



Comparing Romanian Policies on Employment: Lessons for the Roma Decade

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A comparative analysis from a critical perspective of the Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Improvement of the Condition of Roma and the National Action Plan for Roma Inclusion 2005 -2015 in the area of employment

Introduction

During the years of political and economic transformation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, unemployment became a common feature and a personal tragedy for a vast number of Roma families. Roma were often the first to be laid-off from their jobs in the early 1990s, due to lack of skills, lack of education and long-standing discrimination. Most have since been persistently blocked from re-entering the labour force. Unemployment is a serious social problem, which has devastated whole communities. Roma exclusion from the labour market perpetuates the poverty cycle and the low standards of living of Roma. Impact on the community's level of employment should therefore be one of the main factors for governments to take into account when designing Roma policies aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Under pressure from the EU to fulfil the 1993 Copenhagen political criteria,¹ the governments of Central and East European countries have initiated programmes and measures to improve the situation of Roma in general, and to decrease unemployment rates among Roma in particular. From 2000, most EU accession candidates for the first time adopted a specific and comprehensive approach to address the problems facing their Roma communities.

Half a decade later, at the beginning of another major international initiative for Roma – the Decade for Inclusion – there is an urgent need to take a step back and try to analyse the implementation to date of the existing strategies and assess lessons for the future, especially where it concerns the programmes' impact on employment. The Romanian Strategy for Improving the Situation of the Roma is one of the best case studies because, among the new initiatives, the Strategy seemed to provide one of the most coherent and dynamic frameworks for effective intervention. The formulation of the National Strategy was also a highly inclusive and participatory process, in which a large variety of stakeholders took an active part. However, almost all of the elements of the framework failed in the implementation phase. A number of serious weaknesses call for serious attention when analysing and comparing the Strategy with the new National Action Plan for the Roma Decade.

The Strategy

The Strategy of the Government of Romania for the Improvement of the Condition of the Roma was adopted in April 2001. One of its ten sections is titled "economic section" and is related to employment. It focuses primarily on vocational training, aimed at preparing Roma for professions that are demanded on the labour market as a means of raising Roma employment. There are also provisions for tax breaks for companies that employ Roma and for Roma entrepreneurs. Moreover, it is specified that authorities should combat any form of discrimination against Roma on the labour market.

There is also a Master Plan of Measures detailing more specific actions to be carried out by both central and local government bodies. The Master Plan represents a two-year plan of action for applying the Strategy. It defines activities and administrative measures, and the institutions responsible for the implementation of those activities.

These actions include Prefecture-level county Offices for Roma; local experts at the town level; and the organisation of Joint Working Groups at all appropriate levels. They are responsible for the realisation of all ten sections of the strategy, including the economic section.

However, local monitoring revealed that while most of these bodies now do exist, they lack the resources and authority that would enable them to carry out constructive activities at the local level. The 2004 EUMAP monitoring report on the Implementation of the Romanian Strategy for Improving the Situation of Roma finds a number of weaknesses². For example, the County Offices for Roma (in Romanian: "BJR") do not effectively cooperate with other local bodies, which has hampered efforts to realise a coordinated approach to local Roma policy. Monitoring furthermore indicates that participation in local-level working groups has been poor in some counties, with participating institutions delegating only low-level staff to attend.

The process of selecting the BJR officers was politicised in the sense that the Roma Social Democrat Party (RSDP) was assigned the responsibility to implement the Strategy on the basis of a political pact with the Social Democratic Party (PSD), which had won the elections and formed the government. Although there are many other people from different NGOs representing Roma interests, the RSDP nominated only members of their party, even though many of these people did not have sufficient qualifications. For example, according to the EUMAP monitoring report, the institutions responsible for the implementation of the Strategy in Dolj County consulted only the RSDP in the county. Even now that, under pressure from NGOs, three local experts were appointed, they are not respected and taken seriously by the local authorities because they are not members of the RSDP.³ In other words, part of the Strategy was to create these posts, but the persons actually appointed do not always have the necessary resources and skills.

A comparable situation occurred in Galati County, where the Agency for Employment appointed Viorica Gotu, a Roma NGO activist, to mediate the employment process and measures for Roma. She was very active and attended several national meetings of Roma organisations (one organised by European Commission) where the possibility of developing the positive model of Galati County in all Romanian counties was discussed. However, because she was not a member of the RSDP, she could not participate in the meeting of the Joint Working Group. Moreover, the RSDP threatened her when she went into Romani communities and she eventually resigned from that position.⁴

However, the designers of the National Action Plan for the Roma Decade apparently did not take these problems into account when the country working groups were developing the draft in 2004. Hopefully they will take all these drawbacks into consideration when discussing the details of the National Action Plan's implementation.

The National Action Plan

The "Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005 – 2015", was launched in Sofia on 2 February 2005. In Romania the Decade was launched on 25 - 26 February. The Decade of Roma Inclusion is an initiative adopted by eight countries in Central and Southeast Europe and supported by the international community, including the Open Society Institute, World Bank, European Commission, United Nation Development Program and Council of Europe. The participatory process is ensured by Roma leadership and international Roma organisations.

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for governments, the Decade will monitor progress in accelerating social inclusion and improving the economic and social status of Roma across the region.

In 2004, the country working groups, which included Roma representatives and other stakeholders, developed "National Action Plans" which summarise the goals, targets and indicators that each country plans to achieve during the Decade. The National Action Plans are intended to complement and reinforce - and not duplicate - the national strategies for Roma that are in place in nearly all of the countries. The preparation of the action plans was overseen by an International Steering Committee, chaired by the Hungarian government, and supported by the Decade Secretariat, based in Budapest.

The Steering Committee selected four priority areas: education, employment, health, and housing, as well as three cross-cutting themes: discrimination, gender, and income poverty. Workshops on all four policy areas were organised to involve technical experts, Roma stakeholders and other specialists in identifying goals in each area.

On the priority area of employment, the NAP's are foremost focused on increasing opportunities through education and skills. All countries refer to increasing Roma labour market opportunities through expanding the qualifications and skills of Roma workers. The Romanian Action Plan, presented on 25-26 February 2005, contains specific incentives (fiscal incentives, micro-credits) for employers to hire Roma women and youths. Connected with these incentives, the Action Plan provides for information campaigns targeting employers to encourage them to hire Roma.⁵

Employment: How the Strategy and National Action Plan measure up

Both the Romanian National Strategy and the National Action Plan base their approach towards economic development on key issues of *poverty reduction* and *access to the labour market*. The Employment Section of the Action Plan includes target figures to be achieved annually, and names the responsible institutions, for example: creating 42 partnerships between local governments and vocational training of 1500 Roma⁶.

The Strategy contains lines of action that the projects and programmes should follow. The monitoring bodies of the Action Plan should be aware of the fact that the results obtained by the projects and programmes of the National Strategy are very likely to be reported as the results of the Decade, at least in the case of the target figures.

The problem with such measures, apart from the fact that they represent a very small number of partnerships, just one partnership in each county, is that they do not ensure effectiveness and sustainability. Experience shows that local authorities tend to achieve target numbers in the context of separate projects, rather than working towards changes in institutional practices and creating permanent mechanisms. This means that such indicators do not ensure sustainable change for local Roma. For example, following vocational training, some Roma may be legally employed, which means they will figure in the target numbers of newly employed, even though it is often only temporary work, for two or three months, after which they are likely to join the ranks of unemployed again.

One revealing example of what is likely to happen is an income-generation project in Lalomita County. The economic objective of the project was to raise the living standard of fifteen families by employing fifteen women in a sewing workshop. After a vocational training of four months organised in partnership with the Lalomita Employment Agency, the women were hired. From an economic dimension the project was a failure, because the community could not find a market for the products that they produced. As a result, after four months the women were unemployed again. However, they do figure in the target numbers of successfully newly employed Roma and this is the number that is reported at the national level.⁷

The creation of partnerships and participation of Roma in vocational training alone, in the absence of systemic change, does not guarantee that Roma will have increased access to employment. Moreover, such outcomes may have an additional side effect of frustrating Roma who took part in the projects, and discourage their participation in future activities.

Yet the National Action Plan does not envision the systemic legislative changes that would help adapt the labour-related initiatives to the Roma's needs. For example, Romanian legislation requires that job applicants (for *any* job) and even trainee applicants have had at least eight years of elementary education. This immediately excludes many Roma who may have only an unfinished elementary education or none at all, and thus are not allowed to benefit from the training addressed at them.

Some pilot initiatives of organisations from the non-governmental sector however have been successful. Several projects aimed at training Roma in certain professions and to employ them were supported by the Romanian Partnership Fund for Roma. As pilot projects, the majority of these projects were implemented on a limited level based on local resources and expertise. But a common element of the success these projects achieved is the cooperation between the Roma association and local authorities.

For example, the "Amare Phrala" association from Cluj-Napoca, in cooperation with the vocational school "Spiru Haret" in the town, trained 83 young Roma in fourteen different professions such as mechanic, seamstress, computer operator, bartender and hairdresser. After a training of six months, almost all trainees were able to pass their exams. Fifteen were employed and another four who were already employed benefited from salary increases. Though that is a success rate of only 23%, this is already a notable success in comparison with other projects. The project was implemented between September 2001 – March 2002 and it was considered an example of cooperation between the Roma association and the school. This is a positive example of the kind of project that the Decade should support and multiply, even use as the basis to develop policies on⁸.

To increase Roma access to employment and income-generating activities, it is important to make an assessment of past and present experiences with programmes in this field. There is a need for an inventory of both governmental and nongovernmental programmes. Key government officials, experts and representatives of civil society, who are able to reflect critically on the social impact of Roma programmes, should be invited to provide their feedback. A list of impact assessments indicators should be developed, based on reflections from experiences at grassroots level, including: effect on households; real versus minimum wage; official employment versus informal jobs; access to social benefits; sustainability of community enterprises/initiatives; vocational training; public works, etc.

Existing measures for preventing and combating discrimination were adopted in the Law 48/2002, which is aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination.⁹ Despite this, the implementation of the anti-discrimination projects in the section of employment is generally very low because the Government has not allocated any funds in this regard. A positive development is that the National Action Plan on employment takes the element of discrimination into consideration and asserts the need for the institutions responsible for the implementation to be aware of the fact that discrimination is a problem that Roma people still face in the labour market. Hopefully, this will be reflected in concrete activities to combat all forms of discrimination in the labour market.

Mainstreaming and inclusion

To ensure the effective implementation of the Strategy and the Action Plan, local governments should integrate Roma-related issues into overall development plans, giving them a higher priority. This requires not so much additional resources as rather political will. In the town of Fetesti, for example, my NGO had meetings with the mayor and we tried to advocate the implementation of the Strategy. The answer of the mayor was that the local government had

limited funds and the Strategy was not a priority. This appears to be a very common position on the part of authorities. However, local governments still design local development plans; what is needed then is that Roma issues would be included there.

A problem this example highlights is the fact that the Strategy was adopted as a government resolution and thus does not have legal power. Authorities can therefore not be penalised for failing to accomplish the responsibilities they are assigned in it. To enforce a more efficient implementation, the government should perhaps develop a mechanism for reinforcement of the implementation of the Action Plan as a priority in the activities of the national and local institutions involved.

Furthermore, the success of any Roma-related programme is conditional on the genuine involvement of stakeholders. The structures responsible for the implementation should provide information and coordination services to relevant national and international institutions, and should facilitate the dialogue between the institutions and Roma communities. Such a dialogue can highlight the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of respective national and local policy measures and NGO activities at the grassroots level, and increase Roma awareness of and access to income and employment opportunities.

Last but not least, measures that support Roma communities' capacity building should be at the heart of each and every initiative, if long-term development, sustainability and eventual economic independence of the beneficiaries are to be ensured. In this regard it is necessary to strengthen the capacities of Roma in the development processes at various levels. The sustainability of efforts to combat exclusion of Roma requires that Roma themselves are able to be effective organisers, managers, negotiators, decision-makers, fundraisers and advocates. In other words, The Roma Decade should provide a committed support for initiating development processes that empower Roma communities by strengthening capacities and facilitating greater socio-economic self-reliance.

The Decade's approach here should be "bottom-up", in that policy and programme design must reflect the needs and resources of the target groups. At the grass-roots level, identification, planning and implementation of local level income-generation initiatives and employment measures must be rooted in the community, while regional and national institutional responses are to be reflexive and responsive.

Conclusion

As the Romanian experience shows, in consideration of the continued (and more effective) future implementation of the Roma programmes, it is necessary to consider several important factors.

First, the *ad hoc* implementation of employment projects should be discarded in favour of a systematic approach towards Roma access to employment, to ensure that individual initiatives are sustainable in the long-term. This in turn requires periodic evaluation of programmes and an assessment of past experiences so far. The inventory and evaluation of past and present experiences should involve both government and nongovernmental programmes and experts. It should take into account the potentially contra-productive role of targets and be based on reliable indicators of household-level impact.

Second, it is essential to integrate Roma programmes into the overall local development plans. This is conditional on motivating and enforcing the implementation on the local level, gaining support of all the actors and institutions involved, and prioritising Romani issues. The implementation of programmes on a regional and national level should be reactive, driven by the needs and demands at a community level, and adequately address the role of labour market discrimination.

The third and perhaps most important factor is that Roma participation and community development are key to seeing real changes. Such participation should be integral and representative, and not fall prey to the politicisation that has characterised the selection of BJR officers in Romania. Where possible, the Decade's programmes themselves should include capacity-building measures to bolster Roma's own competencies as organisers, managers and advocates.

By considering all these three elements, the Decade for Roma Inclusion will have a significantly better chance of achieving substantial and long-term results.

¹ EUMAP, *Monitoring the EU Accession Process: Minority Protection*, Budapest, Open Society Institute, 2002, pp. 20. Available online at <http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/minority02/> .

² EUMAP, *Monitoring the local implementation of the Government Strategy for the Improvement of the Condition of Roma (ROMAP)*, Budapest, Open Society Institute, 2004. Available online at <http://www.eumap.org/topics/minority/reports/romap>

³ EUMAP, "Monitoring Local Implementation of the Government Strategy for the Improvement of the Condition of Roma in Romania in Dolj County", in EUMAP, *Monitoring the local implementation of the Government Strategy for the Improvement of the Condition of Roma (ROMAP)*, Budapest, Open Society Institute, 2004, p.79-94. See <http://www.eumap.org/reports/2004/romap/report/dolj/dolj.pdf>

⁴ Victor Cilinca, "Se schimba lumea veche a tiganilor...", in *Viața Liberă*, <http://www.vlg.sisnet.ro/arhiva/an2001/3533/Social.htm>

⁵ Government of Romania, *Action Plan*, <http://www.romadecade.org>

⁶ Government of Romania, *Action Plan*, <http://www.romadecade.org>

⁷ <http://www.pakiv.org>

⁸ Open Society Institute, *Evaluare Strategiei Guvernului Romaniei pentru Imbunatatirea Situatiei Romilor*, 2002, <http://www.romanothan.ro/romana/rapoarte>

⁹ Law No.48/2002 on the Prevention and Sanction of All Forms of Discrimination, 16 January 2002