

**THE NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER:  
A NEW STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL IN BULGARIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Seven years after the declared transition to a market economy and the start of reform in the social security system, social protection problems in Bulgaria are seen as an issue for the state regulation system. The idea that the Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (2,800 in number, about 30% doing social activities) will play a corrective role in universal social policy has turned out to be unrealistic. In a situation of deep economic crises, when about 40% of the population is engaged in active state social measures, charitable activities are seen as the only other way to do social work. Is there a way to bring together these two extremes? Neighborhood centers as community support systems existing beyond the state-private dichotomy are a challenge to them both as well as a challenge to the ideology of division of private property and group rights.

**THIRD SECTOR IN BULGARIA**

Seven years after the declared transition to market economy, and the beginning of

reform in social policy, social protection is seen as a problem first of all of the state regulation. The position of the Egos, the so-called third sector to play an active role in the building of the new system, has not been seriously discussed among professionals of the public. Social prevention is dichotomized between social policy dictated by the state (around 30% from the population are included in active social measures) and the partial charitable activities organized by the public. Even officials at the Ministry of Social Welfare acknowledge the need to stimulate individual initiatives and interpersonal relations to fulfill the aim of “help for self-help.”

Civil organizations are the core subject of social protection. NGOs, defending rights of particular groups, may play a corrective role in the abstract and universal social policies of the state. The 1942 statistical bulletin of the Bulgarian Kingdom listed 147 NGOs. A substantial number were cultural and literacy organizations. By 1944, after the war, only few were preserved: the Red Cross, the Union of the Handicapped, the Union of the Blind and Deaf People, and cultural professional unions (musicians, writers, scientists, etc.).

It was expected that the elements of democracy, including the NGOs, would receive broad acceptance after the political changes in 1989. In practice, this did not happen for at least two reasons. First, the political changes were not imposed by civic groups, and second, the decentralization of the state machine was done by central decision making resulting in a hyperconcentration of power in the hands of a few, the new elite.

A privatization of profits and nationalization of the losses took place. It was difficult to expect stable civic organizations with sharp unemployment, growth in criminality, and weakness of social funds. An attitude of awaiting help from the state was developed - an ideology that the state is obliged to be a guarantee of the social health.

That may explain why NGOs are seen more as groups to pressure the state, than co-partner, as well as catering to foreign political interests of hiding personal enrichment. (The tax privileges for NGOs may stimulated illegal business.) Some NGOs register themselves as political parties (the movement of the poor, the movement for the support of people with cardiac problems); poverty and illnesses become social dimensions (Kabakcieva, 1996).

The number of NGOs has raised substantially. There were 2,800 NGOs registered in 1989. One thousand were related to social activities (NGO Directory, 1996). Most use volunteers who are chosen on a personal basis. In 1996 a Union of the NGOs and a Consultative Board for the coordination of the NGOs was found. Most of the NGOs are in a process of development or are clarifying their priorities. Almost all face serious financial problems.

Existing NGOs may be described as oriented toward young people, disabled, children and families, aged homeless, or addicted in this ranking. The activities of NGOs are mainly propaganda, teaching, counseling and information, social and recreation

activities, practical skills training, help with housing, day center work, and dormitory facilities. Volunteers are well-educated, young people, aged 15-34, urban citizens, unemployed or students (Nikolov, 1995).

The main problems of the NGOs are lack of clear state policy for the non-governmental sector, lack of success of the structural reform in Bulgaria, the weakening instead of strengthening of the civil society, and the financial deficit. Furthermore the lack of tradition in charitable activities as a cultural norm restrain the popularity of NGOs in Bulgaria (Minev, 1996). For the moment, the chances for the development of the NGO sector depend mainly on outside foreign help.

Civil organizations usually demonstrate strong activities in periods of crisis. Difficult conditions mobilize rather than amortize civic consciousness. This happened in Bulgaria in the periods after the two world wars. This tendency may be preserved.

#### THE REFORM OF THE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

Countries in Europe have developed both allocative and distributive policies at a time when the welfare policies have become citizen rights. Western scholars point out that there is a convergence or view in Europe that the state is responsible for the provision of certain goods and services, such as health care and education, as well as obliged to guarantee the maintenance of a minimum level of income (Lane & Ersson, 1996).

This is an alien ideology for most of the contemporary governing bodies in Bulgaria. The liberal thinking has no historical trends and weak support from the population. Moves for state protection are prefaced with declarative slogans such as “no socialist in Bulgaria is based on the frame of social insurance,” where restrictive politics toward expenditure and reduction of payments to reach a balanced budget dominate. The redistribution side of the public resource allocation, the provision of goods and services like education, health, social care for elderly and disabled has lacked formation. New risk groups are not included in services.

The social insurance system has undergone transformations which, although bearing the minuses of fragmentary and temporary solution, show concern with the new social problems and interest in reform of the system. In contrast, non-cash social assistance is just starting to transform its structure and priorities. Reformation of the social assistance system requires of ideology change before any practical changes are accepted. At the same time, it depends on the successful adjustment of existing institutions with alternatives, adequate to the new demands.

It is difficult to define whether and when the transformation will be over. We have to consider the weak economic bases, limited resources in general, the deep anomie crisis unprecedented in the new history of Bulgaria, and the impoverishment of the population. This is called “the necessary price Bulgaria has to pay” for the right to

breathe freely by overthrowing the burden of the antihuman state social corporatism. Bulgaria is in Europe but the situation is more like that of Third World democracies.

#### THE NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS AND THEIR FUTURE

The Neighborhood Center for Social Activities, Varna, was established to provide social work in the community and train volunteers and professionals to approach representatives of risk groups (such as unemployed, single parents, problem families, handicapped, adolescents and children at risk, adults in phases of resocialization, and so forth.)

Persons at risk are introduced to new community methods for living and working. Moreover, community development work will improve both the situation of individuals and the living conditions in the neighborhood by organizing people, equipping them with necessary skills, and helping them to form self-managed organizations around community interests. In addition the Center is to develop special projects including Job-Matching, Security in the Neighborhood, and Fight Deprivation. The intention is to reduce the number of people dependent on benefits and to offer a better chance for finding work and improving the quality of life in the neighborhood.

Center staff were super active and aggressive at the beginning of the work. **The work principles** of the neighborhood center included self-management (people taking control of managing things themselves), approaching coherence (finding more

practical and efficient ways of working), creating jobs by social renewal (management of the neighborhood), and problem-solving. The neighborhood center looked for **efficient and decisive** decision-making procedures. The concrete steps at the beginning were:

1. Mutual exploitation of facilities for the Center for Social Professional Training (SUPS) following agreements signed by the Neighborhood Center for Social Activities and the Regional Social Care Center, Varna;
2. Appointment of staff and manager of the Neighborhood Center;
3. Appointment of lecturers and supervisors from the teaching staff at Varna Free University according to the signed agreement between the Faculty of Social Work at Varna Free University and the Neighborhood Center;
4. Nomination of volunteers from the community and from students in social work, applied social psychology, and social management for work in the projects and survey of the community's needs;
5. Nomination of social work NGO representatives in the community for developing mutual strategies;

6. Developing strategies for permanent contacts with the Municipality, Regional Labor Office, Social Assistance Office, Home Patronage, and so forth;
7. Planning first-year activities and selecting technologies for the fulfillment of the projects;
8. Work in the three main projects - Job matching, Security in the Neighborhood, Fight Deprivation.

The program aimed at reaching the main organizational need of the Neighborhood Center, namely to be acknowledged as a meaningful and self managing agent for social protection, by working independently but in concordance with the existing public and private regional and state institutions.

Neighborhood Centers had to become a complementary element to the social public structures to be embedded and integral to the community where they are located. They enrich the practice of the social work in Bulgaria by developing community work activities, introducing social assistance on individual, family and community levels, and involve the energy of the entire community to stand for values of social justice, wholeness, and incorporating diversity.

Up to now the center has developed only know-how strategies for training

participants. The effectiveness of NCSA as an organization will depend on its success building a “web of mutual obligation” that reconciles group purposes with individual and family diversity, builds relationships that create community, and provides opportunities for citizens to act on their own relations. Centers must involve neighborhood residents, the private sector, and the public sector in activities with common interests. NCSA is trying to convince the public that gains require a combination of social and individual goals; NCSA should assist in reducing individual isolation, enabling social participation and improving the living conditions in the whole area. Without activities, however, the Center has no sense. The main activities are:

1. To draw up an inventory of the potential of the people (the human resources) and the community (its socioeconomic development) including their strong and weak points, and to develop a functional network based on the connection of work, housing, education, health, and environment.
2. To prepare the housing base of the Neighborhood Center for work.
3. To engage the participants in the three simultaneously starting projects (Job-Matching, Security in the Neighborhood, and Fight Deprivation).
4. To start project *Job-Matching*:
  - \* *problem* - the high unemployment rate in the neighborhood;

- \* *purpose* - showing the possibilities of finding work, directly or indirectly to local unemployed;
- \* *target group* - all unemployed, registered or not;
- \* *procedure* - organization of job fair in close cooperation with the Regional Labor Office; accompanying people on their way to an application, finding employment, job orientation, extra training, working experience, work;
- \* *result* - employers in the job fair to help training course participation, job information search, labor contacts, finding work;
- \* *sustainability* - the local resident knows of the existing activities for unemployed and the community center as the place to get permanent up-to-date information and work contacts for the future. The job-fair should be only one among many existing activities for unemployed.

5. To start project *Security in the neighborhood* :

- \* *problem* - the high level of risk by signing nonprofessional work contracts, housing contracts, etc. and high degree of personal like insecurity in the neighborhood;
- \* *purpose* - showing individuals their working and civil rights;
- \* *target group* - individuals in phase of resocialization, handicapped, pensioners;
- \* *procedure* - organize a permanent advice, notice and information board

in close cooperation with the social workers at Varna penitentiary and other institutions, the Regional Union of the Handicapped, NGO MEMA, and so forth; provide individual and group training;

- \* *result* - legal advice information and training course participation;
- \* *sustainability* - any local resident in need knows that in the NCSA he/she has organizational, legal and social work adviser as well as other group help.

6. To start project *Fight Deprivation*:

- \* *problem* - the high number of deprived individuals or risk group representatives;
- \* *purpose* - showing to local deprived individuals the case work and group work strategies for empowerment;
- \* *target group* - members of problem families, single parents, adolescents with asocial behavior, battered women;
- \* *procedure* - organization weekly training courses for social assistance, sensitivity training, social skill development in close cooperation with FSW at VFU and NGOs;
- \* *result* - participation in individual and group training, organized and supervised by professionals;
- \* *sustainability* - the local resident knows that the Center has time and resources to deal with his/her own psychological problems.

The Neighborhood Center for Social Activities aims to be a place for community residents to participate in social activities, to seek help for personal and family problems, to find recreational possibilities, to learn job skills, and to join with others to address neighborhood problems. The activities are only starting efforts to build a working social center. A recent idea has been to start building a network of neighborhood centers in Bulgaria as the neighborhood center in Varna reaches its goals.

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