

SEEN Regional Meeting 2005, 17- 19 November 2005, Bled, Slovenia

Developing a National Plan of Action on Ageing: *Case Study – Serbia*

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Background

The first activities in Serbia aimed at the adoption of new National Plan of Action on Ageing started as early as in May 2002, in the framework of the activities of the Gerontological Congress of Yugoslavia, held almost immediately after the World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid. The conclusions of the Congress accentuated the need to approach the task of creation of a new Plan of Action on Ageing in line with the Madrid recommendations. Initially, the content of the future Plan was driven by the communications and discussions held at the Congress.

In addition to the submitted report, the Assemblies on Ageing were also held where a great number of new social and economic issues concerning the status of the elderly, which evolved from the effects of the transition of our society, were presented. What was perceived were the changes in the approach to the issues of the ageing of the society and some examples of good practice in the area of social care for the elderly. Also, the need to adopt the Plan in time, was confirmed as well as the requirement to monitor more closely its implementation in practice, and to use resources of regional and international co-operation. Furthermore, the modest achievements from the previous plans, the need for change of the overall stance of the society towards the ageing, and more active participation of aged citizens in this process were confirmed.

The Gerontological Congress directly organized by gerontological societies from Serbia and Montenegro is held on four-year basis, gathering all interested actors from the field of social policy, ageing and the old age.

The Gerontological Society of Serbia has traditionally been a promoter and instigator of the activities in the process of the adoption of the National Plan of Action on Ageing in Serbia, while the process itself has been carried out in co-operation with the Ministry for Social Policy. The Gerontological Society of Serbia is an association of citizens, gathering experts, specialists, volunteers from the field of gerontology. It is involved in the creation of the Ageing Policy in co-operation with the Ministry of Social Policy staff, as well as other organizations dealing with the ageing issues in Serbia.

A significant share of annual activities of the Society is funded from the budget of the Republic. The project of the creation of the National Plan of Action on Ageing is one segment of those activities, while there are other activities ongoing such as educational and publishing ones. The Society is also engaged in the publishing of scientific magazine “Gerontology” and manuals for carrying out practical activities in the sphere of social gerontology and geriatrics.

The adoption process of the Plan of Action consisting from preparation and organization of series of topic meetings includes interested actors in the ageing policy: first, from the officials of the Government and line Ministries, then, representatives of public services, scientific and professional institutions – especially in the field of pension insurance, social and health protection, humanitarian and non-governmental organizations, as well as regional and local gerontological societies and associations of the elderly, in the first place, pensioners. The next phase in the process of adoption includes formation of the expert team by the Society, which formulates the results of the process in the form of the textual proposal of the plan. The Assembly of the Society then considers the Proposal, after which it becomes the Draft that is forwarded to the line Ministry for social affairs. Therefore, it may be said that the general overview of the adoption process is bottom-down, approach.

Has the process of adoption been initiated or difficulties have arisen?

In 2002, the initial activities in the process of the adoption of the new Plan of Action of the Gerontological Society of Serbia were targeted to the promotion and transfer of relevant knowledge and information to a wider circle of interested institutions and individuals involved in the fields related to the ageing phenomena.

Due to objective difficulties in communication with the representatives of the Federal Government, that was present at the meeting in Madrid, the activities were carried out by means of translation and publication of International Plan of Action and Political Declaration from Madrid. Nevertheless, the communication problem was an ongoing issue, since we did not have the access to the instruments adopted at the European Ministerial Conference on Ageing or to the additional vital activities carried out in parallel in the European region.

Although there were difficulties in the process of the provision of the information and delay in funding of the activities carried out by the Society, the 1st meeting of the professionals in the subject field was held in 2003. The meeting was titled “Reforms of the Social Security Systems and Humanization of the Living Conditions in the Old Age”, the topic of which was creation of the Plan of Action.

Attention was drawn to these activities, but only by a small circle of interested parties: some experts, some representatives from the public sector in the institutions for social and health protection, a few regional and local gerontological associations and hardly any humanitarian and non-governmental organizations.

There was not a great amount of participation by various actors in the activities of the development of the Plan of Action, particularly representatives of the local communities and organizations of the elderly, which were missed out completely and neglected.

The reasons for distractions and a deal of the process are multiple. But the analysis of the causes for that is not the subject of this presentation. It is the analysis of the activities by which we have overcome the delay in the process of the adoption that this presentation is dealing with. Facilitated by some changes introduced these activities allowed for the continuance of the adoption process. What are the changes and how they lead us to positive outcomes will be explained in the remainder of this presentation.

Reaffirmation of the role of NGOs drives the activities

The changes occurred in 2004. In Serbia the immediate use and understanding of the outcomes of the organized international co-operation and support instigated in the process of development and adoption the Regional Strategy for Implementation of the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing, gradually expanded.

Almost in the same period extremely significant segments of the activities of the elderly themselves were initiated, with the appearance of new information on the position of the elderly people and phenomena of ageing itself, role of NGOs in the provision of the support to the elderly was reaffirmed. NGOs begin to organize among each other and cooperate while the interest of the society on the whole for the position of the elderly citizens rose, and activities in the Government and Ministries were instigated.

New information that was now available, not only for the experts and the Government, but for the wider circle of the interested parties, in the first place, the aged citizens themselves, was as follows:

- **Activities of NGOs** started to appear in the media, publications and on the web sites, promoting work and types of working engagement for the elderly and with the elderly;
- **Information and discussions** on accepted obligations of the governments of all East European countries concerning ageing as well as the text of the Regional Strategy for the Implementation of International Plan of Action from Madrid;
- **Reviews and outlines** of basic recommendations and views from the 2nd Assembly on Ageing.

The initiative for cooperation was launched and “Humanas” association and NGO network gathering all humanitarian and NOGs in Serbia active in the area of the provision of the support to the elderly citizens, were established.

The first action taken was provision of the support in the adoption of the National Plan of Action for Ageing and launching of the initiative aimed at establishment of the

Government Council for Ageing and Old Age Issues. The Gerontological Society in the conditions of enhanced co-operation with NGOs organized two forums concerning subjects vital for the Plan of Action for Ageing titled “Partnership between the Government and Organizations of Old Persons and Pensioners” and “Prevention and Poverty Reduction among the Elderly and Pensioners”.

Late in 2004, the Government adopted a decision on establishment of the Council for Ageing and Old Age Issues and ensured the contact with European UN Regional Commission and other key actors involved in the field of ageing and follow-up of Madrid Plan of Action.

In the early 2005 the working version of the text of Plan was discussed at three conferences held in Vojvodina in the towns of Becej, Belgrade and in Central Serbia in the town of Kragujevac. The network NGOs (13 NGOs) with prepared proposals had the leading role at the conferences and also presented immediate experiences and lessons learned from their engagement and work. On these conferences, some of the elderly NGOs members and representatives of the local authorities and media also participated.

Introduction of the new approach and immediate participation of the elderly

Thanks to the international co-operation project led by Help Age International and within the NGO sector in South-East Europe as well as to the segment of the project providing for the promotion of the process and acting at the national level the NGOs network started to function in Serbia.

Two of the leading members of NGO Network members, namely “Viktorija” and “Lastavica” secured the involvement of **the elderly persons themselves**, which reviewed the working version of the Draft Plan of Action. This resulted in the provision of the new proposals to the Plan rendering it more substantive. The support of the network was also critical for the integration of the proposals on social pensions into the Plan of Action, which formerly was met with resistance.

Furthermore, it could be noted that the confidence of the elderly in the proposals given for the purpose of the creation of the document grew. This change stemmed from immediate positive stock of experience aggregated in the period of implemented actions at local level targeted to concrete improvements of the living conditions of the elderly.

In the meantime, thanks to HAI and the SEEN Programme, the formal contact was established between the representative of Serbia and Montenegro Government and the European Task Group for Follow-Up of the Madrid Plan of Action.

The valuable experiences and views vital for further action at the national level and aspects of co-operation in the region in the follow-up and implementation of the future Plan of Action were shared at 3rd Meeting of Regional Implementation Strategy Task Group which was held in Malta in 17-18 May, 2005.

In March 2005, the Proposal of the Plan of Action on Ageing was adopted by the Assembly of the Gerontological Society of Serbia and its Draft was communicated to the Council for Ageing and Old Age Issues and the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Policy, as authorized Ministry. The Government Council established in June, 2005 - at the 1st Session accepted the proposal as a sound basis for final version of the text of the National Plan of Action on Ageing. The Council then created the Working Group for drafting the final version of the Plan of Action. Its work is underway. One of the leading members of the Working Group is representative of the NGOs network. It is expected that the Government will receive the final version of the National Plan of Action for Ageing by the end of this year. It means also, including activities on organizing the Council meetings and the conference with representatives of civil society, on which the final version of the Plan could be represented and discussed.

At the first meeting held on October 28th 2005, the Working Group had been decided that the Madrid Plan and UNECE Regional Implementation Strategy would be used as the base to delineate thematic areas and headings in our national Draft Plan.

How we overcome the main obstacles?

As it may be seen from the overview of the process, the main obstacle in the previous work on the development of the National Plan of Action on Ageing was loss of interest in the creation of the National Plan of Action on Ageing by the relevant actors.

This key obstacle has been overcome thanks to mobilization of the extensive international co-operation and support targeted, in the first place, to the elderly who are most immediately and practically interested in the promotion and improvement of their situation. In the process the critical contribution to articulation of their interests and views was given by the non-government sector, after which followed the assistance in concrete actions aimed at change and promotion of their situation.

On the national level, this interest was articulated by the interconnection of the NGOs on the level of Serbia. The next step was political engagement of the NGO network, formation of the lobby that had the impact on the activities of the Government. Finally, the immediate assistance in the development of the proposals for the National Plan was critical.

Difficulties that arose in the form of lack of relevant information on key and parallel processes in the region (Berlin Ministerial Conference, work of non-governmental and UN expert body, etc.) were another obstacle, which largely delayed the initial activities on the development of the Plan.

This obstacle was predominantly overcome by international exchange of experience of domestic NGOs integrated in the project. In parallel, the inclusion of the representatives of republic and local governments into the activities of NGOs is significant as well as their direct introduction to the facts of vital importance for actual challenges related to the status of the elderly: for exercise of the fundamental human rights and liberties, participation in everyday community life, combat against all types of discrimination, etc.

Simultaneously, transparent work of international NGOs and UN is definitely another contribution for the effective response to the challenges and difficulties. The information on the activities and documents are available on web sites and with time the knowledge has gradually been extended to the whole area of Serbia and is enhanced with greater accessibility thanks to new technologies.

As the process of the adoption of the National Plan of Action on Ageing in Serbia is still open, it is yet to be seen what other challenges are ahead of us.

Some of the key lessons we have learned

Relevant for the process of the development of the National Plan of Action on Ageing, we can formulate two key lessons learned. One is related to the role of international co-operation while the other concerns the role of non-profit sector in this process:

- The active **international co-operation is vital for implementation** of the action with universal significance such as the World action on ageing. The adoption of the Plan of Action on Ageing, as one element of the World Plan of Action simply is not possible in case there is no linking of the countries, exchange of experience and support;
- **Non-profit sector, or civil society** does not only have the critical role in the process, but it accumulates in all its activities the driving force that interconnects and aligns the interests of the citizens into one whole thus presenting convincingly certain political interest. The participation and activities of the civil sector in the process of adoption of National Plan of Action will provide for the document itself the appropriate force and significance.