

COVID-19 Success Stories Heroes

From the Ones who respond in difficult times

Edited by Elizabeth Balint
And Esmerina Hidri

September 2020



“COVID Heroes is a book of successful stories during the pandemic, and showing of appreciation for all our Alumni that yearn for transformation within themselves and across communities”.

The impact of the pandemic and all the challenges that we are faced with as part of our communities has us all made to shift into thinking and acting in distance, exploring innovative approaches to spark changes, while also taking care of one another.

“COVID Heroes” is full of inspiration, practical wisdom based in brave, thoughtful and collaborative efforts. We hope that it will be useful to people trying to respond to real crises through creative solutions that actually seek to build stronger communities.

For us it has been an honor to get to prepare and publish this book and a journey full of appreciation for your courage and persistence to build a better world.

Sincerely

Esmerina HIDRI and Aida CIRO



You will find inside success stories from:

Albania
Bulgaria
Hungary
Romania
Slovakia

Albania

Children and Youths

"The diary of pandemic isolation of 20 children in Tirana, joined mom and dad to learn, play and stay safe home with their kids"

"The steps" that counts

"Code by Having Fun Activities"

Ana MAJKO

2019 Fall, Alumni

"The diary of pandemic isolation of 20 children in Tirana, joined mom and dad to learn, play and stay safe home with their kids"

The day care Centre nearby Selita community in Tirana, closed its services with the best memory event ever for children and their moms, celebrating the 8th of March, Women's Day, without knowing what would bring the next morning. The pandemic situation stuck all the daily routine starting from the provision of services for children, that during one year attended every day "the day care" as a place of increasing their potentials and capacities for school preparedness enrollment.

These children didn't perceive that for the next "tomorrows" they would not come at the center and were forced to meet the new friend called "quarantine times".

Isolation of children and their families prevailed difficulties in living conditions, lack of income, other ways of providing food and other needs of children. Parents were not allowed to work in recycle materials to trash containers, and the poverty conditions were aggravated day after day. This unbearable situation affected children that live in the same environment with concerned parents and full of doubts for ensuring the child basic needs.

Respecting the government measures of security, children couldn't be part of daily program for early childhood development, mothers couldn't go to the Centre and take the psychosocial support that was needed and were eager to benefit as the only way of changing their way of thinking and

raising self-esteem. This challenge of unpredictable risks led the staff to establish the mitigation measures aiming the child wellbeing in a domestic environment.

Even though the physical contact was respected with the children and their families the communication by phones and social media was the right connection to get children involved in the continuance of the program that they attended to the day care Centre. The idea was to encourage children and parents to be engaged in the family environment, raise awareness of the Covid -19 situation, help mothers to cope with children behaviors and spend more time with the family members.

The staff of the Centre proposed a program in distance where children could take a diary of their perspective about this situation as the only communication channel where the child can verbalize thoughts, feelings and emotions with their own way of drawing, playing, or witting. This tool was appreciated by parents and during the weeks the program affected parents to be involved with the tasks of the child diary.

A mother of three children affirmed that with these homework children are less stressed and she had learned how to write her name, taught by her son. Another mother of two kids affirmed that they had a lot of income difficulties, no support and a lot of difficulties to cook the meals for the children.

Even there is a challenge for all parents to deal with the economic impossibilities, child relation with other siblings, withstand the pandemic situation with the unknown challenges, parents have defeated the lost time with their children during their growth. The quarantine helped them to improve their parental skills with children mentored by the psychosocial staff of the Centre.

The child friendly language explanation used to raise awareness

for the coronavirus, the protection measures, the social distance and home isolation to children that served directly to parents who had difficulties in their academic level of knowledge. Animation and role play with cartoons by the teacher, frequently send by social media to children was one of the highest level of engagements for parent-child relationship during this period of collaboration.

The positive impact of children and their families to that program is prioritized by the education programs provided by Initiative for Social Change- NISMA and will be finalized at the end of pandemic situation with a diary of each child as a memory of this difficult situation where the professional would establish the further plan of intervention in psycho-social needs of the child. Children, attendants of this program are supported by the organization for other needs aiming the wellbeing and the health security for all the family. Even in the difficult situations, when you see children eyes, you can find the window of hope.



Lorela MUSTA, STEPS Center

2018 Fall, Alumni

"The Steps" that Counts

STEPS Center has been actively engaged throughout the Covid-19 pandemic period by offering its professional contribution in coping with the psychological and emotional consequences in adults and children.

Our therapists have provided free online psychological support throughout the months of quarantine for people who were experiencing various emotional concerns related to isolation or fear of being infected with the virus. The most common concerns that were addressed were anxiety, managing panic attacks, fear of losing loved ones, difficulties in managing child behaviors, difficulties in couple relationships, and so on. The psychological service was provided through direct means of online communication but also through written advice.

"Deas Travels" was a booklet prepared for preschool children as a way to stimulate imaginative thinking in children in coping with the limitations and new routines created due to the situation of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through this booklet, the STEPS Center aimed to raise awareness among parents about the importance of reading in their child's development, linguistically, cognitively, socially or emotionally. Dea became a beloved character for many children who shared with us many of their "imaginary journeys" during the lockdown period.

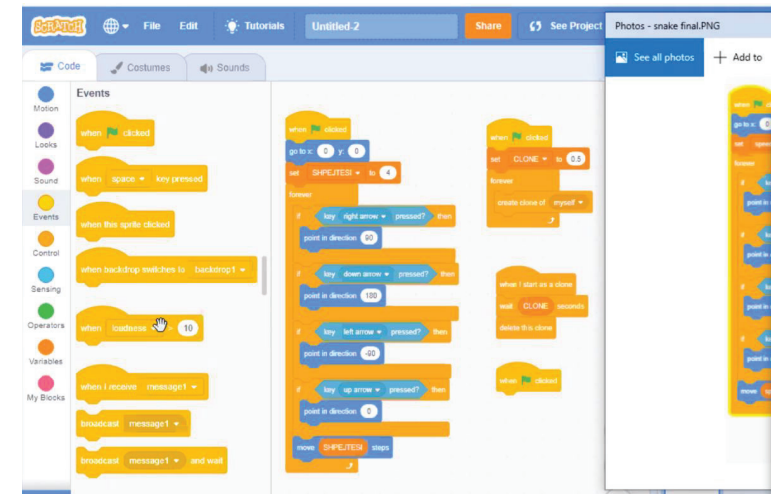


Nensi DRAGOTI, Albania Education Foundation 2018 Spring, Alumni

"Code by Having Fun Activities"

During lockdown on pandemic situation our organization (Albania Education Foundation) got engaged in delivering education courses by online platforms for marginalized group located in city of Durres, Rogozhina and Kavaja. We helped children from 5th grade to 12th grade, with different subject courses as Chemistry, Literature, English, and Math. We facilitated them on filling the gap from not completing school curricula.

Only on March-April we offered 27 different courses for more than 250 youngsters in mentioned cities. Also during this time, we organized two intensive activities for youngster as 'code by having fun activities' and 'create your website in a week' with participation of more than 100 youngsters with in the focus to raise digital skills as a future of success. During June-July with the help of Global Albanian Foundation we provided one-year internet package for 10 families in need instead of having infrastructure for online learning during 2020-2021 academic year.



Fundraising and Employment

"We did it"!

"Campaign Can Help"

Suela KOÇIBELLINJ, VIZION-OJF

2018 Spring, Alumni

"We Did It"!

880 masks donated to kids and youths in Albania, handmade by artisan/craft women!

"Vizion OJF" NGO offered direct support to eight artisan women in Tirana, Mirdita and Dibra to generate incomes for themselves in these difficult times through the production of reusable masks for everyday use.

"Vizion NGO" bought the material and made the first order of 40 masks, for staff and volunteers. The second step was about making the mask available for everyone who wanted to buy them, choosing between a lot of mask designs, full of colors and hope, and giving direct opportunity to the women to produce and to earn money.

In line with women empowerment program, "Hopla-hope and love", was possible to directly offer self-employment possibilities to the eight women. But the need for masks remained still big. And that is why, it was started a fundraising to make possible to produce and donate 1000 mask to children who need to be in hospitals during these times and youths who restarted the high school in Kruja and Mirdita.

Their initiative was embraced by a lot of simple and well known people in Albania, deputy women like Mrs. Eglantina Gjermeni, Mrs. Vasilika Hysi etc. to promote the added value of our work. In 10 days it was possible to fundraise 1080 \$ which was enough to buy the material and to pay the women, to produce the 1000 masks. Actually there have been distributed more than 700 masks.



Mirela JUKA, Down Syndrome Albania Foundation

2019 Spring, Alumni

"Campaign Can Help"

In March 2020, Down Syndrome Albania Foundation started a campaign on helping with food packages the families who had a person with disabilities and were struggling with financial issues due to the Covid-19. Down Syndrome Albania, has successfully aided 320 families and people with disabilities during Covid-19 as well as those impacted by the disastrous earthquake in Albania, by delivering essential food and hygienic supplies to those who needed most. These help was made possible through the support of different businesses and individual donations. The families were mostly from Shkodra, Durrës, Mat district, Korça and rural areas of Tirana.



Community Organizing

"Network and Allocate"

"Humanitarian assistance"

Klaudio HYSENI, Durrësi Aktiv

2020 Spring Fellow

"Network and Allocate"

During COVID-19 lockdown, "Durrësi Aktiv" the NGO represented by Klaudio, was under a great pressure because they had difficulties in Community Organizing and couldn't be physically with the families in need, because their activities stopped for some weeks. Time passed quickly but the situation got worse in this new reality of pandemic especially for the families of the Roma Community, struggling every day for food supply and sanitation. The economic situation of the Roma Community in Durrës, is based mainly on urban waste collecting, selling the garbage to the collection points, but due to the pandemic situation selling the garbage was impossible so it affected the main incomes of this community. The government didn't allocate all the categories of the communities in need that were going to have the smallest of revenues and Roma Minority wasn't included on these categories.

On March 2020, Klaudio got a phone call from an active member of the Roma Community asking for help. He was looking for food supply and sanitation for families, then he started in every way to address the difficulty of the situation to the local institution, contacting with government representatives and other NGOs. They started to make a network between different people and NGOs to help these community, they choose 100 families to be supplied with food. On April, after a hard work of addressing and networking food, the Roma NGO made a clear demand for help to the government that was then allocated to this community.

"Durrësi Aktiv" wants to thank all for the collaboration.

Megi KUSHI, National Association Education for Life (SHKEJ)

2020 Spring Fellow

"Humanitarian assistance"

The unprecedented times of Covid-19 sharpened the landscape of vulnerable life conditions targeting more than ever marginalized groups and minorities living in the suburbs of Tirana. In regard of its vision and mission, National Association Education for Life (SHKEJ) has been fully engaged in humanitarian assistance providing food, hygienic and didactic packages for families in need, Roma and Egyptian communities. The need assessment of these families has been an ongoing process since the beginning of quarantine in order to respond to every urgent need as a consequence of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, children's protection and well-being have been as always prioritized by the committed staff of one of the community centers of SHKEJ, EDEN.

The outdoor activities focused on recreational approaches, in accordance with safety measures, have been the foundation to protect psychological and emotional health of children during those challenging times.

Online meetings and counselling with parents and youth have been other dynamic tools to keep the community as vitalized as possible.



Bulgaria

Service and Fundraising

"Engaging is the new trend"

"We went for self-produced"

"Old devices for a new beginning"

"Persistence"

"Bulgarian sign language"

"From off-line to on-line"

Emil METODIEV

2012 Spring, Alumni

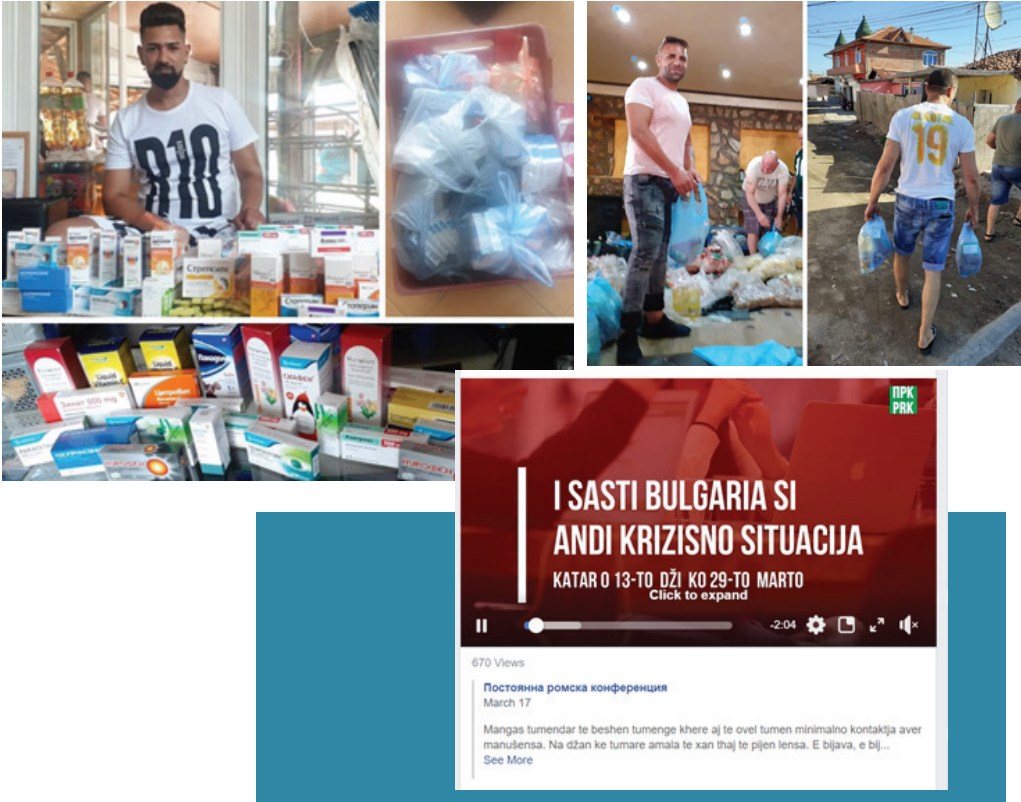
Asen Karagyozev, Ognyan Isaev, Vladislav Petkov

"Engaging is the new trend"

Taking the lead within Roma Standing Conference, Emil Metodiev was instrumental in a particular active role Roma Standing Conference played in the COVID-19 related developments. These efforts included:

- Providing up-to-date, accurate and user-friendly information on the COVID-19 crisis development and response to the Roma community in the country, including through photos and videos in Bulgarian, Roma language and Turkish language;
- Consolidating Roma and pro-Roma leadership support around a couple of positions towards local and central authorities around handling the COVID-19 crises in regards to the Roma community, including a call to end the practice of putting Roma neighborhoods on disproportionately strict lockdowns, end of narratives which link the spread of the virus with the Roma community and involving Roma leaders in consultation and decision-making processes around the COVID-19 response;
- Creating online space for Roma-focused discussions and entertainment, using cutting-edge technologies. Tens of thousands of Roma people were reached by the content, generated by Roma Standing Conference during the lockdown in Bulgaria.
- Engaging local and central authorities in online meetings to discuss strategies for recovery that take into consideration the needs and potential of the Roma community. Such meetings were specifically organized for the towns of Sliven, Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, among others and commitments on behalf of local authorities were made.

- Fundraising campaign for medicine and other necessities for people in need in the Roma neighbourhood of Kyustendil who were blocked in a strict lockdown for three weeks in June 2020. The campaign raised 350 BGN, to which Roma Standing Conference added 2700 BGN. Support was given to 10 people who were treated for COVID-19 along with 35 other families in need who were quarantined.
- Through the Roma Initiatives Offices of OSI (Berlin), Roma Standing Conference funded small relief projects in Plovdiv, Lom, Sliven and other places where community Roma groups have set up plans.



Georgi NIKOLOV

2018 Spring, Alumni

Julia Jurieva, Julia Andonova

"We went for self-produced"

Georgi Nikolov and the foundation he leads - SEED - have self-produced and distributed 240 disinfectants which were distributed mainly within the Roma community in Samokov. The campaign was launched a week before Easter and was meant to increase security, particularly among the religious protestant community in the town.

The funding was secured by the U.S. Embassy, with the proposal being prepared together with alumna Julia Jurieva and future-alumna Julia Andonova.

The disinfectants were made following guidelines provided by the World Health Organizations. The initiative was covered by the Bulgarian National Radio.



Atanas ATANASOV

2020 Fall, Fellow

'Old devices for a new beginning'

Atanas Atanasov was very active in a campaign promoted by his organization Alamlife, called 'Old devices for a new beginning'. The campaign was launched in the first days of the introduced lockdown in Bulgaria in March and by July has managed to collect over 800 digital devices (laptops, tablets) and distribute them to children in poor families in order to secure their access to distant forms of education. 1200 children, many from Roma families, have benefited from the devices and allowed them to successfully finish the school year. The campaign was actively working with schools and apart from collecting old digital devices, also raised funds and was able to buy and distribute 300 new tablets.

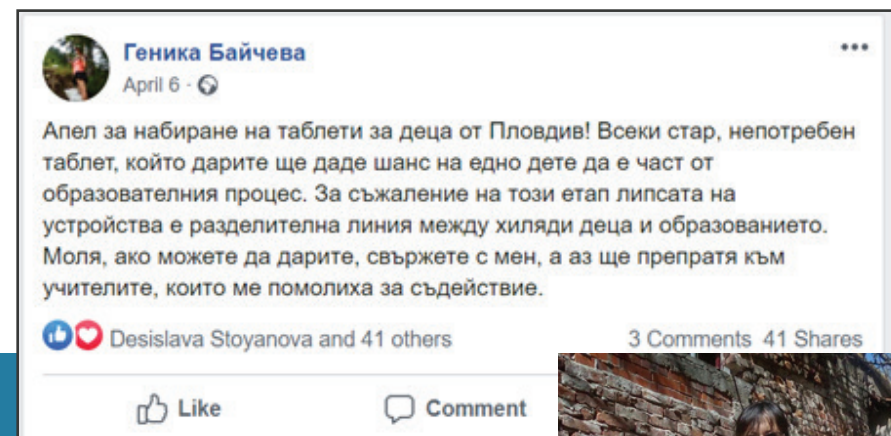


Genika BAYCHEVA

2017 Fall, Alumni

"Persistence"

Genika Baycheva started her own online campaign to collect used digital tablets for the need of children in Plovdiv who have no access to smart devices and are thus left out from the distant learning educational process. In less than 24 hours she managed to collect 15 tablets, install Google Classroom on them and distribute it to children in need. The campaign was not supported by any organizations, but was a private initiative and mobilized the personal network of Genika along with other people who got to know about the campaign online and answered the call.



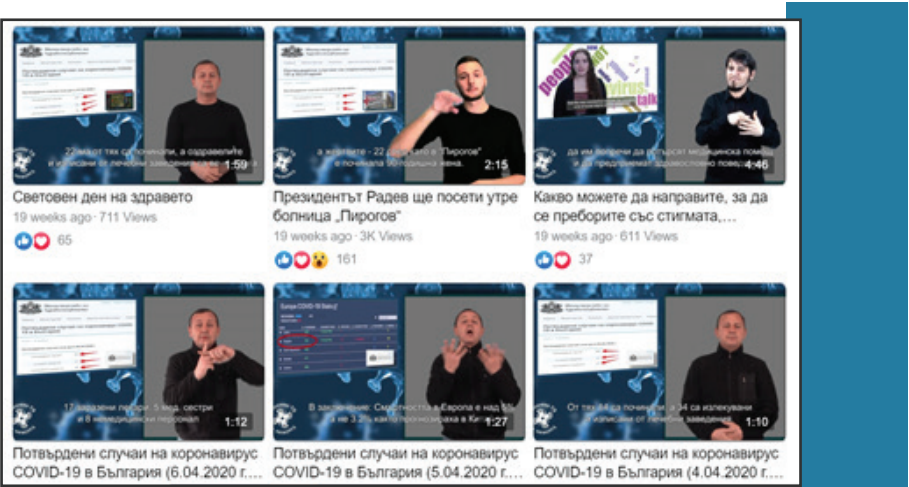
Kiril SLAVOV

2020 Spring, Fellow

Alexander Ivanov, Ashod Derandonyan

"Bulgarian sign language"

Kiril and Alexander both participated in shooting videos on Bulgarian sign language for the sign-language-based online TV Vzaimno, which was particularly important in providing information on COVID-19 developments to Deaf people in the time of the lockdown. The Deaf-led online TV produces daily videos with updates on COVID-19 numbers, measures and developments. A positive development from the pandemic is that COVID-19 press briefing by the national authorities were interpreted to sign language and since the pandemic the big TV stations kept sign language interpereters for their news. However, the Deaf community finds that the quality of interpreting came up to not be that good and many Deaf people remain with limited access to information. As a result, the Deaf community is focusing its efforts on establishing local services in Bulgarian Sign language by Deaf signers.



Lilly DRAGOEVA

2017 Fall, Alumni

"From off-line to on-line"

The LGBTI organization which Lilly leads - Bilits Foundation - has switched its regular community meetings from offline to online, which has provided the possibility to engage people from all across Bulgaria and even people from abroad! This made their ongoing community work more inclusive and made them consider keeping online events even after all the measures are lifted, combining in-person and online meetings in order to keep the accessibility rates high.

From March to May 2020 Bilits also offered 7 online meetings for LGBTI community members for free psychological support. This came to answer the issue that many LGBTI people were locked down together with families they might have difficult relationship with, while being deprived from the opportunity to seek support in the community offline. The meetings were led by a qualified psychotherapist and were held on Zoom.



Community Organizing

"Youths Power"

Asen KARAGYOZOV

2016 Spring, Alumni

"Youths Power"

Asen Karagyozev and the organization he leads – Youth Club Roma Stolipinovo – ran a couple of campaigns to provide food and other necessities to Roma families in the neighborhood of Stolipinovo, Plovdiv. Such initiatives were run in April and June and supported more than 300 families in the neighborhood.

Asen was also active in communicating with both the people in the neighborhood and the local authorities in COVID-19-related developments. Thanks to his efforts and the efforts of other activists, the neighborhood was not put under a specific lockdown, which has happened with other Roma settlements around Bulgaria. The idea was discussed, but rejected, thanks to assertive Roma leadership.



Hungary

Service and Fundraising

"Try to work the most trusted organisation"

"Masks to the front!"

"Let digital education belong to everyone!"

"As the situation remains uncertain, Adapt"

Szabrina ABDALLAH

2019 Fall, Alumni

"Try to work the most trusted organisation"

It was at a retreat period with Szabrina's colleagues where they were planning strategies for the upcoming months, when the pandemic suddenly reached Hungary. They immediately changed their plans because the only thing it was known is that people will need urgent help as the healthcare system is extremely underfunded and hundred of thousands of people are living in extremely poor circumstances. First they collected 18 000 USD for the Red Cross Hungary because they were the most trusted organisation which were able to order and provide masks and other hygienic equipment to Hungary's most disadvantaged families.

In the following weeks, through a collaboration between field organizers it was also created a donation and support system to transfer immediate support (food and hygienic equipment) to 1000, mainly Roma families. With 70 000 USD member support these goods had been delivered within around 2-3 weeks, in the most problematic period of the crisis.

Szabrina was also the coordinator of the donation in the "Ablak a padra" fundraising project that has been launched to decrease barriers of participation in digital education. This program also became one of the largest fundraising efforts in the country and provided almost 400 new and renewed computers/tablets/-phones for poor families and local afterschool programs.



Tamás HORN

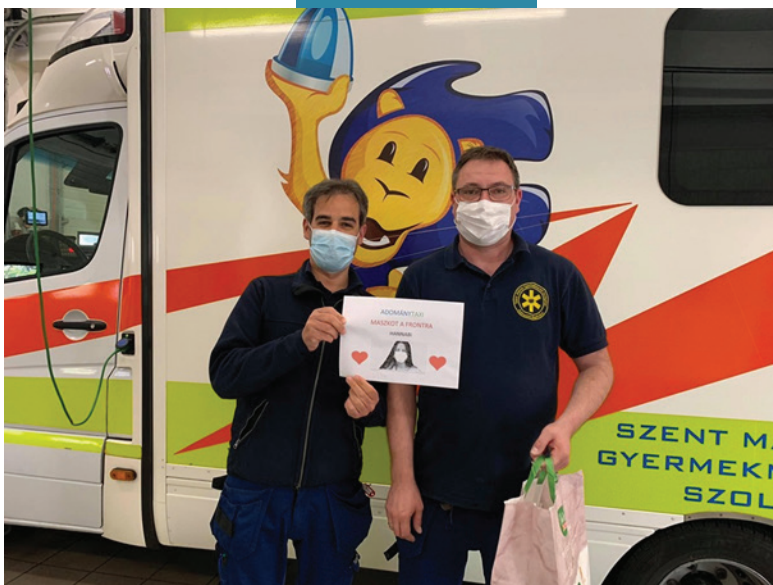
2016 Fall, Alumni

'Masks to the front!'

COVID 19 had changed Tamás plans like most of the organizations'. Luckily his organization could bring out some new opportunities of the new situation. A friend of Tamás who produces furniture found Tamás to help her. She wanted to produce masks but she needed an organization to crowdfund and manage the campaign. After she set up the system, Tamás's organization collected 3 million HUF (~10 000 \$). It was bought material to be given to professional and volunteer sewers. In the end it was delivered the ready masks for the workers of healthcare and social welfare system.

In the frame of 'Masks to the front!' in the campaign were involved around 50 volunteers (logistic, sewers, drivers) and were produced 15 000 masks. They delivered those to 60 different places including hospitals, homeless shelters, medical institutions, ambulance stations, COVID departments, children hospice houses, NGO-s and so on. Their biggest donor was a painter who gave them 3000 \$ after she sold a painting of her and she offered us the money.





Alexandra SZARKA, Márton GOSZTONYI, Mónika BÁLINT, Péter SZABADOS, Szabrina ABDALLAH

2017 Fall, 2012 Spring, 2015 Fall, 2019 Spring, 2019 Fall

Alumni

“Digital education belong to everyone!”

Window to the bench - IT collection campaign

As part of a joint action between Chain Reaction and Invisible School, were collected and distributed digital devices to children in need so they did not lag behind their classmates during the pandemic. According to a recent study, it is impossible for every fifth child in Hungary to join digital education due to a lack of IT tools. These children were currently receiving the curriculum on paper, which they would had to complete without any help. Chain Reaction and Invisible School wanted to provide IT tools and internet access to 300 children in 20 settlements. Finally, they could reach more than 350 children!

They were looking for IT tool offers from companies, as well as donations offers from individuals. It was collected new digital devices or ones that were in good condition (laptops, tablets, mobile, internet devices, headsets). Monetary donations were used to purchase new devices and mobile internet subscriptions, as well as the covering cost of transporting the devices.

IT tools were assessed and distributed by community organizers working in the field with local schools and with the Civil College Foundation. Also Chain Reaction and Invisible School organized the transfer of donations to the families, and our volunteer mentors also helped the families set up and use the IT tools.



Dr. DINÓK HENRIETT

2012 Fall Alumni

“As the situation remains uncertain, Adapt”

The combination of early restrictive measures and low number of tests resulted in a relatively low death toll and few COVID-19 cases in Hungary. In the meantime, the cost of harsh restrictive measures took an extraordinary toll on the economy and on the most vulnerable groups of society. Dr. DINÓK HENRIETT and the crew reached out to all of his students and realized that they had to meet two main challenges. Firstly, they had to ensure the continuity of quality education to prepare the students for approaching high school graduation tests and term-end exams. Swift actions included switching both subject-based courses and skill-development sessions to the online space, hand-in-hand with organizing forums that provided relevant information on the pandemic and helped students cope with the situation. Additionally, with the help of the donors they collected laptops and distributed them among the students, who did not have devices for online learning.

Another challenge for the students was the rapid deterioration of living conditions. As a result of the closure of dormitories, many of them had to move back to overcrowded family homes and due to the impact of the crisis on the economy, several students lost their jobs. As this happened only a few weeks before high school graduation tests and term-end exams, it was launched a crowdfunding campaign to specifically assist students in crisis. They registered a record number of donors and record amount of donations which made it possible to provide complementary scholarships for 14 students in need. As the situation remains uncertain, we have adapted our university prep courses to the online space which allowed us to

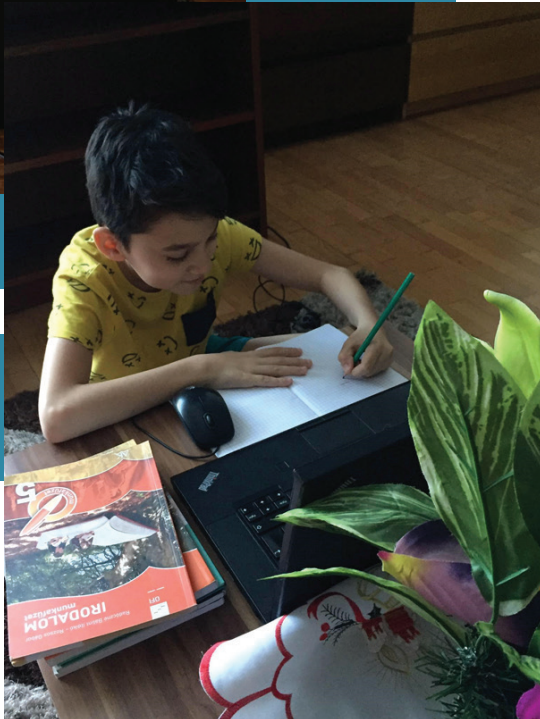
increase the geographical scope of the program from capital-based to national.

Romver1: As soon as the pandemic situation got better in June, we organized an open air event to close the academic year. The event was attended by several students, our staff, our founder and some key donors. It was encouraging to experience how much our community evolved during the pandemic.



Romver2: As dormitories closed in mid-March, many of our students had to move back to overcrowded family homes. "When I need some space to attend online classes, I sit outside of our home in my family's car," wrote one of our students when sending this photo. We love this picture because it exemplifies the resilience of our student body.





Education and Social Care

"What about education now?"

Éva IVÁNYI

2019 Spring Alumni

At the time of the virus in the Oltalom and in our church institutions...

***"Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;."***
(Psalm 23)

In Hungarian educational institutions, was forced to order a halt to classes from kindergarten to university education. In public education, more than three thousands of students are looking forward, with more or less enthusiasm, starting again and then ending the year smoothly. High schools still don't know how the government will decide on graduation. For the most part, small school children in the poorest settlements of the country are concerned - since this time is not considered a holiday according to the government's decision – about how to get the usual three meals a day. It is also difficult because the transition to e-distance learning would presuppose that there is an internet, a computer, or at least one tablet in every municipality and within every household. Our organization called for a fund-raising and a collection for this and we are grateful for the pieces we were able to get from the offering, but still a large number is needed.

In Hungary, happened a forced closure of our higher education institution, John Wesley Theological College. Although the college had not yet fully developed distance learning, professors and students have been surprisingly flexibly and quickly

transitioned to this form of education. They haven't even had to suspend the ample conference offerings.

Since the Wesley College dormitories and classrooms were unused because of the closure, the college opened the dormitories to nurses and social workers or volunteers who were willing to work but by no means wanted to take the infection home to their loved ones. The empty classrooms have been redesigned to accommodate homeless people.

The College's kitchen, which is also the soup-kitchen, cooks about four hundred servings of hot meals (our rural schools get food from several other closer locations) but during this difficult time they were forced to face the fact that the necessary staff no longer wanted to take the job because of the risk of infection.

Many kind volunteers and the Nazarene brothers have sewn protective masks for homeless people. They also received some from the district and the Capital, but they also had to buy large quantities of masks, protective gloves, protective clothing and cleaning supplies using our scarce resources.

New difficulty in their homes for mothers with child/children is that from here, families, or rather family fragments, cannot go home. Moreover, mothers are sent away from the already scarce jobs, the burden of their support is our problem.

In Hungarian educational institutions, they focus on the care of people living in deep poverty, so the educational institutions do not receive any help from these families. Actually, the reverse is true! They need support, and it was provide as much as possible for at least a thousand families. This is also the approximate number of employees of all Hungarian institutions.

One might ask what makes all this possible. Thank you for all donations to those who have supported financially. The smaller and larger amounts of solidarity in recent days have added up to two and a half million forints. Thanks to all our supporters!



Community Organizing

"We have to catch up"

Anita FÚRÓS

2019 Spring, Alumni

"We have to catch up"

Because of the Covid-19, the government has decided to close the schools and started the digital education. At the same time, because these provisions, Anita's organisation had close their 'after school catch-up program' where they were creating opportunities for children with learning difficulties. The environment of the families of these children lacks infrastructure. Their houses are in a very bad condition, they are small and crowded. They didn't have internet connection and the required equipment, also their digital user competences were on a low level and it was difficult to switch to the digital education. This way these children who already had difficulties in school, will regress more and more and eventually fall out from the educational system. This will cause a huge social-economical issue for the whole city. They had to give a chance for these children who are endangered.

It was found out that none of the 25 families has access to the right equipment. So with social involvement they successfully gathered equipment and mobile internet connections for these families. At the same time, they created an action plan to provide all these families with the right tools.

They were dealing with different problems every week, but were able to react to these difficult situations. They were able to switch to an online platform where they kept the workshops with the children. They found out that the families were struggling with finances, so they decided to supply them with food and hygiene packages twice a week. They are still providing food supplies for the families in need.

When the government started to ease the restrictions they started to study with the children in small groups with a lots of volunteers involved. They found out that they did not really do any homework during the lockdown, so we had a lot to catch up with. They successfully closed this school year, no one has to repeat the year fortunately.



Economic Development

"Demand & supply crises"

Márton GOSZTONYI

2012 Spring, Alumni

"Demand & supply crises"

Countries around the world, and most of the industries, have suffered significant economic damage as a result of the global pandemic. This was due to a simultaneous demand and supply shock. Demand has declined as consumers have reduced their purchases of non-essential goods and services, and redundancies have led to a decline in society's overall consumption volume. At the same time, supply also declined, as many companies simply could not handle disrupted supply chains.

"Therefore, what can we expect for the most vulnerable forms of enterprise, for the case of social enterprises? They are likely to go bankrupt. Since they operate in the context of the most disadvantaged social groups and have extremely fragile liquidity. Most likely, this has happened in countless cases, but I don't want to share such a story right now. I would like to share a totally different one", Márton GOSZTONYI .

Romama Social Cooperation, have been operating community-based social enterprises In Hungary, in Borsod County for years. One of their two most successful businesses is a social convenience store in a small rural village and the other is a passenger travel company which carries passengers between villages and cities. Both of their social enterprises tripled their revenues under the coronavirus. There are three reasons for this: on the one hand, they respond to basic needs (food, transport), on the other hand, they have a secure customer base, and thirdly, we have managed to keep our prices low during the virus. As a result, while many of their competitors went bankrupt, they were

able to spend much of their profits on food donations. Of course, as with any business practice, Romama Social Cooperation needed a touch of luck and forward-thinking planning. However, it can be seen that no matter how tiny the business is, if it is surrounded by a strong community and its business portfolio is well planned, it can remain resilient even in huge crises.

Romania

Community Organizing

"You are responsible for your city"

"We are viral"

Gabriela Anghel & Vera Turcanu-Spatari

Fall 2020 & Fall 2019, Alumni

"You are responsible for your city"

During the pandemic lockdown, the civic group Floreasca Civică had to face a surprising emergency - Bucharest City Hall announced the final proposal for the new Urbanistic Regulatory Plan of the 2nd District – "PUZ Sector 2", which was the final step in adopting this type of regulation.

On March 31st, the PUZ Sector 2 was put up for public debate. The new Urbanistic Regulatory Plan was one of the main topics of our advocacy campaigns for the past 5 years. The plan contained a lot of violations of different construction standards and illegal changes of land usage that would allow constructions on green spaces and construction of over-sized buildings in protected areas.

The purpose was to stop the adoption of the new PUZ Sector 2. So the members of Floreasca Civică organized its campaign tactics along three directions and we acted simultaneously.

First, it was held an online meeting and were talked to people with expertise in urbanism, architecture, environment, and with their voluntary help, it was elaborated a document with the counterarguments and substantial improvements for the PUZ Sector 2.

At the same time, it was appealed to other civic groups and NGOs from the 2nd District, and CeRe to inform the communities about the new PUZ Sector 2. They distributed online the document with the counterarguments and called and encouraged people to leave their opinions and comments on the General City Hall's website. Together they managed to organize a great online mobilization of people reaching more than 15.000 people and 243 comments were placed on the City's website.

The third tactic that was used was to meet with the leaders of the major parties that have representatives in the General City Council: Save Romania Union (USR), People's Movement Party (PMP), National Liberal Party (PNL) to advocate against the new plan and convince them not to vote.

During the meetings, it was succeeded in getting their promise not to vote for the new plan.

As a result of all the efforts, the new Urbanistic Regulatory Plan of the 2nd District was not voted. The document was sent back to the judicial commission within the City Council to be revised and later on, it will be opened for a new round of public consul-



Post of Floreasca Civică calling people to write comments on the City Hall platform.

Gabriela Anghel
Vera Turcanu-Spatari

Mihnea Mihail Florea

2015 Spring, Alumni

"We are viral"

MozaiQ experienced a sudden shutdown of offline activities, as did all the other LGBT organizations. Prides were canceled, as were visits and training sessions to other cities.

As a rapid response to the lockdown imposed in Romania, which had a great impact on LGBT people wellbeing, were organized online events:

- a. that presented the experience of LGBT organizing during the pandemic from other countries: Russia, Moldova, U.S.A
- b. that presented the experience from other minority groups, intersectionally: HIV and LGBT during the pandemic; Sex work and LGBT during the pandemic; Roma and LGBT during the pandemic;
- c. that created safe online spaces for the community to meet and socialize;

Zoom call with local LGBT organizations:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=295377568121134>

It was also organized a petition to the President of Romania to turn back the law banning the mention of gender in the education system. The petition raised over 42,000 signatures in just a couple of days. Was delivered after a protest organized with other interested organizations.

They are now working on securing funding for online activities. Project activities include:

1. Organize 10 online strategic planning sessions with 10 active groups from across Romania to consult, coordinate and develop a local roadmap. The 10 targeted groups include: 5 local activist groups from outside of Bucharest (Cluj, Iasi, Timisoara, Brasov, Sibiu) and 5 intersectional groups (trans, LGBTI women, LGBT youth, LGBT Roma, and LGBT people living with HIV/AIDS). The sessions will engage 20 key-activists and will cover: Identifying local needs and obstacles to activism within and after a Coronavirus environment; Setting objectives and developing a road map for local activism, including learning goals; Coordinating actions and resources;
2. Offer support to all the 10 groups to safely restart organizing offline (under the current limitations) by offering them a package consisting of masks, disinfectant, gloves, guides on personal protection, LGBT-themed materials and 1 zoom account subscription;
3. Organize the second edition of the Pride Village (online) aimed at creating a secure, public space for allies and LGBT people to showcase and debate needs and actions;
4. Organize the 10th edition of LGBT History Month (online). This is a cultural festival focused on presenting to the wider public the challenges faced by LGBT activists as well as engage the LGBT community. The 2020 edition will feature 20 online events of which: 1 Digital Pride online rally, with 200 participants; 1 Digital Pride Forum discussing the future of LGBT rights, with 30 participants; 8 LGBT cultural events, with 15 participants each and a total of 120 participants; 10 events co-organized with the groups, with 15 participants each and a total of 150 participants;

5. Publish the “Rise ON 2020” publication which will showcase the state of LGBT rights and activism for the past 19 years since the decriminalization of homosexuality in Romania, with a focus on the past five years since MozaiQ started its own work;
6. Launch a 10-day social media campaign marking the international Human Rights Day, focused on: enhancing the visibility of each of the 10 LGBT supported groups, debunking myths and fake news through 10 video messages, by addressing stereotypes and common misconceptions regarding LGBT people and rights.



Service and Fundraising

“We went big”

Luca Ciubotaru

2019 Fall, Alumni

"We went BIG"

Radauti and the whole County of Suceava was severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic, with several hospitals being compromised because of the lack of adequate protective measures. The health and social crisis that affected our city coupled with the slow reaction of the central authorities made it clear to us that we had to act beyond the usual scope of community organizing, where we focus on administrative and transparency issues.

"We created an emergency fund where we had the biggest crowdfunding campaign ever for our organization. The success of the campaign showed the trust of the local community has in us and allowed us to effectively intervene where help was needed. We also managed to access emergency grants from ING Romania and Kaufland."

To support the local hospital, they bought respirators and directed to them sorely needed protection materials such as masks, lab coats and protective glasses. It was used a 3D printer to print door knobs for elbows, which we donated to them.

In June, their volunteers donated disinfectant and a no-contact thermometer to a local social center, so the kids could go back to their normal activities. To support high school students take their final exams, was donated 400 protection masks to Eudoxiu Hurmuzachi National College.

Radautiul Civic also got a grant from Start ONG, a program financed by Kaufland. Through it, was managed to help hundreds of people from vulnerable communities whose lives have

become even more precarious as a result of the pandemic. It was distributed food, cleaning products and protection materials in towns and villages around Rădăuți. As a last step of the project, were distributed posters throughout the city, informing people of what they can do to protect themselves from the coronavirus.



Children and Youngs

"...postpone, suspend or
cancel my plans and projects..., kind of period"

Victor Catalin Toma

2019 Spring, Alumni

"...postpone, suspend or
cancel my plans and projects..., kind of period"

First of all the biggest challenge during the pandemic was the fact that Victor had to find new ways to reach out his target groups, especially those people with fewer opportunities (young people with low income, from rural areas or less serviced areas, Roma young people etc.) as most of the interaction with them moved online and not everybody had access to proper equipment.

In the case of youth (not only those with fewer opportunities), at the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic it was easier to reach them online, but taking into consideration that school moved online too, their interest to join online activities got lower, as they were fed up with online interaction. Thus, Victor had to first do online research and look for new ways to reach the young people he is working with and, at the same time, to keep alive the connection with them, so the empowerment and organizing process not to be (too much) affected.

As he is working a lot on European funds, during the pandemic, the European Erasmus+ programs and European Solidarity Corps were suspended, he wasn't able anymore to organize the already planned projects and activities. Also, for some of the projects they had already engaged money (for flight tickets for the international participants, accommodation or different other services) and because of the pandemic those services that were paid for, were not anymore done, as it was postponed, suspend-

ed, canceled or rescheduled the activities, but at the same time they could not recover anymore the money spent on the advance.

Last, but not least, the biggest challenge was the anxiety and stress caused by the fact that Victor had to postpone, suspend or cancel his plans and projects and he didn't know how to reschedule everything, as things were (and still are) unclear: when the authorities' restrictions will be lifted, how to find sponsorships to cover the money they already lost if also the private sector was also affected during the pandemic, will the state institutions still keep the funds for the nongovernmental sector and many other questions that are still waiting an answer.

During the COVID19 pandemic he continued to organize the young people he is working with through online meetings, both in group training sessions (on Zoom or other platforms) and individual coaching. At the same time, he tried to keep in touch with our volunteers, trying to understand their needs and challenges and give them support, mostly psychological, as they became more stressed (because of school, family issues etc.) and developed anxiety and negative feelings. Reaching them and keeping in touch with them in this difficult period was essential, as they needed someone to talk with and to feel that they are supported.

Together with other people from the city Victor supported a campaign for helping elder and disabled people with shopping. Between March 9th (when the lockdown started in Romania) and today, more youth and social workers from city, from different nongovernmental organizations developed this campaign.

Another initiative was to understand the challenges the other organizations from my county are facing, so, together with other

partners they did a research project to identify the needs and problems of the nongovernmental sector at our county level, through questionnaires and online focus groups. After collecting the NGOs needs and problems they have tried to find solutions together with the public authorities, through lobby, advocacy and debates towards future measures and policies to help and support the youth sector at local and county level.



Florin Nasture

2015 Fall, Alumni

"resilient communities"

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, elderly and health professionals are most at risk but vulnerable Roma are in particular danger as well — and yet, they've been mostly overlooked. Hence, the Roma are the forgotten victims of the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus because the authorities have developed more than ever practices of institutional racism. In addition, those NGOs, few in number, which intervened in Roma communities with support for the vulnerable population, did not take into account the ethnic cultural background so important in building resilient communities. Instead, they had imminently charitable interventions, creating even more social dependence and the victimhood mentality.

Our organization developed an approach that not only helps people that have emergency needs (providing food, disinfectants, information) but creates resilient communities, as well, taking into account the values that mobilize people and help them to get organized.

There are 5 communities (Ludesti, Fetesti, Barcea, Liesti, Movileni) where we have been intervening, where besides the emergency needs that we addressed, we are in the process of forming resilient communities. In this sense we are going to organize trainings on maternal health and domestic violence with 150 women, training on human rights (15 Roma leaders), mobilize community members for keeping authorities accountable, forming initiative groups, providing online education support for vulnerable children, combating vulnerability of children and youth by teaching them to play a musical instrument, combating discrimination, etc.



Slovakia

Community Organizing

'Corona diaries from the MiddleEarth'

"Create guidelines"

"Issues do not disappear during pandemics"

Bozena Markovic Baluchova

2013 Fall, Alumni

'Corona diaries from the MiddleEarth'

"Although I have been living with my family in New Zealand for several years now, I still volunteer and work remotely for several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Slovakia. This time it's nothing counterproductive or exceptional, as many organizations have switched to 'home office' mode due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In my articles, I often point out that I am also a migrant and I am not ashamed of it".

'Corona diaries from the MiddleEarth' for Slovak audience

On the first day of the 'lockdown' in March 2020, I started writing short 'Corona diaries from the MiddleEarth', which try to bring positive and informative stories, comparing, but mostly connecting life, customs and traditions, as well as the reactions of the population to pandemic measures in New Zealand and Slovakia. My daughter Tove Tui is almost three years old and has never experienced anything like this in her life. Actually, none of us experienced it. So these corona diaries are also dedicated to her. When she will be reading them in future, perhaps she will better understand how the life in the era of COVID-19 looked like. There are more than hundred corona diaries published on Facebook so far. Between two 'lockdowns' my family (my husband, daughter and me) volunteered at the event 'MUVtalks' dedicated to inspiring female community leaders in Aotearoa. As a chief editor of 'Media about development' blogging platform (one of the products of our DocUnion NGO), I conduct interviews with young Slovak people returning from their volunteer missions and field work in low-income countries. In the articles I try to directly touch on challenges related to the pandemic, as it affected them personally and professionally. Wheth-

er they left the project's country earlier or stayed there locked and fulfilled their duties online, these real life heroes and heroines inspire me on daily basis.

Webinars and case studies for NGOs and academia

I also work part-time for the Slovak Platform for development organisations – Ambrela as a communications manager. This NGO has been an active part of an EU project, called 'SDGs and Migration'. The 'Faces of Migration' campaign (as one of project outcomes) is supposed to challenge the existing views on migration. We wanted to change public dialogue and policies by organizing public events: seminars, discussions, media briefings, focus groups, publications' launches. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic we had to transform all those activities into virtual sessions.

In a very short time (from May to June 2020), we were able to prepare, promote and conduct five webinars for one hundred people from the non-governmental and academic sectors. The topics ('Refugees and migrants: Myths vs Facts', 'Racism in development cooperation', 'Refugees in the midst of the climate crisis' etc.) were quite controversial, but important. About the same time, I wrote two publications concerning an alleviation of the refugee crisis in Lebanon through humanitarian aid projects of Slovak NGOs and a mitigation of forced migration through specific Slovak volunteer projects. Ambrela published both case studies in July 2020. The platform also created sub-webpage dedicated to implemented post-COVID-19 recovery activities in Slovakia and abroad by Ambrela members.

The biggest challenge was to virtually present genuine young personalities behind the 'Faces of Migration' campaign, through which we strive to explain the issue of migration to the public through the lens of Global Goals. To attain the objective I have chosen three Slovak development volunteers, who recently worked with particular vulnerable groups (returnees in Albania;

Internally displaced persons in Georgia; Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey). These young people now contribute to raising awareness back home. They fight prejudices and stereotypical portrayals, trying to correct public opinion about the phenomenon of migration as something negative through their own personal experience and stories.

Changing views thanks to travel, volunteer and study stays

All three depicted volunteers from our 'Faces of Migration' campaign noticed that many fellow citizens around them (not only in Slovakia) use the word migrant as an insult. They see the reason for anti-immigration sentiments in the fact that the reform of the Slovak education system is proceeding only very slowly. That was one of the reasons why our Ambrela aims on global education in schools and is changing the situation for the better (through the 'Faces of migration' campaign too). We must add that, besides civil society, the media and educational institutions should be held accountable and expected to provide unbiased and objective information on the issue of migration.

We can consider all those development volunteers as necessary ambassadors of change. In recent years, thanks to travel, volunteer and study stays, as well as globalisation, much has changed in our region (in terms of understanding the migration phenomena). For instance, through their grandchildren's experiences, Slovak grandparents are slowly becoming acquainted with the issues of diversity, otherness, and sensitivity to other cultures. The global COVID-19 pandemic should not slow down this well-started change. Therefore, our Ambrela must continue in 'Faces of Migration' campaign, in offline or online regime.



Jolana NÁTHEROVÁ

2012 Fall Alumni

"Building trust"

I have been working in two vulnerable communities in city Banská Bystrica for couple of years already. Since then, we raised community leaders, lead and won several campaigns and organized many events to support and engage the community and wider population. However, situation throughout the first wave of pandemic was different and new to us. We tried to be as present as possible to keep the trust of community and support its members in challenging times.

Under the program of Center for Community Organizing we have addressed the immediate needs by fundraising for the equipment and sanitary products that we have distributed in the communities through the local leaders. We have also made sure that the communities are well informed and aware of the situation.

Despite the risk, I was visiting the community I work at regularly. My colleagues and I have created a guidelines for a visit in field to be safe and protect both community and us, community organizers in a front line. People in community did not have access to information, some members were confused and most did not have the mask neither sanitary products. In the first round, we have explained to people one by one how is the situation and what to do. At the same time, we started to collect and distribute the sanitary products and masks. It was a big campaign where lot of people contributed. Besides masks and sanitation many families without an access to the running water had to be equipped by basic hygienic products including water barrels that we have also collected. In the discussions we have noticed that many people are scared. We continued to build the trust and relationships that helped to overcome the negative feel-

ings.

Our community leaders had been a big help to us. Besides, we have been helping pupils to catch up with their homework and follow with education process. It was tough and very exhausting to all of us, but I we have made it through together and that is the most important.



Maroš CHMELÍK

2013 Spring, Alumni

"Issues do not disappear during pandemics"

Our success was mainly connected to helping our communities with basic needs and assisting them during this moment of crisis. I believe that despite the danger from being infected it was crucial our communities had the feeling we were there for them and with them. We also highlighted the unfair treatment in Roma communities during this crisis and also we prepared a detailed open letter tackling issues in homeschooling for socially disadvantaged communities that was later adopted by the Ministry of Education in Slovakia. We took lead in advocating for equal access to the education while schools are closed and launched campaign with community organizers, that was supported by up to 50 activists/professionals in field and organizations.

Even during the times of crises community organizing can be moved forward. The crisis showed us how vulnerable are our already disadvantage communities and how crucial it is to highlight the fact that their issues do not disappear during pandemics, but it is the other way around - they become even more alarming. So even during the crisis the big issues can become a huge opportunity that should be tackled, if you did your job right and you build enough trust and worked on the community relationships.



Recording Podcasts

"PODCAST"

Timea HOKOVA

2019 Fall, Alumni

"PODCAST"

I was part of an initiative within which we have started to record podcasts where we interview successful people with visual impairment. The purpose is to motivate and to inspire; we have found blind and partially sighted people with very interesting stories and with very unusual approach to life.

Each podcast comprises two parts: the first one is a one-to-one interview with a special guest (successful person with visual impairment) and the second part is a facilitated questions and answers discussion involving the guest and the audience (blind and partially sighted people from different parts of Slovakia). Whereas the first part is always recorded and published (as an audio-file only) the second part is without recording in order to encourage participants to be more opened for a smooth peer counselling.

Examples of already discussed topics:

- Travelling when being blind or partially sighted: How to prepare for a travel, how to solve mobility and orientation issues when being in an unknown place, and what apps can be used in order to ease navigation and getting around.
- Living abroad: What does it mean to live abroad, what skills are needed to find a job, how to deal with cultural and language challenges, how to create new social networks and where to find assistance and help.
- Getting a job: How to get a job, how to prepare for an interview – tips and tricks to present the visual impairment in a positive way, how to develop interpersonal relationships at a

work-place or how to run own business as a freelancer.

- Daily living: How to take care of own household, how to realize basic things related to shopping, cooking or cleaning.

This project has been started during the COVID-19 quarantine by a small team of employees of the Slovak Blind and Partially Sighted Union; we are taking rounds in leading interviews and facilitating follow-up discussions. I am very happy to participate in this project.

More information and the podcast episodes can be found here:
<https://bratislava.unss.sk/category/podcast/>

Edita Bednarova

2016 Fall, Alumni

"Young leaders empowerment"

I launched a project with youth in my region. I took lead in coordination of all the stakeholders (representatives of various institutions), my co-trainer, other involved alumni and especially 21 youngsters. Most of them were in last two years of their primary school studies and in their first two years of secondary school studies. Out of the 21 there were 4 youngsters from villages, the rest was from the town Prievidza.

It was challenging to figure out what to do and how to do it during restrictions introduced by Slovak government due to Covid-19 pandemic. Working in a small team and especially working with youth was a great opportunity to improve interpersonal skills and it was a nice exercise on how to look for alternatives if there is something unpredictable happening, then testing them and then implementing the best ones. Our alumni Ivana Novakova was sharing her experience about working with homeless people. The other guest (current employee of ESET corporation but ex-employee of People in Need association) was sharing her experience about implementing projects in Cuba and some other activities. The outcome was 361 involved people in micro-projects.

I've realized that moving activities with youth who are having half of the day online education into virtual space is not possible and personal meetings were still needed. This young leaders' empowerment project was done now for the second time. Despite the pandemic and related restrictions we consider it to be successful.

Sona Korenova

2015 Spring, Alumni

"Young leaders empowerment"

We did offer our community center's spaces for online education purposes. We provided internet and laptops to children from Roma community so they could log in to their teacher's classes. We also went online with our tutoring programme for these children.

Maria Radvakova

2017 Fall, Alumni

I was a runner on the ground at "Kto pomoze Slovensku" (Who Helps Slovakia) initiative /airplane distributions/, it led to me becoming a coach in their app - the app which will be functional continuously even after Covid - 19 crises and NGO's, doctors, senior care institutions, towns and villages can connect through that in order to ask and receive any free help they need. The role of garant is to help to set and provide feedback of the app, to check and provide anti-corruption advice and process set up and to check entities who register at the app.

Lydia Mirgova

2017 Fall, Alumni

I was in a Roma community where residents were infected. They therefore had to be isolated from healthy people. We needed to provide them with food, medicine. I was also testing for coronavirus in the settlements, where I provided information, logistics and food aid.

