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Idea versus implementation: Experiences from the project “Elderly for a higher quality of life at home”

“Elderly for a higher quality of life at home” is an important Slovenian initiative for supporting the elderly based on the principle of self-help among the elderly in the local community. The programme volunteers, who are spread throughout the entire country, visit elderly people over age sixty-nine in their homes, and they try to identify their needs with the help of a questionnaire and provide them with further information. The service is free for everyone.

The project is run by the Slovenian Federation of Pensioners’ Associations. The programme is managed by two professionals and one retired professional. They coordinate the programme, recruit volunteers and take care of the network, write reports, do all the administrative tasks and so on. The project board has eight members and decides on all matters connected with the programme. An education committee (eight members) and an IT committee (four members) were created as part of the project board. Regional coordinators (fifteen people) are responsible for the network in their region. They manage and guide the associations in the region. Coordinators at the local level (approximately 240 people) have contact with volunteers and provide them with support. Volunteers (3,307 in 2011), who are appropriately trained, visit the elderly at home and learn about their needs.

The programme is financed from various sources. In 2011, 63.8% of sources were from public funding (from the Ministry

of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and local municipalities), 30% from lottery sources, 4.7% from donations and 1.5% from the Pension and Disability Insurance Institute of Slovenia.

The main goals of the programme are to identify the needs of the elderly living at home, establish ongoing contact with public service providers and NGOs, provide them with information about the needs of the elderly, organise support for their peers, inform the local community about the quality of life and needs of older people living at home, enable civil society to monitor provision at home and expand the programme across the country by including more pensioners’ associations.

An important characteristic of the practice is that it is provided by the users (the elderly) themselves and systematically includes all elderly people in the community. Ongoing help among people living together in local communities is therefore emerging. The goal is for the programme to become a permanent one. Another advantage is that volunteers visit users in their home environment and deal with them face to face, trying to understand their needs and goals. The volunteers try to accommodate their wishes and needs with interdisciplinary help. To satisfy their demands, users do not have to go anywhere (i.e., visit a particular institution) and, considering their age, this is very beneficial. The practice identifies the needs of the elderly living at home

and those that have been overlooked by the social protection system. It informs the local community (the public sector, NGOs, etc.) about the reality of the living situation of the elderly. The practice uses a bottom-up approach.

There are no eligibility criteria for users. Within the programme, all of the elderly over age sixty-nine are visited by volunteers that cover certain regions or municipalities. Low income is not a criterion for a visit. The only criterion is that the user is willing to participate and that he or she is over sixty-nine. In 2011, 277 pensioners’ associations from various regions of Slovenia were included in the programme to help the target group.

When volunteers visit the elderly, they decide on the basis of a conversation and a questionnaire what actions need to be taken to accommodate the user’s needs. The users therefore decide for themselves what kind of help they need and if they want to participate in the programme. Expressing of their wants and needs indirectly affects the programme’s design because the volunteers have the option to participate in planning, designing and evaluating the programme. It is not rare for users’ families to recognise more needs than the users themselves.

One of the extensions of the practice is an instrument called “local coordination”. The function of this instrument is to bring together all the stakehold-



Figure 1: Elderly people at the Fifteenth Volunteerism Festival, May 2014 (photo: Archive of the Slovenian Federation of Pensioners' Associations).

ers that work with the elderly (Caritas, the Red Cross, homes for the elderly, adult day-care centres, etc.) in a certain municipality. For now, only certain municipalities are implementing this instrument. The programme hopes to extend this instrument to all municipalities. The various stakeholders are not directly involved with the programme or each other. However, they are partners in the project. The aim for the volunteers is to recognise users' needs and to then "push" them towards a certain institution that can accommodate their needs better. This enables the elderly to obtain the social services they really need. Local coordination is intended to connect all institutions and individuals that work with the elderly in a certain area. The idea is to find common solutions and to ensure an interdisciplinary approach. The main strength of the programme is therefore to detect and further satisfy the real needs of the elderly.

The practice exists at the national level. From 2004 to 2011, volunteers visited 120,181 people over sixty-nine (57.41% of the target group). The proposal of the practice was designed in 1997 and lasted until 2004 as a pilot project. The practice itself was introduced in 2004, and it has been ongoing since then. There have been no discontinuities. The plan is to continue the practice for as long as possible. No limit has been set. The findings of the pilot project, which were that the elderly want to continue living at home with some help from their community, had a great impact on

Table 1

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many volunteers and much information • Social inclusion of all elderly over sixty-nine • Connecting the local and national levels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few professional staff • Lack of data analysis • Lack of knowhow for administering funds at the local level • No systematic measurement of users' satisfaction rate
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A chance for the elderly to organise among themselves • Nationwide community help • Social services at home and homecare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unprofessional volunteers (some) • Lack of control over volunteers • Potential abuse from outsiders

the design of the programme. The most important milestones in implementing the project were the first favourable results of the programme. When municipalities that were not yet involved with the project realised that it was successful, they joined in.

The programme faces the following barriers: it currently has no access to a systematic list of all people over sixty-nine in Slovenia. This is due to legislative restrictions. This is a major problem, especially in cities. The second barrier is uncertain funding and a lack of financial resources. The programme is currently very widespread and therefore requires more funding. It is almost impossible to cover all the expenses at the national level. This greatly affects the long-term sustainability of the programme. Third, some volunteers are better than others; their psychological and physical skills make working with them very different. The programme is trying to retain its current volunteers for as long as possible, even though it is known that there is a high rate of turnover in this kind of work. On the other hand, it is necessary to constantly recruit new volunteers. There have been situations in which the programme has been used by fraudulent individuals pretending to be volunteers in order to gain entry to users' houses or flats. Volunteers therefore have recognisable badges and announce their visits beforehand.

Even considering these barriers, the programme has much potential for future development. It offers an opportunity for the elderly to organise among themselves, which can lead to expanding their social networks, new friendships and so on. Another advantage is nationwide community help, which can strengthen community bonds and integrate the elderly within a wider local environment. As mentioned above, the interdisciplinary approach involving various individuals from social services at home and homecare can lead to improved service and better recognition of the elderly's needs and wants (Table 1).

Regarding these problems, the programme officials have contacted the national information commissioner and other authorities (mayors of municipalities, politicians, etc.). The idea is to modify legislation and enable the programme to access the data needed. Regarding funding, the programme is seeking to classify itself as a regular activity in local communities, meaning that municipalities would finance the material costs of the programme. The main coordination and training would be financed at the national level. Regarding volunteers, the programme is continuously recruiting new volunteers and training them. The organisational structure is relatively solid and enables the expression of views of all participants in the programme. The only weak point

is the fact that the programme relies heavily on volunteers, which means that the quality of service depends on their work. On the other hand, this enables great effectiveness with a low financial input. The most important issue affecting the long-term sustainability of the programme is the still unsolved question of long-term financing. The goal is to redirect the financial (material) costs of elderly associations operating at the local level to the municipal level. All the other costs of training, monitoring and reporting would remain at the national level.

This practice was qualified among the best practices within the category "Best innovative practices in the area of community building" in the project HELPS (Housing and home care for the elderly and vulnerable people and local partnership strategies in Central European cities), implemented in the 2011–2014 period through the EU Territorial Cooperation Central Europe Programme and co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. The practice was considered innovative because it is an important supplement to other social care programmes. It includes many volunteers, many working hours and low costs because the volunteers visit the elderly in their homes. It includes all of the elderly in certain communities and identifies elderly people that are overlooked by other programmes and services in their areas. These people do not have to go anywhere and, considering their age, this is very beneficial. If a person expresses a certain need, volunteers try to find an appropriate solution (public and/or NGOs). The practice is important and significant because it informs the local community about the quality of life and needs of older people living at home (Banovec et al., 2013).

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