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



CASE STUDY NAGYECSED

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

HUNGARY, Nagyecsed

The Municipality of Nagyecsed is an example of the demanding process of empowering community representation through self-organisation and the challenges of ensuring independent representation of the community's interests from those of the municipality. We can see on the one hand a motivated Community Action Group (CAG) and a new committed Roma organisation but, on the other hand, these people are socially, economically and politically dependent on the local institutions for making a living. The established community structures have reached the position of recognition by the municipality and the Roma community, which brings them the opportunity for further development and work in the interests of the entire community.

Context: problems and opportunities

Nagyecsed is a town in Szabolcs-Szatmar-Bereg County, near the border with Ukraine and Romania. According to the official statistics, its population numbers 6,042. Officially, it is estimated that 16% of the population are Roma; however the unofficial estimation provided by NGOs is higher at around 30-40%. There are two Roma segregated settlements on the two edges of the town. The bigger one with approximately 300-400 inhabitants is populated by Romungro, the smaller one by Olah Roma. The area is agricultural and Roma live in deep poverty, as there are only temporary job opportunities and public work provided by the municipality. Since the local church started its school within the locality, Roma children are facing segregated education since non-Roma tend to enrol their children into the church school. As such the public one is quickly becoming a Roma school only. In the segregated school, the dropout rate is high, as are the numbers for early marriages and pregnancies.

There is a local Roma Minority Self-Government and two Roma NGOs, "Vazdune Chershaja" Roma Women Association and "Jovokep" Association which was established by some of the members of the ROMED2 Community Action Group in 2016. The main partner of the municipality is the Roma Women Association which has been active for 13 years in Nagyecsed. There are also two community centres located in each of the Roma settlements which are maintained by the municipality. There are some services provided in these centres such as public laundry and public bathrooms, which were financed by the National Roma Complex Housing Programme.

Community Action Group (CAG)

"The Community Action Group is one of our achievements, but we see our future as a NGO, where we can keep our independence from the municipality and apply for funding" - CAG members.

Nagyecsed was also part of the ROMED1 Training of Mediators. The first mediator completed the ROMED1 training, worked as a mediator and, motivated by the ROMED experience, decided to continue her education (she is currently attending tertiary education). She has also developed professionally and joined the Budapest team of Partners Hungary in 2015. A new local mediator was identified. She is a Roma youngster who completed her secondary education and has highly developed her competences since she joined as a mediator.

However, the Programme has to work more to ensure its recognition by the Roma community. The CAG became operational in February 2014 in the Olah Roma settlement. It included members from both Roma communities and both genders. During its implementation, the project shifted its focus to the bigger and more disadvantaged Romungro settlement and the CAG meetings started to take place there in 2015. At that time, the CAG was over-represented by Romungro members.

The main priorities identified by the CAG were employment, road building in the Romungro settlement, refuse collection and the educational situation of Roma children.

Apart from ROMED2, training to the CAG members in civic education, communication and activism was provided by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Roma Producios Iroda and Partners Hungary.

Generally, the fluctuation of CAG members was high and the dynamic of work varied. For a few months, the CAG did not operate due to the overall interruption of the ROMED2/ROMACT process in the country. In 2015, one of the CAG members initiated the registration of a civil organisation and invited some CAG members to join the new association. In 2016, the Jovokep Association was officially registered with the leadership of one of the CAG members. The leader of this new NGO does not see the organisation as either a formal representation of the CAG or as a direct result of ROMED2. However, the Programme did contribute to the creation of the NGO as it invested in the capacities of its leader and the other members of the CAG that joined it. Currently, the initial Community Action Group formed by ROMED2 is not in operation.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

The Mayor of Nagyecsed is in his position since 2001. The municipality is open for collaboration and is active in accessing EU and governmental programmes, as well as Roma-related programmes (NDI, Complex Housing Programme, ROMED2, Tanoda, etc.). A Joint Action Plan was not developed however as, according to the Mayor, the suggestions of the CAG members were already incorporated into the Complex Housing Programme. One of the main results of ROMED2 is that there is a small active volunteer community (of approximately 20-30 persons) which was not previously the case according to the contact point of the municipality.

Most of the CAG members were or are working in the local community centre, currently employed through public work for the municipality. Not having other employment opportunities makes them dependent on the municipality. Questioning the status quo of those who are in power is impossible when someone is socially, economically and politically dependent. Independent and effective mediation is not possible in such circumstances.

Results and impact in the communities

“The impact on individuals and new formal (civic organisation) and informal (the CAG) representations of Roma are already visible achievements of ROMED2. However, this cannot be attributed as results of ROMED2 only, as there are other efforts and support from other programmes” – CAG and NGO member.

- The mediator and the CAG members agree that ROMED and other programmes have changed the thinking of Roma people about their rights and citizenship. Community members already have formal and informal practices of advocating for their individual interest. This was not the case before, but today Roma recognise their individual, citizenship-based power and they have more confidence to negotiate with public officials and representatives of institutions.
- Roma people have recognised their power which is in their rights as citizens. Training and practical mediation both helped and required further development by providing the basis for understanding on how public administration and governmental institutions work, and also how to negotiate in the most effective way. A practical example of their skill was the action regarding the refuse collection. Although the service provider charged each household monthly for the service, it did not collect the refuse due to the lack of proper dustbins. The CAG applied to the National Democratic Institute for a very small grant to cover the cost of their action. The municipality provided 60 dustbins and the group got in direct contact with the service provider to organise the proper transport of the refuse. The service provider also agreed to cancel the unjustified debts of the households.

- Putting the focus on the Romungro settlement is one of the main achievements of the Programme. Before ROMED, the municipality and other civil programmes were mostly targeting the smaller Olah Roma community, which has a better economic situation due to their business activities. The Romungro community is much more marginalised with a poor housing situation and economic status. However, this community has experienced many changes since 2011 from identifying good role models to getting self-organised and registering a civil organisation. The process of community empowerment of the Romungro community was supported by the National Team of the ROMED2 Programme which also attracted the support of other programmes as well.
- For the first time in the locality, the CAG organised the celebration of International Roma Day with the involvement of the Roma Self-Government and the Roma Women Association. Both Roma communities were represented.
- Nagyecsed Municipality recognises the members of the CAG and the Roma NGOs as potential partners for implementation of programmes and providing services. This helps with the mutual understanding of interests and functions as a bridge at this stage for further developments.

Lessons forward

- The importance of representing the interests of the Roma community, as recognised by the members of the Community Action Group, is a great opportunity for further advocacy for the development of favourable programmes for Roma by the municipality or other external stakeholders.
- *The CAG and local NGOs are important community-based structures for community building and common understanding.* The establishment of a Community Action Group is a good basis for new local initiatives, but it needs to represent both Roma communities and to ensure the involvement of the wider community.
- ***Effective representation of community interests is much more difficult if the members and the mediator are economically dependent on the municipality.*** In Nagyecsed, the CAG members were also employed by the municipality in public work. In such a hierarchical situation, when the municipality is the employer, it is challenging to ensure impartial mediation and equal communication between the CAG and the municipality.
- ***Better consistency of the implementation of and support to the initiated process in the locality is needed: a long interruption of the Programme and unclear communication about its future can reduce the fragile community trust.*** CAG members stated that they were disappointed by repeated discussions and not having the chance to move to action implementation due to the lack of financial support. This impacted their motivation and desire to participate as well. In addition to that, according to the CAG members, participation in the ROMED Programme caused them some financial difficulties. When the Programme was active, there were monthly meetings and frequent training provided by the ROMED team. The municipality, as the employer of people participating in the CAGs, was not always flexible in letting them attend CAG meetings and training during working days. CAG members were asked by their employer to take leave days to participate in the activities. When they ran out of annual leave, CAG members had to take unpaid leave days and the Programme did not compensate them for that, as it was based on the volunteer and unpaid involvement of people.

Ensuring the representation of the broader community and synergy of the efforts of NGOs from the different segments of the Roma community is important for improving the situation in the settlements. *Registering an NGO can be a good opportunity to establish a formal relationship between the Romungro community and the municipality, but it needs to make sure that it will represent the interests of the broader community. The other Roma NGOs in the municipality are seen as representatives of Olah Roma. However, the joint organisation of the celebration of International Roma Day is a good new practice of successful collaboration among the different Roma groups and their organisations, as well as the municipality.*