

CARDS 2001

Country
Croatia

Implementation period
2002-2003

Funding
€500,000

Results
Improve local authorities' ability to serve their citizens, empower local decision-making and smooth the way for returning refugees

Contact person
Ms Manuela Kräuter
Manuela.kraeuter@care.at

Contact
Trg Nikole Šubića Zrinjskog 10
HR-10 000 Zagreb
Croatia
Tel +385 1 48 12 875
Fax +385 1 49 20 110
Mob +385 91 20 28 534
<http://www.zamir.net>

Partners
CARE Austria
GONG
ZaMirNET

Paving the way for civil society in Croatia

Refugee return: civil society capacity building

The 1990s Balkan war led to untold destruction and displacement of peoples throughout the region. Today, many of these people remain as internally displaced people and refugees.

The aim of this 14-month project was to assist in the strengthening of civil society and the promotion of good governance in Croatian municipalities located in the Sisak-Moslavina, Zadar and Šibenik-Knin counties.

Between November 2001 and December 2003, the European Union, in partnership with Care Austria and the Croatian NGOs GONG (promoting democracy) and ZaMirNET (using information technology to promote civil society issues), provided €500,000 to these communities. With this money, they developed hundreds of local initiatives – reconstruction, awareness-raising, education, website-building etc. – involving over one thousand people.

Stability and sustainability remain key words in this scheme. By improving local authorities' ability to serve their citizens, and through civil society capacity building, the hope is that refugees and displaced people will continue to return to the region, and in so doing rebuild these fragile communities.

Tangible results

The goal of the scheme is to contribute towards concrete, long-term socio-economic growth in the communities. Examples include repairs, made possible by Care and Germany's Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund (ASB), to a building in the town of Glina where five NGOs will base their operations, creating an 'NGO House'. This will provide direct and indirect benefits to up to 15,000 people.

Of the specific activities carried out during the project, some could be regarded as broad operational management tasks, including fund raising, lobbying and writing project proposals, while others were specifically geared towards educating the community about the realities of returning refugees and the need to create safe and stable local governance.

Education is key

Information technology, for instance, was a priority during the project, as well as awareness-raising activities and training in self-governance. Here, NGOs proved their worth in showing the value of local and participative decision-making.

Parliamentarians met local representatives and citizens to discuss the region's needs and future directions. Workshops were organised for high school students on how to participate in elections, and the rights and duties of a democratic society. Something the project called 'citizen hours' were also set up to act as forums for airing community concerns and needs, such as de-mining, reconstruction and economic development. Other topics covered include the issue of marginalisation and discrimination, human rights, gender equality, minority rights, conflict resolution and communication.

In addition, small funds were set up for buying equipment and furniture, and for hosting networking events and exchanges with similar organisations in neighbouring regions.

Working together

The project faced some early challenges. At first, it had to overcome suspicion in Glina and Gračac, whose people needed to understand why 'social development' is so important for 'social cohesion' in Croatia, and why stability is critical before the country can be considered for EU membership.

In the end, the project's success centred on its integrated approach, combining numerous activities and actors – donors, government, the European Union, and NGOs – and applying the lessons learned to ensure future success. Close coordination with the EU's Quick Impact Facility (QIF), which supports the safe return and re-integration of refugees, was also an important aspect of the project. For this, economic development is seen as essential, and this has been supported by loans and building assistance.

Future directions for the communities depend on whether they can obtain further funding from CARDS 2002 and international grants, but the hope is to work more with young people and on building closer ties with their neighbours in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.