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



CASE STUDY JAROVNICE

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

SLOVAK REPUBLIC, Jarovnice Municipality

Jarovnice is an excellent example to demonstrate how the approach behind ROMED2 can support local change. It shows that empowerment can work around tangible issues directly engaging the community. The main reason for success in Jarovnice is that the real participation of Roma was ensured in addressing the challenges of Roma communities. This is due to the shared commitment and vision for Roma inclusion of the Mayor, local councillors – the majority of them Roma – the local administration, and their effective partnership with all community structures and representatives of the Roma community: the Community Action Group, local NGOs, community centres, the Roma pastoral church and other active Roma citizens.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Jarovnice is one of the largest Roma rural communities in Central Europe. According to official data, 5,831 people live in the village, of which 4,879 are Roma and 2,700 of them are children up 18 years of age. Experts predict that Jarovnice will become the first Roma town in Slovakia¹.

Jarovnice faces most of the problems that other localities with a high Roma population face, as well as some unique ones. The unemployment rate among Roma is almost 100%, there are problems with housing and the school works on two shifts. The village experiences high demographic mobility. Slovaks move to live in a nearby town, the better-off Roma buy their houses, leave the neighbourhood and young families take their place in the settlements. The Secretary of the Municipality, Rastislav Zubaj, recognises development potential in this movement with young and motivated Roma seeing the example of their better-off kin and also wanting to improve their lives, but this doesn't happen automatically. Every year, the village has about 200 first-graders which the school still needs to teach in two shifts. Every day, between 150 and 180 children are tutored and/or mentored. If these children do not receive good education and skills, they will follow the unemployment and marginalisation path of their families. The stakes are therefore high for the "first Roma town in the making".

The social work in the settlements has solid foundations resulting from earlier investments. A project on "Improved conditions for mutual tolerance between Roma and non-Roma inhabitants of municipalities" aimed at improving the co-existence of Jarovnice citizens was implemented already under PHARE. A project "Better conditions for Roma self-realisation in the education system" followed, aimed at increasing the school success of Roma children. Jarovnice was also one of the pilot municipalities which employed Roma teaching assistants, health field assistants and social field workers and its community centre was one of the first in the Slovak Republic. A Roma pastoral centre also was established and remains active. In 2009, the project implemented by the NGO "Wild Poppies" and supported by EEA and Norway Grants reinvigorated the community centre.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

In this context, the establishment of the Community Action Group (CAG) came naturally. The CAG consists of 11 members, two of them women. Several of the CAG members are Roma municipal councillors; others are members of local Roma NGOs, the Roma sports (football) club and the women's club. They all are motivated to improving life in their community and discussing the problems facing the settlements, the possible approaches to addressing them and the feasible financial sources. The needs assessment was built on the existing Local Strategy of Comprehensive Approach for Roma Community. Membership in the CAG is stable, nobody drops out.

¹ <http://suvada.sk/jarovnice-buduce-romske-mesto.html>

The Joint Action Plan has ten priority areas and the CAG held a discussion on what could be done and where the resources could come from. The plan proposed by the CAG was discussed and approved by the local government and is integrated into the municipal development plan.

An important factor contributing towards the successful process in Jarovnice is the quality of the national facilitator, Roman Estocak. An educated Roma with a vision and knowledge of the local issues, he has lived in the region for many years and works as a consultant for community problems, a mediator and an assistant. He is currently the regional coordinator of the Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities in Slovakia for the Presov region. His vision is that municipalities with a predominantly Roma population need the function (and position) of “crisis manager”. This should be a person familiar with the region, municipality, its problems and the possible solutions. This person should also have information on alternative financial sources and calls for projects and see the bigger picture, with vision and a three to five year perspective to work with the community and bring it up to a new level.

Another factor contributing to the success is the presence of two dedicated local active people, Jan and Rastislav Zubaj, who currently work in the municipality of Jarovnice. Both brothers are highly educated with many years of experience as social workers and health assistants. Years ago they started as volunteers but have both now been employed by the municipality. They were also trained as mediators under ROMED1. Rastislav is currently the secretary of the municipality. He recalls that, during the CAG meetings, each representative from the distinct groups in the community was insisting on their own priority – the representatives of the football club were lobbying for football, whilst the representatives of the Roma community for hygiene and safety in the neighbourhood. Yet all had some specific and tangible issue to push for. That was the basis for the pragmatic discussion of which one to choose. All CAG members united around the idea that unemployment is a major problem, therefore solving it would essentially address a number of other problems. However, they didn't see any opportunities and real solutions that would be in the competence of the local stakeholders.

[Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government](#)

The situation in Jarovnice is unique to a large extent– the mayor, the municipal councillors and local administration are one team. They work together with the local Roma pastoral centre, the NGOs, the community centre and the educational institutions, involving the active citizens in the Roma community to solve everyday problems of the village and the Roma neighbourhood. Some of the CAG members are already members of the Local Council, which makes the group sustainable and able to solve problems.

The majority of local councillors (seven out of 13) are Roma, participating in CAG meetings. All the projects carried out by the municipality are the result of active communication and cooperation between the representatives of the municipality and the members of the CAG. The role of the CAG is not limited to determining priorities. Members also participate in committees selecting the people involved in the completion of different projects addressing the outlined priorities, for example, deciding upon whom from the community will be most appropriate and most need to be involved.

Recently, the municipality constructed a social housing block with apartments for people living in areas at risk of flooding, a project of Civic Guards was implemented, four health assistants were employed and seminars on various topics connected to the health situation in the settlements took place.

Many activities and projects have been carried out but huge challenges remain. For example, there are still more than 250 wooden shacks so this is the priority of both the CAG and the local authority. In Jarovnice, there are real opportunities for improvement of the living conditions of the Roma in the coming years using the available funding from the new programming period of EU funds and the state budget. However, the Mayor, Gina Florian, is a realist. It is his second term as Mayor and he knows it

is not possible to solve all the problems at once: *"One has to prioritise, to seek external resources, outside the municipality and its budget"*.

Results and impact in the communities

All projects in the Municipality are prepared by the mayor, deputy mayor and the head of the municipality office. In the past, there was active cooperation with the Roma Institute in Bratislava which prepared all the projects for EU calls and national calls, but this is no longer the case, mainly because the funding of the Roma Institute from OSI Budapest has ended.

Obviously, this support will be missed because the problems are very serious, but the local administration in Jarovnice has not wasted time and has since learned to draft, manage and report on large projects. They are able to prepare large projects financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) on their own, although they will need to consult with the ROMED2/ROMACT National Support Team or contract external companies and experts for some of the projects. Jarovnice is also on the Plenipotentiary's list of 150 priority municipalities for the new programming period.

The CAG is able to mobilise the community and gain real support. A project application for sports equipment and support for the football team was drafted. One of the conditions of the donor ("Slovenska Sporitelna" Bank) was to have that support documented in the form of SMS messages sent in their favour. The local activists, together with the future footballers (the Roma children), campaigned door-to-door and managed to generate enough messages for their application to win. This may look like just a small step from a larger "Roma integration" perspective, but it is nevertheless a huge leap for the local people who saw how change is dependent primarily on their own activity and commitment.

Things are therefore set to move – slower than the local activists and authority would like but still in the right direction. What makes Jarovnice a case particularly worth promoting is that *"in Jarovnice, Roma are actively involved in the local government and this is one of the most important factors for success. This is how their voice is heard"*.

Lessons forward

This local change has gained momentum due to long years of work and persistent investment that are starting to bear fruit. This momentum has been matched by the support provided by the ROMED2/ROMACT national facilitator and the active local people who are committed to facilitating the process in the municipality. At the same time, the people in local administration with their history of working on initiatives for Roma inclusion have sensitivity to, and awareness of, the issue. The work on the block of flats or the container school started before the establishment of the CAG, but the group has helped different stakeholders reach consensus on core priorities and helped further focus the decision-making process around tangible initiatives that can make a difference and energise the community. The CAG's participation in the decision-making process of the committees determining the important issues for the community is also real empowerment of the Roma. Last but not least, the CAG managed to achieve success in an apparently small issue (a successful project application). This apparently "minor" success is much more meaningful than just technical training. Such facilitation of the role of the Programme might be the right "niche" for its possible expansion in the future.

Another important factor for the success of the local cooperative process is the direct involvement of Roma in the decision-making process – they are directly represented in the local council (the majority of councillors are Roma). This involvement is also a major sustainability factor that is particularly important given the demographic trends in Jarovnice.