ENPI – SOCIAL SERVICES ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER
North Karelian Society for Social Security

COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER IN JOEN SUU
- A Case Study
1 Background information about Kansalaistalo

Community Center in Joensuu (Joensuun Kansalaistalo) is situated in city centre and is an open meeting place for all citizens. It is an arena for various activities. In addition, it offers support and services, e.g. free computer consultancy.

Kansalaistalo is based on broad, deep and long-time collaboration. It was founded nearly twenty years ago by NGOs, North Karelian Society for Social Security, Soroppi Association and The Finnish Federation for Social Welfare and Health. Nowadays about 100 organizations and groups use the premises every year. There are about 1 200 meetings and 50 000 visitors a year.

Kansalaistalo activities are funded by Finland’s Slot Machine Association, City of Joensuu and the Centre for Economic Development, Transport and Environment (ELY-keskus).

2 Principles leading Kansalaistalo

The leading principles at Kansalaistalo are: to promote social equality, to support voluntary work and NGOs, to make information society available for everyone and to develop the collaboration between the public and the voluntary sector. To sum up, Kansalaistalo aims at promoting people’s welfare and well-being in general.

Kansalaistalo is an example of a place with low threshold. Anyone is welcome! Heterogeneity and variety of people are part of everyday life at Kansalaistalo. Kansalaistalo is not primarily focused on any particular group of people.

It does not matter how old a person is or what the skin colour is. It does not matter if a person is working, studying or unemployed. It does not matter if a person speaks Finnish or Arabic. A person is allowed to sit quietly, take part in activities or start volunteering.

The aim is to avoid a “pigeonhole” society. If people live rather separately in their own holes they don’t have many opportunities to meet people from different living situations. They then may have quite a restricted view on the society. Kansalaistalo wants to promote low threshold meetings where people meet in various everyday situations. Young people meeting older people (and vice versa) or native Finns meeting foreigners are perfect examples of such situations. At its best, there is always a good chance for social dialogue to start and people gain better understanding of other people and the society.

The principle that anyone is welcome is sometimes for some people hard to accept or comprehend. This may turn at first low threshold to a high one. Some people are occasionally discriminated in Kansalaistalo by some visitors who see them unfit for some reason. Some people do not dare to come because they are afraid of getting a bad label, a stigma, when visiting Kansalaistalo.

However, Kansalaistalo is meant for everyone. People are well taken into account as they are.
They are called visitors – or just people, not clients or customers. They are respected as valuable human beings and seen as experts in their lives. People´s skills and abilities are seen first, rather than limitations and obstacles coming from diseases or handicaps. Each one of them has some ability or a talent and is good in something. Each one of them needs to be seen, listened and met.

3 Services in Kansalaistalo

Café is the heart of the meeting place. Freshly-baked buns lure people to come inside. It is an easy excuse to enter Kansalaistalo. The café is run by volunteers, students and employees. Coffee fee is voluntary; you pay by your conscience. This is the reason why Kansalaistalo’s café is not obligated to pay taxes like commercial cafés.

Café and the whole place is furnished and decorated like a living room. The furniture is delivered by the local reuse centre or donated. The atmosphere is welcoming.

Internet café is very popular among the visitors. The facility is equipped with Internet connection free of charge. Fax, printer and scanner are available at a reasonable price. There is free computer and scanner consultation and a classroom for Internet training, too. Internet is considered an important way to participate in the society and to avoid marginalization. People need knowledge of Internet to obtain information of social and health care services or when seeking for a job not to mention for communicating and engaging in social media. Internet café is funded by Slot Machine Association

Self-care point is a kind of low threshold health kiosk. Health promotion material is available there. One can measure blood pressure and blood glucose or test cholesterol. During the dark winter time many people are suffering from seasonal affective disorder. There is a bright light therapy available to help with symptoms in Kansalaistalo.

Cultural events and happenings take place at least once in two weeks. People are singing together and dancing. Live music and performers are not so rare.

Reading Corner has daily newspapers, magazines, books and various information, e.g. bus timetables.

Instant delivery of assistance is available when one needs help for shopping or going to the hospital or to bank. Also helping with cleaning at home or moving from home is available. Helping is always for occasional, not permanent needs. The helpers are volunteers from Soroppi Association.

Bicycle rental and maintenance is especially popular among exchange students. The bicycle service also in away reflects the principles of Kansalaistalo, ecological way of life and doing things with ordinary people’s skills and resources.

Premises rental: one can rent place for a group or meeting. Several associations, organizations and groups use premises in evenings.
Free Public Toilet helps you in trouble.

4 Other activities

Other activities depend mostly on on-going projects and personnel resources, volunteers and students available. Among other things there are following activities or groups:

“Guys on the Corner”: offers meaningful, alternative activities. E.g. cooking club, hiking, picking berries and mushrooms, excursions.

Art Skills and Handicraft group: open group for everyone who wants to learn new skills or just to stop by for a chat or coffee.

Avot group – open rehab group which offers peer support

Summer activities: During summertime Kansalaistalo is on wheels and meets people outdoors. Off they go and have the coffee pot on the bicycle. Kansalaistalo has also a small-scale kitchen garden that is together taken care of.

5 Kansalaistalo is a place to work and learn

The number of personnel varies in Kansalaistalo. There is permanent staff, e.g. executive manager. From time to time there are projects that work in cooperation and with the same themes as Kansalaistalo. The project workers are more or less working in Kansalaistalo and meeting people visiting Kansalaistalo.

At this time there are two cooperative projects. Soroppi Association’s project called Silta (Bridge) works with people with alcohol and drug problems by helping, advising and facing people in everyday life. North Karelian Society for Social Security’s project SALLI focuses on people’s opportunities to participate in the society. SALLI project’s focus is especially on those people who have the weakest opportunities to become involved and participate in the society.

In addition to the permanent staff, and project staff there are workers on various assignments. There may be long-term unemployed people working with a pay subsidy (palkkatuki) on different employment schemes. Or they may have periods for work and training try-outs.

Plenty of volunteers contribute at Kansalaistalo. Some of them contribute for a longer time. Someone visits as a volunteer occasionally. Some volunteer worker may be employed.

In Kansalaistalo students are an important and big group. They come from universities, universities of applied sciences, vocational schools and many others. They study various subjects, social and health studies, media, it-technology etc. Exchange students often find Kansalaistalo atmosphere suitable for their placements. Students have their practical studies and make their projects that
are useful for developing Kansalaistalo activities. For students Kansalaistalo offers an important place to learn e.g. how to interact with different kind of people and what kind of challenges there may occur when people interact with each other, learn about the disadvantaged and their needs and thought.

Tens of student groups visit yearly Kansalaistalo. For students it is important to get to know a place like Kansalaistalo that tells a lot about the Finnish society.

6 What visitors tell

Feedback from visitors and group members is gathered in various ways. Most of the feedback is positive. But there are also critical sounds, and they are taken into consideration.

According to the feedback the most valuable thing seems to be meeting people, having someone to talk to, someone to listen to. People´s stories tell also about empowerment. They feel stronger and see the future lighter. And thirdly, people absolutely like to meet different kind of people.

The quotations below are from Kansalaistalo on You Tube (see links).

“Very meaningful activities!”
“Groups are nice.”
“You don’t have to be alone.”
“Time flies here.”
“You can meet different kind of people.”
“I know almost everyone here.”
“Nice to meet friends.”

“Here you have a place and a group where to come.”
“At least once a week you leave home and come to see other people – that is important.”
“I have made new friends, we meet also outside Kansalaistalo.”
“It is wonderful to meet people of all ages.”

“This makes me more active.”
“This helps to have a sober day.”
“I had help from the group for my drinking problem.”
“I found a new touch in my life.”

“Activities are mostly free.”
“In cooking group you learn to cook and can eat proper food at least once a week.”
“On trips you see new sceneries.”
“Costs are small compared with the benefits gained.”

“There are no other places like this.”

“WE NEED MORE LIKE THIS!”
Contacts

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Links

Joensuun Kansalaistalo - Community Resource Center: www.kansalaistalo.fi

Community Resource Center in a Nutshell:

Kansalaistalo on You Tube. Activities without drugs: Have a day sober
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN0qobHujtw

Kansalaistalo on You Tube. A healthy day in Kansalaistalo – organized together with the students from Karelia University of Applied Sciences
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AS_pF6YjNCA

Pohjois-Karjalan Sosiaaliturvayhdistys ry – North Karelian Association for Social Security:
www.pksotu.fi

Soroppi ry: http://www.kansalaistalo.fi/?page_id=410

The case study is based on the website: www.kansalaistalo.fi and an unpublished article by Marko Haakana & Katja Hämäläinen-Puhakka.