

The CAN DO approach – Principles and preconditions

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So as to understand the effect of our “Can Do” approach, one must experience it. The potential of our approach becomes clear once you have taken part in our international “Can Do” encounters, workshops and projects. Nevertheless, in this article we will do our best to convey our approach in writing. This article is mainly intended for people who already know us and want to understand our work in depth. On the other hand, it provides an initial understanding for those of you for whom the approach is completely new and who, hopefully, will want to have a “Can Do” experience with us in our encounters, workshops and projects.

Our intention is to clarify the theoretical concept behind our approach and make it actionable for others. In the first section “CAN DO in a nutshell” you get a summary of the article, in “CAN DO foundation” we talk about trust relationships, followed by the “CAN DO principles” participatory, process- and resource-oriented approaches and the closed by the “CAN DO methods”. We wish you valuable insights and fun with the following information. You will also find the following information in a film “The power of CAN DO” on our website:
<http://www.candoempowerment.eu/videos/>

1. CAN DO in a nutshell

"Can Do" is the name for a specific series of empowerment projects funded by Erasmus+ in Germany as a strategic partnership of the national agency. The first "Can Do" project ("Can Do Empowerment") took place from 2014 to 2017, the second one ("Can Do Refugees") from 2018 to 2021, the third "Can Do CARDS" from 2022 to 2024 and the current one "CAN DO Democracy" from 2024 to 2028. At the time, the approach was developed by the "founding mothers" Katrin Kuhla and Iman Moutaouakil. Katrin Kuhla has been the consortium leader at VIA Bayern since the very beginning. For more information please visit our website:
<http://www.candoempowerment.eu>.

In the "Can Do" projects, we host five-day encounters, with 2-4 participants from each consortium partner, making a total of about 15-25 participants. In our “Can Do” encounters we professionalize and empower people in the social and civic education sectors. The encounters always have a core theme, in the Can Do CARDS project the core themes were: Learning democracy, intercultural communication and participation.

2. CAN DO Foundation

We believe there are already many interesting and helpful methods, approaches and projects tackling social issues. Despite this, the participants of our “Can Do” encounters reported the huge impact of these encounters. Some even described a “life changing experience”. This deep

social and personal impact derives from our core foundation as well as three principles which we will describe here.

Our foundation: Trustful Relationships

The basis of our cooperation are relationships of trust. In our view, relationships of trust are characterised by recognition, appreciation, respect, affection, joy and humour. For many people, these are self-evident prerequisites of cooperation, which often enough receive little attention. For our Can Do approach, these are the essential ingredients. As a result of this realisation, we always first focus on people in our Can Do project. For our project this means that we cannot achieve the project goal "empowerment for the people who work with us" if we cannot build trusting relationships. In order to establish trusting relationships in the Can Do meetings with the participants, trusting relationships must first be established in the steering group - from a systemic view point, the relationships in the steering group have a direct effect on the group that it leads.

Trusting relationships in management

Can Do projects always have a steering group for management with coordinators from all partner countries. In order to achieve empowerment in the Can Do meetings, the steering group must work together in a spirit of trust. This essential prerequisite focusses on the following aspects:

1) The steering group relationships are cultivated to a degree that goes beyond the professional role of the participants. When people meet and get to know each other on a personal level, they can better support each other in mutual empowerment. These deeper relationships are relatively solid foundations for possible conflict work. The following is required from steering group participants: **the willingness to connect with each other at a personal level and not just in the role of coordinator.**

2) The participants in the steering group work together as equals. The leadership style is participative and cooperative. This means that the participants must take responsibility for sub-processes of their contributions to the overall process. They must be psychologically and emotionally able to engage in participatory, process-oriented procedures, which are often unstructured and uncertain at times and sometimes require very differentiated and individual approaches. In the best case, those involved enjoy a "leap into the unknown", or at least have an **openness to open processes.**

3) Conflicts in the steering group should be dealt with in an appreciative and respectful manner. Unresolved conflicts have, also from a systemic point of view, a direct influence on groups led by the steering group – there is a German saying "der Fisch stinkt vom Kopf" ("the fish smells from the head"). From our point of view, the steering group, as a commitment to the group, has the **responsibility to constructively address and clarify conflicts among themselves.**

With this willingness, openness and responsibility, the downside is the danger of instrumentalization and manipulation by exploiting the participatory approach and supposed personal 'weaknesses'. Since trust cannot be forced or guaranteed, this is where we reach the

limit of the approach. So, if people cannot or will not engage with these conditions, the approach does not work. With the potential in mind, we nevertheless dare to take the leap into the unknown again and again, and have been rewarded many times already.

Trusting relationships for our meetings

At the centre of our Can Do encounters is again trust. Only when trust is present in the group can we shift our focus to content and issues. With trust in the group, difficult issues such as discrimination, racism, trauma therapy, etc. can be approached in a fundamentally different way and at a much deeper emotional level.

Should you notice during the encounters, that you don't have the participants trust, then you need to return to the building trust phase. That is why, trust building methods are always used during a "Can Do" encounter. Many of these exercises are described here. They often originate from pedagogical approaches involving art, theatre, music, dance

2. The three CAN DO principles

The three principles are of course fundamental to our steering group work. Only if they can be successfully applied here, can they be carried forward in the Can Do group meetings. Here we describe what the three approaches mean for the cooperation with the meeting participants.

Participatory approach – inviting people to contribute.

We work in a participatory way. The participants decide which topics we work on. The "Can Do" encounters have a pre-arranged daily and weekly schedule. There is a common thread - but it is up to the participants to decide how this process is shaped. Nothing happens without the involvement of the participants. On the contrary. They are invited to get involved. They contribute the topics that are important to them and with the skills and resources they bring to the encounter. In this way, the participants can become identified with the learning process and what is happening in the encounter space. This approach removes resistance to the learning journey - or, if there is resistance, it can be resolved more easily.

The "Can Do" encounters bring together international people with different perspectives (academic, practical, voluntary, professional, long-term, short-term, etc.). From our experience, the feeling of "I am not alone!" and "In other countries, they do the same work we do!" can be highly empowering. It gives the feeling of belonging to a larger community that cares for the well-being of refugees, migrants and marginalized people. This is an effect of participatory work.

Resource-oriented approach - Making people aware of their strengths and inviting them to use them more.

People learn easier and faster, and the effect lasts longer, when you work with their strengths instead of their deficits. We don't analyse the deficits. We focus on the strengths. People often are more aware of their weaknesses than their strengths. By focusing on strengths, we increase confidence, which then makes it possible to work on difficult issues (e.g., exclusion, discrimination etc.). The participants are empowered to use their competences to improve their

everyday life. The resource-oriented approach increases motivation and enthusiasm for the entire learning journey.

The resource-based approach of the “Can Do” encounters, continuously invites the participants to take on the role of trainer and pass on their knowledge to others. Ideally, a “Can Do” encounter will allow everyone to be both teacher and learner.

Process-oriented approach – ensuring that our work is relevant to the professional or private life of the participants and can be transferred to their lives after encounter.

Our “Can Do” encounters are neither goal- nor result-oriented. Instead, we are consistently process-oriented. We believe that this is the way to achieve results that are tailor-made for the participants and therefore have a deep and long-lasting impact. Following the basic assumption, that "Disruptions have priority!" we prioritize participants' impulses over the seminar agenda. Our experience shows that this process-oriented approach usually covers the essential points on the agenda. Perhaps in a different order and with other emphases as well as detours via topics that were not planned. This approach reduces the number of topics and issues that can be covered in a more structured and goal-oriented approach. However, we can capture and work on the topics that really concern the participants and in which they are interested. This content is often more relevant to the participants everyday life.

4. CAN DO Methods

There are some methods and frameworks that are fundamental to “Can Do” encounters and their approach:

Peaceful, rural surroundings and good food

Maybe it sounds simplistic, but a quiet, rural environment and good food are crucial for creating a relaxed, happy, attentive, centred group atmosphere. Experienced group leaders say that the location and food account for 80% of the success of a seminar - we agree with this, even if it may sound sobering 😊. It is important that everybody can eat together. The finances should be planned accordingly. Our experience tells us that eating together has a unifying and harmonising effect on the group.

Only in an atmosphere framed by these conditions can true encounters occur between participants. This is essential in order to realise each other's personal resources. Once these resources are visible and actionable, the work becomes much more participatory. Such an environment has a harmonising and focussing influence on the entire group process.

Living agenda

The “Can Do” project is led by a Steering Group with a representative from each partner country. In “Can Do” encounters, there is one person from each participating country. This person is also in the project Steering Group and takes a leading role for the participants from that country. This person knows the other people from their country and has already encouraged them to contribute their competences to the overall theme

of the encounter (in lectures, workshops, films, shows, etc.). Before the encounters, the possible contributions of the participants are collected and a first proposal for a Living Agenda for the five seminar days was worked out in the Steering Group.

This Living Agenda is displayed in the seminar room – ideally with flexible cards (sticky wall or sticky facilitation cards, etc.). The agenda is a suggestion by the Steering Group. The first day is implemented as planned. The subsequent days may vary depending on the impulses from the group.

Evening buzz groups

Every evening, people from the same country come together in buzz groups and reflect on the day: What went well? What do we wish for tomorrow? Where would someone like to contribute? One person from each country presents the ideas and concerns to the rest of the group. Based on these evening rounds, the Living Agenda is changed every evening.

Encourage premieres

Due to the appreciative, resource-oriented work, it happens again and again that participants' competences emerge during the encounter, which are then also integrated into the Living Agenda. Here, the members of the steering group sometimes act as midwives, enabling participants to discover these competences. Mealtimes and evenings are particularly suitable for this. The "Can Do" encounters have often been the host to such premieres: Many have applied their methods in English for the first time, we had a hip hop dancer who taught his dance to adults for the first time and some traumatic situations or experiences of discrimination have been recounted for the first time in the "Can Do" encounters.

Leisure Time

When people are having fun, they relax and get into a state where they can really absorb new ideas. That's why part of the "Can Do" encounters is to plan for fun: On the third day we always have a Look & See afternoon where we get to know the local area. Maybe we find something that can even be linked to the overall theme of the encounter. What is suitable has to be discussed with the local partner. On some evenings we offer joint activities. Suggestions often come from the participants. On the last evening, it is obligatory to party all night 😊. Accordingly, it makes no sense to plan particularly demanding things on the last day.

Participants of a CAN DO Meeting in Turkey 2023

