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CROATIA

SUCCESS STORY

Citizens Advocate for Change

Residents of a poor neighborhood begin to advocate for change



Photo: John Hosinski

As a result of community advocacy, the City of Zagreb is cleaning a polluted canal that runs through the heart of the Kozari Put and Kozari Bok neighborhoods.

“This is a neighborhood with big problems. The city and community leaders are doing a lot of very visible things ... There are changes for the better every day,” said Ervin Poljak, a manager at USAID’s local partner organization, Friend.

Kozari Put and Kozari Bok are neighborhoods located in an industrial area on the southern edge of Zagreb, Croatia’s capital. Many disadvantaged people, including refugees, the elderly, veterans, and ethnic Roma are among the 18,000 residents who struggle to meet basic needs. The combination of poor infrastructure, lack of jobs, and ethnic and social divisions results in a sense of desperation and, at times, tension. But with help from USAID, a local organization called Friend has been working in this neighborhood, helping improve the quality of life and create a new sense of empowerment among residents.

When Ervin Poljak, a manager at Friend, returned from a USAID training in Poland, he quickly used his new skills and knowledge to work by helping the residents of Kozari Bok and Kozari Put organize themselves and advocate for necessary changes in their community. With USAID assistance, Friend is conducting seminars to teach residents how to decide what improvements are most important. Neighborhood leaders and groups are excited, contributing to the design of a community strategic plan.

Using their strategic plan, community leaders began advocating for change. As a result, the City of Zagreb approved and launched a major renovation plan to improve the infrastructure in these neighborhoods. The city plans to clean up schools and public spaces, clean and cover a polluted drain canal running through the neighborhoods, and build a much-needed community center. In addition, a new community board will be elected to communicate neighborhood needs to city leaders.

The final step of the neighborhood’s action plan is to create a foundation that would be charged with raising funds within the community and working with the community board and the city government to continue improving Kozari Put and Kozari Bok over the long term.

Changes are getting easier with all the projects going on — as residents see their neighborhood improve, they are eager to join the effort and contribute in any way they can. The projects will take time to complete, but in the meantime, residents know they can look forward to a brighter, cleaner tomorrow.