



# EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY IN DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Experiences from HelpAge International in Eastern Europe and Central Asia

Catherine Hine



In this article, Catherine Hine describes examples of experiences in evidence-based advocacy from HelpAge's programmes in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, to demonstrate how policy change can be catalyzed when the voice of people living in poverty is prioritised above all others. Certain implications for the role and place of development practitioners in this process are discussed.

ISSUE 10  
February 2008

## INTRODUCTION

The HelpAge International (HAI) network has been working since 1983 to help realise its vision of a world in which all older people fulfil their potential to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives. The network was established in 1983 by five agencies in Canada, Colombia, India, Kenya and the UK and presently consists of more than 70 affiliate organisations in 50 countries, and a secretariat.

The network's activities focus on the rights of disadvantaged older people to economic and physical security; healthcare and social services; and support in their care-giving role across the generations and other rights as enshrined in the UN 2002 Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing and other frameworks. Beyond meeting these immediate needs, HAI seeks to support older people to play a role as key development actors and agents of change in addressing the strategic concerns of their communities.

## BRINGING TOGETHER CIVIL SOCIETY AND SELF-HELP GROUPS

HelpAge's programmes in Moldova and in Kyrgyzstan were developed on the basis of highly participatory needs assessment processes that sought

out the voices of some of the 'least OK' older people as well as representatives of communities in which they lived. HelpAge worked together with partner organisations committed both to meeting the basic needs of older people and to harnessing their potential and experience for the benefit of deprived communities. Initial stages of these programmes centred on bringing Civil Society and older people's self-help groups (SHGs) together to learn and share experience about participatory approaches to working with older people living in poverty.

These self-help groups and Civil Society Organisations were supported to develop their understanding and solutions to older people's lived experience of poverty and extreme poverty in communities where they worked through seed monies for pilot action research and self-help initiatives.

In Moldova, able-bodied older people developed volunteering schemes and the concept of *Tyopli dom* (warm house) with the support of the Balti based organization "Second Breath". This very simple concept entailed able-bodied older people (and some younger volunteers) to visit housebound older people, and to talk, come up with shared responses to their concerns and celebrate festivals together.

In Kyrgyzstan, one of the initiatives supported was a pilgrimage for older people as the older people applying for funds said that this visit would enable them to spend time together and develop hope for the future.

At first, providing financial support to both these 'social' initiatives might seem strange, particularly given that these groups were objectively living in poverty by any definition.

In reality, these opportunities enabled important social capital to develop and eventually, laid the basis for more substantial project work together.

## EMPOWERING OTHERS MEANS DISEMPowering YOURSELF

Apart from training in participatory approaches which enabled older people's self-help groups and Civil Society organisations to develop their understanding and empathy for the situation of the most marginalized living in their communities, sometimes in even worse conditions than their own, HelpAge organised trainings in participatory project management, financial and fundraising trainings and evidence-based advocacy / media training (with accompanying seed monies).

Months into the project in Moldova, self-help group representatives, including older people, joined partner representatives and a HelpAge representative on the steering group of this project and effectively shared the responsibility for governance of funds provided by the European Commission and Development Cooperation Ireland. HelpAge deliberately disempowered itself in this situation and was heavily outnumbered on a

steering group for critical decision-making about project resources and direction.

Building on the evidence generated by self-help initiatives such as volunteering and 'warm house', older people successfully lobbied to update the social protection lists and ensure that many more people in their communities accessed their entitlements. They also advocated to private water companies for older people living in extreme poverty to be reconnected to the water supply. HelpAge representatives were initially rather concerned that when they decided to take an older representative from Moldova to present the project at an EU TACIS<sup>1</sup> conference, she demonstrated her advocacy skills by rebuking EU representatives for spending the equivalent of 9 months of her pension on her 2-night hotel bill! Following her presentation, the HelpAge project team was strongly encouraged to re-apply for financial support.

At a global level, HelpAge had organised for older people from across the globe to attend a shadow event in Madrid in April 2002 to lobby ministers in relation to the United Nation's Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). The plan itself was heavily influenced by programme evidence and consultations with older people. Since then older people around the world have tracked progress against MIPAA through the Older Citizens Monitoring project, and even beyond this MIPAA has formed the basis for extensive evidence-based advocacy by older people and their organisations to governments that signed the Plan of Action, and to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA).

## INGREDIENTS FOR EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY IN THIS APPROACH

On the basis of these experiences, a number of key ingredients appear to be central in genuine efforts to facilitate evidence-based advocacy.

1. As practitioners and facilitators of development, we start from the premise that people living in poverty already have all the potential /internal capacities they need to achieve changes for themselves. Afterall, there is amazing and unparalleled skill and resourcefulness in surviving against the odds. We have a responsibility to clearly, demonstrate and model this belief in our actions and words as practitioners and facilitators. This observation is not a new one. Others including Robert Chambers from the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, and Cape Town-based Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) have noted that there is currently little focus on the 'practice' knowledge of development. Evidence of experience and skills in facilitating empowering community development still rarely feature in the 'must have's of person

specifications, whilst English language and 'technical' competences such as project management tend to be overvalued and continue to take priority.

2. If these beliefs in the capability of people living in poverty are truly in place, as development practitioners we can demonstrate real commitment to reach out to and take time to understand what it really means to be living in poverty or extreme poverty (referred to below as 'Not OK' or 'Least OK') by reflecting on the extent to which we enable ourselves to hear (and check that we have heard) the voice of the hard to reach (this being the sole basis for our actions as legitimate facilitators of development).
3. While working with partners and communities, as development practitioners we accept that as long as it is a (clearly communicated) objective from the outset, it is an acceptable premise of our work to expect and support Civil Society Organisations to work together with us to reach those whose lives are 'Not OK' and 'Least OK' in their communities. This focus is sustainable, because it takes into account the actual barriers to well-being and facilitates and enables people living in poverty to address their own needs, generate their own evidence and speak for themselves, whilst supporting them to find out for themselves how to influence policy effectively.
4. In our own (internal and external) interactions and communications, the voices of people living in poverty are faithfully and authentically repeated rather than interpreted, whilst deliberately revealing the hidden assets – valuable skills, experiences, coping mechanisms- of people living in poverty themselves, often at the expense of organizational profiles.
5. As development practitioners we can help to set up opportunities for policy and decision makers to see positive things that people living in poverty are doing for themselves and for people living in poverty to share their own messages directly in their own words.
6. Where possible, we seek to support people living in poverty to develop specific and contextually relevant models, thus making life easy for government to support something that is tried and tested, and make the right policy and practice changes for those who are consistently left out. If this means disempowering ourselves as development practitioners, this is a risk worth taking. At the same time, it is accepted that there will be a very small number of occasions when we might be better placed, through an initial meeting, to unlock opportunities for people living in poverty to voice their own concerns.
7. Our approaches for management of programmes and people focus on prioritising how things are done (as well as what is delivered); supporting reflection and developing practice knowledge on what is not working as well as what is, at all levels; and stimulating innovation and risk taking at

all levels.

8. Connected to the previous point, our investments in high quality capacity building address real needs and are genuinely and patiently participatory.
9. Finally, development organisations are consistently prepared to identify and pay out more for accurate and dedicated translators. The demanding role and non-negotiable competence of a development practitioner is to nurture relationships of trust with people living in poverty and communities that facilitate change. These essential competences are often not accompanied by the Northern or Southern languages of our choice -at least in one handy development practitioner package!

Catherine Hine currently works for Oxfam UK as Regional Programme Policy Co-ordinator for the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States and was formerly Regional Programme Officer for Eastern Europe and Central Asia for HelpAge International. [CHine@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:CHine@oxfam.org.uk)

<sup>1</sup> TACIS stands for the European Union's relations with Eastern Europe & Central Asia. For more information see [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/ceeca/tacis/](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/ceeca/tacis/)

SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2008-02-25



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FLORENGHEL(AT)GMAIL.COM  
ISSN 1654-7985