers, and we need to make use of this force’. The words *network* and *networking* sound so technical. It really is a very alive process, it is about bonding, about coming together and becoming stronger. (Germany)

We started our network when we were 12 centers Slovakia. Everyone came to us and it was a lot of work, so we thought it would be best to structure and coordinate the process more. For instance the foundations got 12 proposals that were very similar, and they cannot support 12 same projects. And we saw that there are many social problems that a single Mother Center cannot solve. So it would be more effective to start a network, that would help the establishment of new centers. After the network was created, within one year we went from 12 centers to about 50. That trend continues. It was important to be able to support these centers, to do lobbying and figure out strategies for how to get these centers funded. The older Mother Centers had their first big problems behind them, we had survived conflicts and we could help the new centers with such issues. (Slovakia)

The meetings played an important role in the beginning.. That helped a lot for all the start up groups of Mother Centers. They were called together by the national coordinator. That was the beginning of the network. We started 8 years ago, when we had about a dozen Mother Centers. At the meetings we discussed the 4 principles of the Mother Center concept, exchanged ideas and the new centers knew they weren’t alone. (The Netherlands)

At my first meeting with the municipality, when they heard that there was an international network, they got interested in it, they realised it was not just us, some mommies at home, but that there was something more to it. (Canada)

If women want Mother Centers so much that they manage to persuade municipalities to give spaces in their towns , and that they get together to influence politics and legislation, then there probably is a sense of movement, this would be called a movement. (Czech Republic)

There are many tasks that our networks fulfill, we create start up packages for new centers, we conduct exchanges between centers and offer training on various subjects, we give consultations via telephone, in person and via the internet. We catalyse political debates in the movement, create campaigns and conduct political negotiations for needed reforms. We have a role both inside the movement as well as towards the general public. (Slovakia)

Networking also means you share your resources, you bring them together, and that way they also grow. And you can work in different roles, you can divide tasks and not every single Mother Center has to take care of all issues, you can do different parts in different centers, and different parts of the network. You can do a division of labour. (Czech Republic)

For me the regional networking also played a big role. When I went there the first time and met all these other women who were all involved in Mother Centers, that was an amazing feeling which gave me a lot of strength and confidence. And we kept the networking going because it helped us a lot to keep our level of energy up in our own center. We also use the leadership support process in our network. That has created trust and closeness. (Germany)

We need networking. Our Mother Center is also less interesting politically, if there is only one center. Together, with more centers we can do so much more. (Bosnia)

You also need a structure to support new Mother Centers, a network of peer counseling and peer support, so that they don't make the same mistakes. For example, if they get a positive response from their municipalities that they also need to get it on paper, make contracts, secure rooms in writing. Over the years The German Youth Institute did research, that gave scientific support to the Mother Centers, it gathered evidence for the work of the Mother Centers, and gave reports on the quality of their work. That was a huge support. That gives credibility. (Germany)

You also need a place that gathers information and documents it. And passes information and know-how on in written materials. Like the 'move the pram' action, all the know-how is there now, after we have done it once. This needs to be written down and stored, so that the next time the action is done, it can be easier and can be done by new women, who can build on this know how. (Slovakia)

That we all have similar issues. That others also have conflicts. You go home from a networking meeting and have the feeling, ok, nothing to worry about, this is simply part of the process and you have heard some examples of how to deal with it. (Germany)

I think without the network and the confirming influence it has. Without it I would have quit on many occasions. It is gold. It gives courage, it gives mirroring, you find role models in other women, you feel you are part of a competent group of women. (Germany)

After the article that caused the avalanche of reactions, we started to provide support by email or personal visits. After a while we did not have the capacity to maintain it. So we came to the conclusion that this is a situation where an organisation, a network should be created, which would be a channel through which information should be flowing. At the same time we hoped to create more power to influence certain organs of society. (Slovakia) ”

Stronger Together

“ You realise quite quickly that you do not get far if you are always only negotiating for your own center. When there is a network you can point out how other communities are supporting Mother Centers. You can use that as your bargaining chip. 'If other mayors can do it, why can't you?' We got a lot of requests that we give presentations about Mother Centers. Churches, municipalities, and local councils wanted to hear what it was all about. But they wanted someone who would speak for all the centers

in the region, not only for their own center. So we needed to create a network as a structure for developing a common voice, so that we could present ourselves together. Also you cannot tap into funding from the regional ministries unless you have a regional structure. You cannot get those kinds of funds as a single Mother Center. But often when the regional or provincial government does something, municipalities pick it up, so it is important to be present on that level too. (Germany)

Now we have a program from the national ministry for work and social issues specifically for Mother Centers that funds us. This has been a success of the networking. The ministry also gives money for staffing. (Czech Republic)

We had a long struggle to get started, if there would not have been the network where we saw others doing it, where we could see that it is possible, and where we got support, we would have given up. (Germany)

In the beginning the Mother Centers did not have any status in society, not for local government or for foundations, we were not considered a player, a partner. In order for us to get funds and recognition for our center, it was important to reach out and get cooperation with the other centers. We have more weight now in society, now that we have our regional and national networks. (Slovakia)

We were the only Mother Center in West Pilsen for a long time, but now there are more centers, so now we also plan regional meetings and we became active in our region. And we try to get regional money, from the regional government. Together we are recognized as partners for the purposes of our regional government. We can start negotiations with them. (Slovakia)

We founded the center, we had different ideas and when we came to the point that we had used up our ideas we were looking for something new. So we decided we wanted to see what is happening in other places, and what could inspire us. We needed advice on fundraising, and we saw that some foundations and donors have in their guidelines that they do not support Mother Centers, so we thought we had to change this. If you want to change a law, you cannot do that as a single Mother Center. We expected more from the network than from the average Mother Center. A normal Mother Center can survive with simple means, simple programs, we wanted to get further than that. (Slovakia)

I can't remember when my Mother Center decided to become a member of the network, it was a normal thing to do. It means you are part of a big movement. It helped us get new information and new partnerships. The network gave us the feeling that we were not standing alone, and also that the weaker voices of the mothers from the East part of the country are being heard. Through the network the name Mother Center becomes a trademark and that opens new doors. (Slovakia)

Networking expands our scope of action and influence. The centers become more visible and influential in public life. Through our networking we develop a sense of togetherness, of common purpose larger than our individual center. (Germany)

We hope that networking will help us find the way to sustainability. (Bosnia) ”

Cohesion and Trust Building

“Through networking we participate in and create a process of growing together across cities, regions and countries. We become like a family, we support and encourage each other. We know we have friends in other cities, in other countries. This gives a lot of backing, you feel supported, and a sense of unity and union develops. (Germany)

We would not have been able to start without the first 200 Euro. I received letters from the women in Germany almost daily, so that I knew I had not been forgotten. There was support. I wanted to show them that I would do it. They believed in us. There were times when we only had money for the electricity, we could not pay for the telephone. Then we simply shut down the phone and continued with our work. (Bosnia)

In the Mother Center network you work through conflicts, you don't just leave when there are issues and conflicts that come up. It is about your life, your family, what is close to your heart. And somehow in these meetings in the end something like a group wisdom comes through. Often the whole group, all the ones that do not say that much, have a wider understanding in the end, than what it looks like from just listening to the protagonists. That is how we learn to stick together, and we develop a togetherness that is bigger than our own family, even our own center. But our successes have helped too. When you are celebrated in public, when you have achieved something big together, then a sense of collective pride and belonging develops. (Germany)

And when we were at our regional networking meeting and there were 80 women and I had something in common with all of them, and I am a part of this. That is really inspiring! I had the feeling I could go into any Center anywhere in the world and say, 'hello I am from the Mother Center in Freiburg, Germany' and I would get a cup of coffee and a sweet and the women would talk to me. It makes me feel connected in a very big way. It is the feeling of being a part of something that is the same and functions the same way, regardless of what city or what country it is in. And that we can campaign together, that we can lobby and influence and make a difference together, that there is a whole, something bigger than our own center, that gives a lot of inspiration. That is very strengthening and life affirming. (Germany)

The leadership support training helped. We learned how to deal with each other, not to be so complicated, not to get into fights so easily. With the leadership support we understood that it is possible to talk things through, to work things out together, that it is possible to be heard. And to listen to others. Or that a third person can give some feedback. That you can support each other in conflict solving. We learned how to work in a team. I had everything on my back first and I carried it alone. That was bad for me. When a crisis came I said, I can't continue anymore. Then the others came and said we can carry on a while. And that helped me regain energy. And now we work as a team. I don't want to work alone anymore. I know that everyone can contribute and that is the meaning of it. I am not a boss and they are not my employees, it is shared, and everyone takes responsibility for their task. (Germany) ”

“The hardest part was seeing and experiencing it and then translating it to people who did not have the experience. It is hard because Mother Centers are not sexy, they don't have anything sensational to tell, but what is happening inside is very sensational. It is very hard finding the right words and the right arguments to explain why women have to have a Mother Center. There are huge worlds that need to be bridged here. In the beginning I gave an exposé and everybody fell asleep before I was finished. Now I have learnt to tell about the Mother Centers in just a few sentences and that works. You need to translate it to their own situation. Remember when your wife was jumping on you the minute you walked in the door from work, because she was lonely, and had no where to go. Husbands don't like lonely wives and wives don't like to be lonely, so that works. Even with politicians. (The Netherlands)

It is about relating the experiences in the Mother Centers to the public debates, the hot subjects that are talked about in the media. There are a lot of issues being discussed to which the Mother Centers give answers, but often they are not seen, because they are not being expressed in the same language and in the same venues. It is incredibly important here to have people in your network who can do this and everywhere where this has succeeded, it has meant a lot to the development, recognition and widening of the movement. (Germany)

We needed to create a language with which to describe and express what was happening in and through Mother Centers. Sometimes we had to invent words to express what was going on and how it was different. Like the term everyday life experts, we needed a term to express that we were not professionals, but also not unprofessional. Everybody was calling us laypersons or volunteers, but that was not how we experienced our own process. We were developing a lot of know-how that demanded the same recognition as professional expertise. We needed the support of each other to do this. We needed the feeling that we were many, thinking and feeling along the same lines to have the courage to create such a new expression and present it publicly. It was often controversial. But when we found expressions or labels for the new ways we were thinking and the new paths we were treading, we were heard and eventually understood. People were attracted by these new terms. It made them interested in us. It helped them acknowledge us. (Germany) ”

V. Country Profiles

The following summarises the role and function of Mother Centers in the context of the different countries included in this study.

Mother Centers have the longest history in Germany, where the idea originated almost 30 years ago. The first Mother Center in Germany opened its doors in 1980. Now there are over 400 Mother Centers throughout Germany, coordinated by regional as well as national networks. Over the years they have evolved in many ways and address many issues of current family policy, including issues of increasing poverty among single parent families, issues regarding an ageing society or the integration of immigrants. Many of the German Mother Centers have filled gaps in municipal services for families and have become an important part of the local infrastructure.

The first Mother Center in the Netherlands was established in 1992 in The Hague, targeting the migrant population. The idea was taken from Germany by social workers employed in social welfare projects and seen as an effective way to support the integration of immigrant women and families. They were mainly initiated in communities with a high percentage of immigrant population. Currently there are 30 Mother Centers and 20 Mother Center initiatives in the Netherlands, coordinated by the Dutch National Network of Mother Centers, active since 1995.

Kitchen crew at Mother Center Stuttgart, Germany.



With the cutbacks in social welfare in The Netherlands, the Dutch Mother Centers are currently facing severe funding issues, which point to a structural weakness of the Dutch centers that highly depend on paid professional coordinators. The cutbacks are also severely impacting the work of the network which is struggling to survive without funds. A discussion has started in the Dutch Mother Centers on how to gain more independence from the big welfare organisations and how to restructure the Mother Centers as a self help movement.

The first Mother Center in the Czech Republic was founded in 1992 in Prague, following a seminar conducted by members of the German Mother Center network in the Czech capital. They quickly spread to other cities leading to the creation of the Czech National Network of Mother Centers in 1999. Currently there are over 180 Mother Centers in the Czech Republic. After Germany, the Czech Republic represents the largest scale of dissemination and transfer of Mother Centers.

From the Czech Republic the idea also spread to Slovakia. The first Mother Center there was founded 1998 in Poprad. In a matter of a few years other centers followed leading to the creation of the Union of Slovak Mother Centers in 2001. Currently there are seventy Mother Centers and several Mother Center initiatives in Slovakia.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia public policy provides three years of parental leave after the birth of a child. The majority of women make use of this leave. Mother Centers provide the opportunity for women and their children to not be confined to their homes during this time. They foster the development of both children and mothers. They offer a place where they can grow and be an active part of society. In post-socialist countries like the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Mother Centers have great importance as support for parenting as well as the development of civil society from the bottom up.

The first Mother Center in Bosnia was founded in 2002 in Zavidovici by a returning refugee, who had found a home away from home in a Mother Center in Stuttgart, Germany. She transferred the concept to her home town when returning to Bosnia after the war. The Robert Bosch Foundation funded three model Mother Centers

in Bosnia in the period of 2003 – 2005, of which two have survived after the funding ended. Further Mother Center initiatives were formed, but the main challenge in Bosnia is the lack of availability of public rooms. The Stuttgart based Heidehof Foundation responded to this structural issue by purchasing rooms for the Mother Center in Zavidovici, thus creating sustainability for this center. The Mother Center in Zavidovici has meanwhile become a model center for the region, conducting start up trainings for Mother Center initiatives in Serbia, Albania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria.

In post war Bosnia, Mother Centers create opportunities to reweave the torn social fabric, and to integrate families with different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

The first Mother Center in Canada was created as the Aboriginal Mother Center in downtown Vancouver in 2002. Mother Centers are seen as very much in line with the traditional First Nation culture. The aboriginal communities in Canada struggle with severe poverty and survival issues. Mother Centers create a place for community support and community solu-

tions. The Aboriginal Mother Center in Vancouver targets the large group of single and teen parents in the aboriginal community by providing parenting support as well as support towards self sufficiency through the creation of social enterprises and collective income generating projects.

In terms of networks the strongest Mother Center networks are in Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia³, which also relates to the fact that in these countries the Mother Center movement has managed to secure core funding for networking. In The Netherlands, the Mother Center network is currently struggling to survive and in Bosnia and Canada no network has developed yet, as the movement has not yet spread beyond the initial centers, due to the strong limitations in accessing public space.

³ : The Czech and Slovak Mother Center networks have been supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, which however, due to reorientation of the foundation is being discontinued in the near future.

Move the Pram - Move the World, International Mother Centers Action Day 2006 in Freiburg, Germany.



“The young teenage mothers in the aboriginal community are the highest risk group for substance abuse, for sexual abuse, for being on welfare or working in the sex trade. The statistics are really terrible. What we see, however, is that when they connect with their babies, their motivation increases to get off drugs and they get into doing positive things. Mother Centers are the biggest support they can receive in their situation.

In this area there is very high poverty, a lot of single parents, working poor, there are parents whose children are in care due to many reasons, also addictions. I see a lot of good in this community, a lot of people helping each other out, trying their best, but often they feel hopeless, there is a lot of hopelessness. The reality is, there are a lot of people dealing with alcohol and drug addictions and every year it spreads to more communities. Living in Vancouver there is a lot of racism. There are only certain areas where single aboriginal mothers can live, that people will rent out. And you need to pay high prices for cockroach infested, moldy places. It is hard for people to manage. We saw that the first need was food. That is why the meal program came here. A lot of women needed help around things like housing, abuse or counseling on various issues or referrals. So we opened the childcare room, where there are child minders watching the children, so the moms are able to see the councilors and take part in the parenting program. In the Mother Center they find support for their immediate needs. We look at ways how the community can work together to create support.

There are many people on welfare that have never worked, there are generations of this; people living on welfare. So the government cut back on welfare to get rid of this. But that did not make people help themselves more, they just live in more poverty. They do not go out to work, they don't know how. They have no self esteem. You have to start with little steps. That is what happens in the Mother Centers, little steps where they learn to gain back their confidence.

I think people don't realise the isolation young families are in. When you are in school you have your friends, you still have your mom and your extended family. A lot of people move around a lot, so people are often not connected to the family. The Mother Center recreates the same feeling of what it was like in school when you had friends around you. It brings different ways of doing things by role modeling and peer learning, learning off of other mothers, what works and what doesn't. When my parents were growing up they had their grandmothers around and they could ask family members how you care for babies, but when you move into the urban centers, you lose all that, you lose that connection. Relatives don't live in the same city, so you become isolated. What the Mother Center does is bring women into a home environment. That makes it so comfortable and that's what brings women to the center.”

“Before the war we did not have issues around religion, there was no unemployment, we could travel. I had enough money. The war changed all that. The war destroyed people. Now people hate each other because of religion. It is difficult to get people around a table from different religions and have a relaxed atmosphere. This happens naturally in the center. Women stay at home more now, men confine women to the house. Our country needs years to recover, until things function normally again. Women do not have the freedom to do what they want anymore. The Mother Center is one of the few places they can go. And even here it is difficult sometimes, if the husband is also unemployed and complains that she is not home.

Since the war there are many unemployed women. They have no place to go and often feel very much alone. Mother Centers are a safe place where they can go with their children. It does not cost money. And they can even earn some money there.

I felt very lost as a mother of two children. The Mother Center is a place where I can do something useful for myself and my children. This is a small city, but we do not have any places to meet as mothers and children. Here you can give of your best talents. You can be creative, you are not useless. And it is never boring.

We are poor. We don't have what we used to have. For activities you need money. You cannot go out, you cannot buy anything, you have no money. The situation in Bosnia has become worse, very much worse during the last 5 years, especially the little cities are being forgotten. Our city desperately needs this Mother Center.

The municipality likes the idea of Mother Centers, because they see that it makes people more active and it builds connections in the neighborhood.

Our country is totally destroyed. In the Mother Center we gain hope and confidence. We see that we can improve our city, and create a vision. Our rivers are full of plastic and cans. We have been doing clean-up actions with our children. We can show people how it can be better. We can show vision. The Mother Center is not a room. It is a way of life. We also show better ways of raising children. That childcare does not have to be so authoritarian. From our 35 children, when they did the test in schools, our children got the best grades. The children come with lots of fun to our pre school program.

Mother Centers are also important for single parenting women, because in our society they do not have a good chance, they are cast out of society. For these women it is also very important to find a place where they can join, where they are accepted. ”

Czech Republic and Slovakia

“Many women come now, open the door and say ‘I would like to contribute something here. I would like to do flute lessons here or something.’ Some of these mothers know Mother Centers from Prague or other cities, so when they move here, this is the first place they go to in town. After one week they already come to the center and already are offering something to the center. (Czech Republic)

In the Mother Centers mothers share their concerns and problems with others, in the exchange they see things from other sides and the problem is not as big as before. In our communities there are no official programs for children under three, so the Mother Centers provide a pre-school program for children. (Slovakia)

It is important to me the kind of world my children are growing up in. Mother Centers give me the opportunity to be in a good environment with my children. I am an active type so I do not want to be idle during parental leave. I like challenges. I like having personal ambitions. In the Mother Center I can follow my ambitions, both in regard to my children as well as in regard to myself. (Slovakia)

I want to develop my skills in different areas, to learn, to get involved in things that interest me, to work on myself, and to improve things for women and families. I have a lot of energy. In the Mother Center there are lots of opportunities for my interests and for my energy. (Czech Republic)

My husband is very busy with his career. I needed to find people to talk to, who can relate to what goes on in my life. And also my child needs companions. It is not healthy to be at home alone with each other all the time. (Czech Republic)

I have always been an active person. Before maternity leave I worked as an entrepreneur, but when I had my child I could not continue, so then I oriented myself towards the Mother Center, to create activity in my life. Since I have had a child I am much more aware of the structures in society that are barriers towards parents. In the center I find likeminded people who want to do something about these barriers. Without the Mother Center I would not know how to get involved in shaping society. (Slovakia)”

The Netherlands

“The women from Turkey and Morocco often stay at home and have little contact with Dutch society. They often do not learn Dutch and are very dependent on their husbands and children. Mother Centers in the Netherlands are an important model of integration. Here they meet other women, Dutch women as well as women from other cultures. They learn about each other. They make friends. They learn the language. The rule in our Mother Centers is that everyone needs to speak in Dutch.

We were asked to do a survey so we conducted interviews with women, about their circumstances. And we brought the women together to discuss the questions and their wishes. We heard from the women that they would like a place where they could

meet. The Mother Center was an answer to what was coming out of the interviews. The women said they cannot take their children anywhere and they have to pay for childcare. So the idea of the Mother Center fitted exactly. Women cannot participate in society if children cannot come along.

What attracted me to the Mother Center was that I could bring in my ideas actively, that I could shape what is going on in the Mother Center. It is a place for everyone. So we have women from many different countries. And we all shape the Mother Center together. ”

Germany

“ I joined the Mother Center as a single mother, in a program run there for single mothers. I liked the Mother Center much better than other programs, where we were supposed to play with children in a very structured way. Here I could join in as I wanted, and develop my own ideas. I built up the second hand store, I met other single mothers and my identity was strengthened, I wasn't ashamed to be a single mother. The Mother Center helps me survive. Also in terms of my family finances.

I came to the Mother Center because I had gone through a divorce and the youth welfare organisation thought I needed some support, so I was referred to the Mother Center. I went there for a singing evening, I liked it, but I got into an argument with someone on the first day. But after 3 months I went again. The second day I was doing childcare, after one week I cooked lunch for the first time and soon enough I was in full swing in the center. It was actually exactly what I needed, not to be looked at suspiciously or with judgment, but being accepted with all my faults, also with the difficult child that I have. I often did not go out, because my older son is difficult. My whole family lives in the North of the country. I left because I felt they were too controlling, but it makes it difficult if you don't have family to take the children sometimes. But in the Mother Center I made friends and we take care of each other's children, so that sometimes I can have a free weekend. The kids' father is abroad, so I am very alone. And sometimes I was so tired and so fed up, and in the Mother Center you can just go and say that you need a break, and the kids take off and play with the other kids and you can have a cup of coffee in quiet, without worrying about what the kids are doing, or that they are getting in trouble, because there are enough adults around that are keeping an eye on them. I found a substitute family here.

I have been in Germany for 12 years. I was looking for something for my daughter to do. In a foreign country I missed my own family networks. There were no other children. I was searching for something to which my daughter could belong. I saw the flyer for the Mother Center at my pediatrician. So I went there and was immediately welcomed by the women there, they opened their arms to me and my daughter, it was warm, I felt at home right away.

We have developed into a multigenerational house. The Mother Center concept proved to be attractive and open to all. When we started our daily hot lunches we were approached by older people in the neighborhood and also the school kids got interested. Now we have all ages in our center and it is very enriching. ”

VI. Successes

The spreading of the Mother Center movement has created many effects and benefits, both for the families involved as well as for society at large. Mother Centers have a strong impact on the participating families as well as on municipalities and communities.

The success of the Mother Centers on the ground is based on specific elements that work together to create the 'Mother Center magic' and success formula:

✓ Mother Centers operate in self management. Mothers are 'the experts' in the centers. Their everyday life experience is acknowledged as expertise. Professionals have a supportive role and engage in equal partnerships.

✓ The centers' approach is resource, not problem, oriented. Women are not approached by asking them to define their problems. Instead they are asked to define the skills and resources they have to contribute to community building and community solutions.

✓ Mother Centers claim a public 'room of their own'. They are not harbored in rooms of other organisations for limited periods of time. The initiatives have full time access to their rooms.

✓ Work in the Mother Centers is remunerated and tasks are spread among the participants. Voluntary work is additional, not a substitute for paid work. In average for every paid hour in the centers about two extra hours of voluntary work is generated.

Roma Mother Center in Simitli, Bulgaria.



✓ Children are welcome and an integral part of the centers, but the focus is also on the interests and needs of the mothers.

✓ Mother Centers function more like family than like institutions. The 'corporate culture' is personal and adapted to family rhythms. It follows women's ways of learning, and women's ways of doing things.

✓ Mother Centers function on the basis of collective leadership and a culture of leadership support. Learning to work together is a major focus. Conflicts are not avoided but an accepted part of it and efforts are undertaken collectively to work through conflicts.

✓ Mother Centers are melting pots in the community for women of diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity is celebrated and integration and peace building methods are an integral part of the daily programs.

✓ Mothers' expertise in dealing with care giving and the everyday life of communities is channeled into advocacy, local governance and policy making.

✓ Mother Centers also claim reflective space. Taking time out for peer learning exchanges as well as for regular seminars to reflect on the daily experiences, the lessons learned, and the way forward, are an integral part of their functioning.

The benefits to the participating women, their families and communities include: assistance in parenting and family issues; improving the quality of child rearing; active roles for women and more gender equality in families and the community; support for the reintegration of women into the labor market and for work-life balance; creation of income generating activities and services that are well attuned to the needs of families; integration of youth as well as the elderly; support for family health and well being; revitalization of local culture and local neighborhoods; diversity management and social cohesion at community level; and providing families with a voice and influence in shaping their environment.

This chapter lists the benefits and successes of the Mother Centers and their networks as they were perceived and emphasised in the interviews.

“Mother Centers are a very important institution, because every problem that society has, starts in the family. When we help families through the Mother Center, we are helping society. We can contribute so that many problems will not arise. When I don't shout at my child, when I am not getting nervous, the child is not frustrated. Every mother has been in the situation where she is angry with her child, and when her husband comes home he does not understand what she wants. A frustrated child from a frustrated mother, will grow up to be a frustrated adult. And if they don't experience their mother in other roles, they will not understand how important it is for mothers to become active, that there are other things in the world besides earning money. They will never understand other values in life. We do awareness building in society about these kinds of things, we talk about it on TV, and in the papers. (Slovakia)

We have presented mothers as subjects and actors in policy, not only as beneficiaries, or as objects of programs. If you look for instance, at current literature on the issue of the lack of education and qualifications of our youth, you see that mothers are treated as totally incompetent. They are labeled and made to feel deficient and powerless. The Mother Centers have brought mothers out of this powerlessness, out of this feeling of being pressured to perform without support. We have created space for mothers who were suffocating under all the labels and images they were being confronted with and measured by. We create space to reflect and decide for themselves, this is my path, so that they are not determined by external expectations. That they can experience motherhood and family life positively. We create a climate in the Mother Centers where this can happen, where they are not under pressure, where they get self confidence, where they can find their own solutions, their own voice, and their own way of parenting. (Germany)

Mothers in the center know what they want and know how to say it. They are considered problematic mothers, everywhere they go, in the schools or kindergartens, because they want to know why things are like that. They have something to say. They want to change things. And the other people don't like them, 'oh here come the hysterical women from the Mother Centers. They are trouble makers'. But this way they make changes happen. (Czech Republic)

I hear many stories from the kindergarten teachers that say, 'oh these horrible children from the Mother Centers, they are too social', and we are proud of that, that they are social. (Czech Republic)

We managed to organise good quality childcare. That was the first success. And we won the fight against the kindergarten director. And we have three savings and credit groups and have saved 17000 KM. That gives hope and encouragement and an enormous boost of self confidence. (Bosnia)

It is a process of awakening of women, because they often live in certain stereotypes, carrying the burden of everyday duties. They become aware of things that they did not see as issues, but when they are more confident they see that there are things they do want to change. They are in roles artificially, being forced by grandmothers or

husbands, and they do not want to get into conflict. The Mother Center gives them a chance to see what they really want, and to stand up for it. They discover themselves, they reflect on their wishes and visions. (Slovakia) ”

Supporting Healthy Families

“ We offer a meeting place for single mothers, we have hot meals at lunch time, healthy food, organic food, affordable for poor families. Children learn through everyday life how to deal with the environment, and healthy habits become normality for them. We influence family life that way; they experience this as normal way of life. (Germany)

For every family or woman who did not have to get psychiatric treatment or whose children did not have to go into institutions, because of the Mother Center, those are our successes! And there are many of these in the center. We can prevent a lot at this level, by being a community and integrating these women and these children. (Germany)

We have been in existence now for 6 years, and we have written a publication about child nursing that attracts a lot of interest, from professionals as well. Doctors are interested, we have our own website, experts from different areas partner with us on different projects in health care. We can say that we have established ourselves as a support for women's and children's health. (Slovakia) ”

Creating Neighborhoods

“ When kids are out in the neighborhood, walking around in the park, people just smile, it is not often you see that in this neighborhood. Kids going up the block to see blossoms. That is what neighborhoods are all about. People who grew up here when kids were allowed to bike about and play, and bringing that back to the community is really important. It makes everyone happy, even the grumpiest of grumpy neighbors, who grump at us, smile at the kids, they can't help it. (Canada)

In the beginning the women do it for themselves, for their own children. After some time, they open and begin to do things for others, and they begin to find programs for others, not only for themselves and that is important. When they experience their own needs being satisfied, something grows inside them, that makes them want to pass this on. That is a process that happens in the centers. Women who were focusing only on their own family get interested in more than their own family. A sense of neighborhood grows. (Czech Republic) ”

Strengthening Civil Society

“ You start becoming a problem solver. And when you do not have any problems of your own any more, you start solving those of others. (Czech Republic)

Mother Centers help parents to participate in civic society. Now there is a new generation of mothers, but at school you still do not hear about civic society, at home people maybe go to the election and that is all, but in the Mother Centers the people see that it is possible to change something in our life and this is the biggest input to society, that we have the possibility to challenge the situation. Also in Mother Centers you can learn that you are responsible for yourself and your family, your children. When the mothers from Mother Centers go to school with their children they are different than other mothers, they are self confident, and they are prepared to say, no we do not want this program or this schedule. We are making the post revolution change go faster. It will take many generations until you have a truly free society but the life in the Mother Centers changes this more quickly. (Czech Republic)

When we have created payment for volunteers, that was also an innovation. In the beginning it was a huge taboo, but we have accomplished this, although it still remains a constant struggle. (Germany)

We can see it now, with the experience of the last 15 years, we have challenged policy makers. Suddenly there is a group who can speak loudly. It was not like that before. There were families with children who stayed at home, and suddenly these people came together. One person cannot do as much as a group of pioneer women. There are real changes in society now. Also because of elections. They want to pay more for maternity leave, also you can have your children attend kindergarten now, even if you are on parental leave., This law has been changed. Now they can go every day for 4 hours. (Czech Republic)

Mother Centers organise the building of playgrounds. That benefits the whole community. Some people say, it is responsibility of the local council, they should do it. But the mothers don't want to wait 'til they do it. Or in some communities there is no theatre. So the mothers invited a theatre group to play there. And then the whole community participated. Or when a center baked cakes and distributed them over Christmas. There was a Christmas tree in town, there were drinks, but nothing to eat. It was a big surprise in the town, that something had been given out for free. We just wanted to say that we are here, we are part of the town, part of society. So we stand for solidarity in the family and in the community. We help each other and we think not only of ourselves and not only of money. (Czech Republic)

We also see a change in our community with regard to other ethnic groups. In our center there is no integration problem. We do not have integration courses, we have many community groups participating in our regular tasks. And we celebrate all religious festivities, as they come. Our children see it all as part of their regular environment. And the community gets used to meeting all kinds of groups and people in our center. (Germany)

We have made selfhelp something that society is aware of. That not all things need to

be managed by the municipality, that parents can do things themselves and become an important factor in the town. (Germany)

There are many examples. Mother Center women visit seniors homes and they make some programs for seniors with kids. And they invite grandmothers to the centers and they can read fairy tales to children. One center started a house for pregnant women and homeless women. There are many examples of initiatives started by the women in the Mother Centers. (Czech Republic) ”

Partnering in Local Governance

“ So the process was, getting people from the council to come to our meeting. So the first step was that people from the city council accepted an invitation from somebody who is not in the city council, but wants to have a say. So you have to get them to accept that. That is a learning process for the town council people. They also need to develop the mental space for mothers’ questions and the Mother Centers. They have to be accountable to us directly, not only to an anonymous mass of voters. (Czech Republic)

There are two levels, the local Mother Centers and the network. We have become recognised as something that represents the voices of mothers and families. They come for our advice, and we have gained their respect and acknowledgement. (Slovakia)

When we got secured with our rooms, we got more standing in our communities and we got into politics more. We can raise our voices in local politics, and try to influence laws, for instance the law on voluntary work. This does not exist. You have to pay taxes on everything you earn. For instance if you earn 100 Mk they want you to give 47 MK to the city. We want to change this. It is time that we stood up to fight to improve our lives. I have the vision to do things a bit bigger. What we do now is fine, but we can do much more. The response to our ‘move the pram’ action was very strong and positive. I went to the mayor’s assistant and said we were honoured to represent our country in this campaign, and I told her about the idea and the event and what we want to achieve, and women gathered from the other offices to hear what I was saying. They asked us what we needed from them. And I said support. And they said we do not have any money. And I said, I do not need money, I need the streets, I need police protection, I need things like that. And they said, make it official in a proposal, and don’t worry, we will support you. And I talked to other organisations and they were supportive. One man said he would give us a video camera and help us make a video, another helped us with making a poster. It is a good way to create partnerships like that. If we make PR for our TV, it costs 200 MK. But the city has a slot on the TV, so she said we can give you some space in this TV slot. (Bosnia)

The municipality is slowly recognising us. They show off with us, but also they start to book us both at the level of our catering service but also as consultants to build up multigenerational houses. First they wanted to come and learn from our house informally, but we had to really make it very clear, we want to be paid here as experts, and we made a case for that. The municipality agreed, so we get paid for the study visits they do here and the consultations we give. (Germany) ”

Entering Bottom-up Knowledge into Society

“ I think we have learned together to understand what pregnant women need, how to change the health system, how to make doctors treat us as partners, we help women with breast feeding. There was not so much knowledge before of this whole field. Many organisations approach us now to ask for this knowledge. For instance an editor of a magazine asked us for our recommendations on how birth preparation should be done, what experiences we have gathered and what we have learned from our women. We also made a book that has spread throughout Slovakia, support for women in breast feeding. (Slovakia)

We are preparing a website where we want to put together the games that you can play with children, that engage them, where they are active, not that they sit in front of the TV, but what you can do to activate children, how mothers can play with children, without expensive toys. Or ways that you can prepare healthy meals for the children. We have gathered a lot of knowledge about these areas too. How to accept the individuality of children. (Slovakia)

We are 20 years ahead with what we do in the Mother Centers. Now the government comes with programs for childcare under three, and for intergenerational work. We have been doing this for a long time already. Now you read in these programmatic papers what we have been doing all along. They learned from us. (Germany) ”

Creating Family Friendly Societies

“ We go everywhere with our children. Our mothers take children to a choir or to some cultural program, and the people are disturbed by that. They are not used to little children. They are confused and embarrassed by this. Our mothers confront this, they stand for a society that welcomes children. (Slovakia)

We have changed attitudes in our municipality. The attitude that families are a private matter has changed. Local authorities recognise that it is part of their mandate to create supportive conditions for families. Also we have been able to change the conservative image of families. In the beginning we were a threat to the conservative parties. And now they see that we are not breaking families up, we are strengthening families. They see now that families today are not only staying at home, but are active in the community, and that that is the way to strengthen family, not to weaken it. (Germany)

We have reclaimed public spaces and public values. The value of motherhood has disappeared in modern society, in the conditions of life. We have reclaimed space for families, so that they are visible in society, and they can live their values. We have created public living rooms, made families publicly visible. (Czech Republic)

Also it is accepted that the children are part of it. It has changed the attitude in public life towards children. In our town now it has also become more possible to take children to cafés and public spaces. We have created a culture of public space that is shared with our children. When we have our family chill -outs in the Mother Center on Friday evenings, the children are part of it, and the fathers also learn to deal with a culture of being with a lot of children. (Germany)”

We are partnering with the university health department, we partner with hospitals, we cooperate with local companies, we have good connections to the media and good PR. Some of our members are thinking of putting themselves up for local elections. We are invited to many events and debates. And the network has signed a contract with the union of municipalities of Slovakia, so that we will be consulted about new legislation concerning families. (Slovakia)

In our municipality we are the only place where normal women with normal kids can come. There are often projects for the disabled or for victims of violence, but healthy women with healthy children are not interesting to anybody. We work together with the kindergarten, we tell the teachers how important it is to work with the parents, that the children and parents can take their time adapting to separation, that the feelings of the child should be accepted, we make posters and educational materials that we give to kindergarten teachers. (Slovakia)

We also work with unemployed, or with rural women. The women do not know that they have rights, that they can find their place under the sun. For some women it is very difficult, because the men are very dominant. They need support to be able to come to the center at all. (Slovakia)

The network does active lobbying with mayors, also with the organisation of Slovak mayors, so the mayors know what Mother Centers are, they have heard of them, so if a group approaches their mayor, he is more prepared to help them. We are taken more seriously, because mayors know we are not just a single Mother Center, but a movement, a network. (Slovakia)

We have a good image in public opinion. The idea of happy childhood, everyone likes that, but nobody seems to actively support it. So our role is to get society to actively support this ideal. This pretty picture everyone has in their mind. But our task is to show where this picture needs support and how to support it. Every political party has it in their program, but we can show them how to do it in practice. That is our goal. It takes a lot of effort and it takes time. You have to do something first, to show how it works. We show where the gaps are by doing it ourselves. The fact that nobody does programs and projects for healthy families. That is a big gap. Because families need support in their everyday tasks. Or for instance to find good programs in the media for children. There are so many things that we are influencing. (Germany)

Often family policies do not see the real situation. Parental allowance for one and a half years does not see the reality that children do not only cost money in the first two years, they actually get more expensive the older they get. There are children here, if you ask them what they want to become, they say a welfare recipient. We need to show them a way into life, not a way against a wall. Families need support not only in the beginning, but during their whole life. (Germany)

There is a new program that our regional government has started, where they want to select intelligent children and there is a questionnaire to interview parents, and a 4 year old child is audited to see what career it should have. The parents are evaluated, do they smoke, are they interested in their children, and kids and parents are stigmatized. It is only about the productivity of children, their achievement level. It is about selecting elites and excluding less high levels of achievement. The 5 year old kids are already put into separate groups of children. That is something we are protesting against. We want to determine the conditions under which our children grow up, we don't only want to do our best in the family, we want to have a say in the conditions outside of the family. Children are not only the high achieving workforce of tomorrow, they are also human beings who need a satisfied and fulfilled life. We have held an information evening for parents about this program and have founded the group of critical parents to campaign against this policy. They call it supporting the development of children, but what they are supporting is only a certain part of the development of children, their cognitive and achievement aspects, basically what is needed in the labor market to be competitive, to be exploited. Mother Centers have a totally different idea of development, it is not limited to high achievers.(Germany)

The welfare mothers do not get child allowance money. It is subtracted from their welfare payment. That means very concretely that the children of welfare mothers are disadvantaged. The image politicians have of welfare mothers needs to change. Poverty is not a private issue, but is part of society. Society has a responsibility towards poverty. Here we contribute to a more honest debate about what should be done with regard to work. People are unemployed, not because they don't want to work, but because they don't have work. That needs to be approached honestly to find real solutions. There needs to be a change of attitude towards work and towards unemployment. (Germany) ”

VII. Challenges

In the process of growing into a global movement the Mother Centers encounter many challenges, which are highlighted in this chapter. Challenges include internal, organizational questions and communication issues, as well as challenges related to external issues and players. The Mother Center movement is in itself in many ways challenging, both to the participants as well as to the outside world, in as much as it involves many innovative aspects that often do not fit into conventional concepts, and usual ways of thinking and doing things.

Mother Centers raise challenging issues like the question of how to create valorisation and acknowledgement for non monetary sources of capital like time, care, presence, diversity and social networks. They are involved in finding ways to recognize and validate informal skills and informal work. They deal with taboo questions like the poverty of families in affluent societies and the question of qualitative poverty, a poverty of social relations in conditions of material wealth, and how to balance economic and social development.

Princess Máxima visits the Mother Center in Bos & Lommer, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.



Mother Centers question the division between private and public, the gap between institutional and informal structures. They develop a culture of public participation beyond professionalisation and formal representative democratic structures. Mother Centers are a model of civic ownership of public space that counteracts the trend of public space being taken over by formal institutions and market forces.

These are not easy processes. They come with many challenges both internally and externally. This section presents the issues that Mother Centers find themselves struggling with. Solutions have been found to varying degrees, but many of the difficulties described remain challenging.

Outside the Mother Center *Plamen* (Flame) in Zavidovici, Bosnia.



Organisational Development

“ We thought that everyone is good at everything. Although it is true that you do not need a diploma to have skills, it is also not the case that everyone can do everything. You cannot put every person in every post. Often we were continuing with someone in the wrong post for too long, instead of confronting the issue and finding the right place for the person, where they could contribute the best. Some are not good at childcare, are better as cooks, often we close our eyes and look away for too long. Now we look actively, is everybody at the right place, how can we support each one to do the thing they like and are able to do best. (Germany)

In our center we can't pay money, but we should have found other ways of showing appreciation and recognition. If there is not money available, we need to find other ways. For instance, taking all the active women in the center out to dinner once a year. That is a gap that we need to fill, how to develop a culture of appreciation in our center. (Germany)

It is important to create mentoring structures, so that you individually coach new women, and also to create documentation for certain activities and procedures, that they become transparent and can easily be handed over to other women, to the new generation. (Germany) ”

Communication and Group Dynamics

“ There are many misunderstandings. These complicated relationships and gossiping, this is an issue. Conflicts also grow from informal relationships. There is no hierarchy, no one is the leader, everybody does everything, but not everybody does what is important for the center, so conflicts come out of that. It is good to say exactly what everyone does, and to include the views from outside. (Czech Republic)

And also to keep communication structures positive. That is also a continuous issue, there are so many different groups in the centers, with so many different backgrounds and you need to make sure that communication functions among all. So you also need tools for that. That is why leadership support method has such a strengthening effect in the Mother Centers, because it secures good communication structures. (Germany)

What has happened in many cases is that some conflict happens and is not dealt with and then there is some frustration and someone just throws in her hat and leaves, without a structured take over and hand over to someone else. And if, for instance, that happens with the accounting or financial issues, it can become quite a catastrophe, gathering up the pieces. (Slovakia)

We have too few active mothers. There is a conflict between women who are ready to do voluntary work and those who are not. (Czech Republic) ”

Paving your own Path

“Nobody had experience with creating new structures. We knew we needed different structures, but we did not know how. We were often against something without knowing how it could be done differently. It is difficult, when there is strong pressure to do things like they are done in the mainstream. (Germany)

Many times we were told, you need to have a professional board, and we said no. It is important that the women who are involved do not get pushed aside. (Canada)

Nobody had experience with organising a network. We consulted with consultants and created 3 models. We had different images, how the network should look. The Union should reflect the needs of the Mother Centers. It should provide know-how, be trustworthy and transparent, and keep the principles and the mission it holds. Mother Centers are organisations that are founded from the bottom up, that is why they are so respected. And that is a principle we wanted to keep. There were no ready made models for this. (Slovakia) ”

Bottom-up Participation

“I had in my head the example of Germany. I knew that there was a network, they organised a conference from time to time. I took these ideas from Germany and tried to put them into our situation. For a long time I was doing networking work alone. We called it a task force, to partners, ministries etc, but I was doing it alone. I thought it was important to organise a meeting for all Mother Centers. So I organised the first national meeting to exchange information about what our problems are, and what our successes are. Everybody participated, and it was organised in such a way, that everybody thought, there is a network, somebody is already organised. Later I thought that this was a big mistake. I was the creator of the network, but I did not show other people that I was the creator. I tried to infect them, so that they all felt they participated in it, and they did, but without putting in the work part. They did not see the work that went into that, so they did not see the need either for building up a network. (Czech Republic)

It is totally different from any other organisation where there is a structure, there are employed people, there is a job description and they get salaries. In the Mother Centers networks all of this needs to be built up. But based on what? There is only free will. It is very hard to get all this in place from the bottom up. Usually it only happens when there is some kind of funding and somebody who has managed to get in that funding. (Germany)

The coordinator is the center of the network. If you want to reach the network you have to call her. We would like people to communicate with each other directly, instead of via the coordinator. We are not democratic. We would like to be, but we can't organise it. It is a lot of work. You have to keep in touch with everybody. The women in the Mother Centers are always busy, or the contact person changes. In the beginning we tried to have a group which was representative of the network, but that

did not work. Now, the women on our network are here on their own, voluntarily, they are not delegated. For the state and phase we are in it works better with people that are interested in participating, and it is not formally structured. If there were a structure it should be a horizontal one, with no bosses, working with working groups. It is lovely on paper, but it is hard to keep it sustainable. Simply for meetings you need to have travel costs. To be more democratically accessible, you need to have travel costs. (The Netherlands)

You get inquiries from the ministry or the council about things that are happening in society. Or for example, there was the suggestion that the women from the Mother Centers get involved in childcare before school and after school, and they would get paid for that and they would get education. The man from the ministry wanted to confirm it with me immediately. But I said, no I have to go back to my women and see if they are interested, and that makes it complicated. But the outside world expects it. They think I can make the decisions. The (Netherlands)

People had different ideas how the Union should work. There are misunderstandings about the aims of the Union as opposed to the aims of the Mother Centers. The Union is formed by Mother Centers. Mother Centers are formed by mothers. There are different aims, and Mother Centers deal with different issues than the Union. The Union with its activities, some say, is not reflecting the need of the centers, because they feel they are overwhelmed with the Union's activities, and that doing advocacy and all these activities are not the needs of the centers. The daily survival of the Mother Center does not include campaigns and such. There is a gap between what the centers perceive as their immediate needs and the priorities that the Union has, because they are looking at the larger picture. The Union is a very young organisation. It still is searching for its own way. There have been mistakes, badly judging the capacities of the Mother Centers. Some centers have the impression that there are too many demands on the Mother Centers. In the different campaigns that the Union is involved in, we have been going at a very fast pace. The centers joined some of the campaigns and underestimated the work that it involved. The Union deals with topics that come from the Mother Centers, the activities come from the centers, they are not made up by the Union, the Union reflects the needs of the centers, but the main problem is that there are more activities than the Mother Centers are able to maintain. One of the main problems is that there was not a proper balance. So the centers do not select, and they have the feeling they need to be involved in everything, and that can get overwhelming. From one extreme, where the Mother Centers were shouting, we don't get enough information to the other extreme, where they are shouting, we get too much information. (Slovakia)

But networking is not that self-evident. For many women it is not that clear why there needs to be a network and why they should engage in it. It is a bit like the step from me to we. Many women only think of their own Mother Center, they don't see the need to take responsibility for a larger whole. (Czech Republic) ””

New Generations

“ There is always a bit of friction and challenge when there is a need for a generational change, for new women to get involved. In our center the energy level was going down, so there was a call for new ideas and new women, and I responded. We brought in some new ideas. We thought it was important that the women got more recognition. We tried to bring in new structures to make this happen, through money and other forms. We actually looked at each woman and what kind of recognition and support she needed to be able to carry on in the center. We tried to give recognition on both the material and non material level. We changed priorities in the budget. We stopped buying new toys, because we saw, we had enough toys, we could also bring some toys from home, or get some from the flea market, we don't have to buy them in the fancy children's toy shops, so we saved money on that end. First we started to reward ourselves with personal recognition, telling each woman how important she and her contribution was. We created time in our meetings to tell each other what we had done, so that it became visible to each other, everyone heard the contributions, and knew that cleaning the toilet and ironing the towels was also work and that it was important for everyone to see that and recognise that, so simply counting and reporting back on all the things we did was an important step. (Germany)

For us, the new generation in our Mother Center, the focus was to have a learning place in the center, a place to gather new skills during the time when you are at home and not yet back at work, so that you have a place where you can develop and prepare for professional perspectives. That you can use this as a qualification process, like an internship, something that gives you qualifications that you can put on your résumé. Because in our generation the single income family has actually expired and we are all looking for employment, but the job world does not accommodate for the needs of mothers with small children, so the Mother Centers provide a unique space to get practical experience and qualifications. We also had to professionalize the work in the centers. We made a letter head. We don't publish anything without proof reading it. We do more publicity and media work. We print our material, we document everything. We make lists of what needs to be done for activities like the flea market, so that we can delegate things, check lists that make the work more systematic and that save time. Our work is more structured, communication is done more efficiently, and the meetings are more regulated and more committed. (Germany)

Mother Centers are vulnerable on two levels. One is the financial level, where there is little sustainability as yet. The other is the turnover of new generations of mothers. When you don't find new mothers to take over. This can happen when Mother Centers become a closed shop, then it is very difficult for new ideas to arise, new ideas will not come and new women will not come up with their energy. This is an area where you need consulting. Women need to be welcomed with their new ideas. But sometimes things have to deteriorate before new women take over. It is not an easy process to create the space for new women. Sometimes it only happens when there is a crisis and things are threatening to fall apart. (The Netherlands)

We never had a problem with getting new women, but lately we do. It seems that a new generation of women is coming in, who are not willing to do voluntary work. They are more interested in services. They want services almost on a commercial level. What

happens more now is that grandmothers approach us and want to support us and contribute to our work. Maybe we need to shift our focus as to which groups carry the Mother Centers. Women are going back to their jobs sooner than before. Or they start working part time during maternity leave. That is a big change. Mothers are having less time. Having the time to talk is getting less. Women are more scheduled in their participation in the center. They come for certain things and then go again, there is less unscheduled time that can be used for encounters and for passing on information in a non structured way. (Germany)

So you actually also need the network to consult on how generation changes can be done in Mother Centers without losing the quality. This is another important issue and reason for the network. This consultation involves consulting both sides of a generation shift in the centers. You need to consult the first generation on how to let go and to pass on their knowledge to the new mothers and you have to consult the new mothers on how to maintain the concept and the quality in the Mother Center while bringing in their own ideas. Many centers get to the point where no more new women want to volunteer. Within 3-5 years you come to this point, and then it is good to have a training or a seminar on how to get the Mother Centers going again. Mostly Mother Centers tend to turn more inwards, the women who established it or have been active for a long time become a closed shop, and it clogs up. You have to break it open again and allow more outside influence, which is sometimes threatening. You have to make them see that it is an opportunity. They all ask the same question. What is happening to our center and to us? They feel like a victim. When they realise that they themselves are the reason that it has become a closed shop, if you discuss this openly with them and take away the threat, freshening up the basic concepts, are they still working, creating new activities,, being open, getting others involved, giving them opportunities to do something in the center, then things start moving again. (The Netherlands) ”

Keeping the Mother Center Culture Alive

“ I think there are issues in our former development. We did not have a certain code of behavior for board members, some kind of internal rules. We built the network just on trust. It was not perceived equally by all the people involved. Everybody interpreted this trust by themselves. Some people had business interests and business thinking. So we developed the ethical code. It was approved last year. It was important. (Slovakia)

Often women also do not understand how we work, who does what. You need the transparency of what kind of work is being done, where decisions are being made and how the whole thing holds together, that is often not there. It is not always so evident to new women. It is very important to make this transparent to new women, to explain how the invisible things in the Mother Centers work. So you always need some of the experienced women to be involved in the regular Mother Center everyday goings on, such as in the coffee shop. (Germany)

We organise inspirational activities, and meetings that also defend the concept. Because all kinds of people tend to take the concept and run with it and lose the

key concept points. You need to keep people aware of the traps, and how you can defend the concept. We do this training for all the participants of Mother Centers. (The Netherlands)

A community center is to consume. You go in and you consume. And you go out again. You do not have to be a part of anything. You just take it in, pay for it and go out again. You can't go there with your child. Only if there is a children's activity. You don't have to interact with other people, or your child with other people. The Mother Center by contrast is run by participants. It is a totally different concept. The atmosphere is different. If you go into a community center, there is drinking, TV, the history of community centers is long, they are focused on what to bring to people. The Mother Center is the opposite. The women are invited to bring themselves, and what is in them out. (The Netherlands)

We have a different form of team now that we have done the leadership support training. We work with it in our coordination teams and also in the small project teams. This has changed the communication. We used to fight about why the milk was not put in the fridge in the evening and was spoiled the next day, or why second-hand clothes were accepted that had stains, subjects like that. The same themes over and over again. Since we work with leadership support, there are different themes, personal themes, we got to know each other better, from the inside, and we have very harmonious teams now. Not that we don't give our opinions, but we find consent and the climate has changed. We are a big house and you don't meet everybody daily anymore, but through the leadership support process, we have managed to keep a very open and trusting atmosphere, very warm, very connected. We develop basic agreements with each other, which we need to get along, to make the centers work. It is a great method. Because I can say the things that I mean, without having the feeling I am not being heard. Before I was often saying things on the side and then often I was not heard. In the leadership support method I really feel seen. (Germany)

We offer a basics course every month for women who want to start getting active in our center. We give an introduction to new women on what the Mother Centers are about. We give this regularly, sometimes there are many women, sometimes few, but it is a regular event once a month. We take two hours for this, so there is an intense exchange, we walk through the house and show what is going on in the different groups. Sometimes women come more out of interest to earn some money. But when they understand the concept, they get more of an idea what it really is about: that values are important, that we respect children, that we respect each other, that the way we deal with each other is important. (Germany)

We had a heavy tax payment to make and we decided to put our cards on the table, to make our finances totally transparent. We showed the numbers and the atmosphere was open and then many people were willing to make cut backs, because everybody was involved in making the decisions about how the cuts will be done. (Bosnia)

We have a very clear agreement in our team that we do not talk behind people's backs. And we really make sure this does not happen. We really focus on that. It takes a lot of work to always say, I understand you, but please bring this to the person whom it concerns and not as gossip. What benefit does it give you if you gossip about

things that you don't even know whether they are true or not, where you haven't cross checked? This has changed the climate a lot. And we are really disciplined about this. (Germany)

We have insisted on self management of our intergenerational house. The mayor wanted to have a coordinator from the municipality who would be in charge of all the municipal intergenerational houses. We refused that. We need to stay independent, in order to be able to make our own concepts. So that we don't have professionals determining us. (Germany) ”

Job Mentality

“ What professionals often do is say, this is my job description, and I am not going to do anything else and that immediately kills the atmosphere. I am in a management position here, but, if I see a table that needs cleaning I will clean it. I take out my own garbage, we help in the kitchen cooking, that makes a huge difference. (Canada)

When Mother Centers have grown to become large entities and become a big service providing enterprise, some of the self help quality gets lost, people come because they are looking for a job, not because they want to contribute to solving an issue or to the quality of life for the community. That is something we have to also watch out for and deal with, because that can change the whole culture of the center. (Germany) ”

Developing Standards

“ Many groups call themselves Mother Centers, including commercial projects. A lawyer told us it is important to be a trademark. To know who is member and who really meets our standards. Sometimes there are conflicts with the commercial centers and the town council says, but you have such high prices, and then we can say, no, we work differently, this is the concept of our centers. The trade mark contains our standards. Every center can use it. That the centers are open for all social groups, for all nationalities and ethnic groups, that they function on the basis of self help, that they are registered, and not for profit. When we define standards, then we are more of a program that the ministry can fund. It gives them quality control. The ministry needs some criteria of what they fund. They want to know what a real Mother Center is, a description what the social service that Mother Centers are providing is and what the ministry is funding. It is also creating a definition of what our work is worth socially. This way we can really make sure that the atmosphere of Mother Centers is secured, because we have conceptual conflicts with professionals, and we need our concept to be acknowledged. That there cannot be hierarchies in the center and so on. (Czech Republic)

We have initiated a lot in the city through our work. We worked hard to show how important family is, that supporting the family is important and what the issues and needs of families are. We showed the demand by demonstrating our services, showed that they were in demand by simply going ahead and doing it, and the city saw that

families come and use our services. We also ask parents if they are satisfied with the quality of childcare that the municipality supplies or if they have other ideas and needs. Now that the city is under pressure they are simply opening up kindergarten groups to children under 2, without changing anything in their concept. That is not what our ideas are about. For small children you need a different approach. You need flexible hours. And the smaller the children are, the more you need to involve and cooperate with the parents. They belong to the child. The less a child can articulate itself, the more you need the time to talk to the parents. But they don't take that time. But you have to be able to talk any time that is needed. Not that you need to make an appointment for next week, it has to be much more flexible. The city has learned from us, but they don't really keep the quality standards. We would need to make a lobby that any service the municipality develops has to be audited by us as family friendly. Starting from every new street that is built. We need those kind of family friendly public quality standards. We need to create visibility for our quality standards. That we define them and then go out and say, we are going to evaluate you according to our standards. And see if you can hold up. (Germany)

We developed quality standards for Mother Centers and the centers can apply for being assessed and evaluated by their own association and getting the certificate to show that this is a certified Mother Center. We always include local authorities in these evaluation teams, so it is also a good partnership building tool. This is also a good way to get recognition and authority as a network. And you can broaden this to include other institutions, like the kindergartens. So that they do or do not get the quality audit and certificate of the Mother Centers. (The Netherlands) ”

Paid Voluntary Work

“ Also the quality of some of our services is actually connected to the fact that it is voluntary. If you pay for it, it is not the same quality. A lot of quality can be lost when you pay for everything. But if you do not pay at all, there is burnout. That is why we talk about paid voluntary work, something that is a contradiction in itself but that is exactly what it is and what is needed. You need to have the core funding and structures resourced, and on that basis a lot can happen on a voluntary level. (Germany)

The public misunderstanding is that self organisation would mean without resources. And that is deliberate. (Netherlands)

For me it was very interesting to see that really very qualified and high quality work was being done on a voluntary basis. Usually in public life the voluntary work is more the helping roles, the assistance, but here I saw women working on a very high level on a voluntary basis. You could tell that very soon. It was quite visible. When we were struggling to get our center off the ground it was a big support to see that this was not just a stupid idea, because we did not get a lot of response in our municipality, but we got the confirmation from the network. That was very important for us. But for the network to be sustainable in the long run, it was also necessary to get funding for paid jobs in the network. (Czech Republic) ”

Making handicrafts at Mother Center *Klub Prima*, Sanski Most, Bosnia.



Roma Mother Center in Simitli, Bulgaria.



Family Friendly Society Award ceremony in Czech Republic.



Mother Center Freudenstadt, Germany.



Outside Mother Center Stuttgart, Germany.



Mother Child 'Sports' at Mother Center Ivanka, Slovakia



Swimming against the Mainstream

“In our society now, the economy demands achievement and efficiency. The whole society is forced to be efficient. Mothers want children to be efficient and high achievers. Mothers want to promote all kinds of activities and skills for their child so then they don't have time for anything else. There is a pressure to achieve and be successful, and nobody seems to have any free time. Everybody is scrambling to get the highest achievement, it is all very competitive and there is a lot of consumerism. Everyone wants to have everything. The Mother Centers do not fit into this category. A Mother Center needs to run on different principles. (Slovakia)

During the communist time, we did not have many possibilities to go anywhere, or accumulate things. So now the whole golden West market is open and everyone has many possibilities. And you get crazy with all the options. People are nervous that they need to get there, get the newest, afraid that they will miss something, they are connected with everyone around the world, but they do not know what their neighbour needs. There are new technical connections, but the personal connections are broken. (Czech Republic)

Motherhood has been devalued. Sometimes we feel that we cannot even use the m word. It is not sexy, not glamorous or en vogue. (Germany) ”

Shifting existing Power Systems

“The next barrier is a distrust of a new leader emerging or coming into the community. In my experience with any disenfranchised group, the moment a new leader emerges, what happens is the drag down system, someone stands up, hits them behind the knees and pulls them down. You really have to work with groups to say, if someone stands up, we should stand up with them, instead of pulling them down. If you don't have the authority to come in and point out this system, then the person who is standing up continuously feels alone, and undermined. (Canada)

Having Mothers in the center of the community fits well with our tradition. We come from a matriarchal society, which means women take a leadership role, they drive the community. But it is men who are running our organisations, our government. I wanted to see women more in control. This whole male dominance. I grew up accepting it, but as I became more involved in working in the community, I started questioning it more. The process was an awakening. When I started this, I did not know I had the capacity. When I started, I worked for a boss, I worked for somebody who was my mentor. I thought he is brilliant. He does all this stuff. So I did not have the self belief that I could start an organisation and manage it. It was other people who saw it in me. How I organised meetings, how I could get everybody together, get the government to listen to me, I could bring people in that nobody else could. They convinced me I could do that, but I had a lot to learn. What community centers were all about, and why Aboriginal women were not going there. And as I was finding out what was going on in the community I found out how male dominated it was and how little support they give to women's organisations. I saw that there was even

more of a need for a Mother Center. People thought what a wonderful concept, but they saw how empowering it was and it scared them. They felt like they were losing control. (Canada) ”

Public Recognition

“ When we confronted the city council about the situation of the playgrounds, they told us that there was no money for this. So we wrote to foundations and found funds and started the process ourselves. The municipality called it your playground. On the day we open the playground we want to formally give it to the town as a present. Because we cannot do the maintenance. We don't have the machines to cut the grass and everything. So in fact we are actually a sponsor for our town. And we actually had to bypass the official channels to get something done. It did not go through the usual channels of participating in the decision making of the town, it was completely different. So it did not really bring us closer to the town, we did not develop a partnership with them in the process. They don't see us as partners. But it is changing. They never thought that we could do it. And we actually generated a lot of money, so they take us more seriously now and we have told them how they can get EU projects to get money for playgrounds. So even though they are ignoring us, they are getting interested because they see we make things happen. They see we are experts, but they don't say it officially. They send commercial developers of playgrounds to come to talk to us. Why should I give them all my knowledge for something they will be paid for? Why should I do that? It is actually an exploitation of our knowledge. (Czech Republic)

Although we do such good work in our centers and they are such a vital part of the communities in which they operate, we do not have the matching visibility and publicity in the media and in public opinion. Mother Centers have existed for 20 years, but they are still not known well enough in public. So basically we have the situation now that the work on the ground functions better than in a lot of other projects, but the making this work known functions a lot less well than in a lot of other projects and that is the dilemma we are facing now. This brings many Mother Center leaders into burn out. (Germany)

So we are brought into these round tables, because we are the only ones in the city that offer childcare for certain age groups, family childcare, or vacation programs for children. We are providing services that they can profile themselves with. But they are not ready to support us. For instance the vacation programs, it is fine when all the places are booked. But if places are cancelled, we cannot carry the deficit, so we asked the municipality to carry the risk costs, and to jump in when there are cancellations. But they have a huge problem with that. They like to show off with us, but they want us to do voluntary work. We are not really equal partners. They do not want to underwrite our efforts. They take from us, but they don't give to us. Very often we are the only partners in such councils and committees who are not participating on a paid basis, who are contributing voluntary time. Sometimes, if you also have a job, you even take unpaid leave in order to be able to participate in such councils or committees. We need to make this public, to show this and the uneven conditions that such partnerships are based on. (Germany)

Another issue is that our ideas are co-opted. For instance now with the dwindling demography, kindergartens have the issue of not having enough children. They need to turn towards younger children and towards other concepts. So now they are declaring that they are integrating the Mother Center approach, so that they won't be closed down. They don't ask us about the concept and in fact they don't really have a Mother Center, but they get funding for it. And then our concepts of really combining childcare and Mother Centers do not receive funding. So on one hand we have a mainstreaming success, we have brought our approach to childcare into the institutions, but on the other hand it takes away from the support we can get from the municipality. So by mainstreaming we actually can cut off the branch we are sitting on. (Germany)

It is because we don't have the formal education. They feel superior because they have education, and we don't have these certificates, and they think, we as qualified staff do not have to go and learn from just mothers. It has to be the other way around. They have a hard time in accepting the expertise we have from the basis of our every day experience. There is this hierarchy there. (Czech Republic)

In Dutch society everything is centered on individuals, not on groups, nothing is family oriented here. You have to have a problem and then you get help as an individual, and all of one category are lumped together, like youth, handicapped, but the family does not exist in Netherlands. We do not have a systemic approach. We do not have a family ministry. (The Netherlands)

There is a Mother Center movement, but it is also a bit hidden, others don't know about it. It is a movement when we are with other Mother Centers, but in our town we are not that well known. Not everybody in society is interested in mothers and family issues. It has to fit in the biography, but there are many groups in our society. And mothers are not really recognised yet. Making something private into a general interest is a step that does not happen that easily. To make it common interest, to bring it into the public realm requires a lot. (Germany) ”

Not a Project

“ It is always a problem when money is involved, even a little money. The Mother Center idea is something different. It was hard to explain to the participants that this money is not humanitarian aid, but it is also not employment, it is not paying for a job. That they have to take the initiative themselves and create their ideas and plans and be creative. That there is not someone for whom you are doing a project like some foreign aid organization, who will pay you for doing something, who will give you a job, but that you are doing it for yourself and that you determine what is possible. People have to understand that it is their own efforts that will create income; that it is their own efforts that make anything happen. That they need to own it. (Bosnia)

What is so difficult to get funders to understand is that we cannot keep on doing and applying for projects. What is happening in the Mother Center is a process of building social cohesion and social capital in communities. That is not a project, that is something that creates the basis of society. This is always so difficult to get across. (Canada)

The whole social work world is made of projects, and you sometimes get the feeling that people think that life is like that. But we are not a project. We are dealing with life, in its many facets as it is for mothers and children in the community. So sometimes we have people here that think they are joining a project and you see that they don't get it, what we are about and what is necessary here. But also it is often difficult for our partners to understand that we are not a collection of projects, that while we do projects, our core business is living and dealing with life and its challenges together, in a community way. And this needs support too. This happens through creating a community, not a project, but it needs support too. And that part many don't see. They only want to support projects and don't see that we are on another level, creating ways that people can become part of the solution, not targets of a project. They might create their own projects; that can be a result, but the process that this comes out of, that is the real thing, and that can get invisible with all this project thinking. (Germany)

Finding funding resources is a huge problem. If we would have wanted to bring in programs with a bunch of social workers it would have been a hell of a lot easier to get the money. The barrier is not so much that there isn't money available, it is the way those funding sources work. You only get money for projects and not for the core functioning of the Mother Centers. You get a certain amount of money for the work you want to do, but it creates a lot of other work which is not paid. It demands more work than it actually pays for. (Germany)

We would like to have the status, so that there are no problems with money. So that we have regular core funding and that we do not have to run after money and make projects and proposals all the time. (Canada)

There is a lot of fear in the aboriginal community, that things will go for a year and then stop. They have experienced this for decades, and how much it devastates them when the thing is gone again. Each time something fails, it takes years for the community to buy into it again. With those pilot projects and one time only grants it happens a lot. Even the successful projects don't get picked up. (Canada) ”

Finances and Fundraising

“ In communities and countries where families have very little resources, and where local governments do not provide free space, the finances become the challenge right from the start. They hinder the spreading of the model right at the start. Without free space and some funding you cannot start. (Bosnia)

Nowadays we need to have a more professional image, to not get into the negative image of subsidised coffee drinking. If you give yourself a more professional image it is easier also to show the work you do. It is very important to know how the trends go, what the themes of each government are, where they are putting their priorities and their money. The sooner you can get this information the better, and this helps us to know what is going on. And we can build a lobby for family issues and we are also visible and receive recognition in the municipality as serious and competent partners. On the other hand if we do this, it looks like we are paid well. And that we don't need any support. (Germany)

I have many people who prepare programs and courses in the center. I don't have to worry about that, that comes out of the ranks, but the fundraising does not. We would need funds to pay for people to raise funds. So that feels like a vicious circle. (Czech Republic)

I have been observing this for a long time now. When centers only get project funding, it really brings them to the verge of collapse, it is a lot of work, but also the instability that is involved, if you have funds for a while and then not again. This is not sustainable. We need to find core funding, and you need to have good PR work to be able to negotiate for that. We have chosen to build up a foundation to this end. If we had secure funding we could do so much more, there is so much human resources, time and energy being tied up by the patchwork funding that the centers have to engage in, that basically takes away from the work in the centers. And it is not sustainable. So we want to create sustainable funding through creating a fund, a foundation that gathers donations from private sources and companies, that we can transfer towards the work in the Mother Centers. We have some already, but these are small donations. (Germany)

We always get these reactions. When people come and see what we do. And then they say, you must be a municipal institution, and are totally surprised that we are not, that we are a group of families, that have gotten together to do this. They are totally stunned. We need to show more that all of this does not come out of nothing, that it is resources we women and families are putting into it. That is also the problem when you try to professionalise the work without having the funds to do that, then people expect it, they do not see that you do not have the same resources as other institutions, but you are expected to deliver the same. The more perfect and professional we appear, the more the people say, well it works, you do a great job, what do we need to fund you for? On the other hand you have to have a good presentation to get any attention at all. People are always surprised when they hear we have issues around funding, because our work is so convincing and our presentations are so good. They can't imagine that all of this is done without funds, that we need funding, they don't see us as having money needs. (Germany)

The amount of money that some organisations get for the little bit of what they do is incredible. If you compare it to what the Mother Centers accomplish with little or no funding. Money is poured into mini projects, things we do on the side, for professional organisations who know how to promote and market themselves, and who have the people who write the proposals. We need to write proposals in the weekends and the evenings, because we are running the whole Mother Center during the week. (Czech Republic) ”

Grassroots Ownership

“ *The problem is that our ideas are taken up, but it is the large welfare organisations that go out and get the big money for them. We are always the pioneers, the ones that open up new paths. And then after a lot of struggles when things start getting successful they are taken up by the big organisations and we do not really benefit from the success. We are not the owners of our own innovations. (Germany)*

In our town hall they now market themselves as having a children's room. We started this 20 years ago, when we took our children to meetings in the town hall. We caused disturbances with this, we took our own people and toys and created childcare in the corner of the big lobby, and at some point some kind staff came and gave the children some drinks. It was the only way we could participate in public council meetings. And now they have this fancy program and this fancy room and it is in the media and it cost a lot of money and the city is getting a lot of publicity and nobody talks about the fact that we started this. It should be written on a panel in town hall that the Mother Centers started this 20 years ago. If they would have given us the money, we could have made a much nicer children's corner at city hall. We have the great ideas, and they grab them. They have all the connections, all the rich people and companies, they never give back to us. It is en vogue now to be family friendly, everything that we have fought for. But it happens now without us. (Germany)

In future I do not want to be too open. Because we have been exploited. We talked about activities and immediately others did it, they stole our ideas. If we have plans, we have to keep it in our team, and then when the time is right let it out. If I talk about things too early, then others have the time to steal it. I told our kindergarten teacher that we were making excursions to our town, that children saw what is the police, the bakery, the court, and so on. And one week later I heard in our town council that the kindergarten was planning to organise all this. (Bosnia) ”

VIII. Ways Forward

While the challenges and difficulties that the Mother Center movement is currently facing were being described very vividly in the interviews, solutions and ways forward also became apparent. Sometimes they were implied and sometimes very clearly and intentionally described. Responses to the challenges were also a focus of the inputs in the second phase of the study. The final chapter of this analysis lays out the ways forward as they are being perceived and presented by active members and leaders of the Mother Center movement.

In looking forward, Mother Center protagonists place a good deal of value on the issue of sustaining and nurturing the visions for which Mother Centers stand. Many centers and networks conduct regular events to raise awareness of the common values, visions and goals. Some of the most prevalent visions are described in this chapter.

A major focus both of individual Mother Centers as well as the Mother Center movement as a whole is directed towards the issue of sustainability. The Mother Center movement has consistently grown for the last thirty years and also individual Mother Centers show a considerable degree of sustainability. Very few centers have closed down again. Nevertheless the issue of sustainability was very much in the forefront during the interviews. Many women felt that there was not enough political and financial support to keep the centers and the Mother Center networks going in the long run. This arose mainly from the feeling that the successes and gains of the movement were due to an 'overdose' of voluntary work, that women (and families) were over stretching themselves to keep things going, that there were not enough reserves to face current issues of cut-backs in social welfare policies and that the issue of burn out of Mother Center leaders was becoming prevalent.

A major condition for the sustainability of Mother Centers was identified as the availability of public rent-free rooms. It was named as an indispensable condition for the emergence and survival of Mother Centers.

In countries where the Mother Centers have spread spontaneously and quickly like in Germany, or the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this is greatly due to the fact that local government and other organisations provide rooms free of charge to community groups. In poorer countries like Bosnia by contrast, local governments see public space as an economical asset through which to make gains. This creates a big barrier for Mother Centers as well as civil society in general to develop. In the context of developing countries this seems to create a crucial bottleneck.

In the experience of the Mother Center movement a very clear correlation emerges between the development of Mother Centers and the policies of local government in the respective countries. Although Mother Centers have also been taken up, for instance in the slums of Nairobi or in a village in Cameroon, these initiatives have remained singular and have not resulted in the spreading of the centers throughout the whole country.

If local government does not take on the role of providing public space that is not tied to commercial interests, other stakeholders in society are needed to create this precondition for civic involvement. Public space is key to any policy that aims at increasing the involvement of women in civil society and governance. The emergence of civil society depends on public space. Personal freedoms and equalities are not enough, there needs to be opportunities for public discourse and encounters. The privatization and commercialization of public space in the context of globalisation constitutes a heavy challenge for democracy.

While secure and long term access to space and funding was seen as key to the sustainability of Mother Centers and the Mother Center movement, it was by no means perceived as the only element needed. Visions and strategies for the way forward also addressed issues of professionalisation and organizational development as well as internal and external relationships.

The following presents a look at the issues and the strategies Mother Centers are currently engaging in to secure their future

“A Shift of Values

What is needed is a shift of values in society. Everything has become geared towards work and employment. We are fighting for the time and the resources to raise children. We need to claim back time for children. Our whole time is being claimed to gain our income, our existence. Basically it is expected now that both parents work to secure enough income. We need our time back for other parts of life. It is another value, the value of having time, of slowing down, of spending time with your family, with your friends. (Slovakia)

Mother Centers in every Community

If someone asks what a kindergarten is, everyone knows the answer. That would be our vision, for everyone on the street to know about Mother Centers. That everyone would understand that Mother Centers are something necessary in society (Czech Republic)

Mother Centers need to be recognised as part of the public welfare system. They need to have a regular funding title and to be integrated into the governance system of municipalities. (Germany)

It is on the same level as childcare. Nobody questions that there needs to be public childcare. It is the same for Mother Centers. When I see these moms with strollers who go from store to store and don't have a place, I mean the malls and cafés are not really child friendly. Give women space and they will do something with it. And it will also help for the powers that be to learn to listen to women. (Canada)

Mother Centers as Universities of Parenthood

It is so important to see that Mother Centers are places where women learn, and where knowledge is gained. It needs to be understood and acknowledged so that we can influence the academic society through our practical experiences. Students should learn in their workbooks the good examples from Mother Centers. (Slovakia)

There are so many possibilities in the Mother Center concept. It is a lake to drink from, a great reservoir of knowledge. Mother Centers could be knowledge centers and do research as well. Professionals need to get a better understanding of the principles of the Mother Centers. As knowledge centers we could provide such trainings to professionals of many fields. (The Netherlands)

Multigenerational Mother Centers

What we actually need is childcare for the children, a place for seniors, a gym for our youth, a games room for the families and all that together. When you have that, the community spirit can thrive and continue. (Canada)

Our Mother Center has developed into a multigenerational center. The basic concept and approach works for all generations. This will develop more throughout the whole movement as our societies are ageing and the need to find solutions for care not only for children, but also for the elderly, is growing. (Germany) ”

Funding

“Public Funding

Although Mother Centers mostly run on voluntary work, they cannot survive without funds. Many Mother Centers engage in income generating activities to support their centers. These services contribute both to the income of the women who run them as well as to the funding of the Mother Centers. The income that can be generated by these activities, however, in general only amounts to about one third of the budget needed to run Mother Centers. It is not sufficient to make the centers independent of public funding. (Germany)

It would be good if there were a national institution to distribute funds, so that Mother Centers could become independent of the local councils. That way they would identify with the whole movement, not only with their local Mother Center. (The Netherlands)

Nowadays if you want to be hip and happening, you need to have publicity. We would need more resources for publicity. We also need more funds to make the movement more structured. (The Netherlands)

What we would need in Canada is a long term commitment. You need 7 – 10 years to deploy the idea beyond a few demonstration projects. You need two or three demonstration projects around the country, then you can go to hundreds. But you need a long term commitment and investment from the government. This is development, this is not capacity building that is going to happen over night. But it would be the best investment Canada could make. Young aboriginal teen mothers are the only and most rapidly growing population. If you can keep them engaged, and having healthy kids, and doing healthy things, you can turn around the statistics on suicide and depression and drug abuse. This cannot happen on its own. Nobody can work for free. Everybody is a single mom. And the people on welfare, the reason they are on welfare is because they don't have the skills to even work. We don't have maternity leave here. If you are not in the labor market you are looking or not able. So there has to be investments in human resources to build up Mother Centers. (Canada)

We are writing many proposals to get support for our centers. It is very hard to manage to finance ourselves totally. If the economic situation in our country becomes a little bit better, then we can get more income. But you need women who can also leave some money in our center. Most families in our city are very poor. And also our municipal government is very poor. (Bosnia)

Core Funding

We need core funding. A public funding title. So that we can be funded just like kindergartens are. We are negotiating for this with the ministry. And we also need core funding for the network. Fundraising is almost killing us. It is so much work. We are constantly over-stretching ourselves and the constant insecurity consumes a lot of energy. (Czech Republic)

A sustainable future lies in core funding, in getting rooms from the municipalities, and that the Mother Centers become a political program with secure funding. With basic

funding secured, the centers can develop many projects and generate further funds, and of course a lot is done voluntarily, but basic core funding is needed. (Slovakia)

Core funding is also needed for networking. You need to build up a pool of women from Mother Centers to consult and support the start up of new Mother Centers and to transfer the concept. Where the Mother Centers have spread, this has happened through peer learning on a regional level. The groups visited Mother Centers close by and learned from them. However at a certain level of growth, it does not function like that anymore. It is too much to demand from individual Mother Centers to respond to all the requests. And also when Mother Centers are spreading to far away places, it is less possible to visit other centers. So you need some resources to develop a network. (Germany)

Every four years the local government changes, so you are very dependent on the colour of the party, and that can change quickly. So it would be more stable to get funded by a national organisation. We need a specific Mother Center funding title. And that is easier to obtain nationally. (The Netherlands)

There is no core funding for NGOs in Canada, unless you get a mandate for services, like childcare or something. So you always risk a marginal existence. We are trying to gain sustainability by establishing micro enterprises. You cannot do it entirely that way, but you can't do it entirely by government grants or programs either. What would be needed is some kind of core funding that comes from foundations or sources that are independent of government, where it is perceived that this is in the public interest. When the women in the Mother Centers spend all their time fundraising, it detracts from what they can really do. We are trying to present the Mother Center idea to the Association of First Nations and the Indians of the Northern Reserves. If we could engage them, it could sweep the country in terms of aboriginal women and really make a difference. (Canada)

It took 3 years before we opened our center. It was not easy. You need to get the start up subsidised. You would have to find some kind of funding pot to pay for the staffing. The people on welfare are the people that stay at home. Most people work, that is the trend. I could see it working and not having so many difficulties in the upper middle class. With the mums that don't have to work. But in our communities to run a Mother Center you need a couple of incomes, somebody who does finances, someone who manages it, you have to buy in that from the government. You would need it to be a national program with core funding. So that we wouldn't have to run after programs all the time. And that we have the building and space secured. (Canada)

The Economics of Participation

We are beginning to understand an important contradiction. That the more successful we are, the poorer we get. Because on the one hand we are getting recognised and we are gaining influence, but on the other hand this means you are spending a lot of unpaid time in meetings and councils and committees, and in showing visitors around in the center. And all this is not being resourced. Our expertise is given and taken for free, and that is not sustainable. So we are talking now about the economics of participation and local governance. Participation costs human resources. This does not show, because as professionals it is often done as part of their job. Or as

voluntary work, which, however, if you look closer is resourced by an inheritance or a wealthy husband. The economy of participation is hidden. There is a third group who has made participation into a commodity and a market. They are called consultants. If you look now at how local governance functions you can see that there are companies that have a lot of influence, like McKinsey or Price Waterhouse Coopers, that give consultation for high prices on highly political themes. The Stuttgart municipality's campaign to market themselves as the most child friendly city, was developed by Scholz & Friends, a big German publicity company. They have developed participation and local governance into a profitable business. Then as Mother Centers we come with our expertise and advocacy activities, that relate to the idea of what participation and governance has to do with a democratic society and find ourselves in a double trap. Because on the one hand our influence is diminished because we cannot compete with the professional marketing and presentation techniques of McKinsey and co, but on the other hand, we want the influence and the recognition in our municipalities. Because of this dilemma we can be blackmailed to a certain extent to give our knowledge and participation for free. So we give it for free and then we get into burn out and we get poor. Because we are giving our time and our resources for free. We are unpaid consultants. We are not filling up our own resources. It is actually a big scandal that the highly paid consultants have such a big influence. It is a totally uncontrolled influence and they get public resources for it as well. They take a lot of money, and gain more influence because of it. Because if you are paid highly, your voice is also respected and heard more. They all talk about having more civic participation, more activity of civil society, but we are getting more reluctant to hand out our knowledge for free. (Germany)

We could offer training on childcare, eldercare, or dealing with family poverty. We have a lot of know-how on these issues. We could put it into a whole package including an apprenticeship in the Mother Center. And the whole package would cost a certain amount. The people that come and call us and want to know, how do you do this, how do you do that. We should start to charge them for this know-how. Somehow from us consulting is always expected for free. (Germany)

This is a structural issue. Mother Centers are creating a pool of knowledge and services and they are giving them for free. But this is a world where knowledge and services are sold. It is like nature. Nature is there for free, but in a world that makes everything into a commodity, all of a sudden it is made into a product. If you have a property on the lake you can sell it for a lot of money, although the lake is nothing you created. So somebody can make a commodity out of what is being created collectively. Often this is done from people who are outside. A consultant, who tries to take the knowledge and make it into a product. Or politicians, that say, give us your advice and then they give a contract to someone else. Mother Centers are creating real value. And the whole world is geared towards exploiting value. This is a tension we are bumping up against in many different forms. Mother Centers need money, the network needs money, and individual women need money. So we are also thinking about ways to make money, to make our work into products we can sell so that we can earn money to support our own work. We have to look at the economics of our movement, because there is economics in our movement. We tend to hide it, we cover it up. But the economics are there. Even if there is voluntary work, there is somebody paying for it, even if it is a rich husband. But somewhere the economics are

there. A lot of struggles we have in the movement are connected to this. We could try to deal with this consciously and collectively, and make the whole movement into an enterprise that creates income collectively and have the whole movement grow that way, but that would create a lot of issues to be dealt with very carefully. We made a mistake in the Mother Center movement in that we never asked for anything back. And that is not sustainable. We provided our services without asking for anything back. We never thought about return on our investment. We have to start changing things in this respect. (Germany) ”

Securing Space

“ In Bosnia there are several Mother Centers who have been trying to get started for years, but cannot access rooms to start a center. Our local government does not provide space. Outside support is necessary to rent or purchase rooms in order to build up and spread Mother Centers. The idea has been so well received in our country. What we need is foundations that invest in securing space for Mother Center initiatives. (Bosnia)

Finding space is the main step to organize a Mother Center. It gave us the base to meet and to plan around our practical needs as mothers. It was central to giving us a voice and a chance to influence our community. It was also important for accessing resources, and gaining and maintaining institutional recognition. It is important that more municipalities understand the importance of providing public space for families. (Germany)

We had been given some space in another program, but it was not ours and after a while you don't feel welcome, you feel you are a burden. We tried to open up those spaces that sit empty at the weekend or in the evenings, like schools, but there is such a lot of bureaucracy you have to go through, just to have a two hour meeting at the weekend. It does not work. What we have really understood is that Mother Centers need rooms of their own. This is what we are negotiating for with our government and local authorities. (Czech Republic)

The first thing is to have the rooms, then to have enough money to pay for the utilities. Having rooms is an enormous issue, especially here in Sarajevo. The municipality sees public space as an asset for their town budget. They even rent out the spaces used by their own programs. If you want to develop civil society, if you want more equality and to engender governance you need to provide space for women to meet. You have all these programs now in our country that talk about this, but they don't talk about what it takes to create it. Availability of public space for women is a condition for women to participate in civil society and in public decision making. This is the way forward. (Bosnia) ”

Sustainable Relationships

“Mother Centers are sustainable if they have a good way to deal with the ever changing generations of new participants. They need to be very flexible in their structures and to be open to include and nurture new generations of mothers in their decision making. This keeps Mother Centers alive. (Germany)

It is important to develop and maintain good relationships in the municipality and in the region. You need to develop a good reputation and a good name, so that you can survive changes of political parties and of government. You need to be known as a reliable and competent partner in your city. (Slovakia)

You need recognition, both within the center and from outside. Appreciating each other is a very important part of sustainability. That is what we exist on, that gives us strength and also the capacity to give to others. It happens because there is a strong bond between us. (Germany)

You need to feel it and love it first. And you need other women who feel like you. You need a group of motivated women and enough inspired volunteers. Then you need the support of your local authorities and the political parties. You have to develop attractive activities and services and you also need to have enough Mother Centers in your region to have influence. You need to develop a strong network and good partnerships. A lot of what is needed has to do with developing good relationships. (Czech Republic)”

Professionalisation

“The Mother Center movement needs the support of professionals, not so much in the centers themselves, but especially in communicating and bridging the experiences, successes and knowledge of the Mother Center movement to the public. We often have big debates and misunderstandings about the question of professionals and professionalisation. Because we do not see a place for this inside our centers, but we do see it as a necessary support from outside and also for our networking role. This can seem confusing, if you do not see the difference in the roles and functions of individual Mother Centers and the Mother Center movement or network. (Germany)

We need a network that can employ four people. One who is in charge of coordinating communication between the Mother Centers, one who does public relations and fundraising, one who does the political lobbying, and one who does administration. On a national or international level, these are the requirements to be able to function professionally as a network. (Czech Republic)

You need staff that stays in contact with the Mother Centers. They cannot be totally disconnected from what is happening in the centers, otherwise you get bureaucratic structures. So you need to work with part time jobs, and maybe also decentralize the network, so that the whole staff isn't centered in headquarters, but that you have the different functions being handled from different Mother Centers in the regions. (Slovakia)

Slovakia, International Mother Centers Conference November 2006.



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We need to be able to employ staff with political competence, that know what is going on politically, what trends are coming and that they can respond quickly. We are often not quick enough, you need to observe the daily politics to see early enough what priorities are being decided, where the money is being allocated. And you also need this on a regional level. Because we have a federal structure, these kinds of themes are dealt with on regional level. Such staff needs to gather what awards are being handed out currently and to network these things between the Mother Centers so that we apply as 20 centers, not just as one little center for such an award. (Germany)

You need a paid someone who can take the time to gather what the centers are doing and to put it into words, to define it, so that we can define what we are coming to the table with, so that our innovations can become visible. (The Netherlands)

All Mother Centers have to work together to get a strong network base. It can not be done by staff alone. The Mother Centers too have to focus on this, they need to look beyond their own daily functioning, they have to be united in a strategy, and all commit themselves to it when there is a historical opportunity. (Slovakia)

I don't know if I will be able to continue with my work as coordinator for the network, because of the cutbacks. The centers are under stress and strain because of the cuts in social funding. They are currently very unsure about their future. Within the network, it looks like the opportunities are diminishing. On the other hand the opportunities are mega big outside the network. Our work relates to so many issues currently being discussed politically. That is a discrepancy that is hard to handle, that we see all these links to current debates, but because of all the cutbacks in social expenditures and the resulting struggles with the welfare organisations, it is hard to seize the opportunities, we hardly have any resources anymore for the network. This is a very confusing paradox, and it needs to be resolved. We need to bring out the potentials of the Dutch Mother Center movement. We need to contribute to the public debate in The Netherlands. (The Netherlands)

The network operates more professionally than the individual Mother Centers themselves, in terms of PR, fundraising, access to political representatives and to sponsors. On the level of the local Mother Centers there is more fluctuation of active women. At the Union of Mother Centers, staff is selected on the basis of skills and capacities, as well as interests and inclinations that fit with the Unions needs. So the board members are experts in a certain field, and they are responsible for a certain field and they can completely concentrate on that. While at the local level the Mother Centers operate based on the women that form the Mother Center at that time. For us it was important to understand this difference and its consequences. (Slovakia) ”

Strategies for Sustainability

“ *We are developing strategies on several levels. We are creating income generating projects, we are trying to develop better relationships with the business sector and we are applying for public funds. All sources are not totally stable, so we need to gain our support from as many different sources as possible for the future of Mother Centers. (Czech Republic)*

We are trying to lobby parliamentarians and political parties to commit themselves to Mother Centers and the Mother Center concept. We are making a statement and a plea, that all the different pockets are brought together to fund the core concept of Mother Centers. (The Netherlands)

We had such a difficult time in our municipality that we decided to try to become independent of public funds. We decided to create our own foundation. There are two ways you can build a foundation. One way is when you have a large amount of capital that you tie into a foundation and then give out the interest as funding. We did not have that, so we had to go the second route. We got an economic expert as part of a sponsored partnership to work with us for three months on a business plan. This helped us professionalize our work even more. We learned to use the available media and technology well. We started our foundation with small donations and grants. We have a board and an advisory committee. We had a McKenzie expert who consulted with us, and this led to a lot of debate and reflection on money issues and how we want to deal with money in the Mother Center, but also on what effects we do not want to have, that we want to keep our culture and values and not become a commercial organisation geared only towards profit making. Working together with partners from different fields in this respect was very beneficial in supporting us to deal with the issues of economic sustainability. We learned a lot. We have two foundation purposes. The first is the funding of our center and the consolidation and securing of its function. The other purpose is to fund other projects for families and children in the region. Basically we should be funded like kindergartens, as a regular public service. But since this is not happening, we need to go other ways. We need to become a trademark that receives big donations and funding. It is not happening yet, but we are pointing towards this way forward. (Germany)

The Alumni Idea

We see a big potential of gaining more support by linking to the many women that have benefited from Mother Centers and have moved on to other areas in society. We put a lot of effort in keeping contact with former Mother Center participants. They are often very interested in supporting the Mother Centers. They feel that Mother Centers have been a great influence and support in their own lives and they like to keep in contact even after rejoining the labor market or moving on with their careers. This is a very important resource that we need to include more systematically in our strategies. (Germany)

Social Enterprises

We need to run some kind of business, to have some kind of income generating strategies to be able to subsidise the rent. I see that as being an important part, where women can make their own money and lower their expenses as well as contribute to the costs of running the center. (Bosnia)

Our social enterprise is working great. When I first suggested it, nobody knew what I was talking about, but now it is very much the flavour of the month and the thing to do. Social enterprise means that it is a community project and the proceeds go back into the community, it is a not for profit business, we are making a profit, but the proceeds are going back into the non profit. And ours is already up and running, we have our product, we have our own label. There are Mother Centers from around

the world and we will carry their products. The purses from Guatemala, they make so much sense. There are so many opportunities. You just need the partnership. According to our business plan, we will profit \$ 100 000 this year through our larger contracts. We have tapped into the government buying, and a lot of our stuff will be bought by the government as aboriginal art and products, and also by tourists. We will cater to the cruise ships. People buy locally made products. If we were to make children's clothes that would take off, because it would be made in Canada, and we can compete with the brand names, because socially conscious buying is increasing. We could have a Mother Centers clothing line for kids. The clothes could be made in Germany, Czech Republic, Africa, wherever. The women in Bosnia could work for our line for fair wages. You remove the middle man, the profit you make is going to your organisation. You are creating labor for women who are poor. They can get discounts on the clothing. And the kids can go to school dressed like the other kids. And pretty soon the rich kids will want those clothes. The production could be in Bosnia and the South, and the shops or retail outlets could be in the centers in Germany or Slovakia. You just copy the latest trends, and you make simple cuts. Or we could create a licensed nanny service. As a grassroots social enterprise international network we could maybe access some other sources of funding. At least as start up funds. (Canada)

We are looking at opportunities to create income for the centers through providing services. There is a market for instance for temporary childcare during training courses. That is something Mother Centers are more equipped to do because they have more flexible structures. (Germany)

Defining the Impact

What we have started now is to look at ways of how to gather evidence of the impact and benefits of Mother Centers. We need to supply information about the social capital that is created through Mother Centers. If we can define Mother Centers in terms of social return on investment, that can be a way to secure long-term investment and support. (Canada)

The ministry sponsors social services. But we are something different. Our work has a strong preventive quality. If we define standards, then we are more like the kind of program that the ministry can fund. It gives them quality control. The ministry needs some criteria to decide what they fund. They want to know what a real Mother Center is, a description of what the social service that Mother Centers are providing is, and who is benefiting. With these criteria we are creating a definition of what our work is worth socially. (Czech Republic)

We have the contact with the families. Often other institutions want us to give them the contacts to families, which they don't have. They have all these programs that don't reach the families they want to reach. In the Mother Centers we don't have that problem. The families are there. We also have our networks. That is a huge resource. That is what the European Union is about. You see how all these groups try to link up to other groups, in order to fit the criteria of the EU grants. And the Mother Centers already have the network, it is already there. Mine is a network of networks. That is a huge piece of capital. That is something that many do not have. (Germany)

The welfare state is being cut down, civil society is being asked to be more active. We have created a culture of support, of respect for each other, of appreciation. This is something that society overall has lost in many respects, and we reclaim it. A culture of care, of giving attention. And a culture of self creating, of doing things yourself. We create civil society. We are helping people become independent of the state by helping each other and we also help women get back into the labor market. (Germany)

We offer a place where you are welcomed, be it as a new family in town, as a new mother, or as someone who is unemployed. There is a place where you can go and are welcome, whatever education you have, whatever colour your skin is, with your children, however many they might be, whatever religion you have, you can be there and be a part of things, and contribute. That is what Mother Centers have created for communities. It is not a closed group, with limited membership, but you are met without reservation, without bias. We have created a lot of contact between families. They know each other, they do things together. In our communities family life is not something happening behind curtains and behind walls. (Germany)

Now we have started with an impact study. We have created a design with which we want to gather scientific evidence of the benefits of Mother Centers on children. We are working together with academics on this. This is an important step and can also be enlarged to include the impact Mother Centers have on families, neighborhoods or the society at large. (Slovakia)

Knowledge Building

Mother Centers create a place for unused talents to be discovered and put into practice. They become visible and they find a place to be applied. Everybody talks these days about informal learning. There is tons of informal learning happening in the centers. And there are lots of innovations coming out of what we do. The municipality has been learning from us. We have brought in many new ideas. Sometimes we feel like the Mother Centers are incubators of new ideas and innovations. We are creating new knowledge. We are also creating another way to look at knowledge. We are developing that more now as part of our program of the 'Mother Center Academy'. (Germany)

We were looking for peer learning and peer support. We wanted to learn from each other. We did not want professionals to talk down to us like pupils. In our society now you need to organise such spaces to learn from each other. They are not automatically there. That is one of the things Mother Centers do, we create that space, it is a learning space. We are creating knowledge about raising children from sharing and reflecting our own experiences. This is important knowledge that we want other parents to know about, that we want kindergarten teachers to know about. In our campaign 'How do we want to raise our children?' we are starting with a strategy for this, to structure this knowledge building and knowledge transfer. (Slovakia)

There is an important body of knowledge at the grassroots level and we need to claim ownership of this knowledge and bring it into society. There are hardly any channels for this in society, official channels, and channels that really recognise this knowledge as expertise. What is really knowledge in society and who should teach whom? The Mother Centers in Germany pioneered the Grassroots Women's

International Academy (GWIA)⁴. This is a very important strategy to address this issue. (Germany)

We are a fourth pillar in family education. There is school education, workplace training, training from family welfare institutions, and there is the university of parenthood that we provide in the Mother Centers. (Slovakia)

Experience is one thing, becoming aware and claiming your experience and knowledge is the second thing, and marketing your experience is the third step. And we are involved on all levels. Through the exchange in the Mother Centers women become aware of their knowledge and experience, they learn to define it. If you are alone and do not exchange with anyone, you might not be aware of your expertise. But you also need to make this visible, you need to find a way to create evidence for it. You need to develop something comparable to formal qualification and certificates. We have learned that we need to document our experiences and make a real study of it. We need to provide scientific and provable evidence. That is why we are cooperating now with researchers and academia to find ways to do this. (Germany)

You can see what we contribute in the councils and round tables that we participate in. The other experts look from above, top down, we look from below, bottom up. The know-how that we have is that we can say what really works in practice. The know-how that others have often does not have the dimension that it has been tested and tried out in practice. It is often more theoretical and not defined down to the level of the actual steps on the ground. (Czech Republic)

When the Mother Center concept was designed it came out of a study. The test for this knowledge came when the women in the centers put the concept into practice. The Mother Center book that compiles the stories of the first groups of Mother Center women, that is actually the tested practice. That is when it became a best practice. If we would have only had the scientific report, it would never have had the same quality and know-how. This is specific know-how only the Mother Centers themselves have. (Germany)

We have to define the know-how that we have, but also the know-how others have. What is the know-how that local authorities have. Is that defined? If the kinds of knowledge that need to come together to make things work were more clearly defined, it would be easier to build partnerships to make things work. (The Netherlands)

Partnerships

We firmly believe in creating partnerships with others. We have received a lot of support from many different places in society. We also believe in creating equal and equitable partnerships. That is an important part of our partnership building strategies. (Canada)

⁴: The Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) was first conducted in Germany during the Expo 2000 and has since been repeated in several countries and at several international occasions by international grassroots women's networks. It was designed and produced by members of mine as a format to create ownership and visibility for grassroots knowledge. A step towards creating a sustainable structure for GWIA has been undertaken by its founder in the creation of the *Nest! Foundation* that hosts the GWIA website and has published the GWIA handbook. The *Nest! Foundation* has been awarded the 2006 Dubai Award for the Transfer of Best Practices for the Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA). This is a biannual award of the UN Habitat program of Best Practices for the Improvement of the Living Environment.

We need to link up with other areas in society. There is a lot we know and we can do, but there is a lot we do not know. We cannot do it all. In our partnership with the business world, we got a lot of expertise and knowledge from areas where we do not have the experience. More knowledge needs to be transferred from the business world to the non profit world. It also often takes an outside view to define the benefits we bring to society. We need partners to help us define and market this. (Germany)

It is not always easy. Often partners want to offer a specific thing, like a sewing machine. But in our center none of the women want to sew. We are seen as someone who needs help, but we don't need this kind of help. But that is difficult to explain. We need partners that listen and are interested in what we really need. (Bosnia)

We need to make new partnerships with new partners. There are many new opportunities for this now. There is a new law, where we can provide care for the people of the neighbourhood. Partnerships with housing corporations are also an opportunity, we are developing that, we have a partnership with a housing corporation. They gave us two rooms in one of the new housing complexes for a Mother Center. The housing corporation did a survey in another neighbourhood, asking what do you want as women, and they said, we also want a Mother Center. And then they came to us and said, there are so many women in our flats and they have no possibility to come out. How did you do that here? So they offered us rooms and asked us to put up a Mother Center in their housing complex. (The Netherlands)

Partnering with schools is an important perspective. The general idea is that schools in the neighborhood are the one meeting point within the community which is neutral. Before and after classes schools want to present all kinds of activities, because children tend to be out on the streets, and behind the computer, so they want to offer more than just school to the children. If you place the Mother Center within this concept, you have mothers coming in and out all the time, you could organise all kinds of activities with them and their children. In Haarlem we are going to start Mother Centers in two schools in the spring. The school kids can have lunch in the Mother Center, and the teachers too. They asked us for that. (The Netherlands)

We find there are a lot of people who want to volunteer to help with our social enterprise. We have a lot of university students, a law firm, a whole bunch of volunteers that want to help with business plan writing, marketing, legal issues. (Canada)

I move a bit in artistic circles. And these friends were touched by the work we do in the Mother Center, so there was a co-operation with people from Bratislava and Prague. We made two musicals and a CD. We performed at concerts. It was a huge success. This partnership made a lot of difference. (Slovakia)

With more partners you can go for bigger projects. We need to go in that direction. If you have partners that are known and recognised, then you have better chances. (Bosnia) ””

IX. Contacts

www.mine.cc

Mother Centers International Network (mine)

www.muetterforum.de

Network of Mother Centers in Baden Württemberg, Germany

www.materskacentra.cz

Network of Czech Mother Centers

www.materskecentra.sk

Union of Slovak Mother Centers

www.moedercentrum.net

Network of Dutch Mother Centers

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Bosnian Mother Centers

www.amcs.ca

Aboriginal Mother Center Society, Vancouver

www.gwia.net

Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA)

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Slovakia, International Mother Centers Conference November 2006.

