A RecomMendation letter

for LOCAL COMMUNITY AUTHORITIES

IN SLOVENIA

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**1 introduction**

The ageing population and longevity society brings up many challenges, such as quality of life, financial security, social inclusion, availability and accessibility of social care and medical treatment for older people, but at the same time it also presents questions regarding **the possibilities of keeping older people involved as active and equal members of society** who can contribute to the development and empower social and cultural wealth of the community.

Older people are not necessary (and not only) retired, lower producers or non-producers and passive recipients of various forms of aid and support by the state. Such stereotyped views on ageing and older people can be alarming, since the elderly must not become invisible, mute, and non-existent overnight with retirement (Krajnc, 2016). On the contrary: learning, connectivity with social surrounding, social inclusion and participation are widely recognised as central to mental health, emotional wealth, cognitive, social and human capital, as well as to better quality of life, positive self-esteem and confidence, values and attitudes, etc. (Merriam and Kee, 2014; Schuller and Desjardins, 2007; Tett and Maclachlan, 2007; Golding, 2011a; 2011b; Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008; Williamson, 2011; etc.).

Forcing older people to a social and psychological death by not giving them an opportunity to fully experience the new life situation that they are entering can be devastating not only for them, but also for our society and the state (Krajnc, 2016). To this end our project *Old Guys Say Yes to Community* developed with European partners from Poland, Estonia and Portugal reveals errors and lost opportunities but also proposes possibilities, suggestions and good practices to foster participation of older people (particularly men 60+) in our societies with the aim of increasing their and our wellbeing, quality of life, happiness and health. Therefore we:

a) evaluated wellbeing and involvement of older adults (particularly men 60+) in education and learning in their local environments;

b) identified obstacles and opportunities for greater involvement of older adults (particularly men 60+) in community activities and communities of practice;

c) and prepared concrete recommendations for local community authorities and non-governmental organisations to empower older people (particularly men 60+) in their communities.

Our project proved how our societies have failed to prepare an appropriate ground for the inevitable demographic, economic and social changes in the last few decades. In particular, it showed that our societies have not recognized the disappearance of older men from community activities - not so much due to death, illness, financial or other deprivation, depression, dementia, etc., but mostly due to isolation, uselessness and needlessness in the contemporary way of life. The **Recommendation letter for local community authorities in Slovenia** thereforepresents our main findings, which can foster strategy and policy implementation for lifelong learning, longevity society and ageing population in local environments (with the emphasis on older men).

**2 The DESCRIPTION of THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS**

The current Slovenian ‘welfare mix’ system has undergone significant changes in the last 30 years. Evolved out of the state-socialist welfare system established in Yugoslavia, it resembles the welfare systems of Western Europe, with some elements of a conservative-corporate welfare system and a social-democratic welfare system, where a strong public or state sector is still the dominant service provider of all types of services (Kolarič, Kopač and Rakar, 2009; Kolarič, 1992; Kopač, 2005; Črnak-Meglič and Rakar 2009; Filipovič Hrast, Hlebec and Kavčič, 2012). However, some of the social protections provided by the state have been slowly reined in – which can already be recognized by a greater material deprivation in the country and the shrinking state support for socially excluded and vulnerable groups among which **the** **elderly are becoming increasingly deprived**. This corresponds to the findings of greater financial and material vulnerability of the elderly and the higher at-risk-of-poverty rate of the elderly in Slovenia – which is twice as high as that of the general population (Hlebec, Mali and Filipovič Hrast, 2014; Stropnik and Kump, 2008; Stropnik et al., 2010; Filipovič Hrast, Hlebec and Kavčič, 2012; SURS, 2018).

According to the demographic projections, the process of population ageing will be more intense in Slovenia than in other EU countries (IMAD, 2018). Slovenia is expected to have 20.6% of population older than 65 years and 5.5% of population older than 80 years by 2020 and the percentage will increase significantly by 2050 (29.9% for 65+ and 11.1% for 80+) (Eurostat, 2017; Wolfgang et al., 2018). Today, each new-born boy can expect to live 77.96 years, or six years less than a new-born girl, who can expect to live 83.86 years (SURS, 2018). Longevity also differs among regions: in the east of Slovenia men die on average three years earlier and women two years earlier than in the west. This also corresponds to the prior findings on polarisation between eastern and western Slovenia regarding health indicators and other quality of life indicators including happiness, financial satisfaction, general satisfaction with life etc., where Goriška and Obalno-Kraška region has had the highest rates and Posavska and Pomurska region the lowest (Gregorčič and Hanžek, 2001).

<0}Among 2.062.874 inhabitants of Slovenia, there are 18.9% older than 65 years and one quarter of them face the risk of poverty. Among the 287,000 persons below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold in Slovenia, 78,000 were retired (15.9% of all retired persons), 55,000 of them women and 23,000 men (SURS, 2018). Theprevalence of social exclusion among the elderly in Slovenia is above the EU average (Eurostat, 2018; SHARE study). The most problematic exclusion is spatial exclusion, since almost half of the elderly in Slovenia do not have access to basic services in their local environment; this is higher than the population average and much higher than the averages for the EU-28 and even non-EU-12 member states (Filipovič Hrast, Hlebec and Kavčič, 2012). According to the Active Ageing Index (AAI), Slovenia ranks among the bottom-ranked EU-28 countries (with Poland, Greece, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania) and the ranking is even declining (from 20th in 2012 to 23rd in the 2014) (UNECE & EU, 2014). Slovenia also has the lowest employment rate among the older population (55-64) by all EU member states (UNECE & EU, 2014; IMAD, 2018).

A completely different reality is foreseen in national strategies: the primary objective of the **Slovenian Development Strategy 2030**, adopted in December 2017, is “Slovenia, a country with a high quality of life for all”. One of its five strategic orientations is “learning for and through life”. The **Active Ageing Strategy,** adopted in January 2018 (IMAD, 2018), advocates for ensuring sufficient labour supply by promoting extension and flexibility of employability, particularly for older people and youths, without acknowledging the particular needs and positions of these groups. Although it promotes active participation of all generations in economic and social life and political decision-making processes, this strategy is therefore less adjusted to the social, cultural and other democratic needs and capabilities of older people.

As indicated, adult education (together with longevity and active aging) as a fundamental component of lifelong learning is ranked high among the priorities of Slovenian development strategies as well as the Resolution on the National Programme of Adult Education – ReNPIO, 2013-2020 (ReNPIO, 2014), pursuing European policies and recommendations. However well addressed and aiming to promote inclusion, equality, participation, creativity, health, financial security, etc. throughout a person’s life course, significant discrepancy between the actual state of the quality of life for older adults and the estimated and reachable development goals appears when applied to concrete statistic data, analyses and research findings. This can be seen in the unsuccessful implementation of the Lifelong learning strategy 2007 that has, among other things, identified the main areas and topics for change but remains unfulfilled (see Jelenc, 2007). In Slovenia at present the participation rate in lifelong learning programmes drops faster with age than it does in the EU on average (IMAD, 2018). The gap between visions and operational objectives can also be seen in declining participation of adults in education (dropped from 16.2% in 2010 to 11.7% in 2015) and public funds which are allocated to adult education dropped (from 56 to 24 million €) over the same period (Drofenik, 2015). Based on the analysis of the financing of adult education under the austerity measures and the uncritical tracking of European standards, Slovenia is abandoning the tradition of an innovative and socially oriented adult education system which used to foster social justice and empower personal and social development through education and learning (Mikulec and Jelenc Krašovec, 2016; Kump, 2017).

**3 The DESCRIPTION of THE researched COMMUNITies: THE BACKGROUND OF STRONG AND WEAK results/achievements**

Recommendations are based on extensive qualitative research on inclusion of older men (60+) in local communities in Slovenia, which was carried out in the spring of 2017 in Ljubljana (district community Bežigrad), the municipality of Ajdovščina, and to a smaller extent in various parts of Slovenia. The research includes three focus groups, 98 in-depth half-structured interviews, 10 case studies of good practices, and a review of existing academic literature and Slovenian and European policies on education and inclusion of elderly adults of local communities for better quality of life.

From the 22 participants included in the three focus groups carried out in Ljubljana-Bežigrad (2) and Ajdovščina (1), 5 were representatives of municipality, city, and town institutions, 6 were representatives of public institutions, and 11 were representatives of non-governmental organisations or civil society.

From the 98 interviews chosen for analysis, 42 were conducted in the urban environment of the capital (Bežigrad), 41 in a half-urban municipality of Ajdovščina and its rural surroundings, and 15 among sociocultural animators in various parts of Slovenia, mainly from rural environments or from smaller towns and municipalities, as well as three from Ljubljana. The average age of interviewees was 71, from which the most represented age groups were 60-69 (46%) and 70-79 (41%) and the least represented age group was 80+ (12%). Three retired persons younger than 60 were also included in the research. The youngest interviewee was 56 years old and the oldest 86.

The majority of interviewees completed upper secondary education, that is, general, vocational and technical upper-secondary education (ISCED level 4 and 5) (54%), followed by a completed first cycle of tertiary education, that is, higher vocational education and higher professional and academic education (ISCED level 6) (25%). 10% of interviewees were less educated, with three interviewees who did not finish primary education, three who completed primary education (ISCED level 2) and four who completed lower secondary education (ISCED level 3). Similarly represented were interviewees who completed the second and third cycle of tertiary education (graduate and postgraduate, ISCED level 7 and 8) (11%).

95% of interviewees were retired, and 5% of the 60+ years old interviewees were still employed. 3% of the retired interviewees were still registered as economically active as sole proprietors or carrying out another form of paid work. The majority of interviewees were married or in a relationship (79%), 15% were widowed and 5 interviewees were single or divorced.

**The district community of Ljubljana-Bežigrad** is thewealthiest quarter of the capital of Slovenia according to GDP per capita and is part of the region with the highest monthly average income per capita (1.099 EUR in 2015) and with the lowest risk of poverty rate (11,8) (SURS, 2017). As a district with four University faculties and the biggest sport centre (Stožice) it has favourable infrastructure and plenty of opportunities for cultural, intellectual, sports, social, community, etc. engagement. Despite all the advantages, more than 10% of residents face poverty, which is more about scraping by than surviving: people can afford to eat and live with the use of family support and neighbourhood support, but they cannot afford much else, particularly new cultural and intellectual experiences, travelling or socializing outside of home – despite living in an environment with all these opportunities. The majority of residents of the district community have moved to Ljubljana from other parts of Slovenia for work, and therefore identification with the local community and the neighbourhood is relatively low, while attachment to place of birth is still strong. As a consequence there is a strong feeling of loneliness and alienation among the elderly. The percentage of older people treated as adults under custody (guardianship) in the district has doubled from 56 in year 2010 to 106 in 2017 (CSD, 2018).

**The municipality of Ajdovščina**, which lies in Goriška region in the western part of Slovenia, was hit by two economic crises in last 30 years. Although the western part of Slovenia used to have a higher quality of life compared to regions in the eastern part (Gregorčič in Hanžek, 2001), Ajdovščina has lost this privilege as a result of the crises and is now in the national average. The unemployment rate in Ajdovščina increased to 14.7% after the last crisis in 2008 and then gradually dropped to 7.3% in 2017 (SURS, 2017), which is lower than the national average. Until 2011 Goriška region had the lowest risk of social exclusion (13% compared to the national level of 19.3%), which increased to over 20% in the following years (SURS, 2018). Ajdovščina (15.2%) ranks above the national average (14.3%) in the risk of poverty rate (SURS, 2017). Both economic downturns had a devastating effect on the elderly in Ajdovščina; many found themselves jobless shortly before their retirement age and the pensions of the retired were lowered because of unpaid contributions of companies. The majority of burdens were carried out by women, because many men died soon after retirement or after job loss due to illnesses, depression, etc. (Gregorčič, 2017). As a consequence, women are often emphasised as those who faced poverty and fought against this economic and material detraction.

**4 THE LIST OF PRESENT AND/OR PREDICTABLE PROBLEMS ELICITED/EVALUATED FROM THE research**

**THE OVERALL RESULTS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS:**

**The focus group participants in KS-Bežigrad (FG1)** defined their social environment as an inclusive, immensely active environment with diverse possibilities for high quality of life and for leisure activities. However, due to urbanisation, immigration (and strong identification of residents with their original environment out of Ljubljana), and the modern way of living, the environment is dominated by separateness, fragmentation, ignorance and detachment. The highlighted problems faced by older people in the community were: a) isolation (the elderly isolate themselves from the world due to hardship, poverty, loneliness, fear, as well as security and anti-burglary systems that prevent spontaneous visits, etc.); b) poorly managed home and social services (reflected above all by criticizing the dissolution of a comprehensive social system that once worked for people, and on the ground with people); c) poverty; and d) insufficient information about possibilities for active ageing of older adults. For the greater involvement of older men in the community, however, they proposed in particular the strengthening of activities for men in NGOs (sports, firefighting, veterans', etc.), introducing or replacing abandoned activities (organising typically male activities, like modelling, woodworking, etc.) and activities that highlight (physical) work and rank (the factors which defined men most in the working period). They highlighted the need for a coordinator for older men as an informer and a link between associations, initiatives, institutions and organizations, and the contribution of the younger generation to the integration of older people into the community.

**The focus group participants in the Day center activities for the elderly in Ljubljana-Bežigrad – DCA (FG2)** define theircenter as a community where the older adults from the BS3 neighbourhood meet each day; men represent 13% of active participants. The center was defined as an inclusive, rich, and encouraging space with free-of-charge activities where it is possible to go beyond individualism and loneliness and to grow by involvement, interaction, joint activities, discussion, intergenerational cooperation, etc., which is achieved mainly through participatory approaches in the choosing and implementation of the program. By contrast, the settlement BS3, including individual apartment buildings, is alienated and distinctly separated, as is typical for Ljubljana. A number of options that older men have in the immediate environment and to which the DCA encourages them to, have been highlighted. Among the most pressing problems in the community were: a) financial distress (especially regarding health care, maintenance of own housing, shameful pensions and poverty in general, which only makes it possible for them to participate in free activities and nowhere else); b) health care (waiting periods, payable health services, etc.); c) functional literacy (reading doctor referrals and instructions for taking medicines), d) isolation, solitude and dementia; e) retirement as a dead point (becoming a nobody). Participants indicated a range of initiatives and examples of good practices that the country should support with additional or new funding, opportunities, information and approaches to older men: the potential of retired professionals; the potential of older men in community and voluntary work (including physical work, if they were professionally defined by it).

**The focus group participants in Ajdovščina (FG3)** defined their social environmentthrough: a) sociological aspects and societal values (co-decision, active participation, solidarity, cooperation, connectedness, mutual support etc.) and not through economic deprivation that they faced in the last years; b) the most vulnerable populations (including older adults, migrants, and refugees) and survival strategies with the emphasis on the poverty of widows, never employed housewives, and farmers; c) and emphasized creativity as an important contribution of older adults to the community development. Problems, challenges and visions for the dignified life of older adults and their quality of life have been discussed particularly through different aspects of mobility and care and with the recognition that older adults do need a better access to information regarding social, cultural and other activities. Opportunities for communities of practice have been mostly seen a) in already existing and diverse educational and training programs; b) in informing and raising awareness about them for older men; and c) in considering alternative activities for older men in their later life. In this regard the emphasis was also on the importance of raising older men's awareness of the advantage of finding new social environments already in the retirement process. Their willingness to transfer good practices to their local environment was strongly expressed (see Gregorčič, 2017).

**5 General RECOMMENDATIONs for LoCAL COMMUNITY AUTHORITIES AND GOVERNAMENTAL INSTITUTIONS IN sLOVENIA**

1) In the framework of national strategies and preparing action plans by different ministries, local and national authorities should support implementation of legislation that tackles:

a) **financial and material vulnerability of older people,**

b) high at-risk-of-poverty,

c) spatial exclusion,

d) labour, social and political participation among the older people, as well as

e) greater intergenerational cooperation, and

f) appropriate supportive environments for socialising and learning of older people (especially men 60+).

2) Because retirement is **a critical stage in life** that the elderly (and especially men) are not prepared for, and because Slovenia has cancelled formal retirement preparation programs, **programs aiming to prepare the elderly for old age and give meaning to old age** to those in the second stage of life (not just before retirement, but rather significantly earlier) should be promoted within public institutions and through NGOs. Young people should also be informed and educated about the process of ageing and about old age; the research has shown that activities in the first two life stages decisively determine cognitive, social and cultural capital in the third and fourth life stages. At the same time, this would encourage the wider society (and not just among older adults) to change the traditional and stereotypical views of old age and ageing.

3) Instead of forced and early retirement (ZUJF law, etc.), **practices for a gradual transition to retirement** (partial retirement, retirement with the possibility of occasional (non)formal participation, etc.) should be developed and aimed at any individual with motivation and interest in continuing employment or work. Good examples of encouraging positive perception of productivity (highly important for men) and creativity (highly important for women) could be done within public institutions (city, municipal, public institutions). **Inclusive longevity society could be developed** through practices of old-new career; involving the elderly in mentoring, training, mediation, development, strategic, motivational, etc. roles/working groups/programs of institutions and companies; gradual replacement of 'careers of male domination', ‘identity of a functionary’, etc. At national level, laws should be drawn up **to institutionalise gradual/partial retirement practices, 'silver economy',** and to encourage economic integration of the elderly, etc. Organisations that develop 'partnerships' with older adults should be financially supported.

4) Despite our awareness of predictable demographic changes, we are facing an intense process of a) marginalisation (especially of impoverishment) of the elderly and b) disappearance of the elderly (especially men) from community due to self-isolation, uselessness, needlessness in contemporary way of life. Because of that, **local communities should develop more democratic and participatory processes for involvement of older adults** in consultation and other practices that would enable them to contribute to the community (including working, cleaning and other community actions): Ajdovšina (as well as self-organised communities with high participation of older people in Maribor, mostly men) is already developing in this direction with its participatory budget (PB), which should be strengthened further (also by more active involvement of older men); in Ljubljana-Bežigrad, where the interest and need for suggesting proposals, discussion, political involvement and co-decision were the most prominent, the development of PBs or similar deliberative practices in which the elderly (men) could also achieve their highly emphasised democratic and collaborative ambitions should be considered.

5) **Educational and other integration and intergenerational programs** and projects within the non-governmental sector - which already create diverse opportunities for active engagement of older adults - **should be financially supported and strengthened**; at the same time, additional financial incentives should be provided for projects that will a) address and eliminate high social, emotional, and other dependence of elderly men on their wives (and families); b) inform about the importance of social networks and social capital for health and quality old age; c) develop programs to increase community support in understanding the ageing process as well as develop social networks that help overcome age-related difficulties. In order to achieve this, it is necessary **to connect, strengthen and upgrade local caretaking institutions and services** (functional literacy, help with daily tasks and disability, etc.) which serve older adults; establish informational points and systems for informing about/coordination of activities, existing assistance, services, etc. for the elderly on local level; develop (men) support groups; men sheds (men workshops), multigenerational residential forms, etc.

6) **Accessibility to quality services, adequate public infrastructure and mobility** have become a major technical (and, above all, financial) obstacle for older adults with the degradation of welfare/social state, which has a significant impact on their quality of life; certain necessary services have become payable, while access to institutions and mobility in general is often inadequate. The research has shown that older men highly value the independence and autonomy that defined them in their working life, and thus we need to identify specific obstacles that prevent older adults from adequate access and mobility (pavements, bicycle lanes, benches at bus stops and along walking routes, car parks near health centers, organised public transport, vicinity of a shop, pharmacy, post office, banks, etc. in the rural environment; unpaid social spaces as an alternative to bars, churches and schools, etc.) in local environments (village, neighbourhood, gentrification of urban centers, etc.), as well as enable possibilities for cheaper or free services for older adults (the already established public transport LPP in Ljubljana) in the context of decentralisation of services (from urban or shopping centers).

7) **The invaluable contribution of the elderly as 'agents of progress' for the wider community should be recognised** and rewarded in local communities (with awards, financial incentives for organisations, invitations to events that celebrate national and other holidays, invitations to cultural and other social events). This contribution comes in the form of managing associations for the elderly, charitable organisations, U3ŽO, other NGOs, academic and voluntary organisations that are not necessary connected only with the elderly, projects of mutual help between the elderly, mutual assistance and widespread volunteering in situations where especially the third generation provides support and care to the fourth generation - in all these respects, the work of women in particular is invaluable. We also have to prepare strategies for transfer of knowledge, practices, skills, competences to the upcoming generation which does not (yet) possess these skills and competences, or the awareness of the importance of community service work and solidarity and the awareness of social welfare and community that the current generation of older adults built in their active working life.

8) Activities and services for older adults (DCA, U3ŽO, intergenerational centers, homes for the elderly, etc.) should be **connected, coordinated and upgraded with the aim of better integration, cooperation and accessibility for all older adults** (also for men and also free of charge). In doing so, local authorities should ensure **adequate facilities** (most organisations included in the research had inadequate, too small and/or payable facilities that have been unable to develop into lively communities) and **co-financing of activities and services** that are at present mainly dependent on bureaucratically demanding open calls (public and European) and the market (public recreational and sports facilities, financially accessible cultural and other events; a need for a cultural home in Ajdovščina was highlighted).

9) **Attention should be paid to potential and pre-existing good practices** in Slovenia and abroad; the older men in our research were especially indignant and despairing at current socio-political and socio-economic situation in the country. More than with their own quality of life, they were burdened with the quality of life of unemployed young people, poor people, employees who are nevertheless dependent on social transfers, etc. Care and responsibility for social well-being, which should be in the hands of public policies and institutions (including municipal, urban, and local communities), should be reflected in the transfer of already established and proven micro practices found in individual analyses of this project, which strive towards greater social, economic and political cooperation, exchange, integration, and democratisation.

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