

# NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS' INITIATIVES WORKING WITH THE OLDER PEOPLE

**Irena Žemaitaitytė**

Mykolas Romeris University

Vilnius, Lithuania

irene@mruni.eu

## **Abstract**

The provision that the successful fostering of democracy relies on individuals, on the active participation of citizens in society matters and public affairs establishes itself more and more firmly in modern times. The National Strategy to Overcome Population Ageing Consequences approved by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania in 2004 noted that the older people should be active participants of economic and social development processes. Accessibility for the elderly to participate in political, social, economic, cultural activities should be created. The principle of democratic life is most often defined as democratic participation especially manifest through participation in activities of different organizations (non-governmental organizations, cultural organizations etc.). The paper seeks to discuss the activities of a non-governmental cultural organization in working with the elderly in Lithuania, attitudes of the older people towards social integration through cultural activities and dialogue of generations. The research applied qualitative empirical survey and a semi standardized interview. A traditional qualitative data management and analysis method was applied: transcription, rephrasing and categorization.

**Key words:** older people, cultural activities, dialogue of generations.

## **Ageing of population and adult education**

Ageing of population and the consequences of this phenomenon create problems that draw researchers' attention worldwide. The focus is on many aspects of this situation: changes in workforce supply, ageing of population effects on the social welfare systems, age influence on quality and productivity at work etc. Lithuania mostly focuses on the capabilities of the elderly to participate in the labour market and on the demographic and social effects of the ageing of population. To deal with this problem European Union member states with regard to Lisbon strategy seek to implement measures which benefit employability and social inclusion of the elderly. Today the key measure in the state policy for the elderly is the National Strategy of Overcoming Consequences of Ageing by which Lithuania took the consideration of the problem on the national level: "Though many a measure is implemented for provision of active personal, public, professional and cultural lives for senior citizens, these measures do not meet completely all the required alterations for the welfare of the elderly, therefore, there still remains the need to combine efforts to build environment in which the elderly would live active personal, public, professional and cultural life" (National programme for 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations).

One of the positive developments of the current period is the growing number of organizations and institutions which provide senior adult education, cultural activities and a wide spectrum of services they put on offer (Zemaitaityte, 2007). The National Strategy of Overcoming Consequences of Ageing notes that "One of the goals of the national culture is to provide the society and every member of this society, also older people, with the possibilities to take part in cultural life, to choose the preferred leisure activities and to give way for self-expression." (2004, p. 23). With regard to this goal every year the budget of the Republic of Lithuania provides support to culture and art projects and programmes, and municipalities provide platform for the amateur production and local community outputs. The important role is assigned to public libraries, which are active in dealing with exclusion, employability, education and lifelong learning issues of older people and take steps in providing conditions for their active cultural lives. Cultural centers, who provide opportunities for elderly people to have free access to amateur art performances: chorus, drama groups, folk dance ensembles, ethnic culture teams and other culture services, are worth mentioning as well. As published by the Lithuanian Department of Statistics (Culture, Press and Sports, 2009) there are 856 cultural centers, 4500 adult art performance groups which unite about 59000 people, 1373 libraries, whose readership exceeds 744 thousands.

### **Cultural activity as an opportunity to lead a more active social life for older people**

Modern public culture could be characterized as a rich leisure form and a source of spiritual development. B.H. Lemme (2003) remarked that culture determines values, their premises and expectations, also shapes individual attitudes and decision making. Culture defines certain capacities and limitations of an individual, shapes one's world outlook, which is a framework for understanding of reality phenomena. Culture also promotes society's creativity which finds its outlets in multiple areas and contexts – from arts and crafts to design, research and entrepreneurship. R. Jančaitytė (Jančaitytė & others, 2009) determines that culture is a sphere defining and shaping individual's mode of existence in society. It penetrates daily activities, creativity, individual

expression through action, artistic expression and education. The process of socialization is understood as passing on cultural experiences and learning.

The cultural activity for older people allows to stay active longer, provides opportunity to integrate into social life and to share experience with the younger generation. For representatives of ethnic minorities this is a perfect opportunity to disseminate ethnic culture, traditions and customs; to foster one's ethnic identity, which is understood as an individual attempt to combine diverse social roles.

One of the art groups promoting their culture, traditions and customs is Polish folk song and dance ensemble „Poluknianie“ established 1989 in Trakai area Palukniai branch cultural center. Its participants are people of a different age and profession: retirees, students, teachers. Presently, there are 27 people (8 elderly women, 8 young men, 11 young women), who sing and dance in the group.

The group performs Polish folk songs and dances, old grandmother's songs, patriotic, war time and humorous songs. The song and dance group takes part in many projects for revival of traditional celebrations, gives concerts, takes part in ethnographic expeditions for gathering folk art.

### **Attitudes of elderly people to social integration through participation in cultural activities**

In the attempt to analyze the attitudes of older people to social integration possibilities through participation in cultural activities in January 2012 a qualitative research was carried out in „Poluknianie“ group, which is created and active in Palukniai village Trakai area (Vasiljevienė, 2012). For the sake of the study a convenient and available sampling was done, seven women aged 55 to 78 in the „Poluknianie“ group were interviewed. The interviews were carried out at different times and in different places with regard to the participants' availability. Two participants were interviewed in their workplaces: Palukniai secondary school and Palukniai parish; five were interviewed at home. The interviewees were introduced with the aims of the survey, they were explained why this survey is undertaken, and why they are chosen for interviews. Each interviewee was talked to individually. Upon the agreement of the women the interviews were recorded so that the answers would be analyzed with greatest possible precision. After the interviews the conversations were scripted. The survey was carried out on the basis of these ethical principals: anonymity, confidentiality, openness and fairness.

Each interview took from 20 to 60 minutes. After the interview all the comments about the interviewees, contacts with the interviewees and the interview procedures were taken down. In the analysis of the obtained data the following topical areas were highlighted: „The social integration of the elderly people through cultural activities“ and „The relations between the senior and the junior team members“.

### *Social integration of the elderly through cultural activities*

According to J. Vaitkevičius (1995), social integration maybe approached in two ways: first, it is the integration into society, when human culture acquisitions are passed on, group and society experiences, customs and language are internalized; additionally, it is the individual self-structuring process and learning.

In the attempt to reveal how the participation in „Poluknianie“ group affects elderly women’s social integration, what new skills, competencies, capacities or, straightforwardly, pleasant experiences were gained, the question „What has changed in your life, after you associated with the group?“ was asked. Other questions served as supplements if the interviewees gave short answers and would not supply sufficient information, the questions were: „What new experiences (new skills) do you acquire through performing in different places?“ and „Did you trace any changes in your character after you joined the group? If you have, what are they?“. The changes associated with interviewees’ answers were teased into three categories: personal (intrapersonal), interpersonal and health related changes.

The interviewees listed personal (intrapersonal) changes which are connected to the appearance of the responsibility, discipline, spiritual renovation and improvement:

I.1 “Well, you know, this sense of responsibility <...> such a spiritual effect of our concerts, and on the whole, they give us meaning to life.“;

I.4 “Perhaps the discipline, when you know that you have to go, you do everything at home faster.“;

I.7 „You just see more things, associate with more people, try to learn a thing or two. You can always notice what others are doing.“

I.4 “Perhaps the discipline, when you know that you have to go, you do everything at home faster. <...> there is no way without discipline. We are senior, we are used to doing what we must.“

These statements of senior women show that participating in the ensemble enriches their lives with new experiences, encourages improvement, self-understanding, learning from their colleagues. This also helps to keep discipline and feel responsibility for their actions and choices.

Interpersonal experiences were grouped to interaction between the individual and the group, and the interaction with the public and sociability. They embrace three groups of interactions: the interactions of the group members, the interactions between the group and the people who come to the concerts, the interactions between the group and the other groups, which they encounter while giving concerts in different locations:

I.4 „Well it is good to socialize, when we all come together, you can learn a lot of things, one adds one thing, another –something else.<...> if we are a group, you have to make friends, you cannot think just about oneself, but also about the others.“

I.2 „<...> I feel joy that people come, the whole audience is full of our group<...>“

I.5 „A lot of people come from curiosity, showing gratitude, pay respects that we still sing, that traditions are carried on<...> They come from the whole of Lithuania.“

Senior women in the group have good relations with each other, they show respect to each other, they try to show understanding, do not forget wedding or birthday dates. However, one interviewee mentioned: I.4 <...> sometimes for concerts outside they

come with more readiness, but for local concerts not always. There might be unpleasant judgments. Maybe they are tired of us, we are here for twenty five years“. She meant Palukniai village people, who sometimes show low interest in the concerts of the ensemble.

Health is a very important factor that affects the active participation of the senior people in social life. The interviews revealed that participation in the group has a positive effect upon the member's health:

I.2“ I am very satisfied. I return newly born “;

I.7 „Always humors me up. It is always good“

True, distant travels, when visiting Poland it takes twelve hours in a bus, make the interviewees very tired, but a very strong sense of responsibility helps them to forget all health related problems.

### *Interaction of senior and junior participants*

Before analyzing the interaction of senior and junior participants in the group „Poluknianie“ it must be mentioned that psychology treats interpersonal relations as informal interaction of individuals, which may last shorter or longer time span and reflect intellectual, emotional and physical closeness of the parties (Zelvys, 2007)

This ensemble stands out in that: “we have no similar group to ours in Vilnius or Vilnius region, here sing grandmothers, mothers and fathers and their children and grandchildren.“ This interviewee was among the first who put all her effort into preservation of the group which started its life almost twenty four years ago. She and some other group members encouraged people to participate: I.2 “<...> I asked, walked the village, encountered people, spoke and invited them <...> and later we tried, we thought that it is time to introduce children to our group.“ This was the start of children in the group; they grew and became brave and active young people.

In the attempt to find out about the senior and junior members interactions the following questions were asked: “How do you get along with the younger members of the group?“, „Did you learn anything from them? If you have, what have you learned? “, „What do you think they learn from you? “. The interviewees' answers fell into two subcategories: junior influencing senior through interactions, and senior influencing junior through interactions.

The answers interviewees provided reveal good, warm and rather paternal relations between senior and junior group members:

I.6 „ We get along well with boys and girls.“;

I.4 „<...> they are like children to us <...>“;

I.7 „<...> we are like parents to them, we teach them, they learn from us. We live very friendly, it suits us all, them and us“.

This sort of relations allows both self - understanding, improvement, common search for good and goal, and learning and sharing values and traditions:

I.4“<...> they learned our songs. Maybe dancing as well, the folk style.“;

I.6 „<...> they learn this culture, they will keep the songs <...>“;

I.7 „<...> they will know these traditions, songs, because we sing in a folk manner as our grandmothers sang, as did the old people <...> And the traditions that were

permanent, since they get fewer and fewer, so that the young would keep in mind that they were singing once.“

The seniors try to pass on the traditions of their ancestors to the younger people, so that the traditions did not disappear altogether but be carried on. Alternatively the young people give energy, freshness, youthfulness and carelessness:

I.1 „<...> we learn from the young people...carelessness<...>“;

I.3 „ They ask us out to disco if we are in Poland“;

I.4 „Perhaps, they give us more energy“;

I.5 „<...> when we give concerts together with the young people, we think we are of the same age as they are“

It is possible to assume that different age groups participating in common activity share the process of socialization, pass on values, norms of behavior, internalize customs, keep the language. It is of particular importance for the young people who in the words of the former Polish language and literature teacher: I.2 „young people do not read much, they do not go to theatre much, they do not go to museums much, they are not interested in exhibitions much.“ Interaction with young people facilitate integration into modern improving world for seniors: I.2 “Youngsters overtook us, more than we they can drive, deal with technology, computers,<...>“ Therefore, several generations in one group is a good way to share experiences.

In drawing the generalization of the senior women „Poluknianie“ ensemble members answers to the semi- standardized qualitative analysis questions, it came up that taking part in the group allows them to socialize and integrate into social life better. The group function is broad – they sing, dance, stage plays, and every participant can choose what they like and bring new experiences to their lives. It must be mentioned that common activity in the ensemble for people of different age and different educational background allow to share cultural traditions, values, norms of behavior, customs and language. The senior people can integrate into the changing reality with more ease.

## Conclusions

1. Literature analysis revealed that the modern changing world, growth of information technologies, economic, social and other changes require human activeness, permanent improvement irrespective of their age. Cultural activities, education allows older people to integrate into social and cultural life, to improve, learn, obtain new experience, internalize and secure social experiences, customs and values.
2. After analyzing semi structured qualitative interview data it is possible to state that participation in the cultural organization activities for a senior women opens up a possibility to show their creative potential and to foster and keep old traditions, customs, values, culture, language of their region and allows to state socially active.
3. The function of the older women in the ensemble adds to their personal growth, spiritual renewal, keeps them disciplined and responsible for their actions and choices. Warm and friendly relations of senior and junior members of the group allow smooth transition of culture, values and traditions from generation to generation. Young people, in their own turn, give the older people more energy, youthfulness, freshness; make them stay interested in novelties.

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