

Supporting the public health associations as key links between government, the scientific community and the population in Central and Eastern Europe

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Introduction

The project “Supporting the Public Health Associations as Key Links between Government, the Scientific Community and the Population in Central and Eastern Europe” was initiated in 2002 by the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the European Public Health Association (EUPHA). The project has the following goals:

- To foster a major role for public health associations as venues for the dissemination of evidence-based public health research that is applicable to government policy;
- To encourage a link between public health associations and the general population;
- To promote multidisciplinary networking between public health professionals and institutions; and
- To establish a strong public policy role for public health associations.

The two main partners in this project – OSI and EUPHA – started working together in 2000 by encouraging central and Eastern European public health experts to present their research at the EUPHA annual conferences. In 2002, the collaboration was expanded to include this project. OSI promotes the development of open societies worldwide by supporting an array of activities promoting educational, social, legal, and public health reform, and by encouraging alternative approaches to complex and controversial issues. Based in New York City and Budapest, OSI is a private operating and grant making foundation. Network programmes administered by OSI include the Public Health Programme, the goal of which is to foster equitable public health policy in selected regions, including Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. EUPHA

is an umbrella organisation of public health associations in Europe. EUPHA, founded in 1992, is an international, multidisciplinary, scientific organisation, bringing together around 10000 public health experts for professional exchange and collaboration throughout Europe. In 2005, EUPHA has 48 members from 38 different European countries.

Methods

OSI and EUPHA developed guidelines for this project in 2001-2002. The idea was to invite countries to apply for a grant to further develop the public health association. The grant would be awarded for a starting up period of maximum 18 months and up to a maximum of \$ 20 000 per country. In the application, the following issues needed to be addressed:

- General information on the existing network in the country;
- Questions on the general, long-term structure and aims of the public health association (existing or to be created); and
- A plan of activities for the next 1-5 years, including short-term objectives and specific tools to be used to achieve these objectives.

An important tool used in this project was the twinning with existing public health associations. The idea was that candidates would select a twinning partner to help them achieve specific goals or develop specific tools. Most EUPHA members presented themselves to the candidates as a possible twinning partner.

OSI and EUPHA selected a total of 19 countries to be invited to join this project. These were: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Romania, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Serbia and Montenegro. Twelve of these sent in a detailed application. After a difficult selection process, four countries were selected for the implementation stage in 2003, being Albania, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia.

Results

1. Albanian Epidemiological Association

Genc Burazeri, Enver Roshi, Ulrich Laaser

The Albanian Epidemiological Association (AEA) started the project on the 1st of May 2003 and finished on the 1st of May 2004. The twinning partner of the AEA was the German Association for the Health sciences and Public Health.

Aims

1. To increase awareness of public health professionals from all disciplines about public health challenges of Albania and the need for a common multi-professional association;
2. To establish a Public Health Forum in which all stakeholders and associations in public health are participants.
3. To increase the awareness of policymakers and the community about public health challenges in Albania.
4. To enhance and foster evidence-based policy.

The selected methods to achieve these aims were: conferences appealing to the public; regional workshops to collect information and establish a broad network among public health specialists and the community; and distribution of a monthly newsletter to all public health professionals operating in Albania.

Results

The awareness of public health professionals was increased by the distribution of a monthly newsletter, which started in July 2003. The 750 copies of the monthly newsletter were distributed to all districts in Albania. The Albanian Forum of Public Health was officially established in March 2004 as an umbrella organisation for existing associations as well as interested individuals. The Forum is an open arena wherein opinions and options for rational health policies comprising all relevant issue of the new public health will be discussed, formulated and documented near the Albanian Ministry of Health. The awareness of policymakers and the community was further increased by the organisation of a first conference on public health on September 10, 2003. Over 60 participants, including public health experts and policymakers, attended the conference. In 2003, three regional workshops were organised to include the different districts of Albania. In 2004, the second national conference was organised in March, attended by 40 public health experts. In October 2004, an extra conference was planned, this time partly financed by the twinning partner. Furthermore, plans to develop regional collaboration with other national associations are currently in progress.

2. Public Health Association of Latvia

Iveta Pudule, Anita Villerusa, Mika Gissler, Ilmo Keskimäki

The Public Health Association of Latvia (PHAL) started the project on the 1st of May 2003 and finished on the 30th of April 2004. The twinning partner of the PHAL was the Society for Social Medicine – Finland.

Aims

1. To develop an umbrella organisation for both academic public health experts and professional public health personnel;
2. To expand the network of public health organisations in Latvia by consolidating different non-governmental organisations (NGOs) related to public health; and
3. To increase interaction between scientific community, general population and policymakers.

The selected methods to achieve these aims were: to organise national scientific meetings, conferences and research courses in co-operation with the twinning partner, to improve interaction between public health scientists, the public health community and civil society; to develop the local internet site and electronic mailing system to increase the exchange of information between members as well as between the national association and the general population. The Finnish twinning partner supported the construction and funding possibilities of an umbrella organisation.

Results

The development of an umbrella organisation was pursued using two tools. First a survey among existing NGOs working in the field of public health was conducted in which expectations and needs concerning an umbrella organisation were addressed. Second, consultations with government, twinning partner and others on how to set up such an umbrella organisation took place. This increased interaction was a continuous process. Regular collaboration with the mass media took place; the homepage was set up and used to distribute the information (www.lsva.lv). In May 2003, a national research conference on the health of children in Latvia was organised with 450 participants (Riga, Latvia). In May 2004, an international seminar on public health in the Baltic countries was organised (Helsinki, Finland). PHAL will continue its activities, expanding the international collaboration to a more regional level to include the Finnish Society as well as other Baltic associations (Estonia, Lithuania).

3. Lithuanian Public Health Association

Audrius Sceponavicius, Mark McCarthy

The Lithuanian Public Health Association (LPHA) started the project on the 9 June 2003 and finished on the 30 November 2004. The twinning partner of the LPHA was the Faculty of Public Health of the Royal Colleges of physicians of the United Kingdom:

The aim of the project was, through collaborating between the twinning partner and the Lithuanian Public Health Association, to strengthen links between the Lithuanian Government, the scientific community and the general public.

Aims

1. To create positive policy and good practice examples in selected municipalities.
2. To strengthen LPHA website www.lvsa.lt
3. To organize international public health conference in Lithuania involving representatives from scientific community, general population and policy makers.

Results

Two municipalities, the towns of Kedainiai and Elektrėnai in Lithuania were selected for partnership with the municipality of Sefton (United Kingdom). Key persons were identified in each municipality who work in public health and are able to spread information, participate in implementing scientific knowledge, and promote involvement of the scientific community with policy makers and the general public. External experts were also identified to coordinate the program and scientific work. Public health reports on Kėdainiai and Elektrėnai Municipalities were written after discussions, sharing of experience and consultation with the United Kingdom partners, external experts and the key persons of the municipalities. A Round Table Discussion with the United Kingdom partners was organised in Kaunas, October 8, 2003. This was followed by an International Public Health Conference “Community for Health” in Kaunas, October 10-11, 2003, which included both UK speakers and also representatives from countries neighbouring Lithuania (Belarus, Russia, Latvia).

Representatives from the LPHA and their twinning partners shared their experience during a two week visit to UK including visits to Sefton. These discussions identified possible areas for future collaboration, including lifestyle surveys, healthy schools, health initiative centres, and a trauma Register. A formal presentation “Lithuanian Public Health Association: Sharing Experiences with the United Kingdom” was made at the Annual Scientific Meeting of Faculty of Public Health in Edinburgh, June 8-10, 2004.

The project has raised interest in international collaboration within UK public health departments. Policy and good practice examples have been presented to other Lithuanian municipalities, to the scientific community, policy makers and the general public. The LPHA website (www.lvsa.lt) has been strengthened and improved.

4. Slovak Public Health Association

Iveta Rajnicova Nagyova, Zuzana Katreniakova, Marieke van der Waal

The Slovak Public Health Association (SAVEZ) started the project on the 1st of May 2003 and finished on the 30th of November 2004. The twinning partner of SAVEZ was the Netherlands Public Health Federation (NPHF).

Aims

1. To establish a multidisciplinary umbrella organisation with a horizontal approach in the field of public health;
2. To develop a link between public health professionals and general population;
3. To become a strong body in influencing the public health policy.

The selected methods to achieve these aims were: education, training and research; instigation of pilot projects; working with media, advocacy and lobbying.

Results

The main task of this project was the creation of the Slovak Public Health Association. This required the introduction of the notion of public health associations in the country, extensive communication with the government to comply with the rules and communication with all possible partners. SAVEZ was officially established on 17 June 2003 as a civic association. The first General Assembly of SAVEZ took place on 5 September 2003. After that, efforts were put into creating a clear corporate identity for SAVEZ (logo, website – www.savez.sk, activities). At the same time, several initiatives for projects were started. One was the MATRA project application, for which the aim was to acquire funds for dissemination and propagation of the ideas and activities of SAVEZ. Even though the application was rejected, it provided a good experience in how to apply for projects/funding. In November 2003, the first workshop was organised to clearly state the objectives of SAVEZ. The outcome of this workshop was reflected in the newly prepared 1st Public Health Act in Slovakia. In September 2004, the stay of three SAVEZ representatives in the Netherlands was realised. The NPHF introduced them the system and several organisations working in public health in the Netherlands. On October 21-23, 2004, the first national public health conference “Education, research and practice of public health in Slovakia” was organised by SAVEZ. There were 8 keynote speakers (the twinning partners included), 19 oral and 16 poster presentations and around 80 participants. From November, several SAVEZ members are active within the online communication irregular meetings available throughout the University of Iowa (United States). SAVEZ is also active in project applications, including:

- The SPHERE project together with EUPHA. This project aims to strengthen public health research in the European Region.
- The PHARE project, for which an application to the project on Slovak public health status and forecasts report was sent to the Ministry of Health on October 19, 2004, but was not accepted.
- Two applications are being prepared to the Ministry of Health for realising Health Impact Assessment workshops and publishing 3 materials on public health in 2005.

Conclusions and perspectives of the project

Throughout the project, three questions became apparent. The first one was how a public health association would be able to influence policy, the general population and the scientific community. In the four countries included, three opted for a similar structure that was to set up or further develop an association with an umbrella function. A public health association with an open access and a forum character proved to be quite efficient in the selected countries. Instead of creating competition with already existing organisations, collaboration was planned from the beginning. This had a positive effect on the apparent closed shop tendencies of some existing structures. The fourth country had a different approach, which was to implement a holistic approach to public health at community level. This more practical way of implementing the project proved effective as well.

The second question was whether financial support for an initiating phase would ensure sustainability of the associations. The project in all four countries definitely showed that the financial boost made it possible to professionalize and expand the efforts made so far, thereby increasing the impact of the project in each country. However, it also became apparent that all associations remain very dependent on external funding.

The last question was the effect of the twinning with existing public health associations and the inclusion in the EUPHA network. Both measures have proven beneficial to the four countries. The twinning with one specific partner has been very positive and – in all four countries – the twinning will continue in the future. The international collaboration could be further developed as it was felt that the strategic planning should include neighbouring countries. At the moment, the idea of regional collaboration is examined within EUPHA.

Outlook

In 2004, three more countries started in the second phase of the project:

- a. Serbia and Montenegro: Serbian Public Health Association, with their twinning partner the French Society of Public health
- b. Romania: Romanian Public Health and Health Management Association, with their twinning partner the Italian Society of Hygiene, Preventive Medicine and Public Health

- c. Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan Association of Public Health Specialists, with their twinning partner the Danish Society of Public Health.

The results of this second phase will be presented at the 2005 EUPHA conference in Graz, Austria.