

## A space devoted to diversity

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The objective of our project was to create an informal space for people of all backgrounds in our area to meet, get to know each other and through various activities realise that we are all quite similar after all. Over the past two months we have organized an activity every other Sunday, ranging from canoeing and barbequing to trampoline parks and sports games. In order to gain a network and legitimacy, we coordinated our efforts with the local Red Cross Youth branch and their “buddy-programme” which had overlapping objectives and values as our own project. Through our project we have been able to offer first-time experiences with the Norwegian nature, such as canoeing. We have also been able to enhance interest and communication skills about different social, cultural and political topics through dinner table talks and couch chilling, in the true UWC spirit. Hence, we believe that we have achieved a few of our primary objectives; to enhance people's' interactions with the local natural environment, offer new experiences to learn from and create a safe and comfortable space to foster deep and meaningful connections. Additionally, we manage to utilize the local community and their many offers for renting sports supplies etc. which increased our economic flexibility and decreased our consumption. We are also very proud to have introduced vegetarian options and achieve good responses, as well as realise that there are already many people eating less meat. Most of the food we bought was either expired or vegetarian and we commuted with public transport, trying to minimize our ecological footprint and promote sustainable living. While not having many grown up participants, we believe that having younger generations interact and learn from each other it will have a sustained intra- and inter-generational impact.

While the project made a difference in a variety of ways. What was a rather unexpected difference was the impact it had on our cooperating partners in Red Cross Oppegård Youth. Despite being an NGO working with different cultures and ethnicities it was really interesting to observe how informal spaces opened for deep conversations between those participating and those facilitating, breaking down stereotypes and ignorance, particularly regarding the current situation in Syria. Our projects also allowed for children in all ages to participate in different types of activities which their families may not have thought of or had access to before. By creating common experiences, it created a platform for sharing and learning which developed over time. This was evident from the recurring participants. We are proud to have made an offer which attracts people not only to attend one particular activity, but to come back to the community and deepening the connections. With deeper connections and better understanding, between participants and with those facilitating, it was communicated a wish for tutoring as an addition to the project. Hence, we incorporated some time after the activities were conducted where we could help with homework if there was a demand that particular week. It was also really amazing to witness people canoeing for the first time and realise that maybe we were offering some new experiences for the people participating. Through the use of social media and google forms we were able to attract people from other districts to participate, and it was really great to see the effect of social media in spreading the “good word” and a potential demand for an expansion of the project to other regions.

Projects like these carry both short term and long term successes, and while the immediate ones are the most explicit, the enduring ones are the most significant. One of our most enduring successes was the revival of the project which Red Cross had been organizing earlier. Through social media, posters and mouth to mouth, we spread the word of the project, leading to new and increased participation from the region. Positive feedback has also been vital in establishing the enduring feedbacks. Participants really appreciated the choices of outdoor activities and vegetarian options, reinforcing a connection with nature and sustainable life choices. Additionally, it has been really interesting and heartwarming to witness and to experience how conversations can move from pop-music to the loneliness in missing family in another country prone by war. Just these very informal conversations has left the biggest marks on this project as a whole and on the individuals participating. Just being introduced to personal videos and pictures made several of us realise that there is so much we do not know and that the media only shows “a single story.” Hence, the most enduring effects of this project is to learn that there are always multiple stories colouring a country, a religion or an individual.

Over the course of this project we have utilized local initiatives and hence saved large amounts of the funding. As stated in our proposal, we wanted to utilize local renting and borrowing to avoid buying new material. Our budget was spent primarily on food. However, since the options were mostly vegetarian and/or expiring, it was usually on a reduced price. Secondly, we did invest in some garden games which could remain with Red Cross and further be used in other projects. The rest of the budget was spent on transportation, tickets to a trampoline park (offering an experience for kids not going away for fall break) and barbequing. Overall, we saved about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the funding, with the realisation that we are privileged enough to continue to conduct similar projects without significant funding, only relying on the support of local initiatives.

To us personally, it has been very valuable to learn of our own shortcomings in understanding and preconceived ideas, despite spending the last two years in a multicultural society. Despite feeling as if I had a general openness and understanding about the heterogeneity of people’s stories, I realised that I am still very much brainwashed by Western media and that there is still so much out there for me to learn, from other angles. It has taught me the value of being curious and to show genuine interest to receive genuine answers. Additionally, the project has taught us the difficulties involved in organizing and facilitating a project. While it has been an enjoyable and educating experience, I overestimated the effort, time and energy needed to translate theory into practice and to fulfil the objectives and means of the project plan. Secondly, it has become evident that engagement in google forms showing interest in participation does not translate into actual participation, despite supplying activities based on demands. There may be varying reasons for this, which would be necessary to identify if the project were to be replicated or reproduced.

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