



ETHNIC INTERACTION AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROGRAMME IN BULGARIA

Representatives of many different ethnicities live on the territory of Bulgaria. About 16% of the population identify themselves as belonging to a community other than Bulgarian. Despite the age-long tradition of tolerance preserved by people of different ethnicities in our country, the initial years of transition from Communism to democracy revealed and exacerbated a number of serious socio-economic divisions among the population. Most affected in this regard were minority communities, Roma and Turks. Several alarming trends developed simultaneously including: significant poverty, high unemployment, increasing dependence on the social assistance system, increased number of school dropouts, poor health, inadequate living conditions, and lack of real opportunities for complete social and cultural engagement in public life.

A certain critical limit was reached, beyond which the conflict potential of the Bulgarian society's ethnic stratification could seriously hamper the development of the country, its national interests and the achievement of Bulgaria's full-fledged integration into the European Union.

Evaluating the social situation in Bulgaria and the danger of occurrence of ethnic conflict, the U.S. Agency for International Development initiated a comprehensive program to improve the process of ethnic interaction, which was entrusted to Partners Bulgaria Foundation (PBF). It lasted 7 years (2000-2007) and targeted 13 municipalities in the country with a mixed population of Bulgarians, Turks and Roma- Vidin, Lom, Kjustendil, Asenovgrad, Dupnitsa, Samokov, Targovishte, Aytos, Devin, Ispirih, Kurdzhali, Momchilgrad and Razgrad.

The main objective was to create sustainable mechanisms for the development of local communities by fostering inter-ethnic and cross-sectoral collaboration and to improve the social integration of marginalized minority groups.

Community interventions were focused on three main areas: building Conciliation Commissions, creating Leadership Institutes for representatives of the minority ethnic groups and developing better inter-sectoral relations between all stakeholders.

Building Conciliation Commissions

Conciliation Commissions were designed to prevent and peacefully settle disputes and conflicts based on ethnic differences. After a long period of training, they were registered as independent, voluntary, non-political organizations with the mission of solving the existing local problems. They included representatives of local authorities, leaders of ethnic communities, businesses, NGOs, and citizens.

The main functions of Conciliation Commissions were to: support and facilitate ethnic and cultural interaction; initiate alternative methods of resolving conflicts by negotiation, reconciliation and mediation; promote the ideas of non-judicial dispute resolution; research

public opinion on important local community problems and promote civic initiatives to address them; work on prevention of situations that generate conflict; collaborate with local and state organizations; support and facilitate interaction between representatives of different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups; educate the local community in the spirit of tolerance and culture of peaceful dispute resolution; organize public debates and discussions on significant local community issues.

During the program 9 conciliation commissions, which included 359 members, were created. They registered 848 cases of various conflicts between citizens, institutions, etc. 70% of cases were mediated to agreement, 14% did not reach agreement, and 16% were terminated due to failure of either party to participate in the procedure.

Conciliation Commissions initiated an annual contest for an award for the "Most tolerant person in the community". In the local communities a kind of public referendum was held annually to determine the winners of this title.

Establishing an Institute for Leaders of ethnic communities

In each of the thirteen municipalities where the EICR programme was implemented, Leadership Institutes were created for representatives of the local ethnic groups. This included 20-25 representatives of Roma and Turkish communities in each. The Institutes' activities focused on preparing participants to be effective managers of the processes of ethnic interaction and successful problem-solvers in the Roma and Turkish communities. Each Institute progressed through several stages: selection of participants, conduct of a year-long 10-module training workshop, and development of practical skills for leadership and networking.

Participants in the Institutes were established based on their established or potential leadership role: formal and informal community leaders, educated and ambitious young people motivated to help the members of their communities. Particular emphasis was placed on involving Roma and Turkish women in the work of the Institute. Their percentage varied from 30% to 50%.

The one-year training enabled participants to gain theoretical knowledge and practical skills in several areas: models of successful leadership, effective communication and negotiation, team building and management, problem-solving through civic dialogue, public relations establishment and work with media, project development and management, strategic management of organizations, fundraising, coalition building and networking, conflict resolution and management of conflict situations. Through a series of theoretical exercises, simulations, role plays, individual and group tasks, participants were trained to organize, manage and support their communities more efficiently and to collaborate with representatives of other ethnic groups in solving local problems. In total, 365 representatives of Roma and Turkish communities took part in the Institutes, of which 149 received certificates as trainers.

One of the tasks for the participants in the Leadership Institutes was to carry out a significant program (in cooperation with PBF consultants) within their communities for developing skills to accept differences. More than 3000 representatives of local and state authorities, educational institutions, private companies, and NGOs were involved in seminars and practical initiatives in order to improve interethnic collaboration. Due to the implementation of this programme, many problems and conflicts in local communities were prevented and

solved, representatives of different ethnicities and religions got to know each other better, and more effective interethnic relations and tolerance were established.

Intersectoral relations

In order to develop better intersectoral relations in the communities, PBF's team used a cooperative planning methodology, unfamiliar at that time in Bulgaria. Cooperative planning is a methodology of change management, which brings together differing interests or stakeholders to participate in the process of reaching agreement on a particular issue.

In each community, PBF implemented three parallel cooperative planning processes aimed at economic development, education improvement and social support to disadvantaged groups. The sustainability of the process outcomes was ensured by involving all stakeholders in interethnic relations. During a series of joint meetings between representatives of local and state authorities, NGOs, educational institutions and civil associations, PBF facilitated the establishment of a stable dialogue, in which the problems of the local community could be discussed and agreements reached on how to solve them. During the discussions the participants built mutual trust, which formed the basis for future collaboration. By building networks and coalitions, they continued to work in partnership and created project ideas, which in turn they realized with funding received from PBF.

During the process more than 1000 participants were involved. As a result of their activities, 199 local projects were supported: 74 in the area of education, 58 in the social sector and 67 in the field of economic development. The total project budget was 5 760 000 leva, 2 670 000 leva of which were granted by Partners-Bulgaria Foundation/USAID. In the process of project implementation 438 permanent jobs were created, 253 of which were women's. 78% of the supported projects were implemented in partnership with representatives of local authorities and institutions.

In the process of implementing the Ethnic Interaction Programme, PBF's team accumulated considerable experience and confidence with ethnic integration programming. They were then selected by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP) in Bulgaria to create a long term program to improve the Roma minority's access to the labor market and reduce dependency on the social assistance system. Again, using the model of cooperative planning, 25 experts were involved from ministries, governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions who directly implemented policies and measures for integration of Roma people in Bulgaria. A nationally representative survey was conducted as well as a comprehensive analysis of the socio-economic situation of the Roma community and existing measures aimed at this community in the area of employment and social policy. A national debate on these issues was organized, through which the capacity of the MLSP and other organizations and institutions increased. The final comprehensive plan was approved for implementation by the MLSP in 2004 and became an official part of the National Program for the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015.

Conclusions

- The program facilitated the active interaction of various ethnic groups in solving local problems and contributed to the prevention of potential ethnic and religious conflicts.

- It established mechanisms and models of civic participation in taking decisions about local economic and social development.
- The skills acquired by participants were a solid basis for participation in new projects
- The business projects supported by the program demonstrated successful business models, generating income and creating jobs and concretely improving the quality of life in communities.
- The program developed and shared a number of cooperative practices at the local level that constituted an entirely new approach to solving local problems through conflict resolution and mediation, including using these techniques for work with children, people with special needs and disadvantaged people.

Programme Legacy

- Nine active Conciliation Commissions;
- Network of Conciliation Commissions and Leadership Institutes
- Strong local partnerships of NGOs in support of ethnic and religious tolerance and improving quality of life in mixed communities;
- Implemented and tested practices for minority group integration

Donors:

USAID, OAK Foundation, King Baudouin Foundation, Save the Children,