CHALLENGES TO WOMEN’S ACTIVISM AND THE FIGHT FOR CLEAN AIR IN BULGARIA

Case Study
The Program

The Program “A Breath of Fresh Air”, which took off in 2021 with funding from the Clean Air Fund, was piloted as a capacity-building, awareness-raising and micro-granting scheme in one, the first of its kind in the country. It specifically reached out to women activists and organizations working - or interested in working - at the intersection of women’s rights and air quality, based in several of the country’s most air polluted towns and villages. It tackled the concurrent crises of air pollution, which has affected 97% of Bulgarians at some point, according to the WHO, and the exclusion of the most affected groups from the decision-making table.

The micro-granting scheme reflected BFW’s aspiration to see women, ethnic minorities, rural populations, and people with disabilities and chronic illness mobilize and lead the budding movement for cleaner air in the country. Sixteen initiatives received BGN 40 000 (around USD 20 500) in direct support. All but two of them were women-led, and the majority took part outside of Sofia, the capital – in the regional centers Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo, Smolyan, Yambol and Shumen, but also in smaller towns and villages such as Devnya, Byala, Novi Pazar and Gorni Domlyan. They addressed at least one, but often more, of these overlapping vulnerabilities and pursued innovative community-building and awareness-raising strategies, reaching more than 6 000 people in the process.

The shared challenges

- There was insufficient public awareness of the extent and gravity of air pollution in Bulgaria, especially among the most vulnerable groups who are the most affected. Activists reported it was challenging to spark initial interest or convey that ordinary citizens, and women in particular, had agency in addressing the issue.
- Air pollution is easily conflated with other environmental crises in the popular imagination, even though in many instances it could be easier to resolve through appropriate interventions.
- The economic crisis made it challenging for our partners to adapt to inflation or find additional sources of funding.
- Advocacy is much more difficult in smaller towns where the local administration may be influenced heavily by special-interest groups. Activism tackling air pollution could entail the loss of one’s job or safety net, while partnerships with institutions might sometimes require compromising the integrity and effectiveness of one’s goals.

How did we address these gaps?

The “Clean Air” Academy we organized prior to the project application and funding stages dispelled some common misconceptions regarding air pollution and gave participants access to the latest knowledge and best practices. It brought together activists with diverse backgrounds, from public health to environmental protection, and encouraged them to envision intersectional approaches they could implement together.

Throughout the funding and reporting stages, BFW aimed to practice one of its core values – responsiveness – and adjust its grantmaking procedures to suit the needs of grantee partners. Since air pollution is still a niche topic, project proposals were reviewed through a two-step process, so that candidates could refine their concepts and implement suggestions. As BFW sought to capture the difference these initiatives were making within local communities, field visits and interviews were conducted, mitigating the limitations of conventional impact indicators, and reporting tools.
Lessons learned

- The low public awareness of air pollution in the country and its ramifications necessitates recurrent efforts to sensitize citizens; and even then, it would be a whole different story to translate public grievances or concerns into concrete policies. This also underscores the dire need for experts and reliable data, segregated by gender and class, among other criteria.

- The scarcity of intersectional approaches to the problem, especially those that build connections between different aspects of climate and gender justice, suggests a need to create more spaces for networking and collaboration and encourage activists to innovate and for supporters to recognize their efforts, even if they appear “unsuccessful” in the short run by conventional standards.

- Clean Air activism remains a risky and painstaking endeavor in Bulgaria, especially in smaller cities where the labor market or local institutions are dominated by special-interest groups.

Project highlights

Dr Zornitsa Spassova, a scientist by training and feminist at heart, filled a significant gap in the literature on air pollution available in Bulgarian by conducting a gender-sensitive review of the latest international scholarship. Her findings on the disproportionate vulnerabilities of women and children in relation to air pollution – which she has since presented at conferences and open lectures – have challenged the notion that the air we breathe impacts everyone equally and started a much-needed discussion within Bulgarian academia and media. Her pioneering studies promise to inspire further data collection and analysis, which are key prerequisites for advocacy and bottom-up policymaking.

Roman Rachkov helped democratize air quality control by designing an easily replicable system for measuring NO2 levels – in the size of a keyholder! He then trained women activists from seven cities in the “Breathe, Bulgaria” network – Veliko Tarnovo, Devnya, Blagoevgrad, Ruse, Plovdiv, Dimitrovgrad – on how to use the devices. With the skills and expertise, they acquired, they will lead the growing movement and bolster its watchdog capacity.

During the Clean Air Webinar which concluded the program, the Hayachi Roma Women’s Association summarized the key to their success in transforming a marginalized Roma community as fostering “togetherness”. Its team has proven versatile and collaborative, always willing to gain and exchange expertise on issues somewhat removed but relevant to its day-to-day work with vulnerable individuals on the ground. They not only established an open learning space that would continue to sensitize to environmental issues residents of a segregated neighborhood, where Roma and Bulgarian Turks are overrepresented, but also conveyed the urgency of air pollution to the local authorities and collaborated in mitigating it.

“Breathe, Devnya” Association: Vanya Zaharieva, Chair of the Association’s Board, who hardly considered herself a professional community organizer before, became the spokeswoman for one of Bulgaria’s most polluted towns, Devnya. Her mission was to educate local women in enlisting the law in their shared aspiration to hold accountable institutions and businesses complicit in the crisis. She shared that the BFW program had expanded her access to a national network of activists, which offered essential moral support in a deeply demoralizing context, where she was subjected to constant attacks by local authorities for her work.

Closing event “A Breath of Fresh Air: Challenges to Women’s Activism and the Fight for Clean Air”, February 21, 2023, Sofia.
Best practices and recommendations

Given the myriad challenges outlined, it would be unreasonable to expect activists to shoulder these responsibilities alone – without a basic safety net and more lasting commitments from donors. The positive impacts of the project-based funding provided through the micro-granting scheme (between 1000 and 1500 EUR per project) exceeded initial expectations, as the partners proved resourceful in mobilizing both material and non-material support in implementing their projects.

However, we believe that only more flexible, long-term funding would suffice to build a national bottom-up movement for cleaner air that is broadly representative and robust enough to hold the state, local authorities, and businesses to account and to see systemic change.

Finally, it is important to note that despite the impressive steps taken to build new partnerships and effective coalitions, this is still a budding movement. Therefore, additional support for awareness raising and mobilization efforts across different regions in the country seems to be a distinctly identified need that must be addressed before we begin to witness any concrete results related to air pollution levels.

The paintings are part of the traveling exhibition “Breathe Wisely”, one component of the “A Walk for Fresh Air” project by activist Helena Hudzhek, who is currently based in the village of Nikyup”.

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Cover photo: “Za Zemiata.” Protest against the incineration of waste and polluted air in Bulgaria.