

# Civic Initiatives Program in the Russian Far East



INSTITUTE for  
SUSTAINABLE  
COMMUNITIES

## I M P A C T S

### Daily life in the communities of the Russian Far East is often harsh, particularly in rural areas.

Six thousand miles away from Moscow, the social reforms that followed the collapse of communism have taken longer to reach the Far East, and the people have not benefited from the economic opportunities of their fellow citizens west of the Ural Mountains.

Against this backdrop, ISC is working at the local level to build civic strength and capacity in the region's communities. By helping local NGOs get organized, the Civic Initiatives Program is giving citizens a new sense of self sufficiency and motivation to become involved and solve their problems.

ISC's program combines training and grants to small community groups with assistance for regional centers that support the growing number of NGOs that have sprung up to fill the void left by a less centralized government.

These NGOs are giving people the support and training they need to achieve their dreams and make a difference in their own lives. Each successful community project leads more people to see and understand that the skills and resources to change the community for the better are within the people who live in that community.

As a result, a wide range of citizens are gaining new and valuable experiences participating in civic affairs. NGOs are better integrated into the fabric of their communities, and are creating a supportive environment for sustained community activism.

ISC's Civic Initiatives Program is developing a generation of people who recognize that their communities will be successful when citizens are engaged in community decisionmaking and problem solving, and have the skills and confidence to step up and help out when they want to make a change.

*The Civic Initiatives Program is helping citizens of the RFE in Primorie, Khabarovsk, and Sakhalin find effective community-based approaches and solutions to many of the region's most pressing needs.*



## A place to share life's challenges

On the island oblast of Sakhalin, Elena Sushkova helped establish a club for women that is a center for social interaction—where women can share ideas and experiences instead of facing life's challenges alone. The project has offered an opportunity for women to connect with one another and build a social network outside their homes, sharing a more positive attitude about life.

*I came to the club to talk, interact with other people, and learn something new.*

Marina Efimova, club member

**The Women's Club in Sakhalin.**

*The month-long activity opened the eyes of the young students to the idea of service to their community, and gave them a chance to interact in a very positive way with some of their older neighbors.*

## Meeting a critical health care need

Involving young people in community life is a challenge across the world, but one small Russian Far East community has succeeded in doing this while meeting a critical health care need.

### **GAINING VALUABLE PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE**

ISC supported a small grass roots group in Nikolaevsk-on-Amur, a city of 42,000 some 600 miles from Khabarovsk, to set up a community center where 20 young medical students were able to provide free medical consultations to 65 senior citizens over one month. The volunteer effort helped to overcome a critical shortage of medical care and at the same time gave the students valuable practical experience that was lacking in their medical program.

### **TWO-WAY BENEFITS**

The month-long activity opened the eyes of the young students to the idea of service to their community and gave them a chance to interact in a very positive way with some of their older neighbors.

Nina Shelestova, project coordinator and head of the local community group "Alternative" explained, "This project showed us that community volunteering is possible."



## New job opportunities for the Deaf

Four young people are busy spiffing up a cluttered room on the ground floor of an apartment building in the city of Khabarovsk. Before the work began, loose wires hung from the ceiling. The walls had to be painted. A new entry door was installed. With the work complete, the room has become a shoe repair shop.

### **SERVING 1,000 DEAF CITIZENS**

All four of the young workers are deaf. The shoe repair shop is being run by two organizations. One is ARIDONS, an association of parents of children with hearing disabilities; the other is Khabarovsk's Union of the Deaf. ARIDONS runs a number of programs for deaf children. When children turn 18, they join the Union of the Deaf. The two groups serve more than 1,000 deaf citizens and children in Khabarovsk.

**Above: Medical students provide free consultations.**

**Right: Khabarovsk shoe repair shop was set up and is being run by the Deaf.**

The shoe repair shop will provide a new vocation for the Deaf. Accompanying the shop will be another business for the Deaf—a sewing operation.

ISC's grant covered the reconstruction costs and the work was done on a volunteer basis by members of the two organizations.

### **GOAL OF ASSIMILATION**

One goal of ARIDONS is to help assimilate deaf children into the community at large. Several of the organization's programs—such as art classes, studying English, becoming computer proficient, learning about business, and taking excursions—now include children who hear *and* the Deaf.

"Kids with hearing problems need to mix with other kids," explains

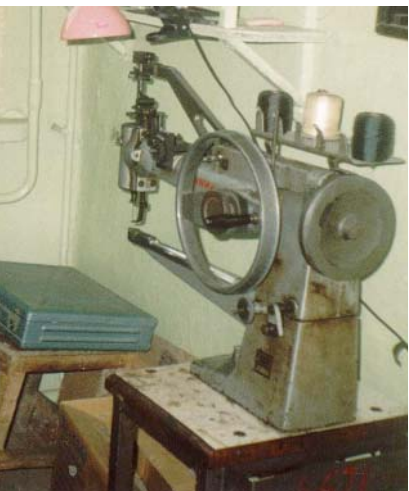


Vera Prereverzeva, the head of ARIDONS. “And people in society need to learn about the challenges facing the Deaf.”

#### **ASSISTANCE FOR ADVOCACY**

The ISC grant is helping to promote this assimilation, according to Prereverzeva, not only through the grant for the shoe repair shop, but also through financial assistance being made for an advocacy program for the hearing impaired.

The second ISC grant has enabled the two organizations to conduct a survey of the hearing impaired in Khabarovsk to gauge their major concerns and needs. As a result of that survey, a video library stocking only videos that include subtitles will be established next to the shoe repair shop. In this way, the Deaf will be able to enjoy a popular activity that had been inaccessible to them in the past.



## Sanctuary builds community involvement

“What is the symbol of peace,” asks a teacher standing in front of a room packed with scores of school children from across the small Town of Amursk in the Russian Far East.

“Dove,” the children excitedly shout back.

“Who sings songs all year round,” the teacher then asks.

“Nightingale,” the children yell out.

Smaller groups of children then move to the front of the long room to identify pictures of various birds. Later, teachers ask the children riddles about birds.

#### **CONNECTING TO NATURE**

“Because we are connected to and are a part of nature, it is our duty to help birds and animals,” announces Vladimir Ivanovich, the director of the Amursk Nature Center. “You children should not forget, throughout your lives, your duty to help birds and animals.”

Before this special program comes to an end at the Amursk Nature Center, awards are issued to children for ornithological projects they have previously completed.

*“Those children who come to the center because of their interest in birds are also learning how to become involved in community activities. And adults also are taking part and learning the same lessons.”*

Vladimir Ivanovich, Director  
Amursk Nature Center

Eight of the awards go to children who helped create a special bird sanctuary outside the nature center. Children built the several dozen bird houses that make up the sanctuary. They also feed visiting birds in the winter and help create nests in the spring and summer. The bird sanctuary was built with support from ISC’s Civic Initiatives Program.

“The primary aim of ISC has been achieved,” says Ivanovich. “A lot of people were involved in the project, and many children and adults helped build the bird houses.”

#### **A COALITION OF GROUPS**

He adds that other organizations also have helped support the new bird sanctuary project at the nature center, which has been open for 25 years. “It’s wonderful to have a coalition of groups working on this project,” says Ivanovich.

One ancillary benefit of the bird sanctuary project, according to Ivanovich, is that it helps children become involved and learn the value of such grassroots community initiatives.

#### **LEARNING TO BECOME INVOLVED**

“Children are very much interested in this idea,” he says, “and not just the project itself. They also took part in planning meetings. And they are continuing to participate in meetings involving the sanctuary. Children also are conducting research and investigating the lives of birds and the problems they face.” Those children who come to the center because of their interest in birds, he explains, also “are learning how to become involved in community activities. And adults also are taking part and learning the same lessons.”

## A natural marvel restored

Makrusha Cavern in Primorski Krai is a natural cave formed over many thousands of years. Uncontrolled tourism and little local oversight had left the cave with smoke damaged walls, broken stalactites and stalagmites, graffiti, and garbage.

Today, with grant support from ISC, Makrusha Cavern is clean and protected not only by the state, but by a local NGO, Ecology of Life, which is committed to more improvements and ongoing upkeep.



**Makrusha Cavern**

## Library provides access to books and activities

Sunlight splashes off the colorful mural of playful elves on the wall of the freshly renovated library room. Not long ago it was filthy and in total disarray, inhabitable only by the roving rats that had nested there. The library, with some 1,500 books, is used by children with handicaps in the City of Khabarovsk.

The renovation project was made possible through an ISC grant to AORIDI, a registered organization of parents of children with handicaps in Khabarovsk established in 1989.

### **VOLUNTEER HELP**

The library is housed in a building that is used by AORIDI as a center for some 400 handicapped children. Other activities in the center include theater programs, the publishing of a newspaper by the children, the making and selling of handicrafts and souvenirs, and a literature club. It is the only center that serves the 3,000 physically handicapped children in the city, according to Irina Yurevskaya, the director and a founder of AORIDI. Various individuals and organizations in Khabarovsk donated books to the library. Volunteers also helped with the construction work.

### **POSITIVE EXPERIENCE**

“Working with ISC was a very positive experience,” says Yurevskaya. “Besides helping us renovate the room for the library, we received information and learned how to make financial reports and how to implement projects. And this information can be used in the future with other grantmaking organizations. This was a new experience for us, receiving this type of important and helpful information.”

ISC has enabled AORIDI to become more well rounded and ambitious in its scope, according to Yurevskaya. “ISC has made our organization stronger,” she explains. “Not only were we able to establish a brand new service—the library—but our project implementers gained valuable experience. We have new volunteers at the library, and our kids will learn and gain vocational skills from working in the library.”

Yurevskaya adds that AORIDI offers the library as a community meeting space. When neighbors and other organizations use the room to get together, it helps strengthen the bonds between the handicapped children and the community at large.

Local government agencies can be bureaucratic and difficult to deal with, Yurevskaya says. ISC, however, allowed flexibility on the library project, which brought it to fruition more quickly. “ISC didn’t mandate what we had to do,” she says. “The project is a model for government in how to work with NGOs.”



*ISC’s mission is to help communities around the world address environmental, economic, and social challenges to build a better future shaped and shared by all.*

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