

Active, empowered and young at heart

The rapid ageing of populations is a well-documented fact and a key policy issue in the twenty-first century. Europe has one of the oldest populations in the world. More often than not, ageing is treated as a source of concern by governments, which fear that revenues will be insufficient to meet the needs of an ageing population. This perception is changing: Older people are a resource for their families, and are willing and eager to contribute to the development of their communities. A study conducted in Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria assessed the impact of the Swiss Red Cross participatory community work on older people and on their environment.



approach supports their responsibility to exercise their participation in the political process and other aspects of community life.

The Participatory Community Work (PCW) approach works with initiative groups of older people in a step-wise process: After the community selection, initiative groups of interested older people are formed who then assess their needs and challenges. Targeted capacity building interventions and a small grant support these initiative groups in developing and implementing targeted actions to meet their needs and address challenges. They receive advice from other elderly people who are trained as local coaches. Groups are encouraged to form networks and exchange ideas while leveraging advocacy for elderly people.

Study Background

In order to better understand the impact of the PCW with elderly people carried out between 2003 and 2016, the SRC has conducted three country studies, using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. The studies highlight whether and how the PCW approach has had an impact at individual, community and national level. The three case studies were used to compare approaches, draw lessons and make recommendations, in order to improve future interventions by the SRC and its local implementing partners, the National Red Cross Society.

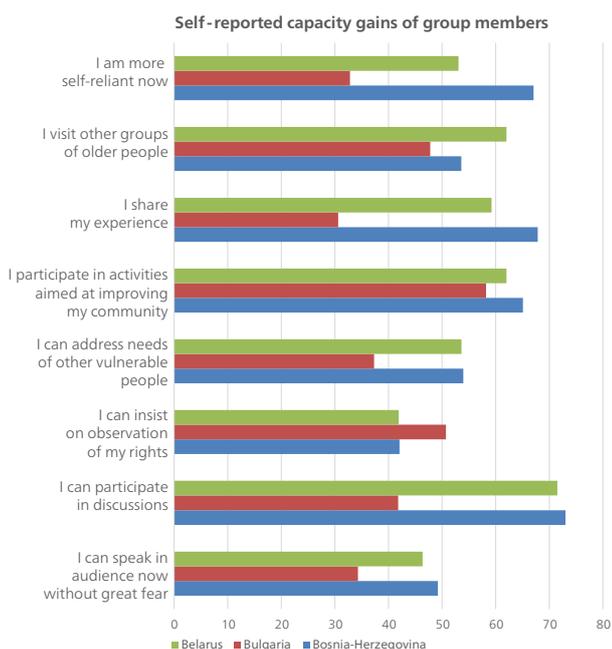
Ageing, Health and Participatory Community Work

«Ageing and Health» is one of eight thematic priorities of the Swiss Red Cross (SRC) health policy. The SRC definition of «Ageing and Health» unites elements of different approaches. On the one hand, the SRC implements the «Healthy Ageing» agenda in its projects by contributing to develop and maintain older people's functional ability in age-friendly environments and healthy cities. On the other hand, the SRC bases its work on the rights-based «Active Ageing» approach, which recognizes the rights of people to equality of opportunity and treatment in all aspects of life as they grow older. The

Participatory Community Work transforms lives and organizations

Members of the initiative groups stated that their engagement in the group had positively changed their life and reduced their social vulnerability. The older people feel more needed and alive, made new friends and learned new skills, based on their interests and needs.

They are meaningfully engaged in personal activities and community work, for example reviving old traditions and crafts, using modern technologies and Social Media for electronic networking and lobbying and are engaged in local fundraising. The study found that visibility of older people increased in the local media, older people are increasingly invited to public consultations and institutions became more sensitive and responsive towards their needs. However, reaching the most vulnerable and isolated among the older people proved to be a challenging task and requires closer attention and removal of access barriers.



Engagement in advocacy is a more mature form of empowerment and an important vehicle for influencing structural and cultural changes that affect the lives of older people. Only mature initiative groups with established leadership and decision-making processes were able to move onto that stage.

The PCW approach also transformed organisations. There appears to be a linear relation between the implementing partner's facilitation skills and readiness to apply participatory approaches and empowerment in its own organisation and the level of empowerment in the initiative groups. Attaching initiative groups directly to the National Red Cross Society resulted in older people becoming volunteers and engaging in other social work. Advocacy impact at national level through the implementing partner depends greatly on the political climate and on the national commitment to fulfil the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing by integrating the needs of elderly people in all policies.

Conclusion

Critical reflection and new approaches are required to include the most vulnerable and isolated older people, as well as opening the groups to all generations. Regular experience exchange and sharing between staff of the implementing partners and initiative group members helps stimulate new ideas and enhances the group's maturity. More research is required to understand when, whether and how older people's wellbeing and resilience increases.

Good practice for Participatory Community Work with older people:

- Develop and follow a joint vision from the initiative group.
- Analyse access barriers to older people's engagement and «go the last mile» to identify and integrate the most vulnerable and isolated groups.
- Develop strategic partnerships and get support from the communities and authorities right from the start of the project.
- Train and maintain local «peer» coaches, who support the initiative groups, particularly when moving into advocacy work.
- Apply regularly a qualitative and quantitative monitoring and evaluation system in order to better measure the baseline and impact of the PCW on older people and refine the approach based on the findings.
- Find a good balance between ensuring that the partners understand the complexity of the concepts on participation and empowerment while reducing the practical approaches and tools to the most relevant ones.
- Become and remain flexible and participatory as an implementing partner and adapt to the needs, speed and capacity of the older people.

The entire publication and three country videos are available online:

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