

CeRe's projects and activities in 2014

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 2014, CeRe continued its Community Organizing Programme in four neighbourhoods of Bucharest: Favorit (Drumul Taberei); Callatis (Drumul Taberei); Lacul Tei and Pantelimon (an impoverished neighbourhood). During 2014, we focused especially on helping 3 of the groups to build their membership and better communicate with the local community. Besides working with the groups' members, CeRe also targeted the larger communities in order to create a better environment and ties among neighbours and to create awareness around participation in the decision-making process.

Another evolution of the programme in 2014 consisted in facilitating communication among groups (those supported by CeRe and other existing groups in Bucharest) to create the premises for collective action at Bucharest level.

By the end of 2014, the Community Organizing programme resulted in:

* All 4 groups (Favorit, Callatis, Lacul Tei and Pantelimon) conducted advocacy campaigns, two of them already having actual results: the group in Lacul Tei managed to convince public authorities to carry out a technical study to determine why the lake



in their neighbourhood is drying up. The Callatis group managed to convince local authorities to vote a project proposal and create a pedestrian alley for children on their way to school that will be built, according to the City Hall, by September 2015.

* More than 700 citizens were involved in collective actions (neighbourhood events, meetings with public officials, actions at the city council monthly meetings and so on) supporting the efforts done by the civic groups in their neighbourhoods.

* Besides the usual advocacy tactics (petitions, meetings with officials, public events, etc.), the Group in Lacul Tei neighbourhood filed a law suit against the public institution handling parks and lakes in Bucharest for refusing to provide public information (the budget of the institution, the expenditures for the past years, the organizational chart and so on).

* All groups organized at least one public event in order to consult their neighbours about community problems and solutions



and in order to recruit new members. As a result, more than 500 persons were involved in local consultation processes and more than 20 new persons joined the existing groups.

* 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.

* 37 members of the 4 groups received constant coaching and training from community organizers and increased their abilities related to communication, negotiation, recruitment, and organizational development.

* Three of the groups gained visibility due to media appearances and neighbourhood meetings. As a result, they received questions and assistance requests from other citizens facing similar issues.

* One of the groups (Lacul Tei) carried out their first project – *History and Traditions in Lacul Tei* – in order to increase community cohesion and the emotional bond with the neighbourhood, its past and its inhabitants.

* Members of 2 of the groups were involved in CeRe's fundraising efforts and formed the swimming team in the Swimathon event – The Neighbourhood Lifeguards. Two of the groups continued to raise money for their expenditures using the 2% fiscal facility.

* Two of the groups (Lacul Tei and Callatis) were awarded at the Civil Society Awards Gala for the campaigns carried out in 2013 and the results achieved.

* CeRe made progress towards its strategy to help civic groups network around shared issues at the level of the city. A first event was organized in November – a civic initiatives’ fair – bringing together 14 informal citizens groups from Bucharest and approx. 150 visitors that were introduced to the groups and to their campaigns. For 2015, CeRe plans to pursue the idea of bringing grassroots groups together in a coalition fighting for city-wide issues.

* Increased visibility of the civic groups and more media time dedicated to participation and civic involvement (online media, radio and TV). More than 60 articles in the media covered stories related to the civic initiatives’ fair and the citizen groups’ actions. Estimated audience: 100.000 persons.

* CeRe has developed innovative ways to send a message about civic participation to a broader audience. A theatre play was developed in a participatory way, based on interviews with members from the civic groups and based on their civic experience. The theatre play “4 square meters” was first performed at the Civic Initiatives’ Fair in November 2014.

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.
 - Neighbourhood events organizing (The Neighbourhood Day, Community Theatre),
 - Coaching the groups to communicate with the local administration, public and with their constituencies.
 - Short training sessions on topics such as: membership building, story-telling, values and tolerance, organizational development for the groups’ members;
 - Helping the groups to celebrate smaller or bigger victories.
 - Promoting the activities of the groups.
 - Organizing a Civic Initiatives Fair to bring groups together, to meet, know each other and explore possible future action.
-
- The Advocacy Assistance Program (PAS)

CeRe is running an advocacy program to assist advocacy campaigns initiated by civic groups or NGOs. The program assists NGOs and civic groups on a regular basis. The purpose of this program is to build the capacity of the NGOs and groups to solve problems of their communities by keeping the authorities accountable. The program has two main directions: one answering to calls of assistance all year round (people that are affected by a problem and want to take action to persuade the public administration to solve it), and a more structured support consisting in training, assistance, material resources for advocacy campaigns in different domains (environmental, social justice, etc.)

Through this program CeRe also promotes activism as a means to alter the balance of power in favour of those having a weaker voice in society. Also, the program seeks to create a dialog between civil society and public authorities. We believe that with each advocacy action led by the civil society, the public authorities will be more "used" to involving all stakeholders when making a public decision.

During 2014 PAS assisted 24 advocacy campaigns (10 led by NGOs and 14 led by citizen groups) all over Romania. Here are a few examples of issues CeRe's beneficiaries fought for: saving parks from being transformed into construction areas, illegal buildings, access to after-school programs for deprived children, better environment, bicycle lanes, social-housing, preventing evictions, services for drug addicts, etc.

By the end of 2014, PAS can report the following results:

- 24 campaigns were supported by PAS during 2014: 8 of them already won, or had partial victories, three failed and the rest are still ongoing. PAS clients won issues such as:
 - closing an illegal construction site,
 - improvements for a park (new recycling bins, an incorrect map of the park was taken down, rehabilitation of the irrigating system, cleaning the lake).
 - saving 500 trees that were meant to be cut down by the Iași City Hall
 - Cluj-Napoca City Hall promised to set up the biggest park in Cluj, „The Park between the Lakes”
 - a promise of the Local Mayor that the City Hall will prevent the eviction of few hundred people
 - money allocation for the pavement of 9 muddy streets in an impoverished neighbourhood.
- 24 NGOs and citizen 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 (housing, drug addiction, access to education for poor kids)
- Approximately 20,000 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; evaluation of progress meetings;
- 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;
- Training on Story telling and Photovoice;
- A workshop with bloggers and journalists.

A few thoughts about CeRe's advocacy assistance program:

* the protests that took place these last few years in Romania have determined some interesting changes in people's attitudes and behaviours. Citizens are becoming more demanding, more engaged and willing to hold the public authorities accountable. 2013 and 2014 brought to CeRe many discontented citizens groups regarding different issues and asking for assistance.

That led to some developments. One is to offer opportunities to citizen groups in Bucharest to meet, reflect on their wishes and possibilities to act together. We believe that sustainable change in the relationship between citizens and government can be brought about if



a critical mass of activism is created, and what we are planning to do in the near future is to bring all these nuclei of activism together and nurture collective action. Another plan is to build our capacity to serve more people in a more effective manner (by reorganizing the current programs and by developing easy to access and use resources).

* after CeRe supported many campaigns focused on issues related to the public – space (parks, buildings, environment) during 2014 we try to include social-justice related issues. It proved to be challenging, but worth pursuing. On one hand, advocating for social issues can impact on substantial problems, such as access to basic services or deep deprivation. On another hand, working with the most disempowered builds power where is the most needed.

* After supporting so many campaigns, we are now trying to transform that experience in learning materials by working on an advocacy tool kit that will be available online and offline for citizens, civic groups and NGOs that want to change or influence a public decision.

1.b 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 2014:

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 was released at the beginning of 2014.

As during 2014 the Managing Authorities prepared the Operational Programmes to be submitted to the European Commission, the coalition also extensively contributed to these documents. Some of the Coalition's recommendations were included in the final documents.

Another effort of the Coalition was to make sure that civil society representatives will be part of the future Monitoring Committees (to supervise the use of the European Funds 2014 – 2020) and manage to convince some of the Managing Authorities to adopt transparent and fair procedures to select the members of the Monitoring Committees.

During 2014, the Coalition continued to build its profile and gather support, having now 31 member organizations. By the end of the year we took time for a strategic planning meeting attended by almost all the members. This gathering resulted in shared goals and direction for the next years.

- Politics without borders

Following up many of the voices visible during the protests that took place in Romania, CeRe facilitated the formation of a new network of activists (some representing different NGOs): the Platform Politics without Borders (PwB). PwB aims to advocate for better legislation to allow new actors in the political arena: political party law, electoral law, political parties finance law are some of the bills that need improvement, according to the Platform.

2. Organizing public consultations programme

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

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 aim of the project was to involve the social partners (experts, administration representatives, politicians, the business environment,



trade unions, citizens and civil society) in a deliberative policy-making process regarding the pensions' system in Romania.

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.

A first launching debate took place on January 30, 2014. The Swiss Ambassador and the Romanian Ministry of Labour attended the event which contributed considerably to the overall visibility of the project. The different stakeholders present highlighted the tension between fairness and sustainability when talking about such a reform, and made valuable contributions to the debate and the study. New ideas have been formulated while some of the ideas present in the report benefitted of informed feedback.

The debate on the different scenarios continued with a deliberative forum, involving 58 citizens, in March 2014. The citizens gathered were a sample of the Romanian demographics for the subject, as we tried to have all voices and interests represented in the debate. After having been presented with the different scenarios of reform and relevant information, the citizens deliberated on the best outcome for a reform proposal on the pensions system, taking into account all the challenges that such a reform is facing. A document summarizing their conclusions has been issued at the end and further used in the project.

There were 3 more debates organized in the project with relevant stakeholders, in June 2014, involving NGOs and trade unions, the business sector and public institutions. They all presented their points of view and tried to bring in new elements for the debate. Some of the views still seem irreconcilable – such as those between trade unions and the business sector, but we discovered on certain issues they do not dispute on the basis of a common understanding, therefore more debate is necessary in order to clarify points of disagreement.

A Chatham House type meeting with political parties representatives was organized in September 2014, in an attempt to mediate a least common denominator.

The project continued with the drafting of the final document and the final debate around it in October 2014. The final debate gathered around 50 participants, representing different interests, many of them having been involved in the previous rounds of consultation in the project. The need for continuing the debate on the subject was again very visible.

In order to promote the conclusions of the debates and the final report, the project partners met with some decision-makers to discuss on the final document.

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

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.

- 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.

In 2013 we counted a small number of victories. 2014 was a challenging year. During the first months, most of the Council's meetings have been organized according to an emergency procedure that didn't allow a predictability of the meeting. A lot of fights among parties were on-going, changing the membership of the council (new councillors were included, to be excluded on the next meeting, vice-mayor change several times etc.) Therefore, we focused more on building resources and instruments instead of working on topics on City Council agenda.

We have been working in partnership with two other organizations (Active Watch and Funky Citizens) to create an info-graphic to explain how a decision is taken at the City Council level. We have also met councillors from various political parties to research on the informal decision-making process. Based on the findings, we started a research to analyse the extent to which legislative requirements regarding the sunshine law are observed.

Both the report of the research and the info-graphic will be ready in the beginning of 2016, and will become subject to meetings with delegations of the main political parties from City Council and with key public servants from the City-Hall.

A second important direction is to extent our attention to the local authorities at district level, offering a back-up and supporting therefore civic initiatives from Bucharest. We went in court against the mayor of the 5th district, Marian Vanghelie, for not releasing the budget of district. The trial is on-going.

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 2014. CeRe had public statements or joined the statements initiated by other NGOs on issues such as: lack of transparency, formal consultations, controversial legislation etc.

Considering that public statements are rarely efficient, in 2014 CeRe initiated two strategic litigations: one against the District Hall of the Sector 5 (the least open District Hall in Bucharest) – for not releasing the local budget of the district and one against the City Hall of Iasi – for not releasing public information important for one of campaigns supported by CeRe (Iasi Loves the Linden trees). The courts decisions will be most probably taken during 2015.

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.

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.

A fifth edition of the Gala was organized in March 2014. Around 250 participants (citizens, representatives of public institutions and NGOs, politicians, diplomats, mass-media) gathered together to applaud the 10 groups of citizens and NGOs awarded at the Gala. All the 10 winners are people and organizations that successfully communicated with public administration and convince it to solve different problems. A variety of campaigns and a variety of groups were brought under the spot light through the Gala: from a simple woman in a village, that mobilized her neighbours and convinced the Mayor to pave their street, to the National Association of Transplant Receivers that convinced the Ministry of Health to allocate money to subsidise important drugs for transplant receivers. All the awards were meant to prove that participation to the decision making is possible and can bring about very concrete improvements for our day-to-day lives.



Besides the 10 awards decided by a Jury, CeRe also gave two Special Awards: one to the “collective character” – United We Save! and one to a young politician and public servant that proved to be very open to proposals and initiatives coming from NGOs.

The Jury that evaluated the 56 proposals submitted for the Gala was formed by respected professionals coming from media, NGO sector, business, academia.

The Gala had very good media coverage: approximately 40 appearances.

- Public participation awareness campaign

By the end of 2014 CeRe launched its first professional awareness campaign. The campaign promotes activism and participation to the decision-making, translating these abstract concepts in real-life stories. The campaign is focusing on showing the real changes that can be achieved by public participation and advocacy.

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

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

- US community organizing fellowships

One of the means is an exchange programme developed by Great Lakes Consortium for International Training and Development. Within this program Eastern European (Romanians included) potential community organizers benefit of six week fellowships to US community organizations. In the same time US community organizers are coming to the countries involved and train and coach local community organizers.

During 2014, CeRe

- selected and prepared a new team of ten future community organizers to have their internship stage in the US in 2015.
- organized local trainings for potential community organizers, having as trainers four US experienced organizers
- facilitated meetings between organizers and journalists

- continued to mentor some of the alumni of the programme, as they are now developing their own community organizing activities.



- Russia exchange

As CeRe became recognized for its community organizing programme, not only in Romania, but in the region, we were asked to share our experience and coach 5 local NGOs in Russia. They visited our programme here and with support from our team of community organizers they started similar activities in their towns in Russia.

- CeRe's participation in the European Community Organizing Network

* CeRe was involved in events organized by the European Community Organizing Network (ECON) and benefited from the expertise of US community organizers and trainers. CeRe's community organizers were trained and coached by Bill O'Brien, director of the Harriet Tubman Center Detroit, at the ECON's Annual Meeting in Budapest (September 2014) and in Bucharest during a 2 day consulting visit. CeRe has also benefited, through ECON, from the expertise of David Beckwith, former director of the Nedmor Fund in the US.

* CeRe supports the organizational development of ECON and provides an umbrella for the network's fundraising efforts. CeRe has also supported ECON to make steps towards registering as an independent organization based in Bucharest.

- The dialogue of the squares

To support the creation of an exchange opportunity for activists from 6 countries, CeRe created the framework for a “Dialogue of the Squares”. The project started in 2013 and was rooted in the last years massive movements over Europe.

The project offered the opportunity of two two-day gatherings among activists from Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Greece and Spain.

The first one was organized in 2013 (see last year CeRe report for details) and the second one in 2014.

The agenda of the 2014 reunion included country/movement presentations and Q&A sessions and work in smaller groups, depending on the participants' interests on May 10, and an open debate on the role of the European Union in the framework of the NGO Fest in the park on May 11.

