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Territorial development for inclusion of Roma and other disadvantaged groups

A multi-faceted, participatory and local approach to Roma inclusion

THE CASE OF MEĐIMURJE COUNTY, CROATIA

Even though Croatia joined the European Union (EU) and has committed itself to the highest standards of human rights protection and the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, the Roma in Croatia (30,000 according to the Council of Europe) still face many of the same problems as Roma in the rest of south-eastern Europe, in terms of securing basic rights, including access to education, employment, social services, health and housing.



Roma settlement Kuršanec is one of the main locations in Međimurje County where UNDP Croatia implements a set of inter-related interventions addressing longstanding exclusion processes of Roma in Croatia.

In Croatia today, according to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) survey in 2013, 92 percent of Roma still live in relative poverty compared to 42 percent of non-Roma people living near Roma

settlements, and the Croatian average of 30 percent; a mere 26 percent of Roma are enrolled in elementary school and only 10 percent of them complete secondary school; and 65 percent of the Roma labour force is

unemployed, compared to 24 percent of non-Roma.

In January 2013, UNDP Croatia launched the project 'Platform for Roma inclusion in Međimurje County', with the financial support of the Open Society Foundation ('Making the Most of EU Funds for Roma' instrument). With its experience in area-based development and an integrated methodology that links bottom-up and top-down approaches to social inclusion, UNDP's philosophy is to facilitate the adoption of a mixed model of social welfare services, strengthen civil society organizations that represent marginalized groups and empower local communities.

Located in the north of Croatia, Međimurje County is territorially the smallest of all Croatian counties but has the highest ratio of Roma to the general population. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of Međimurje was 113,804 of which 5,107 persons identified as Roma. However, according to local Roma non-governmental organizations (NGOs), some 7,000 to 9,000 Roma live in this county.

Roma in Međimurje County mostly live in separate, ethnically homogenous areas, and hence are ethnically and spatially separated from the majority population of the areas they administratively belong to (examples are the Roma settlements of Kušanec, Orehovica, Sitnice, Kotoriba, Lončarevo, Parag and Piškorovec). Some Roma also live on the outskirts of the majority population's villages (such as the Roma settlements of Gornji Kuršanec, Goričan, Hlapičina, Kvitrovec and Pribislavec). The numbers vary largely, from about 30 Roma living in houses concentrated on the village outskirts, as in Hlapičina, to over 1,000 inhabitants in the largest Roma settlement of Parag.

Their daily reality is marked by lack of access to health care and education

(preschool to higher education), chronic unemployment and poorly developed settlements. Dominant misconceptions about the Roma also complicate the process of integration.

To tackle the many faceted problem of exclusion, UNDP's Croatia project works with all stakeholders at the Međimurje county level using an integrated approach to assess, plan, design and implement actions locally. This approach is very similar to that of the UNDP Regional Initiative, which holds as its prime objectives the forging and enhancement of processes and replicable models of social inclusion and desegregation through integrated local development. It is a comprehensive strategy that addresses longstanding exclusion of Roma in different areas: education, employment, community participation and governance in Međimurje County.

The first step was to strengthen the management capacities of the local authorities (in Međimurje County and the City of Čakovec), local institutions as well as all 25 members of the Međimurje County Roma National Minority Council. This capacity-building process of key local stakeholders was done through a set of actions that supported the development of specific products: the Međimurje County Action plan for Roma inclusion (adopted in April 2013); the Međimurje County Atlas of Roma settlements (a database on Roma socio-economic living

conditions); and EU projects for the inclusion of Roma and other vulnerable groups by local institutions and Roma NGOs.

Developing the Međimurje County Action plan for Roma inclusion was one of the requirements of the Croatian National Strategy for Roma Inclusion 2013-2020, a local plan for those Croatian counties where Roma live in numbers that allow them to elect a representative or Roma minority council. Linked with the national policy but reflecting local specificities, the County Action plan has the possibility of using EU funds for its implementation. Experience with the National Action Plan of Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 showed that unless local action plans were developed, interventions for Roma inclusion would remain ad hoc and unfunded.

The Međimurje County Action plan was developed with UNDP's support using a participatory model of action that includes the following: (1) a one-day workshop for a wide group of Roma representatives; (2) a two-day workshop with Roma representatives, public administration, institutions and other relevant actors; (2) presentation of a draft action plan by workshop participants to public administration and other actors in Međimurje County in order to obtain from them missing data/evidence and come to an agreement on suggested measures in the document; and (3) follow-up support for the finalization of an

action plan and organization of public discussion before the final adoption of the document. UNDP Croatia used the same model of action to develop the Sisak-Moslavina County Action plan for Roma inclusion (adopted in February 2014) and plans to use it in other Croatian counties in 2014.

UNDP Croatia also supported the development of the Međimurje County Atlas of Roma communities as a tool enabling better intervention planning, financial resources allocation and progress monitoring. (For more details see the 'County Atlas' article in this issue.)

UNDP's other activities in Međimurje County are at the grass roots level, a set of inter-related interventions including the following: support to the development of Roma self-employment initiatives; hiring and supervision of community development workers in Roma settlements; a mentoring programme (called 'EU clinics') for Roma NGOs that supports them in developing small to medium EU projects; organization of inter-ethnic activities for Roma and non-Roma youth; training activities on inclusive education for teachers in primary schools; and activities with local journalists on discrimination and hate speech in the media. All these activities draw on the complementary expertise and added value of local institutions, civil society organizations and individuals.

County Atlas of Roma settlements

RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The first of its kind in Croatia, the [Međimurje County Atlas of Roma settlements](#) was developed by UNDP Croatia as an interactive database on Roma socio-economic living conditions in Međimurje County, both at the county level and within the 12 Roma settlements.

The use of the Atlas was [recommended by the EU](#) as a tool enabling better intervention planning, financial resources allocation and monitoring of progress. The development of Atlas at the local level was an important step towards creating and monitoring better and more specific local policies on Roma issues, and a starting point for the preparation of funding models for EU Funds. Besides this practical step of creating a database, UNDP Croatia put into practice some principles of the methodology known

as action research. From a social policy perspective, the use of the action research process can be seen as having a 'disturbing' effect, provoking changes in 'roles' in the community where data are collected. These changes may be observed at different levels:

(a) In contrast with other applied social research practices, action research considers participation as the fundamental methodological approach because it is grounded on the assumption that knowledge about a certain community is available within that

community. As a consequence, by involving the analysed community - in this case Roma - in the research process, the community becomes aware of its own situation and can then use this data to organize itself, prepare arguments and carry out advocacy activities towards their goals. In this process, the analysed community evolves from being an object for study to a subject for mobilization.

(b) By involving local authorities and institutions in the research process, results of the research - the database - has more chances of being appropriated by these institutions. In addition, the concerned institutions may change their perception of the analysed community which takes an active role in research process. More generally, such research may lead local authorities and institutions to engage in an introspective questioning process which may not only positively

modify their practices and policies (functional dimension) but, more globally, their perceptions and messages regarding the analysed community (symbolic dimension).

(c) The scientific community coordinating this research process interacts more closely with the analysed community. With action research, the research field becomes in a way a social laboratory questioning the ethics of the research because of the researcher's proximity to the analysed community and her or his influence on it. In other words, the development of the Atlas of Roma settlements links the research process with community organizing. Action research has, by consequence, an emancipating function due to the disruption of the traditional division between researcher and subject.

The collection of data in Međimurje was coordinated by UNDP's staff and a demographer living and working in the community, and conducted by local Roma and non-Roma interviewers living and/or working in the community.

Data for the Atlas were collected on three key levels: (a) the county level with data from local institutions; (b) the municipal level where the 12 Roma settlements are located, and local educational institutions and NGOs in those municipalities; and (c) the household level, in the county's second biggest Roma settlement, in Kuršanec (197 households with 1,134 people).

UNDP Croatia's survey and methodology - with minor modifications for particular local communities - has also been applied by UNDP in 13 localities in Hungary, Romania



Collected data are stored in an interactive database where data can be accessed by county or by Roma settlements. The database also includes a list of key documents/research on Roma issues and a link to Excel charts presenting results in detail.

and Slovakia. This will allow a common framework for future monitoring and comparing of data about Roma in these countries.

Due to its community mobilizing potential made possible by influencing participants, processes, policies and practices, the development of the Međimurje County

Atlas of Roma represents a formidable opportunity to establish new structures and processes both within and outside the Roma community that would promote sustainable development, equal opportunities and social justice.

Exploring alternative routes towards Roma employment

The 2007 economic crisis took its toll in Croatia despite expectations that the recent entry of the country into the EU would pave the way towards a possible economic recovery. Key symptoms of the fallout in the Croatian labor market have been high unemployment and long-term unemployment rates, particularly among the youth.

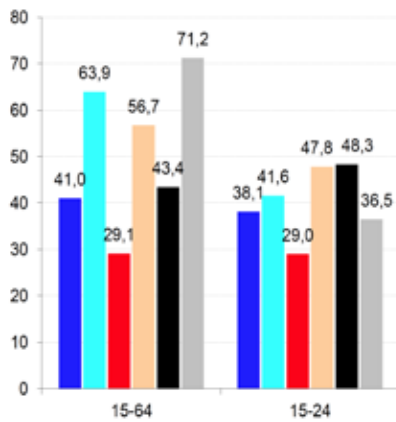
According to the most recent report (March 2014) of Eurostat, the statistical office of the EU, youth unemployment rate in Croatia is at 49 percent, which surpasses the long-term average of 33.5 percent. The Roma community faces even

more obstacles in accessing the labor market: UNDP data shows that the Roma in Croatia have a significantly higher unemployment rate than the majority population. Among young Roma women, 82 percent are unemployed, compared to just 24 percent of

non-Roma women of the same age. Roma in rural areas are at a particular disadvantage: while 46 percent of Roma from urban areas have jobs, only 30 percent in rural areas are employed.

In Međimurje County, the situation is even worse. Demographic data from the local public employment office shows that 7,833 people were unemployed in Međimurje County in August 2013 of which 1,100 - 14 percent - were Roma. This is a significantly high percentage of unemployment considering that Roma make up only 5.5 percent of the county's population. Unemployment is

Employment rate by gender and age (15-24)



Column 1 (dark blue): Roma total, Column 2 (turquoise): Non-Roma total, Column 3 (red): Roma women, Column 4 (pink): Non-Roma women, Column 5 (black): Roma men, Column 6 (grey): Non-Roma men

often linked to a low level of formal education, which the statistics confirm. Seventy percent of unemployed Roma in Međimurje County have not completed elementary school and 48 percent of them are under the age of 30. In August 2013, 80 percent of young Roma from Međimurje County completed elementary school but only 3.7 percent continued with secondary school education. Seventy-eight percent received a high school degree.

The reasons for this disparity in employment are complex but the main reasons are lower levels of formal education and the social barriers that result; lack of formal work training and experience, and social discrimination towards the Roma community.

Nevertheless, Roma should not be misread as passive victims. Despite an overall low level of formal education, a majority of Roma have developed some specific professional skills through informal forms of education which are still not formally recognized in the Croatian system for validation of learning outcomes. Learning from the 'school of life' rather than in formal educational institutions, they have developed survival strategies to earn livelihoods responding to the immediate needs of the informal market, given their limited opportunities to enter the formal labor market.

For this reason, self-employment in the form of a cooperative has been identified as one of the ways for UNDP to support Roma towards economic independence particularly given the current unfavorable conditions of the Croatian labor market. UNDP Croatia, in cooperation with the cluster 'ACT group' in Čakovec (Centre for Eco-social Development), has supported the development of two social cooperatives in Međimurje County which are led by long-term unemployed Roma people.

The first cooperative, Domaći vrt (Domestic garden), established under the project and registered in December 2013, in the Roma settlements of Kuršanec and Sitnice, is organized around organic and

Social cooperatives

Social cooperatives first emerged in 19th-century England as a response by peasants, craftsmen and workers to a decline in socio-economic status that followed the collapse of feudalism and the rise of banking, trade and industry. The world's first cooperative was founded in 1844 as a cooperative of consumers, and was soon followed by the establishment of many agricultural and craft cooperatives. Croatia's first cooperative, Pitomačka zanatlička zadružnica, was founded in 1862 to match those seeking safe investments with small new businesses seeking funds. Cooperatives played a major role in the 20th century, but are currently shunned in Croatia as an unwanted legacy of Yugoslav socialism.

biodynamic farming. So far, some 30 long-term unemployed Roma from Međimurje County have received training in the collection and cultivation of medicinal plants and the production of vegetables and fruits following exclusively biodynamic principles. Due to the complexity of the process, the cooperative will include other ecological producers and experts from the local community, and it will be mentored by ACT group in Čakovec. In February 2014, the cooperative started production. Currently, four long-term unemployed Roma work at the cooperative with the support of self-employment schemes for the unemployed that are offered by Croatian Public Employment Service in Čakovec.

The second cooperative, which is about to be registered, is called Romona and involves four unemployed Roma women aged 17-35 from the Kuršanec Roma settlement. The cooperative will mostly deal with screen-printing using naturally derived colors and will soon start production.

In the aftermath of the economic crisis, social entrepreneurship organizations might be the alternative path towards economic growth for the Roma. Through the concept of self-employment and social entrepreneurship, Roma are empowered to work autonomously, to be socio-economically independent and to expand their formal professional knowledge and skills. However, actions supporting Roma self-employment should not minimize the fact that actions for Roma employment in the mainstream labor market are as crucial.



Domestic garden cooperative is organized around organic and biodynamic farming.

Community development worker: A new working position for Roma empowerment

In Europe, the approaches and strategies adopted to address the disadvantaged position of Roma in Croatia often focus on the question of status rights, citizenship and education. Even though these aspects are crucial, the social paradigm also needs to be emphasized.

The process which contributes to the mobilization of Roma and the relations that emerge with different actors is pivotal for Roma integration. One way to promote progress is exchange and interaction among Roma and other groups in society, through which common interests can be established whilst respecting different values and identities. Solidarity and coherence within the community enables community members to organize themselves to achieve shared interests.

Through community organizing, Roma can move from the role of objects to subjects, in the area of community development, with the capacity and power to define their own needs and objectives and thus create new political opportunities. Towards this end, it is crucial to employ community development workers in Roma settlements. Community development workers seek to actively engage the Roma community in making sense of the issues which affect their lives, setting

goals for improvement and responding to problems and needs through empowerment and active participation.

In August 2013, UNDP Croatia hired a community development worker in Međimurje County, Darko Balog. Through his work in different Roma settlements of the county, Mr. Balog directly links the Roma population with public services at the local level by helping them access services such as health, welfare, housing, economic activity, education and training, and employment opportunities. This support is provided through workshops with representatives of statutory and public service providers and non-governmental service providers, as well as through help in fulfilling administrative forms for access to health insurance, social insurance benefits, scholarships, writing job applications, and so on. UNDP's community development worker in Međimurje was soon identified by national and local institutions as a focal point for easier and more effective

communication with the Roma community, and also as a source of information and advice. Mr. Balog is also active in identifying project ideas from the Roma community and supporting their elaboration into project proposals for funding small community actions. His work and results are submitted in a monthly activity plan that is discussed with UNDP; it is also monitored through weekly reports submitted to UNDP.

In a six-month work period, UNDP's community development worker in Međimurje linked 329 Roma people with local institutions in the following ways: 69 requests for scholarships for secondary school pupils; 12 requests for one-time financial assistance (to buy school books, for instance); 1 registration in kindergarten; and 67 requests for child allowance. In financial terms, this translates to €195,111 directly allocated to the Roma population.

In the months ahead, UNDP Croatia plans to create and reinforce partnerships with national and local actors in order to ensure the financial sustainability of the community development worker's position since it is quite new in the Croatian social and welfare system.

Interview with Darko Balog, UNDP's community development worker in Međimurje County

What was your main motivation for applying for the position?

The main reason why I applied for the position is related to the general situation of Roma in Međimurje County; namely, Roma still don't receive enough formal education to know about their rights and obligations. Thus the community needs people like me to help them in terms of social and economic inclusion. Also, the knowledge and experience I have gained during my education enables me to provide the necessary assistance to the community in

administrative matters and to connect local governments with Roma representatives. I hope to strengthen Roma cooperatives, associations and NGOs, which unfortunately do not cooperate. This is not beneficial for anyone and they need to unite in order to achieve any progress so that the community is accepted within society.

How does a day in the life of a community worker look like? What are your main tasks?

A normal day in the life of a community worker begins with a visit to one of the 12 settlements in the county, followed by a

discussion with the respective Roma representatives. Then we pay a visit together to those citizens who are in a very difficult financial situation. I always try to find at least a temporary solution, which means that I write requests for financial help through which they can manage to survive from month to month. It is a good thing that the Welfare Center in Čakovec has contracts with different stores, which provide purchase orders for those in need so that they can buy the most urgent supplies. My main task is to identify the issues that the population of the Roma settlements



is facing and, in collaboration with the local government, try to find a solution which is beneficial for both sides. Also, I am always

looking for initiatives and hence try to support writing of project proposals for open EU or national calls.

Has there been any progress since you started working as a community worker? What has been your main achievement?

Ever since I started working, progress has been visible. Some institutions which used to ignore requests coming from Roma are now beginning to collaborate with the community. This is largely due to the fact that once they see I work for UNDP Croatia, their approach changes.

So I think, being a community worker, I am really able to help the community. I cannot tell you about my main achievement yet, but solving requests that contribute to the community is a great success for me and I think that my fellow citizens share this opinion about me.

What are your hopes for the Roma community in the near future?

I hope that there are going to be more educated Roma with a university degree. I also wish that we get the chance to be also educated in our native language.

Empowering Roma NGOs to access EU funds

Improving the living conditions of Roma communities is a priority for the EU, yet Roma organizations in Croatia have traditionally fared poorly in competing for EU funds. Now UNDP is hoping to change this by providing direct training and coaching to Roma NGOs in formulating funding proposals and applying for projects.

The pool of development funding available to Croatia has expanded dramatically since the country joined the EU in July 2013: €8 billion in Structural Funds and the Cohesion Fund have been budgeted for the 2014-2020 period. Yet, these funds remain mostly out of the reach of Roma organizations. Only four Roma organizations have participated in the implementation of projects financed from Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) funding – two as applicants and two as partners, according to research conducted by the Vukovar Center for Peace, Legal Advice, and Psychosocial Assistance. This low rate of success stems in part from the inability of Roma NGOs to demonstrate that they have sufficient financial capacity and that they were not previously applicants of EU projects.

UNDP's support is designed to provide Roma NGOs with the tools they need to apply for EU funding. A series of workshops begun in September 2013 have taken participants step by step through all aspects



of project writing. The learning method is practical and covers all basic aspects of developing projects, such as creating e-mail addresses for the organizations, downloading application forms from donor websites, filling out application forms section by section and sending the completed applications by mail and e-mail to donors. Participants work on real world project examples with modest budgets.

"I love those workshops because we write concrete projects," said a workshop participant who belongs to a Roma organization in Međimurje County. "I hope we will finally get some financial support for our work in the field because we are the ones who know best the real problems of the Roma population."

The ideas that Roma NGOs are pursuing through the project include improving the area surrounding a source of drinking water in the Lončarevo Roma settlement, the construction of a football field in Pribislavec and the organization of an exchange programme for youths from Croatia, Slovenia and France. The groups involved have already received some first grants for their projects. While starting with smaller projects, UNDP is also encouraging local institutions to include Roma NGOs in medium-sized EU projects so that a pathway can be built towards larger initiatives that can make a real difference in addressing the challenges that Roma communities face in Croatia. The initiative is also designed to develop leadership skills. "In particular, we try to work with young, educated Roma who will be the Roma intellectual elite of tomorrow and can already play a major role in creating social changes," notes Milan Medić, an expert in community mobilization, and the UNDP workshop leader.

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