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What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

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**Input**

**Open Forum 4  
Evening with Ombudsman**

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The main subject of the Open Forum 4 was the international project “Evening with Ombudsman”. The project was used as an example of some interesting practices and methods that increase the levels of civic participation. During the forum participants were asked to try to find examples of other efficient methods of this kind together.

The first part of the forum was the presentation of the project “Evening with Ombudsman”. The project is financed by the European Commission and organized in five EU member states by five local institutions: Centre for Citizenship Education (Poland), The Civic Education Centre at the Masaryk University (Czech Republic), the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia), Jaan Tonisson Instituut (Estonia) and the Romanian Centre for Lifelong Learning (Romania). The first three organizations are also members of the NECE initiative. Every national partner cooperates with its national Ombudsman Office (or a relevant institution). Moreover, every national partner cooperates with a local drama/Forum theatre group (i.e. Association of Drama Practitioners “Stop-klatka” in Poland). “Evening with Ombudsman” is also supported by an International Ombudsman Institute that provided assistance and expertizes during the initial research phase of the project.

The main goal of the project is to actively raise the awareness of EU citizens on their fundamental rights stated in the Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union. Moreover, the project aims to reach people from remote and rural areas (hard to reach learners, often excluded from this kind of projects) and to encourage the spirit of civic participation and shared culture of democracy and fundamental rights amongst project’s participants.

During the first part of the project several international researches were conducted. The researches amongst other included: analyses (reports) of the most frequent cases of fundamental rights violations in the national contexts, description of the methodology for the social theatre, comparative study of the existing good practice cases and international study of didactic materials. The main goal during the research phase of the project was to provide analyses of the main areas where fundamental rights of citizens of each involved country were violated. Furthermore, the other goals of the initial phase of the project were: defining methodology for social theatre (based on principles of Legal theatre and Theatre Forum), identifying and analyzing good practice cases for raising awareness in the field of fundamental rights of EU citizens and the existing didactic material/tools which are used in the field of adult education for active citizenship engagement as well as acquiring knowledge on the awareness raising and empowering possibilities of new ICTs and new media.

Another part of the project was a series of several international meetings – amongst them summer school training for actor groups was held in Portoroz (Slovenia). The summer school training was intended for actors from social theatre groups to share concepts, methodology and approaches for developing 13 plays that were crucial for the implementation of the project.

The main parts of the project are 70 “Evening with Ombudsman” meetings, which are held in minor cities in all the project partner countries. “Evening with Ombudsman” meetings are a central activity of the project that are focusing on the awareness rising about the EU fundamental rights and builds upon the active participation of EU citizens (particularly those living in remote/rural areas). The central role of Evening with Ombudsman events is also increasing knowledge and understanding of individuals and communities from remote/rural areas about the Charter of Fundamental Rights, enhancing personal skills of citizens to identify and address violations of rights and to increase knowledge on appropriate procedures and measures to address violations.

Every “Evening with Ombudsman” meeting contains of three main parts. It starts with screening of a short documentary movie, which presents a specific case of violation of a certain fundamental right. The movie is followed by a forum theatre performance (drama workshop) of a social theatre group, which performs a play based on a similar case of a violation of fundamental rights. During the play participants are asked to join the play and influence main character’s actions so he/she can stand up and fight for his/hers rights. The third part of every “Evening with Ombudsman” meeting is an open discussion with a representative of a national Ombudsman Office about the broader aspects of the issues connected with violations of rights stated in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Moreover, in the Polish case almost every meeting is followed by some additional activities prepared by local partners (mostly local public libraries) that are also connected with the issue of fundamental rights (exhibitions, youth contests, workshops) – sometimes these additional activities are held on separate occasions but still form a part of the “Evening with Ombudsman” project.

The “Evening with Ombudsman” project presentation was followed by some “questions and answers” time.

During the Open Forum, 4 after the presentation of the “Evening with Ombudsman” project the three most interesting features of the project (good practices) that help to increase the levels of public engagement were described and discussed.

The first one was described as “giving responsibility to the people”. Participants of the forum agreed that people when given responsibility of the project act in a very different way. They see the project as “theirs” and they start to care more about its implementation. The example of this kind of a practice was an approach of a Polish project partner (Centre for Citizenship Education) that invites local public libraries to become partners of the project (not only participants that organize sites where the meetings are taking place) and to have an impact on the final shape of the “Evening with Ombudsman” event being held in their community. Thanks to this approach librarians are more motivated and help organizers to prepare a meeting that better responses to their local need. During the forum participants were asked to discuss the following questions: Does giving more responsibility to the citizens (participants/partners) results in a greater civic participation? How can we do it? What are the possible threats connected with this approach and how can we react?

Another feature characteristic for the “Evening with Ombudsman” project that helps to increase the levels of public participation is referring to participants’ private interest. The practice of the project proved that when participants can see that the activity has some concrete implications to their local context they tend to get more interested in the given topic than in a topic that would refer to some more abstract issues. During the forum participants also discussed how to combine this feature with the first one. Moreover, they were asked to answer the following questions: Is the participants’ personal interest the most important reason for their activity? How can we use this characteristic in civic education? How can we use it for a common good?

The third characteristic of the project concentrates on showing participants what the practical outcomes of a given approach are. People don’t show much interest in talking about some abstract theories. That is why it is crucial to present them how the topic refers to their everyday life and what its practical impact on their world is. This kind of approach also increases the levels of public participation. During the forum participants were asked to talk

about several questions: How much should we rely on knowledge (i.e. on fundamental rights, law) and when should we turn to practice? How can we encourage citizens to use their knowledge in their everyday life?

During the forum all the aspects described above were discussed. We all agreed that indeed these aspects help to increase levels of public engagement. Moreover, participants were asked to give examples of different projects where these approaches were also used (not necessarily successfully). At the end all the participants tried to find other practices that will help citizens to get more involved in civic activities.