

Ovsište Renovates Its School

by Terry Bergdall

It is exciting to see people who have been accustomed to failure and despair use an unexpected opportunity to take charge of their situation and change it. This is what happened in the small village of Ovsište in central Serbia in 2003 when they were offered a small grant for a community project on the condition that they make a matching contribution. It was one of hundreds of such projects in the area completed during a 3-year period of 2003-2005 by the Topola Rural Development Programme (TRDP).

Ovsište is a small farming village in the rural municipality of Topola located about 100 kilometers south of Belgrade. According to the municipality census figures of 2002, its population consisted of 628 people and 268 households. Thirty-two children between the ages of six and twelve were registered at the local elementary school in 2002. Based on priorities determined by the community at a local planning meeting in November 2002, a decision was made to renovate the school building. All three classrooms and the administrative office were renovated over a two month period with completion occurring in March 2003. This involved floor repair (133 m²), repair and refinishing of walls (470 m²), installation of new wall paneling (135 m²), hanging of five new doors, installation of new rain gutters (125 m), and renovation of the school's entire electrical system. The total cost was €12,130; €1,180 was raised in cash by the community, €5,450 came from the municipality, and €5,500 from TRDP.

Once their work was completed, members of the community met to reflect upon their experience. This included identifying and agreeing upon the four most important changes that, in their view, had occurred as a result of their work:

For the first time in ten years, Ovsište has successfully completed a development project. Several different projects had been started in the Ovsište during the past ten years, but not one of them was ever completed: repair to the water system, renovation of the access road, maintenance work on the health clinic, repairs to the church. Money was even collected from residents for doing many of these things, but still every one of them ended in failure. This time we successfully organized all of the work and properly managed the donations so that the school renovation could be completed. We started and we finished! If someone can't visit our school to see it for themselves, then photographs of the "completion ceremony" are proof of our success.

Children now have a more conducive environment for learning. Before, children were easily distracted from their studies because of the condition of the building. Moving their desks to avoid dripping rainwater became a game. The school was full of noise and laughter when they should have been attending to their lessons. The students were also careless about the use of the building and of their educational materials; they simply tracked mud into the building with little regard to the mess it made. Since books and other materials were always becoming wet, students didn't take very good care of them. Now, children are much more careful and remove their muddy shoes before coming in and put their books away. They are no longer distracted and are better able to focus their attention on their studies.

We learned practical details about supervising projects during renovation of the school. We were very poor supervisors in the past. Though we contributed money, we did not adequately give attention to how it was used or where it went. Then in the end we were disappointed. In doing this project, we learned a lot of things about making good preparation plans, attracting good contractors, and then overseeing their work. The tender (contractual) guidelines were especially valuable for us since we had never had that kind of experience before. Everyone knew exactly what was happening and why.

Confidence has been gained for launching new development activities. Several years ago we tried to improve our church. When the money we collected disappeared, we became discouraged and quit. Completion of the school has encouraged us to try again on the church. Work is underway now. We are applying lessons learned from the school work; we only pay part of the money at the beginning and will make full payment only after work is completed.

By reflecting upon their experiences, people in Ovsište become more self-consciously aware of their latent power as a community. Even as these stories are read now, several years after they occurred, one can easily imagine the community's excitement as they rehearsed and reveled in their accomplishment. In doing so, a larger story is created about themselves and what they can accomplish through concerted efforts to build upon their assets. These are strong experiential messages that have the potential to dramatically alter self-perceptions. And ultimately, this is the key to long-term changes within communities. In a very real sense of the word, reflecting on collective experiences like these—as part of an internal monitoring and evaluation process—can be a “transformative” experience.