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Improve the quality of life of persons with disabilities by financing of wider range of services

**We spoke to Ivana Smolovic, representative of the Red Cross of Montenegro, and the topic of the interview were social and child protection services provided to beneficiaries by the Red Cross of Montenegro. We also talked about experiences from the field and identified shortcomings when it comes to ensuring and providing the aforementioned services.**

What services in the field of social and child protection does the Red Cross of Montenegro proved to beneficiaries?

*The Red Cross of Montenegro, in cooperation with the Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, provides home care services for older persons and persons with disabilities in 15 municipalities in Montenegro (Andrijevica, Bijelo Polje, Berane, Petnjica, Danilovgrad, Cetinje, Mojkovac, Kolasin, Niksic, Pluzine, Pljevlja, Plav, Gusinje, Rozaje and Herceg Novi). These services represent the support of geronto-housewives regarding grocery shopping, meal preparation, mobility aid, maintaining personal hygiene and hygiene of the living space, assistance on paying utility bills (electricity, telephone, etc.) and space heating, mediation services for providing different types of housekeeping services and services for maintaining household appliances, as well as the procurement of medicines and helping beneficiaries to visit a doctor.*

*In addition to this licensed service, the Red Cross provides a whole set of innovative services that are completely free for older people and their caregivers, meet their needs and are provided by trained staff.*

*In the framework of the regional project ''Innovative Support Services for the Older in the Community'', which is funded by the European Union and the Austrian Development Agency, in November 2021, the Red Cross opened two community care centers in Bar and Bijelo Polje in partnership with the Ministry of Health. The centres are stuffed by one social worker, one nurse, two geronto-housewives, and more than 40 volunteers were hired, who had undergone a series of trainings in order to meet the needs of older people in the best way possible. The centres provide innovative services with regard to: delivery of preventive services that include home visits by social workers and nurses to the older persons from rural areas of these municipalities; counseling; volunteer home-visiting services for older persons and persons with dementia; slowing dementia progression programme; organizing activities to promote healthy aging and providing consulting services to informal caregivers. The centres cooperate closely with relevant stakeholders at the local level, including civil society organizations that provide services to this target group, as well as the institutions and decision makers at the local level.*

Except those already mentioned services, are there any services for older persons that you deliver continuousy?

*With the financial support of the Italian Red Cross and under the framework of the cross-border project ''Care of the Older – Montenegro – Albania –Bosnia and Herzegovina'', the Red Cross of Montenegro provides volunteer home visiting services to older persons through 8 municipal organizations. This service is extremely important because one of the biggest problem older persons are facing with is precisely loneliness. Volunteers do some small home chores like taking out the trash and doing the quick shopping, but more important is to spend time with older persons and keep them company. At the same time it is possible to learn a lot from them. They learn empathy, tolerance and understanding. Under this project beneficiaries from rural areas have at their disposal the ''the mobile team'' service. This service comprises a doctor's and a volunteer's visit to an older person, monitoring person's health status and giving a referral for further treatment when necessary. The project is implemented in Plav, Gusinje, Andrijevica, Berane, Rozaje, Mojkovac, Niksic, Cetinje and Herceg Novi. Within the municipal organizations of the Red Cross, there are clubs for older people functioning in 6 municipalities of Montenegro (Bar, Budva, Herceg Novi, Cetinje, Plav and Niksic). Healthy aging workshops, social and child protection counseling, trips and other kinds of socializing are regularly organized in those clubs in order to support older persons, especially those who feel lonely and isolated.*

*In addition to the above-mentioned services, the Red Cross provides psychosocial and psychological support for persons with disabilities. It is also important to mention information provision, counseling and education of beneficiaries (in order to exercise their rights in the field of social and child protection), cooperation with other organizations and institutions in the field of social and child protection in the best interest of beneficiaries. The Red Cross of Montenegro also provides personal assistance services for 11 beneficiaries in Podgorica. These services are funded by the Secretariat for Social Welfare - Capital City of Podgorica. The Red Cross distributes humanitarian aid, second-hand clothing and shoes, school supplies, and provides one-off financial assistance for families and individuals in a state of need.*

What is the number of service beneficiaries, for each individual group?

*At this moment, there are 873 beneficiaries of in-home supportive service, but almost 2,000 beneficiaries have been a part of the programme so far. Community care centers provide services for 645 beneficiaries. When it comes to the project ''Care for the Older'', there are 350 beneficiaries. With regard to persons with disabilities, there are 548 beneficiaries.*

What are your experiences from the field? Is there any service which You consider necessary to provide, based on the feedback You receive from beneficiaries?

*The number of older people in the world is constantly increasing, and Montenegro is no exception. For several years in a row, we have had a negative population growth, and according to estimates of the Statistical Office of Montenegro – MONSTAT, by 2050, a quarter of the population will be over 65. The older persons are by their nature one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Research that we carried out several times in recent years revealed that the biggest problems the older persons face are loneliness, poverty and poor health.*

*In order to respond to their needs, it is necessary to improve the availability, accessibility and quality of services for older persons.*

*Older persons who live in rural areas are in a particularly difficult situation. There is no public transport in rural areas, many of them older live isolated and lonely. Access to social and health care is additionally complicated by poverty. They feel isolated and abandoned by others.*

*Precisely these people - social worker, doctor, nurse or medical technician are the only persons that visit them during a month. It is impossible not to notice how warm-hearted and grateful beneficiaries of these services are, and how sincerely they look forward to each visit from the people from the Red Cross.*

According to Your opinion, which service is the most needed, especially with regard to older persons?

*There is a constantly increased need for in-home care. Institutions that provide support for older persons are overburdened, and there is a lot of pressure on informal caregivers, who provide care for persons with chronic illness, persons with disabilities or any other long-term health problem. Those are usually family members, children or relatives. Caring for a family member can often be detrimental to the caregiver's needs, because caregivers very often have to balance family, children, work, friends and the person they care for. On that path, caregivers often reduce their working hours, which results in performing more difficult jobs in the informal economy or leaving the labour market altogether. Bearing in mind that the majority of caregivers come from the families with weakened financial well-being, reduced income increases the risk of intergenerational poverty – in such a way that caregivers eventually become socioeconomically vulnerable or health impaired. If we take into account that female form majority of caregivers, it is clear that the current situation leads to the gender pay gap, and consequently to the gender pension gap, what puts women in even worse situation with low chances to afford long-term care in the future. On a personal level, due to a great deal of pressure and lack of support and constant feeling of guilt, so called burnout syndrome has become an increasingly common issue. It increases the risk of someone getting depression and people experiencing burnout need psychosocial support. Principally, informal care should be a matter of choice, not a necessity. Well equipped community care centers with services provided by trained staff will make sure that information is available to everyone, and that the high-quality services are delivered in a timely manner. One of the aims of the Red Cross is to open such centers in as many municipalities in Montenegro as possible, in order to provide support for as many citizens as possible.*

While You were working in the field, have You noticed any shortcomings in the process of providing services, which You find important to point out on theis occasion?

*Field data proved the importance of competency, high-quality and adequacy when it comes to meeting the health needs, but also the importance of solving the problems of isolation, social neglect and similar risk factors that can lead to depression. No less important is the access to information and education, especially in the areas with evident skill and knowledge gaps in relation to older people, such as behavior and mental health (for that reason meeting of their psychosocial needs has been recognized as very important). Regulation of home support services (geronto-housewives services and volunteer services), meeting financial needs (subject to various restrictions), social worker visits, providing information related to the exercise of the rights from the domain of social protection are of a great importance.*

*The fact that there are not many services of that kind has been recognized as a significant problem, and services that do exist are provided within various project, so their sustainability is questionable.*

*A special effort shall be made to develop a long-term care strategy, which currently does not exist, and which should have integrated both health and social protection services.*

*In addition to the above-mentioned, there are certain challenges with regard to information gaps on the rights of beneficiaries in the field of social and child protection, stigmatization and lack of integration of these persons into the social and child protection system, poor quality assessment of their situation and the accesibility issues related to institutions in the field of social and child protection for persons with disabilities.*

From the perspective of the service provider, do You think that these services are available to all persons who need them and that they meet individual needs of each beneficiary?

*The Red Cross of Montenegro, in line with its mission, seeks to reach each beneficiary in a state of need, but rural areas of municipalities in Montenegro are definitely a challenge for service providers at any time. The Red Cross has its own databases thanks to a network of municipal organizations and cooperation with local self-governments in the field. However, the existence of a Central register of records on all beneficiaries in a state of need would contibute to improved allocation of resources for beneficiaries.*

*In-home care is a service that to a large extent meets the need of beneficiaries. Through creation of an individual plan and continuous monitoring provision of service, it is ensured that this service meets the needs of beneficiaries. There was an increase in the service price at the end of 2022, but personal income of this age group also rose. At the same time, the Rulebook on the participation of beneficiaries in cost of services remained unchanged. Therefore, for some former beneficiaries, new price is unacceptable and they had to give up this much-needed service.*

Lastly, do You have any recommendations for improving the current situation in this field?

One of the most significant recommendations would be the introduction of as many innovative services for older persons as possible, development of a long-term care strategy, reduction of discrimination against older people, and closer cooperation between service providers. There is a lot of room for improvement in the field of providing services for persons with disabilities. Bearing in mind the position of these persons in society, as well as the physical barriers to participation in everyday life, the first necessary step is to ensure access to institutions, as well as to educational, health care, cultural and recreation facilities, aiming at successful socialization. In addition to physical barriers, recommendations of the Red Cross also refer to organizing public campaigns to raise public awereness on the position of persons with disabilities. The most significant recommendation undoubtedly refers to providing funds for a wider range of services, in order to improve quality of life for persons with disabilities.

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Sincerely,

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