

The following case from the Czech Republic belongs to a series of case studies prepared in the context of Community Alphabet, an international peer learning program led by Via Foundation in Prague. The program focuses on inclusive participatory community building and seeks to deepen participants' awareness, knowledge and skills of asset-based community development (ABCD) and participatory mapping, and offers opportunities for peer and expert support to advance their community-building efforts.

Between 2020 and 2022, 26 community practitioners, leaders and foundation staff from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Serbia took part in the program's pilot.

A new round of the program focusing on community practitioners and leaders from a broader spectrum of European countries is planned for 2023-2024.



**Asset-based Community Development (ABCD):** A way of approaching community building/development that enables residents to recognize and use assets that exist in their own community and to connect around shared interests, all with the aim of deepening interaction, enhancing neighborhood life and allowing local residents to lead in making change. See [here](#) for more information on the Core Principles of ABCD.

**Participatory mapping:** A wide variety of approaches that directly and meaningfully involve community members in the process of understanding what already exists in the community (in terms of skills, knowledge, facilities, existing support and the like) as well as views on how the community might evolve (participatory budgeting, Citizens Assemblies, etc).

The case studies in this series offer insights into the ways program participants have tested ABCD-based community building ideas and practices to identify and mobilize local skills, knowledge and other resources or participatory mapping, and what this has brought them in terms of results to date, reflections on their own role and ideas for building community in the future.

The cases seek to recognize the changes occurring in the community and among at least a few people directly involved in the process. Over time, additional reflections and voices will be included to capture changes in the community and in the active group, as well as differences in perspectives and opinions on the process, its value and its main achievements.

# LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



*I wanted the municipality to learn to involve the citizens in planning, to ask for their input. But instead it became clear that the community can do these things without municipal leadership.*

*-Lucie, Dec.'22*



## I. Introductions: The Place and the People

### Chlum u Třeboně

is a town on the southern border of the Czech Republic with Austria. It lies in an area of fish breeding lakes developed in the 16th century and has historically served as a market town. A major glassworks factory built in the late 19th century was the town's main employer for most of the 20th century. The town currently has approximately 1,900 inhabitants. Today seasonal tourism services and a few factories in the area are the key sources of employment. Some residents commute to larger cities in the region.

In the 1990s the glassworks went bankrupt and 600 people lost their jobs. Until that moment it had been a vibrant community with many cultural activities. After the factory closed, some people left, some stayed, but the town has not recovered.

One of Chlum's most important public spaces is its town square, which presides over the town on a hill at the end of a street leading from the shopping district, chateau and lake. Its dominant feature is a 18th century church and it is also home to the municipal office, an elementary school, a children's activity center, a small grocery store and homes. At the center of the square is a fountain, which was surrounded by shade trees until their removal in 2018.



Residents regularly use the square to access the school, office and other facilities, while larger crowds are drawn to the traditional mid-August fair, school crafts fairs and other community events that take place there.

In 2017, the town council commissioned a redesign of the town square. Many residents were unhappy with the initial site design, which envisioned turning part of the square into a parking lot. They complained that the design did not respond to their needs. This sparked the new initiative described below.

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



### Lucie

is passionate about people working together for the good of the community and assuming responsibility for their own role in the life of the community. Although she is a native of Prague, she spent much of her childhood at a house nestled between woods and fish breeding lakes near Chlum U Třeboně. She feels a strong bond to the nature in this area and it is here that she resettled as an adult with her young family. In the 2000s, she co-created an environmental education center in the nearby town of Jindřichův Hradec and ran programs for preschools and elementary schools and led landscape restoration projects.



Today, she designs and implements workshops for preschool and elementary school children and teachers in various subject areas, drawing particularly on her background in environmental education and Montessori pedagogy.

In 2012, she led a community project to redesign the garden of the preschool her children attended. She engaged children, parents and others in the community in planning and building the garden. At the time she said: *"The greatest benefit of the project, apart from the creation of a beautiful space, is that the children were able to plan with the adults and experience that it is possible to develop a vision and actually change things according to that vision."*

Encouraged by people's enthusiasm about the project and the useful garden space that emerged, Lucie became involved in other community public space projects. She became an advisor, through Via Foundation, to community groups creating public space improvements through community engagement. In this role, she advises project groups on how to engage fellow residents and how to manage the design and build process.

Lucie joined the CA program in 2020. At the time she was already engaged in Chlum, and was working under the auspices of the Town of Chlum. She also felt that the community she was seeking to involve was not responding to her efforts as she had hoped.



# LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



She describes Chlum as a place where residents and officials lost some of their drive following the loss of the glassworks and as a fragmented community without a common sense of purpose. While she feels residents are not divided by any stark or impenetrable divisions, there are some tensions stemming from political positions. The governing party and the opposition each have their own circle of supporters and the two groups do not get on well together. In Lucie's view, there is a tendency among residents to believe that it is the municipality's job to manage public spaces and public life, and that there is not much of a role for residents in that sphere.

## I. Letting Go: The Creation of a Community Rain Garden and Hopefully Much More

### Site plan for the town square

Our story begins in 2017, when the Chlum town council commissioned a new site plan for the town square. It entrusted the design process to an architectural firm but did not invite residents to take part. The following spring, the town council reviewed the design variants that the architects had created and chose its preferred site plan at a council meeting. It presented the proposed site plan to residents through a municipal newsletter in July 2018, asked them to submit their feedback and announced that a public meeting to discuss the proposed site plan would be held in fall 2018.



After some residents expressed dissatisfaction with the proposed site plan, in September 2018 a councillor asked Lucie to get involved. Knowing that Lucie had experience in community planning and managing public space projects, the councillor suggested that Lucie lead a community meeting to gather residents' comments on the proposed site plan. Lucie agreed to become involved on a volunteer basis.

Lucie approached the mayor. She suggested ways to give residents a voice in the redesign process, such as inviting a neutral facilitator (other than herself) to lead a community planning process. *I tried to make an agreement with the then mayor to involve people into plans for the redesign of the square, but he did not want to do so. I hoped that the municipality would involve the people.*



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Next, she invited residents to a meeting where she explained how community planning works. About 10 residents came, including a woman who would later become mayor. The then mayor was also invited but did not attend. The group agreed to engage residents in a redesign process but to postpone their efforts until after the municipal elections, which were just one month away. As she said: *By then, the mayoral elections were close and we did not want to make a political issue from it.*

Then, after the municipal elections in October 2018, the composition of the town council changed and the woman mentioned above was elected mayor. She was in favor of engaging citizens although she did not have experience with engagement processes herself.

With the support of the new mayor, Lucie convened and facilitated a community planning in November 2018 where residents had the opportunity to comment on the proposed site plan for the square.

A diverse group of approximately 70 people attended that included people living in the vicinity of the square, older people, people with holiday homes in Chlum, teachers, parents and children, members of the town council, people from nearby villages which belong under the Chlum town council, young people who had just left the town to study elsewhere, and the architects charged with preparing the plans.

A number of participants expressed distrust in the idea of reaching agreement through a community meeting process. People nevertheless gave input regarding the future design of the square. Some wanted to eliminate car traffic in front of the school, which they considered dangerous. Some expressed the need for more greenery and in particular mature trees to provide shade. Some highlighted the need for seating and drinking water.



The newly elected municipal government was quite happy with the result of the community meeting and a summary of residents' comments were passed on to the architects to incorporate into the final site plan. A parking solution was found elsewhere in the town and it was agreed that the square would become a 'no parking, no driving' zone.

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



But then, under pressure to address more urgent community needs, the town council decided to put funding into the sewage system and not into the square redesign.

### A new initiative in the garden

Lucie thought this was a shame and became more involved. In spring 2019, she met with 7 middle-aged or older women she had come to know through the process to redesign the square and raised the idea of a new initiative so that momentum among residents would not be lost.

*It was also at this stage that the municipality pulled back and didn't want to be so closely aligned with it. The municipal leadership struggled with how to show that it wasn't an official municipal action, that it was something community-led.*

Some residents were motivated to 'do something' by their disillusionment with the municipality's decision not to fund the results of the square redesign process. Others, according to Lucie, were angry that the previous municipal administration had cut down the mature shade trees surrounding the fountain on the square.



Shady fountain, 2011



Reflection on how the 2019 initiative began:

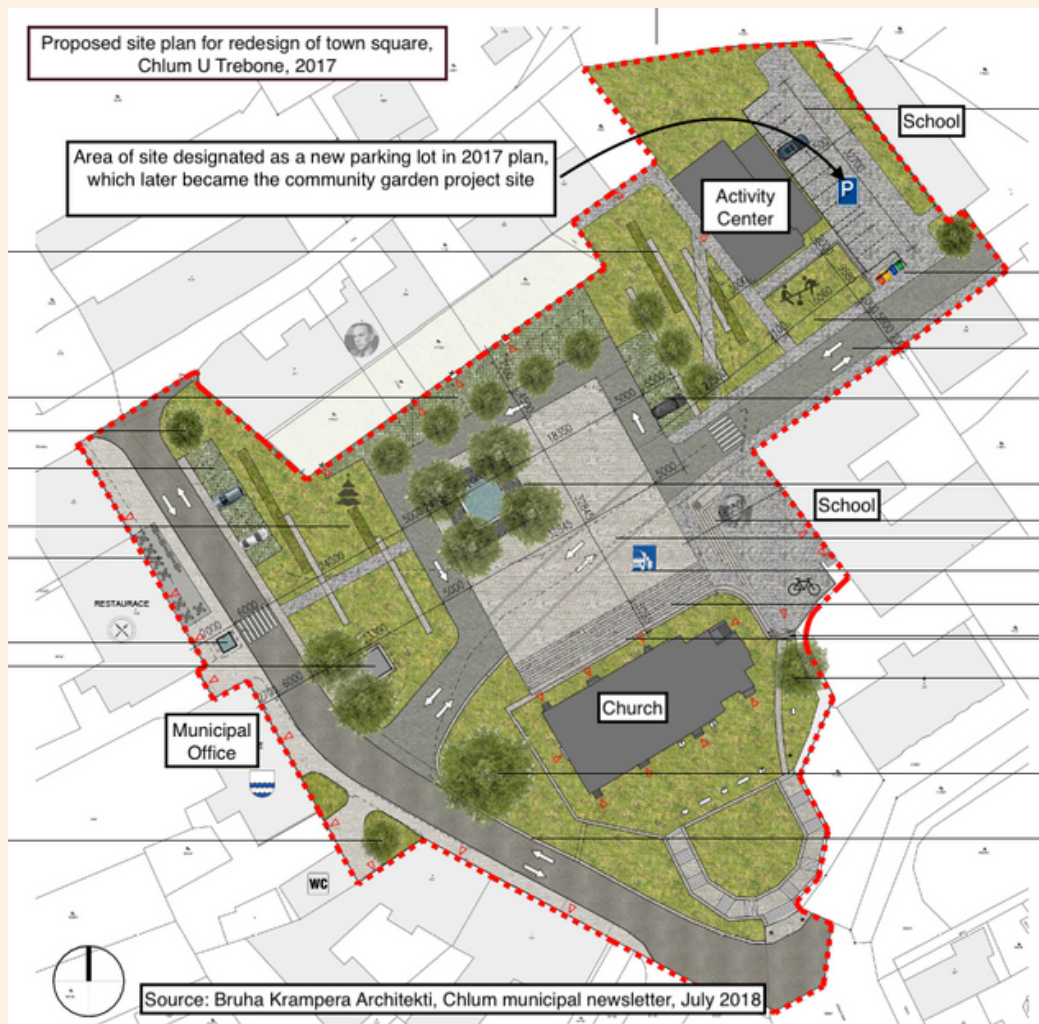
*I was scared that people will lose their motivation for future activities if nothing came to be realized from their wishes like every other time (it was a concern which people shared with me, that this public meeting is only a waste of time and nothing will happen like every other time). So the idea to continue was probably mine, but the decision to do something about it was shared.*

*The team was 7 – 5 ladies who were involved into “Let's try something new, to find out what people want, spend some time taking care about the place where we live, make it better for everybody, it is worth it...Lucie can help us, let's support this and everybody can do something”. I was bringing the framework of steps and they were bringing the specific ideas how to do the steps in Chlum and they did it.-Lucie, Jan.'23*



Lucie suggested that the group pursue a project on one part of the site: namely, the garden adjacent to the school, which was a municipally owned green space of 650 sq.m. adjacent to the square. Situated between one of the elementary school buildings and the children's activity center, this space had been slated to become a parking lot in the original 2017 site plan.

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Based on residents' input to the 2017 site plan, the designation for this part of the site had been changed from parking lot to vegetated recreational use. There was agreement about the need to keep cars away from the school and create a place where children could come between lessons to run and rest.

Lucie notes that: *The children were already using the space in this manner, but it was just a grass field with nothing that would invite kids to play and explore.* Moreover, the garden site was not part of the square as such and thus it would not be impacted if a master site plan was later implemented for the whole square.

Retaining and using rainwater runoff also emerged as a priority. The year before, when the mature lime trees around the fountain had been cut down, the microclimate changed, making the square uncomfortably dry and hot. *We agreed on the need to make maximum use of the rainwater runoff from the roof of the children's activity center and the first grade classroom of the elementary school and to retain it on site, use it to irrigate the site and for play activities, and plant trees and shade the site.*



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Community rain garden site before the changes

Lucie knew of the possibility to obtain a small grant from Via Foundation in Prague and, based on agreement with the group of 7 women, she prepared a grant proposal to engage residents in transforming the garden site. In May 2019, she submitted it on behalf of a non-profit organization that she had co-founded and run for many years.



Reflection:

*Actually, for some action, for change and realization and to support activity in the community I chose a place where it would not be complicated to find agreement. We knew that to redesign the whole square is too expensive and complicated, and it is not the priority of the people of Chlum, who were more interested in investment into a sewage system. And I wanted to do at least something not to lose the energy and activity of people who were upset and interested in change of the square.*

*So we chose a smaller place on a side of the square, just under the windows of the first grade classroom, where parking had been planned and people were really upset about this part of the proposed site plan. And I was sure it will not be too difficult to succeed in realization of something nice. -Lucie, Jan. '23*



### From preparation to engaging residents

Via approved a grant of CZK 100,000 (ca. € 4,200) and Lucie and the group were ready to begin spreading the word about the new community garden project. In the same period, Lucie became a paid employee of the municipality tasked with facilitating the garden community design process and also in charge of the children's activity center. She held this post until December 2022.

*From the beginning it was more about using a snowball technique, asking each person who else might want to get involved. I tried to use all the outreach channels I could, social media and the municipal website, PA system and newsletter. It mostly worked by word of mouth. So it was strongly based on contacts between people in the community.*

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



*This communication was also pretty much on the other people from the "team" as they knew everybody. I did not. I went through the "institutions" and they did the personal invitations.*

*They invited people to the first community meeting in September 2019. Information was shared by municipal radio, newspaper, web pages, Facebook, posters around the town, letters into the postboxes, personally to everybody who was willing to listen.*

*A great role was played by some teachers giving invitations to the parents of school kids. Older kids painted some posters (a huge frog, a mole, rubber boots, a wheelbarrow) which were set on the square and around the town to catch the eyes and through small jokes to involve people.*

*And school kids also had their own community planning workshop about what they would like to be there.*



Two members of the initial team were teachers at the school. They spoke with their colleagues and suggested to involve the kids. But as Lucie mentions when looking back on the process: *I then hoped that the school would take it on and spread the word among young people. But the teachers didn't really encourage parents or children as much as I had hoped. They didn't repeatedly say, 'come to this event', etc. The original principal didn't actively support the project. I had imagined that the participation would be greater. I think without Covid the participation would have been greater. But at the end it was good, more people began coming and there were activities, 300 people came to the grand opening.*



At this stage in the process, Lucie was of two minds about the role she should play: wanting residents to lead and feeling pressure to lead herself. As Lucie notes about her own role: *I think that if I hadn't taken the lead from the beginning, nothing would have been realized. I did it this way with the idea that people will experience first-hand that it is possible, they will learn to be active, they will learn how to do it themselves and next time they won't need me.* -Lucie, Jan.'23



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



As Lucie explained, *We tried to invite every inhabitant of Chlum to be part of the decision making process. The ladies invited personally everybody they knew, I spoke with the schooldirector, teachers, visited the schoolmeetings with parents and introduced what is going on and why they should be part of it, and so on. About forty people were involved and came to plan.*

### Community planning of the garden

At the meeting in September 2019, participants mapped what works and does not work in the existing site, what activities people already engage in there, and what they would like to do in the space.

Those present identified the key problems as lack of shade, excessive heat in summer and insufficient inspiration for children.



They also proposed how the space could be used by the school, what other activities it should serve and identified the presence of a well on the site that had been closed up with blocks of concrete for safety.

The goal that emerged was to involve the school community and others in designing and creating a garden where school children could play during breaks in the school day and to find ways to cool the square which was exceedingly hot without mature trees.

The response was generally positive, although some teachers were afraid that public use of the space would disrupt school instruction. One teacher was concerned that children would drown in the pond that had been proposed.

Lucie and the team compiled the ideas and an architect was there as well and listened carefully. In the months following the meeting, he created two design variants. Through the town newsletter, residents were invited to a second community meeting to discuss the variants.

During this period new people joined the core group, including a few mothers of young children and one particularly active teacher, Tereza, with a group of friends that she brought to the project.



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Some 30 residents came to the second meeting in February 2020. The architect presented the variants and people gave feedback. During the discussion the architect sought to mitigate people's concerns, for example by proposing a pond with only 30cm of water. Through discussion the group agreed on a hybrid of the two design variants that incorporated the architect's mitigating suggestions.



Illustrative drawings from the community rain garden design



When asked how they handled things when different views were raised, Lucie responded: *People did that amongst themselves. When someone appeared who was sceptical, other people in the school community led discussions about the issue at hand. For example, a parent said don't build a pond, a child will fall into the pond, then the teachers talked to the child about it. Some teachers tried to convince children that the garden wasn't a good idea, saying you won't be able to play soccer there, and their parents countered and explained to the child how he would still be able to play soccer there.*

*One woman wrote to the building department to ask whether we actually had a building permit. She was initially in favour of the project, but then she wasn't allowed to plant potatoes between apartment buildings by the municipality, and then she turned against all things community. I was surprised by the reaction, but it does not have a connection with the garden. It is her personal war. -Lucie, Dec.'22*



Gradually parents with children attending the elementary school became engaged, people who realized that it will be a great space for their kids. To get them involved, Lucie and one of the teachers planned a few hours of art in which the children created posters to invite people to the first work party.

Seventh and eighth graders also held their own planning session in which they said they would love to enjoy coffee there and have a clubroom where they could wait for the bus after school.

During the spring of 2020 the architects created a final site plan.

# LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



In May 2020, the core team decided to organize a flea market fundraiser. It was conceived primarily as a community event. Sellers could decide whether to donate all or only part of their proceeds to the garden project. A few women also sold baked goods to visitors. This generated a few thousand Czech crowns.

The group also received many in-kind gifts and a woman who owned a nearby shop contributed CZK 30,000 (ca. € 1,200). As Lucie added: *We collected another I think CZK 15,000 from small donations, which Via Foundation then matched. We got free food to serve at work parties sometimes, and we got some materials for free (concrete bricks, floor tiles, some wood) and in the end we had (because of grants) more money than we needed.*



## From design to implementation

In July 2020, residents were invited to a meeting to view the final site plan for the rain garden and to plan out the implementation steps, including dividing tasks between those that could be completed by community members as volunteers and those requiring professional work.

Three main work parties were held between mid-July and early October 2020, but including spontaneous and small group efforts, there were 26 work days. Eighth and ninth graders came to one of the work parties. Young people also contributed their ideas in the implementation phase. In one small section of the pond, for example, where the roots of water lilies necessitated a water-depth of 90cm, children added stones to reduce the danger for other children.





## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Almost all of the work was done by residents on a volunteer basis. A group of 7 fathers of school children (6 with relevant skills and one just very willing) got together on their own, decided what needed to be done and did it without Lucie's involvement. They used their own machinery and their skills to build concrete walls, dig the pond, lay paving and a wooden walkway and platform next to the pond. This saved a huge amount of money. The municipality's technical services staff also transported some materials.

Jana, a teacher who was part of the core team, described the diversity of the volunteers: *...there was one woman who is an academic painter, also mothers of children, retired people, manual laborers, elementary and high school and university students, also Tereza Sucha's husband, and two fathers of the schoolchildren who have a construction firm, they helped us survey the site which was especially important when we were doing the stairs, they were quite complicated.*





## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Two services had to be paid for: the first bulldozer groundwork (later the bulldozer operator just took payment for fuel) and one father, a mason, took payment for laying paving near the end of the project as he had contributed a lot of time earlier on and could no longer afford to work for free.

*There were fathers who did not come to work parties but said they would bulldoze for free on another day. That was the moment when it began working more along the lines of ABCD. It seemed at that point that the second grant maybe wouldn't have been needed. [...] I believe they would have been able to do it using their own resources.*



The municipality contributed CZK 30,000 twice; the first sum was used to pay for concrete in 2020 and the second to buy wood for the pergola and gravel in 2021.

The mayor herself worked as a volunteer at several work parties. And after about half of the plans had been completed, Lucie wrote a second grant request to the Environmental Partnership Foundation for CZK 149,000, which the municipality submitted in its name.



*As she explained: I wanted the municipality to submit it so that they would learn to write and submit grant proposals on their own. I discussed it with the mayor, but I don't feel that the municipality really learned it. The municipality was supposed to do the financial accounting of the grant but in the end I had to do it because the financial accountant said she didn't have the capacity.*

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



*Lucie has mixed feelings about her own relationship to the municipality. As she noted in late 2022: I had the complication that I led the first phase of community planning as a volunteer and then when implementation became a possibility, I said I can no longer do it as a volunteer and I became a paid contractor as the municipality's community coordinator. But [...] being a paid person made it more difficult. It enabled me to do it all, but it brought other complications.*



Then, just as residents' excitement and energy around the developing garden was growing and Lucie was meeting with various parents and others who were willing to offer help, the fall 2020 wave of Covid hit. As she said: *The entire initiative, the momentum, stopped for a year. It was quite difficult to restart after that.*

### Finishing touches

In spring 2022, when the project could finally re-emerge after Covid, Lucie felt it was **stuck**. *Some people canceled their promises and I couldn't find a carpenter to do it and the mayor said to me, 'You are the community coordinator, so activate the community, it's your job' and I was disappointed, because I thought she didn't grasp the point of the project. When I was a paid contractor, the municipality thought I was responsible for activating the community. But it doesn't work that way with a community. One of my friends sitting next to me asked what is going on and then said that he will do it. He is an inhabitant of Chlum. And then it got a new energy and flow.*

The carpenter-friend's willingness to help made it possible to finish the wooden elements. As they were installed, and spring flowers bloomed, people could see the results of their labour. Finally, after almost 3 years, the finale was in sight and everyone wanted to see the garden finished.



*[...] the project was stuck and I was blaming myself and I couldn't find a way out. When I realized it wasn't my fault – I am not the director there, etc. – but for me the responsibility was quite heavy, I was taking it on myself, and then when I said no, it is not my fault, 'you did your best', then it somehow moved. I freed myself and said out loud "I don't know what to do", then it started to move and people started to work on it. [...] And now it is done and it's great and the garden is bringing a lot of happiness. - Lucie, Oct.'22*





# LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



The grand opening of the community rain garden was held in July 2022. Lucie officially handed over the garden project to the municipality, which assumed responsibility for maintenance of the grassy area. Two of the younger team members, Jana and Tereza, took over care of the garden.

During this period, teachers and schoolchildren also gradually began using the garden, organizing campfire gatherings, fixing things, etc.

Jana, the teacher, noted: *When I go there in the afternoon with the children, they don't misbehave, we all relax, the children calm down and I do, too. And then around 3 pm when the children leave and I just sit there and watch the dragonflies on the water surface and it smells so nice...in my opinion it is beautiful.*



She added, however: *I do have some concerns about it being maintained going forward, right now the other teacher and I are doing that, and that is okay, that is how it should be (rather than the municipality maintaining it).*



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Looking back on the 3-year period, Lucie identifies that: *There were two different approaches: me leading it externally and the insiders leading it, and they needed to see how to lead it before they took it over. I think of it as a shift towards ABCD. ABCD helped me abandon the managerial role and let the project live its own life.* -Lucie, Dec.'22



Throughout this process Lucie was also uncomfortable with her own role. As she said in Dec. 2022: *Before and after Covid I was thinking about ABCD and so I tried to push myself out of the project and let the community be the project. I was working with the community a lot, as a contracted municipal 'employee'. But I also wanted the municipality to take responsibility for it, too. I thought: if the mayor really wants to be open and help people improve their own environment as she has said, then the municipality should learn how to do it. I wrote the grant proposal (to the Environmental Partnership Foundation) but at least the municipality submitted the proposal in its own name. I wanted other people to take responsibility.*

*That was really difficult. It seemed that people weren't used to that role. They are used to having a boss, they will come and help, but they didn't start assuming leadership roles till the end of the project. At that point, suddenly, a group of teachers who have young children of their own began thinking of what kind of activities could be held in the garden, and I shifted to a background role. But I had to wait for that.*

A subsequent tulip planting event was held in November 2022. The new school principal came, along with people who had been part of the project throughout as well as new people brought by Tereza, and Lucie could see that they were assuming responsibility for the garden. Moreover, at the end of the grant period, the team had CZK 26,550 (ca. € 1,100) in grant money left over because so many things and so much help – such as technical work with the bulldozers - had been obtained for free.

### III. So what was achieved in 3 years in addition to the...

- emergence of a group of residents in Chlum u Třeboně – a core team and wider group – who improved a local public space using their own potential
- co-creation of a child-friendly play and learning garden adjacent to the main square with a pond and trees to cool the space
- CZK 362,382 (ca. €15,200) in financial gifts, of which CZK 60,000 (ca. €2,500) from the municipality and approximately CZK 47,500 (ca. €2,000) from local private sources and the flea market, and an additional approximately CZK 100,000 (€4,200) in the form of in-kind donations and time
- 26 work days and 693 volunteer hours donated

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



### Changes in the community

For Lucie the other changes in Chlum u Třeboně are less tangible, but extremely important.

It is her impression that: *The atmosphere at the garden is more relaxed, pleasant, less stressed...children go into the garden, teachers go too, there is no yelling, it is more humane and natural, it is more vibrant.*

Most important perhaps, Lucie feels: *People communicate more. In the groups of people involved in creating the new garden, and visitors to the garden (parents, teachers and especially children), there is now the attitude that things can be changed. This is also connected to the change in leadership, that some of the people engaged in the project are now taking on a leadership role in community activities. She adds: But it is still too soon. We will see how the garden and the community will live in the next years.*

Whether the experience has motivated the municipality to communicate more with residents is not yet clear. At the beginning Lucie hoped that the municipality would start holding regular meetings with residents on specific themes such as vegetation and start involving them in participatory budgeting, but neither of those measures have been initiated. She still hopes that the remaining grant money will be allocated using a participatory budget type of process where residents decide on its use.

The community rain garden project enabled the mayor to step out of her official role behind a desk and do something very hands-on with residents. The mayor strives to communicate with citizens, and is supportive of more engagement, but Lucie is not sure whether this is due to the garden project or the mayor's personal aims.

Lucie also noted that residents are thinking more about their own resources and what they can do themselves. This was evident during a brainstorming session about how to use the remaining money from the grant project: *I have already collected some ideas – one lady said we could buy a garbage bin because there is a spot where people put garbage in a hole in a tree. But as she was talking, she realized she could do it herself. She put a plastic garbage bag on the tree and it works. You just need to touch on it and through talking they realize they don't need any money.*



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



As teachers use the garden with their students, ideas for further projects are emerging. Jana shared these thoughts: *To create an outdoor classroom, perhaps a mobile classroom, partially enclosed. And the property behind the building, which is the municipality's, could be used for something. There are mature trees there and that could become an interesting space maybe with play equipment or a climbing wall and a pergola.*

### Changes in Lucie's thinking

Lucie notices a **shift in her own approach to community building** as well: *Definitely more distance. Before I thought the ideal was supporting the team as a manager, with expertise, a toolbox or cookbook of project steps. Now I think that is one way that has its place in some communities, but the other approach where you let seeds that are there sprout, is more interesting. In other words, ABCD through conversations where you don't provide them a model from the outside. Of course this is a big challenge because I don't have experience in this approach but it is appealing because I see the limitations of the managerial role. This new approach seems time-consuming but meaningful.*

## IV. Further reflections and thoughts

### Key factors in success

Lucie feels there were a few **important situational factors that positively influenced the community's engagement** in the process.

The first was the **anger** prompted by the 2017 site plan that would have transformed part of the square into parking and the cutting down of the mature trees. This was coupled with some **curiosity and hope** among the initial team that the process would work better this time. Also key was the fact that the new mayor was willing to involve residents into decision making as, according to Lucie, *It is not still common in townhalls.*



*I think the new council after the elections 'loosened the screws', made it possible for people other than the municipality to do things, and people sensed that loosening and then grassroots actions began to happen. -Lucie, Dec.'22*



Another factor that contributed positively was the arrival, near the end of the project, of a **new school principal** who took a very active role with regard to the garden. She took part twice in the preparation of the garden prior to her appointment, and spoke positively about how teachers could use it for school purposes. According to Lucie: *So, while she came too late to activate the community for realization of the garden, she came in time to adopt the garden for the school and for the future life of garden, which is even better I think. She also supports active teachers and their activity in the garden. They had a goodbye party at the end of the school year and a Halloween party there.*



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Another key factor towards the end of the project was that there were **visible results** and people began **experiencing the garden**: *Success. A free place for everybody. A welcome atmosphere. Lots of people were waiting to see how it will be. Then the garden started to take shape, started to be really beautiful, people could see the result. Flowers were blooming, frogs came to the lake, kids started to want to spend their time there. Everybody was welcome and could make [use of] his time there, collect some strawberries, flowers... People started to meet each other there with their kids after school, to have a chat, less work and more fun.*

Still, it was not all easy. Reflecting on the process, Lucie says: *It is a long-term thing. At the beginning I felt that people were glad to have a chance to voice their concerns about the original design and give input to the design process for the square. But then many people did not continue with their involvement. Maybe because it is easier to come and say what you think about a plan than to actually take a bigger role in making it happen. That 'make it happen step' might have deterred many people, especially older ones. And for other people it may have seemed too idealistic. They thought of the Zed 'volunteer' community events from the communist era. There is the sense that the municipality or someone else should do it (for us).*

**Working with the municipality was also challenging.** *Despite the fact that the mayor is intelligent and open-minded, I ran into a misunderstanding of basic concepts. The gap between being someone who works on these types of community projects and someone who works at the municipality – the difference in viewing the uncertainties – the municipal wants a managed project that has a clear result. The aspects of empowering the community don't come into the municipal worldview. They have so many administrative duties to worry about.*

She attributes nonetheless the **ultimate success of the initiative** to some combination of:

- *Idealism, trust, from the beginning it was clearly and openly stated that it was for the citizens and with the citizens. We tried to stick with that all the way through.*
- *Trying to maintain a clear boundary between what the municipality could influence and what it could not. To make it clear that it was the community's project, not the municipality's project. And, at the same time, the municipality's support.*
- *And then the persistence: We didn't give up. People who were involved said we have to see it through. And them realizing that it was an activity that hadn't been possible under previous councils, and now it is, and that we have to finish it to show that such community projects can be successful – otherwise the opposition would hold it over their heads as a failure. So there was also this political dimension.*

Also helpful she feels was the fact that the **goals for the garden were defined** at the outset. *The fact that there was a design, a vision, of how it would look at the end. During the course of the project, the group realized that not everything could be built, but the design held their commitment.*

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



Lucie feels that the availability and relative simplicity of the funding offered by foundations played a critical role. *This type of funding can lead to changes towards a less managerial and more ABCD approach. The community couldn't imagine doing it themselves at the beginning, but they could conceive of asking for funding from a foundation. And that enables a step in their development. The project, where they have to decide on the use of the funding, brings to light some potential that these things can work – a step out of hopelessness. It seems very meaningful. It is a very positive shift towards them realizing that they have their own resources and can do their own activities.*

Jana, the elementary school teacher, noted what she found meaningful in the project: *I met people who I would otherwise never meet and some became my friends. We had fun and we laughed, it was all down in a friendly atmosphere, even though it was manual labor. The meeting with other people was great – which is something I miss in our present-day market economy.*



*The form of the planning was another positive – that it was a community effort to do something for which at the outset there was no funding, it started with people wanting to do something and with the support of the foundation it was possible. That is the benefit to me. If we had waited until the municipality would have the funding to do it, then probably nothing would ever happen.*

*Another positive is that some people got involved as volunteers. We did it for the children, the future children who will use the space.*



## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



### Reflections on own role

Reflecting on her own role and things she might have done differently, Lucie noted the **significance of mapping actors in the community and their relationships**: *I think that mapping at the start is really important. If I had done that, looked into who lives there, where they get together, what they find crucial, the neighbourhoods they are in, I think I would have seen the community as much more diverse.*

She explained how the lack of mapping limited the circle of people that the core group reached: *Without the mapping knowledge, we tended to stick to those we knew (the women's husbands and their friends). We didn't have a web through which we could reach groups further from our core group.*

In her opinion, mapping would have made it more likely that *I would know who to turn to when I needed something. I was like a blind person, I didn't know who had a bulldozer, etc. The team did though. But we didn't know who was friends with whom - if we had a better sense of the friends groups in Chlum, we could have asked a bulldozer person from a different group for help.*

She would also have wanted to **deepen the teamwork from the start**, but felt it was difficult to let go of her role as 'tutor' and the feeling that the initiative had to succeed, and to avoid being thrust into the leadership role by others in the initial team.

In reflecting on these dynamics she notes: *I got myself into a trap because I led the first community planning in 2018 and nothing came of it. Then when we spoke of it (the idea of improving the garden space), and I knew about the grant opportunity, I knew what to do, then the responsibility fell to me - and I didn't want to leave it be. If I had, maybe nothing would have happened. And I didn't want to risk that. I really tried to hand things over but they didn't seem to know what to do and said to me 'why don't you do it then'. I didn't figure out a way to have them do the things, assume responsibility...there wasn't anyone in the group who could imagine the leadership role and hold it all together - they were fine filling tasks (find a bulldozer-person, bake, etc.).*

She now sees as more important to support people from the community much more in doing it themselves. *To step back from the role of being responsible for the project.*



*I realized that it is their project and not mine, they have to do it in line with their own capacity. They have to come up with ideas gradually themselves. I used to have much less understanding for these different levels of understanding - that some people don't get what it is about (yet). People are at different places.*







But the challenge of shared leadership remains as, in her view, one very active member and the other group members are falling into the same pattern of one leader and others waiting for their tasks.

Lucie also recognizes the personal benefits of a less 'led' approach. *It was a great relief for me to shift from the manager – social engineer role to the ABCD model. Realizing that it is up to them, to do what they want. It makes it more joyful for me. And I think the results will respond more closely to their needs.*

### V. Looking forward

#### Community use of left over funding

CZK 26,550 (ca. € 1,100) of the funding raised, mainly from Via Foundation's match, has not been spent. Lucie hopes to **use these funds to give the community and the mayor experience with other forms of engagement.** *I want to hold another meeting in the spring of 2023, where I would say how much money is left and let's agree on how to use it. With the condition that funding goes for something for which other funding is not available and something that citizens will do themselves, and that whatever they create will be used by the community. I would also share with them how participatory budgeting works.*

She would like to **focus on the wider community in order to engage more people:** *Many in the group of people involved with the garden initiatives have said 'Let's use it for a school event' but I don't want that – I want it to be something broader for the community, not just for the school community.* And the mayor appears to be open to the idea that, if this new activity is successful, she would find a way to continue by trying participatory budgeting or a similar approach.

#### Lucie's role

But besides Lucie's efforts around use of the remaining funding, she is no longer employed by the municipality and feels she needs to take a break from active involvement in Chlum. *I think they don't need me right now.*

As to her longer-term engagement with the community, it appears likely that she will continue cooperating with the school on ad hoc workshops around environmental education and with the municipality on one-off communication or community events. Alongside this, she is seeking an opportunity to try working with ABCD thinking from the outset in a different community.

## LETTING GO: THE CREATION OF A COMMUNITY RAIN GARDEN AND HOPEFULLY MUCH MORE



More specifically she is interested in trying some specific ideas that emerged during discussions with people practicing ABCD in the Netherlands. *I would like to try something like Joop's escalator coffee – just having conversations with people, so they have a chance to talk and get to know each other and to find a spark in those conversations that you can work with later. That makes more sense to me than the project management approach. I think the first phase should be through the conversations, it seems more natural and not so forced, more meaningful. To give people a chance to find it themselves and connect with one another. My personal challenge will be to hold back. I also had an interesting experience with the Way of Council, which supports sharing between people, and it seems like another good method to try out.*

*Julia Szanton, Lucie Černická, Helen Lenda, 2023*

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST!**

  
**NADACE VIA**  
COMMUNITY  
ALPHABET

