

1.14 Sopotniki DRTS (SLO)

Sopotniki NGO provides a **community-based door-to-door lift-giving service to elderly** people in 16 municipalities in Slovenia, at no costs for the users. This free transport service enables elders to access healthcare facilities, attend cultural events, visit friends, go to the doctor, go shopping, etc.



1.14.1 About the 16 Municipalities involved, Slovenia

<u>Country</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>Target Area</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>Population density</u>	<u>Visitors/year</u>
Slovenia	16 Municipalities	2.432,70 Km ²	127.500 inh.	52,4 inh./Km ²	~100k (estimation from national statistics - Total 5,8 Mln in 2021)

Most of the Slovenian territory is located more than 200 m above sea level. It can be divided into three areas: the karst plateau (Kras), between the border with Italy and Ljubljana; the Alpine and pre-Alpine area which occupies most of the country and a strip of the Pannonian plain to the east towards Hungary.

From an economic point of view agriculture has a modest development while trade and industrial activities in the steel and wood sectors are quite developed. This has led to the development of numerous modest-sized cities such as those in which the Sopotniki service is provided.

1.14.2 Description of the Mobility Solution

The Sopotniki service concerns the door-to-door transport of elderly people, at no cost to them, in 16 Municipalities and beyond in Slovenia. It covers small villages and towns outside Ljubljana Urban Region in the municipalities of Hrpelje-Kozina, Divača, Sežana, Sevnica, Brežice, Krško, Kočevje, Postojna, Pivka, Ajdovščina, Ankaran-Ancarano, Cerknica, Litija, Šmartno pri Litiji, Idrija, Zagorje ob Savi.

The service allows older people (aged 65 and over) and living within the area of the served municipalities, to attend cultural events, visit friends, to go to the doctor, go shopping, etc. In this way they can run their errands independently and carefree as well as make new acquaintances and keep social contacts with the wider environment, which would otherwise be out of reach.



Figure 36 – Involved Municipalities

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The service is available continuously throughout the year. As a rule, services run for up to 8 hours a day, approximately between 07:00 and 15:00. In the event of interest in attending cultural and social events taking place in the evening in a particular service unit, such transport is also available (in this case, several volunteers are rotated). There are no specific seasonal fluctuations, only during the summer heat and holidays (July, August) and in case of poorer conditions in winter (snow, ice), older people are less likely to travel.

The main stakeholders involved in the MS are NGO Sopotniki, municipalities and private sponsors (automotive companies are interested too)

The MS Drivers are volunteers, the work is organized through a smart volunteer work system. The goal is the activation of passive rural population to achieve a higher rate of participation in addressing local communities' problems. Volunteers are people who can spare a few hours once a week, once a fortnight or can devote a couple of days each month to driving the elderly. Sopotniki provides a flexible opportunity to suit their availability. The volunteer network includes job-seekers, young people (18-25) and younger pensioners. This mobility solution, as designed and actually running, provides also students' working practice for students of different university programmes.



Figure 37 – Users and vehicles of Sopotniki service

Sopotniki NGO sets up a web volunteer portal for an easier communication between the organization and volunteers. In such way the coordination body is in regular contact with volunteers, encouraging their feedback and organize annual meetings. The organization owns the vehicles.

Target user groups and needs

The main target group is represented by the elderly, who live in remote villages, with limited access to organized public transport services, with no car ownership or who are unable to drive. The share of elderly (over 65 years) in the population of 9 municipalities is circa 20 % (25.170).

Involved Bodies

The bodies involved in the service organization and delivery are “Sopotniki” NGO, Employment Service of Slovenia (referrals of potential volunteers), Slovenian Philanthropy (referrals of potential volunteers, trainings), automotive companies, municipalities and other regional and national authorities related to transport and social inclusion. At the state level the Ministry of Public Administration (Non-Governmental Organisations Division) is also directly involved.

Some private companies are also involved as sponsors and donors (currently the Sopotniki Institute has over 120 active such contractual collaborations).

Mobility services provided/addressed

The services provided by the Sopotniki Institute, including free transportation for seniors and associated services such as training and counselling, are performed in-house. The Institute has a dedicated team,

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distributed between the headquarters and local units, manages the daily operations and coordinates with the network of volunteer drivers to provide these services.

The total resources involved in Sopotniki are 19 full time employees for the coordination of local groups and overall coordination (4 employed by Sopotniki Institute at headquarters, 13 employed by project partners – municipalities, Red Cross, Social Work Centres etc.). The control centre supports the coordination, scheduling and dispatch systems. The total drivers' network count was 263 volunteers coordinated in 2022.

The total number of vehicles involved are 20, divided as following: 6 units with 2 dedicated vehicles, 7 units with 1 dedicated vehicle; 1 additional vehicle for the "On the road to 1000 wishes" project. The vehicles used are slightly taller vehicles (SUV) to make it easier for older people to get in and out of the vehicle.

Ridership and other key metrics/results

The number of users and trip were increasing since the starting date in 2017. The service started in 2017 with 312 users and in 2022 this number reached 5350. The number of transportations also raised from 1187 in 2017 to 9552 in 2022 with an exponential increase. The number of users transported in a month goes from a minimum of 3671 to a maximum of 4458 with almost 900 new users every year. The average length of the route made in a single service is 31 Km. The total travelled distance in 2023 was 414.633 km.

The users are mainly elderly people using the mobility solution to reach social activities, groceries, healthcare, thereby promoting the physical health and improved quality of life of elder people residents. As a result, the main destinations are shops, health centres, public administration and other essential activities. Access to touristic points of interest is marginal in the overall trip distribution. 66% of the customers use Sopotniki to go to the doctor and 25% use it to reach basic services like groceries, post-office, and hairdresser.

Elders qualify themselves for the service proving they are over 60 years old and if they live in rural areas. Rides are also provided for wheelchair users. If wished, a family member can accompany the elder. All rides at Sopotniki are planned (a week in advance). Sopotniki provides customized rides to best meet the elders' needs. The transport is curb to curb for elder people without mobility problems, door-to-door for elder people who need some assistance; 'door-through-door' for those who occasionally need help with difficult tasks in the house. The service covers rural settlements in 16 Slovenian municipalities and connects them to town centres and between. The service also provides rides to the capital and other larger Slovenian towns, if so needed by the users (medical care, visits and trips). Periodic feedback from the customer was collected to improve the service. Overall, the majority are very satisfied with the service they have received.

Supporting technologies

Sopotniki developed a web application for reservations that supports fleet management and generates all the necessary statistics such as number of new and returning users, number of kilometres, rides, phone calls, volunteer hours, special requirements or disabilities, volunteer data. The system also helps to manage relations with the users. Volunteer drivers on the road use a dedicated mobile app that allows them to navigate between waypoints, make quick calls to users and the coordinator, and enter e-reports (number of volunteer hours, vehicle meter reading, progress notes).

The technological and ITS background was provided since the beginning considering the founder and CEO has background in programming and software development. This supporting background was an essential requirement to design the platform to support the service providing. Integration of Sopotniki service with

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public transport services (bus & trains) is assured to enable multi-modal transportation: public transport timetables data integrated into Sopotniki reservations service to enable efficient route planning.

An advanced reporting tool for automated regular quarterly reporting to municipalities and other public funders on the results of service delivery and the use of public funds.

Development of on demand mobility solution “ToyotaGO” for Toyota Slovenia and integration with Sopotniki (for elderly users of ToyotaGO mobility solution the service is also free of charge and accessible without smart phone & credit card): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9DuHDrh90E>.

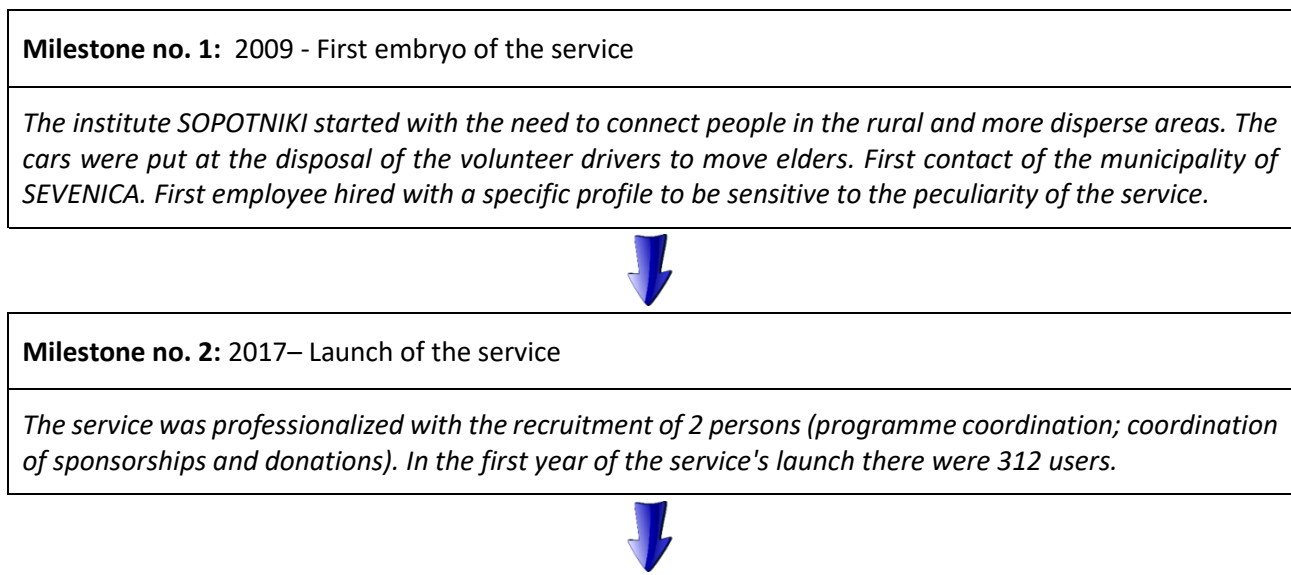
Sopotniki has developed a platform for organising online fundraising campaigns, which is available to all NGOs in Slovenia – www.pomagajmo.io

Engagement aspects

The cooperation between local stakeholders is a key aspect for the Sopotniki service. As the organization expands its services to other regions or countries, Sopotniki adapted its model to suit different local contexts, including language barriers, legal constraints, and varying community engagement. To address this challenge, Sopotniki Institute should invest thorough market analysis, conduct upfront research on local legislation, and develop culturally-sensitive promotional campaigns to engage local communities. As with many non-profit organizations, Sopotniki Institute faces the challenge of ensuring stable funding to support its programs and services. To mitigate this risk, the organization continue to diversify its funding sources, strengthen relationships with existing donors, and explore new opportunities for funding, including cross border programs and partnerships

To improve the direct engagement of local partners, discount coupons for Sopotniki customers were created. Local businesses can be involved as providers of discounts for elderly customers who visit them with the help of Sopotniki transportation. To enable integration of Sopotniki service with public transport services (bus & trains) for multi-modal transportation, public transport timetables data are integrated into Sopotniki reservations service to enable efficient route planning.

1.14.3 Timelines and Milestones



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Milestone no. 3: 2018-2020 - Growth of the service

Growth of the service with a total of 9 operating units.

**Milestone no. 4:** 2020 – Service expansion

2020: expansion of the service - creation of "plug-in" and "add-on" services: vouchers; "On the Road to 1000 wishes", ToyotaGO.

1.14.4 Long-term assessment

Success, Durability and Expansion

The service is still operating and it was growing year after year with positive results among users and a controlled equilibrium between costs and revenues.

Over time, the service was expanded into geographical interested areas. More recently, with a van new transport service solutions were tested. The core service continues to be related to social services to address transport demand of elderly people. A positive result of the mobility solution is that the system has been extended to 16 Municipalities in total.

To ensure sustainable growth and increased impact, Sopotniki Institute will continue to build and maintain strong partnerships with municipalities, NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders. Establishing long-term relationships and collaborating with partners can help the organization access resources, share knowledge, and promote best practices. Additionally, partnering with academic institutions or research centres can enhance the organization's capacity to innovate and adapt its services to different contexts.

Sopotniki Institute will continue to leverage technology to improve its services, streamline internal processes, and enhance data collection and monitoring. This includes investing in advanced IT systems, software localization, and staff training to ensure that team members are equipped with the necessary skills and tools to manage the organization's operations effectively. Digital solutions can also help Sopotniki Institute better engage with its stakeholders, such as using online platforms for volunteer recruitment and communication.

To address the challenges of staff turnover and workload management, Sopotniki Institute will develop a comprehensive capacity-building plan. This plan should include strategies for staff recruitment and retention, as well as the provision of training and development opportunities that enhance team members' skills and competencies. Additionally, the plan should incorporate measures to promote staff well-being, such as fostering a supportive work environment, providing resources for stress management, and offering team-building activities.

Funding and Financing

Sopotniki Institute operates under a non-profit business model and collaborates with various stakeholders through public/private and private/private partnerships to sustain the business model. The public/private partnerships primarily involve funding and support from various levels of government, which account for most of the revenue.

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Why is it considered a Good Practice?

Sopotniki provides a valuable mobility service in rural areas catering to the social needs of the elderly, such as social inclusion, more accessible access to healthcare, and other public services. It has a reliable and efficient management, coordination, and organisation structure, which enables the provision of a transport service across different regions in the country and an efficient management of resources. Over the years, it gained popularity and managed to involve an ever-increasing number of volunteers.

1.14.5 Transferability considerations

CONTEXT PECULIARITIES	TRANSFERABILITY CONDITIONS
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rural Demographics: The model appears to be specifically designed to serve elder people in rural, dispersed municipalities in Slovenia, where public transport may be less accessible or even non-existent. 2. Cultural Acceptance of Volunteerism: Sopotniki relies heavily on a network of volunteers. 3. Public-Private Partnerships: The involvement of municipalities and private sponsors is integral to the success of the service 4. Technical Infrastructure: The successful operation of Sopotniki is reliant on their IT platform. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Availability of Volunteers: A critical part of the Sopotniki model is the availability of volunteers. 2. Technical Infrastructure: The operation of Sopotniki relies heavily on an IT platform. 3. Funding: Resources will be needed to fund the startup and ongoing operation of the service. These resources might come from municipalities, private sponsors, or other sources. 4. Legal and Regulatory Compliance: The service must comply with local regulations regarding transport services, volunteering, data protection, and so forth. 5. Public awareness campaigns might be needed to inform potential users and volunteers about the service and its benefits. 7. Community Support: Engaging community stakeholders, including local businesses, schools, and other organizations. 8. Evaluation and Adaptation: Finally, it will be important to continually evaluate the service and adapt it as necessary to meet the specific needs and conditions of the new context.
DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED/WEAKNESS	LESSONS LEARNT
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dependency on Volunteer Availability 2. Sopotniki's service is free for the elderly, meaning its operation heavily relies on funding from municipalities and private sponsors. 3. Dependency on Technological Infrastructure: The operation of Sopotniki depends on a functioning IT platform 4. Dependency on Vehicles: The service depends on having a fleet of reliable vehicles. 5. Regulatory Changes: The service operates within a specific regulatory environment. 6. Public Perception and Acceptance: The success of Sopotniki relies on the acceptance and participation of the local community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Success Criteria: Beyond financial stability, success may be measured in terms of the number of elderly people served, the number of trips made, the consistency and reliability of the service. - Community involvement is Crucial. It is important of engaging a wide range of stakeholders in such initiatives. - Innovation can be social, not just technological: the heart of the innovation lies in its social model bringing together volunteers, the elderly and community partners to address a common challenge. - Flexibility is key: Sopotniki operates on a flexible schedule, with volunteers contributing as their time

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7. Rural Focus: The model is designed for rural, dispersed municipalities.

allows. This flexible model may be a useful approach for similar initiatives.

References for further details

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