

CREATIVE
LENS

STRONGER ARTS
AND CULTURAL
ORGANISATIONS
FOR A GREATER
SOCIAL IMPACT

CREATIVE
LENSES
CASE STUDY
AMBASADA

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Interviewee Andreea Iager-Tako, co-founder

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Creative Lenses is a four-year project, running from 2015 to 2019, that seeks to make arts and cultural organisations more resilient and sustainable by improving their business models and developing their long-term strategic and innovation capacities.

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CREATIVE LENSES PARTNER ORGANISATIONS



AMBASADA

Location	Timisoara, Romania
Website	www.plai.ro/ambasada
Mission statement	AMBASADA aims to bring together both the non-profit community and creative communities to generate new projects and impact solutions while drinking a fair-trade coffee. A physical space, the cultural and resource centre is equally interesting for the corporate sector as an alternative space for learning and inspiring employees, while connecting to the local community and solving issues important to it. Acting as a bistro, café, meeting room, conference and event room, AMBASADA offers both a coffee and a training, inspiring sessions, concerts and live-public music rehearsals, movies night, artistic installations and much more.
Organisation type	Non-profit NGO and social enterprise
Main activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Bistro, catering and event services2. Events organising and promotion3. Delivery of training and coaching sessions and consultations provided free of charge to NGOs and the creative community4. Hosting of master classes by NGOs and the creative community such as workshops, recitals, rehearsals, concerts and film screenings.
Art forms produced or promoted	All art forms and produce music events via the founding NGO Centrul Cultural PLAI

Introduction

2006 – Founding NGO Centrul Cultural PLAI is formed by founders Andreea Iager-Tako and Norbert Tako to run world music festival Timisoara PLAI on a voluntary basis.

2010 onwards – The team began to produce other events from concerts and workshops promoting active citizenship, diversity and more. Idea of AMBASADA is seeded.

2015 – NGO Asociația CASA PLAI is formed to deliver AMBASADA - an independent cultural centre, which acts as a resource centre and support for the creative community and NGOs in the city.

2018 – AMBASADA is now a meeting place for NGOs, freelancers, artists, musicians, social and creative entrepreneurs. It consists of a bistro, co-working space, meeting rooms, performance and rehearsal spaces, and an event hall accommodating between 100 and 300 people. It offers free facilities and services for the creative and non-profit sectors, supported by income from the bistro and related commercial activities.

Key income streams

1. Bistro and related services (70%)
2. Corporate Sponsorships (30%)

Turnover 2017

€230,000

Surplus/deficit 2017

Surplus €10,681

Number of employees and volunteers

9 employees



'IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT EARNING MONEY, IT'S ABOUT BECOMING LEADERS IN BEST PRACTICE'

The drivers for change

1. Responding to unmet need in the community: The team behind PLAI are a community of volunteers dedicated to positive civic action and social change. They saw an opportunity to continue and increase the impact of the three-day festival PLAI by creating a space that encourages collaboration between organizations and people from the local creative and non-profit community. They stepped in to deliver free access to space, support and guidance, and a platform to develop ideas and businesses, in the absence of government provision.
2. Preserving industrial heritage: AMBASADA chose an initial location of historical significance - famous hat factory, Fabrica de pălării din Timișoara (PALTIM), meaning Hats Factory from Timisoara. At a time when many industrial buildings were being demolished, the team were driven by the need to prove that creative and social business models can preserve industrial buildings and keep them alive.
3. Securing tenure and long-term financial sustainability: AMBASADA'S biggest cost is rent. Realising that in order to become sustainable, they would need to purchase a building, they embarked on the journey to raise investment and secure a permanent home.

The solution

AMBASADA is developing a social enterprise model whereby income from a

bistro and corporate sponsors enable the delivery of free services to the community. Bistro employees are people with disabilities and young people from the foster system. The bistro not only provides employment opportunities, but a framework that is safe and structured, enabling employees to develop confidence, life skills and a much-needed support network.

Recognising a rich opportunity for local community groups and businesses to learn from each other, AMBASADA delivers distinct services to each, bringing them together under one roof. Alongside bistro income, sponsorships serves as services sold to corporates in advance (such as events, food and beverage packages) which also improves cash flow.

From the outset, AMBASADA were a partner in a European funded project, the objectives of which were to create job opportunities for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This drive to create and sustain jobs meant that the project started with a social enterprise outlook, rather than a volunteering mind-set.

AMBASADA has been successful in purchasing part of a paint factory, which also has local historical significance, and they will move in next year (2019) following refurbishments.

The implementation

Strategic partnerships: The team behind AMBASADA had established themselves as significant partners in the city, taking lead roles in the bid for European Capital of Culture for 2021 and developing the cultural strategy for the city. This has enabled them

to leverage the right partners to execute their vision.

Iterative approach: They have learned 'on the job' in terms of running the bistro and meeting the complex needs of the young people that they employ. They tested the relevance of the Ambasada concept 'just by existing' and in the first year delivered over 700 events against a target of 100 to help test and shape the programme of activity.

Diversity: The founding team have corporate backgrounds and have built a very diverse staff team with a mix experience and capabilities that complement each other. The AMBASADA community is equally diverse, attracting a broad mix and creative, cultural and social groups. The broader AMBASADA audiences reflect the rich diversity of the groups and companies that they support, all of which bring their own audience and community. This results in deep, broad community involvement and engagement and allows AMBASADA to continually assess what's needed in the community. They conduct regular feedback sessions and share an annual report on their impact and future plans.

Securing finance: After initial attempts to purchase the hat factory failed, the team began to explore the possibility of investment in 2014 to purchase a new building. Despite being offered both commercial loans and social investment, the terms were too prohibitive and a loan was eventually secured from a private individual who AMBASADA had formed an existing partnership with. The loan

equates to €450,000 for purchase and €450,000 for reconversion, to be repaid by 2021 with fixed interest of 10%.

The results

AMBASADA have firmly established themselves as a convener and catalyst within the social and enterprise community of Timisoara. As the business matures and the social enterprise model develops, the deficit is reducing, albeit at an incremental rate.

AMBASADA's biggest challenge is to continue fine tuning all aspects of the business as it grows. They have embedded the practice of continuously assessing how to optimise each aspect of their work – from products, margins, menu, and services delivered to both the community and corporates.

The direct impact of AMBASADA's work is on the beneficiaries that they serve. While the scale of their activities is sometimes small, the impact is definitely large. Reported increases in skills development, wellbeing, confidence and agency are key indicators, alongside outputs such as jobs created and businesses launched. AMBASADA intends to apply a more robust social impact framework that can measure change over a long-term trajectory to build on the case study evidence base they have established.

A second objective is to provide services to help beneficiaries scale their businesses and provide opportunities for them to grow. This will include training in how to plan ahead, financial literacy, impact measurement and self-evaluation.

Lessons learnt and advice

Validate your ideas at an early stage with the community you serve:

AMBASADA favours a personal and informal approach, which they feel reaps honest answers and feedback.

Always review where you make the most impact: Look for opportunities to pass over ownership to your community and don't feel as though you have to do everything. For example, AMBASADA are exploring how they might hand their flagship festival PLAI to a younger team of colleagues to ensure it stays relevant.

Have a process for evaluating ideas and learn to say no: In order to maintain the balance between staying true to core mission and being sustainable in the long-term, AMBASADA assesses impact and relevance against income generating potential. If the income potential is too low, then work is tuned away to minimise the opportunity cost to the organisation.

Diversity by design: AMBASADA cite 'being outsiders' as a distinct advantage and that complex networking and diversity has been a key strength in enabling an integrative approach.

Treat money a resource, not a means to an end: A sound financial plan is of course essential, but money comes and goes. AMBASADA have developed their capacity to calculate financial risk and treat money as the resource needed to realise their social mission.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ellen O'Hara is an independent coach and consultant in creative and cultural enterprise with 18 years experience spanning the private, public and third sectors. She has designed and delivered enterprise and business development programmes for Nesta and Arts Council England (Digital Arts & Culture Accelerator), Innovate UK (Enterprise Skills for grantees), British Council, Creative United, and the Clore Leadership Programme.



'WE ARE A MEETING POINT FOR A LOT OF DIVERSE PEOPLE, WHICH IS OUR GREATEST STRENGTH'



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