
CONFERENCE ABSTRACT

Active, Empowered And Young At Heart

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Introduction: In 2003, the SRC started with participatory community work (PCW) and empowerment of older people[1] in Bulgaria alongside a home care program. The participatory methods with older people were new to the SRC and its partners. The SRC and partners followed the principles of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (UNECE, 2002). Through the introduction of participatory approaches, the SRC aimed to change the agenda of local Red Cross Partners from doing things FOR older people to do things WITH and BY older people. Older people, based on the past cultural/political context belong to the vulnerable layers of the society, with low pensions, low recognition and high exclusion from information and entitlements.

Objectives: In March 2016 the Swiss Red Cross reviewed the approaches and measured the impact of participatory work in three "Active Ageing/Advocacy Projects" with Elderly implemented in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Belarus in relation to empowerment, improvement of wellbeing and reduced vulnerability. The review was conducted using questionnaires, individual interviews and focus group discussions with elderly people engaged in community groups, project staff and authorities. In total 454 persons participated in focus group discussion and 565 questionnaires were analysed. The five levels of analysis addressed the general context and its most relevant enablers and hindrances for active ageing; approaches used in the whole PCW process, Initiative Groups' (IG) activities/results and finally the impact of PCW in terms of reducing the vulnerability and empowerment at individual, community and social level.

Results: The review revealed the greatest change at the individual level. In all three countries, partners have succeeded in establishing groups of older people who are committed and making a difference in their communities. There is a perceived increase in their social capital, self-reliance and decrease in social vulnerability. Success factors mentioned were: trainings, peer-exchange and doing good for other people. Initiative groups advocated for specific concerns affecting their everyday life. Triggers for moving into advocacy[2] were: experience of working together for a common cause; a good reputation in communities; partnerships with local institutions; good knowledge of local needs and training (introduction to tools, methods and rights-based documents). Empowered community groups effectively influence local decision making bringing changes into their communities: establishment of advisory bodies in

LPA, introduction of new services or reduction of prices of some services, improved accessibility and affordability of infrastructure.

Conclusion: Older people benefitted through their involvement in Initiative groups or as volunteers of local Red Crosses. Interviews showed, that groups are mainly bringing together older, already active people. Future activities should focus on involvement of self-isolated, passive people While advocacy work was done by 30% of all groups successfully, more support by partners is required to connect state strategies with the realities of older people in communities.

The review has also demonstrated how participatory approaches transform the organisational culture of the implementing partner over time i.e. moving away from a pure charity approach. The review could not identify the most effective tools that lead to participation because the result depends on how we use participatory methodologies - not in the fact that we use them. At the same time, it concluded the crucial role of three components: 1) developing capacity of vulnerable people for analysing their circumstances of living, their potentials and their problems in order to actively decide on changes (through learning by doing); 2) creating spaces for practicing new skills (through support to local initiatives); 3) promoting the value of participation.

[1] 65+, but as well younger people were involved, often young pensioners (invalids).

[2] Rights-based approaches

Keywords: active ageing; resilience/coping in old age; involving communities; promoting dignity and reducing social isolation
