

RGD – Making a Difference

Regional Governance with a Vision: Supporting Community Initiatives and Equal Rights in Zakarpattya (Part I)

Over its five years of work in Ukraine, the RGD Project has rightly placed the accent on support to economic growth and development in the regions. This has always been the number one priority of RGD's Ukrainian partners at both Ministry and oblast levels. RGD is proud of its achievements in this area, most notable being the tangible change of approach by local and regional governments in the management of the economy. This approach now prioritises partnerships and co-operation with local business and enterprises, as well as a far more bottom-up and participatory approach to regional and local development.

Improving Everyday Services to the Community

It is important to note that the new approach of local and regional governments extends also to the everyday communal services that town and district authorities in particular are normally associated with – the provision of affordable and good quality social housing and the support of more vulnerable groups such as senior citizens and people with disabilities. In Zakarpattya, with its well-developed NGO sector contributing actively to the debate about priorities for the region's development, this was seen as an essential part of a wider strategy to strengthen citizens' rights. RGD has made a difference by facilitating local government and community organisations to work together to find practical means to achieve this.

Residents' Control of Housing Repairs and Maintenance

Anyone who has visited a Ukrainian city high-rise apartment block will have been struck by stark contrast between the well-maintained apartments and the generally neglected communal spaces in and around the buildings. The post-Soviet process of housing privatization often left householders in the position of being the sole owners of their quite limited living space, but having no control over the fabric or condition of the building they shared with other families. Routine maintenance remained the responsibility of under-financed and inefficient district repairs teams, the so-called 'ZHEKS', a hangover from the Soviet past.

As a response to the generally poor quality of urban housing, condominiums are emerging, albeit slowly. Generally city councils, though they would like to be free of the financial burden of housing repairs, have been unable to provide much assistance with the process. In Uzhgorod, however, 35 condominiums have established community associations to jointly maintain buildings. The city council's Department for Innovation, Investment and Sustainable Development saw an opportunity to build on the experience and lessons learned by these residents' groups and to encourage and support others to follow their example.

A senior official from the department, together with representatives of 3 of the most successful condominiums,

took part in RGD's Project Management Training (PMT) program and learned to design and implement strategic projects. With advice from RGD experts, this project team co-wrote a unique do-it-yourself handbook on setting up a condominium association, prepared by people with practical experience of all the necessary steps and pitfalls involved. Following publication and dissemination of the handbook by the city council, the team has now taken the first steps to establish an independent City Resource and Information Service to residents' associations, with a brief to promote condominium development and give hands-on advice about the process.



**A Guidebook for
Condominium
Associations**

The outcome of this approach has been overwhelmingly positive. As the chair of one recently formed condominium put it, 'for the same money we used to pay as a monthly maintenance charge (about 500 *Hryvna* or \$65 CAD for a 2-room apartment) our association has repaired the entrance porches, put glass in the windows on the stairs which were covered with plywood before, and fitted all entrance doors with a combination lock. We have also changed the electric wiring in the corridors, and put in motion activated lighting that is not on through the night as the previous system was. That's how we save energy for the city and money for ourselves!'

A Tourism Information Centre Serving People with Disabilities

There are over 50,000 registered disabled people in the Zakarpattia region, including 1,000 or so young children. In common with most societies, people with disabilities in Ukraine are vulnerable to social isolation and exclusion from the everyday activities that most of us take for granted. But in Ukraine the problem is if anything more acute, as facilities for travel such as adapted buses, or access to recreation and other public facilities, are still poorly developed. As we know, social isolation of disabled persons, of their care-givers and their families often leads to increased stress, depression and other psychological difficulties. The social, physical and cultural isolation of children and young people in particular can severely impede their personal and educational development. Disability is also a gender equality issue, in Ukraine as elsewhere. Care of the disabled falls largely on women, with data showing that 8 out of 10 disabled adults and children are cared for by women.

While Zakarpattia is one of Ukraine's most strikingly beautiful regions and one of its most popular tourist destinations, access is restricted to people with disabilities due to lack of suitably adapted facilities. Provision of tourism services for people with disabilities, particularly when they are young, has the potential to contribute significantly to their growth, development and social integration. It also helps to change societal attitudes towards disabled people and disability in general. When disabled youth and adults are able to travel alone, they gain confidence and independence, and their example alters the preconceptions of those who meet them. Volunteers from the community organization 'Association of Disabled Tourism' have been arranging summer holiday camps and similar activities for children and adults with disabilities for 7 years. Valuable as this was, always in their minds was the thought that a better solution would be to persuade tourism operators in the region to take more account of the needs of the disabled community. RGD's PMT program provided an opportunity to the Association's founder, working jointly

with a senior local government official from the region's Tourism Department, to establish a Tourism Information Centre for people with disabilities. From the program they acquired new skills in marketing their ideas, negotiating with potential partners, delivering effective public presentations, and writing proposals for grants to European Union and other funding sources.

The Association has recently published a promotional leaflet and is setting up a website for the Tourism Centre. Signed agreements have already been reached with 7 major tourist locations in Zakarpattia that they will make the necessary adaptations to accommodate disabled visitors in the 2010 season, at their own expense, in return for the publicity the Tourism Centre will offer them. In the present economic situation this publicity is more than welcome. RGD has also helped the Association to find partners in a comparable organization in neighboring Slovakia, with whom joint applications for European Union Cross-Border funding assistance have been made. In the words of Association founder Alexander Kazmirov 'our task is to find those tourism operators and travel agencies who are willing to equip rooms appropriately, train personnel and develop a range of services for people with special needs. We are ready to help them do this. People with disabilities are full members of our community and should not be outside it in any realm, including in the sphere of tourism'.



Uzhgorod, Zakarpattia oblast

Project Information

The Regional Governance and Development (RGD) Project is a five-year (2005-2010) cooperation project of the Canadian Urban Institute, supported by the Canadian International Development Agency. The Project promotes civic engagement in regional governance, providing opportunities for Ukrainian citizens and communities to shape their common future and to put their region on the path towards sustainable development.

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