

Seniors and Local Community Life – SenEmpower

1. Project Relevance

The SenEmpower project was built upon several insights; one of these insights was that single, older women and other vulnerable groups of older people in marginal social contexts are at high risk for social isolation, while the number of seniors who need support in order to be an active member of the local community will increase. Another insight is that there is a growing number of seniors who are willing to work on issues of public welfare, including the re-integration of isolated seniors into community life. Their locally based work is usually not integrated into networks, so they miss out on the transfer of knowledge and good practice; therefore, they need to be acknowledged and supported by educational offers and cooperation at the community level. Furthermore, SenEmpower emphasized that the mentioned vulnerable groups have a valuable contribution to make to the development of civil society. The partners in SenEmpower developed the project in order to enable these marginalized groups to shape their local surroundings, to influence the support they receive, and, where appropriate, to use their knowledge and life experience to help develop government policy regarding seniors and related issues. Moreover, training courses were offered to senior volunteers in order to improve their know-how on addressing and empowering isolated seniors. In this way, the project pointed out the link between the two groups.

The above mentioned aspects of SenEmpower emphasize the importance of the empowerment and participation of senior citizens for social inclusion in local communities, as well as for the policy-making process. Making these two key components of ASLECT evaluable demonstrates the relevance of SenEmpower for the project.

2. Background and Aims

The SenEmpower project was carried out in Austria (City of Graz), Germany (City of Kassel, district of Offenbach), Italy (Rome), United Kingdom (County of Lancashire) and Lithuania (City of Kaunas). At a local level, the work was based on cross-sectoral cooperation. SenEmpower was coordinated by ISIS (Institut für Soziale Infrastruktur), Frankfurt. The project was based on the work outlined by the European project “Isolation to Inclusion” in which Local and Regional Action Plans for the re-integration of isolated old people into the community life had been set up.

Similarly to other stakeholders, seniors engaged in civic activities need to be provided with suitable framework conditions, which acknowledge the indispensable value of their self-help and voluntary activities. These include the respect for existing skills and competences of volunteers as well as the offer of training which increases their range of activities, the success of their work and their work satisfaction. Thus, the SenEmpower concept aimed at offering training courses to members of seniors’ self-help group and voluntary work initiatives in order to improve their know-how on addressing and empowering seniors with weak family



SenEmpower
Empowering seniors to take part in community life

Project name: SenEmpower – Empowering seniors to take part in community life
Project number:
Coordinating organisation: ISIS – Institut für Soziale Infrastruktur Frankfurt
Countries involved: Austria, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom and Lithuania
Types of organisations involved: Seniors associations, Governments, Adult education bodies and Research institutes
Implementation level: Local and regional levels
Website: <http://www.senempower.eu/>

and social networks to take an active role in society. Furthermore, the SenEmpower project aimed at communicating that democracy, the heart of every European civil society, is not limited to a representative system, but it includes a broad range of organisations, such as grassroots groups, civil movements, interest groups and advisory boards which seek to define and tackle the problems of their communities and to improve the quality of life of each single member of the civil society.

3. Description of the Target Groups

The SenEmpower project had two main target groups: a direct target group consisting of the members of senior self-help groups and voluntary initiatives, and an indirect target group – the seniors at risk or concerned with social isolation.

In particular, the training curricula developed within the project were directed at seniors in general concerned or threatened with isolation, seniors at the age of 75+, seniors with chronic illnesses, seniors with low educational levels and older carers as nursing relatives.

At each location, the trainings took place in different surroundings. The project evaluation



showed that the number of participants at each location varied and generally ranged overall from 7 in Lancashire County to 20 in Kaunas. The training participants were only seldom younger than 50 or older than 80 years. The age of the large majority ranged from 50 to 69 years. However, people in their 70-ies also appear to be interested in the issues of the SenEmpower courses, which especially apply to the County of Offenbach.

Courses for older carers as nursing relatives were conducted in Lancashire County and were

attended by a cook, a poultry farmer, a secretary, a lawyer, an accountant clerk, an animal food salesman and a teacher.

The evaluation also showed that a large number of the course participants have already had experience as a volunteer; thus, they were sensitised to the problems of isolated seniors.

4. Outputs and Multiplying Outcomes

Based on a European framework curriculum, training courses for members of seniors self-help groups and voluntary work initiatives were developed and tested at six European project locations, each focusing on a specific group of excluded older people. Trainer Manuals for these courses are available in the language of the country where the course was implemented:

- Voluntary senior visitors (City of Graz): Trainer Manual in German;
- Senior volunteers in a preventive health programme for people aged 75+ (City of Kassel): Trainer Manual in German;
- Senior volunteers promoting the social inclusion of older people with chronic illnesses (City of Kaunas): Trainer Manual in Lithuanian;
- Seniors initiatives promoting the social inclusion of older people with low educational levels (City of Rome): Trainer Manual in Italian;
- Senior volunteers promoting the social inclusion of older carers (County of Lancashire): Trainer Manual in English;
- Seniors cooperatives (County of Offenbach): Trainer Manual in German.

The Trainer Manuals, as well as the Guidelines for Action are available for download on the project website, under Outcomes & Documents. The Guidelines for Action include an overview of the objectives, contents and methods of the local curricula, as well as

recommendations for their implementation; the Guidelines are available in English, German, Italian and Lithuanian.

5. Impact and Sustainability

At all the locations which were involved in the conceptualisation and probation phase, the qualification measures reached a very satisfactory and promising level of sustainability. This is highly due to the following factors:

- The involvement of local authorities in the conceptualization of the courses ensured the relevance of their contents and topics for a long-term planning of social affairs;
- The close cooperation with local stakeholders in the field of work with and for senior citizens who are interested in benefiting from the practical outcomes and benefits for their target group;
- The quality of the courses.

In Graz, the initiative started by the SenEmpower project survived the end of the project, and the visiting service was established as a regular offer by the SeniorInnenbüro of the municipality. In addition, a new Grundtvig project was approved to transfer the concept from Graz to Kaunas, Rome, Hessen and Lancashire County, as it was considered to be both low-threshold and very effective for the integration of seniors into the community life.



In Kassel, stakeholders were interested in the continuation of the project; they were willing to support it in providing public relations and their facilities. For many of the organisations involved, the new project - GRIPS - seems to be the missing link to address seniors of a higher age and to expand on volunteer work. The funds for the future training and the continuation of the project were provided by the city of Kassel, which is highly interested in expanding

programs to promote health prevention activities.

In Kaunas, a variety of accompanying measures were developed and implemented in order to establish the project outcomes sustainably and encourage the participants to continue their work. Among others, monthly group meetings were scheduled so that the participants could maintain their mutual cooperation, exchange ideas and receive consultations, e.g. by inviting guest speakers to these meetings.

In order to establish the project outcomes sustainably in Lancashire County, copies of all materials were provided to council employees working with or on behalf of carers. In addition, training materials and reports were further developed by Lancaster University into an accessible format that appeals to carers and new learners with lots of practical support, examples and financial advice.

In the District of Offenbach, sustainability was ensured in two ways: the volunteers of the Seniorenhilfe Langen continued their work independently from the lifetime of the project. The workshop had laid a good basis for implementing measures to reach out to seniors concerned with or at risk for isolation, and the municipality of Langen confirmed its support to the project in the future. On the grounds of the gained experiences, a new curriculum was developed, aiming at multipliers in organisations in the area of work with and for senior citizens, as well as at churches in order to disseminate the idea and concept of the work in the District of Offenbach at Hessian and national levels.

In Rome, suggestions to establish the project outcomes sustainably were given in terms of enriching the curriculum with trans-national issues. Lunaria was requested to monitor the course also in the future and to organize new training sessions and meetings between participants.

6. Educational Process

The contents and methods of SenEmpower courses aimed at empowering senior citizens for active citizenship and social participation in their specific local context.

The methodological approach of SenEmpower courses continuously considered the wants and needs of both members of seniors' self-help groups and voluntary initiatives as their direct target group, and seniors at risk for or concerned with isolation as their indirect target group.



The competence approach – referring to existing skills that are enlarged by approaches of learning participatory competences – is an integral part of civic education. In an enlarged comprehension of civic education, learning does not only refer to political spheres of activity, but to the wide range of civic engagement; it rather addresses the development and the training of individual and societal decision-making and responsibility. As a basic principle, seniors were considered to be providers of knowledge to at least the same extent as recipients of knowledge. The training focused on the senior learners' situation and huge experience and on fostering their autonomy and responsibility in the learning process.

The SenEmpower courses consisted of three parts, which built on each other: firstly the transfer of background knowledge, secondly the exploration of existing offers and finally the development of actions. At each project location, the details on contents, methods, durations and on the learning environment were defined particularly with a view to the needs of local target groups and focus themes.