

Tampere Together: flowing in the right direction

Tampere together is an interesting example how a city can push the boundaries of community work, to reach disengaged citizens with small 'hands-on' mini-projects, low-threshold funding and good coordination and facilitation. The project was able to establish real contact with people who are traditionally very difficult to reach and activate: immigrants, disabled people, the long-term unemployed, people with mental problems, substance abusers and those living in deprived areas of the city.

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The city of Tampere in southern Finland has been active for decades in addressing its more deprived areas and neighbourhoods, where there are more than the average number of immigrants, unemployed people, aged people, and people with a low income and education.

With this project, and with ERDF funding, Tampere wanted to find out whether community work could be taken a step further – really to the grass-roots level of citizen initiatives and activities, which without special facilitation and coordination seldom come to the surface where they can come to the city's notice and gain project funding. The mini-projects in *Tampere Together* are about small-scale, grass-roots activities and initiatives of the citizens themselves, encouraged, coached and nurtured by very close coordination, and provided with small 'seed money' type funding. The mini-projects were run by local associations, parishes and non-profit organisations, together with local citizens, addressing various deprived target groups and suburbs in Tampere, lowering the thresholds of participation in the communities and bringing people together to overcome prejudices and barriers, and to generally activate people in the targeted areas.

'It was unbelievable – we went out to the community like never before. We would never have done this without this project,' said a long-term worker from the open care foundation, 'and we were encouraged to continue like this.'

Tampere Together – flowing in the right direction

The city of Tampere wants to be a pioneer in citizen services in Finland, and to push the boundaries of citizen engagement in deprived neighbourhoods and with challenging citizen groups. With *Tampere Together*, a bottom-up citizen engagement project funded by the European Regional Development Fund, it scored a hit. It succeeded with immigrants (especially women), with long-term unemployed men, with people with mental problems and handicaps like deaf-blindness, and with ex-convicts trying to find their way back into society. If you can get good results with these people, something is flowing in the right direction. But what was the secret? Let's take a short trip back in time to understand the context.

Tampere was destined to become the second largest, and the most industrialised, city of Finland, thanks to the power of water. In 1820 an industrious Scottish engineer-entrepreneur named James Finlayson built a cotton mill powered by the Tammerkoski rapids, and in his wake came other entrepreneurs. By the beginning of the 20th century, Tampere was the industrial centre of Finland, and by 1950 the rapids had spawned the biggest industrial complex in the Nordic countries. With the growth of industries came both wealth and problems, still to be felt today. The city grew rapidly, and was over the decades exposed to domestic and international economic cycles, often resulting in high rates of unemployment and other social problems.



Figure 1. The Finlayson mills and power station at Tammerkoski

addressing the challenges of industrialisation, and has devised both city strategies and broad regional collaborations to promote employment and social inclusion. One of its trouble-spots was the suburb of Hervanta, a 'concrete desert' built rapidly in the 1970s, with a concentration of social problems, and initially a bad reputation. Tampere has carried out several bottom-up community programmes in Hervanta over the decades, with considerable success, and building on this experience the city has continued to push the boundaries of citizen engagement.

Under the umbrella of *Tampere Flows*, the city wanted to see if citizen engagement could be taken a step further by *Tampere Together*, an experimental European Regional Development Fund project. But what could be done to reach the citizens, especially those in the more deprived areas, who often faced multiple problems in finding their way and place in society? After all, they are often labelled as 'hard to reach'. Only the more active tend to participate in 'activation', and it is people without problems who turn up at community events and voluntary activities. In addition, funding for citizen and community initiatives tends to be 'hard to reach' too – even for voluntary organisations and associations, and often only experienced professionals are able to wade through the red tape of making proposals, not to mention running and reporting on projects. It is precisely here that *Tampere Together* was able to make a difference.

Even today, although a flourishing city in many ways, Tampere suffers from higher unemployment, lower incomes, and lower educational attainment, especially among immigrants, than other big cities in Finland. The problems tend to be concentrated in certain parts and suburbs of the city, where an above-average share of the population suffer from various societal problems.

New strategy – Tampere Flows

The city's strategy for 2009–2020, called *Tampere Flows* alluding to its birth by the rapids, sets out the intention to become both a cutting-edge know-how city and a pioneer of customer-oriented services in Finland.

The city has had decades of experience in

New citizen engagement with the Tampere Together project

*I am fumbling in the dark no more
I am enlightened
By the approving glances*

– a poem written by a recovering mental patient in *Searchers of the Light*, one of the Tampere Together mini-projects

Tampere Together is a partnership between the city of Tampere and voluntary and non-profit associations to run mini-projects in the more deprived areas of Tampere. The areas were chosen because they showed higher than average unemployment, low income, an immigrant population and a history of social problems. The activities promote social engagement and cohesion under three headings: activating people with an immigrant background; activating people with various disabilities and diminished capabilities; and enhancing social cohesion in neighbourhoods.

Voluntary organisations had of course been engaging with citizens before, and the city has had area-based community work running on a permanent basis for a long time, and has funded third sector projects addressing social deprivation and other problems before. But even experienced people in voluntary and non-profit organisations were surprised at what happened when *Tampere Together* came along. ‘We would never have dared to come out into the community like this, without *Tampere Together*,’ was an expression often used.

In *Tampere Together* small changes made a big difference. In order to find and facilitate small, but meaningful, initiatives coming from individual citizens, organisations or neighbourhoods, a full-time hands-on coordinator was employed. From a total EU-funded budget of €260 000, small grants – from €3 000 to €10 000 – were announced for citizen initiatives. The coordinator made all possible efforts to facilitate the emergence of these initiatives. This meant really walking the talk, engaging with the associations in the neighbourhoods, encouraging and elaborating the initiatives, helping to draw up proposals, keeping a watchful eye for support for further stages, and helping to prepare reports and publications. All this was done with devotion, humour and zest. ‘They are like my children,’ said the coordinator smiling, ‘and I like to see them grow up.’

This hands-on facilitation proved to be one of the vital success factors. Another success factor was finding dedicated people from the voluntary and non-profit organisations, and the neighbourhoods, and hooking them up with professionals like theatre people, gardeners, teachers and health-care workers. Being embedded in a city strategy, *Tampere Flows*, and the political will and cross-departmental cooperation of the city services and management, was another pair of success factors.

Down-to-earth and bottom-up mini-projects like *Tampere Together* cannot boast spectacular and easily visible results. Things happen on a small scale, but can make a big difference for the people, and can transform the activities, attitudes and service concepts of public, private and third sector services alike. Let us look at some examples.

Getting Finns to like Russians

Historically the relations between Finland and Russia have not been without their tensions and traumas. The aim of the mini-project *Privet* (‘hello’ in Russian) was to diminish prejudices towards, and exclusion of, schoolchildren from a Russian background and to raise interest in the Russian culture and language. The method was that a local non-profit Russian club put on cheerful and colourful cultural performances and interactive events in nurseries and primary schools. The project was run together with schools and day-care centres in three city districts. ‘The Russian-background children started to shine,’ said the teachers, ‘and this raised positive interest in other cultures, too.’ ‘How does a dog bark in your language?’ the small schoolchildren of different backgrounds would ask each other. The project was so successful that the Russian Club has taken it on as a permanent method, and the idea is spreading to other parts of Tampere concerning other cultures.

From underdogs to pride in one's roots

Somalis are the underdogs among immigrants in Finland. The Somali mini-project was targeted at Hervanta, where a lot of Somalis live. During the project, the Somalis distributed knowledge about Somalia and Somali history and culture at interactive events. The project turned out to be especially meaningful for the young Somalis themselves, with weakened ties to their original culture. It got a lot of publicity in the local press and other media, and the material was distributed to other immigration organisations in the region, via social media and through the library.



Becoming a citizen of the country of a hundred thousand lakes

Try to be a full member of Finnish society without a sauna – impossible! And with the sauna come the thousands of lakes and swimming. This is where the *Briani* mini-project, which involved exercise for women, including teaching women to swim and use a sauna, made a difference – and a huge difference, especially to women with a Moslem background. This new way of engaging with women has now become a permanent part of Tampere's services.

Would you believe it – older long-term unemployed men exercising?

So women could be reached in new ways, but how about men? Men in general are often a challenging target group for activation, especially the deprived or unemployed, so getting older (55+) unemployed men together to exercise – and to form new sustainable friendships – was a novelty. Not only did the original 20 men continue getting together after the project ended, but also new, and even older men wanted to join, and the men started to take elderly people for outings in the area. So from a hands-on start with community organisation help, the activity snowballed to a sustained activity.

Putting your neighbourhood on the map

Tesoma is one of the suburbs of Tampere that has a bad reputation because of a history of problems. The *Stories of Tesoma* mini-project was especially for young people and it aimed to help them see their neighbourhood in a new way – and even become proud of it. The project was run together with housing committees, pupils from schools, youth centres, voluntary organisations and a professional theatre group specialising in community-oriented theatre. The core group went to Tesoma, and invited people to talk about their everyday life and tell stories about Tesoma – whether in words, pictures or song. A circulating theatre performance, performed by the people themselves, as a story around a Tesoma family from 1960 to 2010, was assembled from these stories, with professional help, and performed several times in yards and at events in Tesoma. Pride in Tesoma increased, and the Community Theatre got something to tell their theatre colleagues.

The deaf and blind are among us

Have you ever met a person who is both deaf and blind? How would you communicate with him or her? In the suburb of Hervanta there is a deaf-blind Activation Centre (one of two of the kind in Finland), and that is why there are more deaf-blind people in the area than on average in the city. But the deaf-blind people hardly move about the community, and people do not know how to communicate with them. This is where the *Interaction* mini-project made a difference by acquainting people in various services – hairdressers, libraries, health-centres and others – with how to communicate with the deaf-blind people. 'This opened up our work, and especially the world of the deaf-blind, in a new way to the community,' said a representative of the Activation Centre. 'We made coaching videos and material that is now available all over Finland.'



I am enlightened by approving glances

This was the expression of a participant in her poem in *Searchers of Light*, a mini-project run by a foundation specialising in 'open care' (care in the community) for patients recuperating from mental illnesses. Depression is the plague of modern societies, and light is difficult to find at the end of the tunnel. But in *Searchers of Light* something unforeseen happened. The activity was a poem and a music performance tour performed by the recuperating mental patients themselves. The patients had been writing poems as part of their

open care, and with *Tampere Together* funding, and the encouragement of the coordinator, plus professional help, this poem-writing activity was transformed into a new service concept, where the open care association and the patients went out to community events to perform. 'It was unbelievable – we went out into the community like never before. We would never have done this without this project,' said a long-term worker from the open care foundation, 'and we were encouraged to continue like this.'

Getting something green to grow

The parish in Nekala, where there are immigrants, unemployed people and pensioners under the threat of exclusion, wanted to do something good in the community and refurbish the area. It had unused land and a meeting place right in the middle of the residential area. The idea that emerged combined community work and gardening. The parish, together with an association for unemployed people, the residents' association and a nearby agricultural college, organised a mini-project to create small 'city gardens' on some parish property. One-square-metre 'mini-gardens' were set up in wooden boxes on legs, and local people were coached by local agricultural students in how to grow and use useful plants. The people loved it. The concept brought people of different ages, unemployed and employed alike, pensioners, young people, schoolchildren, families and immigrants naturally together throughout the year: planning in the winter, planting in the spring, weeding in the summer and having a harvest party in the autumn. 'The height of this success for me,' said the parish project leader, 'was when a fragile old lady emerged from the houses, delighted by the mini-gardens, and joining the process. She used to be a professional gardener.'



The flow continues

The benefits of the European Union should reach all parts of society, and *Tampere Together*, in its own unassuming but meaningful way, is an example of this. Ethnic minorities are often subject to discrimination. Employment is a key factor of social inclusion, but disadvantaged individuals often need more comprehensive support strategies, which include personalised support. Mini-projects like *Tampere Together* reflect the local dimension of the European Employment Strategy and foster the social capital of a territory.

The mini-projects in *Tampere Together*, as well as the overall *Tampere Flows* strategy behind them, enabled the direct participation of disadvantaged groups and individuals in new ways in deprived neighbourhoods of a big industrialised Finnish city. With a small amount of money, hard-to-reach people have been supported in taking up action for their own purposes, and the voluntary and non-profit organisations, together with city services, were encouraged to take even further steps in fostering citizen participation.

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