
Project Old Guys Say Yes To Community

In depth review of recommendation

Southern Estonia

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Society is comprised of individuals of different ages and everyone must have the opportunity to partake in social life. An increasing proportion of the elderly in society leave the state faced with the need to amend its sociopolitical and economic orientation to ensure sustainable socioeconomic development for its society. People must be prepared for coping later on in life and it is of importance to make efforts in support of coping of the elderly and establish a support system enabling the elderly to cope independently for as long as possible.

The project *Old Guys Say Yes To Community* focuses on older males that reside in Southern Estonian regions. The men that participated in the survey were connected to Southeastern Estonia (Valga, Võru, Põlva).

Relevant principal economic sectors include gardening and bioenergetics; energy efficient logistics and tourism; and forestry and timber processing, respectively. At the same time, the region stands out with lower-than-average educational level of its labor force as compared to the average in Estonian counties, and also provides for significantly lower income and greater relative poverty. On account of this, less income tax is received in the local governments' revenue base, compensated with means from a national equalization fund. The region's peculiarities include a poor road and transport network as well as distinct local languages (seto, võro, mulgi) still in use. The region fosters a self-image of an attractive living and working environment which values ethnic culture and nature and is characterized by competitive economic activity. From the outside, Southeastern Estonia appears to be a unified and strong region of distinct character which in every sense (economically, culturally, security wise) forms an important part of the Estonian state as a whole. Southeastern Estonia constitutes a border region, which in itself affects its economic development.

Irrespective of a person's age, an individual must be viewed as a compound, proceeding from the following four different aspects that surround an individual: environment, network, physical coping, and psychosocial adeptness.

In Estonia the *Active Ageing Development Plan 2013–2020* has been devised as encompassing the following topics: shaping of age friendly living environment as well as of attitudes, values, and practices to promote active ageing; collecting, analyzing, and disseminating of information pertaining to ageing and the circumstances surrounding the elderly; raising of increased awareness as related to the topic of active ageing; supporting of

cooperation between different domains and levels as well as promoting of coordinated activities aimed at achieving the objectives set in the *Active Ageing Development Plan*. More specific goals of the Development Plan encompass the following:

1. the elderly are involved in society and are socially active;
2. the elderly are eager to learn and constitute versatile active learners;
3. the elderly are active in the labor market and are satisfied with their working life;
4. the elderly live longer as healthy and well coping individuals.

Through joint national cooperation, performance of objectives of the Development Plan constitutes a task of local governments and local development plans which, nevertheless, has been scantily implemented thus far. One of the reasons behind this relates to the administrative reform carried out in 2017 as a result of which local governments' administrative territories increased in size and the role of local governments changed. Obligations previously borne by the state and county governments were added to the burden of local governments and divided between other competent bodies. The administrative capacity and limited resources available to local governments have made it impossible to tackle all relevant topics and target groups, incl. those pertaining to older men, promptly. Following the administrative reform a situation has emerged in which certain rural municipality centers have, due to scattered location of their institutions, moved overly far from local residents and available bus connections fail to provide fast and convenient access to services offered in the rural municipality, leading to a state of affairs where it is not possible for residents to participate in activities provided by the municipality.

Note here that different national and local development plans look at various activities meant for the elderly as involving the elderly target group as a whole, without defining approaches based on gender and age.

The project *Old Guys Say Yes To Community* focuses on older males living in Southeastern Estonia. The project provides a good description of features peculiar to the region and it is noted that the region is predominantly home to Estonian speaking residents that have been living in the region since childhood, most locals live in private houses, and, oftentimes, use their own local language (võro, setu, mulgi); there is a large population in the area consisting of individuals with reduced work capacity.

A survey carried out within the framework of the project revealed that the target group exhibits different expectations and behavioral strategies and that regional factors play a big part in their lives. Controlling such resources as material needs, knowledge, mental and physical health, social relationships, and safety, a person can yield command over their living conditions. Studies show that wellbeing in older age tightly relates to the physical environment that establishes a significant connection between the experience and opportunities related to ageing and determines independent coping. The living environment surrounding an elderly person should also facilitate active participation in social life.

Southeastern Estonia constitutes one of the regions in Estonia which for the purposes of regional policy is under greater scrutiny in terms of bearing upon the local social and economic environment, increasing participation in employment of older local residents, and facilitating emigration of young people, thereby reducing relative poverty.

On a national level, a number of regional labor market measures have been devised for Southeastern Estonia to promote job creation by employers in the region as well as integration into the labor market and continued employment of people of pensionable age, those collecting early retirement pension, and individuals receiving the allowance of a rescue servant. Foremost, teleworking opportunities are supported by advancing the region's IT infrastructure, road network, and heritage culture based business; simplifying the sale of own products in the region and requirements applied to small producers; and setting up service points based on the principle of availability thereof of all required public services and keeping in mind the goal of enabling people to communicate with government authorities in one location as much as possible.

Southeastern Estonia's action plan 2015-2030 prescribes that by 2030 a sufficient number of people live by the border who are loyal and foster a sense of being needed. So that people might want to move to or stay in Southeastern Estonia, there must first be opportunities for employment in the region which would, as a result, develop business, public service infrastructure, and employment, through which local government adeptness would in turn be elevated.

The project *Old Guys Say Yes To Community* renders an outline of the target group via its environment, network of affiliations, and physical coping while placing more attention on the role of the individual and the psychosocial adeptness of the individual, affected by the former role as well as the individual's will and need for change, without which the individual cannot function as an active member of society, participating in a variety of activities. Oftentimes, older people look for external initiative, seeking involvement through a personal approach. Local government capabilities vary, consequently leading to varied opportunities for individuals to receive required services. For example, the home pages of Antsla and Rõuge rural municipalities provide a list of activities hosted by the village community center, citizens' associations, and clubs which include sufficient engagement for older men. Relevant rural municipalities also list activities by local master handicrafters that include a multitude of men engaged in furthering handicrafts and culture. Furthermore, Southeastern Estonia is home to exceedingly active hunting societies, uniting men of all ages.

Oftentimes, older men withdraw from active life due to health reasons or lack of a more expansive communication network; another reason for such withdrawal lies in the fact that said men are engaged in cultivating horticultural products and maintaining their private residences which activities occupy most of their day.

Suggestions as to what could be done, in cooperation with local governments and in addition to measures noted in the project, in Southeastern Estonia as involving the target group in this project:

- 1) Instead of setting up activity centers for the elderly, rural municipalities in cooperation with local vocational education institutions, trade schools, or folk high schools should, for the purpose of activating the elderly and keeping older men motivated, devise and develop study/development programs providing skills training and general knowledge, also including language classes, gardening and technical skill related training, digital skills training, and health related training.

- 2) As an output of lifelong learning, intergenerational learning opportunities should be developed within the framework of which older individuals would teach younger people and vice versa both within families and more widely in the community and society.
- 3) To improve coping for the elderly, it would be expedient to set up complex services encompassing social, health, and cultural services and keeping in mind the sociocultural perspective of older individuals' safety and wellbeing in rendering said services.
- 4) Community wide joint events should be promoted – common undertakings, discussions, and themed days and debates help boost a feeling of solidarity and make it easier for the community to notice and understand those that are in need of assistance.
- 5) As a tourist region, more information should be given and efforts should be made to improve skills to market local services and products which would also result in increased social activity for the target group.
- 6) The development of civil society should be enforced by way of different informative events.
- 7) To involve older men in social activities, they must be motivated and their sense of worth must be impacted.
- 8) To activate older men, relevant information must be given in the relevant region for example by way of direct mailing or handing out leaflets next to stores, at family physician centers, or at places of employment etc.