



ViabilityNet 3.0 Program 2017/2018 evaluation:

Community leaders' learning path

("impact measurement")

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Dear Readers,

The publication you have just opened was created as part of Via Foundation's ViabilityNet 3.0 program. This program was supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation from its beginning in 2009 to its conclusion in 2019. The program's 3.0 edition focused on development of local communities by bringing together community leaders from across Central and Eastern Europe. The thinking behind the programme revolved around development of local community leaders as a tool to help their local communities become more resilient and function well, based on the principles described by John W. Gardner in Chapter 11 of his book *On Leadership*. These community leaders, i.e. the ViabilityNet 3.0 participants, are the engines who introduce the sparks to ignite such changes.

The group of local community leaders came together for four intensive meetings to immerse themselves in a wide range of topics useful for their daily community work back home. They also received grants for their own community projects and consultations from the program managers at Via Foundation and mentors (former participants of the ViabilityNet 2.0 program).

This publication describes a qualitative study, which looked at different aspects of development that the program introduced to its 12 participants: personally, professionally and, where possible, through them to their respective communities. The set of development aspects was based on the concept of resilience as described in *Building Resilient Communities: A Preliminary Framework for Assessment*. The intention behind sharing results of the study publicly is driven by the fact that through the ten years of experience of working with local community leaders across Central and Eastern Europe, we have realised that people engaged in community leadership address similar issues, yet they often feel alone and unaware that there might be other people in other places confronting similar questions. In this publication, you will be able to read about the personal reflections and observations connected with such challenges, yet also about a great deal of willingness to try and reflect on how the attempts to deal with challenges worked out.

Last but not least, I would like to note that one important challenge for us in the ViabilityNet 3.0 program has been to search for ways to measure the impact of our work. We tried several different approaches and this is one of them. As such, it can also serve as inspiration, showing how impact can be observed (albeit not measured) and communicated.

If you find this study interesting, we invite you to also look at the other publication from this source – ***ViabilityNet 3.0 Program 2017/2018: A Case Study on Community in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria***, which describes more specifically changes that occurred in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, a town of one of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program participants.

We hope you will find this publication inspiring.
On behalf of the ViabilityNet 3.0 team,

Monika Novosádová
Co-facilitator and program manager, Via Foundation

Via Foundation

supports development of local, or place-based, communities, mostly in the Czech Republic, both through financial support as well as development and support of community leaders.

The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

supports non-profit organizations that are working to strengthen their home town of Flint and communities around the world. They envision a world in which each individual's quality of life is connected to the well-being of the community, both locally and globally.

1

EVALUATION



1.1 Evaluation question

What are the changes (conscious and unconscious) in community engagement based on the intervention of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program?

1.2 A unique knowledge generation & learning process

The standard evaluation processes are usually based on the TOR (terms of reference), the document that establishes an assignment for an individual evaluator or team of evaluators.

The TOR² serves as a basis for a proposal request for external evaluators or as a guide for an evaluation team if the evaluation is conducted internally. The TOR is a statement of the background of the intervention/process/program to be evaluated. It states the objectives and purpose of the evaluation, the individual duties and responsibilities of the members of the evaluation team, and the timelines for deliverables (outcomes of the evaluation: e.g. reports, presentation materials, workshops, artistic presentations, etc.). It also establishes the initial agreements, i.e. what needs to be accomplished in the given time. The TOR may already include the development of the evaluation design (the evaluation matrix) and/or the evaluation matrix/design could be one of the deliverables of the evaluation process. The TOR should not substitute the evaluation design nor be substituted by the evaluation design. The TOR focuses on the goals/expectations and the responsibilities, whereas the evaluation design is a plan for conducting the evaluation. The organization/implementer/donor/etc. publishes the TOR and then the evaluators (individuals or teams) react by developing and forwarding the evaluation proposal. It is a good practice to discuss and finalize the overall design with the evaluator and other key stakeholders to ensure that all parties are clear about the processes and outcomes of the evaluation. This also contributes to the support of the evaluation process.

On the other hand this PILOT evaluation ("impact measurement") represents a rather unique knowledge generation and learning process with respect to couple of factors: it is not based on the previously formulated TOR. Its goal, process, and tools are established and refined throughout the regular consultations between the evaluator (consultant) and the ViabilityNet 3.0 team, respecting the needs and possibilities of the participants.

The aim of this specific process is to build the capacities of the ViabilityNet 3.0 team to co-develop, test, and employ (on a pilot basis) the tailor-made

² Morra, L. and R. Rist, 2009. The Road to Results: Designing and Conducting Effective Development Evaluations. World Bank.

research/evaluation instruments in order to i) set the basis for the evaluation mechanisms that are used within the ViabilityNet 3.0 programs (after adjustments) also in the future and ii) at the same time to generate knowledge about the ViabilityNet 3.0 processes in order to shed more light on the occurrence of the expected impacts of the program (behavioral changes and other effects), provide missing data and missing links (i.e. understanding better the possible links between the outcomes and changes produced), and elucidate the processes of how these changes occur.

1.3 Qualitative aspects of the research & the participatory approach

Based on the discussions between the external consultant and the ViabilityNet 3.0 team, the choice was made to focus on the **qualitative aspects of the research/evaluation** and to keep the knowledge production process **participatory** (with the relatively stronger role of the consultant in the facilitation of the research process and in the phase of the data analysis).

The **value added** of this approach is to enhance the motivation and ownership of the process, the data collection instruments, the knowledge produced as well as to allow for the above-mentioned learning processes. Moreover, this approach facilitates the further replication of the instruments (after adjustments) by the ViabilityNet 3.0 team in the implementation cycles allowing for the development of tailor-made evaluation and learning schemes that can become an integral part of the program in the future.

The planning of the evaluation/research processes, development and pilot implementation of the data collection instruments, and the gradual data analysis is completed at the same time as the implementation of the ViabilityNet 3.0 program. This is done in order to avoid distinct (additional) processes that might divert the attention and energy of the participants away from the program towards the research (the consultant/external evaluator and the ViabilityNet 3.0 team have agreed on the priority of the program components implementation over the focus on the research).

Based on the above agreement, the decision was taken to conduct the **participatory non-experimental design** evaluation. No control group is designed to compare with the treatment group; the design is longitudinal and tracks individuals and the group over time.

The rationale behind this method is to:

- make use of the strong sides of different evaluation approaches (internal and external), allowing for more informed and engaged internal insights into the program through accumulated in-depth knowledge of the processes by the ViabilityNet 3.0 team as well

as for the involvement of the more specialized skills and oversight of the external evaluator (having both the academic and NGO background);

- foster the learning processes and strengthen the evaluation capacities of both the ViabilityNet 3.0 team members (implementing organization) and the target participants of the programs. The participatory approach to evaluation allows for the development of tools to empower the participants (not only in measurement but also in educational tool/building capacities and awareness). Participatory evaluations i) draw lessons from interaction and take corrective actions to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of ongoing activities, ii) allow for more intensive contact with the target group which enables better planning and design of data collection mechanisms and instruments including access to data, and iii) reflect the target group's voice as well as the different stakeholders' perspectives.

1.4 Participatory approach: methods employed

The role of the external evaluator/consultant is to work together with the representatives of the implementing organization as well as with the participants that are subject to the intervention to design the plan (identify the questions and plan the process), familiarize themselves with the different range of instruments possible to be used in qualitative research, develop (and/or adjust the existing) tools for data collection, collect and analyze data, and draw conclusions and recommendations.

Within the participatory evaluation both the traditional non-participatory methods as well as participatory qualitative instruments were employed. Some of these instruments were used by the external evaluator (e.g. in-depth, semi-structured interviews and focused discussions with participants and team members, informal discussions, observation, participatory action planning method), other by the ViabilityNet 3.0 team (e.g. participatory reflections and facilitated sharing at each of the meetings, individual consultation by Skype), some by the ViabilityNet 3.0 team together with the external consultant (e.g. individual questionnaire forms following each meeting, mapping matrixes, time-lines), and some of them by the participants themselves (e.g. participants interviewing key members of their communities, community mapping, etc.). The sample included all participants of the ViabilityNet 3.0 2017/2018 cohort (13) and their respective team members that were invited to the joint meeting and participated (12).

The process of tool development/adjustment, data collection, and data analysis occurs in parallel and is subject to constant consultations between

the external evaluator and the ViabilityNet 3.0 team. In the first phase of the research the data collection dominates the analysis while the ratio significantly changes towards the end of the process. The collected set of data was systematically analyzed using the thematic analysis aimed at uncovering patterns and trends in the data. This method emphasizes the organization and rich description of the data set, identifying implicit and explicit ideas within the data.

Respecting the ethical considerations, all data have been anonymized, revealing only the specification whether the cited proclamations come from the participant(s) and/or the team member(s) since this might have implications on the point of view and degree of familiarity with the processes related to the specific mode of participation of either of the groups involved. The quotes have also been altered to minimize the possibility of identifying individual participants by the geographical and/or specific community project content identifiers. The quotes are kept marked with the indication of the time frame (e.g. first/second meeting) as the longitudinal perspective played an important role in the analysis.

1.5 Modes of working

- Preliminary workshop on the possibilities of qualitative research in impact measurement with the ViabilityNet 3.0 team;
- regular consultations with the representatives of the implementing organization; co-planning of the process, co-development of data collection tools, data collection and analysis including report writing;
- sensitization and training of the participants. The idea behind the training is to elucidate the evaluation goals and procedures as well as to explain the value added of the enhancement of the knowledge on the impacts and outcomes of the interventions (processes involved in the ViabilityNet 3.0 program). This can be done by drawing the attention of the participants to the value added of structurally learning about the effects/changes we/they are part of and produce in the communities. The idea is also to introduce and train the participants in using some participatory evaluation instruments in order to be more aware of the changes which occur;
- additionally there is a discussion held about developing the design for the case study/studies of the selected community/communities where the program is being implemented in order to understand more in detail the processes impacting the participants and

in what way it is translated into their work in the communities, what impact it leaves on the community processes, and therefore how it contributes to the strengthening of resilient communities.

1.6 Aims & expectations about what can (cannot) be done

The qualitative data collected throughout the implementation phase of the intervention as well as at the end of the intervention are needed to **track and understand the changes that happen in the process which leads towards both the expected and unexpected impacts.**

Through the qualitative measures the aim is to uncover whether positive changes are observable among the target group, how they are related to the ViabilityNet 3.0, and how they were achieved. The qualitative research is mainly concerned with **understanding HOW the intervention makes a difference, WHAT are the mechanisms, HOW the changes understood to come about, HOW the actors involved in the processes attribute to the cause of the changes, and HOW are these changes on the target groups translated into their work in the communities influencing the processes in the communities?** It is more than a description as it also includes the interpretation of the situation by the most knowledgeable about the situation.

Although the causal evaluation questions are part of the qualitative research, it is not possible to establish that a straightforward causal relationship exists between the individual parts of the intervention and the changes produced. In other words, a valid causal relationship between the interventions and behavioral changes is not possible to achieve through the qualitative non-experimental approach. For that the full experimental design would have to be established, including the formation of the experimental and control group.

Understanding the situation at the beginning and end of the intervention is valuable with respect to evaluating the contribution of the intervention, though not as strong as counterfactual and/or experimental designs (based on the observation of treatment vs. control groups' comparison) that would allow for attributive effects.

Therefore there is a strong suggestion to establish a complementary process of the quantitative impact measurement for future programs.

2

EVALUATION REPORT



The ViabilityNet 3.0 program is "...about inspiration, sharing, reflecting, gently opening the treasure boxes from the other participants, people on the site visits and from the invited experts and ever-present trainers and mentors" (interview, participant, 4th meeting).

In what way was the ViabilityNet 3.0 program/process perceived to be special by its participants? What meaning did it carry for them? How did they describe the experience they lived through a year with the aim to learn more to be able to better understand their communities, to take part in their respective communities' development, and to show their abilities to change and adapt their strategies both on the path of becoming stronger as community leaders and also perhaps on the path of becoming better in supporting and/or strengthening the community processes?

2.1 VIABILITY LEARNING ATMOSPHERE AND SPIRIT

The ViabilityNet 3.0 program learning ambient was characterized by its participants as a very organic "atmosphere of trust and open communication" (participant, questionnaire, after 2nd meeting). The participants and team members were repeatedly mentioning that the ViabilityNet 3.0 program was able to create a *special spirit that allowed for the integrative feeling at all different stages of the year-long cycle* (interviewed participants and team members in the focused discussions over the timelines visualizing their personal important learning moments as well as in the interviews held at the 4th meeting).

One of the team members (interview, 4th meeting), describing the general feeling in the group, has shared that ViabilityNet 3.0 allows for "creating safe space, where the different *mix of different activities fits with the different participants of the program*. There was a versatility of challenges, really suitable to the different learning styles." As an example, the other participant shared in the interview at the fourth meeting that "the readymade concepts are [usually] confusing me [him/her], but in Viability I [he/she] did not feel to be suppressed...no one was telling me I...we must...I [he/she] was never pushed to anything...there was space to try...I [he/she] was guided, not pushed...I [he/she] have never been to such program...I [he/she] found own comfortable space to do what needs to be done". Another one commented, "the program is also done in a way that there is no overload...you do not think you are on the assignment...everybody has a chance to talk, everybody is respected...it's natural that everybody is different, but in a sense everybody was on the same level" (team member, interview, 4th meeting). Across the entire learning cycle as well as during the individual meetings, there was a *balanced mix of activities and breaks* to relax but also (as the participants were commenting and it could be illustrated with the words of one of them) to allow for "further discussions and exchange between us [them]...so we [they] could also collect and organize

their own thoughts" (interview, participant, 4th meeting). This provided yet another extra extension of the rather informal space for learning. The other aspects of the working mode is nicely illustrated with the following quotes extracted from the interviews with participants and team-members at the 4th meeting: *"[the program was perceived as] nice and flexible...although there were deadlines to complete the different activities...it did not feel rigid;" "...of course it was challenging, but there was no pressure in a bad way."*

The ViabilityNet 3.0 process and its atmosphere were also seen to encourage and provide room for **comfortable talking and sharing**. *"Even if during some concrete exercises, as a part of the game, there was conflict created, people knew it is just there, it did not spill out of the exercise, there was never a hostile feeling afterwards"* (interview, team member, 4th meeting). *"Working with emotions, providing for the safe space, allows for not carrying the emotions along the following parts of the program...there was always an environment that allows for closing and wrapping up before moving to the next part of the program"* (interview participant, 4th meeting).

Apart from the safe space and pleasant atmosphere, one participant representing the prevailing opinion of the others concluded that *"the program helps us [the participants] to grow...it makes you realize some things actively...it's like a wakeup call or a good way to put a mirror in front of you, besides showing you the concrete tools and methods you could use [in a community work]"* (team member, interview, 4th meeting).

After experiencing the second meeting in Serbia, the participants in their evaluation questionnaires mentioned that the **VIABILITY provides them with the analytical frameworks** and *"helps me [says one participant] understand better what I and my team actually does, how we are working, which is useful because it allows us to reflect better together about what we do and what can be improved; [the other one adds that] it helps us to better structure the knowledge and gives us more clearer picture of what we did in past and what we are doing now."* In the questionnaire after the 2nd meeting the participant describes the learning environment as *"it is giving us background support and pushing we need to achieve things,"* sharing the character of the support provided.

Different participants during the sharing after the open space discussion at the fourth meeting also commented that the VIABILITY program, in the words of one, *"provides us [the participants] with the possibility to try to experiment with different tools;"* another grasped the group feeling explaining that *"when I take part, I can dive in completely getting yet another lesson about myself, it allows me to think in a different way...to see problems from different angle...if it could be done without the meetings in a normal way... then we would already have all the solutions...we need to stop returning to the old frames and repeat the same things again and again...it helps to give more chance to fantasy, creativity...helps to produce more questions about our communities, at the beginning I had only one question and now I have many things to think about, many questions."*

As seen above, the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning program/process has been generally perceived as providing positive changing effects on the respective participants which can be illustrated by the following quote: *"the program has some kind of the re-programming effect on you [laugh] and then you cannot work the same way you feel. You must do the things differently"* (participant, interview, 4th meeting). Generally, the participants felt there was support from the part of the ViabilityNet 3.0 team. In the questionnaire after the third meeting, the participants commented that ViabilityNet 3.0 provided them with the tools to be tested in reality and then with the space to reflect on their application so they can learn more after having their own experience from the community.

At the same time, however, until the end of the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning cycle, the participants did not stop mentioning that it **continues to be difficult for them to re-connect with the others when switching the environment from the meeting/trainings to their own context**: *"when coming back its difficult to re-connect with my work...almost I have felt I have lost it all," "I am having trouble to get everything you are providing to us and we are taking from the program to put it to my own context"* (participants, interviews, 4th meeting).

Towards the end of the program, the comments with more confidence and empowerment of the participants began to appear: *"During those meetings I was seeing my professional growth and also between the meetings, but can I do it on my own...I need to do it to continue growing, on the other hand I will also miss the peer pressure to realize the improvements"* (participant, interview, 4th meeting).

Another process element highlighted by the participants as special to them was the importance of being able to share. *"Talking to others in Viability and having the possibility to reflect has probably been the most important aspect in this process, because each person in the Viability has a treasure, that he/she keeps: own experience, expertise, knowledge and even mistakes they have learned from"* (participant, questionnaire, after 4th meeting). Apart from the different structures and parts of the program, the participants constantly mentioned the **importance of networking and sharing between one another (so-called peer-to-peer learning)**, both as a formal part of the informal learning-based program sessions as well as in the more informal time spent during the meetings. *"The network of people is priceless as well as the practical tools and methods to be used in the everyday work. And skills sharing in the group I value the most"* (participant, questionnaire, after 2nd meeting). It is also seen as important because it provides inspiration and possibility to see, discuss, and learn from the concrete experiences of the other participants. In their thoughts, they constantly returned to having learned the concrete practical tools such as CANVA for increasing visibility of their work (participants reflection, 3rd meeting). Or appreciating that *"thanks to you [referring to other participants], I [not only] got to know the simple graphic program, I also learned more from the others about the importance of communication more*

intensively about what we do...we shared the tips for improvement of our work...from own experience...I got more aware about the sensitive participatory practices" (participant, questionnaire, after 4th meeting). Also, *"people were asking about the activities implemented..., sharing about what were the challenges, what were the examples of changes created, and if and how sustained...also realizing how important it is to be visible with this..."* (participant, interview, 3rd meeting). It was also mentioned that *"the others were especially encouraged by sharing that there is no need to hesitate and it is absolutely ok to ask the help for the advisers...it's not a failure...it rather shows that it is not the one man show...that there is a bigger group behind..."* (participant, interview, 3rd meeting). The other participant, when asked about their own role in the community, referred to the important lesson he/she learned from what the other one pointed out: *"I have to be more team player, after... [the counterpart at the training] inspired me with own experience of giving more responsibility to the others, so they can also grow as professionals....this got stuck in my mind..."* (participant, interview, 3rd meeting). Later, in the interview at the fourth meeting, another participant also shared his/her useful experience he/she had while learning from the others, which has improved his/her style of working in team/community and also improved his/her own comfort as a community leader: *"I have learned from one of the participants, that she would never gossip about the team members...I need to take this seriously...I shall not heal my frustrations through talking badly about the others in the team...it's not a problem that we have differences among us, it's part of the story, the diversity...it just needs to be managed to the benefit of the process."*

It also proved to significantly add **value to have included the mixed group of participants** into the 2017/18 ViabilityNet 3.0 cohort, not only because it included people with different modes of learning which could enrich the groups' overall learning potential, but also people with different levels of experience in community work and practice. The participants commented on how important it was in the end for all of them to benefit from one another's presence, *"each of them taking what they needed from the process...the examples of past errors and successes for inspiration, energy and ability to re-think what you have already achieved, formulate it and present it as a valuable experience helped me to realize it was actually a valuable experience... to realize that you have already accumulated this experience, which is something that could also be shared, and in the end also reviewed...because in the past I approached my experience as something given, something automatic...and all of sudden I had a chance to grasp it more concretely, formulate it into something that I could present and share with others...which means I should have really thought about what it was and what it means"* (participant, interview, 3rd meeting). For those participants that came to the program as more experienced community workers/leaders, the ViabilityNet 3.0 program continued to produce an atmosphere of learning since the program

strengthened and gave new knowledge of how to develop a project of that kind. To those that were newer to the concepts and community engagement, it also provided contacts to people with whom to share and consult with on concrete issues – the mentors, trainers, experts. (Participants, questionnaires, after 3rd meeting; participants, interviews, 3rd meeting).

It provided a variety of structures to allow for reflection and the strengthening of the participants' own work and resolving concerns. The learning process became more solidified through the strong element of the peer-to-peer sharing and discussions.

Apart from atmosphere, structures, learning space, tools, and the *"enormous sense of support and guidance,"* the ViabilityNet 3.0 program has also been valued for the fact that *"it gave us [the participants] the legitimacy, the status...since the program has started, more people were joining us in our activities...there was a feeling of being part of something bigger, important"* (participant, interview, 4th meeting). The program also gave the participants some **regularity** (on and between the meetings). One of the participants mentioned, *"it gives some rhythm and sense that the future can be predictable to some extent, its relaxing, because it gives me more confidence..."* (participant, interview, 4th meeting).

2.2 CORNERSTONES OF THE LEARNING PATH

When the participants and team members share their experience on their individual as well as group learning paths, they refer to several factors that they believed played an important role for them.

2.2.1 PERSONAL MEETINGS³

Apart from participating in different presentations, exercises, and simulations by experts focused on different aspects of community engagement

³ There were four ViabilityNet 3.0 meetings organized for the participants at four different venues. (For further reference, in 2017/2018 the first meeting was organized in Slovakia, the second meeting in Serbia, the third meeting in Rumania, and the fourth meeting in Hungary). The meetings were distributed across the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning cycle and included site visits to projects in nearby communities in the given country, expert inputs on specific community engagement-related topics (such as competencies to work in team; community mapping; community resilience; leadership

and leadership, the participants valued the times of reflection and sharing of the individual lessons learned as well as the constant discussions with the experts, trainers, and other participants. *"I have realized that I need to directly speak to different people and collect the ideas about what is important for them...piece by piece and then put it together with what we want and what was the general goal,"* illustrated by one of the participants in the focused discussion after the learning path timeline exercise at the fourth meeting. Through talking and reflecting, the participants appreciated **learning together and from one another**, *"this showed me in practice, how things can be done better"* (interview, team member, 4th meeting). *"I am somehow glad for all the conversations I had with all the others...it's not part of the program, but it is in fact"* (participant, sharing, 4th meeting). The participants also oftentimes referred to their own vulnerabilities and how important it was for them **not to feel alone in the process**. They appreciated *"that other people are here and can help with the problems during the meetings;"..."**speaking to one another is important, because we have similar situations....we can help one another not only in the free time, but also as a part of the program"* (participants, sharing at the 2nd meeting).

The presence at the meetings was also **valued as time to detach from daily routine** issues at home (including personal, professional as well as community life), giving the participant and team members (later in the process) space to *"brief,"* think, and see the issues from a distance, creating a greater perspective. **Traveling to the meetings also provided them with extra time which they could devote to planning and structuring** their thoughts about the community processes (participants and team members, interviews, 4th meeting).

2.2.2 INVOLVEMENT OF TEAM MEMBERS ⁴

2.2.2.1 Integration in the VIABILITY meeting

From the comments by the participants as well as team members related to the expectations and anticipations preceding the enlargement of the group

skills and styles; work-life balance; motivation; adaptive capacity of the communities - connectedness, institutional memory, innovative learning, local resources; impact measurement; conflict resolution) and individual and group reflection and sharing.

⁴ The team members were invited to join the participants and take active part in the fourth ViabilityNet 3.0 meeting in Hungary. Prior to the fourth meeting, they were involved in the process of learning and/or active community work only through the ViabilityNet 3.0 participants/leaders going through the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning cycle at four different meetings/trainings.

(which occurred at the fourth meeting/training), it was possible to observe a **certain level of closeness of the Viability group and even a bit of protectionism** over its special spirit and atmosphere (that the participants could always experience during their meetings and they valued it). There were also fears shared that the joint meeting might produce the dynamics where the newcomers would not have enough *"space"* and that there might be a language gap (participants and team members, interviews, 4th meeting). At the same time the participants reflected the **importance to open the "club"** to others and allow them to *"step out of the shade,"* hoping for the team members to get inspiration and a better understanding of what is being done and how specific the ViabilityNet 3.0 approach is (observation, 3rd meeting; informal interviews, 3rd meeting; interviews, the 4th meeting). In the end, the team member concluded in the interview at the fourth meeting that: *"I think I can speak for the others also, and I think we have been accepted well and also outside of the amazing workshops, I also managed to have deep conversations that I am happy for"*.

Both the participants and team members ultimately valued the participation of their fellow team members at the fourth meeting. *"We got to the same boat"* (participant, interview, 4th meeting). *"[After participating in the meeting] I see more openness and importance of getting involved"* (team member, questionnaire, after 4th meeting). *"Before the participation in the meeting, my imagination about the Viability was very weak, but the participation on the meeting was super-important since now I can understand most of what my partner was sharing with me and can work with it"; "the relationship strengthened"* (team members, interviews and questionnaires, after 4th meeting). *"For me it was really important to come to the Viability meeting, it's not that my team member [referring to the participant/the leader] would not share with us every time what they were doing on the meetings, and [he/she] did come with lots of new ideas...but for me it was really important to also find out how these ideas are being born, where they come from...now I feel [he/she] will not be there [back in the community] alone...I think I got to understand a lot"* (team member, interview, 4th meeting).

"The common meeting also made possible for us to distance a bit from the situation back home...to have more overview...to be able to go more in depth in the reflections and planning..." (team member, interview, 4th meeting). *"The fact that we have both participated in the common meeting helped to **improve our communication**, we will be now travelling in the same car...not one here the other one there, it will also help me to **see the complexity of the training**, how the different methods overlap, combine together, I will get some more examples....before my team member[the interviewee is referring to the leader participating in the ViabilityNet 3.0 program], who participated in Viability came with all these ideas, we talked, but coming here is interesting to see and also to hear talking the others...how although each case is different, we could do things back home, engage with the people..."* (team member, interview, 4th meeting).

2.2.2.2 Catching the VIABILITY spirit and involvement in the process

From the experience shared by team members, the *degree of their involvement in the overall ViabilityNet 3.0 process varied team to team. In cases (which did occur in all teams) their interaction with the leaders was more intensive* (participants actively organized sharing meetings and discussions for them when coming back home from the meetings/trainings and/or participants actively involved with their team members in completing different tasks – e.g. assigned homework), the *team members resumed the higher stake in the community process and developed the feeling of ownership earlier and in a more intensive way*. *"We worked together on some of the homeworks, besides [meanwhile] the things have connected with the [Viability] program,...we worked together on developing the project idea and other steps connected with the project;" "[we had conversations between us] to make more clear agenda, to specify the roles..."* (team members, questionnaires, 4th meeting; team members, interviews, 4th meeting). This had further implications on their inspiration and motivation to take action (beyond the mere completion of tasks assigned by the leader) in the communities: *"inspiration, motivation, that changes could be done, I could imagine the way;"... "I started to believe in the ability to act and change in the community"* (team members, questionnaires, after 4th meeting). In these cases, the team members' ability to catch the Viability spirit and activities during the fourth meeting had been easier and their experience more intensive and profound (see below).

Most of the team members, when exposed to the personal experience at the fourth meeting, *attributed their presence with the improved understanding of what the ViabilityNet 3.0 program is and what are its specific modes of working* (team members, focused discussion over time). The team members also shared that, prior to their own active participation at the ViabilityNet 3.0 meeting, most of them did not really understand what was communicated to them between the meetings, and they could not imagine what the Viability process and experience was like. Generally, the team members' connection to the ViabilityNet 3.0 program was rather weak (both emotionally as well as concerning their involvement in the communities). Additionally, they did not have much to say about the influence of the ViabilityNet 3.0 on any of the processes in the community. (Team members, timelines; team members, focused discussion related to the timelines; team members, interviews).

As shared by the team members (informal discussions 4th meeting; interviews, 4th meeting; questionnaires, 4th meeting), in cases where *the experience, tools, and strategies, acquired at the meetings by the participants, were communicated to the team members and shared with them more intensively and/or in more structured manner* (e.g. through trainings, common discussion and planning groups, more involvement in preparation for homework), *it was easier for the team members to take a more active role*

in the team as well as in their communities. However, even in this case, the ViabilityNet 3.0 program was seen by the team members as an unknown, hard to imagine dynamic. After experiencing the joint Viability meeting, the team members regretted they have not been involved more intensively in the earlier stages of the projects (team members, interviews, 4th meeting).

The team members commented on how important *"it was to feel involved and publicly appreciated for the work done."* They also mentioned very strongly the importance of the use of *"better language when communicating the visions and experience, not only with the wider community but also with themselves as not having the personal experience with the Viability meetings"* (team members, interviews, 4th meeting).

Overall, from the questionnaires, timelines, and focused discussions related to the timelines (fourth meeting), it was evident that the *team members were not able to express their reflections about their experience and lessons learned from the training and community work so eloquently as the respective participants*. They lacked the practice of formulating their positions in discussions, reflections, and intensive learning processes. The participants, on the other hand, developed their skills of reflecting and deriving the lessons learned from the reflected experience gradually throughout of the program capitalizing on the reflections and sharing parts of the training (more intensively in the latter stages of the process). *Comparing the team members with the participants, there was a significant lag behind in understanding the essence of community work, ability to imagine the concrete use of strategies, and concrete actions taken or to be taken in the community as well as the ability to reflect about the lessons learned* (if present, then mainly at the level of personal development, and less in the sense of community work). Only when/after they participated at the meeting personally, they commented that they finally understood the program and/but still they feel it will take them more time for the experience to settle in. (Questionnaires, after 4th meeting; focused discussion after the timelines exercise, 4th meeting; team members, interviews, 4th meeting).

2.2.3 HOMEWORK⁵

At the beginning of the ViabilityNet 3.0 process, the homework (tasks to be

⁵ When saying "homework", the participants were referring to the analytical assignments/tasks given to them to be completed between the different meetings with the aim to support them in learning more about their respective communities, and thus understanding them better (which was perceived important for better engagement in the communities).

completed by the participants, and ideally team members, between the individual meetings/trainings) were elaborated on by the participants in limited way. And if they were (in individual cases) elaborated in detail, it was rather an exception. The participants were explained the process through the detachment from the Viability process and mood, as soon as they had returned back from the meeting to their communities, respective to their own lives, work, families, simply "home problems." They shared that they had "no energy, no motivation to devote extra energy to these homeworks..." (participant, interview, 4th meeting). It was also commented that at the **beginning of the process, they "did not understand them to be important learning tool"** (participant, interview, 4th meeting).

The participants also reported that, especially at the beginning, it was quite challenging to do the tasks assigned as homework (especially the technical part and logistics). They said that they would need more instructions, hints, and tips on how to conduct the exercises, how to communicate with the people in the community, how to approach them, how to conduct the interviews...but gradually after putting the efforts into it, they mentioned that they had acquired newer and useful skills such as recording or presenting the aims in a way that required changing the way they expressed themselves in order for the people to understand what they wanted from them. (Participants, sharing, 2nd meeting).

Gradually the attitudes changed and they realized more that the tasks hidden in the homework **were helping them to reflect about the processes and strategies and make changes in the community work.** "I just had a mind blowing moment when I realized that the matrix that we did [task assigned for homework] is helping us to see the real connections...I never thought that it helps me to make up [referring to prepare the project] the project, it's nice to realize the target public...who can be potential partner to the project...which was really mind blowing, wow..." (participant, reflections, 3rd meeting).

Later when debriefing the findings and processes of completing the homework during the ViabilityNet 3.0 meetings, the participants realized that there are many, **not only interesting, but also very useful things they could derive from** the process of completing the tasks to help themselves with their community work. For example, the participants discovered that there is lack of connection between the existing resources and the use of them, that people in the communities do not see that there are resources present in the community, which oftentimes leads to the people thinking that it is difficult to do something since there are not enough resources available. They, to their surprise, also discovered that there is limited institutional memory and that they are "discovering the wheel again and again." During the reflection at the 4th meeting, the participants shared that they had identified other organizations, groups of active people, and the areas of activity they are focusing on and realized how important they could be for the life of the community. One participant later mentioned that "not all of them [referring to the key actors]

are so visible as the others, we would otherwise not know about them...I would not have thought about these at all...they are invisible on the first sight..." (participant, interview, 4th meeting). For example, "the mapping...I talked to the people, they have some information about the city, and they gave me some valuable insights in how the city operates" (team member, interview, 4th meeting). The homework "we were doing, helped me to make some more connection, ones that I did not realized before" (participant, interview, 3rd meeting).

People were surprised how open and dedicated some of the respondents were they talked to and **how valuable it could be to give other people voice.** "I found it very beneficial to put on the paper everything that is in the air or mouth to mouth, which fulfils the bigger picture" (questionnaire, after 3rd meeting). "We were trying to do steps through the homeworks...the direction after each meeting is going more and more clear...what direction we should go and should do...this is the compass on the map, but the map here is like [so far] a partial map...so it is not [yet] the whole story we need...and that's because the learning here is so specific that we are trying to do some steps through our homeworks and after we go harder to the process in our learning and to find our direction" (participant, sharing, 3rd meeting).

Even those that did not originally devote enough time to the homework later realized how important and helpful it was to have a broader picture and therefore worked to find the way of completing the tasks in one way or another to understand their community better (questionnaires, after 3rd meeting).

As mentioned above, **the homework (in case that the tasks leading to complete them were shared with the team members) played an important role as a learning and integrating tool** (i.e. helping the team members to experience the spillover effect of the lessons from the trainings and also become more intensively integrated in the process of community building). This can be illustrated by the following quote from a team member (interview, 4th meeting): "for the long time I helped [the leader] with the homeworks and [he/she] taught me how to speak to other people and to do some activities in the community....I realized that I can change things when I understand a lot more the community...communication and needs of the other people...". The other team members (interviews, 4th meeting) added, "I got the assignments to fill in and so I got better idea about what is it all about, it helped me because it gave me some structure, some key words, also, that I could start exploring more on my own and get more familiar with the community action..."; "the homeworks were a useful introduction for me...if I did not do it, I would feel a lot more lost".

2.2.4 SITE VISITS

Participants as well as team members shared, as illustrated by the following quote, that **"the site visits helped us to see a variety of perspectives, models,**

ideas, concepts and dreams...that could work and could be effective...In fact I feel like I now have so many experiences and examples to choose from" (interview, participant, 4th meeting).

The site visits provided the participants **not only with the inspiration but also largely with the courage and energy**, comforting them in the "we are not alone" feeling (focused discussion after the timelines, 4th meeting). *"It's about learning from what works and also from what does not, so we are constantly not re-inventing the wheel"* (interview, team member, 4th meeting).

During the trainings the participants heard and even tried out the activities related to **creativity and thinking out of the box**. However, what strengthened their thinking about its practical importance were the concrete examples from the site visits where they had the chance not only to see, but also to relate the lessons learned from the example to their own projects. For instance highlighting the [local leader's] words: *"what worked was the trying something new, experimenting with something new, because they know that the world is not working the same way as we knew it in the past times..."*. Pointing to this, the participants linked the verbalized lesson learned to their own commitments to try out something new, the need to come up with something new related to organizing their things back home (e.g. being more connected to the community, etc.). They also realized the importance to really *"enjoy the activities you are engaged at...to keep it fun"* (participants and team members, reflection on site visit, 4th meeting).

During the site visits, the participants **spotted other factors important for community engagement** (as the further inspiration and/or encouragement and motivation for them) since it resonated with something they increasingly found important and worked well in their own case. As an inspiration from the site visit in Budapest (4th meeting), the wider range of participants realized the important role of **telling stories** that could help to better communicate issues in the community as well as contribute to the involvement of a higher number of people and/or their more intensive engagement in different community processes (interviews, participants and team members, 4th meeting).

During the reflection after the site visit the participants shared that they realized the importance of keeping the **institutional memory**. The participants highlighted the role of the **"connectedness"** (i.e. the networking, creating webs and interdependencies between the different people/groups): *"they have markets, training networks, yes, and pairing networking with local initiatives"* (reflection after site visit, 4th meeting).

2.3 THE VIABILITY LEARNING PATH: SHIFTS AND CHANGES

All the previously highlighted aspects were essentially part of the ViabilityNet 3.0 process, the learning path. The ViabilityNet 3.0 learning cycle allowed the participants to link across different group meetings (trainings and reflective

sessions) which divided their learning path into different sections. In the times between the four different group meetings/trainings, the participants returned to their respective communities being further guided in their work through by having the possibility to address the trainers and mentors for consultations as well as through focusing on the assigned "homework" (that should guide them in the hands-on learning about their respective communities and reflecting over the processes occurring). The times between meetings were also devoted to the implementation of concrete community activities (later rather to the facilitation of specific processes) based on the participants plans (that were revisited throughout the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning path).

The participants commented, as illustrated by the following quote, that they **"feel more relieved every next and next meeting, because they are no longer afraid to think big. The meetings help them to see things more clearly and what is important..."** (participant, interview, 4th meeting). The participants also mentioned that the turning point for them was especially in Romania (3rd meeting) and onwards because it helped them to start connecting things together (participants, interviews, 4th meeting; observation; group reflections 3rd and 4th meetings).

The participants described the process of learning with the following words: *"It was a mix of experience;" "[we have gradually learned how to] walk more confident and how to play more aware;" "how to work more efficient;" "it was a balanced experience"* (participants, questionnaires, third meeting). They also mentioned that they thought it would be more about resilient communities and then only realized that it was a lot about the group itself, about their personal development. They gradually discovered that *"if you do not focus on your development, there is no community development at all;" "the personal development is a pre-requisite for any community work"* (participants, questionnaires, 3rd meeting). *"We were shaped the same way as the project"* as one participant described the process. However the others contrasted this statement with a bit of sadness in their voice mentioning that it is a pity that they did not know at the beginning of the process all that that they knew now (towards the end of the process). If so, they would have definitely paid more attention to the activities, collected information back in the communities, and done the process the right way. It is evident that the process of learning about how to navigate in communities takes time and many lessons learned that would be difficult to internalize without having the personal experience with how things could have been done differently and what are the effects of changing approaches (participants, interviews, 4th meeting).

What was perceived to be changing throughout the learning path were especially the following aspects of the community work: the changing perception of participants as leaders, respective of their role in the community; a growing emphasis of the voice and role of the people in their community and their needs; more structured way of thinking and organizing (less

emotions, more framework including the perceived need of having more evidence based knowledge about the community and what is happening); and discovering the need of changing modes of communication both in team as well as with the wider public.

2.3.1 STRUCTURE, STRATEGIC THINKING AND MORE ORGANIZATION

The more focused strategic thinking began generally after the third meeting. It was when the participants were naturally able to connect the re-formulated vision (tied to the more realistic understanding of their own communities) to the activities they were implementing in their communities. Later, at the fourth meeting, there was an observable trend (however seen more intensively with respect to concrete individuals) that an even deeper shift in the thinking about community engagement had occurred which can be illustrated by the following quote: *"I have also realized that we cannot built our community processes just on the activities, anybody could do the activities, but our role needs to be wider, visions, plans, communication, networking... a bit of overview...providing birds perspective"* (participant, interview, 4th meeting).

More generally, after the third meeting, participants commented in the questionnaires that they had started to put into practice concrete strategies aimed at looking for potential actors/people they could work with in the future in their community; setting better goals in a more structured way; focusing on the division of labor; finding a better way of communication in the team as well as externally (e.g. started to initiate public discussions where relevant, visiting people door to door in other places, going around and talking to people directly). They also confessed that they started to be clearer about what to do as a part of their community engagement and why. When interviewed at the fourth meeting, one participant had returned to their experience before coming to the meeting: *"you also need a vision for your working group, not only for the community...for people to be able to imagine what may they aspire for...so we organized the meeting with a facilitator to think about it...plan...and there we also realized how important it is to also involve the wider community...to know what they want and we wanted to make the process public so the interested people could see it."* After the phase of realizing the importance of better structuring, the participant jumped into the phase of taking concrete steps to change the approach, sharing the example, *"it also helped us to determine who are the actors for change, what needs to be the environment for them to allow to enact the change, so we knew better how to support them...but first you really need to know who they are... and your vision? You have to realize it has to have the meaning for them [the people in the community], people need to see the relevance of it for them...it has to have a meaning for them."*

After the third and fourth meetings the participants more frequently shared the commitments to organize more meetings both inside and outside of the core team, take care of the relationships in the group as well as to maintain communication (seeking information as well as sharing what is going on) with the wider community. They realized more significantly, before coming to the fourth meeting, how important it was to use understandable language when explaining their point both in the core team as well as towards the community. One of the participants shared their own experience from work when realizing how difficult it was to pass the message on to others and to engage them. In an interview he/she said, *"you really need to talk their language, ...asking them how do you mean this or that, we need to more explain ourselves, before they can make their own concept...and I realized that because of the language we can sometimes lose some of the allies in the communities, we are perceived as aliens, ...that we may have arrogant position."* *"It's important to listen more, and to keep the personal contacts with the people are important...need to go to the people, speak with them, explain, invite."*

Participants also described the need for a lot more visibility and communication as an important factor for engagement in/with the community. On the other hand, participants commented that they were originally (until the fourth meeting) rather afraid of the visibility because it also assumes a lot more responsibility for the commitments and outcomes (questionnaires, 3rd meeting; participants, interviews, 4th meeting).

After the fourth meeting, participants internalized that there are so many resources available in the communities, it is only necessary to communicate more, ask people around, and expand the portfolio of the useful resources to be able to put them in the process which could be illustrated by the following: *"right now, I see my community as a resource, a resource that can be enhanced, transformed, adapted, improved and consulted etc. I used to think I needed to find the external things in order to improve the aspects of the community, but now I see that everything I need is out there, at my reach, I just have to take the time to focus on them... Viability has helped me to realize the importance of this thing, I see my community as capable of achieving so much more..."* (participant, questionnaire, after 4th meeting). Rather towards the end of the learning cycle (based on the reflections, evidence-based thinking, and putting together examples from the site visit and linking it to own experience) the participants came to the above conclusion and kept referring to it more intensively (interviews, participants, 4th meeting).

In retrospective, the participants also connected the above findings with the realization of the importance of mapping the community and the need for evidence-based learning and decision-making. In their thoughts the participants returned to the experience of the relative ineffectiveness of their actions in the past, when they did not have much information about the communities beyond their perceptions and judgements. Prior to genuine

engagement in the collection of the variety of information from different resources, they struggled with creating possible examples of useful resources: *"we were struggling with the imagination of what could be the possible resources and how to find out about them"* (participant, 4th meeting). This was related to the lack of internalizing the importance of the evidence-based action at the earlier stages of the ViabilityNet 3.0 cycle (see examples above in the section on homework).

In the questionnaires after the third meeting,⁶ the participants realized that *seeing the results and impact of their activities was important for the motivation to go on* because it helps them produce a more complete picture not only about where they are working but also about what they were actually doing. They were also increasingly able to see beyond the individual (and/or series of) activities they were previously implementing. They mentioned that it is important to see the processes that were happening in the community and how they were changing. One participant described it in the following way: *"it's important to also see whether it bubbles in the community because of your projects are already over...then our work had an impact"* (participant, questionnaire, 3rd meeting). Participants also realized that they often only *"somehow felt"* that their work was effective in the community, but it was necessary to have proper tools to know exactly what was happening: *"...to discover the impact...learn how to put right questions to receive right answers from the people, to know how is the community like and what is happening....as if you have an magnifying glass to see...and sometimes the impact is not seen on the first sight, you have to look carefully to realize..."* (participant, questionnaire, after 3rd meeting).

The participants pointed to another important factor of change in the community engagement: *the need for flexibility and regular re-assessment of their strategies and approaches*. They connected the internalization of this finding with reflections from the experience from the site visits and the example projects at the fourth meeting: *"the protagonists of those projects rely[ed] a lot on the re-assessment...re-assessment of their own model....thinking about what they are doing right and wrong..."* (participant, reflection after the site visit, 4th meeting). They also depicted the importance of the evidence-based planning, feedback as well as the institutional memory as a *"set of rules...so even if they lose the people the model stays and develops,"* as illustrated by the words of one participant in the reflection during the site visit at the fourth meeting. This particular factor resonated with a lot the participants since many of them shared their own frustrations of losing the people that were part of some of the activities in their own respective communities. This may lie in the fact that these people did not have motivation, time, etc.

⁶ At the third meeting, the participants were introduced to the tools for impact measurement and familiarized with the rationale behind evidence-based planning.

to stay apart of the group and/or processes and the participants needed to find new people and start again from the beginning.

Overall, towards the end of the program, the participants shared (in the interviews that were conducted at the fourth meeting) that they found the following factors crucial in their own community practice: *"the need to produce the feeling in people that are part of something bigger;" "even being small but using the right tools could produce big things;" "using the story telling to pass the message on;" "diversity in the team, different backgrounds is useful;" "even if you lose the people in the future, it can work, if you are well organized and connected [to the community];" "media and publicity is needed to encourage the people;" "huge ability to think out of box...is absolutely necessary;" "if we do something we need to do it with fun, its shall not be a burden, it shall be a bit of fun also...;" "we do not come home to copy paste what we see, but use it as an inspiration...it's about ability to see and connect things and use them for our own benefit;" "first step revolves around the needs of the people, if not making it a perfect place...but making a space/place where they can meet their needs;" "you provide the path;" "what resonated with me was that we are not the alternative, we are part of the community;" "you need to change your approach, if you do not see the results...;" "the danger is if the group soon becomes encapsulated...stops taking care about one another....you need to facilitate the carrying responsible attitude;" "not to be in contradiction with the people, not blaming them for seeing things differently."* To have arrived at this point, the participants needed a lot of rethinking and restructuring of their strategies and modes of working.

2.3.2 LEADERSHIP AND ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

At the beginning of the VIABILITY learning cycle, especially at the time of applying to the program, the participants saw themselves as having the central role in *"bringing" change in their respective communities*. Before the first meeting, the participants spoke about themselves as leaders that want to *"push through"* changes in the community. After the first meeting they referred to themselves/the leaders as *"the one that is really interested in the improvement and development of the community, but now believing that all these public meetings and discussions can make life easier...I can hear what's relevant and make priorities in my work and see more clearly what I want to do and what I do not want to do"* (participant, questionnaire, after 1st meeting). They do not see themselves anymore, put in the other participant's words, as *"the angry person pushing through their vision of the city"* (participant, questionnaire, after 1st meeting). Rather, they generally started to place, at least theoretically in their proclamations, *more emphasis on the need to hear the voice of the others and, at the same time, saw themselves as the ones still making the priorities and actions* and *"having the passion to push the change;"*

confessing that the program *"showed them the techniques of how to bring the community together and what are the different methods of approaching the community"* (participants, questionnaire, after 1st meeting).

At this stage, the participants were not explicitly relating any of the ideas to what they were going to do differently back in their community. There was not any observable significant shift from knowing to acting differently.

Using the mapping tools, the participants discovered that they could start *making use of the available resources such as involving more people with different capacities and sharing spaces and/or equipment with others in the community* including other organizations (reflections over the mapping, 2nd meeting). However, in most of the cases, at this stage the participants were still placing themselves at the center of attention (referring to *"their"* responsibility, *"their"* planning, *"their"* activities to be implemented). On the other hand, they discovered there were previously unexplored resources available in their respective communities and that these resources had not been previously utilized. They confessed that they started to see this as a *"need to find out why it was not working, why it was not used"* (reflections on the mapping exercise, 2nd meeting).

At the second meeting during the session devoted to sharing experience about how the participants conducted the tasks assigned for homework, the participants admitted that *"it was interesting to find out about the things in the community, especially during the interviews conducted with the community members, it helped me [him/her] to shed light on how complicated the state of the community was;"* the other has shared that *"I met people I don't usually meet..., I was surprised of who could be the key actors in the community;"* *"I had interviews and [different people] gave me different perspectives and new approaches how to grow the community in more relaxed way."* The participants started to see the *importance of diversifying* knowledge about the community in building a bigger picture (i.e. having a better understanding of the place where they plan to engage).

After the second meeting the participants also *assumed other qualities necessary* for improvement of leadership and/or useful for effective work in their communities (apart from knowing more and learning more from the other voices). They shared their views in the questionnaires after second meeting: *"I need to relax more [it is not so much about me], I need to be more team player than the 'red type' of leader, give more space and responsibility to others, so they can grow into professionals;"* *"I understood that leadership does not mean to be at the top of the community, but taking care, I have to include others more and more;"* *"I realized that the role in the community is going to be changing with time;"* *"I should be better listener and more focused on the message the others are sending (both the team members and people in the community)."* In the interview (4th meeting), one participant travelled back in time remembering the first half of his/her experience in the Viabili-

tyNet 3.0 cycle using these words: *"thanks to VIA I have realized that I cannot be the 'gentle dictator,' I cannot be like this...I need to distance from some things, invite more people in and share the tasks and responsibilities, need to let things happening without me being all the time around and controlling, then I realized that the things are happening without me...and I felt less tiredness...now I have more a role of the co-owner interested in the process."*

Only gradually, throughout of the Viability process (especially after the third and fourth meetings), the participants realized that their role in developing stronger and a more sustainable community is more as a *facilitator/mediator/holder of the vision/etc.* to be the *"spark that will burn [light up] the changes...to motivate them [other people] to change the community together...to create the sense of responsibility to their environment, to give them visibility and make them proud of the place, to create emotional connections between them and the projects . . . to coordinate the process of the developing and working in the team, create new partnerships, strategies and plans in order to communicate all the work with the team and the community, to go through the impact measurement more often during the period of the project, to review the resources and stakeholders, think of new strategies that all together can create the resilient community"* (participant, questionnaire, 4th meeting).

The participants learned that in order for community processes to begin or for the *"vibes"* in the community to be observable, *they really need to find their own specific ways to include people and their perceived needs into the vision and strategies.* Realizing that the *"main resource are the people and the neighborhood itself;"* *"when the people become aware that they are part of the process that connects them with other places and other people with similar interests;"* people gradually discovered that the *"relatedness with the community"* is really important (participants, reflections, 4th meeting).

In the interviews (4th meeting), the participants *shared their previous experience that activating people and giving them more space for their own initiatives and finding out what is important for them in the first place* *"proved to be more important than initially expected."* The participants noted that the role of the leader's group shall be like an incubator, to let the ideas stem from the community to develop and grow, support the processes already happening (participants, reflections, 4th meeting).

After the fourth meeting the people felt more as empowered holders of the vision, that had the tools to make their vision widely known and apply it in the community by the people involved (interview, participant, 4th meeting). One participant (questionnaire, after 4th meeting) commented it with the following words: *"I see myself as wiser, more courageous, capable of achieving much more...experimenting with the tools I have learned, adjusting them for my own context."*

There was a significant degree of more confidence and a declared sense of belonging to the communities observable at the fourth meeting. At

the same time the participants talked about being more humble than before as illustrated by the following words: *"I started to feel we are not so special and unique as I felt before, because there are hundreds of supportive people around Europe who have similar activities and care about their communities and other people a lot"* (questionnaire, after 4th meeting).

It was towards the end of the ViabilityNet 3.0 cycle when the participants started to credibly admit the shift in their thinking as well as a difference in their role in the community. This included changing their perspectives from "we plan and organize" to "we facilitate, we organize the participatory community planning" in a formal or even very informal way as well as giving voice to others and reflecting their aims and needs (participants and team members, reflection, 4th meetings, informal discussions, 4th meeting, focused discussions over the time-lines, 4th meeting; participants, interviews, 4th meeting). Although it is not really possible to prove (from the perceptions of the participants and team members) the improved community work in each locality, there is evidence on the side of the participants as well as the team members of a realized importance of shifting the approach based on self-evidence of better/easier engagement of the community members, self-learning, and set of "aha moments" (participants and team-members, reflection, 4th meeting; participants, interviews, 4th meeting).

2.3.3. CHALLENGES WITH "CONNECTION"

Before revisiting their strategies and roles in the community, the participants reported the following challenges in their daily work in the communities, among the most prevalent and reoccurring they highlighted the ability to bring people into the process, keep the motivation strong, connect to the community (become part of it), and ability to spot/visualize changes.

Throughout of the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning process, the participants mentioned that they found it challenging to bring people into the processes and/or to sustain their active and engaged presence, referring both to the team members as well as to the wider community members. Later in the process they assumed that it would be necessary to develop a more personalized communication method and to learn more about the needs of people so that the visions could resonate with all involved and be linked to the needs of the varied net of stakeholders. The participants also realized that something more is needed to make the strategies viable: *"we have to keep in mind...no matter how noble you write about them on the paper, always in life you have human emotions, expressions and motives you have to bear in mind"* (participant, questionnaire, after 3rd meeting). So, they had to also step down from the strategy of "pushing through" and focus more on the emotional engagement of the people. *"The emotional attachment of the people is also needed, some emotions to the people are also needed, it's so hard, you go*

through these people to explain every time, because they have no experience." The participants also realized that engagement needs *"patience for something you want to make...if you do not have time to talk to the people it is a problem."* The participants came to the conclusion that many people find other issues and ideas more important including the possibility to speak about what matters to them. *"I realized from those interviews [participant referring to making interviews in his/her own community as a part of learning more about own community through the community mapping homework exercise] that for people they are more and more important the recognition of other people, that they are of those ideas and that those ideas are to be promoted, because it is appealing for the action...and valorification [valuing] of own space"* (reflection group, 3rd meeting).

"What we [participant, 4th meeting, sharing with the others while responding to the re-occurring frustrations of the other participants] realized is that what helps us to keep the motivation for doing something and perhaps achieving the change was to link the activities to the problems that were felt there...to the things people in the community were frustrated about." Another participant (4th meeting) shared with the others that what seems to work in their case was *"opening the process to more and more people and associations, inviting them for the activities, providing them with the open knowledge sharing space, to also say what they do...also what helped was to build the online sharing community."*

The participants mentioned that they realized that the strategies they had come with at the beginning might clash with the realities (see the Us vs. Them problem below) which can be illustrated by the following: *"whatever plans you have and how ever noble the strategy would have [be], when the reality bites, it's like this, so we need loosening..."* (participant, 3rd meeting). People described the challenges but at this time, were still not able to link it to the fact that the strategies were still defined more or less as a top-down approach, thinking about the good changes for the community, not linked strongly with the stakeholders, and existing dynamics and needs (i.e. the in-depth and reflected knowledge of the community). After changing the strategies (see above), they gradually started to report a stronger sense of belonging and more connections to the community.

2.4 CHANGING PERCEPTION OF COMMUNITY

At the beginning of the ViabilityNet 3.0 process, the participants had clearly created their own picture and understanding of community and the activities they wish to see happening there. It was them, the participants, at the center of the aims, descriptions of the communities, needs, and problems. When asked about how their perception of the community changed as compared to the beginning of their engagement in the ViabilityNet 3.0 program and after

the first meeting in Slovakia, the participants, in the questionnaires, referred to quite a narrow range of answers from *"[at the beginning] I had a limited perception, aspirations, limited ideas, limited goals and aims..." as opposed to "I can envision for my community, [the/my vision] might be put in practice and have a great effect"* to *"actually it did not change, but I reassured that I have to ask the community before the projects."* Another participant mentioned, *"I had a feeling that community is something non-existent [hard to imagine] and engagement is impossible to measure, but now I am enthusiastic to try the methods proposed by [the trainer]."*

It was also said that *"the community is something that can kill a good idea, and in this way my perception did not change."* The participants perceived the community as *"something connected to activism and desire to live together, now they perceive it more as something organized, structured"* but still structured more in a mechanistic sense, which can be illustrated by the following quote: *"...quite simple: community – town, group of people in a certain location, that have a same interest. 70% of leaders' work, 30% followers' work versus 70% followers' work, 30% leaders' work"* (questionnaires, after 1st meeting).

When asked about community engagement, participants in the questionnaires (after 1st meeting) mentioned that they *"stem from initiatives that start from all members, where everyone needs to have the feeling of ownership;" "[it is a] group of people that needs to get together and focus their energies, resources and interests for the achievement of the same goals."* However, this understanding was also rather mechanistic at this stage, referring to the definitions and concepts shared during the training. There was not explicit evidence of approaching the communities in such a way yet.

In a similar way, after the first meeting when speaking about community resources, the participants were able to define resilient communities as *"the ones that shall be organized the way they do not rely on the external funding."* However there was a disconnection when referring to their own projects. They were still mentioning/relying rather on the external resources and describing the lack of resources as one of the limiting factors for the projects (participants, questionnaires, 1st meeting).

At the second meeting, the participants received some new perspectives on community. They realized that there were some important aspects that they missed before (such as a wider range of stakeholders and their roles, different and/or more diverse perspectives on them and their roles). Moreover, the importance of such aspects became clearer to them, making it easier for them to work in the community. It also became easier for them to grasp what community was and to reflect about it in more open way (reflections, 2nd meeting).

The participants began to realize the importance to build a wider picture. During mapping, which was part of their homework activities, they spotted the limitation of being unaware of a more complete understanding of the

setting as well as being detached from the views and ideas of the community. While engaging in the exercises related to a better understanding of community, the participants learned how important and enriching it could be to find the right people as a resource of knowledge and ideas and to benefit from the diversity of information (see the above section on homework). The most significant changes were observable with respect to the understanding of their own role in the process, respecting the need to open the process beyond the core group and to involve more of the people and their voices, regarding their needs and the styles of communication needed for that (see above).

After the third meeting, the participants saw their community more clearly and in a more extensive way. They had also mentioned that *they started to value their communities more*, which had to do with the better sense of belonging and closer connection with the community, as opposed to the past when they were pointing to the distance and *Us vs. Them* feeling. Participants (in the questionnaires, 3rd meeting) shared that *"I found more attached to the community and more reflexive of what it is and what it can become" and/or "I also found very important and relieving to focus on what community has rather than what it is missing, to build on available resources, people and experiences."* People also commented that they had realized the relieving value of the communities having ownership over the processes and their own ability to become more inclusive and welcome more actors into the process: *"...it's not just on us [anymore]...it is a process that could be shared with many...[this is] very relieving."* They commented that previously they were not aware of this and a lack of understanding produced a large amount of stress stemming from the perceived responsibility (questionnaires, after 3rd meeting; interviews, 3rd meeting).

Learning more about the concept of resilient communities, the *participants realized that there could be aspects of non-resilience also built in their own approaches, strategies, and teamwork that needed to be tackled.* Participants realized that they needed to focus and structure their work more and redefine the roles and responsibilities as well as synchronize their own priorities (perceived) and the needs of the wider community. The participants realized that people (including the ones in the team) could have different priorities and ways of talking and working which needed to be balanced within the vision. They also understood that the ways they spoke about issues were very important for any message to get through and be understood. And in order to accomplish this *"it is important to be clear about my [the leader's] role, expectations, points of irritation" as well as those of the others.* Participants found it is not only about the leader as such, but also about the wider variety of team members with different and shared responsibilities (participants, 4th meeting).

During and after the fourth meeting, the participants started to observe and communicate the positive vibes in the community as well as the self-iden-

tification of the community. It was reported to happen especially after informing the community about the ideas for new processes, learning more about the actors and relations, the resources available, and after creating the opportunity for the people to join in enlarging the pool of engaged actors. For this to have happened, there needed to be a shift of approach and activity in the community first. When mentioning the "vibration", respective of changes in the communities, the participants shared that more and more people were curious about what was happening, colleagues were interested to know more, people were happy and proud of the results, and the activities were being implemented and more visible in the wider community. The participants evaluated these things as key factors that had the potential to allow for more in-depth changes in the processes and relations in the communities (questionnaires, after 4th meeting; interviews, 4th meeting).

Prior to the change, especially towards the beginning of the process, the participants reported the challenges related to the *Us vs. Them* atmosphere. As described by one of the participants in the interview (4th meeting), *"originally there was no much contact with the other actors, including there was a competition between the active people and generally unpleasant atmosphere... I wanted to bring this topic up, I appreciated the work they do...invited them for the program, sharing each other's work on fb...its important the other actors and appreciate their work, it's good to share the good practices...also it is important to crate the network between the diversity of actors with different interests, but this is only possible when you know about them and what they do and what they think."* Another participant shared in the interview (4th meeting) that *"I found out that there is a need to listen to the people and support them in their actions...support the courage and provide the space...you have to connect somehow to the people...through common things...story..., before I thought you need to use some sophisticated methods to engage with the community, but it's simple as to talk to the people..., face to face approach, come closer to the people, talk with them normally..., show the interest in the people...and also what helped a lot was using the right words the people could understand...appreciate what people do...let them know that you appreciate it, its... Publicity also helps for people to realize what they actually have in the community...sell the importance of the connections to the people...I realized how it feels not to be in contradiction with the community".* Another participant added that *"the community work is not a fight...it's not must...you shall not push the change...it needs some space and lots of talking...and reflecting...and sharing"* (participant, interview, 4th meeting).

During the reflection at the fourth meeting the participants described the resilient communities using the phrases *"survive disturbances, adapt to new conditions, uses its resources, ability to survive through changes of society."* When asked about relating the adaptive capacities in their own communities they had mentioned, *"creating relations, doing regular interventions and give enough time to the participants to connect to them, our initiatives causing*

growth of other initiatives." From this part of the learning cycle, the participants were able to connect the (rather abstract) terms and concepts related to the resilient communities and community engagement to concrete experiences from their communities (relating them to their own lessons learned). During the same meeting the participants were able to clearly spot and relate the theoretical community building/supporting/strengthening-related concepts with what they had seen during the site visits. They were able to verbalize the essential resilient community engagement factors using their own words and link them to concrete examples. This could be illustrated through the following insights from the reflections after the site visits (fourth visit): *"they are focusing on the community needs." Participants also pointed to the "importance of the diversity of events and activities in the community, so they could satisfy more diverse needs...the personal relationships created facilitated the spillover effect of the initiatives."* *"So it's the diversity of those things you bring [to the community, to the different groups]...because you... any project has a kind of things to bring the people in, you know...so what is so special? What is so special on this? They are kind a trying to satisfy all the target group which they are appealing to."* Another aspect brought in by the participants as spotted as an important factor of community building was the *"system of ownership, sense of belonging to the process...so that people from the community have their role, stake in the processes, not just being the recipients of the change;"* *"it's very important to have the system of ownership and the members and so on,"* *"at the end it works like a system of satisfying needs...somebody from the community makes this, the other one makes that;"* *"so it's like the idea of incubator, like anybody can come with the idea and they provide their people's resources, network, to help...I think this is strong."*

The participants and their view of the community now (at the end of the cycle) included more emphasis on the aspects of *"diversity, respective of plurality of small particles, which acts together, the unity is the union with one vision that gives sustainability and ability to change regardless of any cataclysms"* (questionnaire, after 4th meeting). The definition of resilient communities from the part of the participants changed significantly from book-like definitions into ideas reflecting their own experiences and change in strategies that proved to be more effective in their case (i.e. shift from definitions to the internalized essence of the sustainability and resilience).

3

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



The ViabilityNet 3.0 program 2017/2018 was seen by its participants as creating a specific atmosphere full of trust, open communication, and integrative feeling. During the program, the participants were provided framework for learning aimed at strengthening their own capacities as community leaders to be able to understand their role in the community better and to be able to involve other people from their surroundings into the community processes. All of this in an inclusive way of exploring diverse available resources. Experiencing the learning cycle allowed the participants to better structure their thinking and actions, based, among others, on a clearer picture of what their community was like, what was happening there, and what changes were being produced during their activity. Ultimately, the participants claimed to become more confident and empowered in their roles in their respective communities.

The ViabilityNet 3.0 program of 2017/2018 was also valued by the participants for offering them certain regularity in their engagement, providing for the gradual process of learning reflected in the changes ("re-programming") in strategies and practices they used while being engaged in the communities and moreover, especially towards the end of the program, contributing to the "better work in the communities". Participants also confessed that being part of such a program gave them more credibility, resp. status vis-à-vis the wider community.

The ViabilityNet 3.0 process was perceived to have offered a varied mix of activities, fitting different learning styles of the involved participants. It provided for a balanced ratio of training, reflection, sharing, inspiration gaining, and relaxing time which allowed the participants to digest the learning experience and eventually turn it into a modified way of thinking and acting in their communities. There was also a space to allow for experimenting with different tools and gradually (more towards the end of the learning cycle) adjusting them to the context in different teams and communities.

When reflecting about their learning path, the participants pointed to several cornerstones that proved to be important for them: the personal meetings with trainers, experts, mentors, community leaders (at the site visits), and especially with the other participants in their cohort; involvement of the other members of their team into the ViabilityNet 3.0 process (at and after the joint meeting); analytical assignments to be completed between the meetings (homework); and the site-visits in the communities.

During the common personal meetings/trainings, distributed across the learning cycle and organized in four different places (Slovakia, Serbia, Romania, and Hungary), the tied network of participants was created as a "priceless" value added to the practical methods, tools shared, and skills enhanced. The participants also pointed to the advantage of having their group composed of members with diverse lengths and depths of experience in community engagement, since they could have gained the inspiration: practical hints and tips; examples of what worked and examples of how to deal

with different challenges in practice; and courage through seeing that there existed practical evidence that changes in the community dynamics were possible; at the same time also the fresh energy and enthusiasm of the newcomers motivating for restructuring and capitalizing on the previous-lived experience. The physical presence at the meetings was also appreciated as a time that provided the possibility to detach from daily routines (including the personal, professional as well as community related) and to think and reflect in a bigger perspective, providing them extra time to allow themselves to think more strategically.

The more structured and evidence-based thinking was attributed by the participants to the experience gained through the assigned homework they had to complete in the times between the personal meetings/trainings. However, this was realized and appreciated by the participants rather retrospectively (i.e. only a bit later in the process they realized how much it was hidden to them before). In the time of completion of the homework (referring especially to those assigned towards the very beginning of the process), participants confessed they did not have enough motivation to elaborate on them with much depth because at this time they did not foresee the potential value added. It was only later in the process, when the participants realized that the exercises were not only interesting, but also important to help them to reflect about what is/was in the community and what is happening in order to make more informed decisions and/or to readjust the strategies of their community engagement.

The site visits were also perceived as important elements that helped the participants to see the variety of perspectives, models, ideas, and concepts that were put in practice and could serve as an inspiration and motivation for them. It was also important for the participants to realize that they were part of the wider "movement," that they were "not alone" in their engagement, so they could seek further guidance, information, recommendations, and play around with a variety of examples.

The degree and intensity of involvement of the team members in the process varied team to team. Referring to the times preceding their participation at the fourth meeting, team members shared that their cooperation and involvement became more intensive and active in cases when/if they were invited to work on the tasks to be completed between the meetings (the homework) or to the implementation of concrete activities where they had the chance to also participate in the planning and strategies development and/or the debriefings and reflection processes, rather than just completing the tasks planned by the leader and referring to them. The overall connection to the program was rather weak. At the same time, team members confessed that until the time many of them came to the ViabilityNet 3.0 meeting, they really could not imagine much what was going on, they were not really a part of the process beyond the activities and tasks assigned to them by the leader (participant). Several times they could even imagine what

the leader was trying to make happen and why. Both the participants and the team leaders reflected the importance of the joint ViabilityNet 3.0 meeting. It was important for the team members to be able to imagine the specificity and spirit of the Viability and to gain inspiration and a better understanding of what was happening in the process. Both groups also valued the experience of joint meetings because it helped them to better understand one another, to be on the same boat, which in the end eased up the communication, further planning, and involvement in the community while having a stronger back up of a like-minded persons in the team.

Throughout the ViabilityNet 3.0 learning path the participants experienced changes in the following aspects of community engagement: **the change in their perception of their role in the community (including the changed perception of the leader role); more emphasis on the voice and role of the other people in the community; more structured way of thinking, planning, and organizing (which also required internalizing the importance of more evidence-based knowledge about the community and the processes of change); as well as discovering the need for different modes of communication both with team members as well as with other people in the communities.**

The important turning point was associated to the time around the meeting in Romania when the participants were observed to have started to connect different things (training experience, reflected experience from own communities, examples from the site visits) together in a more profound way. The more focused strategic thinking and reassessment of the approaches was also associated with the period after the third meeting and even more strongly later on. In individual cases they also realized that they cannot build the community process just on the activities implemented as there needed to be a shift towards wider facilitative processes. After the third meeting, the participants also shared more commitments to organize meetings outside of the core team willing to be more open and inclusive. In order to do that, they realized the need to change the mode of communication to use a more understandable language and pass on messages through more engaged methods such as tying the communication to the stories and community memories.

The most significant change was observable with respect to the participants' role as leaders and more generally with respect to their position in the community. At the beginning of the process, the "leaders" were rather referring to the need to push the changes they had designed for the communities. Gradually, throughout the process they saw more of a need to give voice to the members of the community to share their needs (in the beginning however, the main focus was on the leader's position). After the second meeting the leaders also pointed to other qualities to be essential for them including division of labor (sharing responsibilities), involvement of more people, emphasis on team play, being better listeners and more attentive learners of the information that is coming from various resources (closer genuine

communication to people, using tools for collecting data, mapping, etc.), and working “with” rather than “for” the community. After the third and even more so during and after the fourth meeting, the participants realized their role as having the character of facilitator, incubator of the processes, mediator, and holder of the vision. Based on the realization of the importance, they communicated the processes necessary to find ways to include people and their perceived needs into the visions and strategies. They also reported to feel more empowered and courageous to act in the communities. At the same time, towards the end of the learning cycle (at the last meeting), the participants voiced their fears and insecurities related to the process after the end of the ViabilityNet 3.0, asking themselves how they were going to manage without all the services and support (from the part of the trainers, experts, mentors, and also the peers) they had been provided throughout the ViabilityNet 3.0 experience.

Apart from their roles in the community, the participants gradually changed their perception of the community as such. At the beginning of the process, the picture of the community, its character, problems, and needs were painted by the participants (and/or with participants playing the main role). Later after the first meeting, the participants admitted that their image of community was very blurred as the community was difficult to imagine. Later, the participants admitted the limitation of such a partial picture of the community and started to operate more with the concepts and definitions that were presented to them at the meeting/during the training. In relation to the second meeting, the participants widened their perspectives on community including the aspects of necessity to include a wider range of stakeholders, looking into what their roles could be including more diverse voices. After the third meeting it was observable that they valued their community more which had to do with a better sense of belonging and closer connection to the community. At and after the fourth meeting, the participants communicated that they had started to see the positive vibes in the community, more and more people being curious about the processes, interested to know more, happy and/or proud of the results, people becoming involved and taking different roles. The communities became to be as living organisms. Using the words of one of the participants: *“a resource, a resource that can be enhanced, transformed, adapted, improved and consulted etc.”*

In order to learn more in depth about these “community living organisms” and how they have been influenced by the participants’ and their team’ engagement (i.e. in what way the process of change of the participants translated or is being continuously translated into their respective communities), further research focusing on individual case studies is necessary.

4

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Experiencing the learning cycle allowed the participants to better structure their thinking and actions. The following factors were perceived to have played a role in it and thus it might be considered to keep them as a part of the program in the future: the regularity of the meetings and tasks for the participants which provided for the gradual process of learning reflected into the changes in strategies and practices vis-à-vis the communities; the varied mix of activities (such as training, reflection, sharing, inspiration gaining, relaxing, etc.) fitting the different learning styles of participants; personal meetings among the participants and with the trainers, experts, mentors, and other community leaders; diversity in the group based on the different length and depth of previous experience in community engagement; evidence-based thinking based on the completion of the homework and/or site visits.

On the other hand, the below-presented challenges and suggestions for improvements are contextually bound. It is necessary to be careful with their generalization and, at the same time, they might be transferable to other groups if reflected, contextualized, and adjusted. This is similar as well to different challenges that could develop in different groups depending on the processes that can be influenced, not only by the previous experience of the individual participants and/or their cultural and/or professional background, but also (importantly) by the concrete group composition, including also the relations between the participants as they develop throughout of the process. This could play a role in influencing the group dynamics and learning environment as such (among other, the level of trust among the members of the group as well as between the participants and the facilitators/mentors/trainers; the willingness to share, learn from one another and/or support each another etc.).

In addition, it should be reminded that it takes time for ideas to develop and be translated into practical, taken steps. Therefore the general suggestion for process facilitation is to remain patient and balance a controlled approach with a natural process flow.

Among the concrete challenges identified in the studied group and their learning path were the following:

- The reflections and sharing during the meetings led to the identification of the “aha moments” and modifications of the lessons learned on the knowledge base, which has the potential to help participants move along their learning path. The perceived lessons learned, however, are generally not explicitly tied to the concrete steps and processes needed to facilitate a transfer of knowledge to a wider group of team members and/or communities, respective to the concrete context specific community work strategies and actions, at least not immediately and directly. The participants themselves repeatedly communicated that it had not always been easy to reconnect with the team and wider community after

after coming back from the meetings.

Suggestion: create space during the meetings to lead the participants to formulate concrete steps to be taken to enhance the spillover effect for the benefit of the team members and wider community. This might even include the development of new tools to be used during the meetings that could support the participants create a action plan(s) by bridging the "aha moments" and lessons learned with the concrete actions and next steps to be taken.

- The homework (analytical activities focused at deepening the knowledge and improving the understanding of the communities) were found to be very useful "path changing mechanisms." However, it is only truly realized by the participants at a bit later stages of the process. Therefore, the motivation to engage in-depth in their execution at the time of assignment is generally rather limited (with important exceptions/cases of participants that naturally incline to be more analytical and reflexive thinking).

Suggestion: ask the participants what would help them to complete the essence of the tasks that is part of the homework at the relevant time and guide them through the process. Moreover, although the participants themselves developed the habit to call these tasks "homework," given the context and prevailing discourses on take home activities internalized during the formal educational processes in Central and Eastern Europe, it might be more beneficial to change the rather discouraging name of "homework" to something else and address the activity with a different label such as "learning support activity" (or other) in order to motivate the participants to undertake them with more interest and at earlier stages of the process.

- In addition, the participants related some of the constraints associated with elaborating on the homework not only to the a decrease in energy and motivation when returning back home to their respective communities and to the limited understanding why it was important for the process, but also to the lack of experience in conducting the individual tasks. They mentioned they would appreciate more hints and tips of how to do the matrix, mapping, interviews, and how to approach the people, etc.

Suggestion: better explain what is the "essence" of the homework and/or to share stories of what the "previous cohort of participants"

struggled with; share their concerns, hints, and tips and messages from the previous participants of how beneficial they found the activities for improvement of their own processes and how sad they were only to have realized it bit later in the process. In addition, it might be beneficial to guide them more in the process of the homework elaboration, including putting in place early reminders to reflect and report on what they have learned and what related actions they have developed.

- The participants valued the diversity of experience among themselves, which allows for sharing expertise, formulating hints and tips, and bringing in fresh energy and motivation to interact with.

Suggestion: to keep the mix of participants with different depths and lengths of experience as an additional value added to the process.

- The team members (in most of the cases) reported that their understanding of the ViabilityNet 3.0 process as well as the "spirit" was rather limited until they joined the participants at the meeting/training. At the same time, both participants and team members valued "being on the same boat" as very positive for communication among themselves as well as for the common engagement in the community.

Suggestion: think of more diverse and earlier ways of how to make the team members more engaged in the process, allowing them to become familiar with the specific atmosphere and approaches by the VIABILITY, including designing of new/specific activities/tasks to be given to team members to complete earlier in the process. This will help them to be more motivated and feel a sense of belonging at an earlier stage as well as it may enable them to become more effective support to the respective leaders in the community processes. It might also be useful to share their experience from working in teams among the participants, so that they can see what kind of different role/task divisions exist in reality in different contexts/communities and compare the different teams with the aim to gain more inspiration needed for adaptation of their team strategies.

- Generally, the participants as well as the team members valued the evidence-based work and felt more confident when they can track more concretely what was going on. And if any changes were happening, they could have made more informed planning.

Suggestion: try to build up the training on adequate tools as well as sharing of the importance of evidence-based action (impact measurement) already at the earlier stages of the learning cycle. The participants mentioned repeatedly that they felt sorry that they had only recognized the value of more-informed planning and action retrospectively. In case they had recognized it earlier, they would have put more energy in doing the exercise as well as using the outcomes of it in their daily work.

- Many of the participants shared their concerns about what will happen after the end of the learning cycle, communicating that although generally feeling more equipped, more empowered, and more courageous, they were not all that secure to stand on own feet yet. They commented that they would miss the discussions, support, sharing, and encouragement they had grown accustomed to during the ViabilityNet 3.0 process.

Suggestion: to think of the phase-out procedures related to designing different ways of supporting participants after the end of the cycle and lead the participants towards the "imagining the future" while still staying connected and supported.

I would like to humbly appreciate the participants and team members of the 2017/2018 ViabilityNet 3.0 program for their courage, patience, and willingness to spend their precious moments with me and openly share their ideas, experience, and feelings allowing me to learn both about and from them as well as to mediate this over an amazing year-long process to other interested people. I wish them many more beautiful learnings as well as enjoyable moments on their community engagement journey.

Lenka

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ViabilityNet 3.0 Program 2017/2018 evaluation:

Community leaders´ learning path

(“impact measurement”)

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