

Funded
by the European Union
and the Council of Europe



COUNCIL OF EUROPE



Implemented
by the Council of Europe

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



CASE STUDY FIGUEIRA DA FOZ

creda consulting
Creative Development Alternative

bl & meyer
& sanz European value(s)



ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

PORTUGAL, Figueira da Foz

In Figueira da Foz, the Community Action Group (CAG) is led by a majority of women with ambition and determination to promote Roma inclusion, Roma identity and culture as a positive strength. The municipality has been very supportive and a dynamic collaboration was established. The maturity of the CAG gave rise to the constitution of a local NGO called "Ribaltambição" - Association for Gender Equality in Roma Communities – in order to promote more initiatives. Near the Atlantic Ocean, ROMED2 is bringing hope, optimism and opportunities to a land where Roma continue to fight for social inclusion. Despite all the merits of the ROMED2 process conducted over more than two years, the achievements and the direct impacts were aluable but limited in time, raising some questions about sustainability in the long term. The framework provided by ROMED2 can be seen as an anchor, providing a context and a driver for a good start that needs to be continued.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Figueira da Foz is a municipality in the Centre Region of Portugal, having a population of 62,125 inhabitants. Figueira da Foz is situated near the coast, with a harbour on the delta of the Mondego River. There are beaches on the seafront and tourism, especially in the summer, is an important economic driver. Industry is also relevant in the municipality, as well as the traditional activity of fishing.

The Roma community in Figueira da Foz is estimated at 950 inhabitants living in seven neighbourhoods (Leirosa, Fonte Nova, Vila Robim, Quinta do Paço, Buarcos, Ferrugenta and Marianos), mainly in social housing administered by the municipal housing enterprise Figueira Domus. In Ferrugenta and Marianos, families live in prefabricated (temporary, ALGECO type) houses. Most Roma families in Figueira da Foz ensure their monthly income by selling clothes in markets, stores and flea markets. The economic recession had a significant impact on their way of living, aggravating social problems, with many Roma families relying only on social welfare subsidies.

Prior to the ROMED2 Programme, the municipality did not have any projects focusing specifically on the inclusion of the Roma community, however some efforts were made in terms of social housing and other issues, according to a more general municipal agenda for social inclusion ("Figueira Solidária"). The participation of Figueira da Foz in the Programme can be credited to the initiative of the ROMED2 National Support Organisation (Letras Nómadas). They motivated the municipality to participate and proposed the constitution of the Community Action Group (CAG), identifying members and establishing preliminary contacts.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The Community Action Group in Figueira da Foz has ten to twelve members, with more women than men, in a proportion of 60% - 40% present in the meetings. The age of the members of the group varies from 17 to 58 years old and most of them have finished primary school. Currently, there are four members of the CAG at university studying different subjects, resulting in part from the commitment in ROMED. Some members are working in local markets and stores selling clothes. Most of the Roma neighbourhoods in Figueira da Foz are represented in the CAG. Several members are followers of the evangelical church and the pastor is also an active presence in the CAG. The composition of the group is relatively diverse and heterogeneous, with members highly-motivated and skilled, having communication abilities. Meetings are characterised by a high level of interaction, with different voices expressing opinions in a positive group dynamic. There has been an evolution over time, with periods of higher or weaker commitment, depending also on the results from the cooperation with the municipality. The first meeting of the CAG was in March 2014 and, during the

last two years, members met almost every month, depending on the evolution of the proposals. Meetings are normally held in a place provided by the municipality.

The local facilitator, Tânia Oliveira, an active and communicative person, had previous experience in educational mediation and gained more skills with the training provided by the ROMED2 National Support Team. Nevertheless, her role has been influenced by her unstable professional situation and she had no previous experience in mediation. After starting the process, she became unemployed and this affected her motivation, with an influence on the dynamics of the CAG. Over time, the situation improved, the CAG made a request and the municipality was able to provide the local facilitator with a temporary job working on the transportation services of municipal children. This example shows that, when the local facilitator is only a volunteer and has an unstable professional and financial situation, there are impacts in terms of group instability.

The short-term priorities of the CAG focused mostly on cultural and civic interventions; in the long term, the leading priority was to create employment for the Roma community.

The CAG created an NGO (Ribaltaambição - Association for Gender Equality in Roma Communities) in 2015. This is viewed as an opportunity to enable access to new possibilities, for example, applications for small grants in order to implement activities proposed by the group. This transition to a formally-registered civic association is a sign of the maturity of the group and determination to continue, despite the future of ROMED.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

The relationship between the CAG and local government was positive with communication channels open for dialogue and cooperation. Nevertheless, implementing the proposals was not very easy to accomplish, notably due to legal and administrative reasons. The first proposal of the group suggested the creation of three jobs for members of the community. Achieving this took several months with some periods of delay and frustration along the way. One of those in charge of the process in the municipal company Figueira Domus was moved and the CAG had to start the lobbying process again. In addition, the procedures for social employment measures were long and complex. In the end, the municipality was able to obtain the funding and satisfy the proposal, however along the way the CAG suffered impacts in terms of motivation and it was not easy to move forward from that.

The second proposal from the CAG was presented to the municipality in July 2015, focusing on Roma culture and identity. The objective was to organise specific events in order to promote the intercultural diversity in Figueira da Foz. On 24 October (municipal day of equality), the CAG organised a cooking demonstration in the municipal market, promoting Roma gastronomy, with the 250 people in attendance tasting Roma dishes. The CAG also collected food products to be delivered at the "homeless support centre" as a sign of solidarity. In December, another "solidarity soup" event was promoted. In 2016, a photographic exhibition was held with support from the municipality and more initiatives were on the CAG agenda.

The third proposal from the CAG was launched in 2016 and addressed the difficult access of Roma families to dental treatment. The group proposed an initiative called "Figueira da Foz Smiling". It suggested to the municipality the establishment of an agreement with private clinics and dental laboratories. The proposal was complex and the municipality had to analyse the legal and administrative issues involved, therefore the CAG was waiting for feedback on the viability of the proposal. New ideas are in the CAG pipeline and the municipality is willing to collaborate. ROMED2 provided the context for that good relationship between both parties.

Results and impact in the communities

There are positive direct results from the proposals made to the municipality. The local facilitator was employed by the municipality. The CAG asked for three jobs (for women) and obtained six jobs (three women, three men) for the positions of cleaning staff, animator in the local library, animator in the children's hospital and operational staff in the Salt Museum. In some cases, the workers were positively recognised for the work developed, but others suffered from prejudice and discrimination from their colleagues. The working contracts were temporary (generally one year), but there were indications that in some cases the renewal was a strong possibility. In the field of culture and identity, the CAG was able to organise several initiatives (for example, cookery demonstrations, solidarity initiatives and a photographic exhibition), showing creativity and organisation skills.

There are also more indirect impacts and spillover effects for the Roma community in Figueira da Foz, especially in terms of ownership, self-esteem and pride at having members of the community doing proactive and innovative efforts for inclusion. There are benefits in the public perception about Roma people, especially due to the significant communication efforts of the municipality (for example, in the local media) to show the activities and achievements of the CAG, thereby raising the awareness of the local community. In the long term, these indirect impacts are even more important than the aforementioned direct achievements of the CAG. The municipality is also more motivated to work for the inclusion of Roma communities. Several departments and even other local institutions have become aware of the efforts of the CAG, gaining a more positive image about the Roma community, perhaps becoming even more willing to act for their benefit. In the long term, those attitudes may improve the lives of the Roma community, especially in accessing public services.

In terms of education, ROMED2 contributed to creating conditions that enabled a group of Roma students to obtain university scholarships. These active younger members of several CAGs in different municipalities had over time expressed their interest and motivation to continue their education to a higher level, provided they had the necessary economic support. The National Support Team (Letras Nómadas) identified several young men and women and prepared a project called "OPRÉ CHAVALÉ". They obtained funding for Roma scholarships under "Programa Escolhas" (a national funding programme that receives applications for inclusion projects). In Figueira da Foz, four members of the CAG are engaged in the Programme with the possibility of studying in the University. That innovative project was born from ROMED2 and is helping to improve the levels of formal education, whilst also being an example of social inclusion.

Lessons forward

ROMED2 in Figueira da Foz is viewed as a valuable and constructive Programme, becoming a spark for social change in Roma inclusion. The CAG is showing signs of maturity and its evolution to becoming a local NGO (Ribaltambição) can be seen as ambitious and audacious. There are several factors that are relevant for understanding the good performance of the process:

- Guidance and support from the National Support Organisation (Letras Nómadas) helped significantly. The facilitator is also skilled, experienced and empathetic, with good communication skills, which contributed to managing group dynamics.
- The Community Action Group is solid and skilled. Several members have a reasonable level of formal education and are motivated to learn more and gain new competences. The high level of women's participation is a result of inclusion efforts enabling this to happen and also of the openness associated to the local process, representing an important social capital.
- Municipal support was another crucial factor in the success of the ROMED approach in Figueira da Foz. Political commitment and operational conditions were granted since the beginning and even in difficult moments. It is also important to highlight the active communication effort from the

municipality (and also from the National Support Team) in order to raise local awareness and create a positive dynamic.

The organisational and social learning obtained over the last two years must also be considered as a ROMED achievement.

The future holds several risks and challenges. Despite the optimism and achievements, it is important for the CAG and the stakeholders involved in the process to be able to manage expectations and maintain the focus on concrete goals and actions. There are also operational issues to be assured, for example, the working contract between the municipality and the facilitator in order to sustain the commitment and the activity of the group. The various parties involved in the process are motivated and willing to continue the collaboration initiated under ROMED2, having expectations towards a new stage of the Programme.