

Report from the Roundtable

## **Social Cohesion of Citizens and Youth in Fighting Poverty and Delinquency of Minors**

held on Friday, 15 June 2012

14:30 – 17:00

Human Rights House, Selska cesta 112c, Zagreb

The Roundtable started with presentation of good practices by Split association “MoST”, which for the past 13 years, through its activities, supports building of social cohesion and solidarity in the local community. The speaker presented main groups of activities of this association concerning social services to homeless in the local community; promotion and organisation of volunteering activities of young people, as well as work with young persons with risk behaviour. The panellists emphasized that the issues related to poverty, and especially homelessness, have been a neglected area in social policies in Croatia for a long time, so that homelessness has not even been accepted as an actual social problem. This is also confirmed by the fact that certain social rights of persons without permanent residence have only been regulated in 2012, through amendments to the Law on Residence, whereby the existence of homeless people have finally been recognized, as well as realization of their social rights as provided by the Law on Social Care. It has also been revealed that realistic estimates of the current state in Croatia speak of the existence of more than 1000 homeless, who are currently being cared for by 11 shelters that have the capacity to care for approximately 300 beneficiaries. Majority of shelters have been established by and are actively managed by CSOs, amongst which Association MoST is the source of best practice, so that their experiences acquired through social work in their community, are being replicated in other communities in Croatia.

The panellists expressed that they see stimulation of activism and volunteering amongst local community members and especially the youth, as one of responses to the complex social situation in local communities in Croatia, as well as in the entire country. Within this context, they particularly pointed out the examples of Association MoST activities and grass-roots civic initiatives that established good collaboration with the Association. Examples of good practices with potential for replication in other local communities include the action „A di si ti?“ (Where are you?) for collection of food and other products, as well as money for their purchase, mostly within schools, but also during public events – such as flea-market of donated articles. Beneficiaries of this action are 250 extremely socially endangered families within local community. Establishment of social supermarket represents continuation of this action. With assistance from a wide scope of donors from all sectors in the local community the supermarket continually provides new products for an extended group of beneficiaries. Moreover, the emergence of independent civic initiatives has also been pointed out. These initiatives handle local “burning issues” of which institutions in charge of social care are not even sufficiently aware. Initiative O La La has been exemplified as best practice, as it used the opportunities of communication via social networks (Facebook) and in collaboration with Association MoST, as organizer of social services and volunteer work, it prompted citizens to help the homeless – beneficiaries of MoST shelter – through daily delivery of meals in 2012. Another example of organisation of volunteer activities focused on stimulation of solidarity and social cohesion - and outside of the area of volunteering of youth – concerns volunteer engagement of certain number of dentists in Split, who provide free dental care services to beneficiaries of MoST. The panellists also pointed out examples of self-organisation of citizens

during snowstorm in Split, whereby it was proven that citizens functioned better than completely blocked local institutions, by using own resources for provision of mutual assistance; and mobile telephones and social networks for communication.

In the area of work with youth, MoST relies on peer-to-peer volunteering assistance concept, which may be considered as an important form of social innovation in prevention of behavioural disorders in youth. In this way the shortcomings of the program for prevention of violence and social services to the youth within formal education systems and social care are compensated. In this segment of Association MoST activities the emphasis is put onto autonomy of youth in preparing of social activities and actions, whereby MoST tries to position itself as a centre for education and promotion of volunteering and innovation (within actions such as „Sajam ideja“/“Ideas Fair” for youth, „Udarac“/“Hit”, etc.).

Moderated discussion followed after panellists’ presentations, identifying factors that contribute to engagement of citizens, especially youth, within local communities in Croatia. Amongst them the following factors were particularly emphasized:

- Authenticity and continuity of CSO activities,
- Visibility of activities and results within local community,
- “Open door” policy towards all media, and
- Collaboration with local institutions that is carried out through information and sort of “tutoring” of the local administration and self-administration officials and other relevant institutions, to which solutions to social problems in the local community need to be offered.

Discussion participants pointed out the need for visibility in the media through emphasis on activities concerning beneficiaries instead of focusing on funds that CSOs require for their activities and issues related to financing of CSOs. In this view it has also been established that state and local institutions of all types (administration, social welfare...) completely lack understanding of the issues of poverty, and especially homelessness, and that there exists the need for activism, volunteerism and social innovation by citizens.

The discussion also covered the issues concerning lack of solidarity in the society as a whole, which also creates the reasons for emergence of homelessness as relatively new, but also very complex and rather frequent social problem. Based upon presented examples of work with beneficiaries - the homeless - by the participants and the panellists alike, it has been found that there is a need for synergy in actions of “official institutions” and CSOs in order to be able to solve at all the multiple problems which homeless persons face simultaneously: the health, psychological issues, social issues, issues related to reintegration, etc.

Moreover, there was also the discussion on issues concerning stimulation of activism and volunteerism in local communities, especially amongst youth, with the purpose to ensure solidarity and social cohesion. It has been established that cynicism and other barriers to volunteering may be overcome by including volunteers in all phases of social services provision – from its planning to delivery. It has been pointed out that, in that way, two groups of positive effects may be accomplished. By including potential beneficiaries and volunteers that will provide social services into the process of planning, not only are the principles of participation respected, but it also ensures that maximally efficient services/activities/projects are conceived that are adjusted to the needs of the local community. Moreover, full inclusion of volunteers into the use of donated funds for service provision, i.e. delivery of donated products and services to beneficiaries, increases the visibility and citizens’ trust in CSOs and encourages them to continuous engagement and volunteer work.

Participants agreed on the following conclusions of the Roundtable:

- It has been pointed out that it is necessary to recognize inclusion of volunteers and local communities into all aspects of CSOs activities, as an important factor for recognition of successfulness of their work and criteria in tenders for grants from public sources. Likewise, it is emphasised that there is a need to recognize, monitor and evaluate social innovation resulting from CSO activities within this context.
- Since there is a general trend towards “bureaucratisation” of evaluation processes in the civil society and lack of authentic communication with donors, participants noted the importance of evaluation of CSOs activities based on site visits to organisation and beneficiaries, as well as systematic monitoring of achieved results.
- Collaboration between CSOs and all levels of education institutions has particularly been emphasized, and special support was given to introduction of educational themes directed at acquisition of knowledge, stances and values focused on volunteering. Hereby it is established that it is necessary to systematically promote networking and two-way communication between education institutions and CSOs, especially in the area of information on volunteering programs and possibilities for volunteering.

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