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Roma Women Empowerment Projects of the Roma Initiatives Office (OSF)

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This study was commissioned by the Roma Initiatives Office (OSF) . It was conducted and recognized in partial fulfillment for the “Policy Labs” course within the Department of Public Policy at Central European University. Policy Labs are part of the MA curriculum. They give an opportunity for small teams to work for external clients producing and presenting policy relevant research that will be used for advocacy, assessment and development. Clients are civic organizations, donors, research centers and international organizations. The Policy Lab focusing on this project was mentored by Martin Kahanec, Assistant Professor at the Central European University’s Department of Public Policy.

ABOUT THE PAPER SERIES

Policy Research Reports are occasional studies that provide support or background information for wider research projects. They include reviews of scientific literature, state of the art reports, and country studies. They are works in progress and offer practical combinations of academic and policy writing.

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Introduction

Empowerment can be perceived as a process and an outcome in the development literature and the international assistance communities. The former focuses on “organizational capacity building” and the “increase in participation of previously excluded groups in the design, management and evaluation of development activities”. The latter emphasizes the importance of “economic enhancement” and improving income opportunities for individuals (Luttrell, et al. 2009, 5). In gender equality thinking, empowerment on the one hand helps women to become part of social and political debates on different public matters on par with men (process) and on the other hand, it helps women to have equal accesses to public goods, entitlements, and rights (outcomes). According to the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation the process of empowerment should lead to the “bolstering of self-confidence and ability to develop potential solutions of their own” (Luttrell, et al. 2009, 16). The Roma inclusion experts and the gender equality thinkers and experts propose to fine-tune the concept of empowerment in the context of multiple discrimination which Roma women often face and critically use of concept of ‘potential solutions on their own’ (Balogh-Kóczé 2011).

Most of the **twenty-three projects funded** under this grant program are process oriented seeking to **support Roma women efforts to improve life in their communities**. The projects funded seek to raise individual and community awareness of rights, alternatives and opportunities. Using a variety of methods, the leaders of the projects seek to build self-esteem and change “own perceptions about their rights, capacities and potential” (Luttrell, et al. 2009, 7). A minority of projects are more outcome oriented and seek to improve the economic status of Roma women.¹ They use professional trainings to equip targeted groups of Roma women with different skills that will hopefully enable them to participate in the labour market.

The 23 projects awarded aim to provide empowerment opportunity for Roma women at local level and, in some cases, connect to developments at national level. This report is based on analysis of the project applications, and final reports from the project leader. It builds on the mid term assessment report by Isabela Mihalache. The aim is to use the different project documents to identify achievements, significant experiences and to consider potential lessons for future development of the small grant program.

¹ For example, the *Roma Women’s Network “Together”* and *The European Center for the Integration and the Promotion of the Roma*.

1. Main problems addressed by the projects

Main problems addressed:

- Discrimination of Roma women
- Early marriage and young motherhood
- Gender inequality
- The specific needs of Roma women returnees
- Economic marginalization
- Social inclusion and increasing political participation

Going by the methods used by the NGOs, projects can be divided into awareness raising and culture change, capacity building projects for Roma women in general and capacity building projects for training Roma women leaders. Almost all the projects sought to address problems connected to the **discrimination of Roma women**.² The project proposals use a variety of frames to address the nature of discrimination that Roma women suffer in different domains of life but the majority of projects resonate with the concept of multiple discrimination gaining growing attention in broader equality policy debates in the European and international organizations in recent years (European Commission 2007; Roma Rights Special Issue 2009). The majority tried to broaden inclusion of Roma women in all areas of social life, by improving the image of Roma women in respect of local non-Roma populations and promoting better communication with various state and non-state institutions, including trade unions, labour offices, and social care centers.

Early marriage and young motherhood among Roma women were two issues which were the focus of a number of applicants. The aims of the NGOs working on these topics were to bring about attitudinal change within Roma families towards the dominant custom. Their methods varied considerably. One for instance tried to work introduce local Roma girls and young women to educated Roma students from other parts of country, thereby offering an alternative role model.³ Others sought to create discussions amongst different generations and to actively involve men in the talk.⁴

Organizations targeting **gender inequality** not only seek to raise awareness of the importance of Roma women rights among a variety of stakeholders but also involve Roma women leaders in policy making.⁵ The organizations dealing with this issue highlight the lack of Romani women leaders who are, on the one hand, close to the community in order to understand their problems but, on the other, are able to lobby on national and local level for solving Roma women problems. At least ten of the groups listed this as either a direct or indirect objective and it would be interesting to follow up on their experiences as active in local policy making as well as their experience in policy making outside their immediate

² For example, Roma Active Albania, Integro Association – Bulgaria, HCAR-KHAM Delcevo

³ (Student Society for Development of Interethnic Dialogue, Association LARGO)

⁴ Social-Cultural Foundation of the Roma “Ion Cioba”, Roma Children Centre, Roma Education Center –Nis, Forum for Roma Women)

⁵ (Roma Women Association “Better Future”, Centre for Roma Initiatives Niksic, “Inter – Active” Communitarian Development Agency, Roma Centre “Amare Rromentza”)

environment. To what extent were their experiences in the implementation of their project deliberately communicated into policy making fora?

Two NGOs focused on addressing **the specific needs of Roma women returnees** and, in that sense, they were different from the other projects in that they would find out specific needs, rather than seek to change a particular practice.⁶ They dealt with economic empowerment through professional courses, support for obtaining issuing ID cards and facilitating communication between state institutions and the Roma women.

Three of the projects focused directly on the **economic marginalization** of Romani women.⁷ They chose to work at three different levels – awareness raising, policy work and professional trainings.

Other projects focused on promoting greater **social inclusion and increasing political participation** of Romani women. Only one project directly addresses Roma Decade Action Strategies; it aims to help “fund allocations for Roma women under the Roma Decade”. Some projects mention the Roma Decade Strategy in their applications. However, these activities do not directly connect to the Strategy because the Decade action plans in most countries (besides Spain) do not include any specific goals concerning women’s empowerment. Therefore, these projects should be viewed as part of the more general plans for social inclusion for the whole Roma population within the Roma Decade implementation.

2. Goals set by projects

Main goals:

- To improve relations with both state and non-state institutions
- To raise awareness amongst different constituencies
- To generate useful knowledge concerning attitudes and instances
- To improve the local capacity of individuals and organizations to get involved in local politics and development

To improve relations with both state and non-state institutions Improve relations between local state officials and Roma women ⁸ For some of the projects, of the objectives can be said to establish or build on successful working relations with other organizations and state officials. Some previous knowledge and experience with public administration can be invaluable for successful communication and partnership. According to Mihalache’s report, this was an important characteristic for successful implementation: “They all came across as strong, determined women with knowledge about the way local administration works and

⁶ (Roma Women’s Network “Together”, Association of Roma Novi Bečej)

⁷ (Gypsy Women “For Our Children”, “Impreuna” Agency for Community Development, The European Center for the Integration and the Promotion of the Roma (CEPIR))

⁸ (Roma Active Albania, Inter – Active Communitarian Development Agency, Tanja Jovanovic, Integro Association - Bulgaria)

the needs of the communities they represent” (Inter – Active Communitarian Development Agency).

To highlight issues and raise awareness amongst different constituencies The Roma Centre “Amare Rromentza” and the Forum of Roma IDP projects are such examples. The former is a “first step towards creating a Roma women’s strategy in Romania” and the latter sets the start of a “campaign for documentation for Roma Internally Displaced Persons” together with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Some projects are reported as being aimed at **raising issues for the first time.**⁹ For example, although problems connected to Roma traditions such as early marriages and motherhood have been known for some time, the premise of a number of projects was that they have not been discussed as problems before. In this regard, the goal was to find ways to bring up the issues in way that might lead to changes in attitudes towards early marriage, although there were other instances within the same project of young women expressing support for early marriage, saying how they would expect their children to do the same.

To generate useful knowledge concerning attitudes and instances and were important and complementary goals for project leaders.¹⁰ The argument was that small NGOs have better access to information and more opportunity to effectively research underlying causes of certain problems together with investigating different attitudes within the Roma population. As one result of their work some organizations were able to develop their human capital, improve relations with the Roma communities, and in turn show themselves to be valuable contacts with local state officials and other civic organizations.¹¹ Those state bodies who work with Roma sometimes do not know enough about those realities and traditions which make a big difference for the education status and employment opportunities for Roma women. Therefore, some organizations develop connections with local and national officials which can help project success but also seek to transfer knowledge about Roma conditions to state institutions. For example, the Roma Children Center in Serbia reported that their project helped the social care centers and health centers to gain new information which will help them work with Roma women and girls in the future.

To improve the local capacity of individuals and organizations to get involved in local politics and development In terms of developing projects into longer term actions, two of the organizations - Integro Association – Bulgaria, HCAR-KHAM Delcevo – have tried to connect their work to the Roma Decade Action Plan or local municipal strategies. Integro, for example, wanted to convince local authorities to establish what they called Mother Centers which would be funded by municipalities. HCAR also aimed for stronger commitments from local authorities. It managed to get the municipality to finance 20% of every subsequent project which can be presented as fulfilling objectives of the Roma Decade on local level.

⁹ (Social-Cultural Foundation of the Roma “Ion Cioaba”)

¹⁰ (Roma Children Centre, Tanja Jovanovic)

¹¹ (Association LARGO, Roma women association “Better future”, HCAR-KHAM Delcevo, Roma Women’s Network “Together”, Initiatives for Emancipation of Romani Women “Romano Suno”, Sastipen - Roma Center for Health Policies, Association of Roma Novi Bečej)

Interestingly, although the diagnostic statements of the project proposals acknowledged the problem of multiple discrimination, among the project goals the **role of men in empowering women** is rarely mentioned. This can be explained by the sensitivity of this issue in minority and disadvantaged communities in which the intra-group ties are often constraining voice in gender terms. This can also be connected to the modesty of political visions by the NGO women leaders in the case of the selected projects. These visions can be bolstered by peer learning, knowledge sharing, and capacity building—not necessarily within the frame of small grant projects.

3. Methods for assessing achievements

Numerically – several projects described their work in terms of the numbers of people they wanted to contact, the size of the populations they were working with or the numbers of direct beneficiaries of their project, so for example, the Social-Cultural Foundation of the Roma „Ion Cioaba“ said that they could “decrease of the number of premature marriages among the Roma communities by 10%” and that they “targeted 4 000 people from 4 different counties.” In many cases, the final reports offered figures as to whether these numbers had been reached, the case mentioned previously reaching the more modest 200 people from four counties.

Take Up by Others - those projects which fitted within ongoing work and were part of a strategy to demonstrate the practical contribution of say, a Mother’s Center, and then to have the local municipality assume at least partial responsibility for its future funding

Inspiration for Others – Whether in terms of positive appreciation or in some cases, direct copying of their work, some projects could be judged according to the actions and attitudes of others. The Impreuna Agency for Community Development in Romania, for example, sought to promote equal employment opportunities by creating an economic empowerment model that will work not only for Roma women but also of other vulnerable groups on the labour market. The NGO reports that they have been able to establish a partnership with the Trade Unions in Romania and that this has led to the continuation of the project together with the National Trade Union.

Problem solving capacity – given that one of the objectives of the grant was to support existing organizations that appeared to have a proven record of useful activity within Roma populations, one of the measurements that can be used is problem solving ability. Of course, projects faced many small and large problems in their work and in some cases, this was explicitly referred to, whilst in others, there is perhaps only an indirect suggestion, for example, with the final tally of beneficiaries or beneficial actions not being on the scale initially planned.

The variety of projects and objectives means that **no one set of output/outcome indicators would fit all projects** and although knowing the numbers of attendees at a workshop can give some idea of the scale of the activity, it does not offer that much more by way of understanding impact. Instead, there could be some development for certain kinds

of projects, for example, for those who say their intention is to make a model for others to use, there should be some meaningful measure of success. It could be that they would select from a list, but the advantage might be that it offers a chance for a subsequent and complementary phase in which someone actually uses that information to look at the reality of take up.

4. Consequence of the projects

Main results:

- Enhanced reputation of the civic organizations amongst the local community
- Improved co-operation with local authorities
- Dissemination of findings and good practices
- Successful campaigns for raising awareness
- Attitudinal change
- Involvement in policy making
- Development of economically useful skills

The results of the projects are based on an analysis of the final reports produced by the organizations and by the mid term assessment carried out by Isabela Mihalache.

- One of the clear advantages of the small grant program is that the provision of external financial recognition clearly enabled civic organizations **to enhance their reputation** amongst the local community by showing their ability to bring resources into the community. Although the small grant program is not an aid program, by allowing the applicants to connect their work to a range of civic and state institutions, they support their efforts to bring attention to both well known and less well known problems.
- The majority of projects were done with **some kind of co-operation with local authorities**. These might be specific departments such as the labour offices, the child protection services and social welfare offices and where the nature of the relation was information provision, liaison with Roma settlements and joint activities around common interests. Some projects addressed the municipal level and connected to local policy and development, for instance, there were some projects that sought to lobby at municipal level for specific actions.¹²
- A very small number addressed their work to **national state bodies**, for instance, those addressing IDP issues. There were others that had partners with state wide networks that could act as **conduits for disseminating findings** and good practices, for example, there were those who worked with national trade union

¹² (Association LARGO, Roma Women Association “Better Future”, HCAR-KHAM Delcevo, Roma Women’s Network “Together”, Initiatives for Emancipation of Romani Women “Romano Suno”, “Association of Roma Novi Bečej”).

- organizations,¹³ others who had partners with academic institutions¹⁴ and a small number who said that they worked with international partners.¹⁵
- **Successful campaigns for raising awareness** – Seven groups reported that they had been successful in raising awareness amongst Roma women about their fundamental rights.¹⁶ The evidence for these conclusions varied. In some cases, it was shown that the project had led to a new institution being created, for example, a new Mother Center in another part of Albania. In Macedonia, the HCAR-KHAM Delcevo had managed to get the "Action plans from Roma decade have been adapted to local level with the support of NGOs and community leaders, counsellors. They have been adopted as part of the working program of Delcevo municipality for 2009-2012." Other projects said that they had managed to identify individuals willing to participate in training workshops without specifying particular outcomes.
 - **Changing attitudes** – Four groups worked specifically towards attitudinal change. As reported in the mid term assessment, it is difficult to make significant headway with a subject that is not seen as a problem, and there were few applicants who claimed to have made big progress, preferring to see their work as laying the way for others to take it forward. Only the Social-Cultural Foundation of the Roma “Ton Cioaba was very optimistic about their achievements, reporting that the project had changed the way of thinking among parents, related to the future of their children. The meetings in the Roma communities marked the beginning of a new mentality of the new Roma generations, a fundamental change that generates the basis for promoting school and education among the Roma”. Furthermore, the project had “a very remarkable result ... related to the women leaders raised from the community and eager to get involved the educational life of the children and youth”. The Roma Children Center also reported change of the perceptions for early marriage among Roma mothers. The other two NGOs seeking to change attitudes described one successful change being that Roma women were willing to take part in a free discussion concerning family problems.¹⁷ It is unlikely that projects brought about big attitudinal changes within the short timeframe of the work. Whilst awareness raising was a first step towards attitude change, for more lasting impression it needed to be supported by other actions such as formal education, trainings, and work with the whole family.
 - **Involvement in Policy Making** – Three NGOs said that they felt their work had influenced policy. The Centre for Roma Initiatives in Niksic, Montenegro reported that “local and national institutions asked for the conclusions and the

¹³ Impreuna worked with the National Block of Trade Unions, the Women Organization form the National Block of Trade Unions, and the National Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Romania.

¹⁴ Integro planned to work with the Centre for Ethno-cultural studies within the Bulgarian Academy of Science, whilst the Student Society for Development of Interethnic Dialogue sought to work closely with Roma students from several universities in Bulgaria.

¹⁵ RWAR Romany Women Association in Romania worked with the European Roma Rights Center, Ioan Coiba foundation worked with Save the Children and the Forum for Roma Women in Slovakia listed OSF as one of its partners.

¹⁶ (Roma Active Albania, Integro Association – Bulgaria, HCAR-KHAM Delcevo, Initiatives for Emancipation of Romani Women “Romano Suno”, RWAR Romany Women Association in Romania, “Association of Roma Novi Beče”)

¹⁷ (RWAR Romany Women Association in Romania, Roma Education Center –Nis)

recommendations from the conference in order to add them to the 2009 priorities". The Roma Children Centre reported that the conclusions from the round table which it organized were presented to the League for Roma Decade in Serbia and that they have been used for lobbying for changes in the Serbian Action Plan.

- **Building economically useful skills** – All projects that reported organizing professional trainings for Roma women aimed at building skills which would make them more competitive at the labour market. Some worked to put on training courses themselves, for example, the Roma Women's Network Together taught 20 women hairdressing. Others saw their contribution as connecting Romani women to training opportunities provided by the local state labour offices, for example, the European Center for the Integration and the Promotion of the Romani in Romania.

Some conclusions

Given the grand ambition of some projects and the limited resources, there is a danger of disappointment by not be able to achieve the level of change wanted, the numbers affected and the time in which it was done. A couple of the reports hinted at this with a scaling down of predictions as numbers of beneficiaries. It would be **a mistake to conclude that the gap between objectives and achievements shows failure**, because there might be other effects that were not recorded in the report and that there will be others were the jury is still out on the impact of the project, particularly on those programs where the goal was bringing about change in cultural attitudes. However one method is available of seeing how the projects progressed and that is to **compare the assessments in the mid term with the results** as recorded in the final reports. Of the ten projects the author visited there are follow up final reports for six.

Of these six there were two projects that addressed early marriage. Whilst describing the main activities, the author is careful to show that the issue is not one that will change quickly, that there are supporters of early marriage and that to transform the practice, it will need time, sensitivity, alternatives, role models. Both final reports acknowledge that there is only so much that can be done in the context of a short period – the Romanian report talks of having 'laid the basis' for changing mentalities – nevertheless it is interesting to see that both have be **able to tie their work and the issue to particular institutions**. In the Serbian case this is two social care centers, whereas in the Romanian, the project reporters say that their work has inspired a number of Romani women to get more involved in the schooling of their children.

The two IDP projects were interesting as examples of attempts to systematically gather information concerning the problems faced by those returning from Kosovo. The two had different sampling methods and their follow on use of this information differed. The northern Serbian project worked closely with small groups, attending to individual problems connected to missing documents, whilst the Belgrade based project was larger in scale and, at the time of the mid and final report, it was not possible to point to particular uses of the information gathered. However, it was clear that the latter, at least in the minds of the project leaders had a **clear political destination**. They saw their work as part of a wider

effort to convince the state authorities that there should be a dedicated ministry responsible for internally displaced persons.

The achievements of the Impreuna project, which sought to gather information on the experience of Romani women employees of trade unions, attracted positive reviews in the mid term report. The author reported that there were chances that this policy oriented report might be taken up on a larger scale, whether by trade union organizations or other donor. Unfortunately, the final report does not give much detail on what was the reaction to their report, save to say that they have received additional funding, presumably to work in a similar or related project, from the European Social Fund.

The recipients of the awards ranged from established groups, small coalitions, recently created groups and in a few cases, the grants went to support individual led projects. They also varied considerably in how they saw the needs of the local communities and the ways in which they could act to help Roma women. In some cases the intention was to address issues within the community that clearly would take a long time to deal with; in this sense, the achievements of the individual projects are to have initiated discussion, to create confidence in some that they can carry on this discussion and to try to keep the issue alive by tying it to specific institutions such as schools and social welfare centers. However, some of the NGOs do not report any continuation of their work on similar projects. Raising an issue as something of long term importance, only to let it disappear again can **undermine the credibility of the message** and for those who come later to try similar projects. This connects to the question of take up – to what extent have the ideas or initiatives presented in the projects been taken up by others, whether other NGOs, local authorities, trade unions, or donors? There is some evidence that this has taken place and perhaps one recommendation might be for a follow up inquiry that would see whether the seeds sown by a project have take root.

It is clear that from a policy point of view, the majority of applicants address their concerns to specific bodies with responsibilities for labour, training, health etc and only a minority sees their work as being part of a wider co-ordinated effort to change policy at state level. Nevertheless the material gathered by the local actors can be considered a resource that could be utilized by a range of policy actors, whether they are from academia, from national campaigning groups or advocacy organizations such as trades union. Perhaps there would need to be some **additional investments to make put those materials in a format that would be better used**, but it is clear that the information gained is privileged and arising out of strong trusting relations.

Most of these projects focused on Romani women leadership match the recommendations of the EC for improving Roma situation in the EU. According to the presented by the EC report “The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged EU” a compulsory condition for “increased involvement of Roma in both policy and projects is the capacity of local groups and organizations to participate actively” (EC 2004, 47). These small grants “politically and practically” empower local Romani organizations supporting them to develop their human capital and their connections with other organizations and officials which fulfill these requirements.

Some of these organizations set up too high goals which cannot be implemented with the received grants. Therefore, due to lack of experience and management skills they are not able to achieve substantial goals. Whilst there are descriptions of connections to a variety of others, there is not so much which describes the quality or the consequences of these relations. It may be beyond the capacity of the project applicants to report on this but this

does not preclude the usefulness of further inquiry into the experience of these civic/state relations.

One question is the extent to which these small grant projects need to be part of bigger strategic plan. **It might overload a project to insist on some proof of connection to national or international programs.** It can also distract from meeting immediate local needs and to take scarce human resources from poor communities. There are a number of NGOs who collaborated with larger NGOs which might suggest that in these cases, there could be some co-ordinated gathering of material and presentation in diverse settings.

In most of the projects it is not stated how beneficiaries of the programs are chosen. A lack of explanation for the method of selecting the beneficiaries can create unnecessary tensions within the community and does not help the donor to understand the constituency of the project. Thus, the application and reporting materials of the grants program should give a transparent account of the selection of beneficiaries in the community. It may be the case that there are not as many beneficiaries who have the desire to participate in the projects or that there might be many more than could be accommodated

In a nutshell, these small grant projects play an important role in raising awareness for Roma women problems and give chance to local NGOs to participate and develop. According to the conclusions of the EC report “The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged EU (2004)” the experience from Phare projects shows that in order to achieve substantial results in social inclusion projects, they should not be “stand-alone initiatives working in isolation from the policy environment, but represent the operationalisation of policy” (EC 2004, 48). Therefore, it could be suggested that the effect of the projects would be more substantial if they are working under bigger strategic goals. Whereas smaller NGOs may not be expected to give a thorough description of the larger policy landscape around their activity, the project applications should include questions for more information about what projects on Roma issues have been implemented in the past in the respective regions and if there are other organizations working on Roma issues at the present. The more established NGOs (there are some among the awarded ones in the current pool) can be expected to offer information and reflections on recent significant activities having been implemented on Roma inclusion issues in the respective community/region. Furthermore, interim and final evaluation exercises can also address the context of the selected projects for better understanding of their impacts (or no impacts). Finally, project proposals as well as the evaluation reports can recommend meaningful continuation of the pursued goals by the applicant, other actors or a coalition of actors.

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