

SOZE (SOCIETY OF CITIZENS ASSISTING MIGRANTS)

Àgora

Abstract in English

SOZE – Society of Citizens Assisting Migrants - is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation. Its aim is to assist refugees and foreigners coming to the Czech Republic. The support cover free of charge legal, social and psychological counselling, organising of leisure-time and educational activities and complex social-legal assistance to long-term legally residing foreigners, during the challenging process of integration into the Czech society.

Abstrat in italiano

SOZE – Società dei cittadini che assistono gli immigrati – è un'organizzazione non governativa e no-profit. Il suo scopo è di assistere i rifugiati e gli stranieri che giungono nella Repubblica Ceca. Il sostegno consiste nella copertura gratuita delle spese legali, delle consulenze sociali e psicologiche, dell'organizzazione di attività educative e per il tempo libero e del complesso dell'assistenza a lungo termine per le questioni sociali e legali degli stranieri residenti durante il combattuto processo di integrazione nella società ceca.

Area: Quality of Life

Kind-category of project: Housing, Health, Education, Legal Advice, labour.

Kind-category of actor NGO

Country: Czech Republic

Year: 1992-present

5 key-words: housing, education, health, lodgement, refugee.

1. THE PROJECT

1.1.-Organisation

SOZE – Society of Citizens Assisting Migrants - is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation. Its aim is to assist refugees and foreigners coming to the Czech Republic. The support cover free of charge legal, social and psychological counselling, organising of leisure-time and educational activities and complex social-legal assistance to long-term legally residing foreigners, during the process of integration into the Czech society.

SOZE was established as a response to the first wave of refugees entering Czechoslovakia in 1990, and it was registered with the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic in 1992. It is based in Brno and its expert and experienced advisors provide assistance not only in the Brno office, but also in all refugee centres on the territory of Moravia and Silesia. Moreover, SOZE, independently runs two accommodation centres for rejected asylum seekers with toleration status, who had to leave refugee accommodation centres, while they were expecting the final decision of the High Court. Last but not least, the society runs a multicultural asylum house in Brno. Higher level of care and protection is given to vulnerable categories of

refugees and aliens, as for instance single women, women with children, numerous families, unaccompanied minors, ill or handicapped persons etc.

By organising lectures, cultural events, as exhibitions, seminars and national cultural events, SOZE tries to reduce distrust, intolerance and xenophobia in the society, and at the same time, to support awareness of the public in the field of human rights and principles of rule of law. Expert activities of the SOZE in the field of alien, asylum and migration law focus on participation in the work of expert commissions on national as well as international level. SOZE further participates in legislative process and in elaborating of expert studies, analyses and recommendations.

SOZE works in a long-term close co-operation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In compliance with international legal documents – particularly Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Geneva Convention, 1951), Convention on the Rights of the Child, Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and other international conventions setting basic human rights and freedoms – SOZE tries to ensure at least minimum standards of asylum procedure. They seek for permanent acceptable solutions for individuals, families, as well as refugee communities, either by their full integration into the Czech society, or by their voluntary repatriation into the country of origin.

1.2.-The project (objectives, activities and results)

1.2.a. Objectives:

The main objectives of SOZE are to assist refugees and foreigners going to the Czech Republic thus contributing to the development of the tolerant multi-cultural society



and to find durable acceptable solutions for individuals, families, as well as refugee communities, either by their full integration into the Czech society.

1.2.b. Activities:

The activities developed by SOZE include providing legal and social counselling to asylum seekers, educational activities for adults, and leisure-time activities for children. SOZE also has an

asylum house, a multicultural centre, and works on refugee clinics. SOZE delivers humanitarian aid (especially drugs, clothes, toys, toiletries and sweets) to Romania and Moldova and publishes papers related to asylum seeking.

Psychological counselling

Psychological counselling is integral and indispensable part of SOZE's activities. It is



focused on help to cope with serious psychological problems and difficulties connected with the leave of the homeland and with the necessity to reside in strange country. The psychologist thus assists to solve not

only traumas, which refugees bring already from countries of origin, but also adaptation problems originating from common accommodation of applicants with different ethnic, cultural and customs background, neurotic troubles of anxious or depressive character, arising from the disproportionately length of asylum procedure and interpersonal conflicts. Psychological Counselling is provided in the co-operation with the UNHCR, Ministry of Interior and Refugee Facilities Administration.

1.2.c. Context and target

Asylum seekers constitute the group that first and foremost benefits from SOZE's counselling activities. Asylum seekers, from individuals to large families with small children, were forced to leave homes and to flee from war, violence, torture and/or persecution and to travel hundreds and thousands of kilometres in fear for dear life. Very often these persons suffer from various types of physical and/or mental troubles due to their previous traumatic experiences and need therefore our assistance. They pay special attention to the most vulnerable among them – single women and mothers with children, separated minors, elderly and disabled persons. Those asylum seekers, who have succeeded in asylum procedure and were granted asylum, pass to the status of recognized refugees. These people who face at the commencement of the integration process many objective handicaps/barriers and has to cope with the Czech language familiarizing and job/accommodation seeking, need our complex assistance during the demanding process of their integration as well. The Czech Republic belongs to the countries with the most rapid growth of foreign population in the world. Foreigners who are long-term residents (foreigners under the permanent residence permit or long-term visa) thus constitute ever-rising group of their clients. Regardless to the purpose of their stay (marriage with a Czech citizen, studies or employment), they also need our assistance in adaptation to the unknown environment and to become familiar with the new socio-cultural background.

Psychological counselling

Being a refugee brings a lot of psychic distress, which is not always possible to cope without psychological assistance. Many refugees have suffered in country of origin from physical and mental violence, sexual abuse, pressure, everyday stress and/or harassment or have a war experience. They have to face up to painful and traumatizing experiences. Such process is not always easy and it is hard to succeed in. Such struggle is accompanying with extremely stressful and long waiting for being granted asylum and living in a refugee camp with no privacy.

1.2.d. Methodology

Expert and analytical activities in the field of alien and asylum law, including legislative advocacy, constitutes an important element of SOZE's work. SOZE thus actively takes part in the drafting/advocacy of legislative proposals regulating foreigners' and refugees' rights and duties on territory of the Czech Republic towards reinforcement of the respect to the democratic principles within the state administration. In this regard, SOZE uses its experts' involvement in the work of Committee on the Rights of Foreigners under the Government Council for Human Rights, commissions of the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, dealing with the issues of foreigners and refugees, and similar commissions on regional and local level.

Together with the work developed by SOZE'S professionals, the organisation also benefits from high school and university students who practice their studies with

SOZE in the fields of economics, law, and humanitarian actions. Collaboration with SOZE is also an alternative for those Czech citizens who prefer performance of an interesting alternative civil service.

Volunteers Network

Many volunteers participate in realisation of SOZE's projects. They supplement the SOZE specialised counselling staff, and help to realize daily activities, as well as preparation of the extraordinary ones. They are the staff reserve for unexpected crisis situations (e.g. massive influx of refugees). Volunteers represent the engaged civil society, with sense of solidarity and will to help people in need. Volunteers usually are coming from churches, students of social, legal, psychological and theological schools, and also from members and supporters of minorities.



Cooking with women



producing of plaster masks



A riding-hall visit



Excursion to the Pernštejn Castle



Games for children on the occasion of International Children Day

Sponsorship

Activities of this organisation and assistance to refugees is possible in addition to grants and projects also thanks to financial and material donations provided by firms, businessmen, and as well individuals. Refugees were given a lot of clothing, school requirements, sweets, special nutrition packages for infants and toddlers and other items from humanitarian collections, and number of various social, cultural, religious and sport events arranged. Both helped refugees to cope with their difficult conditions, to forget about experienced suffering at least for a while, and to escape the fear of an uncertain future.

1.2.f. Collaborations, networks:

SOZE is a member of **ECRE** (European Council on Refugees and Exiles) - associated European NGOs dealing with refugee issues and monitoring human rights situation of refugees in the member countries.

Among other international partners SOZE cooperates with is **WCC** (World Council of Churches), **CEC** (Conference of European Churches), **IOM** (International Organisation for Migration), and NGOs from partner town of the city of Brno – Leipzig and others.

By realisation of its projects, SOZE develops co-operation with many state as well as non-state organisations, with competent central, regional and local authorities (Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Aliens Police, Labour Offices, Social Departments of Town Halls, Brno Town Hall). Likewise, SOZE cooperates with NGOs of similar specialisation -Counselling Centre for Refugees (PPU), Organization for Aid to Refugees (OPU), Counselling Centre for Integration (PPI), Orthodox Diaconia, Czech Catholic Caritas, Ecumenical Diaconia and others.

SOZE representatives actively participated in the working groups of the Commission of the Minister of Interior for preparation and realisation of the government policies in the field of integration of aliens and development of relations between communities, as well as in the similar Commission under Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

These working groups analyse legal and practical implications of integration of aliens into the Czech society, they also raised initiatives in the process of preparation of legal documents setting rights and duties of aliens and refugees on the territory, and consequently changes and amendments to these documents.

SOZE was invited to cooperate with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in relationship with the approval of the pilot project regarding actively recruitment of foreign workers, and its experts elaborated comprehensive cultural-social profiles of first three countries, having their citizens included.

In the year of 2002, SOZE also participated in international seminars and conferences organised by UNHCR, ECRE, European Parliament, Council of Europe, and European governments. They further attended seminars on national or local levels dealing with human and minority rights issues, trafficking etc. Cultural and educational activities of SOZE included organising of lectures at schools of social and legal specialisation and providing internships/professional training for students of these schools.

1.3 SOZE partners and sponsors



UNHCR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is constantly the most important partner; it enables SOZE to provide the basic projects of legal, social and psychological counselling.



Ministry of Interior, Department on Asylum and Migration Policy - projects aimed at legal counselling for asylum seekers and integration of refugees, and providing of social-legal assistance to long-term legally residing foreigners on the territory of Moravia and Silesia.



Ministry of Interior – Refugee Facilities Administration – projects of legal and psychological counselling and leisure-time activities, and complex counselling, accommodation and board for foreigners under the toleration status.



Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports – tuition of the Czech language for recognised refugees within the state integration program, courses of Czech language for foreigners and leisure-time activities for children.



Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs - projects on integration of foreigners into the major society and the Asylum House for Foreigners.



Ministry of Culture – project on cultural and religious centre for migrants and refugees in the premises of Asylum House.



Open Society Fund Prague - projects on refugee legal clinic for students of Faculty of Law of the Masaryk University in Brno, monitoring of asylum/alien legislation and practice in the Czech Republic and strengthening of gender sensitivity within the asylum procedure.



Brno Town Hall - on a long-term basis supports SOZE activities, as to social-legal assistance to refugees and foreigners residing on the territory of the city.



Help the Children – a programme of NROS – Foundation for Development of the Civil Society and of the Czech Television has funded the project already from 2000.



World Council of Churches – support of groups at risk within the refugee population.



JMK - Office of South-Moravian Region – supports projects on secondary drug prevention of asylum seekers on the territory of South-Moravian region and the Asylum House for Foreigners.



European Union Socrates/Grundtvig program – project on mutual exchange of experience among EU member countries.



MATRA-KAP / Small Embassy Projects - the Netherlands Embassy in the Czech Republic supported project on refugee social/psychological clinics.



VIZE 97 Dagmar and Vaclav Havel Foundation Vize 97 – supported project “Refugee women against xenophobia and intolerance”.

2. COMMENTS AND HINTS FOR AN EVALUATION

2.1. Strengths

One of the most positive and relevant aspects of SOZE is that it takes the leading part in helping migrants integrate in the Czech society. SOZE does not wait for the immigrants to contact them, but goes to the places where they are massively grouped (asylum camps, detention centres, and even countries of origin: Moldavia and Romania) to offer its help to those who need it. SOZE goes to where it is needed, making the migrants' problems their own, and not waiting until migrants go to them for help. In most cases, institutions and organisations created to help immigrants provide help in order to lessen the negative effects that the diverse communities of (legal or illegal) immigrants produce in the target country. Helping immigrants is therefore focused in most cases as a way to help the new community of citizenship they become part of. SOZE finds them before they become part of such community and arranges everything so that their integration is the least traumatic for them. It really focuses on immigrants and their needs.

Another remarkable aspect of SOZE is the diversity of their actions. SOZE does not focus on a particular need that immigrants may have, but on the many needs that human beings have when adapting to a new country. This approach is the result of a direct contact with immigrants and a humane approach to their difficult circumstances. Thus, they focus on legal counselling, social counselling, and psychological counselling (one of the most needed, since the migratory experience is highly traumatic). SOZE helps foreigners find their place and some degree of identification with the new environment without undergoing a complete acculturation process. The general landscape of SOZE activities is so wide that immigrants find help in most of the immediate needs they may have in a first encounter with a new country and culture. This is most convenient for foreigners, who can find in the same place, all the help they need.

SOZE also provides humanitarian aid in the countries of origin of their largest immigrant groups, so as to improve the circumstances of those who might ever need to migrate to the Czech Republic. Thus, SOZE proves to care about the circumstances that make people leave their countries of origin and put themselves in such a difficult situation as a helpless immigrant's in a foreign country. Most people love the places where they are born and raised and would hate to leave such places. To most people, emigration is the last recourse to an unbearable situation that they finally prefer to change for the uncertainty of displacement, acculturation and helplessness of migration. Worrying for the needs of those who did not leave their countries of origin yet, shows a deeper knowledge of migratory circumstances at an international level and a deeper implication with others' needs.

They are innovative in selling refugees' products in order to economically help refugees. As citizens of any society, people are strangely attracted to the difference and exoticism of other cultures (while rejecting their people), and like to buy products they cannot easily find in their own countries. The sale of refugees' products helps both refugees by making them useful to the new community they are entering and to the people who benefit from the products they produce. Immigrants are thus highly involved in SOZE's activities, not only as beneficiaries, but also as agents of their own development and integration.

As for financial resources, SOZE counts not only on the usual means (grants and economic donations). SOZE also encourages material gifts and sponsorship

contracts, making donation/contribution easier for those who want to donate by increasing the means of donation.

2.2.Critical points

We have underlined the width and diversity of SOZE's activities as a positive aspect of their project. However, such width might sometimes result in certain deficiencies or lack of specialisation. For instance, SOZE provides language courses so that immigrants adapt to the new linguistic environment, but does not provide help on the native language of immigrants (specially needed in a first contact with a new culture: legal help, health, etc.). It would be very positive to develop the same activities in different languages so as to lessen the linguistic impact of immigration. As an example of good practices in this field we could mention Nafsiyat-The Intercultural Therapy Centre in London (not only providing therapy in several languages, but also including professionals from diverse ethnic origins).

2.3. Conclusion: what is “exportable” in the project.

Themes

1.- Psychological counselling: The circumstances of immigrants are sometimes so hard that we tend to focus on the satisfaction of especially urgent demands (i.e. lodgement, clothing, labour) and forget about other demands that are crucial for immigrant's wellbeing. The experience of immigration is always a traumatic one, not only due to cultural reasons, but also to the circumstances that made people search for refuge/asylum in a different country (wars, starvation, etc.). The whole process of arriving and getting installed in a new country/culture is also highly traumatic (the journey, during which immigrants endure terrible hardships, see their mates and relatives die, get sick, are abused and starved, etc. or social rejection once they reach their destination; they are uprooted, do not know the language or uses, etc.) and does certainly negatively affect their process of integration (rejection of new language, customs, food, people, rules, etc) and their subsequent acceptance by society. The psychological component is central to any activity planned to help immigrants and is perfectly exportable to any practice.

2.- Refugees' products: The sale of refugees' products directly involves the community of refugees in the project. It does not only increase the organization's funding, but also the refugees', and increases their autonomy and self-esteem. It is also innovative in opening a new job market for refugees and their opportunities for self-employment.

Methodology

1.-Global approach: Despite the possible inconveniences that a global approach to intercultural issues in immigration may produce (i.e. lack of specialisation), the possibility of getting help in many areas from a single organisation, makes things much easier for immigrants. In many cases, the difficulties that immigrants find to get adapted to the new environment are interconnected and have a common or related cause/solution. For instance, immigrants might find it difficult to find lodgement because they do not have a remunerated job, and they cannot have a remunerated job because they cannot apply for it (due to language problems) or need legal counselling they cannot pay for because they do not have a remunerated job. It is certainly difficult for organisations with limited funding to provide such a wide scope of

activities as SOZE does. In such cases, cooperation with other organisations might complement their services.

2.- Active help: We would like to distinguish active help from what we could call "passive help". Most organisations provide this second kind of help; they wait for immigrants to reach them and ask for the help they need before providing it. With this type of action, there are many immigrants who take a long time to find out which organisations can help them with each particular problem they may have. In this sense, these organisations provide passive help, vs. immigrants' active role in searching for help. On the contrary, SOZE meets the immigrants where they can be found (asylum camps and detention centres) and do not only provide help for already existing problems, but also give them counselling about the future problems they may have. For instance, if immigrants receive legal counselling before looking for a job, there are fewer chances that they are abused when they start working, become the victims of mafias, etc.

3. OTHER COMMENTS

Testimony from:

(http://refugees.ecn.cz/magazine.shtml?sh_itm=5498a77d817ea77b8b26857f7b110c91)

Azyl 02/2002

My Work in a Refugee Camp in Albania

Date: 07/11/2002, Organization: Organization:Society of Citizens Assisting Emigrants

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When the war in Kosovo ended in the summer of 1999, television news ceased to broadcast pictures of the humanitarian aid camps in along the Albanian and Macedonian borders. Many refugees returned to Kosovo, but those that did not have any place to return to, remained.

There were three refugee camps in Tirana in 1999; two of them founded by the Albanian government and one by the regional government of Catalonia. The demographics of the population were the same in all three camps: the elderly, single mothers, socially vulnerable persons and Kosovo Roma who had been accused of collaboration.

I came to Albania with the Dutch NGO "Balcan Sunflowers", which is staffed by volunteers. In a crisis situation, the group provides its volunteers only with basic shelter. In 1999 this organization ran offices in Tirana, Pristine and Skopje. The field of its activities was not limited to refugees; it also helped homeless children, people who lost their savings in financial scandals, and the Albanian Roma.

I was posted to a camp that was organized by the Albanian government. This camp was established in a former cinema and hostel previously known as Studio. At the time I arrived, seventy people were living there in dire circumstances. I could not imagine that previously this facility had held twice that number of people. The Studio did not have basic facilities including showers or a launderette. Troughs of tin were placed in a mildewed and damp concrete room that served for both of these purposes. Other facilities included Turkish toilets. The small rooms were overflowing with bunk beds. The former cinema hall itself now served as a dining room, social club and sport ground. Permanent camp employees consisted of a director (who also served as

a manager, quartermaster, etc.), a doctor and a cook. This was the whole camp. We were five volunteers and visited each morning to do everything that the employees were not capable of handling. This was a combination of social counselling, organizing of leisure-time activities for children and general humanitarian work. In the afternoon there were a few of us who took turns in construction and physical labor. We cleaned the rooms and corridors and made small repairs. We tried to make the inhabitants of a camp active, providing them with something to do, but were not often successful. We met with the people the whole morning. However, this was rather complicated because of language difficulties and our interpreter, a student, was not able to come every day.

Among our other activities was an English language course that was widely welcome by the refugees as it gave them a way to spend their time in an interesting way. However, our health education courses were not very popular among those living in the camp. Often they came from socially weak backgrounds and did not have developed hygienic habits; those who did found it difficult to practice them under such hard conditions. Children suffered from rotting teeth, lice and eczema.

Many representatives of the EU, international organizations like UNICEF, UNCHR and others were present and provided us with funds and materials. For example, our task was to distribute toothbrushes to the children and show each of them how to use them. Sometimes we distributing clothes, sometimes toys. Arranging that finances intended to run the camp actually did so was made difficult by the fact that locals managed these funds.

Afternoons spent with the children were our most well received activities. Mothers were content that they could take a rest and the children were grateful for our interest. While I was not working on the front-lines of the humanitarian crisis, I am quite sure that those people fully deserved our interest and support.

4. LINKS

Soze's Webpage: <http://www.soze.cz>

UNITED for Intercultural Action: <http://www.unitedagainstracism.org/>

Autonoon Centrum: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~ac/english/index.html>

Cimade: <http://www.cimade.org/>

Pro-Asyl: <http://www.proasyl.de/en/wir-ueber-uns/foerderverein/index.html>

Büren-Gruppe Paderborn: <http://www.aha-bueren.de/aktuell.htm>

Asylkoordination: <http://www.asyl.at/>

Collectif contre les expulsions: <http://www.collectifs.net/ccle/appelnl.php3>

Mouv. contre Racisme, Antisémitisme et Xénophobie: www.mrax.com

Antirassistische Initiative