

CeRe's activities and projects in 2013

1. Building social actors' capacity to get involved in the decision-making process

Goal. : Improved capacity of the social actors to get involved in the decision-making process

Objectives:

Building the capacity of citizens groups in Bucharest and grass root NGOs in Romania to advocate for their issues

- The community organizing programme

Through its Community Organizing programme, CeRe seeks to empower un-organized citizens to get organized and campaign for issues of public interest. We follow the neighbourhood-based model that implies:

- ✘ *Door knocking and one-on-one visits with residents in order to engage more people in civic action*
- ✘ *Group-building and membership building*
- ✘ *Collective action/ advocacy campaigns.*

Besides working individually with each group of citizens, the program is also offering training opportunities and exchanging of experience among citizens' groups in Bucharest and from other countries involved in CO programmes.

During 2013, CeRe continued its Community Organizing Programme in four neighbourhoods of Bucharest: Favorit (Drumul Taberei); Callatis (Drumul Taberei); Lacul Tei and Pantelimon (an impoverished neighbourhood).

By the end of 2013, the Community Organizing programme resulted in:

- ✘ All the 4 groups (Favorit, Callatis, Lacul Tei and Pantelimon) conducted advocacy campaigns, two of them already having concrete results: the group in Lacul Tei managed to convince the public authorities to better take care of a park in the neighbourhood and the Group in Callatis managed to convince the local public authorities to take safety measures for the kids attending a school in the neighbourhood.

- ✘ Besides their particular issues, the members of two of the groups (Callatis and Favorit) got used to permanently monitor the local public administration activities: they regularly participate in the local council meetings and keep an eye on the local budget.

✘ All the groups improved their abilities in the area of public communication, fundraising, communication with the authorities, collective action.

✘ Approximately 850 citizens were involved in collective action, supporting the efforts done by the civic groups in their neighbourhoods.

✘ Many of the citizens that are members of the community organizing neighbourhood groups become active citizens beyond their own campaigns. For example, many of them participated in the national movement for Rosia Montana that took place in Bucharest during the autumn. Some of them also participated in other projects and campaigns organized by CeRe. (On long term CeRe's strategy is to help the groups to network around shared issues at the level of the city.)

✘ Two of the groups were awarded at the Civil Society Awards Gala.

Bottom line: three of the groups we worked with following the community organizing neighbourhood-based model are now more powerful in their relationship with the local public administration, aware about their rights, better in their relationship with their constituencies, one step closer to sustainability.

To make these happen the community organizing team organized the following activities:

- Door knocking to identify new members to be involved;
- Strategic and/or action planning workshops to help the groups to plan their advocacy activities;
- Exchange of experience workshops;
- Coaching the groups to organize public events or other campaign activities: writing petitions, presenting their requests in public hearings, accountability sessions,



protests etc.

- Coaching the groups to communicate with the local administration, public and with their constituencies.
- Short training sessions on fundraising, communication/negotiation, leadership, organizational development for the groups' members;
- Helping the groups to celebrate smaller or bigger victories.
- Promoting the activities of the groups.

- The Permanent Advocacy Service (PAS)

CeRe is running an advocacy service to assist advocacy campaigns initiated by civic groups or NGOs. The service assists NGOs and civic groups on a regular basis. The purpose of this service is to build the capacity of the NGOs and groups to solve problems of their communities by keeping the authorities accountable. Through this service CeRe also promotes activism as a means to alter the balance of power in favour of those having a weaker voice in society.

During 2013, PAS assisted 10 NGOs and 8 civic groups from all over Romania to plan and implement advocacy campaigns for issues of public interest. 14 of them were requests of assistance addressed to CeRe, and 4 of the campaigns were selected after a call for applications launched by CeRe.

By the end of 2013, PAS can report the following results:



✱ 18 campaigns were supported by PAS during 2013: 8 of them already won, or had partial victories, 11 are still ongoing and one failed. PAS clients won issues such as: a river was saved from being captured into concrete tubes; a park was saved from being transformed into a mall; public money were allocated for a park to be refurbished; public money were not allocated for the building of a very expensive statuary group; a walking area was created around two lakes, instead of a road; a law to better regulate the diagnosis of autism, more

honest regulations for the relationship between people and banks;

✘ 18 NGOs and civic groups (and their partners) are now better advocates. For most of them it was their first such experience, a practical experience but also a very good learning opportunity.

✘ Local and National Public Authorities were held accountable by NGOs and groups by being exposed to advocacy activities (petitions, protests, marches, exhibitions, hearings, debates, etc).

✘ Media was exposed to new information, sometimes on rather sensitive issues (autism, the right to clean water, environment, real estate mafia, corruption, the national budget for education, etc). Better visibility for such causes was created. Also, the media was exposed to advocacy practices, and successful public participation initiatives, thus increasing the public awareness on the good changes these practices bring to the communities.

✘ Approximately 8500 citizens and NGOs members were involved in collective actions.

The main activities that led to these results were:

- Organizing trainings on advocacy for members of the groups and organizations;
- Strategy workshops to design the most effective plans to approach the public and the authorities;
- Coaching NGOs and groups to organize smart and effective advocacy activities;
- Organizing networking events gathering NGOs' and groups' representatives and media representatives and bloggers;
- Coalition building;
- Helping NGOs to promote their causes;
- Lessons learned workshops;
- Exchange of experience workshops.

To develop networks and coalitions powerful enough to act as dialog partners on policy matters.

- The NGO coalition for the fair use of Structural Funds:

In 2006 CeRe established the NGOs Coalition for structural funds – an informal group of NGOs preoccupied by the planning and use of structural funds and by the NGOs access to Structural Funds. Since, CeRe has been coordinating and building the capacity of the

Coalition. The coalition acts as a watchdog and advocate for the good management of the structural funds.

The main activities and results achieved during 2013:

The members of the coalition continuously monitored the relevant public institutions and released various public statements. The coalition also proposed recommendations and participated in working groups with the managing authorities. As a result, many problems were ameliorated but many others remain an obstacle for the efficient use of the funds. A full report covering the faults of the system, but also recommending a wide range of solutions for the next 7 year programming period will be released at the beginning of 2014.

Besides different particular improvements that the coalition brought about, we can also mention that we have managed to determine a substantial openness of the Ministry of European Funds and other relevant Ministries, regarding NGOs participation in the programming process for the next funding period (2014 – 2020).

In addition to its monitoring activities, the Coalition organized local and national deliberations with stakeholders regarding the use of the structural funds in the next programming period. The two topics of discussion were: financing priorities and funding mechanisms. As a result, the managing authorities were provided with a full proposal on some of the priorities that the government should consider for funding for the next 7 years.

As a result of its activities during the years, the Coalition is now fairly recognized by many of the authorities and media as a relevant dialog partner.

- The White Paper of the NGO Sector

The White Paper of the NGO sector in Romania is a document addressed to the Romanian political class which summarizes the views of the involved organizations in relation with 12 policy areas of concern for the NGO sector. The first edition of the WP (2010) was developed by the Civil Society Development Foundation (CSDF). In 2012, CeRe took the lead and, in partnership with CSDF, developed the second edition – with the contribution of around 100 NGOs.

During 2013, the White Paper was updated and brought into the attention of the Parliament and Government with the occasion of the National NGOs Forum.

2. Organizing public consultations programme

Goal: participatory decision-making on issues of major interest at local and national level

Objectives:

Involving social actors in the policy making process on issues of major concern (education, the pension system, etc)

- Organizing public consultations:

CeRe plans to organize such consultations once a year, starting with 2013/2014. We plan to use mostly deliberative methods (such as the Deliberative Forum or the Citizens Jury), with the participation of relevant stakeholders (e.g. experts, implementing agencies, trade unions, companies) and the larger public on issues that are relevant for the society.

In 2013, CeRe initiated such a project in partnership with a Romanian think tank: Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE). The topic of the consultations is the reform of pensions system.

A policy brief was prepared by CRPE on the pensions' reform. The policy brief presents an analysis of the current system, some of the trends that should be considered by the policy-makers and possible future scenarios.

At the beginning of 2014, a first launching debate will be organized. The debate will be followed by a series of other in depth deliberations: a deliberative forum for citizens, and separate debates for businesses, trade unions and NGOs. By the end of the process, a set of recommendations will be presented to the policy-makers.

Another similar initiative was related with the revision of the Romanian Constitution. As the Romanian Parliament decided to amend the Constitution and established a Special Committee to produce a draft, CeRe, in partnership with other NGOs organized consultations with civil society organizations. Deliberations took place including approximately 50 organizations. Our effort was aimed to make the voices of CSOs active in the areas of good governance and human rights heard and, thus, to complement the efforts of the Constitutional Forum (the entity in charge with conducting the consultation process at Parliament level).

Through meetings and online working groups, the project coagulated a new NGOs group active in the area of good governance which proposed a considerable number of amendments to the Constitution. The working method was deliberative and all proposed amendments have been adopted through consensus inside the group. Most of the amendments are in the areas of rule of law, accountability of institutions and elected representatives, third generation rights.

Some of these amendments are present in the final report of the Constitutional Forum while some of them caught the attention of certain journalists and opened the public debate for certain social subjects (such as the right to housing).

As the constitutional reform was postponed, we will probably be able to assess our results in 2014.

Involving social actors in strategic planning processes at local level

CeRe's plan in this direction was only to explore opportunities to facilitate such processes at local level (especially participatory budgeting processes).

During 2013, CeRe was contracted by a company to develop and facilitate community meetings in two villages in Romania. The purpose of these consultations was to help the local public administration and the citizens to better understand the opportunities they have and to try to identify measures for local development, building on the opportunities offered by the company's investments.

3. Watch-dog and advocacy for better public participation to the decision-making

Goal: Improving the legislation in the area of public participation and its implementation

Objectives:

To improve the transparency of the decision making process in Bucharest in order to make sure that the citizens do have the necessary space for participation

- Open up the City Hall (Bucharest Municipality):

During the summer of 2012 CeRe started Open up the City Hall campaign as a response to the decision of the General Mayor of Bucharest to forbid the citizens' access at the General Council meetings. This decision was very much in line with the Mayor's disinclination to listen to the civil society's opinions regarding the development of the city and with the misuse of public money.

At the end of 2013 we can count small but important victories towards a more transparent public administration in Bucharest. As results of our efforts we now have:

- ✘ Almost all the contact details of the Municipal Councillors posted on the official city-hall website.
- ✘ The hearing schedule of almost all the Municipal Councillors posted on the official city-hall website.
- ✘ Some of the Municipal Councillors brought into the discussion the transparency of the decision making-process during the Council Meetings.
- ✘ 24 citizens “adopted” a councillor – called, wrote or met her/him and asked questions about her/his activity and priorities. All the information was collected and is posted on a dedicated website.
- ✘ Approximately 100,000 citizens were informed about different local matters and about the progress of the campaign through online communication as well as a printed newspaper.
- ✘ Four journalistic investigations were developed and published disclosing information about public spending;
- ✘ Approximately 250 citizens and 30 NGOs were involved in different activities.



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The most relevant activities organized during 2013 were: direct meetings with the Municipal councillors, workshops with the municipal councillors and campaign supporters, direct mailing to the councillors and other relevant stakeholders, petitioning, “Adopt your councillor campaign”, press releases and meetings with bloggers and journalists, monitoring the Municipal Council meetings, media investigations, printed and on line materials, a dedicated website, coalition building etc.

To improve the relevant legislation on public participation

CeRe has agreed a strategic partnership with APADOR-CH to improve the Freedom of Information Act, Sunshine Law and the Internal Regulations of the Deputies Chamber (lower chamber of the Parliament).

No progress was made under this objective. Given the political context, and the tensioned relationship among civil society and governance, 2013 was not the most appropriate year for such activities. The only opportunity we took was to present recommendations for improvement of the legislation within the National NGOs Forum.

To constantly react when the legislation or good practice principles regarding the participation of the public in the decision making are ignored

CeRe is constantly initiating collective action, or is supporting fellow NGOs in their endeavours, whenever the institutions deny access of citizens to the decision-making process, or whenever decisions disrespecting the rule of law or democracy are taken.

This was the case many times in 2013. CeRe had public statements or joined the statements made by other NGOs on issues such as:

- ✘ Lack of transparency of important decision-making process (constitutional reform, administrative reform or the development of the national budget);

- ✘ Controversial legislation being abruptly introduced on the agenda of the Parliament;

- ✘ Citizens were denied participation in the decision-making process (in Bucharest or other smaller communities);

- ✘ Politicians publicly condemning the protests or the protestors, promoting the idea that participation to the decision-making process is not legitimate once a country is ruled by elected representatives.

4. Promoting public participation and activism

Goal: Public participation at the decision-making and activism are recognized as valid approaches to achieve change. Public participation is also seen as a means to alter the balance of power in favour of those having less power.

Objectives

To promote successful stories in the area of public participation and their actors

- Public Participation Awards Gala

The public participation awards Gala is an event for people, institutions and organizations who managed to overcome their convenience, inertia and the lack of trust in the public authorities. Every year, through the stories and the people rewarded at the Gala we offer a concrete view over the concept of public participation and its benefits.

The fifth edition of the Gala will be organized in March 2014.

To promote community organizing as an approach to be employed by other individuals or organizations interested in developing grass root activism

- US community organizing fellowships

In addition to conducting its own Community Organizing programme, CeRe also promotes this methodology presuming that other organizations and individuals will employ it.

One of the methods is to train and expose to community organizing practice young NGO representatives, mostly working with vulnerable groups. During 2013, within a partnership with Great Lakes Consortium for International Training and Development, CeRe helped recruit 10 potential community organizers and offered them six week fellowships to US community organizations. The impact of their fellowship experience is visible at least at two levels. Firstly, on a personal level, they have developed new soft skills and strengthened some of their previous abilities. The main areas of improvement are related to presentation and communication skills, public speaking, networking/building relationships, flexibility and openness to different cultures, just to name a few. All these skills are essential in community organizing work and in general for their professional performance and career growth. Secondly, this experience was energizing and an eye-opener for many of the participants as they have seen and learned about other approaches to citizen participation and empowerment of vulnerable groups.

In addition to their 6 weeks stay in the US, the fellows also benefit of CeRe's Community Organizing Team's experience and are coached into starting their own CO projects.

CeRe is also keeping together this community now counting 22 practitioners. Learning circles are organized from time to time and people come and share their new experiences, having the opportunity to learn from each other.

As part of the exchange programme, US community organizers are also travelling to Romania for short term visits to do trainings and consultancy with local groups, NGO representatives and to help promote community organizing as a citizen participation method. Two such visits took place in Romania during 2013 and more than 200 citizens and practitioners were exposed to information about community organizing.

To research and create space for debate and reflection on issues that are relevant for activism and public participation

If research has taken a more prominent role in the last two years, the second one is incipient, as CeRe started in 2012 to bridge the different sectors (business, academia) with the intention, in the long term, of implementing projects in partnership.

CeRe developed an impact evaluation of the 2012 protests in Romania answering questions such as:

- How has the political, economic and social context changed as a result of the protests?
- To what extent have the objectives of the initiative been achieved?
- To what extent did the initiative empower active citizens?
- How did public and private institutions change as a result of the initiative?
- What steps have been taken to ensure that the momentum generated by the initiative continues?

Another project developed by CeRe in this direction was the "Dialog of the Squares". As protests took place all over Europe, putting public participation and civic involvement very high on the public agenda, CeRe thought of gathering together protestors from different countries to offer them a space for debate and learning.

Thus, around 50 activists coming from Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, Greece, and Turkey met in Bucharest for three days to discuss issues such as:

- How do you keep a critical mass engaged in long term movements?
- How do you keep the momentum after the protests? How do you work with other actors (NGOs, trade unions, political parties etc.)?
- How do you envisage or define political involvement? Do we need a new political class and if yes, how do you create it?

- How can the different movements work together and help each other in fighting unjust decisions from governments and corporations? Why isn't this happening now, what are the obstacles? What would be necessary in order to overcome the obstacles?



A new visit will take place in 2014, including participants from Ukraine and Russia.