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

CASE STUDY PEREYASLAV- KHMELNYTSKY

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ROMED
Médiation
pour les Roms Mediation
for Roma

UKRAINE, Pereyaslav-Khmelnysky

The regional centre of Pereyaslav-Khmelnysky has been an active participant in ROMED2 programme since 2014. There had been no Roma-related programmes in the region prior to ROMED2. The visit demonstrated highly motivated local authorities committed to Roma inclusion. The Community Action Group (CAG) is a mix of Roma representatives and local authorities. They have developed open and engaging communication and see the added value of such cooperation. Limited financial resources at the local level impede the development of plans, such as for increasing supply of social housing, supporting families in need or providing medical assistance. The results at this stage include targeted assistance to Roma families in need and establishment of effective cooperation of ROMED2 and local authorities. However, both local authorities and the ROMED2 National Project Officer (NPO) have the vision for the necessary steps for Roma inclusion and see the opportunities that could arise from fiscal decentralisation, increased self-governance and empowerment of Roma communities.

Context: problems and opportunities

The municipality of Pereyaslav-Khmelnysky is located about 90 kilometres south of the capital city of Kyiv. Its population is around 30,000 (2013). The town has great cultural significance with around 20 different museums related to Ukrainian culture and ethnography. The main industries include services (trade and restaurants), a sewing company producing traditional Ukrainian embroidery and a local farm growing mink for fur production. Many residents commute to work in Kyiv.

The Roma population is not numerous and consists of around 600 people. Roma families live mainly in the villages in the region. The proximity to the capital makes the region attractive for Roma families who move seasonally from other parts of Ukraine. This makes the population of the settlement dispersed and changing overtime.

The problems of the local Roma community are similar to those in the other regions of Ukraine: mainly unemployment, housing issues, access to education for Roma children from families with many children, poverty and lack of social protection. There are cases of discrimination, in particular related to employment, for example, local supermarkets, despite having vacancies for different technical staff, refuse to hire Roma. Social housing is insufficient – the whole region has only one social housing building with 18 rooms. There are instances of discrimination when Roma are not able to rent adequate houses.

One of the most urgent problems in the municipality is the lack of financial resources to feed children. The families are big and may have up to ten children. Children need clothes, shoes, vitamins and school stationery. There are also particular gender problems in the region. Many women have reproductive health issues and cancer. Cases of domestic violence are frequently reported but women are generally afraid to file official complaints.

The level of organisation and mobilisation of the Roma community in the region is weak. There is no local Roma NGO and the young are not involved in civic or charity activities. In general, civil society at regional level is weaker than in the capital, with only a few groups dealing with social and human rights issues, including the Veterans of Chernobyl, and groups helping women with domestic violence issues.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

ROMED2 and the municipality of Pereyaslav-Khmelnysky signed a cooperation agreement on 20 May 2014. The CAG was established as part of the Programme in September 2015. On average, eight CAG

members participate in the meetings. Five of the CAG members are women. The CAG is a mixed group of representatives of the Roma community and the local authorities. As its key priorities, the group has identified more visits to Roma families in the region, improved access to social protection of Roma women, support to families living in difficult conditions, and engagement of youth and children in social activities in the municipality.

In the long term, the CAG would like to focus on improving education, employment and the promotion of equal opportunities for Roma. There is also an idea to open a "Roma for Roma" centre to provide free consultations and information to Roma and explore ways of addressing the issues facing female victims of domestic violence.

The general dynamic in the CAG is positive and its members sustain regular communication with the community. However, the dynamic of the group's work often depends on the stimulus given by the mediator and the NFP (Chiricli Foundation). CAG members' motivation to participate is linked to their desire to improve the social conditions of Roma families and to contribute to the local community. The capacity of the CAG to increase the involvement of the Roma community is developing slowly. The key problem, as stated by a participant of the CAG during a meeting, is the *"lack of trust, as people do not believe they could get some tangible results out of such activism"*. Another obstacle at this stage comes from the dispersed settlement of Roma families in the villages around the municipality. The lack of funding for transport (local private mini buses are expensive) impedes the enlargement of the CAG at this stage.

CAG members are strongly motivated to create opportunities for the young generation of Roma. The young boy present at the meeting said he feels happy growing in the community and feels "no different" in terms of attitude from teachers or other children at school. His grandmother, a member of the CAG, mentioned that it would be great to showcase more Roma culture and engage more young Roma in local activities.

Interaction between CAG and local government

A special working group with CAG representatives and local authorities was created in June 2014. It consists of 11 representatives, including eight women and three men. The key priorities of the working group are the development of tolerant attitudes to the Roma community, improving access of Roma to social services, provision of support to women in a crisis situation and assistance to Roma children with special health issues.

Interaction between the CAG and local authorities takes place via regular meetings which usually take place in the municipality building or in communities (in the houses of Roma families). Sometimes, the Roma CAG members meet without the representatives of local authorities. When needed, the contact person, Mrs Lubov Onoprienko, invites state representatives from various services (registration, housing, health). The mediator and the contact person are always present at these meetings.

The National Focal Point and mediator often travel to the neighbouring villages to meet the community. For example, from January to March 2014, there were meetings with community groups in the village of Erkovtsi and in Pereyaslav-Khmel'nitsky, as well as three meetings in the municipality. Such visits are important as they help to identify the needs of the families. Local authorities also visit these communities regularly as part of their social support system.

The project has established great working relations with the local authorities. The contact person in the municipality is very committed, open to cooperation and extremely motivated to effectively address social issues. She participated in the exchange trip to the United States in the framework of another technical assistance programme in Ukraine and was inspired by the things she saw. At the same time, she had never had the opportunity to be on an exchange visit to EU countries to see

working practices there. She regularly conducts individual meetings with the families and advocates for their interests in the municipality. The dialogue between the contact person, the CAG and the community is very effective.

The mediator working with the community is very experienced in mediation, in particular in women's health issues. She is highly respected but also overwhelmed with work, as she covers the Roma communities in Kyiv and the region. Recently, a new mediator was selected to work with the local Social Centre. She is a young Roma woman who was trained for her work by the Chiricli Foundation based on the ROMED1 curriculum.

The Local Action Plan was developed and approved on 21 January 2014. It includes a set of activities related to training for employment, assistance in solving social problems, support to Roma internally displaced people (IDP), celebration of International Roma Day, commemoration of Roma holocaust, training for regional government officials on Roma inclusion and health check-ups.

The plan is directly linked to the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) as it focuses on social issues, human rights, education, access to medical services, education, employment etc. The municipality gives serious priority to women, an area which is rather weak in the NRIS.

Results and Impact in the Community

The most visible results in the municipality are related to supporting families with many children, as well as providing assistance to women with difficult family situations and victims of domestic violence. The work of the CAG covers a rather small segment of the Roma population and delivers fragmented results. However, it is able to support the neediest families.

From May 2014 onwards, the local municipality conducted a needs assessment of the Roma community and the information was transferred to the Centre of Family, Youth and Children to improve planning and service delivery.

The approach of the local municipality is to provide services to all citizens equally. The key contact person from the municipality is motivated to cooperating with the ROMED2 Programme because it provides them with a better understanding of local Roma issues, as well as the culture and mentality of Roma. Mediators are very useful for facilitating communication as local authorities often do not speak the languages of the Roma.

In 2015, in just three months of work, the working group produced the following results: six families raising 32 children received humanitarian assistance; four women received support in preparing documents for post-natal assistance; 32 Roma received access to medical services (including three linked to childbirth); and four people became employed. Families from Erkvitski village have many children and little financial resources. In order to address the problem of school attendance there, the CAG, with the municipality, tries to help by providing mentoring and support from the Social Centre (two families) or relocating some families into social housing (one family).

Special focus was given to Roma women and their health. These issues are regularly raised at the meetings dedicated to the status of women held at the working groups of state agencies, with the participation of the CAG, the National Project Officer and the mediator. As a result, the state provided temporary accommodation to victims of domestic violence in the Social Housing Centre. The Centre was opened several years ago with the help of western technical assistance and is now run and funded by the state.

Following the conflict in the Donbass, there were some Roma IDPs from the region. 22 people arrived from Luhansk oblast in 2014. The CAG, together with the local authorities, provided them with

housing in the village of Guaishyn and basic humanitarian assistance. After the relocation, the CAG representatives visited the families to provide psychological assistance and help mediate the relations with the local community.

Lessons Forward

The ROMED2 Programme was successful in Pereyaslav-Khmelnytsky municipality. The main drivers of success were the commitment of the local authorities, the hard work of local mediators, the interest on behalf of the Roma community and the visible benefits in terms of improved social services to needy families resulting from the cooperative process between the CAG and the municipality. Some of the emerging lessons and needs for the future include:

- **Openness and determination of local authorities to cooperate on Roma issues is crucial.** Personal commitment of the head of the contact group is a major success factor. Opening up the vision of people holding key positions in local authorities and institutions can be supported by more exchanges as part of ROMED2 for the participating municipalities. Exchanges of experience among municipalities in the country were also mentioned as an important element for any future Programme. The municipality has allocated 670 EUR (20,000 UAH) in the local budget to the Roma action plan for assistance to families in crisis situations. This is a small amount but starts a good practice of public funding for solving Roma issues.
- ***Viable and effective cooperation between civil society and local authorities takes time.*** At this stage, the Programme has created the basis for effective partnership in the form of an action plan and good working relations between the mediator, Chiricli Foundation and the community. Sustainability is uncertain however. Both the local authorities and the CAG expressed the need to involve more young people into the CAG's work and to train several young people as activists. It is difficult to ensure sustainability at the moment in the municipality, where there are no Roma NGOs to develop the work. The CAG and activists should therefore consider setting up an organisation but, at this stage, CAG members are reluctant to take on such responsibility. The local municipality suggested including a CAG representative into the Regional Administration Civil Society Advisory Council, but nobody from the CAG has volunteered to join. Even if the NGO is established, it will require serious capacity-building efforts on behalf of the National Project Officer in order to develop advocacy, programme management and community mobilisation skills.
- ***The empowerment of the local Roma community is a difficult and long-term undertaking.*** It is particularly complicated in the areas of scattered settlements. The CAG is working well at this stage because it is a mixed group, including local government officials. The representatives of the community are not always active enough to drive the process, therefore the work of the mediator and the NPO is crucial. Their interest could also be stimulated by tangible results that the CAG could deliver. That is why it is important to share widely success stories of how the CAG improves the lives of the local Roma community. This could be done during local community meetings, publications in local media and radio programmes.
- ***A lot depends on human resources and the ROMED2 training helped increase the capacity of social workers.*** People have to be trained in how to approach Roma issues and the needs at local level for such skills are high. Joint training between Roma mediators and social workers could help reinforce the network, increase knowledge and break stereotypes.
- ***A difficult political and economic situation in the country leads to a lack of financial resources for development.*** Local authorities struggle with funding for social services. The only social housing project in the municipality was constructed with western donors' funding. Therefore, it is important to coordinate the work of donors in Ukraine around Roma issues and, where possible, join efforts together around infrastructural and technical assistance projects.
- ***A shortcoming of ROMED2 is the lack of funding for small local projects that the Roma community could do to accelerate the trust and the process of empowerment.*** The National Project Officer is trying to attract other project funding through the ROMED2 National

Support Organisation, Chiricli. Chiricli is in a contracting process with the EU Delegation in Ukraine for a project that will include local small grants.

- ***Decentralisation reform could provide a new pathway for working on Roma inclusion.*** According to the reform, each village would have a village head (*starosta*) who could act as a communicator and a focal point for people living in the villages. Fiscal decentralisation would also allow communities to tailor their budgets in accordance to local needs. Financial resources would be accumulated at community level. It would be important for the budgetary process to be participatory and to involve the community. The Civil Society Advisory Council could be such a consultative body. It is important that Roma mediators and CAG representatives are active and voice Roma needs. To achieve this, more capacity-building should be done for the CAG, mediators and local government officials on how to run consultations, plan budgets, do needs assessment and ensure inclusive decision-making.