

Bringing children into mainstream society

Convincing parents to take their children to kindergarten was a huge step for a dirt-poor settlement in Western Romania with no road, no electricity and no drinking water

Marian Daragiu is a Roma sociologist and one of the founders of the Ruhama Foundation, which has been helping people at risk and contributing to an equitable society since 1996. In Romania, the project A Good Start which concentrates on early childhood education took place in the village of Telechiu, Bihor County, on the border with Hungary, which has the country's third largest concentration of Roma.



It took a while for parents to want to bring their children to the kindergarten

“We chose this village from a list of the poorest Roma settlements in the country, according to the 2005 Proromi survey by the World Bank and the Romanian government. We were shocked the first time we went there, despite having worked in tenements for many years. It’s a little outside the main village, beyond the cemetery. The houses were no more than one mud-brick room, the roofs were plastic, there was no electricity, no drinking water, no road. The parents slept in shifts to protect their children from rats, and despite this we saw kids without noses and ears.

“Of course, we didn’t start with schooling. Education is not an issue when life is about survival, and the only priority is what you are going to eat today. First, we used private donors and our own resources at Ruhama to build nine houses, bring potable water and electricity to the settlement and repair the roads. We gained the people’s trust when they realised we hadn’t just come there to take pictures.

“Then, little by little, we talked to the parents about the importance of education, and we set up an educational centre in the community. A Good Start’s programme allowed us to open a crèche, with 20 parents bringing their babies every day, and a kindergarten for 3-6 year olds, where there are now 40 children. When we first arrived in the village, only four or five children went to the public kindergarten.

“If children are encouraged very early on to integrate into public life, then they integrate more easily when adults. At first, the Roma parents were scared. They said the non-Roma children would hurt their kids, make fun of them, the teachers would victimise them. It was a huge job getting this going; we invited parents and teachers, doctors and health mediators and got them all involved.

“Some Roma parents are starting to work, and thus pay taxes. There’s a big employer in the city of Alesd who runs a shoe factory and hires some Roma. The major problem for Roma in Romania is employment. Roma families need economic independence to sustain their children in school. Everything is connected. In Bihor county and Romania as a whole Roma are mostly unemployed and their pay is very low. They don’t have a culture of working in steady jobs; they’re used to receiving money at the end of the day for black market work, and they wouldn’t be able to survive for a month and a half waiting for their first pay.”

A pilot factory

Many employers won't hire Roma people, so the Ruhana Foundation bought an old school and turned it into a basket-weaving factory that employs only Roma

The Willow Basket Factory is a programme subsidised by the European Social Fund, and managed by the Ministry of Labour. Ruhama Foundation was awarded €20,000 from this fund that was set up to encourage initiatives in the social economy. Marian Daragiu explains:

"The willow basket factory is a pilot project. Some Roma still make woven baskets, but we hired a specialist to teach them the techniques. We have an Austrian partner who buys the baskets and sells them in big supermarkets. The factory is in the village of Tamasda in Bihor county. The townhall and Ruhama invested in an abandoned, rundown school, and we bought the equipment and have been paying a decreasing share of the salary for six employees. We own the company, and the profits go back into the factory's expenditures, including raw material and salaries.

"The problem for the Roma is that many people won't hire them. We see that again and again. We need to create a labour market for the Roma via private donors and factories like this one. If you hire a person from a poor settlement, that person goes off social welfare, and he or she joins the labour market and pays taxes.

"Rather than force Roma people to emigrate, we should give them the chance to stay in their own country and have a job. Of course, it's a long-term investment. They have to develop skills, and we need employers who are willing to be patient for a few years before they see results. It's also very important that the state, the government and the EU create integrated public policies because employment, education and health go hand in hand."



An Austrian partner sells the baskets made in this Romanian factory

A Good Start

A Good Start is a EU Roma pilot project implemented by the Roma Education Fund and partners, and supported by the European Union, the Lego Foundation and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. It took place in Hungary Slovakia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Romania between June 2010 and May 2012.