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

CASE STUDY TUNDZHA

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ROMED
Médiation pour les Roms
Mediation for Roma

BULGARIA, Tundzha Municipality

The municipality of Tundzha demonstrates a very successful model of good governance, inclusive to Roma, supported by the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme since 2013. We saw a highly-motivated Community Action Group of 18 active Roma citizens (the majority of whom are women) and very competent and collaborative local authorities. The long-term vision is guided by the main priority of the education of Roma children and youth as an engine for Roma empowerment and inclusion in the long term. Both have well-established communication with each other and work together in the pursuit of the jointly-developed local integration strategy. Both are highly committed to finding joint solutions to existing problems and there are already visible results and impacts in Roma communities, especially in the area of education and infrastructure. Sustainability of this success will require further support from a follow-up phase of the ROMED2/ROMACT Programmes.

The Context: problems and opportunities

Tundzha municipality is a large rural municipality in south-east Bulgaria, comprising 44 villages located around the town of Yambol which is the municipal and regional centre. The total population of the municipality numbers 24,182 people. 3,000–3,500 of these are Roma, concentrated in ten of the villages, where they comprise one third to one half of the population. As in all rural areas, residents of the municipality are facing economic deprivation, although opportunities for employment are provided by some larger enterprises (mainly textile), wineries and furniture producers in Yambol.

The unemployment rate among Roma is between 15%-20% compared to the overall unemployment rate in the municipality of 10%. Roma from the villages are mostly employed in large enterprises with transport provided to the town. Some of the Roma families work in farming. The unemployment rate of women is higher. In the past years, migration of Roma to western countries (mainly to Germany and Belgium) has increased in order to earn a better income. Many of these migrants support their extended families back home.

The major challenge to social inclusion is the low educational level among Roma, only a very small percentage of whom complete secondary education. A number of adult Roma leave school before concluding eighth grade, which severely limits their access to jobs. Other serious issues are early marriages resulting in girls dropping out of school at a very young age, especially in four of the villages, as well as poor infrastructure and living conditions, lack of health literacy and access to health care services.

The main developmental opportunity in the municipality is the openness of the local administration with its history of consistent policy and innovative initiatives for Roma integration. The Mayor and his administration are in their third mandate and are genuinely committed to providing equal access to services to the entire population, including Roma. Notably, this was the first municipality in the country to provide free of charge pre-school day care for all children, full board and food in schools, and free transport for all children from the villages to the schools and kindergartens. Tundzha's local administration is often referred to as one of the few examples of good governance inclusive to Roma and has received national and international awards for Roma inclusion. In 2011, Tundzha municipality received a UNICEF "Friend of children" award for effective policies benefiting children and their parents. Later in 2013, the Deputy Mayor of the municipality, Mr Stavrev, received the award for "The best social partner" from the European Committee on Education and the Syndicate of Bulgarian Teachers. The award was recognition for his special achievements in the area of education and social policy development. Mr Stavrev participated in the development and successful implementation of 16 educational projects and is the author of methodologies and publications in the area of civic education.

Another key factor for success in the field of Roma inclusion is the history of self-organisation within the Roma community. The "Patients with No Asthma" Roma NGO has been working since 2004 with mothers and families in the villages for increased health literacy and access to healthcare. This NGO has a truly passionate leader – a health mediator herself, working in a team with five health mediators. None of these attended the ROMED training for mediators, but they are active members of the National Network of Health Mediators in Bulgaria and were trained by the Network. An increasingly important role in the Roma communities is played by the local Roma evangelist church which has more than 300 members.

The Community Action Group (CAG)

The CAG was established as part of the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme at the end of 2013. It consists of 18 people: five men and 13 women from the ten villages in which the majority of the Roma population lives. The main engine for developing the group was the leader of the NGO "Patients with no Asthma" and the core group of six health mediators. As a result of previous initiatives, they already had a good informal network with active Roma community members in the villages. The NGO provides its office space for the meetings of the CAG. One of the leaders of the local Roma evangelist church is also a very active member of the CAG and helps with outreach and links to communities and local authorities.

The main drive for participation in the CAG is the personal motivation of its members to create better conditions for their children and to increase the educational level of the Roma community. As shared by three of the women who joined the CAG, *"we are mothers and we want our children to have an education and better chances than us, instead of repeating what we did not have"*. As a result of their involvement in the CAG, they have decided to continue their education and finish secondary school. One of them has taken professional hairdressing courses, whilst the other two have become educational mediators hired by the municipality within an educational project. As shared by all members of the CAG, participation in the group is an opportunity to voice the needs of people, together with a responsibility to be a positive model for Roma, encouraging them to get involved and thus improve the life of their communities.

The group is very stable and committed to continuing. No member of the group has dropped out, even though some of them need to travel more than 30 km from their village to Yambol in order to attend CAG meetings. Due to lack of travel resources, some members cannot attend all meetings. According to the CAG members, the ROMED2/ROMACT process gave them the confidence to formulate issues and the opportunity to put the collective demands of the community to the authorities which in turn can lead to solving concrete problems.

The CAG members are in constant interaction with the Roma communities in their villages. They use any informal and formal gatherings, especially of youth, women and the church, to discuss issues and to inform people about the work of the group. They have gained support from mayors in rural areas, as well as from the formal and informal Roma community leaders. The group remains politically neutral, as they believe that any perception of affiliation to a political party will be a serious threat to the trust gained in communities. The group is also concerned about the changing political situation since the last elections with the visible growth of nationalist votes and of those less supportive to Roma inclusion.

Interaction between the CAG and the Local Government

"Programmes for Roma do not start with ROMED and will not end up with ROMED, but the Programme gives us the best collaboration tools and the right people directly from the community for the formulation of local policies". These were the opening words of the Deputy Mayor in our first meeting.

We met a very committed local administration – Mayor, Deputy Mayor, experts in education and social issues. All of them believe that the inclusion of Roma is part of a development opportunity for the municipality. They view the CAG as a legitimate partner representing the community. In May 2014, the municipality established the Public Council on Ethnic and Integration Issues which has institutionalised the dialogue with the CAG and is a sign of recognition of the importance of the consultative process with Roma communities. However, the work of the Council is not limited to formal gatherings – the administration and the CAG have ongoing intensive communication, mandatory monthly meetings and sometimes interaction on a daily basis when issues need to be resolved.

All proposals of the CAG have been considered and included in the Local Action Plan for the implementation of the municipal Roma integration strategy. These include both long-term priorities related to access to quality education, healthcare and resolving housing issues, as well as other identified urgent problems that require immediate reaction, for example, the lack of water in one village or the poor condition of the roads and infrastructure in another. The Mayor, Deputy Mayor and experts in the municipality are in constant contact with the representatives of the CAG to quickly resolve emerging issues. In addition, eight members of the CAG were also hired on a part-time basis as school mediators in the framework of educational projects implemented by the municipality.

The Tundzha local administration has completed various projects for Roma inclusion. For them, the main added value of the ROMED2/ROMACT Programmes is the investment in the structured cooperative process with Roma communities through the creation of the CAG. This increased the capacity of the municipality to gather more concrete and real data concerning the problems of the Roma community, as well as to get feedback from the communities on the implementation of local policies: *"If previously we worked on some assumptions we developed from our desks, now we have a direct link with communities and they give us much more accurate statistics on a range of issues. This helps us learn directly with communities and find together what can make a difference for them and for the whole municipality."*

Results and impact in the communities

The main visible results are in the area of education, identified as a leading priority for the municipality. As shared in the focus group with the CAG, *"investing in all our children, including Roma, is investing in our future as a municipality"*. As shared in all interviews with the Mayor and Deputy Mayor and their team, this is a human mission, not just a paper plan. The local administration works based on a long-term vision in the area of education. It has already been very successful in ensuring full coverage and enrolment of children in preschool and school education. Whilst with the optimisation of the school system other rural municipalities are closing schools, Tundzha has invested in a new general school in the village of Skalica which is more accessible for the children from the surrounding villages.

Another example is the construction of a kindergarten in Hadjidimitrovo near the Roma neighbourhood, which is aiming for a complete change of attitude of the Roma families towards education. As a result, 50 Roma children have the opportunity to attend the kindergarten, which will give them an equal start at school. As the Deputy Mayor pointed out, *"I was touched when a Roma mother from a very poor family came to my office to thank me for her child having the chance to be in kindergarten and learning poems like other children"*. The funds for the construction of the school and the kindergarten are from the municipal budget. Yet full coverage and enrolment of children in school is not enough. As shared by the Deputy Mayor, *"we need to also invest in the quality of education, so that all children from our rural communities - both Roma and non Roma - are competitive with the children in the district centre"*. At the moment, the municipality is investing in the qualification of teachers to teach in a multi-ethnic environment. The municipality is also developing a

project to raise the quality of education of students in schools in the villages with the help of the ROMACT expert.

Another success is that the local administration has hired eight educational mediators to work in the schools in the framework of educational projects. Even though they could only be hired on part-time contracts, this consistent work with the children and their parents will help to increase motivation and educational results. By raising money from outside sources, the local administration wants to demonstrate the benefits of having educational mediators and, based on that, to persuade the local parliament to support this practice in the future with funds from the local budget.

In addition to the focus on children's education, with the support of the CAG the municipality has supported adult Roma in completing their basic education. 27 elderly people in the village of Kukorevo have already enrolled to complete secondary school. Another 50 Roma adults in the village of Veselinovo have been motivated to start education to finish eighth grade, an initiative which will be assisted by the local authorities through the launch of an adult education programme in one of the schools. As a result, 77 people in the two villages will have more chances of finding work, as completing secondary school is a requirement for most job opportunities.

As a result of the advocacy of the CAG, the municipality has already resolved a number of ad hoc infrastructure problems in different villages with a concentration of Roma. The problem with the lack of drinking water in the village of Boyadzhik has been resolved. Electric meters in villages have been installed. Five completely destroyed streets in different villages that flood with mud and water when it rains have already been asphalted thanks to funds from the local budget. In other places, the problem with street lights has been resolved. A children's playground was built in one of the villages. In addition to providing children with a place to play, it will help improve communication between the majority population and Roma, as it is built in the very centre of the village.

The municipality has started steady work on another priority in the Local Strategy for Development – to improve the housing conditions of the population, including Roma. It has paid for the preparation of detailed regulation plans as a first step in the legalisation of illegal housing. It has also prepared a project for the construction of social housing which was approved. However, due to the redirection of funds to the national priority for road construction done by the central administration, the project was not funded.

The health mediators continue their work for the increased health literacy of mothers and families. Especially important are their ongoing discussions and campaigns with families for reducing early marriages. As stated by health mediators in the interviews, there were previously about ten early marriages per year, a number since reduced to three.

Lessons forward

The ROMED2/ROMACT process was very successful in Tundzha municipality. The main local factors for success are the commitment and previous experience of local stakeholders, active people within both the Roma community and the local administration. Some of the emerging lessons and needs for the future include:

- ***If not led by a shared vision for Roma inclusion as part of local development, the ROMED2/ROMACT process can hardly be consistent and there will be only fragmented actions or just plans on paper.*** Yet developing such a vision takes time and years of cooperation. In Tundzha, the cooperation process did not start from scratch. Long before ROMED2/ROMACT, the municipality was ready with its strong belief in the benefits of Roma inclusion and had a clear long-term vision for that. Having a long-term policy vision of Roma inclusion as an integral part of the developmental strategy for the municipality is a critical success

factor. However, it took more than ten years of previous work by the municipality of Tundzha to develop and start testing this vision. The main driver for this commitment was the strong belief that investment in the education of children and youth in the municipality would guarantee its future development.

- ***A second success factor was ensuring the diversity and representation of the different Roma communities in the CAG.*** The group was not just a random gathering of Roma people who wanted to be active and do something. It built upon existing resources and skills inside the communities – a local NGO, the health and school mediators, the local Roma Church and active women in the neighbourhoods – which, in turn, can mobilise other groups and resources in the village communities. Women, as the majority members of the group in their capacity of health or school mediators, helped achieve better outreach inside the communities.
- ***The commitment and competence of the national facilitator is another critical factor for success.*** The ROMED2/ROMACT National Facilitator working with Tundzha municipality is extremely committed, very competent and experienced in work with health mediators, community empowerment and facilitation of local processes. As she explained, starting a local process is a responsibility to maintain the trust of *local stakeholders – both people in communities and in the administration.*

There is high potential for the sustainability of the local processes initiated in Tundzha municipality. Both the CAG and the local administration are committed to continuing to work together. However, there is a visible need for follow-up support focused on sustainability:

- ***The sustainability of successful cooperation is vulnerable to political changes that can come after elections.*** While the Tundzha local administration is a model of work for Roma inclusion, it is questionable as to what extent this model will stay in place after electoral changes. Some signs in this direction came as a result of the last elections in 2014. The new local parliament does not always share the same commitment and vision for Roma inclusion. Evidence in this direction is that it has not voted through parts of the local budget suggested by the local administration. A major deficiency in the ROMED2 process is that it works mostly with the mayor and the administration and not with the local parliaments where political decisions are taken.
- ***Another shortcoming of the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme is the scarce resources allocated at the very local level.*** The CAG had very limited support covering only the travel costs of members to meetings attended by the national facilitator and very few consumables for printing. As shared by the group, they need to meet more often, not just when the facilitator is there, but they cannot afford to pay for their own travel costs, printing and other expenses.
- ***A second gap in the ROMED2 approach is that it relies on bringing resources for the identified local initiatives from external project money or the local municipal budget.*** These are not always in place immediately or at all, and in some cases there is a need to prepare the ground for accessing these resources. Including in the Programme a small local fund to support small initiatives was recommended by both the local administration and the CAG. This could help pilot initiatives and avoid losing momentum and trust in communities. It can also prepare the ground to convince the local parliament to allocate money from the local budget if they see the practical benefit of the suggested approach.
- ***Further investment in the capacity for Roma inclusion processes of the various levels of local government and local parliament can help sustain the process.*** Despite its high competency and experience in Roma inclusion, the local administration in Tundzha has underlined the need for further training and capacity-building in effective approaches to working with Roma communities. The exchange of experience at national and international level among municipalities was also emphasised as essential for learning and disseminating good practices.
- ***The institutionalisation of the CAG and local cooperative process is still at a very initial stage and will need support and mentoring from the ROMED2/ROMACT Programme.***

The CAG is strongly committed to continuing but the process so far has had no space for an in-depth discussion for identifying the best form of institutionalising the process. This will require consistent assistance and facilitation from the National Facilitator, which needs to be provided by a follow-up stage of ROMED2.

If the CAG continues to exist as an informal active group, sustainability will be provided if members are hired in programmes and projects of local government. However, this can jeopardise their definition as an independent civic group.

There is an established formal Public Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, however the effectiveness of its practical usage will be vulnerable to potential political changes after local elections. It is important that the CAG participates there as a "strong and collective civic voice". This is the second option discussed by the group - to be institutionalised as a community-based NGO with representatives from all villages. This option can provide for much more sustainability as a legitimate but independent partner of the municipality. It can also become a model of a new type of Roma community-based organisation, gathering active groups based in the ten villages in the municipality. Effective Roma organisations based on the self-organising of people in village communities are lacking in the rural areas of the country. This will require training and assistance in organisational development, advocacy and community mobilisation.