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



CASE STUDY TORRES VEDRAS

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

PORTUGAL, Torres Vedras

The municipality of Torres Vedras embraced ROMED2 as an opportunity to promote the social inclusion of Roma communities, actively supporting the empowerment of the Community Action Group (CAG), through a bottom-up participatory approach. The municipality believes in public participation as a tool for good governance and provided all of the support needed for the CAG to evolve and present their proposals. The prospects for the future are positive and the seed for sustainable inclusion of Roma is growing. Nevertheless, there are challenges ahead in terms of capacity-building of the group, the broader engagement of the community and the definition of goals to be followed in the long term, including an agenda of specific actions to be promoted in the future.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Torres Vedras is situated close to Lisbon (approximately 50 kilometres to the north) and has a population of around 80,000 inhabitants. The Roma population living in the municipality is estimated to be 350 individuals and the majority of the families live in the largest social neighbourhood of the city (Boavista). The community is strongly affected by unemployment and, over the last years, the economic recession has had a significant impact on their traditional activities as street vendors. Many families rely on social welfare and the future is far from bright especially in terms of education and living standards. Over the years, the municipality has developed several inclusion efforts in order to minimise the vulnerabilities affecting the Roma community and also promoted cultural projects focused on Roma identity and tradition. Over several years the "Romale" project brought artistic performances, with music and dance, to the historic centre of the city. The municipality had a good track record in its relations with the Roma community prior to its involvement in ROMED2, which was seen as a tipping point for a new approach.

It is also important to highlight that Torres Vedras already had a strong practice of participative planning. The municipality developed the Local Agenda 21 based on a wide process of social engagement, with public meetings in all the parishes and with many stakeholders, leading to a municipal action plan focused on sustainability. The culture of participation was therefore present and the political executive saw ROMED2 as an opportunity to promote the social inclusion of Roma communities, using innovative participative tools.

The story of the former President of the municipality (Mayor), Carlos Miguel, is especially relevant for the case. He comes from a Roma family and that fact did not inhibit his professional and political evolution, becoming Secretary of State of Local Municipalities of the Portuguese Government at the end of 2015. After forty years of democracy, he became the first Roma in office in the government. Due to that nomination, he left the presidency of Torres Vedras after eleven years in charge. He was also a member of the Advisory Group for the Inclusion of Roma Communities in Portugal. As Mayor of Torres Vedras, he was the main person responsible for its participation in ROMED2, ensuring the needed collaboration with his team. Almost all the other Portuguese municipalities participating in ROMED2 were selected at a national level, having participated in the first phase of ROMED in the provision of training to mediators.

Before ROMED, Torres Vedras had no mediator dealing with the Roma community and the problems were managed by the social department in charge of issues related to social inclusion, in collaboration with other departments and institutions. The Programme highlighted the need to have a local facilitator to coordinate the work of the Community Action Group (CAG). This was seen as an opportunity to recruit somebody capable of performing the dual role of facilitator and (sometimes) mediator assisting with the work of the social department. Lindo Cambão was a member of the local Roma community and was selected and hired to work within the municipality on the ROMED2 process.

One of his first assignments was to help the municipality to improve the level of knowledge about the community living in the territory. A survey was prepared and conducted on the ground by the facilitator, with the support of some members of the CAG. A comprehensive diagnosis was produced, becoming a landmark and an important tool for dealing with the problems of the community. Prior to ROMED2, the lack of information was a handicap preventing more accurate social interventions.

The survey was conducted among 90 individuals, corresponding to almost a quarter of the total members of the Roma community in Torres Vedras. The results were worrying: 74% of the individuals surveyed were unemployed and 58% were living off social welfare subsidies. About 80% of the individuals were living with less than 500 EUR per month. In terms of housing conditions, 47% of the individuals considered their houses in a good state of conservation, 29% in a reasonable state and only 15% pointed to a poor state of conservation. In terms of education, only 34% completed the first cycle, 13% never went to school and just 3% went to university; the main reasons given for dropping out from school were "tradition" (36%) and the need to get to work (29%). In terms of active citizenship, 94% of the individuals had never had an experience as a volunteer.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The Community Action Group (CAG) in Torres Vedras started to meet in the beginning of August 2014. The CAG is composed of 12 to 14 members, mostly men, with ages ranging from 18 to 36 years old and schooling levels up to secondary level. One member started university studies but left due to economic reasons. One member is a pastor in the evangelical church. Two women are regulars in the group and other women also attend meetings sometimes. The local facilitator had a key role in the selection of the members of the CAG, identifying individuals with the necessary motivation and profile, sometimes from a closer circle of personal relations inside the community.

During the first months after constitution of the CAG, efforts were made in terms of capacity-building. The National Support Team of the ROMED Programme (Letras Nómadas) played a determinant role in the whole process in terms of motivation, organisation, mentoring, transmissions of concepts and skills, support given to the local facilitator and to the municipal team along the way. Their work was highly recognised and they became partners of the municipality in other activities. It is also important to highlight the support provided by the municipality, including providing a place for the group to meet in the city hall. The Municipal Councillor for Social Affairs was a major supporter of the process, highly available, dynamic and extremely focused on improving the levels of social inclusion of the Roma community. The Social Affairs Department also collaborated with the facilitator to provide operational support to the process.

Despite the favourable context surrounding the CAG, the internal evolution was difficult and demanding. The local facilitator made significant efforts in order to motivate and convince group members to join the meetings. Sometimes members did not initially understand well the objectives of the process. There were also misunderstandings and moments of distrust, for example, when some members of the group thought that ROMED2 had money that belonged to them. In addition, the local facilitator had no previous experience in terms of mediation or facilitation; therefore he had to gain skills and competences to deal with group dynamics, as well as to win the trust of the members of the CAG.

Again, the support given by the ROMED2 National Team and the municipality was fundamental in overcoming the problems. For example, when the group presented the first proposal to the municipal executive, several questions and problems were encountered, requiring a budget and time in order to be resolved. The situation provoked some distrust and disbelief inside the CAG, despite the efforts from the municipality and the positive outcome of the proposal. The learning curve was long and the deficits in terms of participation and skills were difficult to overcome. After almost two years of

ROMED2 in Torres Vedras, the CAG seems to have stabilised as a group, with a more prepared facilitator and an improved internal work dynamic, with several individuals becoming more participative and motivated. Nevertheless, without the framework of the Programme and the support from the national team, it is hard to see here a sustainable group in the long term, even if there is support from the municipality.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

The CAG became a platform for communication and collaboration with the local government. The main priority identified by the group was job creation for the members of the Roma community. The facilitator worked as a pivot player on that relationship and over time gained trust from both sides. Interaction really started with the presentation of a first proposal to the executive, consisting in the resolution of a problem affecting the local evangelical church, in terms of accumulated debt in the payment of rent and electricity. The CAG asked for economic support and requested 2,500 EUR to help the evangelical church. The second proposal from the CAG focused on employment, considering all the problems related to the high levels of unemployment affecting the Roma community and the low levels of formal education. The group proposed the hiring of five Roma people - three men and two women - by the municipality or other local institutions. The third line of proposals were more focused on the cultural dimension, including the organisation of a photographic exhibition associated to the initiative "Experiencing ROMED" in November 2015.

Results and impact in the communities

In terms of impacts, there were direct and objective achievements resulting from the proposals made to the municipality. From an overall perspective, they accomplished a significant degree of success. In terms of employment, the CAG obtained four jobs for Roma individuals on temporary contracts, the local facilitator was also hired by the municipality and another job is to be created soon. The financial support requested by the evangelical church was also obtained, solving the debt problem and gaining the respect of the community members of the church. In the field of culture and identity, the CAG was able to organise initiatives (for example, a photographic exhibition) increasing local visibility and impact.

There were also indirect and spillover effects in terms of ownership, self-esteem and pride at having members of the Roma community making a proactive and innovative effort for inclusion. The CAG appeared as a sign of change and as a social achievement in the eyes of the community. There are benefits in the public perception about Roma people as well: in that regard, the municipality made a significant communication effort to show the activities and the achievements of the CAG, raising the awareness of the local community. In the long term, those indirect impacts may be more important than the aforementioned direct achievements of the CAG.

Today, the municipality is more prepared and more motivated to act for the inclusion of Roma communities. The survey and the diagnosis prepared became an important piece of knowledge for planning specific interventions. Several departments of the municipality and even other institutions became aware of the efforts of the CAG, gaining a more positive image about the Roma community, perhaps even becoming more willing to act for their benefit. The stronger commitment for action on behalf of the local institutions is also a ROMED2 result, which may be an important achievement in the long term for improving the life of the Roma community, for example, in terms of access to public services.

Lessons forward

ROMED2 in Torres Vedras has been a positive Programme due to several factors. There was a high level of municipal motivation with strong political commitment and operational support. The previous experience of the municipality with participatory processes for good governance was also a relevant

factor. The municipality hired a local facilitator under a working contract that gave him motivation and stability to perform his role adequately, sustaining the activity of the CAG. Alongside the process, the municipality gained more knowledge about the local Roma community as a result of the survey conducted by the facilitator with the support of CAG members. There was also a significant communication effort made (for example, in the media) in order to raise local awareness about the process, with an impact on community ownership. It is also important to highlight the continuous efforts made by the National Support Team, who are always very near to the local process, providing guidance and motivation. The good collaboration between the municipality and the ROMED2 National Support Team also created conditions for new projects and initiatives. ROMED provided a collaborative framework that stimulated the networking and the exchange of perspectives between the municipalities and multiple institutions involved in Roma inclusion (for example, events such as “Experiencing ROMED” were relevant arenas for discussion and social learning).

- For the future, there are several risks and challenges to be addressed. Looking towards the CAG at the core of the process, it is important to improve and to sustain the group dynamics from a capacity-building perspective (for example, regular meetings, motivation levels, organisation and skills).
- It would also be relevant to bring new members into the group, giving the chance for other parts of the community to join and collaborate on a more open and accessible basis. Another challenge is to bring more women into the group and to promote their active participation in it.
- In terms of education, it would also be important to engage members on professional training or educational courses, raising their skills and possibilities of employment. The sustainability of the process also depends on the capacity of the municipality to maintain the facilitator, considering that it is becoming more difficult to hire public servants with low levels of formal education. The CAG is still very dependent on the support granted by the ROMED2 National Support Team and the group therefore needs to gain more autonomy and initiative. In that regard, they must define goals and actions to be addressed in a more long-term perspective. They have already achieved short-term goals (subsidy for the evangelical church, local jobs, civic initiatives) and therefore they need to find a wider agenda, with new activities to be promoted in the future in order to keep the group dynamic. If they can gain more associative maturity, from there onwards another step might be taken, with the CAG taking the transition to a formal local association, with a management board and statutes, allowing new possibilities in terms of activities and funding. Nevertheless, more commitment, capacities and skills are still needed, in terms of leadership and organisation as well.

There is a strong will from all the parties involved in the process to see the continuation of ROMED2, even if under a different programme framework. The municipality will try to maintain the efforts to sustain the CAG, but without the support from the National Support Team, it will be more difficult. A different collaborative arrangement might be possible to maintain that operational collaboration, but ROMED is also a strategic framework, with an international dimension, which enables organisational learning and networking between institutions from several countries. The European nature and dimension of ROMED is highly valued and recognised by the Portuguese participants. The municipality of Torres Vedras is very proud to be part of ROMED and the Roma community is starting to benefit from the active participation of the municipality.