

Community Engagement and Cultural Humility in Sagene, Oslo City

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NORWAY

- Sparsely populated Scandinavian country a little bigger than the size of New Mexico with a population of **about 5.23 million people**.
- Mountainous with deep fjords expanding throughout
- 3% of land is suitable for cultivation
- Languages: Norwegian, Sami- spoken by the indigenous Sami people, English as a second language, and in various communities- Somali, Arabic, Spanish, and more. [CultureGrams]
- Ranks top in environmental quality, personal security, subjective well-being and above average in jobs and earning [OECD Better Life Index]

Sagene District's Unit for Culture and community Affairs



Sagene is situated along the Akerselva River, the cradle of Norway's industrialization in the 60's. The Unit is tasked with overseeing the Sagene Community Center and the 21 Parks to provide holistic approaches to community development in this culturally diverse and densely populated district of about 40,000.

Background

- Sagene has the highest number of public housing throughout Norway;
- Largest disparity of unemployed between ethnic Norwegian and those of immigrant background;
- 21% of children living in low income households;
- Highest number of high school dropouts in Oslo;

The Unit worked with resident initiatives, and other organized groups, as well as local government to create support and understanding between the diverse families and single households living with all types of experiences from substance abuse, living with mental health diagnosis, unemployment, people with disabilities. This included, but was not limited to the structural design of the open park spaces to create an atmosphere that was accessible and inviting to people of all identities, funding and supporting programming by various culture groups to share traditions and bring people together, as well as to facilitate community conversations

Skills Utilized

- Program Evaluation
- Cross Cultural Communication
- Community Entry/ Engagement
- Needs Assessment
- Strategies for Positive Youth Development



Project Descriptions/ Outcomes

- **Participatory Methods Workshop**
Co-designed and co-implemented a workshop for municipal leaders to discuss creative strategies for creating space for participation despite structural barriers
- **Youth Summer Employment Project**
Program Planning/Implementation- Incorporated structures to engage youth in peer leadership and program design as well as activities to engage youth in life skills development and identity building through an empowerment approach
- **Citizen Participation University**
Co-facilitated a workshop and gained perspective on international organizations taking ownership of engaging civil society to promote democracy

Career Connections

My interest in working with this agency was to gain experiential understanding of the roles that bureaucrats can play utilizing participatory methods to create culturally relevant, preventative measures to improving social well being in the community.

Classroom Connections

SW 648: Issues in Global SW Practice (K. Lopez)

This course provided the space for discussion about the real ethical dilemmas that arise when working abroad and navigating the tension between cultural humility and utilizing our skills as growing professionals.

SW 647: SW Practice with Community and Social Systems (R. Subbian)

This course provided a deeper understanding of Paulo Freire's critical consciousness and ways in which it can be applied to reduce barriers to participation for groups who may be marginalized by mechanisms of oppression.

SW 697: Policies and Services for Social Participation and Community Well-Being (R. Subbian)

This course provided frameworks to unpack complex social problems that arise within society which affect individuals, families, organizations, and communities as well as skills to challenge differences in power and privilege to promote social justice.

Lessons Learned

My time working with the unit affirmed for me that in order to build thriving inclusive communities, we have to be willing to invite people to the table, so to speak, encourage dialogue and find ways to truly embrace the strengths that come with diversity. There is a commonly accepted assumption that Norway does not have challenges because of where it ranks on happiest people one earth and because of its economic well-being. However, hard is relative and placing judgment on someone's situation based on our own worldview is counterproductive. Through work with the youth, community members, and staff I have grown a deep appreciation of the power that conversations have to change perceptions and inspire critical reflections. This open and creative unit has been an inspiration that if we take the time to build strong foundations and choose bring people in, despite skepticism and resistance within our systems, wonderful things can happen.

Advice

- ❖ I would encourage us all to take time to 'just be' when we are in new spaces. By practicing patience in listening and observing, we minimize pressure on communities we engage with to *teach us everything we 'need' to know* and allow ourselves to become aware of the nuances in our interactions and take the time that is necessary to build a foundation mutual respect and knowledge exchange.
- ❖ We are outsiders in many spaces. This does not equate an inability to work with those who do not share aspects of our identity. Rather it reminds us as humans to understand the challenges as well as the potential benefits, sit and process any discomfort that may arise.

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