



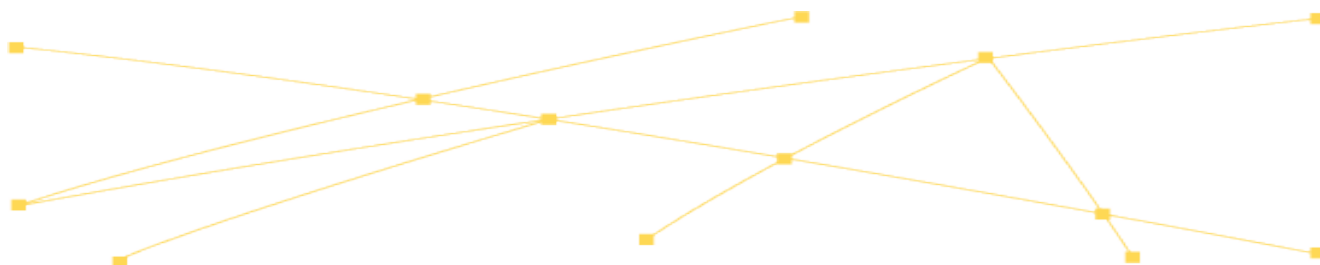
Roma-Net

Integration of Roma Population



Case study on integrated services

The case of a non-governmental organization as a strategic partner to deliver services for excluded Roma communities (Czech Republic, Ostrava)



EUROPEAN
PROGRAMME
FOR
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Introduction

This case study shows that an NGO founded by volunteers in order to help to solve the problems after a natural disaster has been gradually turned to a professional organisation providing multisectoral services and outreach programs for socially excluded Roma communities working together closely with the local communities and establishing close relations with the local authorities and institutions that spread from cooperation to common projects and formal service provider contracts.

Background

The Living Together (Vzájemné Soužití) is an NGO founded in 1997 in Ostrava after the big flood that destroyed housing of many families. The aim of the NGO was to mitigate the consequences of the flood. At the time of foundation the NGO consisted of volunteers but in few years it became a professional organization in service provision for socially excluded groups, among them Roma. In 2009 the Living Together association employed 46 people including also volunteers.

The Coexistence Village program implemented by the Living Together association in the outskirts area of Ostrava aimed to solve housing situation of Roma who were housed only in containers after the flood destroyed their homes. In the framework of the program 30 new, standard social rental units were built in 2000-2002 providing housing for 10 Roma, 10 non-Roma and 10 mixed families. The program also intended to facilitate the peaceful cohabitation of Roma and non-Roma groups which was characterized by severe tensions. The housing program was accompanied by social and community development measures and the future tenants had to take part actively in the preparation and the construction works.

The active involvement of the tenants continued after the completion of the construction as a village managing board was set up being in charge of decision making related to the operation of the village. The managing board included the representatives of district and city municipalities (both of them were Roma), of civil organizations and tenants. For example this board selected the new tenants if a unit became empty. When the management of the village was taken over by the Diocesan Caritas organization in 2007 which also participated in the project this board was dissolved.

However the Living Together association continued its presence in the area, they established a community center in the village in 2003 that provided social and community services for socially excluded groups also from the wider surroundings of the village.

Services Provided

The Living Together gradually diversified and extended its activities by establishing a social service team, job-seeker and counseling service, prime prevention service and the so called "Nest" service team. Beside the community center in the Coexistence Village two other centers were established in other socially excluded neighbourhoods of the city. These community centers provide wide range of social services for socially excluded groups. Furthermore the association implements programs in the surrounding areas of the city and on smaller scale in the Ostrava region for socially excluded people and communities.



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The social service team carries out social and legal counseling, field work and outreach programs in order to help and enable Roma families to cope with their problems and to activate them in the process of social inclusion. The outreach activities aim to contact people in their homes or close living environment and help them to get access to social benefits, to put them into contact with mainstream services and authorities. It also supports Roma families in solving problems related to housing, housing costs related debts, employment, education, health, family and human rights/discrimination. The aim of the services is to assist people in difficult situation, to find solution to their problems and provide them with skills with that they can avoid similar situations or can solve them independently. Thus channeling adequate information on available services and on their rights and obligations constitutes an important part of counseling activities.

Housing related assistance is one of the most important activities of the association. Beside legal counseling there is a accompanying social program that helps families to learn how to avoid debt accumulation related to housing costs and live together with their neighbours.

In order to improve living conditions of Roma people and other families of socially excluded neighbourhoods the association also established a pilot program to repair building repair activities. The needed materials were provided by a private real estate development company.

Another program with private sector partnership is the provision of transition social housing for those families (especially with children) who lost their housing. The association is the landlord for 8 social rental units which were given by the largest private rental agency and which are used for housing vulnerable families providing them also complex social help in order to stabilize their situation. Furthermore the association helps to find shelters, hostels, sublease for the evicted families.

The so called Nest service team assists families in order to avoid that their children are taken into foster care or to help families to return their children if they are already placed in foster care. The team gives support to parents in all the related matters through legal counseling, strengthening their parenting skills, enhancing ability to meet their children's needs and to solve their family, financial problems and to ensure that children attend school.

The job service team provides counseling and assistance that facilitates finding job on the labour market for Roma and other socially excluded. Such activities include teaching how to search for jobs, how to communicate in interviews and in workplace. It also establishes contacts with potential employers, helps to find adequate training and education etc. The program is run with the cooperation of labour offices of the city.

The crime prevention service called Helping Hand works in closed cooperation with the city police and local police departments. It gives assistance to victims of usury and other crimes occurring in excluded Roma communities. It also combats against the increasing drug use and traffic in Roma communities. The activities include individual work with victims and persons at risk of becoming victims, the joint work with local police departments through joint patrols in the districts, helping to communicate with local residents. It also organizes regular meetings for actors operating in the neighbourhoods to exchange information and jointly address problems. Through its activity the team promotes the enhancement of mutual understanding and trust between the Roma families and the police.



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Community development programs include also a wide range of activities aiming the activation and capacity building of the Roma communities and strengthening relations between Roma and non-Roma. A high number of activities address children and young people. Actions also target the improvement of living environment through joint work of the local community including cleaning of public spaces, renewing common part of buildings, developing parks and playgrounds for children.

The association also takes part with other civil organization in fight against discrimination in every sphere of life and resolving ethnic conflicts in the form of awareness and protest campaign and concrete anti-discrimination projects. The latter ones included participation in projects aiming at stop segregated education for Roma children and forced sterilization of Roma women.

Partnership building and financing services

The association has been gradually building up an extended partnership including district and city municipalities and their departments, regional and central government authorities, public institutions, other civil organizations and private actors. At the beginning of its operation the local authorities were reluctant to cooperate with the association but as its activities brought concrete results and were also acknowledged by the majority of the local society this reluctance dissolved and it became a strategic partner in service provision for socially excluded groups.

The partnership relations with the official institutional system include different forms of cooperation from exchange of information, harmonizing actions in some fields of activities to common projects and public service contracts. Furthermore the association got involved in municipal service planning concerning socially excluded communities. It is also important that the association largely rely on volunteer workers who substantially increase its human resource capacity.

The Helping Hand program is a good example for extended partnership building of the association. The program has a service contract with the Regional authority regarding its outreach social work with crime victims while the joint work with local and city police is financed by the City of Ostrava. The crime and drug prevention actions have an additional contract with the Department of Education, Culture, Sports and Leisure activities. The child protection program of Nest social service team is also has a public service contract with the Regional authority while other social services are financed by the City of Ostrava.

Consequently the services are financed from a serious of resources such as central and regional funds for registered social services stipulated by the law, funds provided by the city and district municipalities and also EU funds mainly of ESF are used. Funding from private sector is also included in some concrete projects.

Lessons

A non-governmental organization such as Living Together can increase local capacities substantially in dealing with problems of socially excluded Roma. However to achieve real and sustainable results effective partnership building is needed with local, regional and central authorities and other stakeholders.

Mediating between Roma and non-Roma groups can bring positive results and break the strong discriminating attitude and prejudices against Roma.



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Active participation of the Roma themselves including take up real responsibilities in programs largely ensures the success of interventions and makes sustainable the investments. A number of results has proved this in the programs of the association. For example the Coexistence Village program demonstrated that it is feasible to provide standard housing to Roma families in mixed neighbourhoods. As a result of the long term social and community work and active involvement of Roma there was no damage in the newly built housing of Coexistence Village however many claimed that Roma would destroy the newly built houses and thus rejected the project.

To achieve sustainable results in integration of socially excluded groups long term programs with long term funding are needed.

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