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



CASE STUDY VALEA SEACĂ

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

ROMANIA, Valea Seaca

Local authorities from Valea Seaca are very committed to improving the situation of Roma communities in the municipality and the development of the Community Action Group (CAG) has helped them to better understand the needs of people in communities. The cooperative work of the local administration with the CAG has brought a number of tangible results in the Roma communities due to the projects developed. In order to be successful in their efforts for Roma inclusion, small rural municipalities need to mobilize partnerships, especially with NGOs and other actors, in order to be able to access financial resources provided by European funding.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Valea Seaca is a small rural municipality in the Moldova region of Romania, located in the southern county of Bacau, composed of two villages - Cucova and Valea Seaca. According to the 2011 census, the population of Valea Seaca is 3,867 inhabitants, slightly increasing as compared to the last census of 2002. Most of the inhabitants are Romanians (58.91%) with a minority of Roma (33.1 % or 1,700 people).

There are four schools in the municipality, including one secondary school in Valea Seaca (with classes I-VIII) and three primary schools (with grades I-IV), as well as four kindergartens and two community centres - one in Valea Seaca and one in Cucova which is rehabilitated. Only part of the village is connected to a water supply and sewage system. The main economic activity is primitive farming oriented towards a self-sufficiency and sustenance livelihood. Some people work in the few shops or local services of immediate necessity.

The main problem facing the Roma in Valea Seaca is the high level of unemployment, with most people surviving on occasional work. The majority of Roma have at best a secondary school education and a very low level of qualifications. There is continuous dropping out of school of boys in order to earn money for their families, whilst girls often drop out due to household duties and marriage. There is a growing wave of emigration of Roma from the municipality, usually to Nordic countries.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The CAG was established with the support of the ROMED2 Programme at the end of February 2014. Initially it consisted of 12 people including representatives of the villages of Valea Seaca, the school mediator, the health mediator and the school principal. Five of the members were Roma women but in time they have gradually dropped out from the group.

The group is affected by migration and its structure has been changing over time. The core part of the group that participates in its meetings on a permanent basis consists of five people – the school mediator, the health mediator, the school principal and two community members. The CAG has tried to engage different segments of the local community in various activities in support of the Roma.

The CAG has been officially recognised through a decision of the Local Council in March 2014.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

According to the Mayor of Valea Seaca, there is a close and good working relationship between the local administration and the Roma community: "*We have many Roma who currently respond to every request for assisting our difficult work*". The main issue is migration and the change of people involved in the CAG.

The Action Plan was developed by the members of the CAG under the guidance of the ROMED2/ROMACT Facilitator. It encompasses many problems in different sectors: education, health, agriculture, employment, housing and identity documents. All proposals of the CAG have been

considered and included in the local Joint Action Plan, which was adopted on 5 March 2014 by the Local Council of the municipality.

Results and impact in Roma communities

The main visible results are in the area of community infrastructure and IDs. Local administration is very committed and involved in dealing with issues that communities are facing. So far, local administration has implemented a significant number of projects for a small rural municipality, most of them dealing with community infrastructure issues.

The water supply system has been developed in the whole locality and partly in the Roma settlement. A modern treatment plant for water was installed in the whole village.

The municipality has worked a lot to improve the road infrastructure and accessibility of the villages, which was lacking before. Previously, many Roma children used to suffer injuries whilst trying to get to school, especially on rainy days. A large modern bridge over Cucova brook was constructed ensuring the link between the two villages. A second bridge was then built over the Valea Seaca creek in the Roma settlement. The main road was paved starting from the national highway to the entrance of the Roma settlement, as well as the road between Valea Seaca and Cucova. Street lights in both villages were repaired and modernised.

In the area of culture, the municipality financially supported the local churches including the ones attended by Roma. The local Cultural House of Valea Seaca was refurbished with a bathroom and an equipped kitchen. This followed a request from the Roma community members to renovate the local cultural centre so that they could hold cultural events and music courses there.

A six-month project initiative, which was developed as a partnership between the municipality and a local NGO "United Europe" and funded by the National Agency for Roma, provided access to IDs and cadastral documents to 54 Roma households from Valea Seaca. CAG members were involved in all the implementation phases of the project.

Lack of education was one of the biggest problems identified by the CAG. A number of children could not get enrolled in school due to the lack of a birth certificate. The procedure for obtaining birth certificates for six-year-old children is very complicated, since certificates can only be obtained by a court decision which usually takes years. Thanks to the efforts of the ROMED/ROMACT facilitator in the framework of the Programme, 13 children obtained a personal identification code, a unique number that every child gets when the birth certificate is issued. This helped to enrol those children without their birth certificate in the first grade of school.

Ensuring access to pre-school education was another significant success of the cooperation process between the CAG and the municipality. A new modern kindergarten was built in the centre of the village, equipped with all utilities. Roma children with socio economic problems were also enrolled and the expenses were ensured by the municipality. A day care centre for disadvantaged children is being established as a result of an initiative developed by the Star of Hope Romania Foundation in partnership with the City Hall of Valea Seaca and with the financial support of 150,000 EUR provided by private donors from Norway and Sweden. The centre will provide better pre-school care for 40 children daily which is an investment for their enrolment in school. It will also actively work with parents instructing them on how to care for their children, as well as the importance of their education.

The municipality has hired one school mediator. Another educational initiative included second chance school education for adults to enable them to finish their secondary education.

Several main initiatives contributed to the increased access to healthcare services of Roma families and especially children. The local medical centre was refurbished; a local pharmacy was opened in the centre of the village and an apartment was renovated to open a dental surgery. Access of children to healthcare was supported by the project "Non-discrimination means equal rights! Roma children have equitable access to health services - a fundamental condition in a non-discriminatory society". This project was implemented within the RO10 - CORAI Programme financed by the EEA Grants 2009-2014 and managed by the Romanian Fund of Social Development.

The City Hall of Valea Seaca is planning other projects in support of the integrated development of the Roma community and is actively looking for finance to support job creation initiatives in the community (for example, greenhouses).

Lessons forward

The ROMED2/ROMACT Programme was successful in assisting the empowerment of the Roma community in the villages of Valea Seaca municipality. By assisting the creation and development of the Community Action Group, it provided the opportunity for local community members to organise themselves. This significantly improved the communication between local administration and the Roma community. The increased mobilisation of different resources by local authorities to address issues that were prioritised and raised by the CAG, is a clear sign that local authorities have become much more aware of community needs. This has led to visible initial results towards changing the situation of Roma communities in this poor rural municipality.

Despite the results, the initiated local process had its challenges and the sustainability of established cooperation is still vulnerable. Among the factors affecting the sustainability of the process is the instability of the members in the Community Action Group due to increased migration to other countries, as well as some deficiencies within the local administration. The capacity of the municipality to access and to manage projects supported by the European funds is limited. This is due to some of the specific conditions related to these funds which are restrictive to small rural municipalities. Another obstacle is the lack of local human resources with specific expertise to work on European projects. Such categories of localities are eligible to apply only for a few programmes. To meet the eligibility criteria, they cannot apply by themselves and they need to establish partnerships in order to access to projects supported by European funds.

The main lesson from Valea Seaca is that small rural municipalities depend on additional external resources which provide for the sustainability of the process in the medium and long term. External funding (especially from Operational Programmes) can only be successfully approached as a result of strong alliances and partnerships with other actors (especially NGOs) in order to mobilise the needed additional expertise and human capacity.