

SMALL GRANTS
PROGRAM
FOR
INCLUSION
ACCOUNTABILITY
AND
PARTICIPATION

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NADÁCIA OTVORENEJ SPOLOČNOSTI – – OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATION

The aim of the NOS-OSF is to develop free and open society through strengthening principles of equal opportunities, human rights and citizens' participation in the public issues in Slovakia and abroad. NOS - OSF promotes these principles through its grant schemes and through implementation of its own program initiatives, especially in the following areas:

- inclusion of marginalized groups of citizens into society,
- development of non-governmental sector and support of non-governmental organizations,
- educational support at all levels,
- development and strengthening of rule of law, public administration and self-governments,
- public health,
- media.

Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti – Open Society Foundation is a non-governmental organization operating in Slovakia since 1992. NOS – OSF is a part of an international network of foundations known as the “Soros Foundations Network” (www.soros.org).

In 2005, NOS – OSF supported 346 projects of other non-governmental organizations and individuals, either through its grant programs or scholarship schemes.

THE DECADE OF ROMA INCLUSION

The Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015), an initiative adopted by nine Central and South-east European governments (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, FYR Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, and the Slovak Republic), and supported by the Open Society Institute, the World Bank, the European Commission, and other international organizations, represents the first cooperative international effort to change the lives of Roma in Europe.

The Decade is not another institution or a new program. It is a political commitment by countries to reduce poverty and exclusion. Roma participation is a core value of the Decade, Roma representatives and civil society organizations are involved in every stage..

The Decade is an open process and other countries, including EU member states, are welcome to join the initiative.

Decade Action Plans summarize the goals, targets and indicators which each country plans to achieve during the Decade in four selected priority areas: education, employment, health and housing, as well as three cross-cutting themes: discrimination, gender and, poverty.

It is very important that countries move to implement the National Action Plans, including reallocating resources to finance them.

Projects supported in year 2005

New Way Civic Association, Michalovce

Roma Participation in Public Life

Organization: New Way Civic Association, Michalovce

Characteristics: The organization was established in 2002. It operates on both local and national levels in the field of education, public benefit works, cultural and social activities, counseling and arranging employment and volunteer work.

Project Title: Roma Participation in Public Life

Project Goal: To inform the public and Roma electors about the importance of Roma participation in local elections, to identify and prepare Roma candidates to serve in the local government board if elected, and to motivate the participation of young people and women.

Experience of community field workers has repeatedly shown that much remains to be done in order to increase Roma participation in managing public life. The experience of Laco Horvath, project coordinator and director of the Information and Counseling Center in Michalovce (ICC) confirms this finding. "When we started working in the Zemplin region in 2002, we realized that the Roma were not represented in local government bodies. This is the reason we started the community council project," he says. Since this program has proven successful the project implementers have been trying to raise funds for it, and replicate it all over the Zemplin region.

"It was not easy to involve the Roma in the public arena, especially since Roma community members often lack basic information about their rights and obligations and are not accepted by the authorities as equal citizens," says ICC coordinator Tibor Kešel. "So we identified the first group of community leaders and started to train them to improve their leadership, management and communication skills." This effort led to the establishment of community councils in the municipalities that have become a sort of intermediary between local authorities and the community. 5-member councils were established in the bigger municipalities and 3-member councils in the smaller ones. When establishing them, one of ICC's basic preconditions was women's representation. "First and foremost we try to achieve proportional representation for women among the community activists," stresses Mr. Horvath. A high percentage of female representation also brings ample benefits when it comes to project results. "The women are active, they need to resolve their every day problems, they are more flexible, and once they get on board, their enthusiasm is slow to fade," Horvath sums up his experience.

The project aims to establish community councils in each location in the region. "Once the Romas are able to state their needs and know their rights, communication with local authorities becomes much more efficient," says Horváth.

The Roma Participation in Public Life project is not a self-seeking activity within the overall organizational goals. It is just one of the forms through which ICC penetrates communities and assists them in increasing Roma participation in managing local affairs. "The community council members contribute to increasing community involvement in designing and implementing programs," notes Mr. Horvath.

Mr. Horváth also believes that the Romas will come to understand that, without their active participation in the administration of public affairs, their specific problems will remain unsolved.



Minority Community Center, Velký Krtíš

Increased Roma Participation in Public Life

Organization: Minority Community Center, Velký Krtíš

Characteristics: The Minority Community Center has been operating in Velký Krtíš since 2001. It focuses on providing counseling and information services for marginalized clients. It carries out services related to employment, cultural and charity activities. It has prepared and implemented various successful projects, including community patrolling and housekeepers. .

Project Name: Increased Roma Participation in Public Life

Project goal: The goal of the project was the preparation and training of 6 activists and candidates for deputies in local governments with the objectives of designing the pre-election campaign, and increasing Roma citizens' awareness of the need to participate in issues of public life with the mediation of a deputy in local government.

The Minority Community Center has been operating in Velký Krtíš for five years. "We were established as a civic association. Our aim was to activate the Roma community. Almost three thousand members of the Roma community had not one single representative able to publicly present their needs. The Roma were presented as people who could not become united, not even state what they actually want," Janette Knapková, the project activist, recalls. "Since we are Roma ourselves, we noticed all of those negative reactions and we understood them as the fruits of the overall Roma image in the region. Today we are a partner organization to many different institutions and we cooperate in implementing various social activities. Our final goal is for as many Roma as possible to understand that only they can make a difference in their own lives," points out Adrian Berky, director of the Minority Community Center.

Currently six Roma activists have been trained. "You can resolve many things at the local level if you have the information. Once the people realize there are solutions, they get motivated, it gives them new incentives and they become more active. We consider this the core of our activities: making people active," says Ms. Knapkova.

Activists trained as part of the project have thus organized regular community meetings. "At the beginning, participation was very low. The people were very indifferent, waiting for somebody to fix everything on their behalf. This unhealthy attitude resulted from the fact that for many years nothing

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has been done for the Roma in the town,” says Jana Oláhová, MCC coordinator. “We have started to explain to the Roma that once they have representation in the local government – somebody who will promote their interests and needs – their quality of life will improve. We wanted them to understand that this can happen only if the whole community is active, if they are interested in improving their own situation,” Ms. Knapková adds.

During the community meetings, the activists tried to identify community needs. “We wanted them to reflect on the actual situation and be realistic and go step by step,” explains Ms. Oláhová.

Based on the discussions in the communities, a document was prepared that can serve as background for a complex program aimed at solving the problems of the Roma in Velký Krtíš.

“The biggest problems from the Roma perspective are unemployment and lack of social housing. They are also concerned with criminality, migration and children’s education,” says Adrián Berky.

Mr. Berky hopes that their endeavor will also bring higher participation of the Roma in the municipal elections at the end of the year. “If they go to vote it will be a signal for us that we have made progress, and also that we have proved that the Roma can be a part of public life in the city,” adds Ms. Knapková.



People in Peril-Czech Television Association, o.p.s. Rudňany

We Are Not Bad

Organization: People in Peril-Czech Television Association, o.p.s. Rudňany

Characteristics: The organization was established in 1994 as the Czech Television foundation People in Need. In 1998 it was transformed into a benevolent association, and as of 2004 it has a branch in Slovakia with its main seat in Rudňany. The People in Need organization cooperates with the IOM in monitoring Roma migration and trafficking in Slovakia. The organization works with various strategic partners (including Heiffer International, the NGO Colping's Work, Milan Šimečka Foundation, LaStrada, Association of Field Social Workers, Association of Towns and Municipalities in Slovakia, and SDF). It also implements projects aimed at employment of Roma and of socially disadvantaged groups (through Local Job Counseling Centers, EQUAL).

Project title: We Are Not Bad

Project Goal: The goals of the project were to prepare Roma activists for work in local government bodies, to create a counseling committee for the public administration, to design strategic plans of intervention in local politics, and to prepare local and regional governments for creating partnerships, especially with communities and NGOs in the localities of Zborov, Vranov nad Topľou and Čierna nad Tisou. Seminars, workshops and strategic planning of community development in the region and micro-region were also included.

The representation of the Roma minority in local government is a starting point for improving their quality of life. In cases where the Roma, for various reasons, were unsuccessful in municipal elections, there is only one solution: to create advisory bodies for local governments made up of active Roma individuals. This view is also held by the organization People in Need. "The Small Grants Program accurately 'matched' planned activities, wherein we tried to identify, approach and activate individuals from Roma communities to become involved in a systematic manner," says project manager Štefan Kačír.

"Initially, we approached activists in different localities and informed them about specific project goals and planned activities. Later on, we contacted and involved the local governments, too. This has been a time of constant talks and negotiations, meetings with mayors and community members, conceptual work and strategic planning," Mr. Kačír explains. "First we initiated the establishment of local partnerships on the municipal and micro region level, including all the key actors, local governments, NGOs,

schools, informal community leaders, and religious groups”, adds Mr. Kačír. The Project operates in seven locations in Eastern Slovakia.

“Furthermore, a Council of Roma Activists was established as an informal group, and we have been cooperating with them. The council includes representatives from all relevant municipalities,” Mr. Kačír continues. He points out that it functions as a sort of “shadow regional parliament,” consisting of people who are interested and skilled in influencing development processes in the region.

Partnership creates a broader platform for problem solving. By involving the Roma community as a target group in project implementation it will be possible to create room for the Roma community to become not only an object of the project, but its very subject as well. The best results in the fight against poverty and social exclusion are achieved in those projects where civic associations and interest groups are directly involved in the process.



Roma Cultural Association in Slovakia, Banská Bystrica

More Active Approach by the Roma to Public Life and Community Development

Organization: Roma Cultural Association in Slovakia, Banská Bystrica

Characteristics: The association was established in 1994 at the Faculty of Roma Culture in Constantine the Philosopher University, Nitra. It focuses on solving problems relating to the coexistence of the Roma and non-Roma population through various integration activities and services. Its specific goal is community development in the Banská Bystrica region.

Project Title: More Active Approach by the Roma to Public Life and Community Development

Project Goal: Seminars and trainings for target group of Roma communities in Ružomberok and Liptovský Mikuláš, 20 persons, aged 18 - 40. Topic of the seminars: social skills development, structure of public administration, basic principles of community administration, methodology of drafting and management of projects with the aim to improve social and communication skills of the target group, increasing of civic awareness, partnership building and stimulating of interest of Roma communities in community development.

Almost twenty Roma women and girls from Ružomberok and Liptovský Mikuláš are acquiring basic information on how to contribute to the development of their communities within the More Active Approach by the Roma to Public Life and Community Development project. "They have proactively expressed interest in increasing their involvement in public life and development of their communities," says project manager Andrea Bučková. The women, however, lacked basic knowledge and skills to identify community needs and address them efficiently. "Since these women had no experience with this type of work they needed to know how to implement their ideas," says Ms. Bučková. On the other hand she emphasizes that they have the strong advantage of knowing the environment and the problems in the community. In order to assist them in enhancing their capacities, the Roma Cultural Association in Slovakia offered them four training modules focusing on development of social skills, public administration structures, basic principles of community organizing, methodology and project management. Project participants were trained over a period of six months. This training has enabled them to be more active and organize themselves. In January 2006 a group of activists also established a new NGO in Liptovský Mikuláš to tackle the existing issues in the community and enhance civic involvement.

"The project intention corresponded exactly with the call for proposals and its criteria. The main project goal was to develop personal potential, strengthen human resources, improve communication tech-

niques, improve planning and organizational skills, and forge NGO partnership development,” Ms. Bučková points out.

“The Ružomberok group’s ambition is to prepare a project in cooperation with the local government to reconstruct premises that should serve as a community center. The municipality’s ‘in-kind’ contribution would be the building itself. In addition the group of Roma women is in the process of formalizing the institution ,” says Ms. Bučková.

Viera Kroščenová, one of the activists, says that about 700 Roma live in Ružomberok in very poor social conditions. “These people need help; they are almost totally isolated from the surrounding world. This always bothered me. When visiting eastern Slovakia I noticed that the Roma there are more active, they have community centers, they undertake bigger or smaller activities but here in Ružomberok, nothing was happening. So I started looking for contacts to get us something similar to the Roma in the east,” she says in explaining the project’s beginnings.

Ms. Bučková, emphasized that potential donors were identified for each individual activity that could provide long-term project sustainability. Primarily they will strive to strengthen cooperation with local governments.



Young Black Eyes Civic Association, Veľké Kapušany

Drom Ande Bari Luma – Trip to the Big World

Organization: Young Black Eyes Civic Association, Veľké Kapušany

Characteristics: The organization has been operating since 2002 as a Roma Community Center. The center focuses on involving unemployed persons into working process, improving the quality of the educational process in Hungarian and Slovak elementary schools. It carries out environmental education, health education, and participates in the fight against crime and discrimination.

Project Title: Drom Ande Bari Luma – Trip to the Big World

Project Goal: The main goal of the project was to train of 12 – 15 Roma consultants in the region as a network of experts as a service to less experienced and newly established NGOs and to create a framework for cooperation among Roma consultants and other professional organizations and public administration institutions.

A dozen Roma leaders from Veľké Kapušany and neighboring settlements, interested in an active role in the development in their communities, participate in training through the project Drom Ande Bari Luma – Trip to the Big World. "The biggest problem in our region is not only high unemployment and an almost zero chance of changing this, but the fact that more and more frequently we face the issue of illiteracy and the language barrier. The Roma in our region do not speak the Romany language, but they speak Hungarian. They speak almost no Slovak at all, giving rise to many problems in communicating with various local and regional authorities," says coordinator Karol Lakatoš. A low education level, lack of knowledge of the official language and long-term unemployment all create a negative impact on community life. "So we are glad the activists' team was created. The activists' role is to work with communities on the local level, with the people they know well, where they are familiar with their problems," Mr. Lakatoš sums up the project.

In addition, the Young Black Eyes Civic Association wants to improve communication among organizations, activists and local self-governments. "We have already started to prepare joint projects aimed at uniting people in the process of finding solutions to the problems," Mr. Lakatoš states.

The initial project results are already visible. "Existing civic associations have already become more active. Furthermore, new organizations have been established," explains Mr. Lakatoš.

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Mr. Balogh from Kráľovský Chlmec confirms his statement. “We never considered changing something in the community by ourselves, but we understood we should have tried. We have very limited experience of working with non-governmental organizations, so basically we are looking around to see what can and cannot be done” After participating in a few trainings they managed to establish their own civic association.

“The advantage in our being Roma is that we live in big families, all know each other and are connected in one way or another. Information spreads in the blink of an eye,” says Ján Balogh. He supposes that if they manage to involve children and thus help parents, it is only a step away from increasing civic engagement. “The Roma are marginally involved in public life since they believe nobody cares what they think,” explains Mr. Balogh.

“I believe that when we create a basis for cooperation, we will have a good starting point for uniting at least part of the Roma community,” Mr. Lakatoš points out. He believes that this is not an unrealistic goal. Experience from other regions where similar projects have gotten underway a few years ago gives him hope that his efforts are not in vain.



Carpathian Association for Integration, Košice

CHANCE – preparing Roma students for university studies

Organization: Carpathian Association for Integration, Košice

Characteristics: Established in 2002, the organization strives to support Slovakia's integration into European structures. The organization primarily operates in eastern regions of Slovakia. It deals with the problems of underdeveloped regions and marginalized people. The organization has participated in a regional training summer school for public administration for the Roma minority.

Project title: CHANCE – preparing Roma students for university studies

Project goal: A pilot project, preparation of 15 Roma students from a socially disadvantaged environment with the aim to enter University, with specialisation in: political sciences, law, history, or psychology. Networking between cooperating institutions establishes a problem-solving model for increasing the number of highly educated Roma, especially in strategic fields of public administration.

This year a group of Roma students participated in special preparation courses for university studies. This training program is organized by the Carpathian Association for Integration as part of its CHANCE project. The preparatory courses started in October, after lengthy preparations and discussions with regional associations and authorities.

The selection procedure was quite a challenging process, as confirmed by the project's supervisor Štefan Šutaj. This was partly due to the fact that schools and organizations failed to respond to the invitation to join the project. The project organizers focused on identifying young Roma who either finished high school or were in their final year of studies and were interested in university education.

Mr. Šutaj thinks that working with Roma youth requires completely different methods. "These young people, often over 25, have been out of school for several years and require a different approach, motivation and incentives," he points out. He believes that if the approach was conventional, for example without an individual or special approach to each student, their chances of success would be much slimmer.

One of the main partners in this project is Univerzus Civic Association in Rožňava. Its executive manager Marián Ikri is truly content with the project: "Ten people are involved in the project from the city of Rožňava and neighboring localities. What matters is that they are all motivated to study and know more," he stresses.

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Mr. Ikri believes that their good example is a strong motivational element for increasing interest in education in the Roma community. "I believe that educated Roma will strengthen the credibility of the community," thinks Mr. Ikri.

His words are confirmed by Andrea Baloghová, currently working as a community worker. "It was not an easy decision to make, to study at university at my age, even though I have finished high school and studying is not a problem for me. I am over 30 and have two girls back home - 13 and 7 years old. At the beginning they were quite surprised, saying 'Mom, you want to go to school now?'. But then they accepted it as a fact, and actually now they are happy their Mom wants to study," says Ms. Baloghová.

Project manager Zlatica Sáposová believes that "the CHANCE project is the first of its kind, testing specific working methods with talented Roma youth and at the same time helping them to fulfill their ambitions. Our goal is to seek opportunities for a much broader application of their talents and work achievements in practice."



Roma Press Agency, Košice

Roma Letters

Organization: Roma Press Agency, Košice

Characteristics: RPA was established in 1999 to improve the media image of the Roma in the non-Roma media in Slovakia. As a professional media agency it provides opportunities to young Roma people interested in journalism to get training in the field and also to apply for an internship; it has been providing a news service to the domestic non-Roma media, foreign media and international organizations since 2002. In 2004 it expanded its production from its print base to include electronic media.

Project name: Roma Letters

Project goal: Roma Letters is a periodical newsletter about the life of Roma targeted at the majority audience as an insert into a mainstream newspaper. The aim of the project has been to continue and revitalize the newsletter in 2005, and focus on activities of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, social reform and its impact on Roma community, cultural heritage, traditions and history of Roma, self government, and special focus on women in the Roma community.

Ignorance of Roma culture, indifference to actual needs of Roma communities and sensationalism have been the hallmarks of most information provided by non-Roma media to its readership. "The result has been so detrimental that for more than a decade we have been unable to reduce the distance between the Roma and the majority community. This situation is palpable at all educational levels and in all regions," asserts project coordinator Kristina Magdolenova.

This is one of the reasons the Roma Press Agency (RPA) has long been striving to increase public sensitivity towards the Roma population through the media. "Information is a very tricky weapon. People live under stress, overloaded by their own problems. Selectively presented information about the Roma community, stressing the negatives and scandals, omitting some facts or the context, all hinders the Roma and non-Roma in finding a way to communicate and live together. Actually, it is completely counterproductive," emphasizes Ms. Magdolenova.

Therefore the Roma Press Agency works to provide ample information about the lives of the Roma, not only via reporting but through explaining the issue in a broader context, e.g. in the Roma Letters insert to the weekly magazine Domino. "We created Roma Letters in 2003 and readers showed great

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interest. We had the chance to test different forms of communications and arguments. We tried to identify how to explain the problems without taxing the readers, providing a comprehensive picture to encourage thought on the Roma community's problems. At the same time we wanted to encourage an alternative understanding of stereotypes," Ms. Magdolenova says. RPA managed to identify a certain style for processing the information. "Currently Roma Letters' main priority is to explain the goals set for the Decade, to encourage active participation in the program and identify solutions to Roma problems together, majority and Roma, in a common space."

"It is very encouraging to be getting orders for new issues of Roma Letters from the state administration, local self governments, NGOs and individuals, all of whom have come across our newsletter and taken an interest," says Jarmila Vaňová, editor in chief of RPA. She is fully aware that the basis of their success is know-how accumulated through years of hard work in the majority environment. "We know that if we want to change stereotypes, we need to be careful. Certain discussions simply distress the majority, and then they close not only their doors, but also their eyes and ears. Information that is not read or heard cannot be efficient," Vaňová continues. RPA continues to seek new means of communication with the majority, and in particular with decision-making officials.



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