

Neuland: Bringing refugees and Austrian residents together

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Practical background. The main practical issue of our project “Neuland” (German: new ground) is to find a way of communication between Austrian residents and refugees in rural areas of Lower Austria.

With the experience, network and attendance of our organisation we provide our target groups the possibility to get to know each other on a personal level within a protected area. By this, we are eager to dismantle and consequently overcome prejudices on both sides.

What distinguishes our approach from other practitioners is the fact that we aim to propose an exchange on equal terms. Participants meet each other not to either learn or teach, but to learn and teach at the same time.

Evaluation of this project attaches great importance to continuous feedback of all participants, such as discussions and the completion of evaluation forms, as well as participant observation from our side as project leaders.

Research background. Since the cultural turn in social science, many social phenomena have been described as cultural phenomena. Dunja Larise defines the radical refusal of modern universalism as common denominator of all different currents of theorists of the cultural turn (2009: 145). Questions of culture, religion and identity became central for the scientific and public discourse, while gender, class or other social categories got less important.

In fact, many proponents of such a culturalisation of social science even tend to culturalise these other social phenomena, like class, power and gender. Concurrently, these social categories have received less importance in the works of many social scientists. Debates on multiculturalism or interculturalism reflect these developments.

Yet the idea of a multicultural society is not an antiracist idea. Slavoj Žižek called the Idea of Multiculturalism „*a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a racism with a distance*”—it ‘*respects*’ the Other’s identity, *conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position.*“ (Žižek, 1997: 44)

While multiculturalism conserves this distance, interculturalism focuses on the exchange and intermixture of so-called identities.

Intercultural communication focuses on exchange and change of societies, both of natives and migrants. Hybridity, cultural knowledge and intercultural

competence have become keywords in this intercultural discourse (see Schmidinger in Rosecker/Müller, 2007, p. 183-190).

The premise for the acquirement of these intercultural competences is communication. Communication gives impulses for all partners involved, and therefore helps developing intercultural understanding between refugees and locals.

Aims. The aim of our project is to encourage and develop intercultural communication in Lower Austria between residents and refugees who live in this region. It is aspired to engender sensitisation and to encourage participating communities to vividly exchange and to act as supporting multipliers.

The project „Neuland“ intends to be an information and exchange platform for Austrians and refugees, and thus eagerly supports an interchange between these groups.

Another focus lies on contentment of all participants, which is a very important factor for the success of the project. If participants are satisfied, they will on the one hand reach the project goals (like integration, overcoming prejudices, intercultural understanding...) more easily, and on the other can be good multipliers for the project.

Main contribution. „Neuland“ is a tandem project, where 30 tandem-pairs with 60 participants are formed and supervised for a period of nine months that is located in three different districts in Lower Austria: Wiener Neustadt, Baden and Neunkirchen. An information campaign and public relations about the project and the topics of asylum and integration accompany the project, which are aimed to reach at least 2.500 people.

We offered workshops for participants in order to compensate lack of information, and in order to sensitise participants for problems that may occur during their respective tandem-partnerships.

By planning and organising activities and events together, the collaboration of “Neulanders” might as well take place besides formed tandem groups, which also encourages dismantling barriers. Through these formal and informal practices, intercultural dialogue is enhanced.

Implications. The project releases processes that stimulate participants on both sides to overcome prejudices, and therefore requires a number of different local agents. Thus, it helps to establish a common space of locals and migrants/refugees, which is the base for creating a society on common grounds.

Current situation in the project region

The region south of Vienna, where the project "Neuland" is located, is known as "Industrieviertel" (industrial area). As one of the oldest industrialised regions of present day, Austria has attracted migrants ever since the 19th century, in some areas even earlier (see Hahn, 2008). The legendary Marienthal-study in the 1930s by Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Marie Jahoda and Hans Zeisel, explored unemployed workers, who were still partly speaking Czech (see Schmidinger, 2008). In the 1960s and 1980s it became also one of the main target areas of migrant labourers, who worked in factories of the region. In recent years it became the main region for asylum seekers. In contrast to the close capital Vienna, a relative majority of asylum seekers lives in organised housing. These accommodations are often former hotels and guesthouses, whose owners have little perspectives to economically profit from regional tourism. Yet through subventions of the Province of Lower Austria economic survival is secured through accommodation and subsistence of asylum seekers.

As 65% of Non-Austrian nationals in Lower Austria live in communities with less than 10.000 inhabitants, integration is a matter of importance for all municipalities. The social and political scientists Karin Bischof and Barbara Liegl demonstrated the importance of civil society activities for the integration of immigrants in these rural regions of Lower Austria (see Bischof / Liegl, 2008).

Legislation of asylum in Austria

The procedure for granting asylum in Austria is divided in two steps:

The first step involves the admission for an asylum application, while the second step is concerned with its contentwise examination. During the first phase asylum seekers are obliged to stay in a migration detention center, which can last from some weeks to six months. When step one is approved asylum seekers are transferred to other accommodations. As mentioned above, in Lower Austria these accommodations are small former guesthouses that are located in various extremely isolated and peripheral villages. They are run by property owners, who tend to be less interested in the people (and their lives) they host then they are appealed to the financial securing provided by the local government. While social security, food and accommodation is provided for free, asylum seekers obtain no working permit and are not allowed to leave the local district. 40 Euros "pocket money" per month is their only financial resource that they are granted by state

officials. In these accommodations and under those circumstances they have to wait until their case is either approved or denied. On an average, this can last up to four years, in many cases even longer.

The investigation of step two results in various scenarios:

1. Positive notification: the asylum seeker is accepted as refugee according to the Geneva Refugee Convention (1951) and has the same rights as an Austrian citizen.
2. Negative notification: the asylum seeker is not accepted as refugee and should leave the country. In that case, there are various possibilities to make an appeal against this notification, which can lead to point 1 or 3, or to a final negative notification.
3. Subsidiary asylum: the asylum seeker is not accepted as refugee according to the Geneva Refugee Convention, but is accepted for other reasons (e.g. because the health supply for a critically ill person (like HIV/Aids) is not granted in the country of origin). This residence title is usually limited to one year and has to be extended every year.

Project description

The target groups of the tandem project „Neuland“ are asylum seekers and migrants, as well as residents of a respective district.

In the first "project round," 26 tandem-pairs were formed and supervised for a period of nine months (March - November 2009).

In total, there were 52 active tandem participants (26 Austrians and 26 refugees) at the age of 19-71 years, with 37 women and 15 men.

Seven participants originated from the Russian Federation, five from Mongolia, three from the Kosovo, three from Afghanistan, and one respective participant from the following countries; Egypt, China, Zimbabwe, Sudan, Georgia, Ukraine, Iran and Ghana.

The refugees were divided into groups of three that were entitled to be granted asylum; five were entitled to subsidiary asylum, and 18 were asylum seekers. All of them were Muslim except for the Mongolian participants, who were Buddhists. All Austrian participants were Christians, except for one, who had converted to Buddhism.

Before the start of the project each participant was cleared by us as project coordinator in order to decide whether they were suitable participants for the project. We were interested in their ideas about and specific interests in the tandem-partnership. Based on these information, similar interests, values and goals, tandem-pairs were matched. The clearing interviews were held either at the office of “Caritas Wiener Neustadt” or in the districts’ main towns by responsible supervisors. Interviews were about an hour long, which resulted in overall 65 clearing interviews that we conducted.

The actual beginning of the project was a kick-off event including an impulse speech about integration, and a following game, which sought to give participants a chance to get to know each other on a more personal level. Food and music supported a welcoming atmosphere where people felt comfortable talking to each other. The ones who decided to start the tandem (there was a case of a tandem pair, which decided to cancel the partnership) were given an appointment with their district supervisor to sign an agreement. This agreement detailed certain rules of behaviour towards each other, like intensity and mode of partnership.

Throughout the nine months of the project participants were contacted and monitored regularly by their supervisors. They were informed personally about events that were organised by “Neuland”, and every four to six weeks we sent a newsletter to all participants about activities and current news, which also included works written by participants themselves. We also offered workshops to compensate lack of information and to sensitise participants for problems that may occur during the tandem-partnership. Participants always had the possibility to contact their supervisors in case they had any problems or questions. In the beginning of the project this happened quite often, but as time went by everyone seemed to get more and more confident and independent. We also provided mediation, yet no one took advantage of this offer. If there were any conflicts occurring participants informed us and took our advices, but in general they preferred to work on it by themselves.

By planning and organising activities and events together, collaboration of the “Neulanders” can be accomplished aside the formation of the tandems. By this, barriers can be dismantled and intercultural dialogue is encouraged. It is important to stress that all possible conflicts occurred in a protected area, as participants were supervised by a professional team.

In all three districts we had an intense public relations campaign including information folders, an internet website, events and media work.

However, most important were personal meetings and networking in order to present the project in parishes, municipalities, communities, and to associations and NGO’s. Of those 2.500 people, who were aimed to be informed about this project, 200 participants were expected to take part in further trainings of the project.

Intercultural interaction

Since the cultural turn in social science, many social phenomena are described as cultural phenomena. Dunja Larise defines the radical refusal of modern universalism as the common denominator of all different currents of theorists of the cultural turn (Larise, 2009: 145). Questions of culture, religion and identity became central for the scientific and public discourse, while gender, class or other social categories got less important. The debate on multiculturalism or interculturalism reflects these developments. In fact, many of the proponents of such a culturalisation of social science culturalise other social phenomena like class and power.

The idea of a multicultural society is therefore not an antiracist idea. Slavoj Žižek called the Idea of Multiculturalism *„a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a ,racism with a distance’—it ‘respects’ the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed ‘authentic’ community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position.“* (Žižek, 1997: 44)

While multiculturalism conserves this distance, interculturalism focuses on the exchange and intermixture of so called identities.

Intercultural communication focuses on the exchange and change of societies, both of natives and migrants.

Hybridity, cultural knowledge and intercultural competence became keywords in this intercultural discourse (see Schmidinger, 2007: 183-190). In the US intercultural education already became a topic during the 1930s and 1940s (see Davis-Du Bois, 1939; Brown, 1939; Giles / Pitkin / Ingram, 1946). In Europe the term of intercultural education is used for exchanges between Europe and tricontinental societies (see Sandhaa, 1988), whose debate took at least another 40 years. Yet it has to be stated that the use of the term “intercultural” has not been accurately distinguished from the term “multicultural” in many early works on interculturalism.

The focus of the multiculturalist discourse varies between the US and the German and Austrian one. A society, whose members perceive themselves (to a greater or lesser extent) as a society of immigrants, a “melting pot,” debates the interaction of people with different cultural background; whereas in Europe the prevalent issue is multicultural acceptance of cultural differences.

Interculturalism in context of our project is understood as interactive and reciprocal cooperation in contrast to the tolerant, ignorant coexistence that the concept of multiculturalism stands for. The most recent debate within the Anglo-American context advances the concept of interculturalism into the idea of transculturalism and cosmopolitanism. (see Merkl / Stierstorfer / Volkmann / Antor, 2010)

In our context, both interculturalism and transculturalism mean interaction at an equal level. It means discussion and even conflict between participants, who approach each other with an interested attitude towards each other. By that, relationships are more grounded, and thus bilateral understanding can grow. These terms might differ from the use of the terms in the Canadian or US-American context, as they are more orientated towards a German and Austrian discussion. For the project it is important to state that the aim of “Neuland” is not just to support a tolerant coexistence, but a real interaction and intermixture of “new” and “old” inhabitants of the region.

Methods

There are two major domains of methods, which we related to: on the one hand, information exchange and transfer, individual contact, exchange and supervision, and on the other hand, networking and public relations.

During the course of the project we realised that especially information transfer was an important tool to get people to understand each other and their diverse backgrounds. It is constitutive for the integration process that both sides (residents and refugees) are open to engage in the process of understanding. That means that effective projects on integration need to work with motivated migrants and long-term residents. Ideally, they should include all members of a society.

All people who got to know about the project in advance were extremely skeptical about its success. We replied to that skepticism with intense conversation, partly in low-threshold contexts (e.g. parish meetings, film evenings, public discussions).

By that, constructive discussions and an information transfer about the topic of asylum was enabled. We experienced not only once that much fear and several prejudices resulted from wrong information on both sides.

In the beginning, the majority of participants of “Neuland” were quite insecure how to interact with their partners. To minimise this fear of contact we organised preliminary and collateral trainings about topics like the legislation of asylum, the social situation of refugees in Austria, aftermaths of escape and trauma, presentation of various country profiles, etc.

Furthermore, exchange meetings, tandem meetings and supervision were an important method for participants to reflect and to review with their supervisors. As already mentioned, mediation was offered, but not used by participants.

Summary of the applied methods

participants: information, preliminary talks, workshops for participants, public events, skill enhancement, mediation (if needed), exchange meetings, mentoring, support and attendance

public relations: project folders, networking with municipalities, parishes, associations, NGO's and other relevant institutions (like schools, universities, etc.), contact and networking with the local press, homepage: www.neuland-niederosterreich.at and web2.0: facebook group Neuland: www.facebook.com/?ref=home#!/group.php?gid=379487908957&ref=ts

project staff: supervision, permanent reflection, evaluation of the project development in the middle and at the end of the project.

Examples and conclusion

At this point, we would like to give some examples of concrete tandem experiences:

Mr. S., an Austrian participant, decided to join Neuland because he wanted to improve his Russian skills for a 3-month-journey to Russia. Mr. S. is a student and lives alone. Mrs I. is married, has two children and is a housewife. In the tandem exchange with a woman from Chechnya he was able to prepare for his journey, and at the same time the Chechnyan woman could improve her German. After his journey, he told us that he was happy to have had the tandem, as it helped him a lot. One might think that it could be difficult, especially for the chechnyan woman, to meet an Austrian man. Yet it was not. The only

problem was rather that they did not share similar living situations, and therefore not the same interests, respectively conversation topics.

Mr. D., the Austrian tandem partner, of the Egyptian asylum seeker Mr. S., planned a trip to Africa, which would start in Cairo. Mr. D. told his tandem partner about those trip plans and was told that the family of Mr. S. lived in Cairo and that he was invited by his relatives. Mr. D. was welcomed warmly and could see first hand how people live in Egypt, and where Mr. S. came from. At the same time, the family of Mr. S. was happy to meet a new friend of their son and hear news about him.

An example of exchange is Mrs G., who has three children. She is often overwhelmed with raising them all by herself. Ms. F., her Austrian tandem partner, has no children herself, yet is happy to spend time with children. For Mrs G. in return, this is a great relief. Both enjoy the time together and at the same time profit from each other, which creates a nice give-and-take situation.

Another extraordinary story is that of the daughter of the asylum seeker Mrs M., who had an exam in physics. At one of our events, Mr. D., who was part of another tandem, heard about that. He is a teacher in physics, and the same evening he came over to their house to offer tutoring. The daughter successfully passed the exam.

What we found was that the main difference or problem between participants was not the often cited "cultural difference", but most of all the legal status, and furthermore, distinct expectations from participants towards the project.

Different expectations were about the regularity of the tandem meetings, topics of conversations, about who is responsible for maintaining the contact, peripheral living situations, change of legal status of the asylum seekers and therefore removal to other districts, etc. Concerning our own perception, we had one very impressive incident in the city of Baden. One of the events organised by "Neuland" was a city tour around Baden. One of the Neuland-supervisors insisted also on visiting the local Jewish Synagogue. Speculations began about the possible reaction of Muslims visiting the Synagogue. From the perspective of some social workers this could have raised conflicts and it was not clear if this would have been a good idea. Yet the implementation of this idea then was completely unproblematic.

The Muslim participants were highly interested in the Synagogue and discussed with the Neuland-supervisors and a guide from the Synagogue similarities between Judaism and Islam.

The Muslim Chechens, Egyptians and Kosovars did not show any negative reaction on visiting the Synagogue, nor did anybody say anything anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. All of them were highly interested and gave a very positive feedback on this visit. This example shows that fears of some of the members of the Neuland-Team were for no reason. The Muslims and the Jewish woman, who guided through the synagogue were both enthusiastic about the personal encounter.

The cultural and religious problem between the Muslim refugees and the Jewish Community only existed in the imagination of the social workers. This was an important learning process for the team. For the year 2010, another visit of the Synagogue for the new group is planned.

While there was no Jewish-Muslim conflict at all, topics like the living conditions of refugees, education of the children, gender relations or the legal status of refugees were often discussed.

This demonstrates that a multiculturalist perception of the conflicts and problems of the immigrants who are involved in the project, would distort the social reality of the participants. The intercultural communication between refugees from Egypt, Chechnya, Kosovo, the Neuland-team and the Austrian participants revealed a lot about each other and about multiculturalist misperceptions of "the other". In this way, "Neuland" is a great example for an applied trans- and intercultural project.

As the project was quite successful, it is financed for one more year by the ERF (European Refugee Fund) and the BMI (Bundesministerium für Inneres), including a fourth district of Lower Austria called Mödling, starting in April 2010. Negotiations for 2011 are already taking place.

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Biographies

Thomas Schmidinger was born in 1974. He is a political scientist as well as a social and cultural anthropologist. Since 1998 he attended study visits and journeys to various Middle East nations and Arabic, Turkish and Spanish courses in Cairo, Tunis, Istanbul and Guatemala. Since 2004, he has held a lecturing position at the Vienna University's Institute for Political Science ; board memberships at LEEZA (an aid organization active in Iraq and Turkey), Westpapua-Solidarität Wien, and the Society for the Critical Study of Anti-Semitism; and the position of advisory council at Iraquna. He is researching on Political Islam, State theory, migration and integration. He is a member of the Austrian Society for Political Science, the Sudan Studies Association and the International Association of Contemporary Iraqi Studies.

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Margerita Piatti was born in 1980. She is a social and cultural anthropologist with a focus on medical anthropology and migration studies. For the time of her study, she chose different places around the world to live and study at, like Paraguay, Denmark, India and Spain. She worked for several smaller Austrian NGOs, like "Verein Ute Bock" (association for social care of refugees in Vienna), "Lefö" (association against human trafficking and for the rights of sex workers) or the Tibetan Cultural Association. Since 2009 she is working for Caritas MFB (mobile refugee care) in Lower Austria and in the Project 'Neuland'. Additionally she has attended further education in art therapy, which she will complete in 2010.

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