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CASE STUDY PRILEP

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

“THE FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA”, Prilep

Prilep municipality is a good example of how the ROMED2 approach can activate the involvement of the Roma community by identifying the right “entry point” on issues of real interest to the community which can further be expanded in a broader process of Roma inclusion. The main initial driver was the interest of the older informal leaders in building a mosque in a Roma neighbourhood, which later expanded into other important issues and led to very good results in education, infrastructure and support for various community initiatives. Key factors for the success of the processes in Prilep were the openness of the local authorities, representation of Roma in the local council and local administration departments and the gradual involvement of diverse interest groups in the Roma communities, as well as the search for synergies between resources from the local budget and existing national programmes in support for Roma inclusion.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Prilep is the fourth largest city in “the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia”, located in the southern part of the country. Based on data provided by the municipality, at present the population of Prilep numbers approximately 73,925 people, out of whom 4,500 are Roma. The majority of Roma living in Prilep are Muslim.

Prilep is an industrial production centre of high quality tobacco and cigarettes, metal processing, electronics, wood, textiles, food and white marble. The Roma community lives mostly in the neighbourhood of Trizla, which has poor infrastructure (lack of a sewage system and street lights, non-asphalted streets). Some of the Roma population is employed in local industry, but a great number of Roma in Prilep are unemployed and rely for their incomes on support sent by relatives working in western European countries.

The Municipality of Prilep has a good record of work over the years on issues towards Roma inclusion. It has implemented a number of projects for improving the infrastructure of the neighbourhood, as well as renovating the local elementary school. Prilep is the only municipality in the country with an established Department for Roma Issues. Five Roma are employed within this department, all of them trained through the ROMED1 Programme. There are two Roma elected in the local council of the municipality, as well as a number of Roma employed in various programmes.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The Community Action Group (CAG) in Prilep was established in November 2013 and consists of 15 members. Initially, the CAG was organised around older informal leaders of the Roma community. They got involved in the group due to their interest in building a mosque in the Roma neighbourhood. At a later stage, young Roma from the community joined the CAG, bringing new perspectives and experience into the group. Some of them worked in the Roma information centres of the municipalities, whilst others had experience in the NGO sector or were students. Locally-elected Roma municipal councillors are also involved in meetings and discussions of the CAG.

The participation of women in the CAG has been minimal throughout the ROMED2 Programme, due to the cultural and religious specificities of the Roma community in Prilep.

At the beginning of its activity, the main priority of the CAG was the construction of a mosque in the Roma neighbourhood. However, once the group started discussions with the

representatives of local authorities, many other important priorities around this initial leading priority were identified. In order to build the mosque, it was desirable to have a comprehensive cadastral and reconstruction plan of the whole Roma neighbourhood. The Joint Action Plan developed by the CAG included as long-term priorities both issues – the building of the mosque and improvement of the infrastructure of the entire neighbourhood. The plan was adopted through a decision of the local council in August 2014. The effective interaction with the local administration, as well as the participation of the young Roma interest group in the CAG, shaped two more priorities - the development of a local education strategy and the creation of opportunities for the professional development of young Roma after completing secondary school.

The CAG has very good relationships and visibility within the Roma community. The CAG also enjoys enormous respect from the Roma community, an indicator of this demonstrated with the building of the mosque in the Roma neighbourhood. The CAG received an initial contribution of 30,000 EUR from the municipality and the Ministry of Transport, but subsequently mobilised the Roma families in Prilep and their relatives working in western Europe and succeeded in raising 300,000 EUR towards its construction.

The age differences in the group and their diverse interests are the reasons for the wide range of issues submitted to institutions. In the course of the ROMED2 process, the Mayor requested having legal representation of the CAG in order to be able to sign agreements with them. To interact more effectively with the local government, the CAG created two organisations. The first one was organised by the older informal Roma leaders around the completion of the construction of the mosque. The second one, "Roma Perspective", is a civic association of young representatives of the Roma community and their focus is more on the education and political representation of the Roma community.

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

The system of interaction and communication with representatives of local authorities in the municipality of Prilep was very effective. The mayor appointed two people from the municipality who are in constant contact with the representatives of the Roma community, the institutions, the representatives of the CAG and the Roma organisations. There are monthly consultations between the CAG and the representatives from the local administration, as well as daily communication as needed.

The work of the local administration with the CAG follows three basic directions. It contributes logistical support, for example, by providing the municipal meeting hall for meetings of the CAG. It consults with the CAG on identification of priorities and development of local policies and it works together with the CAG to design concrete programmes and projects.

The municipality has adopted a local development strategy in consultation with the CAG and the priorities identified by them were included within it. From the perspective of the municipality, the main long-term priority for development of the Roma community is increasing the access of Roma children to quality education. The strategy includes work in the direction of preschool education, reducing the number of school dropouts, improving school infrastructure, extracurricular activities and improving the environment in schools.

The local government views the ROMED2 process as a valuable tool that contributes to the clear formulation of local issues with the participation of people from the Roma community, putting them on the policy agenda of the municipality. Improved interaction between local authorities and representatives of the Roma community also contributes to the successful implementation of various programmes.

Results and impact in the communities

Good cooperation between the representatives of the Roma community and representatives of local authorities has resulted in long-term policy and concrete plans for the improvement of the situation of Roma in Prilep. A local development strategy has been adopted which includes measures for improving the infrastructure and education of the Roma community with funds allocated to execute the strategy and projects in the process of implementation or application.

There is already a development plan for the infrastructure of the Roma neighbourhood, as well as applied for or implemented projects to repair streets and resolve other infrastructural issues. The mosque is already built and, upon completion of some additional interior work, it is planned for the mosque to carry out not only religious but also cultural and educational activities in the community.

There are also various achievements in the area of education. A new kindergarten was opened and there is ongoing improvement of school infrastructure. Eight educational tutors working with 188 children have been employed in schools. According to the municipality, this has already resulted in a reduced percentage of school dropouts from 30% to 15%. The municipality has also provided a building for the "Roma Perspective" association to use when organising extra-curricular activities for children from the Roma community.

The Roma Perspective association, together with the contact points in the municipality, are currently working together on developing a fundraising strategy to create a fund for the implementation of small projects in education.

To support the Roma community, the municipality has opened a Roma Information Office. It has also allocated a separate budget for the Roma community for specific activities on various issues.

Lessons forward

The ROMED2 process was very successful in Prilep Municipality bringing some important lessons:

- ***It is important to identify the right "entry point" of issues of real interest of the community in order to further activate its involvement in a broader process of Roma inclusion.*** The main initial driver was the interest of the older informal leaders in building a mosque in the Roma neighbourhood. This was the initial cause that "sparked" the processes of activation of the Roma community which later on expanded to other important issues and led to very good results in education, infrastructure and political representation of the Roma community. One of the members of the CAG was elected in the local council of the municipality. His credibility in the community has increased due to his participation in the CAG.
- ***Diverse representation of Roma community members in the Community Action Group*** in terms of age, interests, level of education and personal motivation is the guarantee for keeping

the process open to the broader issues affecting the community, not only confined to a specific interest group. This can help the understanding and consolidation of the community around the long-term vision for the empowerment and inclusion of Roma, which will be the engine to work on specific causes.

- ***To obtain good results, there must be the political will of local authorities to develop appropriate local policies and programmes*** concerning the problems of the Roma community. Good representation of Roma in the local councils and the structure of local administration is a key factor for ensuring the long-term commitment and political will of the local administration.
- ***One of the main factors for success is the search for synergies between the ROMED2 Programme and other available programmes in "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"***. The splitting of specific funds in local budgets to supplement funds allocated by national programmes is an indicator of the political will to solve the problems facing the Roma community.

There is high potential for the sustainability of the local processes initiated in Prilep. Both the CAG, through the two registered organisations, and the local administration are committed to continuing to work together. However, there is a visible need to continue the support in order to further sustain this effort in the long term:

- It is important to provide support for organisational development and mentoring to the new organisation that has emerged from the "youth" group in the CAG.
- To overcome the minimal participation of Roma women, the CAG should receive support from facilitators and the NFP to better address the issues facing Roma women and their involvement in the consultation process with representatives of local authorities.
- There is also a need to invest in increasing the capacity of local authorities and representatives of the CAG to absorb the national funds allocated for Roma inclusion, in order to address the broader problem of underspending the allocated funds from the national budget for Roma.