

Community mapping and engagement - a sociologist's perspective and practice



Irina Șerban-Atanasiu, like a number of others in the community foundation field in Romania, is a sociologist. She therefore has a particular interest in processes of community mapping and engagement. Here she describes three linked instruments developed and implemented in conjunction with ISCOADA, a publishing platform that hosts written articles and multimedia materials that present, in a synthesised and accessible format, research in anthropology and related disciplines. The process, which lasted four months, not only brought clarity to the work of Galati Community Foundation but also it brought the foundation closer to communities and vice versa. Irina concludes saying 'put yourself out there and bring new blood into the process, it will surprise you for the best'.

Irina Șerban-Atanasiu

Context

During the lifetime of the Galati Community Foundation, I've witnessed two major turns. The first one was in 2018, when the epicentre of the Foundation shook to cause a full change in the executive team and the second one in 2020, due to COVID, another turning point for most of the non-profits, but in particular, a moment when our community foundation responded with all its assets to the crises, but lost sight of some its strategic objectives, causing internal burnout and some financial difficulties. As a Demartini method enthusiast I can now say that a balanced view on these events have both positive and negative aspects and I choose to focus on the learning opportunities they brought for the organisation and myself as an individual.

A shoe that fits all - the sociological approach

Community Foundations (CFs) use various ways of mapping a community and should continue to do so in order to keep its ear close to ground, but a higher perspective, thus integrating the *now* into the *next 3 to 5 years or more* that build a CF's strategy.

By the end of 2020, apart from gaining a lot on our image and strengthening our role as some of the first responders to the medical crises, we also took on some new challenges like working in other areas such as the environment and dealing with social issues. Looking back on our operational and strategic plan we thought it would be a good time to scan our communities and engage them in a more insightful conversation in four areas: education, social, health and the environment. We wanted to see what are the needs and resources in these broad topics and how to address them through our programs or bridge them for a more effective cooperation.

With these objectives in mind, I started up a conversation with [Rucsandra Pop](#), now an independent consultant, back then CF Program Director at ARC, on developing some

instruments for *community mapping* and *engagement*. She connected me to [ISCOADA](#), an editorial initiative that hosts multimedia articles and research in anthropology and other related subjects.

As a sociologist, I've often found these methods are suitable when in a social dilemma or when the topic needs more data behind it. After talking to Raluca and her colleagues Laura and Maria from ISCOADA, we agreed to develop and implement three instruments, considering the budget, human resources and timeline: a questionnaire, a guided interview and a sort of focus group in the form of a community coffee talk.

Instruments

The online questionnaire consisted of mixed open and closed questions with 3 parts: introduction on the view of the city, the core addressing the four areas and the last section that would point to the individual's resources and availability to get involved in the community.

The introduction focused on the citizen's view of Galati, as inhabitants and also by comparison to other cities in Romania that they look up to and their arguments for choosing and a question on their intent on leaving or continuing to live here and why. These questions would play into our mission, to make Galati a place to call home, somewhere you would never leave, a place you find your people, family, people that build a strong community.

The core of the survey starts digging into the four distinct areas mentioned, looking for needs or burning issues, a prioritisation of those problems and success stories, initiatives or initiators that are active in the field and would recommend.

The last part of the questionnaire switched the focus on the individual. We wanted to check the person's availability and will to get involved in the community, either as a donor, volunteer or even initiator.

We launched the questionnaire on Facebook and shared it on different local groups and got 132 answers. We were very pleased to read about the different views on the needs and assets the city brings, as well as some of the systemic problems that are shared around the country. Some of respondents even suggested solutions and offered to play a more active role in them, an outcome we did not foresee, but gladly received and would capitalise on.

Interviews

Switching from the broader view that the questionnaire brought, I wanted to get a closer look at the non-profits active in our communities in the targeted areas.

The interview guide I worked on with ISCOADA would serve the purpose of gathering similar insights as the questionnaire did, on the needs and resources of their organisation as a first layer. The second layer focused on how the community foundation would best serve them in their activity. Lastly, we wanted to form working groups around their interests and assets, a subject we would address in the next phase, the community coffee talk and continue throughout our activity.

We talked to 8 NGOs representatives in a 1-hour interview, half of them had previously received grants from us and the other half had never worked with our Foundation before.

Community coffee talk

By the time we organised the community coffee talk (online) ISCOADA managed to centralise all the qualitative and quantitative results of the questionnaire and the summary of the interviews. We invited all of the NGOs' representatives and others as well to join us in a guided talk about our communities and discover the challenges we share and the opportunities each of us can bridge. The aim of this event was to create a space for sharing

the sores (some complaining is inevitable) and to discover the assets and opportunities for cooperation or moving past the difficulties. Representatives of ISCOADA shared a presentation of the reports which were very interesting for all of the participants. Afterwards, the discussion was split into virtual breakout rooms, pending on a common area of interest with a member of the CF in every room. Rucsandra Pop moderated the talk, setting the mindset from needs to asset, which helped a lot in the conversation of how to get a greater impact of our work. There was a shared conclusion by all participants, that such meetings should become recurrent and the idea of a hub for NGOs was again brought up.

The “and”

This process lasted for about 4 months and brought some clarity towards our work, especially considering our areas of intervention. It also brought forth the strategic plan for some very needed updating, but also put us back on track on one of our main strategic goals, which is to empower others, to bridge the initiatives and help them grow. Even if the process showed there were more needs to be addressed in our city and our mission is clearly far from achieved, it brought us closer to our communities and we could see a domino effect. We invited people to speak their minds on very important and stressful subjects, we listened and even if a solution was not handed, being listened to is quite big. We kept our doors open, and guests arrived. We could see new organisations or initiative groups joining our programs that year and more opportunities were shared for us to connect on several of the topics we addressed.

On this occasion and beyond, our job is to find solutions and connect the resources in the city or region for the needs we choose to address, but sometimes we get lost in our work and forget to just talk to the people we are doing this for. Being open and transparent, being available is a great part of our mission and this exercise reminded us of that. We do want to be more consistent in building capacity for our organisations and provide more space for our communities to talk and help them find solutions. The main challenge at hand is getting the resources around this initiative beyond our grantmaking programs. The thought I'm left with after this is to put yourself out there and bring new blood into the process, it will surprise you for the best.

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