

Central Baltic INTERREG IV A Programme 2007-2013
Opening Event Mariehamn
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Inspirational speech by Nina Fellman, Chief editor of NyaÅland

Dear partyants. That is how a minister in the Åland government greeted his quests at a meeting not so long ago. What he meant to say was of course participants, but isn't it so much more fun when you try something and get it wrong, than if everything is correct to the last letter?

So, dear partyants.

Do you know what the most difficult thing in the world is – the thing that we people fail to accomplish again and again.

It is for people to sit in the same room, face to face, breathing the same air and honestly understand each other.

It is so difficult even for people who love each other, that up to 50 per cent of all marriages in this society end in divorce. It is so difficult that world summits designed to solve very important problems fail miserably, with world leaders forced to go home with no more than "productive talks" to show for all the time and money they spent.

I think, but I'm not quite sure, that this problem is what the Central Baltic Programme is designed to solve. Among all the other programmes and agendas in the world.

You, the participants and the administrators of this project are supposed to make the world a better place. That is no small thing to ask for. Would you please save the world a little bit. We'll give you money to do i...

Some of you might think that this is a somewhat dramatic approach to what we are up to, to implement a EU-financed programme with very specific and well specified goals.

When I started preparing to give this speech, I tried to read the programme documents, drafted by clever people, approved by the proper authorities and available in pdf by a mere click on my computer.

I was instantly overwhelmed by an urge to curl up under the table and fall asleep. All those big words, all the requirements and budgets and plans and reports... It is all just incredibly complicated and – to be honest –quite boring.

Necessary, yes, important even, but boring for all those who do not have the skills or the need to work with that kind of bureaucracy.

I'm not here to put the entire programme down, or to belittle the important work that Ann here and all her colleagues are doing.

I just need it to you straight and simple. Being a journalist and therefore both lazy and shallow, I don't have the energy to take in all the details. I just assume from what little I've read, that the whole programme is designed to make that difficult sitting in the same room and doing things together a little easier in our part of the world.

If you and all of us together succeed in doing that, everything else will follow.
If the programme or any part of it is a success it will in some small way change the world.

What I'm going to do is give you some examples of why and how you should use Ann Nedergård and her co-workers to squeeze as much money out of the Central Baltic programme as you possibly can.

I did get through the three main priorities of the programme:

A safe and healthy environment

An economically competitive and innovative region

Attractive and dynamic societies.

Well, those are wonderful ideas. Let ´s get going and get it done. Right?

I know. Don ´t you just feel very small and unimportant and even kind of too lightweight in the face of "economically innovative region" and "dynamic society".

Well, don ´t. Those are just big words for creating opportunities for people to meet, to talk, to giggle, maybe get drunk together and come up with great ideas in the early hours of some morning.

It is about cooperation. The essence of cooperation is that what you are doing together feels equally important for all partners, that you have a common goal and a common understanding.

Again, this is not easy.

Let me give you an example of a serious mistake that I made a few years ago.

In Mariehamn we have a wonderful, wonderful event in March every year, called Mariehamns litteraturdag. The opening speech that year was given by a Danish author I ´d never heard of, Carsten Jensen. At a cocktail party after the opening I met Carsten Jensen and made some small talk, but wasn ´t really interested. He was attentive, open, wanted to talk, and I was totally focused on the local elite, at the moment involved in some power struggle I ´ve now forgotten.

After that, Carsten Jensen keeps popping up, in brilliant newspaper articles, books, and recently in one of the best novels I ´ve read in years, *Vi de drukkade*.

Stupid me. I missed a chance to meet and talk to a really interesting person because I was too caught up in local trivia

This programme, with its broadened spectrum, is about making people see good, important things beyond their own immediate surroundings and have the courage to seize opportunities. It ´s like that phone call you really need to make. You know what to say, you know you have to, and still it is so difficult to lift the receiver, dial the number and say Hello, my name is Nina Fellman...

A human instinct that is not so flattering is to ignore or stay away from things unknown. The Central Baltic programme is here to change it!

In speeches like this what is usually said is a repetition of what has already been written, with some encouraging words about the importance of our environment like the sugar on top. That is the safe and easy way. You say the proper things, and no one can accuse you of doing anything wrong apart from being mildly boring.

Well, my conviction is that most everything good and strong that might develop anywhere is hindered by only two things – fear and ignorance.

Say you have a great idea. For example: Your region has a few very good choirs, and you want to organize a choir festival. It ´s brilliant. Singing makes people strong and healthy, making friends in other choirs is a great start for business ventures, an international choir festival attracts visitors, you can have workshops, student exchanges, maybe a television show, certainly you should document the whole event...

What is stopping you?

You don't know where to start. Your English isn't good enough. Someone might think it's a silly idea and laugh at you. Others have done the same thing, only much bigger. You don't know enough, and it might make you look like a fool. Fear and ignorance.

Let me share with you one experience from the only EU-financed project I've ever been involved in. Ten years ago the Åland Islands Peace Institute started a cooperation with a women's group in Lithuania. Together we started a centre for women and children, a kindergarden and all kinds of good things. It could all have come to an end much sooner, because of our ignorance and the fear of our partners.

When we started we were a group of well-meaning Åland women with a second hand shop and the desire to work with projects that would strengthen women and children. We found a group of women in Lithuania engaged in different social projects.

When we first met the group from Åland was dressed and behaved like we usually do. Well worn jeans and sweaters with the odd hole or tear, comfortable shoes, no frills. Matter of fact. It's the inside that counts. Come as you are. The Lithuanian group was dressed to the gills, all high heels and blue eye shadow. We saw bad style. They saw disrespect. We saw pretence, they saw bad manners. We had to learn, through a long process, to understand each others cultures, societies and hierarchies. Only then did our common project become successful.

Why? Because when we didn't manage to understand each other we had very polite and nice meetings, with every one agreeing with everyone else. Not until we learned to trust each other enough to start arguing did we get things right, because we needed our Lithuanian partners to set us right when we were wrong, and they didn't until they trusted us not to take our money and go.

One example. A few years into Nendres existence there was some commotion over the fact that a lot of money was spent on extensive dental care for one of the mothers in the project, a former prostitute with several children with different fathers. Nendre was criticized for spending money on trivial stuff when the children actually needed food on the table. By then our Lithuanian women had learned to be cool. They calmly explained that the new teeth were necessary for this mother to get a real job. Without them she would remain dependent, with them she could make her own future.

Speaking of trust and fear. One big difference in this new programme compared to earlier versions, is that the language is foreign to everyone. We speak English now, you are to write reports and applications in English, to ponder over words like intermediary and budget deficit.

That is going to be hard.

Tell me, how many of you who are here today would feel confident in giving a speech in English or writing an application or just discussing with other people in English.

Ok. That's what I thought.

Many small projects are in danger of never being realised, because the practical obstacles become too great. That is a problem program managers will have to address, unless they only want the big, professional and bureaucratically skilled project applicants.

The language issue can also be a possibility, and it is certainly necessary. We need common ground, with everyone on the same unsafe footing.

I have a piece of practical, down to earth advice.

Practice.

No, not on language courses. Practice at home, with co-workers and family or alone in the attic. Speak. Just let the words come out of your mouth and taste them. Get comfortable with actually doing it. It is not enough to think that you are going to do it at the next meeting.

When I was pregnant with my second son I discussed with my midwife that I did not want to give birth lying down on my back again. She said; Ok, practice. Get down naked with your butt up and imagine what it will be like to do that with people you don't know all around you and all kinds of stuff

coming out of you. Once you put your mind as well as your body in that position, actually doing it will be okay.

It was - and that was very good advice

Sorry about the metaphors, but it is a very good one. Maybe you'll remember this speaker as the one who made you think about her behind in a not so flattering way.

The biggest danger in the coming programme period is not that there will be a lack of projects. After all there's a lot of money to be had, so...

The problem is that there is a lot of money to be had.

The really good stuff, the ideas that will take on like forest fires, are the ones no one has thought to lay the ground for in the programme, so those ideas won't fit. They will be all wrong in so many ways.

This is my most important piece of advice:

If you have a good idea or a good project, stick to it.,

Bend the rules as much as you can. Don't break them, but twist them hard.

Don't adjust your reality to the programme requirements. Make the programme adjust.

Get help with the difficult stuff, the budgeting, reporting and red tape. Do what you do best, and what makes you enthusiastic.

The Central Baltic Programme so far is a frame.

It is canvas and paint.

It is an instrument, a tool, a computer blinking new empty document.

What you need to do is to start painting, playing, building, writing. If the art, the fun and the business does not come out of your ideas, the EU will have spent a lot of money in a few years time on absolutely nothing but office space.

Finally, I put my trust in you. You will be working with our money to make our societies better.

A good, healthy, strong society is a place where people feel safe, where they feel they have options and can make a difference. It is a place where people like each other.

You will be using our money to make our dreams come true of a better environment, better health, stronger societies.

I believe this kind of change comes almost by itself once you solve that initial problem of sitting in the same room, really caring, really listening, honestly trying.

Have fun. That is essential. Don't try to be politically correct all the time. Go crazy. Make sure that all your failures teach you something.

Please. Go change the world.

Nina Fellman