

AUSTRIA

Diversification & job creation

Location

Hainfeld

Programming period

2014 – 2020

Priority

P6 – Social inclusion & local development

Measure

M19 – LEADER/CLLD

Funding (EUR)

Total budget 38 000

EAFRD 16 800

National/Regional 4 200

Private 17 000

Project duration

2016 – 2019

Project promoter

Association Herzverband

Contact

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Website

www.comedordelarte.at

Comedor del Arte is an open meeting space that promotes a society built on empathy and solidarity through the arts and creativity.

Summary

The basic idea of Comedor del Arte is to enable people living on the fringes of society to meet within a context of mutual respect, and to provide a platform for creative activities.



It is an open-minded meeting place where people, regardless of their age, gender, colour, origin, religion or political views, can meet and be active and creative together. The space is run by volunteers and all activities are free-of-charge and focused on education, communication, creativity, networking, cooperation and integration. Anyone can donate their time or know-how to the project. They can also support the initiative through in-kind or financial donations.

Results

274 people participated in workshops between 2017 and 2019.

Students in the various language classes came from Afghanistan, Iraq, India, Egypt, China, Iran, Dagestan, Ukraine, Syria, Chechnya and Romania.

At least 42 local people helped on a voluntary basis with language classes, workshops, markets, product creation and website maintenance.

Context

The vision for Comedor del Arte was first presented by Franz Witzmann at the 2015 social festival 'Tu was, dann tut sich was', which took place in Mostviertel Mitte in the Traisen-Gölsental region of Lower Austria. The festival aimed to promote socially-engaged and citizen-run initiatives that contribute to strengthening social cohesion and to improving the social participation of disadvantaged groups. The festival jury awarded Comedor del Arte a grant that its founders used to rent a space in downtown Hainfeld as the creative project's base.

'Comedor' is a Spanish word that means dining room/hall. Comedor del Arte therefore means a 'dining room of or for the arts'. The basic idea of Comedor del Arte is to enable people living on the margins of society to meet within a context of mutual respect, and to provide an outlet for creative activities. People who were previously anonymous people would 'gain a face', and locals would be given the opportunity to potentially change their views about the world and their hometown. The goal is to promote a society that is built on empathy and solidarity.

Hainfeld is a small town, but more than 10 % of its inhabitants have non-Austrian citizenship. Given Austria's socio-political situation, there was a pressing need for such a meeting place to help people who were in the process of seeking asylum. The activities at Comedor del Arte provide a daily structure, enable contact with local people, support meaningful social participation and foster integration.

The furnishing and maintenance of the meeting space and all programmed activities are provided on a voluntary basis and supported by donations. In the beginning, the meeting space was open for three days a week, and soon afterwards on an almost daily basis. To establish a long-term programme for the project, the association Herzverband was founded to act as the responsible oversight body.

Since its creation, the programme has been adapted based on current needs. For example, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated school closures, access to learning for school children was particularly important.

Objectives

The specific objectives of Comedor del Arte were to:

- support children from lower socio-economic classes;
- promote the integration of marginalised people into the labour market;
- support communication, knowledge transfer and learning in groups;
- discover talents and develop manual skills;
- promote people's talents through events and blogs; and
- revitalise the town centre and facilitate social exchanges.



Activities

The Comedor del Arte creative space, with its kitchen, study material and games provides opportunities for cooking, eating together, learning, or participating in arts activities. By offering these easily accessible activities, people from various socio-economic backgrounds can take part. Participation is free and everyone can create their own particular project, for example, successful activities organised in 2019 included:

- **Computer classes:** Iranian engineer Reza Goudarzi set up the 'Sozialcomputer', purchased at a discount price. He volunteered to offer IT classes in Farsi and German so students could learn basic computer skills.
- **Kite building workshop:** In March, Mohammed Ahmadi and Hossain Rezai organised a kite building workshop. Afghans know how to build and fly kites (as exemplified in the 2003 film 'The Kite Runner'). The kites were offered for sale at the Easter market.
- **Women's group:** Alexandra started a Friday women's group to encourage women to attend the space. She invited various friends to develop a programme. The space held ten meetings covering topics including board/card games, circle dances, yodelling, fasting, acting, games for mothers and making curd wraps for ill children.

German group lessons and individual tutoring: The programme for learning German is always arranged to fit individual needs. It involves:

- Two-hour German group lessons from Mondays to Thursdays;
- Individual tutoring prior to level A2 (basic level) exams, two to three times a week;
- Weekly two-hour long classes for a Romanian family over many months;
- C1 (high level) exam preparation: The Afghan Dr. Rahimian M.D. passed all the exams to practice his medical profession, with the exception of the C1 exam. The group was able to find a committed retired volunteer who invited him for daily conversation practice;
- Dialect classes: Oleksandr Horobchuk is from the Ukraine and got a good job in the town of Hainfeld. His knowledge of German is very good, although he had problems with the local dialect. Franz Witzmann practised with him using specific examples from his everyday professional life; and
- Homework help: Children can receive support with their homework on a daily basis.

Internship: Birgit Schafhauser is completing her training as a professional tutor and she gained practical experience of working with grade school pupils, including working with children from other countries.

Individual (talent) support and job research:

- In spring, Mohammed Ahmadi and Hossain Rezaï started a weekly hour of pantomime activities at the elementary school.
- At the Easter market, they posed as Easter bunnies for photo shoots.
- In July, the company music band of Traisen showed children various wind instruments and Mohammad performed an extract from a pantomime.
- At the space, people often get help in filling out forms and in writing applications and CVs/resumes.
- Alexandra helped master tailor Ali Hossaini find a job in the state of Salzburg. There were multiple discussions with the company management, Franz Witzmann helped with the move.

Main results

The Comedor is used spontaneously throughout the week: as a meeting place, internet café and play/recreation room.

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Outreach programmes and public relations exercises for the Comedor resulted in:

- 57 media articles,
- two reports on television,
- 63 own blogs were created
- 131 Facebook posts
- the project was referenced four times in student papers
- participation in more than 16 events
- participation in three competitions
- four in-house cultural festivals have been organised to date; and
- a student created the movie 'HLW St. Poelten' about the space

The project leaders of all 30 'Tu was' projects at the 2015 festival created a communications network. The Comedor team has maintained and expanded this network over the last five years, using the internet and social media

Additional sources of information

www.zukunftstraumland.at/projekte/2714