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EVALUATION OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND EUROPEAN UNION JOINT PROGRAMME 'ROMED'

CASE STUDY BUCHAREST 6th SECTOR

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

ROMANIA, Bucharest, 6th Sector

The ROMED2/ROMACT Programme in Bucharest – Sector 6 is a case showing the challenges of local cooperative processes between the Roma community and local authorities when the local administration is open to collaboration only formally but seems to react only under civic pressure. It also shows the importance of Roma community mobilisation and self-organisation for resolving urgent problems of the community through democratic tools, including peaceful civic protest, thus making the authorities take action and rehabilitate the roads and restore public transportation, which is the only link the Roma community has with the rest of the city.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Sector 6 is the second largest district in Bucharest, located in the north-western part of the capital with a population of 380,000. It has its own Mayor and Local Council, both directly elected in the local elections. According to the last census (2011), there are 1,776 Roma living in the district. However, according to the estimates of Roma NGOs, the Roma population in the Roma neighbourhood of Giulesti Sarbi within Sector 6 is in the range of 20,000–40,000 people.

The Giulesti Sarbi Roma neighbourhood of Sector 6 has very poor infrastructure. Water supply and sanitation was introduced only after 1990 wasn't finalised. Thus, most of the houses still do not have running water and a sewage system; instead, they have wells in the courtyard. Most of the land in southern Giulesti Sarbi is flooded due to the rising level of groundwater in the area close to the Dambovita River and Morii Lake. In such an environment, no construction is allowed on many of the open spaces. Many roads and streets are improperly maintained, except for Giulesti Road and Săbăreni Road which were recently modernised. The rest are, at best, cobblestones. This part of the neighbourhood is linked with the rest of the city through Giulesti only; residents can use several bus lines and a tram.

The neighbourhood also has a poor school and healthcare infrastructure. There is only one kindergarten and two schools, just one of which is modernised (the other one has outside toilets and no running water). There is only one medical centre. The nearest pharmacy is located 5 km from the neighbourhood. There are no school or health mediators.

In recent years, parts of this area have attracted the attention of investors, changing the vision of the authorities who have since understood the high potential of the area in terms of investment. Possible future investment in this area will create employment opportunities for Giulesti-Sarbi inhabitants.

There are no Roma councillors elected in the Local Council. The City Hall has a Roma person, employed as a local expert, who is considered to provide a "superficial involvement" in solving community problems (statements of facilitator and CAG members).

The General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection of Sector 6 have implemented a total of seven projects funded by the ESF that have targeted the Roma community in Giulesti Sarbi. Under these projects, a lot of vocational training courses were conducted in qualifications such as trade worker, caretaker for the elderly, baker, data operator, hairdresser, manicurist and massage therapist. As a result, 1,688 persons from Sector 6 who belong to vulnerable groups, including Roma, have received new qualifications.

There is an active Roma NGO, "Romano ButiQ" association, established to promote non-discrimination by holding cultural and educational activities. Its headquarters are in the Roma Museum in Giulesti established in 2014. The association has organised a series of cultural events which aim to raise awareness of non-discrimination on ethnic grounds. Other areas of intervention of Romano ButiQ

include the promotion of Roma craftsmen and their products, theatre activities with children in isolated districts, as well as lobbying and advocacy for Roma inclusion.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The Community Action Group (CAG) of Giulesti Sarbi neighbourhood was formed in November 2013. The members of the CAG were selected based on a democratic process with a wide participation from the community. The initial meeting was attended by over 400 Roma citizens, both men and women, living in the neighbourhood. After discussions, the participants in the meeting elected 27 community representatives as members of the CAG. The leading motivation of people in joining the CAG was to solve the problems in the neighbourhood which affect them as individuals, as well as the entire community.

Initially, women from the community were also part of the Community Action Group, but they gradually dropped out from the group due to their household and childcare obligations. The membership of the group has been fluctuating and gradually reducing. A number of members dropped out due to their responsibilities in needing to make a living. The constant number of members that stayed in the group over time was about ten members which had stabilised to five members by the end of the ROMED2 Programme.

The Community Action Group was recognised only in April 2016 during the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme when some CAG members were accepted as members of a Mixed Working Group of Sector 6 municipality. The mixed Working Group is a mechanism specifically designed to implement the Strategy for Roma Inclusion at local level. It consists of representatives of local institutions, NGOs and private persons (Roma citizens). The CAG as a community-based structure, as it was set up within the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme, was never recognised by the City Hall. Instead, some members were accepted as part of the Mixed Working Group as a compromise.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

The Deputy Mayor of Bucharest Sector 6 supports the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme, even though he did not participate in any CAG meetings. As an example, the City Hall of Bucharest Sector 6 provided material resources to support the efforts of the CAG in organising the Pakivalo Solidarity Festival.

The Action Plan was developed by the CAG under the guidance of the facilitator and submitted to the City Hall in order to be approved by the Local Council.

Communication between the CAG and the City Hall, as assessed by CAG members, was good during the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme due to the openness of the Deputy Mayor and the Directorate of Social Assistance. However, in the course of the Programme, the Deputy Mayor resigned and the CAG was left without support from City Hall. After the resignation of the Deputy Mayor, CAG requests began to be ignored, the local action plan was not approved and the group was not officially recognised by the municipality.

As outlined in the interview with the ROMED/ROMACT facilitator, when it comes to assuming responsibility, *"they are continuing to act superficially or pretend that there are no human and financial resources"*. As an example, the local public authority did not budget for the local action plan which remained in the drawers of various departments at City Hall. In the beginning of 2016, efforts related to the Action Plan were resumed by members of the CAG, which is currently being updated.

Results and impact in the communities

There are several noticeable results in the framework of the ROMED/ROMACT Programme:

Community-based campaign that resulted in repair of the main road linking the neighbourhood to the city

In August 2014, transport services to the Roma neighbourhood were interrupted due to the catastrophic state of the main road connecting it to the city. This affected the whole neighbourhood, but especially the children who had to walk more than a kilometre on a road surrounded by vacant land and full of stray dogs. The general metropolitan City Hall of Bucharest was "bombarded" with over 200 petitions and complaints from community residents. Due to lack of action from the municipality, in September 2014 the neighbourhood inhabitants, the CAG members and the Roma NGO working in that area started a "peaceful protest" with the main request to repair the road and restore transport services. As a result of this effective community-based civic action, the metropolitan administration of Bucharest took the necessary measures for complete reconstruction of the road. The road was repaired and the transport services restored in October 2014.

Approaching the issue of property documents and IDs

The most pressing issue that people from Giulesti-Sarbi neighbourhood are facing is the issue of property documents and personal identity documents (IDs). Many neighbourhood residents bought the homes where they live using so-called "receipts by hand" which do not have any legal value. In addition, many of them cannot afford to pay for the necessary procedures to obtain legal documents for their houses and land. In the absence of property documents, IDs cannot be issued and, without IDs, it is not possible to have a regular job or to have contracts for utilities (e.g. water, electricity, sewage system) and other most basic services. At the request of the Community Action Group, Romano ButiQ initiated a partnership with the City Hall District to include Giulesti-Sarbi in the National Cadastre and the Land Registry Programme, to enable neighbourhood residents to acquire legal ownership documents for their houses and land. The certificates and cadastral documentation necessary for registration in the integrated Cadastre and Land Registry of holders as owners were then issued free of charge. About 20% of cases have been solved through the involvement of CAG members. Being involved in this initiative, CAG members became familiar with the procedure and now provide help and assistance to other community members on how to obtain property documents and IDs.

Organisation of the Solidarity Festival by ROMACT

The second edition of the Solidarity Festival was organised as a joint effort involving several organisations, institutions, foundations and independent individuals. The Community Action Group from Bucharest Sector 6 was strongly involved in mobilising the local community's participation in the event, especially that of the Roma children who were involved in artistic activities. It was the first time that such an event had been organised in Giulesti-Sarbi neighbourhood. The event helped to increase the sense of pride of identity and belonging to the Roma community.

Lessons forward

The ROMED2/ROMACT Programme was very successful regarding the empowerment of the Roma community from Giulesti-Sarbi neighbourhood in Sector 6 of Bucharest. According to the statement of the ROMED2/ROMACT facilitator, the most important step was to overcome the thinking from the perspective of personal self-interest and problems only and making the leap to caring about community needs and priorities.

Community members experienced and saw that together, through self-organising, they could solve problems that affected them. They were supported by Romano ButiQ and other Roma leaders, who helped bring national television to broadcast the issue. The experience of organising a peaceful protest that put pressure on the local administration to repair the main road and to put back into

operation the interrupted bus services helped the people from the community to understand that they can be strong and their voice can be heard, but only if there is unity and a common community goal.

The main lesson from Giulesti-Sarbi is that when the local authorities are not responsive to urgent problems of the community, it requires community self-organising for effective pressure and advocacy to resolve these problems.

In terms of sustainability of the process initiated by the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme, it is very vulnerable if we take into account the fact that, although the local authorities may show a formal commitment, they seem to (re)act only if under pressure. As shared by the CAG members, "*we never see the Mayor (of Sector 6), he never came to speak with us*". The only real support that came from local administration was from the Deputy Mayor, but after his resignation, there was no institutional support given to the process.

Regarding the Community Action Group, even though the number of the actively involved members has been reducing, they will continue to work for the community. Very helpful in this will be the support of Romano ButiQ based in Sector 6. It is most important that the contact with the community is maintained and that the latter is constantly informed about the actions that take place.