

## **Group Discussion – Pazardjik, August 19 , 2003**

*Participants – 8 people. Among them:*

### **Men:**

A private-sector biologist, 56; a teacher, 49; a private-business chemist, 38; a disabled from the NGO sector, 30;

### **Women:**

A pensioner, 63; an unemployed, 45; a philologist from a private medium (of a Roma origin), 31; an unemployed, 27;

The respondents' opinion about the work of the municipality is positive. They were very active and informed – including on the situation of the municipality. The observation is that, despite the deteriorated situation – factories closed, lack of sufficient funding, etc. – alternative funding on projects and programs is gradually being secured, which is changing, albeit slowly, the appearance of the town.

### **Problems of the town and alternatives for their solution**

The preliminary survey has put forward sanitation, healthcare and integration of the Roma community as major problems of the town.

The opinion is that the mandate of the present mayor has been successful as regards cleanness of the town. Competitions have been conducted and contracts have been concluded with firms to maintain the town. In some regions of the town the hygiene is bad, domestic animals are raised, etc. There are no garbage containers everywhere and most of the baskets are stolen. Active construction work is under way, and the construction firms do not keep clean. Beyond these details, the conclusion is that as for the cleanness of the town there are at least three factors with a negative influence:

1. The first factor refers to the parameters of the contracts with the construction firms. They are not familiar to the public and therefore it is impossible to exert a civic control over their implementation. The opinion is that the municipal authorities do not monitor the work of contractor firms.
2. The second factor relates to implementation of these contracts by the municipal administration on its part. The opinion is that tenders are conducted, but on final

account there is not enough funding and the contractor firms cannot fulfill the engagements they have taken.

3. The third factor concerns the low level of culture of the citizens and their inability to maintain good hygiene. This problem has many aspects – from inability to maintain good hygiene in the common parts of the blocks, through the hygiene in spaces between the blocks, and the pollution in streets, parks, and gardens, to the lack of civic culture for self-control and control over others.

Not the last, the lack of civic culture is also associated with the lack of sanctions on the part of the government – the municipality does not sanction violators. The respondents unite around the opinion that the government control lacks completely. The necessary change requires both gradual creation of hygienic habits (yet from school) and strict control and sanctions.

### **Citizen participation in resolving problems, attitudes toward NGOs**

Occasions when citizens organize for a joint action are rare and refer not so much to existing habits for citizen activity as to violated interests.

The main reason for the people to remain passive is the bad economic situation. Part of the population has moved to town over recent years from small settlements and villages. They actively raise domestic animals in the outskirts of the town. This is worsening the sanitation. Second, part of this population do not have established habits to keep clean “outside their private space” (and sometimes even inside it).

The bad economic situation makes the people passive regarding community problems. Their interest is mainly oriented towards problems of their every-day life. People perceive issues like cleanness of the town as a problem and a responsibility of the municipal administration, and not as a personal engagement and responsibility.

A way of problem solving in such a situation is the strict sanctioning of violators. Another way – especially when the issue is about a Roma population – is building “mixed blocks” where Roma and Bulgarians would live together. In Iztok residential district of the town, there are both blocks with mixed residents and blocks populated only with Bulgarians. The respondents’ opinion is that, in the mixed blocks, there is a better hygiene. This is probably due to a mutual control, while habits are gradually established.

Habits and inclination for citizen activity must be built yet from the school through involvement of children in such type of initiatives. One of the respondents, a teacher, gave an example when they had created a garden in their school with participation of the children. As a result,

the children kept and maintained the garden, and their participation in its creation subsequently made them sensitive.

Going beyond the problems of sanitation and public works, we can draw the following **conclusions** regarding the citizen activity and the NGO role:

The respondents put a strong accent on the lack of habits in the residents. This includes both lack of criteria for self-control and lack of critical attitude towards the behavior of others.

Another issue is the lack of culture for public participation and activity. Problems are seen as problems of the municipal authorities. Such activity is related to the first years of the transition (1990). Subsequently, enthusiasm gave way to apathy, and today people are secluded within their private space.

This is why there is a need for a stricter control on the part of the government institutions, which now does not exist. It is necessary through increased requirements and constant sanctions to build a citizen responsibility.

Here is the place of NGOs and structures with citizen participation. As examples for Pazardjik, mentioned were the control bodies “Eco-patrols” and “Blue Zone” groups (inspecting the parking lots of the town). As new structures however, they are still seen as indolent and with low effectiveness.

The place of NGOs is also seen along organizing citizens for effective actions. The opinion is that, despite the general passivity, there are also people who would respond to reasonable initiatives. When citizens take part in such initiative and it is successful, this will gradually create a culture of participation and activity.

The place of NGOs is also sought with regard to alternative sources of funding for projects important for the town. The opinion is that, at present, existing NGOs in the town are working well but are very narrowly qualified – they address primarily specific target groups (minorities, disabled, and the like). There are a number of other activities within the municipality (for example environment and problems of every-day life), for which NGOs could pursue funding as well as citizen activity and participation.

According to the respondents, NGOs can help citizens in exerting control over the work of the municipal administration. Moreover, this can be done in various manners – from how local taxes are formed to how they are spent. Control is also necessary over contracts signed by the municipality with contractor firms on projects addressing infrastructure and public works.

How are the competitions conducted? What are the contract parameters? How are responsibilities under those contracts being implemented?

A strong accent was placed on the necessity for a periodic accountability of the municipality for its activities.

For the citizens' involvement in such initiatives an active media campaign is needed. The local media channels (TV, radio, and press) are seen as most effective. Second, in order for the citizens to be attracted it is necessary to show them clearly their own interest in the respective initiative – “we'll ensure money, and your participation will lead to such and such result.”