

Lessons from an exchange

Bucharest - Amsterdam

November 2022



'In a nutshell, we came looking for new ideas to boost and spark engagement in our communities, to energize and inspire our team, to learn new techniques to keep our communities buzzing. The exchange was an excellent practical school for our foundation, in a time when we most need it.'

Alina Kasprovschi, Bucharest Community Foundation

Key learnings for the Bucharest Community Foundation

- 1. Funding community events focused on celebration** in order to make people enjoy their community, reconnect with their neighbors and make new friends, build trust and boost their will to change things together.
- 2. Develop a more flexible granting policy**, allowing grantees to apply and implement for short term projects, responding to very specific needs of the community without committing themselves for more than a few weeks-months.
- 3. Develop our own alternative tour of Bucharest** with a fundraising and awareness purpose, by visiting the communities we worked with and the projects we funded.
- 4. Focus more on the positive change we are already making in Bucharest**, than on the difficulties we are facing in our attempt to create a systemic change; bring more happiness in our team dynamics.
- 5. Work more with the imagination of people**, by creating scenario rooms in our planning/ community sessions - what would happen if...? This is an exercise of resilience that is needed in times like this.
- 6. Work on the way we function as a team** - our motivations, our processes and our interactions.

Personal reflections

Our team expanded in the last 12 months and this exchange was also a learning experience for us as a group. It was interesting to see how each one of us perceives the same events in a different way, to reconfirm our common ground and find the most valuable ideas to boost community engagement to a higher level.

Alex: For me the most valuable lesson came from ACCU Stichting. Enjoying our work and focusing on creating positive experiences in the communities we are working with is essential nowadays, when everybody is overwhelmed with so much uncertainty and pressure. Art and playing together are good ways to bring people together and dissipate social tensions.

Alina: as always, such study visits are an opportunity to learn from others, but also reflect on our own work and processes. We left for Amsterdam to meet MMA, hoping to learn how to engage smaller communities. And we used time to look at our motivation, our processes and our impact. If there is one thing I am left with, it is that people come together around issues because they have to; but in order *to choose to come together*, they need good and pleasant reasons. In a time when our communities have been hit by multiple successive crises, it may be the community foundation's role to find and support pleasant reasons that make people come together. A new, asset-based, rather than issues-based, approach, may be needed for that. For me personally, this trip was also a nourishing chance to connect to other community leaders and share our experiences, challenges and reasons to continue. Thank you, ECFI, for continuously supporting us to learn and imagine better futures!

Ana: It felt great to meet people responsible for implementing such diverse projects in their neighborhoods. I've learned that sometimes less is more. That it's not mandatory for all the projects to be complex, in order for the community initiatives to constantly grow and get more diverse. I really appreciated the positive energy that the people of Stichting ACCU shared with us, and we already planned a holiday event inside one of the programs, of which I am responsible for.

Cristina: It was great to meet a variety of people and initiatives (big and small), all focusing on community work and how to bring people together to bridge different gaps/divides and work together to better their quality of life in that specific community. Despite the challenges, people seem to focus more on their achievements, no matter how small, rather than problems and this seems to keep them engaged and mobilized. And I left with one of the MMA's ideas, that they use micro-grants also to give a voice and more power to people in neighborhoods that were not heard and not visible to the larger community.

Ilinca: I left Amsterdam with a sense of normalcy, of people proud of their work, be it grant-making, community organizing, fundraising, art making, of people acknowledging both their achievements and the short-comings. In other words, people celebrate their achievements (while recognising hardships - like not enough funds, sometimes a difficult relationship with local authorities, or not enough engagement from the community) and accept short-comings because they are a normal part of any project. It was refreshing for me not to hear people blaming each other or others or invoking ludicrous reasons for when things don't work out. It was also interesting to hear about how the City Hall supports NGOs and how a People Make Amsterdam could become a model for our work in emergency situations (small grants, dispatched rapidly, grass-roots funding) and Schiting ACCU will remain, for me, the epitome of celebrating life and bringing people together.

Miruna: I loved the variety of initiatives visited and meeting some of the people who are moving things forward in the neighborhoods of Amsterdam! It was inspiring to hear all the stories and the reasons why people started doing things together and why they continue

despite challenges. I took back with me a lot of enthusiasm and I was reminded that no matter how small (or big) is the result of your efforts, one is always on the positive side of things by doing work on behalf of or with the community. Things add up quickly!

Simina: We began our learning adventure with lovely Berber - her name meaning “Stranger” - from *Tours that Matter* and it was a most appropriate introduction to what would become a very meaningful experience in Amsterdam that turned strangers into like-minded and like-hearted friends. I was very impressed by the sustainable floating neighborhood of Schoonschip, the community spaces, makerspaces, community gardens and recycling centers, especially the Midwest hub and Stichting ACCU’s variety of arts in the community initiatives. It was very interesting for me to find out about the progression of the squatting phenomenon and its positive aspects in building creative communities. In our conversations with new found friends working at the grass roots in different communities of Amsterdam, I could sense some common values: trust in themselves and other people, willingness to share and give the responsibility to other resources raising up (relinquishing control), respect for the efforts made by everyone and a general contentment.

Simona: From ACCU Stichting I remembered how powerful art can be as a tool for healing and connecting a community. In Elsa and Buurtwerkplaats Noorderhof I saw that one’s passions and skills can connect members of an entire society. Overall, I learned a lot from this experience, and new ideas emerged. Thank you.

Alina Kasprovschi, Bucharest Community Foundation

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