

## TRAINING ROMA AS CULTURAL MEDIATORS

***The Roma are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Europe who are often subject to discrimination and prejudice wherever they go. As there is little understanding of the culture and traditions of this community, social and health services set up for other minority groups do not often sufficiently respond to their particular needs. Cultural mediation is one way to bridge this divide and dissolve misunderstandings. Such an approach is being developed by the Roma Cultural Mediation Project, an EQUAL Development Partnership in Dublin, Ireland. The Project is training cultural mediators from the Roma community to act as a link between service providers and other members of their community in order to facilitate their access to social and health services.***

Roma people have been coming to Ireland from Eastern Europe since the mid-1990s following the fall of Communism. Many arrive as asylum seekers, fleeing the discrimination and persecution they face in their home countries. There are no official statistics available, but estimates put the Roma population in Ireland at 3000. The vast majority (85%) of Roma in Ireland come from Romania but do not identify as Romanians, and speak their own language – Romani – which is unrelated to the Romanian language.

Having fled persecution in Eastern Europe, the Roma continue to face discrimination in their new home. As a visible minority, they face hostility to their appearance and aspects of their behaviour such as street begging, and are often portrayed in a negative way in the media. There is very little knowledge or understanding of the history, culture and traditions of the Roma community among the Irish public and the government agencies they come in contact with. Many Roma in Ireland have low education levels due to discriminatory practices in education in their countries of origin and few speak English. This means they have few prospects. Also, as asylum seekers they do not have the right to work, and the long asylum procedure puts them in a situation of uncertainty about their future.

The Roma have faced difficulties accessing the services set up to respond to the needs of asylum seekers in Ireland. Many Roma have a distrust of state authorities because of negative experiences in their home countries. Non-governmental organisations have been unsuccessful in developing a relationship of trust and engaging members of the community and including them in their projects. Not only language barriers but also cultural differences and a lack of awareness and understanding on the part of service providers can hamper access to services for ethnic minorities such as the Roma, and limit the effectiveness of social and health services.

Access Ireland, the leading partner of the Roma Cultural Mediation Project, an EQUAL development partnership, already had experience in designing and putting into practice an innovative cultural mediation service for asylum seekers and refugees. Cultural mediators were trained to act as a communication link between service providers and ethnic minority communities in order to facilitate their access to services. Through this experience, it became obvious that there was a pressing need to train cultural mediators from the Roma community to tackle the specific communication gaps and cultural misunderstandings they often face. "The Roma are the most disadvantaged group in Irish society and there is a pressing need to address the obstacles they face when approaching social and health services." explains Mayte Calvo of Access Ireland and coordinator of the Roma Cultural Mediation Project: "We have received requests from health service providers for mediators who could help members of the Roma community address the communication and cultural challenges they often face when accessing their services. This shows that there was a great need to develop a cultural mediation programme tailored to the particular needs of the Roma in Ireland."

A cultural mediator is a "cultural broker" who acts as a communication link between service providers and their clients from ethnic minority backgrounds. They serve a dual role: acting as a resource for service providers and helping them deliver an effective and culturally sensitive service, while empowering their clients to voice their needs, and in this way facilitating their

access to services. At the same time, the mediator can provide training and awareness-raising for both parties in intercultural communication.

The aim of the Roma Cultural Mediation Project is to help Roma people access health, social, education and probation services and be able to benefit from what they have to offer. At the same time, service providers will be able to gain professional skills and improve their awareness of intercultural issues. This will lead to greater cultural understanding on the part of service providers and improved services and support for those on the receiving end. By having a person they can trust and depend on to act as an intermediary, members of the Roma community can be empowered to voice their needs and overcome their distrust of government offices. At the same time, this can enhance equality and their inclusion in Irish society. Eddie Matthews of the Health Service Executive explains the value of such an approach: “The increase in the ethnic population in Ireland combined with the range of language and cultural issues this brings makes it vital that services such as mediation are developed to ensure that people’s experiences of the health service are as positive as possible.”

The partnership is made up of six project partners, each bringing their own experience and skills to the project. The Roma Support Group brings its first-hand knowledge and experience of the target group to the partnership. The cultural mediation programme has been developed in collaboration with two government agencies: the Health Service Executive and the Vocational Education Committee of the City of Dublin. Tallaght Intercultural Action, is an NGO which promotes interculturalism and has experience in working with asylum seekers and Roma. Technical expertise in language learning is provided by the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies at the Dublin City University.

## **TRAINING ROMA TO TRAIN OTHERS**

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The Roma Cultural Mediation Project has trained two Roma – one man and one woman – to train other members of their community to become cultural mediators. They have completed a customised thirteen-week training programme in cultural mediation which was specially designed to respond to the needs of the Roma people in Ireland. The course has taken a flexible approach which evolved and developed as it went along. Participants were able to provide inputs to the design of the first phase of the programme and be actively involved in identifying training needs. In this way, the training programme is a pilot project which is being developed and improved as it goes along through the feedback, input and observations of its participants.

This first theoretical phase of the training programme was guided through inputs from Access Ireland staff and a variety of external trainers from public and voluntary bodies. Specifically, the training programme has covered different modules which would be particularly helpful for the future work of the cultural mediators, covering three main areas: mediation techniques, cross-cultural communication and the Irish health and social sector. Several site visits to health clinics and hospitals were made so that the trainees could learn about the services they offer and familiarise themselves with them, as part of the “learning-by-dong” approach of the course. Training has also included attending relevant conferences and other events providing a useful learning experience for trainees. Further courses will be offered on mediation and negotiating skills, as well as facilitation skills for working with groups. Over the next phase of the training programme, participants will be involved in practical placements at the Children’s University Hospital in Temple Street, Dublin and in reception centres.

Lideu Bujor participated in the training programme and explains how it has been beneficial for her: “What I have done during these thirteen weeks has been very useful, interesting and beneficial for me. My self confidence has increased. I have met many wonderful people who have taught me a lot about mediation and about being professional. I learned many useful things. First of all my English language has improved, I learned how to talk to Irish services providers in hospitals and other services. I learned how to be a professional cultural mediator, I learned about human rights, Irish legislation, culture, health, and how different cultures and religions influence perspectives over health. I want to use what I have learned to help other Roma parents to encourage their children to go to school and promote education as much as possible.”

Once they have completed the training programme, the two trainees will train other members of the Roma Community to be cultural mediators. They will be able to work alongside social workers and health service providers to provide members of the Roma community equal access to these services, prevent cultural misunderstandings and clarify and explain different expectations and perceptions. The cultural mediators will be able to help their clients understand the role of the health sector and the services they provide, while explaining to providers how they can be more effective when working with Roma. By acting as a link, they can give their clients a voice which will empower them to freely voice their needs. They can, for example, assist with child-rearing issues and situations of family conflict, reassure hospital patients and assist hospital staff in crisis situations like bereavement or the diagnosis of a serious illness. There is also the intention to extend this service in the second stage of the project to schools and the probations service, where there is a pressing need for such services.

Contact with service providers has been crucial for the development of the Roma Cultural Mediation Project and have been involved in all stages of the project. Staff from the Children's University Hospital working in human resources, social work and patients service have provided input to the training programme with regard to content, making suggestions on what they as service providers would find useful. Contact with service providers through the project also contributes to dissemination and mainstreaming. These contacts have been facilitated by the active involvement of the Health Services Executive as a partner in the project.

## **LETTING OTHERS KNOW ABOUT CULTURAL MEDIATION**

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Ireland and cities like Dublin are becoming increasingly multicultural following the fast growth the economy has enjoyed in recent years. This changing cultural landscape has required some accommodation for newcomers in a country which has historically been a country of emigration. Intercultural communication and cultural mediation are new concepts which are increasingly gaining recognition in Irish society. The Roma Cultural Mediation Project is a promising example of the importance of delivering culturally sensitive health care to the most disadvantaged groups.

In order to spread the word to service providers who come into contact with Roma people, the project coordinator and cultural mediator trainees have made presentations and provided information sessions on the role of cultural mediation. In this way service providers have been able to learn about the benefits of using cultural mediators to improve the access and delivery of their services to this disadvantaged group.

As a result of a study visit to the Children's University Hospital, the two project trainees were invited to participate in the hospital's Diversity Committee. This presents a good opportunity to promote cultural mediation and encourage mainstreaming of the practice.

## **SHARING IDEAS AND EXPERIENCE**

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The Roma Cultural Mediation Project is part of a transnational network called TRIALOG (which represents three-way communication between the target group, the host society and intermediaries) made up of EQUAL partnerships in Belgium, France, Ireland, Spain and Slovakia working on issues related to intercultural mediation, interpretation and integration activities for asylum seekers and Roma people. The aim of the transnational network is to reach a better understanding of the social situation of the target groups and especially the social exclusion they experience and the underlying causes.

The TRIALOG network was officially launched in October in Granada, Spain. This provided an opportunity for all transnational partners to establish contacts and share ideas and experiences. The active participation of the two trainees of the Roma Cultural Mediation Project in the launch of the network was an empowering and rewarding experience which offered a chance to compare notes with others working in similar contexts in other countries. Lideu describes her experience of the official network launch: "It was a great experience for me to go to Granada last October with my project colleagues. I learned a lot about the other projects involved in TRIALOG. It was also very interesting to meet Roma people in Spain and learn about their history."

The work of the transnational network has been divided into four thematic working groups examining common issues addressed by each of the partnerships: interpretation, intercultural mediation with Roma peoples, employability and excluded groups, and national observatories. The Roma Cultural Mediation Project has many parallels with the Spanish transnational partner who also has considerable experience with cultural mediation.

Network members have set themselves a number of ambitious objectives for the network's work in the years to come. A common glossary and terms of reference will be produced to facilitate a mutual understanding of joint activities, processes and common objectives. Members will be able to exchange the methodologies, tools, models and good practices they have developed so that they can be applied in other countries. The factors which lead to the social exclusion of target groups will also be examined so that new approaches can be developed and contribute to the empowerment of these disadvantaged groups.

**Mayte Calvo**

Roma Cultural Mediation Project

Access Ireland

35 Exchequer Street

Dublin 2

Ireland

[mayte@accessireland.ie](mailto:mayte@accessireland.ie)