

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.

The 2023-24 program engages up to 34 community practitioners and active citizens from a broader array of European countries - from Serbia to Sweden, Spain to Romania - in another cycle of peer learning.



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.

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



This case study follows a group of neighbors through the preparatory phase of a participatory community mapping project. It delves into the details of and issues around identifying aims and motivations as a group, creating a conversation outline and guidelines, and gleaning learnings for community mapping and for supporting citizen-led initiatives more broadly.

I. Introductions: The Place and the People

Jindřichovice pod Smrkem

Jindřichovice pod Smrkem, a village of 651 residents, is located in a remote part of the Liberec Region of the Czech Republic in the former Sudetenland. Historically a German-speaking village, it experienced industrial growth and prosperity from the mid-1800s to the 1920s. The 1930s brought the depression, industrial decline and political unrest among the village's predominantly German-speaking population. After World War II, the German population was expelled. During the communist era Jindřichovice was resettled with Czechs and many historical buildings were razed. In the late 1990s, the municipality began investing in wind power and low energy housing. In the 2000s young families began moving to the village.



Today, the village is a mix of post-WWII settlers, new arrivals who moved in after 2000, a fraction of the original German inhabitants and newcomers from Germany. Senior citizens who live in the local regional retirement home make up ca. 10% of the population. Socially excluded Roma and non-Roma who are particularly at risk of over-indebtedness also comprise a significant part of the local population, with 16% of villagers in foreclosure, a total of 500 foreclosures and an average of 6 foreclosures per person in the village.



Despite its small size, Jindřichovice has a host of active civic associations: the volunteer firefighters, football team, choir, an association for preservation of the local church, beautification association, women's club, ecological association and the Ecological Information Centre. The municipality runs a community centre and a library.

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



The People

Michal, a participant expert with the Czech government Agency for Social Inclusion, has extensive experience leading community development processes in socially excluded localities.

He moved to Jindřichovice in 2017 with his wife and 3 children. He and several other newcomer families share an interest in alternative forms of schooling, environmental protection and community life. They are known as 'alternatives' by more conservative longstanding residents and are perceived as an insular group by some.



What helped me the most was trying it in Jindřichovice as a citizen, not as an expert from the Agency. I think whoever wants to seriously learn about ABCD should try it out him/herself in the community in which s/he lives. As a neighbor.

-Michal, Sept. '22



Honza is a psychotherapist whose practice focuses on group and community interactions. He provides oversight during disputes and facilitates community building workshops. After regularly visiting Jindřichovice for some years, he bought a house in the village in 2021. Since then, as a full-time resident of the village, he has become more engaged in community activities and informal gatherings, both of which bring him into regular contact with Michal.



Honza on why he finds community life appealing:

I consider myself to be an active community member, sometimes I feel I am part of every activity. My children are grown up, I don't have a partner right now, I have a big house where I can host events, so I can dedicate some energy and time to the community. But that's not my main motivation – I have an inner urge to connect people. (...) Going beyond the family or personal role seems like the future, so I support that wherever I see it.

Honza, Dec. '22



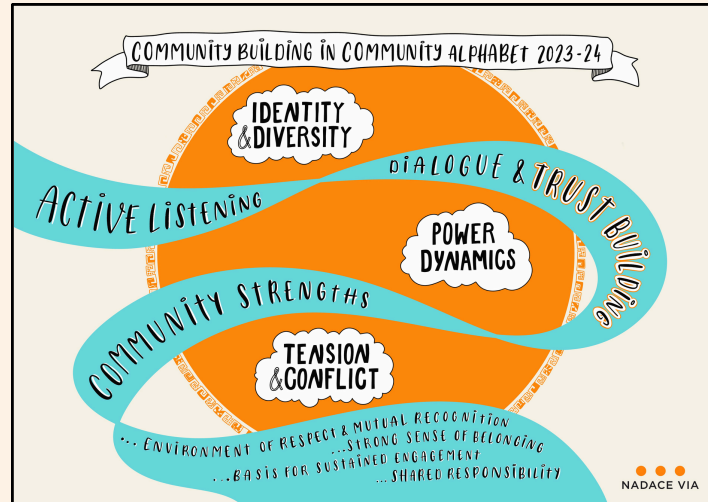
LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Why participatory mapping?

In fall 2021, Michal joined Via Foundation's Community Alphabet program as a participant and was introduced to principles of ABCD, participatory mapping and other approaches to community building.

As he later explained, *This experience expanded my view of community development, connecting it with active citizenship on the most fundamental level. A group of neighbors wants to do something – how can we support them?* Michal, Sept. '22



Drawing on the inputs and inspiration generated by ABCD and mapping approaches, Michal decided to pursue a new project in his own village. Michal's idea was to engage friends and neighbors in holding conversations with other residents to identify the skills, knowledge, experience and interests present in Jindřichovice, an approach referred to as participatory mapping (or asset mapping, capacity inventory or learning conversations). It is principally about building an understanding of what strengths are found among people living in a community.

Some of his friends and neighbors had previously expressed interest in sharing yard or construction equipment and when Michal mentioned his idea, they were receptive to learning about community members' experiences and skills and sharing them through a database.

Michal was eager to gain practical experience with participatory mapping and test it in a real-life setting. He also thought it could help residents identify specific resources, including potential community actors and informal leaders, and create space for discussion on how they might use these resources. Besides generating information, Michal saw the process as a very important way to strengthen relationships between his own circle of relatively new arrivals, longstanding residents and various groups on the margins, such as Roma or residents of an adjacent part of the village.



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



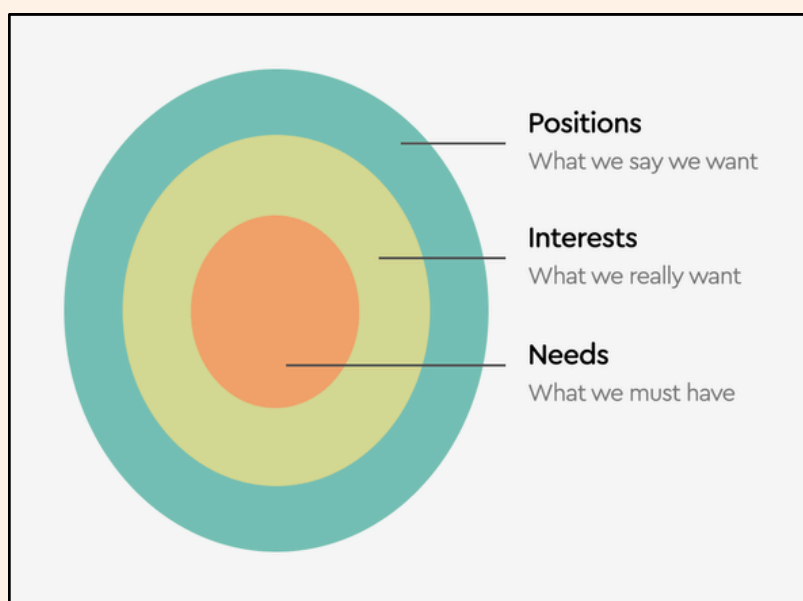
II. The preparatory phase

In mid-January 2022, Michal invited friends and neighbors whom he thought would be interested to an introductory meeting about ABCD and participatory mapping. Ten people came, all of them residents who have lived in the village for 3-15 years who are part of the group known as ‘alternatives’. Michal shared a [video of a talk by Cormac Russell](#) to introduce ABCD principles and discussed the purpose and potential value of participatory mapping through structured conversations. Most of the group reacted positively, and about 5 people decided to get actively involved.

Michal's original plan was that the group would prepare the participatory mapping process in early January, conduct structured conversations with residents throughout January and February, and hold a community meeting to share the results in February or March.

Peeling an onion to understand personal motivations

Yet early on, the group agreed that an important step was letting each person vocalize why s/he had joined the participatory mapping effort, even if it slowed down the timeline Michal had originally envisioned. When they met again one week later, they used an [onion analysis](#), a tool that had been introduced during Community Alphabet, to understand their underlying interests and needs in relation to the participatory mapping initiative.



Onion analysis, <https://leadcase.net/topics/onion>



Michal explained why they considered this step so important: *...each of us got engaged as an individual, a person living in Jindřichovice, and we each did the onion analysis to understand why we want to do this. Because each person realized that s/he is doing it for him/herself, it is about us, and it can have a big impact on life in our village. If it is done poorly, it can negatively affect life in the village, i.e. [people will say] ‘the alternative types are screwing things up in our village’. We are doing it as community members, not as professionals who come in and then leave. Michal, May ‘22*



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Clarifying and communicating goals

After analyzing their motivations, the group members agreed that for them, participatory mapping was more about the process of facilitating contact between the different social groups in the village, which have little or only superficial contact with one another, than the information generated.



As Michal noted: *We have an idea of how we want to work with the data - report writing, etc. but for us it's not just the information that is important - the process is just as or even more important to us. (...) even if we don't find out anything essential, the conversations themselves are important while people are interested about each other. We have no idea whether it will be 50 or 500 conversations. There are 500 adults who could speak with us; 50 is the minimum. Michal, May '22*

Fostering collaboration across the village was another key goal for the group, he said: *So that it connects people. Everyone knows someone, but we are missing collaboration across groups - mainly between new arrivals and long-term residents. We don't want another project just led by us 'alternative types'. The conversations themselves can play a role in greater interlinkages. Michal, May '22*



HOW TO COMMUNICATE THE MAPPING AIMS TO RESIDENTS?

The group debated how to introduce residents to their participatory mapping initiative and aims. Should they each share their own personal motivations, or present a unified list? They later decided to share these aims at the start of each conversation:

- **make contact with other residents**, get to know one another and connect those who have something in common
- **promote exchanges of services between neighbors** (paid and unpaid); e.g. help for neighbors, odd jobs for other residents
- **map human resources** (who can do what) and **material resources** (tools, equipment, facilities, etc.) for mutual assistance and community activities
- **take responsibility** for a safe and healthy environment (not waiting for someone else to address issues for us)
- **create an opportunity for all local citizens to take part** (not excluding anyone)

At the same time, the group agreed that each of them could add his or her personal reasons for joining the effort – such as meeting people outside of their usual circle of friends or creating new exchanges of services between neighbors.

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



As they dug deeper into these tasks, it became clear the time-consuming and very personal and detailed process of identifying motivations, setting goals and creating documents was not for everyone. As Honza noted: *Michal really pushed it at the beginning, he asked us to come to up to 2 meetings per week. There were more of us at the start but 2-4 people left, either because they didn't expect it would take so long – a full year of preparation – or they may have been deterred by the deep personal questions or because it was intense work – clarifying what we meant by certain formulations, reviewing documents, administrative tasks. Honza, Dec. '22*



Outline for structured conversations

The group set about creating an outline for the conversations with suggested questions and a question sequence. They intended it as a rough guide, giving each group member the freedom to choose his/her own style and how closely to follow the outline. They also began creating guidelines on how to prepare and lead the conversations.

OUTLINE FOR STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

- What drew you to Jindřichovice and why did you decide to settle here?
- What is important to you?
- What does community mean to you?
- What are your hobbies and/or interests?
- In what ways have you become involved in the local community?
- In what ways do you want to get involved in the local community?
- What would you like to see in your local community that does not exist now? What hopes and dreams do you have for your local community?
- In your opinion, who keeps memories alive in Jindřichovice?
- Who has lived here the longest?
- What skills, talents and abilities, resources, materials or supplies do you have that you would be willing to share with your neighbors or use for a collaborative community effort?
- Which local associations or informal networks are you part of?
- Which local associations or informal networks would you like to be part of or would you like to help create?
- Is there anything specific that you need?
- What activities are already taking place here that you would like to see more of?
- What is the best way to contact you?

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Honza appreciated the experimental nature of the project and focus on process over output: *It's not about a database, or a catalogue. I am fine with that aspect, but at the same time, the project has to be somehow visible. It's not that we are going from point A to B, but that we have a backpack and we are going on a journey and along the way we will see what we will pull out of the backpack and where the journey will lead. Let's create it together and it develops as we go. It's exciting to see that some people are fine with this approach, others need it to be more clearly defined, and one question is how to communicate it given all these different needs. E.g. the questionnaire should be concrete and yet as open-ended as possible. Someone wants to include a particular question, someone else doesn't want that question.* Honza, Dec. '22



Practicing structured conversations

Next the group members began holding practice mapping conversations with one another. They felt it was important to experience both roles: leading the conversation and asking questions, and answering questions. After each practice conversation, the two people gave feedback and talked about what they had learned.

They quickly found that maintaining comfort zones and creating an atmosphere of trust were problematic. When he posed questions, Michal saw that for some people, the questions could be too direct and personal.



He noted: *During my first conversation, I asked, "What are you best at? What would your mother say you are #1 in?" This was too intimate. Women said they couldn't compare themselves to others. When it was his turn to answer questions, he internalized this lesson: (I learned) that it is difficult to answer, to think deeply about not only what I am good at, but also how I can contribute to the community, and that it is difficult to open up.*

Michal also found that sometimes, trust enabled deeper connections: *This is one of the most difficult aspects and sometimes we achieved it - when the person said something that s/he wasn't sure about, revealed something, a hidden potential that they wouldn't just tell anyone. Going beyond our usual scripted answers to reveal deeper sides of ourselves. Also, we felt we would uncover the greatest potential where the person realizes something (a gift) on his or her own. Sometimes we managed to get that far, sometimes we didn't. To get beyond the person's usual repertoire, CV, but to get to something the person would like to do, but that s/he thinks other people will not be interested in. This seems like the ultimate point.* Michal, May '22



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Snowball expansion

During the practice phase, the group also debated how to move beyond their own circle to conversations with other residents. There was a recommendation in the ABCD asset mapping guidance material to stick to people you know, and this reasoning made sense, they felt. Michal explained that *they sought to maintain the rule that we only do conversations with people we know, so that we know how to speak to a particular person, so he feels comfortable and we can go deeper. It is much harder to build trust with someone I don't know well.*

But some group members wanted to lead structured conversations with people they didn't know for the very purpose of getting to know them. The group finally opted for a snowball technique to gradually reach people in other social groups in the village, while maintaining an atmosphere of personal trust.



Michal said: *The Krompach process [note: a mapping initiative in a different village] was a guide but we decided we didn't want to do it like that - that was more superficial - they went door to door asking for people's activities, gifts, etc. - we realized we want to go deeper and be more personal. Therefore we want to have conversations with people we know, which is a challenge because our team is a bit of a bubble of 'alternative' types.*



Michal explained the snowball method:

The idea is that each person in our team will choose a few people from other groups whom they know but who are outside of our bubble. They will lead conversations with them, and then those people will (hopefully) lead conversations with other people they know, which should get us further and further from our own bubble. We see it as an organic process, using the snowball method. Michal, May '22

At the end of each conversation, the leader would 'roll the snowball' by asking if the other person would like to lead a structured conversation themselves, and offer the option of having one of the team members along for support. By enabling anyone to lead a structured conversation, the group sought to share power and spread ownership of the mapping across the community. The group members had discussed and accepted the risks that this approach would bring. Honza said: *One risk that we decided to accept is that if we let it out into the community like this, it may go in directions that we cannot predict. e.g. What if some people say 'we want to get rid of gypsies', a Neo-Nazi group may emerge. Honza, Dec. '22*



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



After discussing various options, they decided to prepare for structured conversations with other residents using a fish aquarium approach where two group members would act out a conversation, including the mistakes, and others could observe and comment.

Moving towards a community-wide process of conversations

By mid-February, they were ready to begin structured conversations with people outside of their group. Michal felt that would be a good moment to check in with a mapping expert to discuss questions that might arise in 'real' conversations. The group members were aware that unlike the practice conversations conducted with one another, where familiarity enabled them to go quite deep, conversations with other residents would be different and touching on some topics might be beyond the comfort zone of neighbors whom they knew only slightly or not at all.

At this point, the group was still unclear on what to do with the information that would be generated through the conversations. They decided to present the mapping as a process with no predetermined outcome, i.e. it would be up to the community to decide whether to create a database of the information or to use it in other ways.

Postponements: Ukraine and local elections

Then, abruptly, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in late February brought the mapping to a standstill. The check-in with the mapping expert was postponed as the group turned their full attention to helping incoming refugees from Ukraine. Suddenly their recent practice in identifying assets became a real benefit: they found it very easy to find resources within their own group to arrange housing for 4-5 refugee families, a warehouse for materials, and Russian interpreting.



Busy with the refugee aid efforts, they delayed launching conversations with people outside of their group. However, they did continue with practice conversations within the group and with weekly group meetings.

Then another obstacle emerged: municipal elections scheduled for September 2022. The group decided to postpone further work on the mapping until after the elections so that their efforts would not be perceived as a pre-election campaign.

“ Michal said: *The main goal was to connect people between different groups, not only 'alternatives' and the majority, but also Roma and people in outlying parts of the village. We want to interconnect people from these various groups and thus holding structured conversations before the election seems too risky as it would likely be perceived as election campaigning. We want to resume asap after the elections. The plan is that during September we would prepare our next steps, have a consultation with [the mapping expert] and then after the elections we would jump back into it.*

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



He added: *Many of our group are involved in politics (...and) we were concerned that it could get political. So we will resume after the elections; we worked intensely on the preparations for 2-3 months and did 10-12 practice conversations with one another. That gave us a lot of information about one another and also tips for how to lead a mapping conversation. Michal, May '22*



The municipal elections were indeed a pivotal moment in the community. The women's party initiated by some of Michal's friends won two seats on the village council. One of the newly elected women became the Deputy Mayor, in charge of the village's social and cultural agenda, and also had the deciding vote on the council.



Michal explained: *Several women from our group decided to form a political party but with the idea of the party connecting to other women in the village, to clearly not isolate themselves from the other groups in the village. From the beginning their goal was to find other subgroups of women (e.g. longstanding residents, Roma) and to connect with them. People had the feeling that politics were a macho area and there were 2 'roosters' in the village and the women wanted to introduce a more collaborative approach. The main goal of creating connections with these women succeeded. They didn't have the ambition to become mayor, but wanted to be part of the village, be part of the council, take part in the joint decision making. They agreed that the women who would get into the council would continue to meet with the other women to discuss issues – that the elected councilwoman (Kamila) would really be representative of the entire group. She also now delegates tasks. She took on the newsletter in her councilmember capacity but other women write articles.*

Michal reflected on the significance of this change:

From my point of view, I see now that you can do a lot in a village when you put a few people together, or interconnect people from different groups.



In addition, a new mayor was selected who reestablished a tradition of meeting with local associations once a month to share information about upcoming events (e.g. balls, clean up days) and coordinate dates. He also began a monthly meeting with residents. The new council began initiating more community activities as well.

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Taking stock at the end of the first year

In November 2022, the group resumed their meetings, took stock of their situation and planned their next steps. They now viewed the project as having three phases:

1. Preparation: clarifying motivations, creating guiding documents, testing structured conversations, now considered finished,
2. Extending the mapping to local associations, to begin in January 2023, and
3. Opening up the mapping to the entire community, planned for late spring 2023.

They would start Phase 2 by attending the mayor's monthly meeting with local associations in January 2023 and introducing the mapping initiative. The idea was to ask each local association's representative to participate in a structured conversation led by a group member. The next step would be to invite the representatives to lead conversations with members of their associations - either by themselves or with a group member. Involving people from associations was seen as a crucial intermediary step before opening the mapping to the entire community.



Involving people from associations was seen as a crucial intermediary step before opening the mapping to the entire community. Michal explained: *We are concerned that if we went public without that middle step, it would be viewed as just an activity of our group of 'alternatives'. We want to connect with the leaders of other bubbles so that it is more of a shared project. We also want to consult the process with them, present our plan and still have the space to incorporate their feedback, which should help spread the ownership of the mapping project to these other groups.*

The underlying theme was building trust. Michal said: *This phase is mainly about trust building. If we skipped this phase, we think there would be a big risk that the mapping would be connected just with us and longstanding residents wouldn't trust us.*



At the same time, as Michal noted, the group realized that *by involving the local associations, we think we will reach most of the people in the village, but not everyone.* How to reach a wide swath of residents in Jindřichovice, including those that might be too easily missed or overlooked, was a question they tackled creatively.



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Three women in the village, who were launching a mobile social service for immobile elderly residents, planned on mapping these individuals' needs. The group saw an opportunity to link the two mapping efforts, as Michal explained: *We think that once we have some gifts listed in our asset mapping, we can connect those gifts with these people's needs and vice versa, find out about what gifts these individuals would like to share with others in the village. Through this connection we should be able to reach isolated residents on the margins.*



The group also presented the mapping initiative to the village council, with the expectation that they would lead conversations with council members. In turn the new mayor offered use of 4 municipal information boards, where the group could post the results of the mapping, and use of the municipal café to hold community meetings to share the results.

Roles within the group

Roles among the four members of the consolidated core group had now crystallized. Michal said: *In our team of 4, we have divided the leadership roles – each person brings something different to the group – e.g. Honza – he brings structure, graphic design, Tanya and Zdenka – they are ready to resume the process, they suggested that we meet and get things going, they are stepping in as drivers of the process. Michal, Dec.'22*



Transferring leadership going forward was on his mind: ...my thoughts are about transferring it to other people – at the beginning it was really my idea, but this time when we met to resume the mapping, someone else convened the meeting. And we agreed that I would not be the chief of the project. I don't have the capacity and also I want to share the responsibility.

I realized it means letting go of my expectations, and letting go of the timeline I had in my head. I think that helped a lot. If we had gone ahead full-steam in the spring, I think it could have ended badly. I perceive I am more calm and secure in my role, which has changed, I see myself now as someone who is a guide if things get stuck but not the one driving the project. I am one of them and we are on equal footing.



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



III. What was achieved in 1 year

Results

At the end of the year, the group assessed the results that the preparatory phase had generated:

- 3 guiding documents, including the structured conversation outline, guide and a one-page introductory information sheet about the mapping process a plan for phase 2
- practical experience in leading conversations
- learnings from these experiences to apply in the next phases

Benefits

Alongside these results, the group recognized benefits that had materialized almost immediately:

- Quickly mobilizing aid for Ukrainian refugees by recognizing local assets. *The result of the asset mapping in my own circle was that when the Ukraine war started, we were able to quickly mobilize and offer our resources to help refugees. It was good that we were able to try it out on something relatively small – we met and within a few days put together housing options, a warehouse for materials for the refugees, and then the concrete things that each of us could offer – someone could speak Russian, etc. Thanks to the asset mapping, we knew how to go about identifying our assets and to connect the assets to the needs. Michal, Sept '22*

- A new awareness of their own gifts. Honza explained how the practice conversations brought revelations about one's own gifts: *It was about the gifts and assets I discovered I have within myself. E.g. I thought I wouldn't ever do graphic design again, then during the conversation it occurred to me that maybe I could do it one day a week, and now I am going to be doing the graphic design for the municipal newsletter. And from there it is just a small step to doing this type of work one day a week. And I realized there are many other things I can offer. Honza, Dec. '22*



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



- **New awareness of the complexity of others.**

Honza reflected: *Another big realization was that if I have these things to offer, then I can look at other people in a much more complex way. That they also have various gifts, and the resources really are here in Jindřichovice. Even if the assets are not in concrete form – it's not: '600 people live here', it is: 'there are 600 different universes here'. Honza, Dec. '22*

- **Effects of introducing ABCD in the community**

Michal noted that sharing the ABCD approach with villagers had led to the emergence of community activities unrelated to the mapping initiative. The community's internal resources were more in focus, too: *we occasionally put on a large community gathering and smaller working groups have emerged on specific topics and now, under the influence of ABCD, our core group realizes more keenly the need to look at internal resources. Michal, Dec. '22*

- **Volunteer-run Jindřichovice Community Centre**

Michal explained that two community workers are collaborating with a neighbor and the new mayor to provide basic social counselling and referrals to social services. One of the volunteers will be employed as a trainee and a professional social worker provides basic social counseling on a voluntary basis 2 hours a week. Michal, Dec. '22



IV. Key learnings from the preparatory phase

The group members distilled the key learning points for leading structured conversations:

- **How you introduce the mapping is important.**

People will want to know the purpose or intended outcome of the mapping. The group opted for an "open outcome", as they wanted the community to decide how to use the information from the conversations. At the same time, each group member was free to say what s/he would like the outcome to be or why s/he is taking part in the mapping.

- **Environment is key to creating comfort and trust.**

Holding a conversation in the home of the resident who is answering questions provides a safe environment, and they see things around them that spark ideas about what gifts they can share. Some group members felt that an at-home conversation was possible only with residents they knew, while others had positive experiences holding a conversation in the home of a resident they did not know.

- **Conversation outline is only a guide.**

The group confirmed that the outline would serve as a rough guide for the conversations, not as a rigid structure.

- **Review of notes.**

The person leading the conversation would send the other person his or her notes to give them a chance to check, edit and/or add to the notes.

LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



In parallel, Michal came to several new realizations about the roles of local residents, professionals and institutions in community building:

- **Mapping as a local, not as a professional.**

For Michal, who is a civic participation professional, experiencing mapping in his own village as a neighbor, a citizen, a resident, was key. He said: *What helped me the most was trying it in Jindřichovice as a citizen, not as an expert from the Agency. I think whoever wants to seriously learn about ABCD should try it out him/herself in the community in which s/he lives. As a neighbor. You can't hide behind your professional role, you have to step out of your role and do it as a neighbor. Otherwise you are always in your professional role and it will not be true and people won't believe you.*



- **Supporting community strengths.**

The focus on local resources transformed Michal's professional approach: *As experts we are used to starting from the other end, with what people don't know – but it is better to turn it around and start with what they do know...and then work from there. As an expert I couldn't imagine this before, I was used to 'we are helping to teach them to be self-sufficient' instead of starting with what they already know and waiting till they ask for help with what they don't know. I think this is most difficult for professionals; to abandon one's prior stereotypes about how we should support or intervene in communities.*



- **Role of institutions.**

Michal also revised his view of how institutions should support citizen engagement: *community development is about the people who live there, about the neighborhood, and the institutions are important, but they support it, they don't do it for the citizens. They complement what is going on. And it can be done without institutions – like the Norway brochure about ABCD [pictured on right] – it was by residents. For example, here in Jindřichovice we have 3 municipal employees; they won't create a community that can fulfil all of the residents' wishes. We shouldn't wait for them. This is a challenge – to come into a community and say, 'super that you want something, but we won't do it for you.'*



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



V. What happened next

Emphasis on connections

By March 2023, after the group had done 11 structured conversations, they held a community gathering to share news from the process and engage more people. Only a few neighbors showed up, and some of the group felt that the gathering came across as very formal.



Reflecting on their priorities with the mapping expert, they realized that wanted to emphasize connections over information gathering: *after one year the most important thing are the one-on-one conversations. The list of assets is a bonus and we don't want to push it. Neighbors began seeing the list as the main result. Michal, March '23*

Michal realized that the process was taking much longer than he had imagined and that they needed to let it mature.

Slowing down

Thus the group decided to take a slower approach, fostering connections in informal ways. One group member explained: We want to try a sort of "Neighbor, come have a chat" method where you invite people to come over for a coffee and a chat. We want to slow the process down and open up connections with each other organically. Zdenka, Mar. '23

About once a week one of the group members had a conversation with someone from a different social group. In parallel, they organized a second community gathering - a neighbors' dinner - but as an informal evening with no agenda. They invited the 15-20 people who had been engaged in conversations up till then. In Honza's words, *the dinner gathering was very informal and very pleasant. It was more spontaneous, and the intention was for neighbors to get to know one another. Relaxed. Honza, Mar. '24*

In line with the slower pace, Michal's view of his own role had also evolved away from the professional to the personal. He said: *I see myself as more as a citizen, as part of the community – a different role, not as a manager or community builder, not such an active role. We are still in the beginnings of the mapping process and we are organizing sessions with residents, small neighborly events. We need to take it in a more organic way, not pushing so much. It may take years, it may be more natural for our community. Michal, April '23*



LEARNING ABOUT NEIGHBORS: STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS IN JINDŘICHOVICE



Later in the spring a third neighbors' dinner was held. In Honza's and other members' view, the aim of the gathering was unclear. People's reaction was *'I came to hang out with neighbors, and I was assigned some tasks, and I don't want that'*.

At the same time, the group's plan to hold conversations with all of the association representatives, and to "snowball" the conversations to association members, did not go forward, as some group members now lacked the capacity to take part.

Among some group members, there was a feeling that the process had faltered for a number of reasons:

- the increasing **lack of personal capacity** among some group members
- **divergence on how fast/slow the process should go**. Some wanted to use the momentum and move quickly to snowball, while others wanted to first work out how to go public with the data, where to store records of conversations, who bears responsibility for the process if things take a bad turn, etc.
- **inconsistent participation of group members in the process**. Some felt that because others had missed some deliberations over wording or steps, there was a lack of shared understanding of some terms or parts of the process.
- **demotivation**. Feeling that leadership was fading and fewer conversations were being held, some lost motivation to keep going. There was a suggestion that regular bi-weekly meetings to share enthusiasm from inspiring conversations and work out issues would have kept motivation high.
- **core group members were all from the same social circle**. This made it challenging to engage with other social groups in the village. Engaging people from other groups from the outset could have made a difference.

At their last meeting, the group concluded their work on the mapping initiative. Most of the core group had to shift their energy from the initiative to other areas of their lives. However, a team did emerge to plan the next community meeting, which had been a regular feature of the village in recent years where people discuss what community activities they would like to focus on. There is hope that the energy to build community will continue in that forum.

