

SOPOTNIKI

FREE TRANSPORT FOR ELDERS IN RURAL AREAS

Country: Slovenia

OVERVIEW

Short description of the Good Practice Case:

The “Sopotniki” NGO provides free car transport for the elderly in rural areas. The service is provided by volunteers and is free of charge for elders within individual areas, who communicate in advance their mobility needs. This practice of intergenerational solidarity is an innovative approach towards the mobility of elders in rural areas in Slovenia, where public transport options are lacking. It provides a valuable and efficient solution for the isolation and mobility of elders in sparsely populated villages.

Currently, “Sopotniki” service is available in 9 rural municipalities in west and southeast Slovenia.



Figure 1. Sopotniki (source: www.sopotniki.org)

Main aspect/issue addressed by the good practice

- Lack of public transport options in rural areas in Slovenia.
- Additional limitations of the elderly regarding mobility.
- Social isolation of elders in remote villages due to lack of mobility options.
- Needs of the elderly for healthcare, grocery shopping, socialisation, etc.

Main objectives of the good practice

- Provision of free transport for the elderly in rural areas.
- Supporting an active social life of the elderly in rural areas, prevention of social isolation and loneliness due to lack of mobility options.
- Intergenerational solidarity.

DESCRIPTION OF THE AREA

Region	Target area	Population	Population density
9 municipalities in west and southeast Slovenia.	2.432,70 km ²	127.500	22,6 – 90,2 inhab. /km ² average 52 inhab. /km ²

Other

Municipalities in which “Sopotniki” provide their service are Divača, Hrpelje-Kozina, Sežana, Kočevje, Pivka, Postojna, Sevnica, Krško, and Brežice.

They are characterized by one small urban centre (town) and numerous sparsely populated villages.

Target user groups and needs

- The target group are the elderly, who live in remote villages, with limited access to organized public transport services, with no car ownership or who are unable to drive.
- The share of elderly (over 65 years) in the population of 9 municipalities is circa 20 % (25.170).
- Main transport needs of the elderly are connected to healthcare, shopping and socialisation with friends.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

Timeframe(s)

The "Sopotniki" NGO was established in 2014.

the public service – however, "Sopotniki" NGO is a private law body, which does not qualify as a public transport service.

Bodies involved

- "Sopotniki" NGO.
- Employment Service of Slovenia (referrals of potential volunteers)
- Slovenian Philanthropy (referrals of potential volunteers, trainings)

Cost and Financing sources

- There are 3 main financing sources
 - Donations from users,
 - Public funds, i.e. grants from municipalities,
 - Donations from private companies and sponsorships.
- Public funds from municipalities currently represent 80 % of financing. Municipalities in which the NGO operates usually provide a car, co-finance the work of coordinators and the activities of the NGO.
- Transport within one unit (usually corresponding to one municipality) is free of charge, while users agree to contribute 0,11 €/KM donation for longer routes, outside one unit, to cover the cost of gas.

Mobility services provided/addressed

- "Sopotniki" volunteers (31 persons in 2017) provide free car transport for the elderly from rural areas.
- The target area of 9 municipalities is divided in 7 units, each having a coordinator.
- An elderly person communicates needs for transport to the coordinator of an individual unit in advance, by phone or e-mail.
- The "Sopotniki" NGO developed an internal application for the coordination of transport. After each transport volunteers fill a report.
- The services is available 6 days per week.
- The service is provided as door-to-door – a volunteer picks up a passenger at the agreed time and location (usually at home), drives him/her to a location, waits for the passenger and drives him/her back home.
- In early 2018 they had 350 users.
- Each unit has one car for the provision of services.

Organizational set-up

- The "Sopotniki" organisation is established as a private non-profit body.
- The founder and director of the "Sopotniki" organisation is Mr Marko Zevnik.
- The operation of the organisation is divided in 7 units, each having a coordinator that coordinates volunteers and receives user requests for transport.
- In 2017, the organisation had 31 volunteers and recorded 4.769 hours of volunteer work performed. In 2018 the organisation has 47 active volunteer drivers.

Legal Framework

- The main regulatory framework is related to volunteer and non-profit organisations.
- The relevant public transport law is the Road Transport Act (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, nr. 6/16), which defines types of public transport and rights and obligations related to

Supporting technologies

- The "Sopotniki" NGO uses applications for the coordination of transports, administrative reporting and statistics, information on user needs (as special requirements or disabilities), an application for volunteers, etc.

INNOVATION ASPECTS

ORGANISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Organisational aspects represent the innovative character of this good practice, where you have a private NGO, co-funded by public municipal funds, that implements an important social service for the vulnerable group of elderly persons in rural areas.

LEVEL OF PUBLIC SECTOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The practice can be a more cost-efficient way of providing transport in rural areas, as the establishment of bus lines with few passengers (due to sparsely populated rural areas) would be more costly.

INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN SHARED AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICES

This practice is a case where shared transport replaces a non-existing or lacking public transport.

ICT CONNECTIONS AND IMPACTS OF THE TECHNOLOGICAL SOLUTIONS IMPLEMENTED

N/A

OTHER (E.G. SOCIAL INNOVATION, ETC.)

This practice is also a case of intergenerational solidarity, volunteer community engagement, etc.

ASSESSMENT

Ridership and other key metrics/results (through key-indicators, where applicable)

- This practice is a good example of a private initiative that provides for the needs which public services do not cover. It is also an example of NGO action that is faster than state or other public institutions; the legislation in Slovenia already provides the possibility for public dial-a-ride transport, which has not yet been developed, while Sopotniki basically provides this exact service, free of charge for a vulnerable group.
- In its operation the Sopotniki NGO plans the routes of users in such a way as to increase the number of users per individual trip.
- This practice is transferable to other countries; the organisational model can be replicated anywhere else, provided there is a base of engaged persons.
- Strong points of this practice are its cost-effectiveness, social engagement and multiple positive effects of this practice (social inclusion of the elderly, provision of transport options, intergenerational solidarity).
- A weakness of this practice is a lack of formal institutional framework that would guarantee its longevity. Funding is mostly based on public calls and grants, which means there is no guaranteed steady stream of income, which may endanger the operation of the Sopotniki NGO.
- This practice has already expanded significantly, as it started in 3 municipalities and now includes 9. It is expected that more and more rural municipalities will join this initiative, where local NGOs, under the guidance and infrastructure set up by Sopotniki, will offer free car transport in rural areas.

- This practice demonstrates effective community engagement with the reliance on volunteers and with its social aims (inclusion of the elderly, intergenerational solidarity).

Success factors/strengths

- Approach tailored to rural areas, with a high share of elderly population, sparse population, remoteness.
- Organisational framework.
- As the service is free of charge for users it is bound to increase the number of regular users.
- The provision of such service, which is needed but not provided yet by public authorities.
- Cost-effectiveness vis-à-vis the establishment of a public bus line to remote rural villages.

Difficulties encountered/weakness

- Dependency on volunteer work.
- Dependency on public funding, which is not guaranteed.
- Financial difficulties – especially at early stages, it is financially risky for the NGO to set up such service without pre-agreed financial support from public sector. Between different public calls or grants there may be periods of limited income that may endanger the operation of the service and of the NGO.

Good Governance

- Part of the business concept is the development of the Sopotniki brand, which will in future attract more private sponsors and decrease the dependency on public funding.
- The organisational framework with local coordinators that are a focal point between users and volunteers is an example of good practice. Furthermore, the internal organisation of the Sopotniki, i.e. coordination of routes, timetables, user information, is also part of good governance.

FEATURES THAT ARE CONSIDERED TO BE GOOD PRACTICE (LESSON(S) LEARNT)

Sopotniki provide a valuable mobility service in rural areas, which is not provided by public authorities, but is nevertheless needed by an ageing population. It may prove to be more cost efficient than the establishment of public transport. It also caters to social needs of the elderly as social inclusion, easier access to healthcare and other public services. This private initiative has excellent prospects for future development.

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER DETAILS

Contact of the operator and of relevant stakeholders

Organization: Zavod Sopotniki

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Key references

- www.sopotniki.org/home.html
- Media reports on Sopotniki (various)

Websites

- www.sopotniki.org/home.html