

**Action Project:
'Sustainable Development of
Local Economies and
Communities through Social
Economy, Improvement of
Social Services and Effective
Usage of Structural Funds',
funded by ESF, OP "HRD"**

EAPN Bulgaria

AIMS:

- To qualify students to elaborate and implement projects;
- To assess the opportunities to improve quality of living and foster social inclusion;
- To enforce social economy and social enterprises
- To bridge local communities with educational institutions, NGOs, business and research centers;
- To assess the effectiveness of the national Structural Funds management system (Do Structural Funds really support local development? To what extent do the priorities of Structural Funds correspond to the priorities of a small municipality?);

THE PARTNERSHIP:

- Two Universities (Sofia and Blagoevgrad),
- The Institute of Sociology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,
- The municipality of Sapareva Banya,
- A local NGO (Women's Association: 'From the Spring')
- The National Federation of Employers of People with Disabilities.

- Elaborated within the Transnational EU PROGRESS project 'Bridges for Inclusion', this project activated local initiative groups and local capital through participatory action research and social methodologies for public participation.
- Many different stakeholders worked together to foster local development.

Basic modules

- 1. Participatory action research (students & local communities – needs assessment);
- 2. Building capacity of local communities to achieve development;
- 3. Social risks and social competence;
- 4. Social economy and social enterprises;
- 5. Social technologies for civil participation
- 6. Local development projects & Structural funds

- 54 students from the two Universities worked together with academics, local people and local authorities;
- ‘Projects of hopes’ were elaborated in different fields (eco-farm, cultural festival, local communication strategy, capacity building of local NGOs working with the disabled, regional association for agricultural producers, development of tourism services and activities for children).

- Efforts to place the projects derived from the participatory needs assessment within the OPs were made: a high degree of inconsistency between the local needs and the framework of the OPs;
- Projects aimed at meaningful Active inclusion (adequate income, quality employment and access to quality services) drop out of the framework of the OPs;

PROBLEMS

- **The current SF's framework is too businessoriented (in private interest) and not adapted to local development needs;**
- **The projects and their management are weakened by inappropriate administrative burdens and financial obstacles;**
- **Fragmented projects do not follow long-term strategy & socially accepted vision**

PROBLEMS:

- **Top-down instead bottom up approaches**
- **Reporting on events & excel tables instead on results**
- **Imitating transparency and keeping chronic opaqueness**
- **Misuse of Structural funds (the basic problem is not corruption but the loss of meaning) – waste of resources (For example, a fountain of mineral water was built up hampering people to use it)**

A Poster at Sofia Airport says:

- **“The Project ‘Sofia Airport reconstruction, development & extension: Lot B1 New Technical Terminal and Related Infrastructure’ is being part-financed by the European Union. The project is helping to reduce social and economic disparities among the citizens of the European Union.”**
- **Meanwhile Bulgaria is among the countries in EU with the highest inequalities, the lowest incomes and regressive taxation.**
- **There is a need for authentic Social Impact Assessment: Do and to what extent European Structural Funds foster social cohesion and social inclusion? Or are they neutral? Or on the contrary the current framework of the European Structural Funds intensifies disparities, inequalities and exclusion?**

Meaningful Steps Forward:

- **Clear identification of “social inclusion”;**
- **Centering Structural Funds on well-being and development;**
- **Bridging concepts of inclusion and participation: the most “active” inclusion is the effective participation;**
- **To consider seriously participation of people (including people in poverty), means to consider to what extent they could influence the political process of decision making in reference with the accumulation and distribution of public resources as well as to control the implementation of the decisions;**
- **The Structural funds are EU public budget per se and they have to be influenced and monitored by the concerted public.**