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CABLE goes to Liepaja

Community planning workshop in former Russian military port

CABLE stands for **C**ommunity **A**ction **B**ased **L**earning for **E**mpowerment. It is a European-wide project of ECG (having 8 partners in Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Czech Republic, Latvia, Romania and UK) focused on community development and training.

There are disadvantaged places all around Europe where local inhabitants do have a difficult life. They started to carry out some activities to improve their situation, but it doesn't really function well, or they are not sure and they need some advice. Maybe the development doesn't go so fast and something needs to be changed. The latest CABLE workshop was organized in such a place, hosting community workers from **Latvia, Romania** and **Czech Republic**. The Latvian hosts wanted to show us activities they started in the neighbourhood and they expected on the other side advice and feedback from the others who came from a different context and can see things with different eyes.



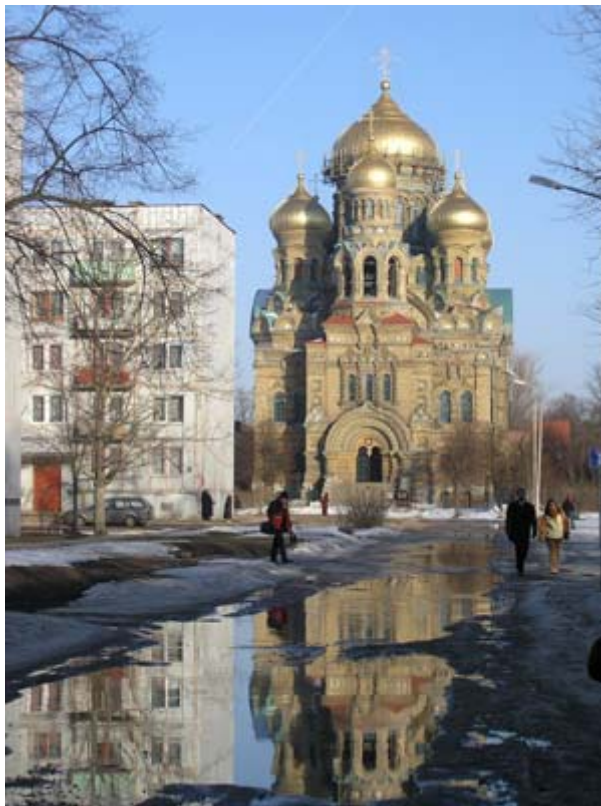
This article was written by two Czech participants - Petra Hamernikova and Hana Malinova, who are working in an organisation providing medical and social service and help for victims of trafficking. It is their personal reflection on the workshop.

Latvia

Latvia is a beautiful country. You can feel here the space above all around. Green land surrounded by water, this is how it looks like from a plane. It has almost the same surface area as the Czech Republic – but there are living only 2 000 000 inhabitants on 64 589 square metres. We have landed on 16th of March in the capital city Riga. From there we went in a small bus together with the Romanian participants straight to the disadvantaged locality, where social problems are inherited, preserved and created.



This place is called **Liepaja** and it is in the very Western edge of Latvia, but full of eastern problems. Latvia gained independence in 1990, but it was only in 1994 when the Russian army finally left the country, and it was the **Karosta harbour** (part of Lijepaja) where they used to be settled. After they left, the number of inhabitants of Lieepaja decreased from 60 000 to 24 000, and even today the Russians form one third of Latvia's population. There are certainly some rich people among them; nevertheless more than 80% of homeless people in Latvia are Russians.



Karosta

Karosta used to be a closed military quarter of Lijepaja with round about 25 000 inhabitants. After the independence and withdrawal of the Russian army it dropped down to 6000. There was no evidence of the flats in the quarter, so anybody could come and squat the apartment. Nowadays there is already a legal system of distribution.

A huge golden Orthodox church is the main feature of the neighbourhood, surrounded by grey half-empty barracks and former tsarist military headquarters. There is also a school, small shops, museum, waterworks and old prison turned into a museum where you can pay for a prison show and even become a prisoner for an hour or even a whole day.

Another important place in Karosta is the open centre called **K@2** where anybody can come to realize his or her idea. The centre doesn't offer services but a space for free activities. There are many kids and

youngsters coming every day to train dancing or to make their own films with a professional assistance of the managers of K@2. Most of the movies reflect local reality and also EU enlargement.

The centre also provides accommodation and meeting rooms and it was the best place for us to stay – right in the middle of all the happenings.

Before we set of to the visits

The main CABLE coordinator **Tony Addy** explained us basic tools of a community worker – these are his eyes, ears and nose. When he goes to clients, he must concentrate on following things:

What do I smell?

What do I see?

What do I hear?

In the second step you think about what you've seen, heard and smelt. And then you propose changes, select methods to achieve these and also find money to do it. Participants of the workshop were divided into three groups:

There were only men in the **first group**. They went to see a local textile factory, which produces underwear (what a coincidence:-D) and is one of the biggest employers in the city. They have seen the whole process of production – from a lace to a bra, and also discussed with local trade unionists. What they noticed were the surroundings of the factory, which nobody took care about. There was no sidewalk, no pavement, only holes full of ice and water, which is particularly dangerous for old people.

Second group walked around the neighbourhood and visited a day care centre for homeless and unemployed people. It was quite bizarre for all of us, coming from overcrowded cities, to speak about homelessness in a place full of empty flats.



There are not many job opportunities in this part of the city and the level of unemployment is very high, also linked with problems of alcoholism. The day-care centre tries to solve these problems. It is very difficult in a place with high level of unemployment to break through, especially when you lose step by step all your working habits, dignity and self-confidence. The centre tries to get back their clients into a regular daily rhythm and find them a job afterwards. They organise various trainings to gain skills that are needed when applying for a job, and teach people to be responsible to keep the job they found and to know the value of the money they earn. Other services of the centre include laundry, library and a small chapel. The clients can visit a doctor twice a week; they get psychological and social support. They also get food twice a day, but they must do some work in the centre. We joined one of these meals. The centre has around 30 clients and 5 paid workers, all the others are volunteers.

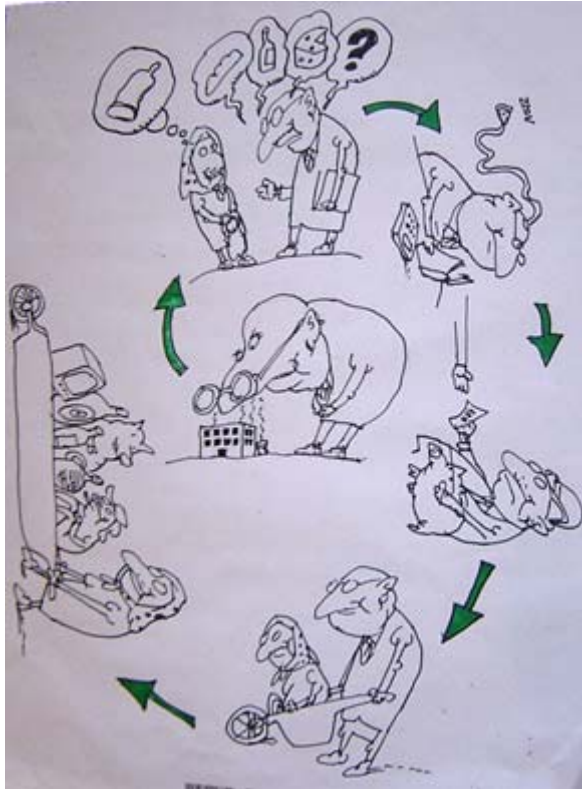
What can be improved here? There should be tighter links between the locality and the municipality so that Karosta doesn't accommodate only people with heavy social problems. This gives Karosta a negative image. There is also nobody who would take care of the public spaces. There are no parks, no playgrounds, nothing. This could be a common task for all the inhabitants, and maybe also a way to take more care about the place they live in. Once it is improved, it might attract young people who are looking for a place to live.

Third group left Karosta and its problems and headed 20 km to the south to a little fishing village called *Jurmalsciems*. This place is so special because there is absolute silence. The sea was frozen; waves were far away and all around was quiet. Just a single bird was singing, also shy to break the silence. We wanted to get near to people, to talk to them, smile at them, but there was nobody, not a single soul. We couldn't approach the houses since they were guarded by dogs of a respectable size. Finally we reached the sea. There was a little port and two fishermen were just repairing their boats, but they didn't want to socialize. I don't like when I cannot talk to local people or at least to greet them. On the way back we met an old lady, smiling, friendly, with sexy golden teeth. Our

lingua franca will be Russian, I thought. Well, it wasn't. There are places even in Latvia, which are untouched by Russian influence. The lady remembered her bits of German, but it was not enough for a conversation, so she switched back to her native language. So we didn't succeed again, but she did allow us to take some pictures of her. The other lady we met was called Brigita. She invited us to her home and spoke a bit Russian.



Finally we met the others in a community centre Saragda, which is a shop, a snack bar and canteen all in one. We were offered a nice lunch – fresh fish, and talked about the life in village. Women are the ones to build and preserve the community. They run two shops and made a small museum out of an old shed. The village is very nice in the summer, there are international camps organised, and paths for bicycles cross nearby. Nevertheless it is not enough to make one's living. Young people are gone, even the gold miners left their unfinished dacha's (big houses).



The next day women from the village came to see us and we presented them our development plan: to enlarge accommodational capacities (first of all to build up better services for the camp – which they already knew themselves) so that the cyclists stay for couple of days (and do not only pass by) and offer different services and leisure time activities (for example safari on the sea). It would be also interesting to think about facilities for cross country skiers (there is a lot of snow in winter).

In the end of the workshop we created a set of methods, practical tools and know-how for a community worker he needs to acquire before he starts to work.

A similar workshop was organised in recent days for participants from Germany, Finland, Netherlands, UK and Sweden. It took place in Southampton, UK. Two testing workshop will soon follow to prove the training method we have developed.

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Bliss without Risk

http://www.rozkosbezrizika.cz/01_hm/100_ENGLISH.htm

For more information click on CABLE website:

http://www.ecgnet.cz/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=11&Itemid=20

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