Ensuring a society for all ages:
Promoting quality of life and active ageing
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Older people’s Self-Help Groups
Serbia
(part of the regional project "Older People Civil Society Dialogue in Western Balkans" implemented in partnership with Age UK and HelpAge International, OSMIJEH-GRACANICA, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albanian Association for Geriatrics and Gerontology and funded by European Union)

The Project description

The Self-Help Groups are part of the broader regional project “Older People Civil Society Dialogue in Western Balkans” implemented in partnership with Age UK and HelpAge International, OSMIJEH-GRACANICA, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albanian Association for Geriatrics and Gerontology and funded by European Union.

One of the main objectives of the project is to empower older people to get involved in the issues that affect their lives – to help themselves by participating in older people’s Self-Help Groups as well as to contribute to development of their communities. The project facilitates older people’s active participation in society – to help themselves but also their peers who cannot come to the meetings of older people’s groups- those who are disabled, chronically ill, or with special needs - and to improve the situation in their communities. Older people follow the principle “Nothing about us without us”. In fact, there are few opportunities to deal with older people’s issues in the region. Older people are the least represented group when it comes to government and decision making or planning. So, the needs for older people’s participation and activism are clear and the slogan “"Nothing about us without us” could be easily replaced by “If you cannot see us, we will help you to”.

In the Republic of Serbia, the Humanas network, lead by the Red Cross of Serbia initiated 48 older people’s Self-Help Groups bringing together 462 senior citizens throughout Serbia. The groups are organized in different environments and settings (in villages, towns, cities, and suburbs) and are very diverse in terms of ethnicity, nationality, education level, education and professional background, and residency or displaced and refugee people. Groups meet on average twice a month, but there are groups that meet every week.

The meetings are meant to first of all provide mutual support to group members – self-help. The most frequent topics in the meetings are: health issues, high medical drug prices and inadequate cost-free drug list, discrimination in health services, discrimination in general, poverty, neglect, problems within family – with children, grandchildren, loneliness, bereavement, human losses, and all other topics that affect them.

But meetings are also used to plan the participation of older people in the community and volunteer activities by older people. Namely, group members - older people themselves - are helped to identify their peers in need in their immediate neighborhoods, to see what their needs are, and how they could be helped. In addition to individual help that they provide to their peers, they are trying to see what the major issues in their communities are and the issues that affect them in a negative way to provide evidence to inform local and national policy-making and service delivery.

Why is it considered good practice?

The Self-Help Groups concept is a highly flexible and context-specific one. The activities of the groups always reflect local issues and challenges that are older people facing. This provides a strong evidence base for advocacy. Another very important property of the Self-Help Groups is that they can be easily transformed from a platform for advocacy (older people advocate for change in their local communities) to a platform for solidarity (active older people supporting more vulnerable) to a platform for the intergenerational cooperation (older math teachers tutoring elementary school students or school kids helping older people to learn how to use Skype). Older people in Self-Help Groups are also active as volunteers in the local community. Self-Help Groups are an entry point to volunteering for people who never volunteered before. Self-Help Groups can support rural communities. With a little logistic support from a CSO they can a very efficient way to address some of the issues that affect older people in the rural areas, for instance attending medical appointments, preparing for severe weather, or staying in contact with family.

Timeline/duration of the project

2 years but we expect due to the fact that the self groups are very cost efficient model most of the them will continue with the activities after the official end of the project. The Self-Help Groups concept is a proven one in the region and elsewhere.

Lessons learnt

One of the main takes from the project is that if you provide older people with basic logistical support (premises for group meeting, coffee/tea, and in some cases transportation) as well as support in their advocacy efforts (e.g. scheduling meeting with local stakeholders) and give them freedom to organize/design group work around the issues they find important for them results are very encouraging. Older people in Self-Help Groups do not only focus on the issues concerning them but also the wider community, forging partnerships and developing activities with other NGOs or institutions. For instance, in Vrbas, the local Self-Help Groups worked with a local environmental NGO trying to pressure the local government to set up benches on the walkway between the two city markets and adequate rubbish cans in order to keep city as clean as possible.

Relevance for the UNECE region

Self-Help Groups are a flexible and sustainable organizational platform, and are highly inclusive and adaptable in meeting older people’s needs. They can be organized in urban or rural areas. Activities of the Self-Help Groups reflect local issues such as public transport, access to entitlements, and provision of healthcare and social services. They can provide hard evidence on the implementation and efficacy of government programmes and service delivery. Experience in the three countries that are involved in the project are confirming this adaptability of the self-help groups to different settings.

Location of the project

48 Self-help groups in 27 municipalities in Serbia, as well as 70 groups in Bosnia i Herzegovina and 15 groups in Albania.

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