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## ***Project Old Guys Say Yes To Community***

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### **In depth review of recommendation**

**Eastern Estonia**

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Ageing population and 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. Estonia's demographic dynamics, dominated for years by negative population growth, labor shortage, and high concentration in society of the elderly strongly affects the country's social and economic environment which, in turn, bears on reasoned policies and courses of action as well as deliberate decisions.

Irrespective of a person's age, personal actions must be viewed by way of four different aspects: environment, network, physical coping, and psychosocial adeptness.

In Estonia the *Active Ageing Development Plan 2013–2020* has been devised including the following as recurrent actions: 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.

The Development Plan has been prepared for Estonia as a whole; however, the demographic and sociopolitical circumstances in different parts of Estonia may vary. Resulting in an increase of local governments' administrative territories and a change in the role of such governments, the administrative reform carried out in 2017 has in turn affected scant employment of objectives proceeding from the *Active Ageing Development Plan* in various parts of Estonia. 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 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 transport 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 elderly males residing in Estonia's Ida-Viru County. The project provides a good description of the environment in which the target group resides as well as of features peculiar to Ida-Viru County in particular: the region constitutes an industrial area where the population is ageing fast; Russian speaking residents that due to their sociopolitical and cultural peculiarities may not fall into the joint information space with the rest of Estonia are prevalent.

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. Working and living in an industrial area has left a mark on the locals' health, while autonomic coping and social activity render more limited.

Ida-Viru County 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 and increasing participation in employment of older local residents. It has oftentimes been stressed that, in relation to shortage of workforce, the elderly could remain in the labor market for longer as they as individuals are more stable and more experienced. Employers, on the other hand, indicate in their response that elderly employees are less innovative, overly convenience oriented to adjust their working habits, less flexible, and of poorer health. *The Elderly in the Labor Market*, a study commissioned in 2012 by the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs, highlights the exalted readiness of the elderly to continue working: 47% of the working elderly 50–74 years of age and 36% of the unemployed are considering continued employment after they reach pensionable age; only one fourth of the employed as well as unemployed plan to stop working once they reach pensionable age. A number of labor market measures have been devised nationally to keep people of pensionable age, those collecting early retirement pension, and individuals receiving the allowance of a rescue servant working. Flexible working time, labor market related training, tailoring of work facilities and tools, free use of technical aids required to perform particular work, practical training, and start-up assistance are some of the supported measures aimed at increasing cohesion of the elderly with society.

The project lists the peculiarities of the region and reasons as to why the relevant target group is not or cannot be active. On the national level, various measures and action plans have been devised to assist the target group, and the local government is obligated to offer different social activities to the target group.

Another aspect to be highlighted here is the role of civil society, affected by the number of enterprising individuals in a given municipality, ready to involve people in social activities and to provide opportunities for self-actualization. In Ida-Viru County, operational activities do exist in various municipalities in which the elderly, including older men, participate and can participate: for example, the rural municipalities of Lügánuse and Aseri have mixed choirs in which men as well can sing, Toila rural municipality features a Soldiers' Club and folk dancing groups, morning events for the elderly, culture clubs etc.

The *Development Strategy for Ida-Viru County 2019-2030* prescribes that by 2030 a good quality, versatile, and requirement based network as pertaining to transport, education, social services, and health services will be functional in the County, ensuring high public health indicators, dignified quality of life for local residents in all stages of life, and maximum adeptness for independent coping. As a result of this, social services offered in the County are accessible to people as based on both location and cost. In the social sphere a seamlessly running system is in place as encompassing services provided by the state and by local governments; complex services are being devised for the elderly. To link relevant social services and health services and improve accessibility thereof, uniform accessibility is prescribed across individual counties; in cooperation between local governments, services can be interlinked and accessibility thereof as well as the capability for service design improved; new ways to involve different communities are pinpointed.

The project *Old Guys Say Yes To Community* provides an overview of the relevant environment, network, and physical coping, yet fails to note an individual's own responsibility and role as well as psychosocial adeptness without which it is not possible to be an active member of society and take part in activities. Oftentimes, older people look for external initiative, seeking involvement through a personal approach.

Ida-Viru County constitutes a complex case in that if local individuals are not actively involved in the Estonian information and language sphere, information concerning local happenings fails to reach local residents due to lack of appropriate means of communication. Often, information in Estonian pertaining to different events and opportunities goes unnoticed as a result of scant or lacking language skills. The elderly that retire withdraw from active life due to health reasons or lack of a more expansive communication network. Relevant positive examples include Peipsiääre rural municipality where the municipality's home page publishes information on different public events taking place at the local community center, and Jõhvi rural municipality where a variety of themed events are organized for the elderly. All this, however, requires digital competence and proficiency in the relevant language.

Suggestions as to what could be done in Ida-Viru County as involving the target group in this project:

- 1) Accessibility of relevant and current social services offered to local residents and of information on things which help connect the elderly as a community should be improved.
- 2) 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, devise and develop study/development programs providing skills training and general knowledge, also including language classes, digital skills training, and health related training.
- 3) Libraries and culture centers in the area could provide to the more active elderly in Ida-Viru County language study opportunities and digital skills training.
- 4) Regional peculiarities and ethnical-cultural backgrounds should be considered as one municipality may be home for elderly of different nationalities – thought must be put into suitable joint activities which would be well-suited to all nationalities and would facilitate easier integration.
- 5) So as to involve older men more actively in activities, well-known spokespersons in the region must be engaged in launching such activities.

- 6) To involve older men in social activities, they must be motivated and their sense of worth must be impacted.
- 7) 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.