



Summary

- MitWirkung supports local government authorities in Berlin to effectively address child poverty. We act as systems stewards to facilitate learning across systems that leads to change.
- The fight against poverty can only be successful if we all change the way we think about poverty, question our mindsets and metaphors. We need to learn from and with people who have first-hand experience of poverty. But it's not enough to invite them – we need to change the ways we hold discussions so they are meaningfully included.

MitWirkung – Perspektiven für Familien, Berlin/Germany

| Overview and history

MitWirkung – Perspektiven für Familien is a project run by the nonprofit organisation Gesundheit Berlin-Brandenburg, an association concerned with public health, social justice and inequality.

In September 2022, the federal state of Berlin passed a strategy against child poverty. Berlin is not only a federal state but also a city of 12 districts. Each district has its own local government and is expected to create an integrated district strategy ("*Integrierte bezirkliche Strategie*"). This is where we come in: We create spaces for professionals and executives in district administrations to develop their strategy against child poverty. This includes facilitating meetings, conferences and workshops as well as coaching professionals in their roles as part of the strategy development team. We offer systemic consulting service to the administrative staff in charge – we are systems stewards. We believe that the fight against poverty can only be successful if we change the way we think about poverty. To help others change their perspectives, we need to change our own first. And this is where the HLS approach comes in.



| Why We Love the HLS Approach

When we came to discover the HLS access, it was eye-opening: Yes, this is the formula it is all about.

- We need to be human, and speak and act as humans, relate to each other as humans and have true and honest conversations. This requires working on our mindsets (as a form of inner work) and working with the actual, existing people (rather than our constructions of people).
- We often witness a deep gap between the public service system and the actual people the system is supposed to serve.
- We are committed to the systemic approach: We believe that organisations are made up of a variety of different people who form living, dynamic structures which cannot be changed by simply following 'how-to'-manuals.
- We see that there is a need of orientation and knowledge, yet at the same time we know that more knowledge, more techniques won't do it.
- We believe that learning in co-construction is the key. This is so much easier said than done.
- Mindset is everything: We need a different mindset, but we also need knowledge, freedom, imagination to change our behaviour accordingly.
- In a conservative surrounding such as the public service sector, changing mindsets is the most difficult thing to do.





| How We Work

Two examples might serve to illustrate how we try to practise systems stewardship.

| 'Lernwerkstatt'

Example 1: Learning workshop based on Peter Senge's concept of learning organisations

We invite professionals from district administration to take part in learning workshops. These take place four times a year. The main idea: We do not focus on information, or input. Instead, we try to create spaces which enable us to learn together how to fight child poverty. Together we work to find answers to questions such as:

- How can we address poverty without stigmatising people?
- How can we change the ways we work together?
- How can we address, and possibly change, the boundaries created by hierarchies?
- How can we make an impact?

Instead of giving information to the participants, we invite them to discuss shared and individual visions, or mental models of poverty related topics. We introduce elements from team learning concepts and systemic thinking, trying to install new ways of thinking and sharing.



The workshops are intended to allow learning across all levels of hierarchy, departments, and districts, thereby opening new spaces that enable us to share ideas, to share failures and to build trust. Coming together in this space is the first step towards a construction of something new and different. We believe that – if we really want to make a lasting difference – co-construction and co-creation is the only way to do it.



In our “Lernwerkstatt” on poverty awareness, we did not offer any definitions of poverty, we did not talk about numbers or facts. Instead, our focus was to create a space that would enable everyone to understand (and possibly change) their own attitude towards poverty, and to question the way we talk about social inequality.

How did we do that?

- We invited the participants to get involved, starting by talking in groups about our individual experiences with poverty or wealth. This allowed people to open up and share their own stories, thus completely changing the space. When one professional shared her own experience as a welfare recipient, this allowed us to leave the sphere of detached professionalism. A change of perspective became possible. Also, we were able to address the question of power and hierarchy in our workplaces: Who makes decisions, and why? What does it mean that many valuable perspectives are usually not represented? How could we change that?
- We specifically created space for emotions to be part of this learning experiences as well by inviting the group to small writing exercises to explore their own entanglement.
- We talked about the framing of poverty: Which images and phrases come up first when we think about people affected by poverty? What assumptions do we draw from that about causes and responsibilities? How can we reframe these assumptions? How can we change the general image, and how would that affect the way we act?

The basis for this kind of learning environment is our attitude as facilitators: We hold the space, but we also show ourselves, share experiences, and take part in the learning process. And so do our colleagues from the Berlin state government institution who take part in the workshops. Showing ourselves as learners first allows others to join in.





| A different approach to conferences and public events

Our work is all about improving the accessibility of services, and thus minimising the implications of poverty. We often tend to automatically call for direct dialogue WITH families living in poverty rather than talking ABOUT them. This goal seems to make perfect sense at first sight.

However, when running public events such as conferences, real participation requires a lot of preparation, a very professional attitude, and a high level of awareness.

We have learned this the hard way in a symposium on child poverty in Berlin: One participant of a panel was invited to share their personal experience of growing up in poverty – an attempt to ‘talk with’ instead of ‘about’. The other participants had been invited as professional ‘experts’ but were not addressed as private people. A conflict arose when another panellist, a politician, dismissed the personal story, using their privileged position to essentially silence the first panellist. This caused a bias in the ongoing discussion and lead to insulting behaviour towards the only person on the panel who represented having actual experience with poverty.

We as professionals had to admit: The effect of this panel was the opposite of what was intended. It does make a difference who is involved and who is invited to take part in the discussion. However, it is not enough to invite. If we honestly mean to include everyone, we need different ways of working together, different ways of talking. The old rules do not work anymore in a different context.

As system stewards, we try to learn from experience how to do it differently next time. New questions arise:

- How can we successfully facilitate a dialogue between people who experience poverty, and those who don’t – without shaming those who are much more vulnerable in this context?
- How can we facilitate participation in hierarchical contexts without exposing people to strong power imbalance?
- Who should be involved in decision-making when conceptualising an event?

Small steps towards change might be the creation of a safer/braver space, discussion rules, or systematic reflection in the aftermath of each event or dialogue.

To quote Tupoka Ogette, a Black German facilitator and antiracist writer: The aim is to ‘replace guilt and shame with responsibility’.



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If we honestly mean to include people with lived experience, we need different ways of working together, different ways of talking. The old rules do not work anymore in a different context.

How do we bring this forward exactly?

As systems stewards, we offer a series of digital events called ‘Räume öffnen – Let’s talk change’ (translates as ‘opening spaces’). These events usually have one panel guest each and are open to anyone. The idea is to create a space for discussion and reflection of new approaches towards systems change.

Last year, we started a second series called ‘Let’s talk privilege’. Our guests are literary writers, often novelists, who write from an informed biographical perspective. In this series, our panel guests are experts on a professional and on a personal level, and we never question this position.

We invite them to read from their books, and participants can discuss their emotions and thoughts afterwards in breakout rooms. Connecting with Tupoka Ogette’s assertion, our intention is to convert our emotions into action, to take responsibility in our daily life and work. It is our responsibility as facilitators to enable this conversation after each reading.

| Open Questions

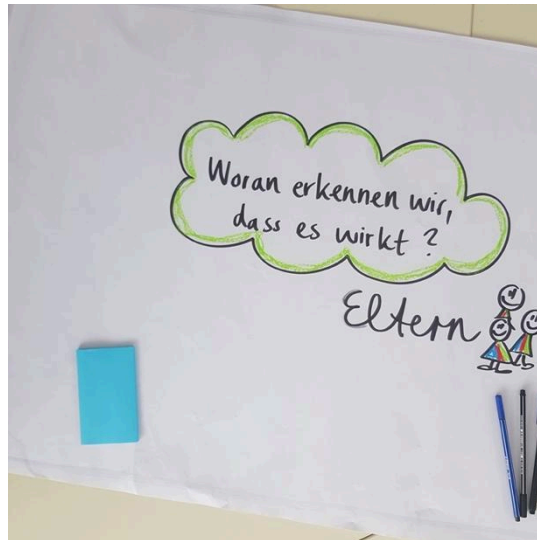
Following on from these examples, systems stewardship is a fitting description for what we do. Fulfilling this role is an ongoing process though. Some questions remain:

- Are we focussing too much on the results of poverty instead of looking into the causes? Does this focus make our efforts futile?
- How can we do that in a way that is engaging and encourages others to fight for change?
- And how can we start to look more systemically and critically into our own structures, the structures of our organisation and our funders? How do we avoid becoming entangled activists?
- How do we stay awake; how do we avoid too much narcissism and self-praise?
- How can we learn to deal with irritation?
- How do we become increasingly aware about what is going on under the surface and take into account the effects of power and micro-politics?



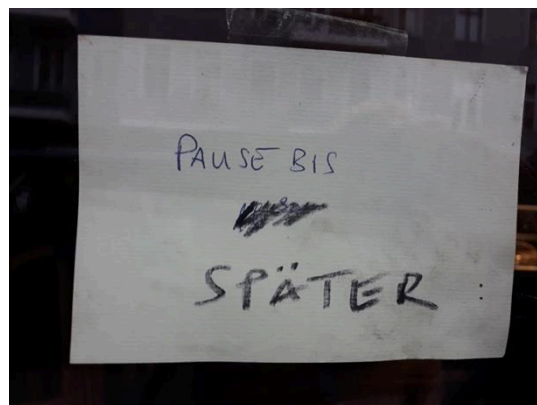
- How do we find the stakeholders in the background, the 'rhythm groups' and important players in that system?

Our conviction is that we cannot change a culture without going the first steps first. This is why we are constantly learning, hoping to make small progress every day.



How do we recognise that it's impactful? Parents

Reflection, creating safer spaces, and sharing emotions is an act of selfcare, but it is also a necessity. Changing mindsets, changing a culture takes time. It is one thing to know this rationally.



Break until ... later

The other side is: How do we handle this slowness; how can we still feel effective when our work is not visible immediately? How can we care for ourselves in a way that enables us to keep working? As systemic consultants, we make use of various approaches such as systemic constellations, in counselling, but also as a tool for team reflection. Tools like these allow us to address problems we share with the people we work with, and at the same time establish a new work culture.

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