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

CASE STUDY NYIRBATOR

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

HUNGARY, Nyirbator

The ROMED2 Programme in Nyirbator has been implemented successfully with the contribution of other programmes and of the municipality. The Programme focused on education and employment, with concrete results obtained. The engines of the Community Action Group are eight women committed to the empowerment of their Roma community. The Community Action Group remains active and the municipality is open to further collaboration. These two factors give high prospects to sustain and further develop the results achieved by ROMED2 in Nyirbator.

Context: problems and opportunities

Nyirbator is located in the North-Alfold part of Hungary with approximately 13,000 inhabitants. It has one large Roma settlement with approximately 3,000 people. The municipality has experienced an upward trend in its economic development in the past few years with the relocation into the town of multinational companies which offer job opportunities to locals and people from neighbouring localities.

The unemployment rate at municipal level is between 10% and 20%. Roma are facing high unemployment due to low qualifications, high requirements of employers and discrimination. Besides spatial exclusion, educational segregation is also present in the locality since the church opened its private school. Most Roma attend public schools while the non-Roma families prefer to enrol their children into the church school. In terms of civil society, there are no real visible and active Roma organisations.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

Nyirbator participated in ROMED1 and then continued with ROMED2. The local mediator is an active, credible and educated Roma lady with many years of field experience behind her before joining the ROMED Training of Mediators. For her, the main added-value of the ROMED training was that she learned to facilitate impartially between the Roma community and institutions, as well as the social network that she established as a result of the Programme.

With the start of the ROMED2 Programme, the Community Action Group (CAG) was established by the mediator/local facilitator and initially consisted of eight people, the majority of whom were women. In the course of the Programme, the only two male CAG members dropped out of the group due to working obligations. The CAG members try to meet every other week, or at least monthly, in one of the member's houses.

Members pointed out that the Programme developed greatly their communication skills and provided them with practical information about the local public administration system. Another important impact was the new self-confidence they gained in presenting their opinions to the institutions. In addition, CAG members were included in additional training sessions in civic education, communication and activism provided by other programmes attracted by the ROMED2 National Team and the local mediator/facilitator. The CAG is a group of motivated and reliable women who truly want to support their community. They are considering formally registering as a civil organisation in order to access financial resources for their activities.

The priorities set by the group are education and employment. As part of the work, the CAG and ROMED2 facilitator organised an educational institutional meeting, where representatives of public and private schools and of the municipality discussed the main educational challenges faced by Roma children such as segregation, cooperation with parents and school dropouts. In the area of employment, the ROMED2 Programme also organised a meeting with the representatives of local companies and institutions in order to draw their attention to the available Roma human resources.

The companies presented their selection process and, as a result of the ensuing discussions, a new initiative was born – a scholarship programme which aims to increase employability.

An additional problem identified by the group that needs to be addressed is the high level of drug usage among youth, refuse collection and stray dogs.

The CAG is able to represent adequately the general problems of the Roma community, but not the specific interests of all of its segments since the CAG is quite homogeneous, consisting of women of the same age. The need for a more diverse group and inclusion of more community representatives was formulated by both the mediator and the municipality.

Interaction between the CAG and local government

Cooperation between the local authority and the CAG is good and stable and was not affected by the change of mayor after the elections. The current mayor was the supporter of the previous one and both of them belong to the same left-wing party. In addition to that, the current mayor was working in the previous administration prior to his appointment. He was in charge of public works in the municipality and gained an insight into the employment difficulties of Roma from that experience. The municipality considers the Programme to be valuable because it is politically neutral and *"shows the problem of Roma from a different point of view due to community involvement"*.

The contact point for ROMED2 in the municipality commented that sharing information as part of the institutional meetings with the CAG helped the municipality to better understand the situation of the local Roma and that they have been learning a lot from this process. A Joint Action Plan was developed with the involvement of local institutions, CAG members, the mediator (local facilitator) and the ROMED2 National Team. The priorities of the Roma community development identified by the CAG have been incorporated into the document. However, as of January 2016, the plan had not yet been adopted by the local council.

At the start of the Programme, the motivation of the CAG members was higher and the interaction with the local institutions more dynamic. After a while, development stagnated and the CAG did not manage to move forward in its work. According to the Mayor, *"the CAG narrowed its operation and was not able to become an independent actor"*. The CAG was unable to include more people from the community and be active without the support of the ROMED2 National Team. Although interaction was facilitated and initiated by the ROMED2 facilitator from Budapest, it could not make the step to regular and direct professional collaboration between the CAG and the municipality.

However, despite these difficulties, the ROMED2/ROMACT local process contributed to some visible results and significant favourable decisions for the Roma, one example of which is the introduction of a local scholarship programme by the local council, as described below.

Results and impact in communities

The ROMED2 process has created direct communication between the Roma community and the municipality by establishing the CAG and introducing the joint institutional meetings. This process had an impact on both sides: it helped the municipality to understand the main challenges of Roma and it increased the competences of the CAG members. It also identified a group of active members, whose skills developed significantly since the start of the Programme. However, additional support and learning opportunities should be ensured in order for the members of the CAG to become stronger advocates for the interests of their community.

As a result of the institutional meetings, the commitment of the municipality and the support from the ROMED2 team, the following results can be highlighted:

- The CAG initiated the introduction of a second school bus for pupils. It was very much needed as the sole existing bus was not sufficient to take all children to school. The municipality found the request justified and put into operation a second bus for children commuting from the Roma settlement to their school. Although small in terms of support, this greatly improved the access of Roma children to mainstream education.
- The local council adopted a local scholarship programme for primary and secondary school students with multiple disadvantages, jointly financed by the municipality and by local companies. The aim of the programme is to ensure completion of secondary vocational school and a skilled labour force for local companies. The programme is due to start in the 2016-17 academic year with approximately 50-100 students per year from fifth grade until the last grade of vocational school.
- The municipality approved a sports scholarship programme which is due to start in September 2016 for talented and disadvantaged students.
- The municipality hired two Roma public workers¹ to work as school mediators. They are responsible for facilitating communication between Roma parents and the school, as well as for following students' attendance at school. The school mediators report to the municipality and the feedback from the schools on the effect of their work is positive.
- In terms of refuse collection, the municipality and CAG worked together to eliminate the illegal dumping ground and to ensure organised collection of refuse. The CAG applied to the NDI (National Democratic Institute) for a mini-grant to finance the minimal cost of their action. The proposal writing was a great learning experience for the CAG members.
- There is an ongoing discussion about the establishment of a Roma office/department as part of the local administration. The concrete responsibilities of the team and their location are still not finalised.

Lessons forward

The ROMED/ROMACT process in Nyirbator opened new channels of more structured communication between the Roma community and local authorities which have achieved some visible results in the community. The main lessons from factors which contributed greatly to the positive outcomes of the Programme include:

- *The qualities of the human resources working in the locality such as the skilled local mediator/facilitator, national facilitators and motivated CAG members* are critical to the success of the local process. The national team and local mediator were working even when not contracted to do so and the CAG still met regularly during the overall gap resulting from the negotiations of the Council of Europe and European Commission on the ROMACT grant agreement.
- *The sustainability of the openness of local authorities is critical for the consistency of the Roma inclusion process.* The Mayor has a good understanding of the need for targeted policies for Roma inclusion as benefiting overall local development. He is supported in this by the local council and the changes of administration after the elections did not affect the openness of the municipality in supporting the Roma inclusion processes.
- *Municipalities that are economically advantaged can become more open to launching new initiatives if Roma are identified as an opportunity to match the demand for human resources needed for economic growth.* In the municipality, there are quite a few companies lacking human resources, whilst Roma are facing a high unemployment rate. The Mayor and the ROMED2 team understood this opportunity. As a result, the scholarship programme was adopted with the aim of providing local skilled human resources which, in turn, will reduce unemployment.

¹ Public work is financed by the government for short-term employment of people benefiting from regular social support and registered as jobseekers. Public workers can be employed part-time or full-time and receive a salary lower than the minimum wage. In most of the disadvantaged localities, these are the only employment opportunities for Roma.

- *The proactive role of the national team to attract diverse resources from different programmes to optimise the impact of the work in the municipality* (Roma Produkcios Iroda, NDI, Partners Hungary training). The municipality attracted other programmes which supplemented the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme with additional aspects of training and resources that were lacking. They also ensured training and community activities when the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme in the country was “dormant” during the nine-month “contractual gap” in 2015.

There are also some barriers which challenged the development of the Programme and could have been addressed differently:

- *There is a need to clarify and clearly communicate the role of the mediator/local facilitator in the process to all local stakeholders.* Transparent communication about the role of the local mediator/local facilitator was not ensured by the ROMED2 team in terms of responsibilities, payment and reporting obligations towards the local institutions, which were not aware of the concrete role of the mediator at local level.
- *Continuous information flow between the CAG and the community was not ensured.* This was due to the homogeneity of the CAG which did not represent all segments of the community. The CAG also lacked tools and resources to organise more formal gatherings which were needed to reach the wider local Roma community. A good approach in the future would be to include in the Programme regular public meetings where members of the CAG would share their work with the Roma community, as well as gather inputs from others. Such meetings would also increase the visibility of the Programme and provide opportunities to involve new CAG members.
- *Lack of financial support at local level caused demotivation and dissatisfaction.* The CAG was not able to move forward to action implementation due to a lack of financial support to implement their initiatives, while the local mediator did not receive proper payment and equipment (laptop, printer) to conduct her work.