

Summary of the report on the impact of Bridge to Business programme on partner companies





Bridge to Business is performed within *"Bridging Young Roma and Business - Intervention for inclusion of Roma youth through employment in the private sector in Bulgaria and Hungary"* project that has been supported by the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation ("EaSI") 2014-2020.

Goal: The overall aim of the project is to highlight an approach that contributes to the emergence and strengthening of Roma middle-class, consisting of Roma with at least secondary education, working in mainstream environment in quality positions. The project is applying rigorous quantitative and qualitative measurements to evaluate the effect of the interventions. The final outcome of the project will be policy conclusions and recommendations for state employment services to adapt to the needs of that special target group of relatively educated Roma employees as well as providing similar policy advice to future employers on internal procedures and services needed for a similar Roma employment initiative.

Project Duration: 3 years (1/10/2016-30/09/2019)

Implemented by: Open Society Institute Foundation – Sofia (Bulgaria) in cooperation with Autonomia Foundation (Hungary) and Central European University (Hungary)



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SUMMARY OF THE REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF BRIDGE TO BUSINESS PROGRAMME
ON PARTNER COMPANIES

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Description of the programme

Bridge to Business (BtB) embodies a new approach for Roma inclusion through promoting employment on the primary labour market, in the private sector¹. The main idea of is to facilitate access of highly educated Roma (with at least upper secondary qualification) to quality, white-collar jobs in the private sector. The project involved 150 Roma with completed grammar school or tertiary education.

The programme understands inclusion to be a mutual process occurring between Roma seeking jobs and companies aiming to employ a more diverse workforce, hence it aimed to have an impact both on Roma youth and on the companies open to extending their diversity employment strategies and practices to Roma. Another unique approach of the programme is that it brings together a diverse set of stakeholders: Roma and pro-Roma civil society organisations, large corporate-level companies, and researchers from the academic field. The core of the programme is establishing cross-sectoral encounters and facilitating innovation by combining various approaches and expertise.

The activities in the programmes implemented by the Autonomía Foundation (AF) target potential Roma employees as well as partner companies. Roma youth take part in an intensive, 4.5 days long training that aims to prepare them to successfully apply for and enter jobs in the corporate sector. The programme supports participants' access to private sector jobs by providing information about job opportunities, helping with the application process, offering career guidance, and connecting young Roma directly with employers offering relevant openings. The project also supports the employer companies in adapting their internal procedures to support the recruitment and inclusion of Roma candidates as well as to create more inclusive environments within the firm. Partner companies were offered the opportunity to take part in a series of workshops discussing and sharing strategies and practices for diversity in employment, with special attention paid to Roma employment.

While the core idea of the project is rather straightforward, the initiative has several innovative elements. It targets a relatively small but important sub-group of the Roma community – i.e., highly educated young Roma - highlighting a social issue that has largely been neglected by employment policy measures. The project is also unique in the sense that it targets existing, quality employment opportunities on the primary labour market and aims at making these available to Roma living in relatively disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, as opposed to other programmes which create new job opportunities that are rarely sustainable or integrated into the mainstream economy.

¹ The Bridge to Business "Bridging young Roma and business – Intervention for inclusion of Roma youth through employment in the private sector in Bulgaria and Hungary" (Ref. № VS/2016/0236) programme took place between October 2016 and September 2019 with the financial support of the EC DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. The project took place in Bulgaria and Hungary. It was coordinated by OSI Sofia. The implementing partner in Hungary was the Autonomía Foundation.

Summary of results of the research about corporate partners

As a starting idea of this report we argued that the labour market context, characterized by labour shortage during 2016-19, offered an extremely favourable environment for initiating new approaches and innovation concerning diversity employment and the inclusion of Roma in corporate firms. Companies struggling with an increasing shortage of suitable workforce were more likely to be receptive to cooperate with the project in the hope of reaching out to new segments of the labour market and consider and test new approaches to and practices of inclusive hiring. However, despite the very favourable labour market context the programme faced a mismatch in terms of professions and regional distribution of its participants and corporate partners: most of the young, educated Roma reside in parts of the country characterized by little economic activity and presence of the corporate sector. Also, young Roma typically possess qualifications that are of little interest to the corporate sector. Therefore, the potential of the program to place participants at partner companies was limited even in such a favourable macro-economic environment.

Eighteen companies in the corporate sector formally partnered with the Bridge to Business project during its three-year time span. These companies vary to a great extent in terms of their geographic distribution, their profiles, their sizes, and their employees' profiles, but generally they are large, corporate-level firms, and the majority of them are global companies - this last feature influences their attitude toward diversity to a great extent. The companies covered a wide range of sectors, but their geographical coverage turned out to be less balanced, with an overwhelming presence of companies in the capital city. This characteristic limited the opportunity of successful placements through BtB at partner companies, as the majority (over 80%) of young Roma programme participants lived in rural Hungary and many are not in a position to move to the capital.

As to what partnering entails, there were different activities to which companies were invited, such as:

- participate in a so called HR dinner during each training session where companies and young Roma training participants could meet and get to know each other in an informal environment. Company representatives could get a first impression of candidates and inform them about their firm and about suitable positions;
- receive CVs of potential applicants matching the profile of the firm or to actual openings advertised;
- contribute to a series of think-thanks (workshop events organized by BtB programme in liason with the Equal Opportunity Employers' Forum) focusing on different aspects and practices of corporate diversity such as outreach, communication, selection and hiring procedures, and managing diversity inside a company;
- provide input to the Guide for Employers, if interested in extending their diversity strategies towards Roma.

There was a great variation in terms of what partnership actually involved; it ranged from intensive cooperation in the think-thank activities, intensive partnership in the placement process of the young Roma participants, to merely formal partnership with little or no active involvement either in the placements or in developing the ideas and practices of diversity management.

Motivation of companies to partner with Bridge to Business specifically as well as to pursue diversity approaches in hiring employees diverged significantly. Their arguments revolved primarily around the business rationales emerging through the employment of a diverse workforce, such as responding pro-actively to the labour shortage and looking for new groups of potential employees; serving the needs of a diverse client group better with more diverse employees; retaining a good workforce; and reducing employee fluctuation.

The research found that the target of increasing Roma hires was primarily approached through partnership with (pro-) Roma NGOs or programmes. The target group was socially (and often geographically) quite distant for corporate firms, thus the network and expertise of NGOs was instrumental in finding potential Roma employees.

Looking at the framework of activities and practices concerning diversity employment, and Roma inclusion we found that, following from the legal environment, which is anchored in the Law on Equal Treatment (2003/CXXV) companies emphasize the guiding principle of equal treatment/antidiscrimination. However, when looking at actual practices, many of the partner companies applied affirmative measures in order to equalize opportunities. They did so not only with regard to the large demographic groups who are usually the focus of diversity strategies (women, youth, 50+, mothers with young children or people with disabilities), but some also supported Roma in this way, too. When checking the changes that occurred during the 2.5 years of the project we found that formal diversity strategies and, within them, the approach to employing Roma, has not changed. However, on the level of practices a number of initiatives or innovations were identified that actually supported the inclusion of Roma in the company. Participation in the workshop series - serving as a think-tank and exchange of ideas for companies willing to open their doors to Roma employees - contributed pro-actively to a more conscious and strategic thinking about the possibilities and tools of corporate firms to employ (more) Roma.

The research has identified a number of innovative HR practices enhancing Roma's employment that happened during the time scope of the Bridge to Business at the partner companies. The most significant terrains of innovation and actual practices are as follows:

- Several companies developed and tested new, innovative tools of reaching out to Roma communities. Some companies liaised with established pro-Roma NGOs and employment programmes to recommend open positions to young Roma and vice-versa, to recommend suitable Roma applicants to companies. One of the companies also employed a Roma trainee whose task included to liaising with Roma organizations and educational units (secondary and vocational schools) that could potentially serve as a source of young, job searching Roma.
- The BtB training and the involvement of HR fellows working at firms operating in the corporate sector can be considered innovative practice in and of themselves. The training offered in-depth, extensive preparation for participants to apply and go through a selection process, where Roma youth could get in direct contact with representatives of partner firms and get feedback from them.

- The HR and alumni dinners organized in the framework of the 4.5 days training is a similarly significant innovation. The HR dinner proved to be a tool to begin closing the gap between corporate employers and young Roma, while the alumni dinner was a forum for sharing experiences by young Roma peers, who have found employment after partaking in the programme earlier.
- A few partner companies have started to communicate about the Roma and diversity in their advertisements and PR materials through photographs with Roma appearing among employees of the company (among 'company faces'). However, no textual references were made inviting those belonging to vulnerable groups important for the company to apply.
- A few companies implemented pro-active affirmative practices in the selection process- ones that are not in conflict with the principle of selecting a fully eligible candidate for a given position. One of these practices was to ease the way to the personal job interview for Roma who arrived through BtB. Some companies felt that the program (BtB) itself made pre-selection of eligible Roma youth. Another intervention several companies started to apply in the course of the BtB programme was to invite eligible Roma applicants for an introductory interview that made the applicants feel more prepared and comfortable later in the actual interview.
- There were fewer innovations concerning the inclusion of those young Roma who were employed. Most of the time – if any inclusion was strategically done – it remained within the framework of mainstream operations, such as assigning a mentor or a buddy to the newcomer. However, two companies initiated an informal employee group for Roma as an additional tool of inclusion. This initiative was received with some reservation by the young Roma: some thought that such a group was helpful in managing everyday problems related to a new job environment and (for most of them) a new life situation, while others considered forming a group based on ethnicity problematic as they did not want to exhibit their ethnicity in the work environment.
- One of the hardest challenges concerns the structural issue of the geographic mismatch between job-seeking young Roma and employee seeking corporate firms. Companies did little to overcome this barrier: two of them tried to support a Roma job-seeker by paving the way for the candidate to apply to the existing relocation support offered in the framework of state-funded labour market measures.

Finally, when considering the impact of a programme that proved to be fruitful for both the partnering companies and, even more importantly, for the participating Roma youth, the potential of its sustainability needs to be reflected upon. The research found that despite the numerous innovative practice at individual companies to increase the number of Roma hires, the most significant obstacle to sustain Roma's inclusion in the corporate sector, at present is the generally (1) low level of institutional commitment, which therefore influences the sustainability of these practices; and (2) practices related to the employment of (more) Roma driven by single individual commitment (e.g. an HR head).

To reiterate what has already been spelled out before, in order to increase the level of sustainability of the results of the program, and to enhance Roma's presence in corporate level firms a stronger institutionalization and higher level of institutional commitment are important preconditions.

The complete report can be accessed at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/research/bridge-to-business>.