

EMPOWERING ROMA INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS

In the Greek prefecture of Aitoloakarnania, NGOs that represented the interests of Roma people had not been involved in the various decision-making processes relating to social and developmental policies. This was leading to feelings of exclusion on the part of people from the Roma Community and the internalisation of a sense of frustration, as they believed that they were not being treated as equal citizens and were being exploited by local and central Government.

So, the **Aitoloakarnania Local Pact for Social Entrepreneurship** DP decided to see what it could do to increase the participation of Roma NGOs in the social dialogue and the planning of policies not only for regional development but also for combating inequality and discrimination. Aitoloakarnania is an agricultural area that is characterised by low educational levels and significant geographical and social differences. The Roma community faced large problems in integrating into the educational system, the social environment and the job market, with the result that 85% of its members were unemployed or only worked part time and 90% were illiterate or had not completed their basic education. These figures give some indication of the need for services and facilities that were better targeted at the Roma Community.

However, there were a number of problems that had to be overcome and these included:

- The low educational level of representatives from Roma NGOs;
- The biases that had developed in the locality against Roma people;
- The lack of acceptance from local institutions and agencies of representatives of the Roma NGOs;
- The need of Roma people for direct results that would really change their situations.

The DP set up a support structure to strengthen and empower the Roma NGOs and their representatives. There was on-going collaboration between staff members of the support structure and the NGOs. People within the support structure who had specialised skills passed these on to the Roma NGOs so that their representation might be more effective. Together, ways were sought to find additional educational opportunities for Roma representatives and also job opportunities for Roma people. At the same time, the support structure acted as an advocate for Roma NGOs and briefed other local agencies and institutions on the potential contribution that these NGOs might make and offered guidance as to how they might best be integrated into the decision making processes. Direct cooperation was then established between Roma NGOs and those local organisations and agencies that appeared to be most open and receptive.

Now, the overall situation has changed. Two Roma NGOs participate in the network of institutions that plans policies in the sector of social economy and the growth of social dialogue. A further two NGOs are involved as equivalent members in the planning of community work and have assessed the contribution that might be made by their members. Another Roma institution collaborates with the local government in the implementation of community work and a member of the Roma community is working in the field of social enterprise. In total, 70 Roma people cooperated with the support structure on a continuing basis.

There have been mutual benefits from this experience. The Roma people and their NGOs feel that they are being accepted as equals and their views are now being taken seriously. Whilst, the other local institutions and agencies feel that their planning and decision-making has benefited from the practical knowledge and experience provided by the Roma representatives.

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