II. Outcomes or Consequences?

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3. Networking 'Communities'

Through participation, museums seek to attract new audiences and further their outreach (Simon 2010). Museums often employ participatory methods to connect with 'communities' that do not (yet) visit the museum. Participatory work establishes a connection between the museum and individuals, but whether this work ties the participants to the institution in the long term has not yet been adequately investigated. What connects people to a museum? What aspects in the museum's approach form obstacles to developing long-term ties with 'communities'? How could the goal of networking 'communities' become a realistic one? And, most importantly for this study, how relevant is such a network for the participants themselves?

Starting from these questions, this chapter discusses the potential of a network as an outcome or consequence both for museums and for the communities involved. It discusses the types of relationships between participants (and between participants and practitioners) through a study of the museum's use of the concept of 'community' and through conflict and trust. The chapter points to the relational motivations and objectives of the participants and assesses some of the relationships built throughout the processes, whether formal or informal, positive or negative. It builds on the idea of the museum itself as a node in a network, relating to the 'communities' that they work with on equal footing, in keeping with Morse's logic of care (2021). A museum director involved in this research referred to this idea, stating that connecting the participants with the institution

> could have been a wish, but you have to be realistic. That is simply not the case with all this participation and [its] sustainability. It's important to . . .

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> work in a participatory way again and again, but you don't always have to work with the same people (MEK-D01).[1]

Following Helen Graham, the sustainability of participatory work is defined by small-scale group work or community engagement. Graham suggests that participatory work would be less problematic if, rather than working with different 'communities' "successively (one group after another), it is seen as adding new nodes into a wider network" (2017, 84). Though museums often aim to create such a network, in which the participants and the museum remain in contact after the project, this is rarely an outcome in practice. To investigate the potential of a network as a valid outcome of a participatory museum project, this chapter evaluates the different aspects relevant to shaping relationships that stretch beyond the project's timeline.

One of these aspects is the concept of 'community' and the way this term is often applied to describe forced migrants as a group. This includes a reflection on the modus operandi of community engagement, for which I start with the process of recognising, addressing and inviting a 'group' to become involved in a project. Based on a theoretical discussion of 'communities', invitation processes and related expectations within the museological realm, this chapter outlines the ways in which four different participatory projects shape potential networks.

3.1 Inviting 'communities'

Museums are increasingly acknowledging the importance of inviting 'communities' to represent themselves; a practice that is largely based on the museum's ambition to move away from its colonial displays of 'others'. Participatory work claims to provide a stage for marginalised people, but it often starts from a contributory logic (Morse 2021). Preparing for a project, museum practitioners or project facilitators put a lot of work into developing the concept for the project, imagining the goals and possible outcomes of the project, and securing funding. This process most often includes outlining

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1 This quotation is from an interview carried out with a museum director for this research. Throughout this chapter, quotes drawn from different interviews with participants and museum practitioners are included to provide insight into their personal experiences and perceptions of the projects. The interviews with the different stakeholders were conducted between May 2020 and June 2021.

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goals for participants based on assumptions by practitioners, rather than on conversations with participants. A participatory project gains its participatory nature when the invitations are sent out, or when the people who already work with the museum or external facilitators are asked to join a particular project. For this invitation process, museums reach out to 'imagined communities'[2] based on assumed characteristics and connections (Waterton and Smith 2010) and with prescribed aims of what might come out of the project for the members of that 'community'.

Museums, as well as other cultural organisations and funding bodies, often refer to communities to suggest that they are targeting a specific 'group' (Meijer-van Mensch 2012); their work aims to address a representative group of people based on what they have in common. This approach to participatory practices means that museums are often unable to break with existing hierarchies, despite their underlying aim to share agency with the invited group. This principle is further explored by Anja Piontek (2017) through a study of the existing and perpetual power dynamics within participatory practices in museums. According to Piontek, it is not possible to develop a project that seeks to diminish power relations when the invitation to participate itself confirms existing dynamics (2017, 86); the involvement of the 'community' is dependent on the museum, at least in the sense that it must first be invited.

The following sections look at the use of 'community' in the invitation of forced migrants, and assess the potential to shape invitation processes around 'areas of curiosity' (Lindström and Ståhl 2016, 186) rather than extending an invitation to an invented or presumed 'community'. It problematises the use of 'community' in practice, and suggests what should change for participatory methods to successfully lead to the creation of a network connecting participants, the museum, and its practitioners in a way that might benefit the participants rather than (or in addition to) the museum.

2 This term was first used by Benedict Anderson (1983) to describe how people come to perceive themselves as part of a national community. Waterton and Smith (2010) use Anderson's term to underline that being a member of a community is not always a choice, as is clear from how it is applied in museum practice.

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3.1.1 A 'community' of forced migrants

As a 'community', forced migrants are envisioned as a clear focus group for the museum. This 'grouping', as pointed out by Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith, is intrinsically shaped by existing hierarchies and therefore difficult for museums to navigate or challenge (2010). Emphasising the problematic nature of this practice, the concept has "been pushed onto class, racial or ethnic hierarchies" (Waterton and Smith 2010, 7). This was recently addressed during an online discussion organised by COMCOL on the term 'community' and how it is used by museums in their work.[3] One of the speakers, Idil Efe, who is a 'diversity agent' for the Stadtmuseum Berlin Foundation (city museum of Berlin), stated that museums often use the word 'community' to refer to an ethnic group, which constitutes a re-ethnicisation of people, simplifying them and essentialising their backgrounds whilst neglecting their hybrid identities (Efe 2021). In agreement with this statement, Natalie Beyer added that the term more often than not applies to migrants, which limits their perceived identity to one aspect of their lives. In doing so, they create a dichotomy between 'local' cultures and that of forced migrants.

In their role as participants, they become representatives of 'forced migrants' as a group, applying their individual experiences to a larger 'group'. Natalie Bayer and Mark Terkessidis point out that:

> The structure of representation seems increasingly inappropriate in this context, as the idea of representation bases the presentation and uniformity on the notion of a group that is reductionist, selective and limited. (2017, 70)

The institutional practices based on assumptions about a 'group' of people begins with the invitation to participate in a project. The assumptions that draw these so-called 'communities' together are based on generalisations and stereotypes about these 'groups' (Coffee 2008; Meijer-van Mensch 2012). This is most problematic when the exhibited element of their identity leads to

3 On 20 May 2021, COMCOL (ICOM's International Committee for Collecting) hosted an online discussion entitled "What's 'Community' Anyway? Uses, Misuses and Alternatives for the term 'Community' in Museum Work" as part of the series *Making Museums Matter*. The discussion with Jamie Keil (Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History), Jules Rijssen (Imagine IC, Amsterdam), Roman Singendonk (Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin) and Idil Efe (Stadtmuseum Berlin) was moderated by Alina Gromova (ICOM COMCOL) and Sandra Vacca (ICOM COMCOL).

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discrimination (Wonisch 2012). This is very likely when the museum invites forced migrants to represent the topic of forced migration, for which they are separated from the local population in practice, as well as in the discourse that is generated by this practice (as described in introduction).

In invitation processes, the concept of 'community' is especially problematic, as it tends to identify forced migrants as a homogeneous group, of which the participants become representatives during the participatory project. Bayer described participatory practices as a confirmation of a separation between the participants and those organising the projects, as she states: "as a result [...] it becomes apparent that, time and again, participation in museum work creates a division that objectifies the called-for [invitees] as contributors and the callers [inviting museums] as conductors" (2017, 31). The museum practitioners choose a theme for the exhibition or project, and the invited participants merely come to symbolise this topic or debate, whilst at the same time demonstrating the museum's inclusivity. One participant noted that they would not have been invited if it were not for their experiences and their skin colour (MEK-D08). Through their invitation processes, museums decide which stories are worth telling (and which are not). Largely depending on the process of inviting forced migrants to participate in a museological process, they themselves and their artefacts become objects of study.

3.1.2 Invitation processes

The invitation processes are different for each participatory project, depending on its focus, as well as on the museum's access to, and the interest from, 'communities'. Two of the selected projects had already gathered a group of individuals to work with before they decided to take on a different setting and format appropriate to the museological realm. There was no clear moment of invitation for these projects, as they were dependent on relationships that had evolved over time, often through more formal structures. The invitation processes took place in different spaces: online spaces, museum spaces and spaces already familiar to the participants. The space, and people's familiarity with a space, impacted the processes, and will therefore be addressed in this chapter, before being elaborated on further in Chapter 5.

The *Aleppo* project at the Tropenmuseum was initiated through an online invitation (both on the museum's own channels and in other online spaces). The museum shared the invitation via its own social media channels

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(predominantly through Facebook), and those of an organisation they collaborated with, the Amsterdam-based organisation Refugee Start Force. The latter organisation would help engage the 'community' that the museum envisioned for the project: former inhabitants of Aleppo. The museum educator who initiated the project said:

> They posted a call and we also posted a call ourselves on our website and through all social media channels. I sent it around to people I knew, and said that people could come by for an information session, that we were looking for guides, well, people who wanted to share their story and we asked specifically for people not having to speak, but it was also okay to do it through theatre, music, books, anything really. (T-A01)

The invitation on Facebook was posted alongside a picture of three people standing inside the museum looking out into the central hall, and comprised the following message:

> ALEPPO | We are looking for Syrian hosts for the exhibition *Aleppo* (31 March–10 September 2017). Did you live or work in Aleppo and would you like to share your memories or personal stories about the city with us? We are looking for people who speak English and/or Dutch and enjoy working with people. Are you a poet, musician, performer or artist? Then you can also share your story creatively.
>
> We provide training and financial compensation. The maximum time is 2 hours per week. Interested? Then send an email before 22 February 2017 to [email address]. (Tropenmuseum Facebook page, date posted: 15.02.2017)

With 207 shares and 242 comments, this Facebook post seemed to resonate with a great number of people. Additionally, many potential participants were tagged in the responses to the museum's call-out. Through this post and through the network of Refugee Start Force, the museum managed to generate a lot of interest in the project from the envisioned participants. As these call-outs do not usually bring in so many people, the museum educator was pleasantly surprised by the interest in the project. The museum's online engagement brought many people to the museum for the scheduled information session: approximately forty people out of about eighty that had signed up joined the session. The information session provided participants with the opportunity to ask questions about the project, and enabled the organisers to inquire about their potential expectations of the exhibition and

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to ask which stories people were happy to share. This led to a selection process, for which the organisers applied criteria such as the variety of people's stories and their command of Dutch or English. The latter was due to the lack of funds to provide translators for the preparatory sessions and for the tours themselves. This meant that those who were not able to express themselves clearly could not take part. This aspect of the museum's invitation strategy was based on a practical decision, yet it highlights the exclusionary nature of the project: just like in most formal recruitment processes, the museum applied a selection procedure that included some people and excluded others. In this way, they decided on those who would represent the city of Aleppo, and forced migrants from Syria more generally. The Tropenmuseum selected a group of ten people to join the exhibition's programme for its run. The guides took part in two more preparatory sessions, and ran weekly tours every Sunday after the exhibition opened.

The museum team in Friedland applied a more personal and direct approach that focused on an 'area of curiosity' to invite participants. By promoting the project as a photography workshop, the organising team sought to draw people in and spark interest in the activity rather than presupposing the value of collaborating with the museum (MF-S01). "During their initial reception, it is not of immediate interest for refugees. There are many other necessities and the museum is pretty irrelevant, which is Friedland's biggest challenge for participation" (MF-S01). The project curator explained how, together with the museum educator, they invited people to join the project by striking up conversations during the week to invite them for the weekend workshop (MF-S01). The workshop took place on the weekend, offering a recreational activity at a time with limited other activities or obligations. "We simply went to the cafeteria every day of the week of the workshop, and promoted it somehow. Often we brought some flyers along, but it was rather about starting a conversation with the people, and sparking some kind of interest" (MF-S01). They continued to explain how they had to be quite persistent, going back to the cafeteria on the first day of the workshop to remind people about the workshop. Rather than inviting a supposed 'community' to come to the space of the museum, the museum practitioners built relationships with people in spaces already actively used by the 'community' of forced migrants.

Other museum staff members have since asked the museum educator for a guide or checklist for inviting people who are being temporarily housed at the transit camp, assuming that there is one method for inviting this

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'community'. In an interview with this staff member from the education department, they responded with disbelief:

> They want a kind of checklist or a manual or a secret, a magic wand that they can use to invite people to participate. I don't know . . . I can't do it. Because what I did for four or five years is building a special rapport, talking to them, using certain jokes, trying to make them . . . actually, I want my face to be familiar to them, so just say "hi" or whatever, just to give them, let's say, a feeling that we are family, or that we know each other. So when I invite them to any activities, they will come. (MF-S02)

There is no magic involved in inviting people to join a process that should be voluntary and, above all, meaningful to them. The invitation process cannot be prescribed, nor can it be broken down into steps or checklists: the museum educator demonstrated that it is a matter of developing personal connections, often crossing the borders between work and private life, and of great time investment (MF-S02). At the same time, it is about listening to people, learning about their needs and interests and catering to that using the means available in the museum. As described by Sandra Vacca, cited by Sergi, "museums cannot expect to work with forced migrants without being enmeshed in their lives" (2021, 84). Reaching out to people was a time-consuming part of the project, but it allowed for a reciprocal connection. Following Clifford, reciprocity is culturally specific and its manifestation often depends on the power relationships in place (1997, 194). The process of building these relationships does not depend on addressing forced migrants as a 'community'. Instead, the process was based on individual relationships between the museum educator and the participants; an individual approach that was reinforced by the independent photography projects that came out of this project.

The facilitators of *Museum Takeover* employed a similar approach, but rather than simply finding spaces where the envisioned 'community' might be, the project facilitator reached out to a group whose members were already connected through an 'area of curiosity'. The project started from a creative writing workshop, organised by the Red Cross in collaboration with Writing East Midlands, which sought to support the social inclusion of forced migrants in the UK.[4] The participants were already taking part

4 For more information about the project and its objectives, see: https://writingeastmidlands.co.uk/projects/write-here-sanctuary/, accessed: 21/04/2022.

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in these workshops, and the workshop facilitator joined them for several sessions before initiating the museum intervention (LM-MT01). As well as being united by shared experiences of migration, the participants shared an interest in creative writing. They would apply this interest within the museum by writing new labels with interpretations or personal stories for some of the objects on display. Rather than focusing on their trauma or stories of migration, the project tapped into their interest in writing; it started from an 'area of curiosity' that the practitioners already knew the participants were interested in. The perception of this group as a 'community' occurred both beforehand, in the invitation processes for the workshop, and afterwards, when the project was framed by the museum as a part of Refugee Week, and later as part of the Journeys Festival. Though stories of flight were not necessarily foregrounded, the participants (or at least the material they produced) were ultimately framed as being representative of forced migration within the museum context.

Similar to the two aforementioned projects, the invitation process for *daHEIM* also addressed a group of people that had already (been) gathered together, and it reached out to participants in in spaces completely separate from the museum. The project facilitator started collaborating with interested forced migrants in the *heim* (a government accommodation centre for forced migrants) in the Berlin district of Spandau before the project moved to the MEK several months later. The project facilitator 'reached in' by predominantly engaging with people within the spaces in which they were housed after their arrival to Berlin. The collaboration at the time started from the facilitator's interest in investigating "what flight actually means" (MEK-D03), but it was meant as a way for participants to engage in artistic practices. The participants were not from one specific country but instead were considered a 'community' based on their experiences of forced migration. The invitation was not directed at forced migrants per se, but participants were asked to speak about precisely this experience, thus essentialising this aspect of their identity.

For the performance planned to mark the end of the exhibition, the facilitator employed a different approach. First, they invited other artists to join the organising team, which now included friends of theirs who, in turn, invited other people through their personal networks (MEK-D07). At this point, the invitation process no longer focused on one 'community' but rather extended to a group with a shared interest in dance and performance. For the performance, some of the participants from the initial *daHEIM*

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project were invited back to the museum. A participant who had already been involved in the *daHEIM* project mentioned they felt intimidated due to the involvement of approximately thirty to forty predominantly white, German-speaking artists, performers and dancers in the project. Their affinity with performance and their experiences working creatively within a German institution set them apart from most of the people who were initially part of the project. By inviting people through personal networks and based on an 'area of curiosity', the performance brought together these groups to address a topic that only reflected the experiences of the initial project participants. Despite the potential of inviting participants based on an 'area of curiosity', expanding beyond the scope of a single, supposed 'community', this process created two separate groups of 'performers' and 'forced migrants' to represent experience of forced migration.

The different projects in this study addressed the invitation process in a variety of ways, but all of them focused on refugees as a community; their focus was on forced migrants, and this was often evident in the theme at the centre of the exhibitions or projects (this aspect is discussed further in Chapter 6). The focus on this 'community' provided the museums with a means of securing a first-person perspective on a topic of sociopolitical relevance. Museum practitioners invited people with these perspectives by 'reaching into' spaces already used by this 'community', or through the thematic focus of the exhibition or project (or a combination of both). In addition to the focus on this 'community', many projects also found their participants by tapping into so-called 'areas of curiosity' (see Lindström and Ståhl 2016). These shared interests – such as photography, creative writing, artistic practice and performance – often dictated the form and material output of the project, yet they also brought together different people who might otherwise not have met.

3.1.3 Deconstructing assumed 'communities'

As scrutinised at the start of this chapter, museums often address an invited 'community' of forced migrants as a homogenous group, ignoring the (perhaps known) diversity within the group. This issue is also addressed by Nuala Morse, who discusses the "messy nature" of participatory work due to the dynamics within non-homogenous groups (2021, 42). For the sake of the project, museum practitioners apply the notion of 'community' to address a contemporary issue through the perspectives of those involved. In

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his book, Sergi (2021) similarly reflects on the potential conflicts that may arise within the groups of participants. Such conflicts, or the 'messy nature' of participation, also defined the projects that were examined for this study. The potential for conflict is rarely considered by museum practitioners before the start of the project, nor does it affect their perception of the project's success (see Morse 2021). This success is often measured by achieving maximum participation (Carpentier 2011) in which full authority is handed over to participants. However, the impact of potential conflicts between participants as a result of bringing them together is rarely evaluated. In conversations with participants and practitioners, though, it became clear that conflicts between participants had prominently shaped the process and outcomes. It especially limited the possibilities of developing a network for future collaborative work, as envisioned by many museums.

A participant from *Museum Takeover* in Leicester recounted that no conflicts occurred during the process simply because the museum's community engagement officer never allowed any to arise (LM-MT06). Though there were no verbal or physical confrontations, this participant did refer to experiences of exclusionary practices during the workshop. In line with Sergi's observations from his ethnographic fieldwork during a participatory project, methods and experiences of exclusion commonly occur between people who are grouped together by the museum, even when the engaged 'community' shares a nationality or religious affiliations (2021, 85). The project studied by Sergi involved forced migrants with different nationalities who were "meticulously avoiding mixing with each other, arranging themselves according to country of origin" (2021, 83). The participant from *Museum Takeover* described a comparable experience in an interview. They mentioned that they had struggled to connect with other participants, as many of them were fluent in a different language than the participant's mother tongue. They said: "you know, there is like, country-based people, so they make a group, if you're Indian, or Kurdish, they make their group, already separate. And as a Bangladeshi-Bengali, I was alone there" (LM-MT06). Despite everyone writing their labels in English, the sessions allowed for people to discuss amongst themselves in a language they were more fluent in. The exclusion experienced was not based on nationality, ethnicity or religion but was the result of language barriers. The language-based separation, at the same time, provided limited opportunities for further conflicts to arise between participants.

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The project at the Tropenmuseum brought together former residents of Aleppo, based on the assumption that they would operate as a coherent group. The 'community' was invited to add personal narratives to the exhibition about Aleppo. In an interview with one of the participants, I asked them whether the collaboration had run smoothly. The participant laughed and replied that they had expected this question to come up. They said: "we had conflicts, a lot of conflicts, and it was very hard" (T-A04). The main problem within the group was the result of divergent political opinions; despite most of the participants having fled the war in Syria, they were not necessarily 'on the same side' of this national conflict. "The problem was that everyone wanted to share their opinion, and they could, of course, but that is a very personal opinion" (T-A04). Participants often shared these opinions during the tour, interrupting other participants' stories and contributions to bring in their own perspectives. Each of the participants had their own reasons for fleeing Aleppo, and these different reasons sparked debate and conflict within the group. This created an uncomfortable atmosphere for the participants as well as for the visitors of the tour. On several occasions, participants were not able to continue the tour, or were forced to walk away from a discussion. To put a stop to these incidents, the educational team had to intervene. A solution that worked for all participants was found: they agreed that everyone should steer clear of political subjects, stick to their own contributions and stop interrupting each other, and the educational team arranged for some people not to be scheduled for a tour on the same day (T-A04). The *Aleppo* project revealed in particular how the political urgency of forced migration naturally brings up the participants' individual political perspectives, which might very well be at odds with one another. This aligns with Sergi's statement that "reasons for flight are often a source of conflict among refugee populations" (2021, 85). Museums might exacerbate conflict between these populations (Sergi 2021, 83) by applying the term 'community' to a selected and otherwise unrelated group of forced migrants, who are invited to represent their experiences within this complex political context.

Such experiences are not unique within similar projects; the *daHEIM* project also led to several conflicts between participants. One of the project facilitators of the *daHEIM* project referred to several conflicts between the participants, who, like in the *Museum Takeover* project, had come from many different countries and did not all share the same language (MEK-D05). They mentioned that topics such as war, nationality and religion were mostly avoided during the work in the museum space. The project facilitator referred

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specifically to a conflict about the role of women, which caused friction amongst the participants. Some of the participants found it hard to adjust their perspectives on what women can and should do, yet they did not apply the same understanding of women to the project facilitator, whom they all admired (MEK-D05). This discrepancy between how the white, female facilitator of the project was perceived compared with other women points towards the hierarchies in place (addressed in more detail in Chapter 4); the male participants were in some ways dependent on the project facilitator for the duration of the project, which might have led them to treat her differently than they would other women.

These conflicts show that 'communities' cannot simply fulfil the role assigned to them by the museum. The methods of invitation and the focus of the projects limit the participants to exploring topics that are likely to cause conflict. Between these different projects, it is evident that the projects based on long-term collaboration were more likely to lead to conflicts between participants. *So sehe ich das…* and *Museum Takeover* were short-term projects that mostly worked with the participants individually, or involved the aforementioned practices of exclusion that divided the group. The *daHEIM* project and the *Aleppo* project, on the other hand, adopted a format that required interaction between participants over a longer period of time. Therefore, these projects serve as distinct examples of the 'messy nature' of participatory work described by Morse (2021, 42). The 'communities' that were invited to be part of these projects could not always 'act' as a homogenous group, leading to conflicts between the participants. In their assumption that the participants form a coherent group, museums might not be equipped to deal with the conflicts that occur. Despite the obvious relevance of these conflicts for the process and long-term outcomes, museum practitioners rarely discussed them at length during the interviews. However, their role in the process is vital, especially when it comes to building relationships that extend beyond the project. Therefore, museums should exercise increased caution in inviting forced migrants and addressing topics related to forced migration in order to avoid (exacerbating) conflicts.

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3.2 Building relationships

For many of these projects, building relationships or networks was envisioned as a potential outcome. These relationships start from the invitation process, which moulded the initial bond formed between the museum practitioner and the supposed members of a 'community'. They continued to be shaped as the project developed, and changed through conflicts and friendships. At this stage, it is important to mention that the responses of the museum practitioners to conflicts mentioned above impacted the relationships built between practitioners and participants. However, this also ties in with the role of the museum more generally and its potential to function as a safe space (further discussed in Chapter 5). One of the aspects that museum practitioners often refer to as a necessary part of participatory work is building trust, yet this is not the only aspect relevant to the possibility of building relationships. In conversations with practitioners and participants, the different stakeholders referred to conflicts that arose over the course of the projects, as well as to friendships they formed. The potential of establishing networks depends on these aspects of the process, but their sustainability also relies on the museum practitioners having the resources to maintain these networks. This sub-chapter discusses these aspects to underline their relevance to the process of building long-term relationships.

3.2.1 Building trust

Trust has been addressed as a relevant aspect of participatory memory work in different ways: museums are perceived as trustworthy resources by their visitors (Janes and Sandell 2019, 6), and 'radical trust' is described as a necessity for a participatory practice in which museums truly hand over authority (Lynch and Alberti 2010, 16). The latter theoretical approach signifies one-directional trust on the institutional side in the participants, or in 'users' engaging with the museum in the online realm (Spadaccini and Chan 2007). This concept of 'radical trust' applied to the *daHEIM* project at the MEK, which the museum curator explained was characterised by trust from the museum's side. Though this concept is meaningful in addressing power relations in participatory work, it diminishes the need for trust from the participants' side. In order to create a space in which participants feel like they can voluntarily and freely contribute to the museum, they should fully trust the facilitator, their intentions and the museum as an institution

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(MEK-D08). Corresponding to Morse's idea of care in community engagement work, the concept of trust is addressed frequently as a necessary means to working with 'communities'; she states that "[t]rust underpins care in a relational sense" (Morse 2021, 196). As such, trust is an indispensable component of participatory work in museums, especially for those who are being marginalised (Morse 2021).

During many of the interviews, both museum practitioners and participants referred to trust as one of the most important factors for making the projects possible and for facilitating positive outcomes. The museum director of the MEK pointed this out in an interview, suggesting that outreach work is necessary at the start of a project to build trust. They stated that "you can't do anything without it [...] if there is no mutual trust, there is no point in taking the project further" (MEK-D01). Before the project moved to the museum spaces, museum staff visited the project participants in the refugee shelter and vice versa, in order to get to know each other. The museum curator described the process thus:

> And in autumn 2015, in late autumn, I think it was already December, we were invited to the shelter as a larger group. We drank coffee together and of course exchanged ideas. But we were also divided into small groups. For example, [a museum staff member] cooked with one of the women from the shelter. Some of us also went into the workshop, for example, I was in one of the participant's rooms. [...] We simply tried to get to know each other through these different channels. So that we weren't working together anonymously, but somehow got to know each other personally. (MEK-D02)

This process of familiarisation helps to foster trust; the museum ceases to be an institution, instead consisting of several different people with good intentions. In line with this 'outreach' approach, Friedland's museum educator emphasised that the most important aspect of their work is building rapport. In their experience, this requires a lot of time and ongoing investment in the relationships with the people based at the transit camp (MF-S02). Their engagement with the people and their lives goes far beyond interaction regarding a museum project or related topic. The museum educator is involved in the day-to-day functioning of the transit camp, helps put out proverbial fires when necessary, and makes people feel heard (MF-S02). This is how they slowly build trust between them and the (potential) participants. It is mainly due to these relationships that the participants joined the project and that they felt comfortable sharing their perspectives

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and experiences within this context. After the project ended, the outreach officer continued this unofficial aspect of their work using the project's output: for several months, the exhibition served as a means of starting a conversation with new arrivals at the transit camp. It played a significant role in building trust, as it introduced people to experiences of the camp and the town, and made them aware of the possibilities of creating something with, and exhibiting something in, the museum.

The project facilitator of *Museum Takeover* also addressed the necessity of trust, especially at the start of the project. "I definitely don't think that you can do these things without trust, and I think that that's the biggest job" (MF-S01). They acknowledged that the project could not have happened in the same way without the involvement of the community engagement officer and the workshop facilitator, both of whom were already familiar with the group of people that joined the project. Over time, they had built a relationship with the individuals who participated, which meant that the participants felt comfortable engaging in a new project with them later on. The project facilitator identified building trust as important groundwork for participatory projects, and as absolutely necessary where the project has a very short timeline (MF-S01). As trust is understood as imperative to the process and to forming relationships with the participants, museum practitioners have to put in the work to build up trust amongst people they want to work with. The museum's community engagement officer at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery mentioned that communities often do not trust the museum's intentions in creating the project and handling the content they create, and rightly so (MF-S02). Even if people are familiar with the museum, they might not feel welcome inside or know much about the workings of the institution (for more on this, see the discussion in Chapter 5). Without preliminary relationship-building before the start of the project, the participants are unlikely to trust what the museum might do with the materials they will produce.

The project at the Tropenmuseum allowed less time for building trust before the project moved on to its public aspect: the tours through the exhibition. The participants were invited to the museum, and they got to know the staff members through a few meetings. This was partly related to the space in which these meetings took place (discussed in Chapter 5), but also due to the chosen narrative for the exhibition (discussed in Chapter 6) and worries about what would happen to the objects they loaned to the museum (see Chapter 7). The museum practitioners gained the participants' trust later

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on, through their support during the tours (one of the museum educators was always present), their ongoing communication with the participants and their interventions in the event of conflicts and unpleasant encounters with visitors. One of the participants from *Museum Takeover* also mentioned the continuous involvement of museum staff as an important aspect of the project (LM-MT06). Describing the continuity of the community engagement officer's work with members of the community, they said: "they have got their involvement with us, so we don't feel excluded" (LM-MT06). The participant pointed out that feeling included is dependent on the sustainability of the relationship; practices of inclusion are not only about establishing a relationship and building trust, but also about showing a continued and genuine interest in people, and involving them in the life of the museum. They also referred to their friendship with the museum practitioner as one of the outcomes of the project. To them, this friendship means they are acknowledged as inhabitants of the UK. At the same time, this connection provides access to museums and other cultural institutions and debates from which they had previously felt excluded (LM-MT06).

The project facilitators and museum practitioners managed to build trust amongst the participants in different ways: by taking their concerns seriously, by assisting in the event of conflict, by acknowledging them and their work, and simply by slowly building relationships. Participants need to trust museum practitioners before they can fully commit themselves to the project, knowing that their input is valued by the museum and that their contribution will be handled respectfully.

3.2.2 Forming friendships

In her book, Morse identifies "networks of engagement" as a way of connecting museums and 'communities' (2021, 160). She states that "in considering networks of engagement, it is necessary to examine relations and events that are not directed towards the functioning of museums, but that might still be significant to others involved" (Morse 2021, 161). Tasks such as building trust and nurturing relationships do not seem directly related to museum work, yet they are recognised as important to the participatory processes that have become increasingly common. Rather than merely building temporary, practical relationships, several participants as well as project facilitators or museum practitioners described that they had formed friendships through the projects.

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For some participants, friendships were a main motivator for taking part in the project. One of the participants from the *daHEIM* project expressed that, despite not being able to clearly define their needs or expectations immediately after arriving in Germany, they felt like they needed the project "to socialise or to meet people" (MEK-D08). The project created a space for this, they elaborated, as the museum became a place for warm, friendly interactions and a place to share their stories of migration (MEK-D08). Despite this not being an explicit goal for the museum or facilitator, friendships formed an important aspect of the project for the participants. Several participants mentioned that they were happy to have gotten to know the other participants through the collaborative work in the museum; they produced artworks together and people stepped in when someone needed a hand at any point during the day (MEK-D04; MEK-D06; MEK-D08). One participant, who took part in the performance only, referred to the shared movement of bodies in the museum space as a deeper way of connecting and creating friendships. Overall, the process was often harmonious and these friendships, the participant noted, felt very "real" (MEK-D07).

The workshop facilitator who was part of the project in Leicester described this as potentially the only way for a project to have lasting impact on the lives of those involved. They said: "I am friends with them now, and we've been through things together afterwards. [...] If you do something and then you just disappear, it's okay, but it won't leave a lasting effect, you know, in their lives" (LM-MT01). During the interview, the workshop facilitator repeatedly referred to the participants as their friends (LM-MT04), a feeling that was shared by the participants interviewed for this study (LM-MT03; LM-MT05; LM-MT06). This does not mean that everyone remained friends afterwards (not all participants were interviewed), but it does demonstrate that friendships formed naturally throughout the process. Many people involved in the project kept in touch afterwards, not as part of a network created and maintained by the museum, but as friends. This extended beyond friendships with the workshop facilitator, as people also referred to being in touch with the project facilitator and the community engagement officer from the museum. One participant said: "Yeah, [they] are a good friend of us, you know [...] so it was a great opportunity to have them in our lives" (LM-MT06). In the interview with the community engagement officer, they also described friendships that remained a part of their life, some of which were still active some three years after the project (at the time of the interview). In their role as community engagement officer, these relationships can be useful for

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the conception and creation of future projects, but they understood these friendships as personal outcomes rather than professional gains (LM-MT02). These friendships are not one-sided leftovers from the participatory project; they are valued friendships through which the practitioners learned a lot (LM-MT01–L02).

Friendships were also described as an outcome by one of the participants from the *Aleppo* project. After the scheduled tours, the museum educators allocated some time for a more informal conversation between visitors and participants. During this time in the museum's café, the participant became friends with a visitor to the museum (T-A04). This was not a common outcome, but this rather informal time in the café did provide the opportunity for people to network, during which two musicians were invited to play elsewhere, and someone was invited to be part of a play (T-A01). One of the participants continues to be friends with some of the other participants and with the museum educators who ran the project. Upon inquiring about friendships with any other museum staff members, this participant replied that they were never really in touch with anyone else from the museum, whether during or after the project (T-A04). As such, these friendships also emphasise that museums do not merely function as rigid institutions but are equally defined by the people who work in them. Understanding the museum in this manner also reveals that friendships, though valuable, cannot constitute a continuous bond with participants in the long run, as museum practitioners retire or move on to other jobs (Onciul 2019).

In many ways, however, it is the people who make ongoing relationships possible – or impossible, if they do not see the value of such relationships or if the project does not provide ample opportunities to build them. Accordingly, not all projects led to lasting friendships as a long-term outcome. A participant from the *daHEIM* project recounted that they cut contact with all members of the group, because they do not like to be reminded of the project nor do they wish to be involved in any further work with the project facilitator (MEK-D06). The co-curator of the project said that during the process, it felt very much like they had built friendships, but afterwards they lost touch with people (MEK-D05). Another participant from the *daHEIM* project similarly described that many friendships faded after the project ended: "Once there is no funding, no money, no physical space, no this and that, then the ones responsible […] say 'no we can't do this anymore'" (MEK-D08). The *daHEIM* project had a natural ending for the museum and for the project organisers, but the end of the project was experienced as abrupt

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for some of the participants; after spending a significant amount of time and energy on the project, they were left with "no language, no friends, no documents" (MEK-D08). This is different from the other projects, in which the friendships were not dependent on the availability of the museum's space or infrastructure, due to the relationships between equals formed during the process.

This reflects what Annemarie De Wildt noted on the potential of relationships or networks to constitute sustainable project outcomes. De Wildt stated that "personal contacts are important to sustain relations, but there is often no time to continue seeing all the contacts from previous projects" (2015, 231). Personal connections only hold up when they have become true friendships, moving beyond the museum practitioner's sense of responsibility towards a person or a 'group'. These friendships, though dependent on individuals within and outside of the institution, might constitute a network.

3.2.3 Creating a network

In bringing together people to build trust, friendships and networks, museums construct a "contact zone", a term first introduced by Mary Louise Pratt (1992), and applied to the museum by Clifford (1997). Pratt's definition concerns the interaction and continuing relations between two differently treated and perceived 'groups'. Clifford adds that the relationships are not equal – recognising the undeniable power relations at work – despite these processes perhaps consisting of "*mutual* exploitation and appropriation" (Clifford 1997, 194, emphasis in original). As such, the 'contact zone' inherently contains the ambition of developing long-term relationships. Ones that need to be two-sided if they are to continue beyond the timeline of the project. "As both a concept and a metaphor, the network presents a more compelling description of museum-community relationships that goes beyond a focus on linear relationships of contribution" (Morse 2021, 160). Morse refers to Schorch to describe how networks often give the impression that communities and museums are "co-constitutive" (Schorch 2017; Bennett 1998, 205). This co-constitutive relationship is necessary for making a network a possible outcome of a participatory project.

As mentioned at the start of this chapter, many museum practitioners are united by an ambition to renew or establish contact with an envisioned 'group' and maintain this contact after the project's end. Yet, according

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to Bryony Onciul, "long-term institutionalisation of community relations, beyond the friendships built between individuals, continues to be a challenge for museums" (2019, 167). The community engagement officer at the Leicester Museum & Art Gallery confirmed this, as they addressed forced migrants as a 'community' that the museum had failed to serve and lost touch with (LM-MT02). It seems that the lack of communication between practitioners and the 'community' has led to the deterioration of formerly existing relationships. The museum needs to rebuild these relationships should it wish to engage with the same people in the future (LM-MT02). Participatory work is understood as a means of creating a tightly knit network between museums and the 'communities' that make up the museum's local population (De Wildt 2015). These networks, however, require work beyond the project's timeline, which often outstrips both funding and staff's capacities. The project-based infrastructure does not support related work after the project has finished, nor do existing practices acknowledge the importance of personal relationships and trust developed over time.

The project curator at the Friedland Museum stated that the goal of creating a network was impossible, due to the temporal connection with the people they engage with through their work in Friedland: "it would also not make a lot of sense, as they [the participant groups] will be completely ripped apart again. They don't exactly form any sort of social community that goes beyond these two weeks [while they are based in Friedland]" (MF-S01). For the Friedland Museum – given these complexities – this ambition was rendered impossible from the get-go. The exhibition opening, which took place six months after the last workshop, already posed a challenge for the project team.

> We invited everyone to the exhibition opening using the different channels to contact the participants, but two *spätaussiedler*[5] and four of the refugees attended the opening day, which for us was actually seen as a very good average. As in, we thought it was very satisfactory as it is so incredibly hard to stay in touch (MF-S01).

5 *Spätaussiedler* are immigrants of German descent who moved to Germany from Eastern European countries, most of which were formerly part of the Soviet Union. The transit camp in Friedland serves as the first stop for most *spätaussiedler* entering Germany, where they stay for a few days before moving to another city or town.

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The difficulties involved in continuing relationships after the project's end are particularly evident here, as people only stay in Friedland for a short time before moving away or being placed elsewhere. However, the museum educator stated that they do attempt to continue the conversation, both among the participants themselves and with the museum (MF-S02). As the former participants are no longer based near the museum in Friedland, the museum educator remains in contact using digital means such as WhatsApp (MF-S02). They acknowledged the difficulties of maintaining the 'network' this way:

> When we meet at Nissenhütte, I try to ask them to register their names and to give me their mobile number, so we can be together on WhatsApp. But you know when they come, they have either their Turkish number, or their Jordanian number, or the Egyptian – and some of them, they don't have mobiles, or – of course, I keep, I got these numbers and I try to keep them in the loop. [...] Now, the WhatsApp group, I always invite them but when they change their number or change their mobiles, you know, technology [might get in the way]. (MF-S02)

Digital technologies provide a solution for remaining in touch with former participants, yet they go hand in hand with limitations in terms of accessibility (Kidd 2014, 13), and with the ethical considerations these commercial applications imply (Parry 2011, 321). Besides the technological complexities, the continuation of this connection also represents a burden on the museum educator, as it eats into personal time and moves such conversations into personal 'spaces'. Despite the ambition to remain in contact with participants, the museum allocated no resources or capacities to this aspect of community engagement work. In the interview, the museum educator recounted that they had to cancel the very first group they made on WhatsApp, as it simply required too much time and attention (MF-S02). Their involvement is essential to sustain a network, but the effort they need to put in is barely considered part of their role. In their role at the museum and beyond, the museum educator seeks to establish good relationships with the participants. The WhatsApp group that they created in May 2017 was still running at the time of the interview (November 2020) and remains a point of contact between the museum and those previously involved in a project or activity. Current members of the group were not part of *So sehe ich das...*, but were part of more recent projects initiated as part of the museum's programme.

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Rather than this being project-based work, museums should acknowledge it as an ongoing task of museum staff, and integrate it into the day-to-day work of practitioners. One of the participants from the *daHEIM* project mentioned they noticed a difference between what the end of the project meant for the project facilitators and museum curators, and what it meant for the participants:

> What they do is, you know, being an artist and organising exhibitions and being productive. And of course, they have a next idea, a next state, a next thing, they will go and do something completely different. [...] So I think it wasn't in their plans, or we were not in their plans and we are still not, so it's just like this. (MEK-D08)

Their experience of the project identifies something very central to museum work and the lack of sustainability of these projects: after the project has come to an end, museum practitioners and project facilitators move on, whilst the forced migrants who were involved do not have the luxury to return to anything in particular. This comes back to the situation that sets this 'community' apart from other marginalised people that museums work with.[6] The continuation of relationships naturally also depends on the ability and willingness of participants to remain connected with the museum and, perhaps, with each other. As museum practitioners often hope to develop a network with the individuals they worked with, they should question what the value of such a network might be to the (former) participants. Some of the participants interviewed expressed excitement to be involved in museum projects in the future, whilst others were not interested in maintaining this rather formal connection.

However, as the case of Museum Friedland likewise demonstrates, the continuation of a project is dependent both on staff capacities and on the structural integration of communication work into the roles within the museum. The museum director of the MEK proposed that in order for participation to become part of everyday museum work, relations with 'communities' need to exist on a structural level. Rather than connecting

6 While their asylum claims are being assessed (which in 2015–16 could take up to three years), forced migrants cannot do anything but wait. They might not be allowed to work until their application is processed, or getting a job or another source of income can mean a reduction in the benefits they receive to support themselves and family members.

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with individuals, museums could develop connections with community organisations. They continued: "cooperation is important on a structural level. And then other people can join in. That's the thing, and that's sustainability, and not now with individual people or so, that doesn't matter" (MEK-D01). In the long-term, the director argues, the museum cannot work with the participants individually, as it is structurally impossible to maintain these relationships as part of museum practice (MEK-D01). Though these relationships might be difficult to maintain, some of the case studies show that friendships and other forms of personal relationships can persist, and continue to support the museum's work. For these relationships to function as a sustainable outcome of a project, the museum must not only have the requisite infrastructure to allow staff to remain in contact, it must also be willing to relinquish its position at the centre of these relationships, allowing networks of reciprocity to emerge.

3.3 Conclusion

Participatory work relies on relationships with participants, yet the ways in which these take shape are largely dependent on the museum. The invitation processes, the initial meetings, and opportunities for exchange all contribute towards the project and the relationships shaped throughout. The different case studies analysed here show that there is a need to carry on relationships and explore the opportunities for engaging with the established network on a long-term basis; they suggest that Morse's aforementioned 'networks of engagement' could be an outcome of participatory memory work. In these networks of engagement, museums are "just one point within a larger network of organisations, of people, things and ideas. There is no centre, and as such, no centrifugal move towards it" (2021, 160). It is not the museum but the people around it who become the focal point. Museums ought to look beyond organised groups and, instead, address and work with individuals who are excited to work with, and contribute to, the museum for their own reasons. Addressing a group of people who might not see themselves as a community makes room for the ambition of 'community-making'; bringing together a group of people who will remain a network after the project has ended. In this way, 'communities' are no longer based on a presumed identity or traits, but bind together people with similar interests to create "dynamic networks that become interpretively assembled,

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disassembled and reassembled through the relations between individual actors, objects and curatorial practices" (Schorch 2017, 41). For these networks to emerge, however, the museum must structurally integrate relational work that goes beyond the museum's goals for a specific project.

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