

ROMA AND SINTI – SECURING EMPLOYMENT AND LIVELIHOOD THROUGH SELF-ORGANISATION

The Development Partnership “Roma & Sinti durch Selbstorganisation zu Beschäftigung und Existenzsicherung” (Roma and Sinti – Securing Employment and Livelihood through Self-Organisation) is the only DP in Germany that has worked on the topic of the Integration of Roma in the first round of EQUAL.

CONTEXT: ROMA AND SINTI IN GERMANY

Recent reports¹ show abundant and convergent anecdotal evidence that:

- Roma in Germany (as in most or all other Member States) face crippling disadvantages in gaining access to education, are affected by discrimination in school to a particularly large extent and drop out at a disproportionately high rate.

It is widely reported that Roma children are at times regarded as a disturbance to normal school life by teachers and school administrators and frequently assigned to special needs schools or even to segregated classes. Though special schools in Germany generally benefit from better conditions than those in mainstream schools (in terms of facilities, staff/pupil ratios and interactive teaching methods), in many or most cases their curriculum is geared towards low skill qualifications and this bars school leavers from progression to higher levels of education and training;

- There are significant barriers to legal employment for Roma. In addition to the disadvantage of generally low levels of education and training, they appear to face strong prejudices during the recruitment process and in the workplace. The unemployment rate among Roma communities is well over 50%, with estimates ranging from 60 to 90 percent.

A large proportion of Roma in Germany, many of whom long term residents, have a status of “tolerated” refugees (mostly from South-Eastern Europe). This status is merely a stop on expulsion. It must be renewed at short intervals and generally includes restrictions on, inter alia, access to employment;

- Media coverage reflects a strong anti-Romani bias. The vast majority of the press coverage concerning Roma is related to crime or immigration problems and only a small number of articles address daily discrimination issues.

This bias is echoed in prejudices held by the German majority society. Opinion polls and surveys conducted in the 1990ies reveal negative common perceptions of Romani communities and a high degree of anti-Romany sentiment.

Roma in Germany are facing many other forms of discrimination, but the issues listed above are directly addressed by the activities of the DP.

There are no reliable figures on the size of the Roma population. Estimates of the number of Roma with German citizenship vary widely, between 70,000 and 200,000. An unknown but significant number of non-citizen Roma should be added to these figures, reportedly up to 100,000, the majority of whom are refugees. Thus, Roma represent only a very small proportion of the German population. However, the partners involved in the DP believe that action to fight the multiple discrimination against this small minority must be a particular concern in Germany and requires a high degree of sensitivity to the fate of Roma during the fascist period of German history.

¹ e.g. reports published by the EUMC (2004) and the Open Society Institute (2002)

AIMS AND ACTIVITIES

The [Development Partnership](#) was set up as a network of three regional partnerships in Berlin, Aachen and Frankfurt/Main and started its main activities in 2003. It involves 11 operational partners (Berlin: 5; Aachen: 5; Frankfurt: 1 lead organisation working in close cooperation with other local partners). Strategic partners who provide policy support and/or advice (and in some cases co-funding) are primarily the relevant local authorities (welfare offices, education/youth departments and authorities concerned with issues of immigration and residence). The responsibility for overall coordination resided with the [Regionale Arbeitsstelle für Ausländerfragen](#) in Berlin² (Regional Agency for Issues concerning Migrants, or RAA-Berlin for short) and continuous formative evaluation was carried out by an independent foundation (Freudenberg Stiftung).

STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY FOR SELF-ORGANISATION

Through a range of different types of action, the DP pursued the main objective of strengthening the capacity for the active participation and self-organisation of Roma (individuals, families and communities) in the three local areas. A key element in the work of all three regional partnerships was the training and use of special **target group mediators** who are recruited from the local Roma communities. These mediators speak the language of the target groups and know their cultural values and norms. They establish contact with (the families of) potential participants in the activities of the DP, explain the content and objectives of these activities and act as a tutors for all participants who decide to enrol in one or several actions of the project.

In all three locations, these mediators assumed responsibilities for:

- organising information meetings and events involving (potential) participants;
- tackling problems of lack of trust and motivation;
- providing continuous practical support and counselling to help participants to succeed in the project's activities, and to counteract drop out.

By carrying out these and other tasks, the target group mediators played a crucial role in mobilising Roma people to take an active part in the work of the DP. Regular meetings of participants provided feed back on progress and problems in the various types of action. In Berlin, Roma people elected a participants' council to represent their views vis à vis the management and the operational partners of the DP.

Three main types of action of the DP are described briefly below. Together these actions involved a total of approximately 150 participants.

TRAINING FOR ROMA SCHOOL-MEDIATORS

There have been positive experiences of the use of special "[school-mediators](#)" who are recruited from the Roma community and provide a link between schools and Roma families that is built on mutual trust. School mediators encourage parents to send their children to school and offer advice on questions and problems that may arise. Working closely together with teachers and social workers, they accompany Roma children on their way to school, help them to engage in the life of the school and participate in school conferences and parents meetings.

The RAA Berlin has defined a profile of Roma school-mediators and developed a modular training curriculum for this new role. The content of the training relates to:

- basic knowledge of education and training provision;
- relevant legal aspects;

² The (currently) 49 RAAs form a country-wide network of regional agencies offering different types of support and services for ethnic minority groups in Germany. RAAs can have different legal status (public, private non-profit or public-private partnerships) and cooperate within the framework of a Federal Working Committee. The RAA Berlin is one of the two coordination agencies of this network.

- techniques of presentation and discussion;
- use of IT;
- German language;
- methods of Intercultural Mediation.

A target group mediator (see above) with experience of intercultural work in schools assisted with the training of the school-mediators. Theoretical instruction is complemented by work placements in schools, and practical exercises to identify and better understand the needs of Roma children, under the tuition of experienced teachers and social workers.

An EQUAL conference was organised by the DP, in October 2004, to present and discuss its new approach to school mediation and to assess it against the experience of participants from other Member States and the USA.

During its test phase, the Berlin school mediation project involved 6 (from initially 12) “students”. On completion of their training, the mediators worked in different primary and secondary schools located in the neighbourhood of Roma settlements. In the longer term, however, the focus of their work will not be limited exclusively to Roma, as it will be extended include other ethnic minorities. It is expected that the experience gained from this training project will be used, by the educational authority, as a basis for certification and formal recognition of intercultural school mediators or school assistants.

IMPROVING THE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR ROMA THROUGH QUALIFICATION AND INDIVIDUALISED GUIDANCE

All three regional partnerships offered special opportunities for Roma to gain a recognised secondary school certificate. They also provided work experience placements and vocational preparation and qualification modules, in the uses of PCs/IT and in a range of particularly suitable vocational fields that enable/facilitate access to employment or to courses leading to recognised vocational qualifications. Flanking activities included German language courses.

The Aachen partnership has also been successful in obtaining formal recognition of the qualifications that some of its participants had acquired in their country of origin.

In Frankfurt, activities aimed at the vocational qualification and integration of young adults were combined with individualised guidance offered by a Roma youth centre.

All three regional partnerships stressed the need to provide social counselling and advice, in order to attract participants to these qualifying courses and to maintain their motivation for the successful completion of the training. These tasks required considerable human, financial and time resources and the involvement of target group mediators was essential in this respect. In Berlin, the training of the school-mediators was combined with training for social and family counselling.

TRAINING ROMA AS MEDIA DESIGNERS

Awareness of the situation of Roma in society can be increased through the active involvement of Roma people in media activities. In Berlin, a modular course has been used to prepare a group of Roma including both young people and adults, for work as [intercultural media designers](#). The 2.5 years of the course provided basic skills in IT, video and audio for the design of print and digital media. The training aimed to enable and motivate the participants to play an active role in presenting practical problems and issues that are faced by Roma people in their local environment in Germany.

These activities have mobilised a group of committed Roma to establish [MeDIA-RrOMA](#), a mobile media workshop which seeks to explore new ways to support the integration and participation of socially disadvantaged young people. *MeDIA-RrOMA* offers intercultural media workshops enabling young Roma and their peer groups to produce Video DVDs and other media that reflect their own everyday life situation and that provide a new means to express and make

known their personal views. These workshops are often organised in contact with schools, youth centres and initiatives that work with young people. They encourage the participants to take up a pro-active stance over counteracting ethnic discrimination and social disadvantage to which they are exposed.

INNOVATION

Given the scarcity of structured action to support the integration of Roma in Germany, the mere creation of this broadly based DP (broadly based in terms of both coverage of different geographical/territorial situations and different types of action) could be seen as a new impetus to tackle the issues described under point 1 above. Specific innovative aspects include the development of profiles and training for different types of mediation activities (target group mediators, school mediators, social counsellors, media designers) and the emphasis on strengthening the capacities for self-organisation amongst the DP's target group.

MAIN DIFFICULTIES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DP

Roma communities in Germany are very heterogeneous as regards nationality and cultural origin, individual levels of education/training and legal status. This diversity had to be taken into account, in the design and planning of the DP's activities. Furthermore, in comparison with other minorities, there is a deficiency of structures for self-organisation amongst Roma groups in terms of a lack or little visibility of Roma associations and self-help groups, recognised leaders and lobbies. Thus, the dissemination of relevant information amongst the target group, the creation of cooperative links and the organisation of feed back had to rely on informal channels and mouth-to-mouth propaganda. The effect of all these factors produced a situation in which an extended period of time was required for establishing effective trusted contacts with the target groups and for preparing, fine tuning and adjusting the different types of action of the DP.

All beneficiaries involved in the DP were unemployed and depended on financial support from the local social welfare services. In some cases, where the criteria for providing such support were not met, the individuals concerned faced severe problems. Even if they had arrived in Germany several years ago, many if not most of the participants still lived under the threat of possible expulsion, because their residence was only tolerated and not granted on a permanent basis. As a corollary of their legal status, most of them were not eligible for participation in, and financial support from, active employment measures funded by the public employment services. These factors generated uncertainty amongst Roma communities, and a feeling of being rejected. They weighed heavily on the motivation of the target group to engage in the activities of the DP, all of which required a continuing adherence to objectives and processes that were demanding and unfamiliar to the participants and that did not promise any short term financial benefits or other rewards. In some of its actions, the DP therefore had to face difficulties related to the recruitment of participants and to fluctuations in their interest and attendance.

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[Link to EQUAL database description](#)