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Entering communities – involving citizens

The Ruhama Foundation, the NGO we represent, has formed a work methodology of its own during its 7 years of activity. Although the foundation has no structured methodological frame, there are a few basic principles on which the citizen and community approach is based. This particular practice of active civic participation stimulation was generated by the need to penetrate inside communities, to enter into relation and take action together with its members. In a nutshell, our team established the functional algorithm in time as we were putting into practice the social projects in the poor communities and especially in Rroma communities: contacting the key-persons in the community so that they help us have access inside the group and so that we can diminish the citizens' prejudices; the team access in the community in two complementary ways, the participating observation and non-structured individual and group interviews; identifying the informal leaders; citizen mobilization in order to state the common needs (the list of community needs); priority-ranking of needs; suggesting solutions together with the citizens; direct social intervention through active involvement of the citizens and of the local governance. This intervention mechanism may serve as proper practice pattern and can even be the empiric fundament of a new specific methodological paradigm for approaching poor communities.

From empiricism to theorization

The Ruhama Foundation, the non-governmental and non-profit organization within which the authors of this project are working, started social activities seven years ago. The initial mission of the work team was the direct intervention in finding solutions for the most serious social problems the poor Rroma communities from Bihor County (Romania) were facing. This is how a series of social projects started, their purpose being that of supporting disfavored minority groups from different villages. During the field visits they paid in the poor communities, the work team made up of sociologists and social workers recorded a large number of empiric data concerning the community and the individual needs the rural population has, as well as specific data for the ethnic minority Rroma population who experiences a social exclusion situation. The sad reality from the locations visited influenced the actions of our organization and made us focus especially on the neighborhoods and colonies where the socially marginalized and even geographically isolated Rroma population was living, away from the majority population. We were aware from the very beginning of the fact that our mission was a difficult one and we assumed it, planning to get involved in the process of solving basic problems of the Rroma communities, although experience had shown how difficult it was to get into their hermetic communities and get the other community members take part into group actions

centered on the group benefit. The Rroma population is perhaps the group with the lowest civic participation from Romania, and this social aspect is influenced by a set of factors that are very difficult or even impossible to act upon and change: the precarious material situation in which their households are, the low education level, the lack of professional qualification, the cultural patterns that do not encourage the assimilation of contemporary society values, etc.

Confronted with the lack of a specific work methodology for the Rroma population, of an efficient approach of the Rroma communities, we resorted to making our own work plan. As we studied the specialty literature and the researches in this field, we noticed that the similarities between the Rroma ethnic group and the other minority ethnic groups from different countries are very few and insignificant, that is why replicating an already-existing instrument is difficult. In these circumstances, the interdisciplinary work team from the foundation approaches the Rroma communities from different communitarian perspectives:

- direct actions, through specialized intervention methods, centered on needs that are acutely manifested and experienced in the every-day life of the community; supporting the community members in the exercise of their citizen rights and obligations, which finally leads to legislative facilitations, concrete material income that are established within social governmental policies;

- the mobilization and involvement of the Rroma community in sustained actions through which, together with the Foundation, they take part into the process of starting social services that meet the long-term and medium-term community needs: including disabled children in social program such as Daily Centers, developing and adapting the school syllabuses in accordance with the cognitive level of the Rroma children with special needs, putting the bases of social refectories, improving the medical community services system, starting new income-producing activities, organizing alphabetization courses for the illiterate and semi-illiterate population, finding workplaces for the Rroma citizens, making identity cards and the necessary documents for getting arable plots of land, etc.

- local structure improving activities. Branching to electricity, road improvement, making drinking water installations with direct access for the Rroma population, making sewage, ditches and footbridges, thus making the roads to be practicable even in rainy periods.

Empiric fundaments

During the seven years of social activism, a lot of projects took part within our organization. These projects are getting more and more complex, targeting more and more extended groups and developing into projects whose objectives are the improvement of the Rroma citizens situation in entire villages, as well as the communitarian development of these Rroma settlements. The last relevant project for this theme is called "Rural Community Development in Sânmartin – Hidişelu de Sus Area" and is a part of the IRCD programme: Integrated Rural Community Development, financed from the Carpathian Euroregion Development Fund. Before

establishing the specific objectives of the above-mentioned project, the work team thoroughly studied the specific of the target area and of the beneficiary target categories, among which the Rroma population from Sânmartin - Hidişelu de Sus microregion are the most numerous. This fact supposed weekly visits in the communities chosen for project implementation and resorting to the use of a methodological work frame for approach and intervention in Rroma communities that was planned during previous projects. The methodological frame developed by our organization proved to be a very effective one on a local scale, with remarkable results in stimulating the active citizen participation in the three villages having Rroma neighborhoods. The recent success encourages us to improve the structure of this methodological guide in order to make it as good and complete as it can be.

This project is based on the field experience acquired by the work team within the social projects that were implemented. In order to empirically fundament the theoretical aspects mentioned here, we resorted to completing the project with concrete examples taken from the case studies made in the three Rroma communities which were assisted in the IRCD project. We are talking about three villages – Cordău, Rontău and Haieu – from the commune of Sânmartin, which are similar from the point of view of the ethnic heterogeneity: the Romanians represent the majority: over 81%, the Rromas are over 12% of the community, the rest of the population being Hungarians. The 12% means a total of over 700 Rroma people: that is over 200 people in every community. Each of the three villages has the same ethnic space-structure: the Romanians occupy the central part of the village and its prolongation to the access way into the community, and the Rroma colony is situated on the opposite side, being isolated from the village. This kind of emplacement in the rural environment disfavors the marginalized minority group in its access to the community context resources and inhibits the citizen participation. Within these Rroma communities we encounter the state of anomy of the inhabitants, who no longer trust anyone outside and who are not cooperative when facing initiatives coming from outside their group. The serious problems of this ethnic group are: the lack of work places, illiteracy, the low education level, low and inconstant income, the average of over 4 kids in each family, the very low institution support, all these aspects leading to collective anomy and indifference towards local decisions. The Rroma community leader, chosen in accordance with the gypsy law, is the gypsy chieftain (bulibaşa) whose attributions do not comprise representing the community interests outside it, but only internal conflict mediation. Thus, the Rromas lack any pressure mechanism that would protect their common interests. The Rroma ethnic party has no supporters in this area, the natives being unsatisfied with the indifferent attitude of the political leaders coming from the same ethnic group, who promised supporting policies before the elections, but did nothing after being elected.

This inexorable process of social exclusion of the Rromas from the three communities generated a state of social apathy with self-destructive effects: any initiative coming from the outside is regarded skeptically and disregarded from the very beginning by its potential beneficiaries who are fed up with the promises of a system in which they aren't integrated and which they don't perceive to be theirs.

Knocking on community's door

The first and most important stage in approaching a community, especially when it is semi-hermetic, is "the entry" of the work team in the target-community. This first step is decisive in the economy of the intervention process at a community scale. If this one isn't successfully made, it can bring about an irremediable clash between the citizens from the community and the work team members. This is why we are very cautious and we pay attention to the slightest details as far as the main event is concerned: the entry. Before the event itself, the work team has to do enough research on the social, political, economical, religious and cultural aspects defining the community. To reach this purpose, we often resort to sociological instruments such as semi-structured interviews with the local elite and the key-persons from the community. Within the IRCD project, in each village we interviewed the local governance representatives (mayor, deputy mayor local counselors), the priest, the minister, the schoolmaster, the teachers, the doctor, businessmen and the gypsy chieftain (bulibaşa). After interpreting the data we got through interviews, we drew some conclusions that have an important role in guiding the next actions. After a thorough analysis of the history of the social actions initiated in these communities, we understood which were our predecessors' mistakes. We thus eliminated the cultural and political risks. We avoided suggesting cultural changes or appearing in the community accompanied by representatives of The Local Public Administration not very much liked by the community. We understood that we have to enter the community as a team of independent specialists who are ready to listen to what people have to say and not make preconceived proposals.

The second step in the community approach is the first public appearance of the work team. This is why we went on a spontaneous visit in the community and we subtly organized a massive, non-structured citizen hearing. In order not to be rejected from the beginning, we asked for the help of key-persons whose trust we managed to gain by presenting them the objectives of our project. The community visit was made together with the priest, the schoolmaster and the gypsy chieftain (bulibaşa), who presented us to the citizens as members of a non-governmental and non-profit organization who want to find out which are the acute problems each individual faces. Although our visit created an inevitable bustle, we had the first significant success: getting the citizen's attention and interest. There were a few steps left to take until gaining the citizen's total trust.

As we enter the community, the purpose we have in mind is the rapprochement to the citizen. Unlike other social actors who interfered in a way or another at the community level, the work team of the Ruhama Foundation allots enough time to visit each Rroma household in order to talk to the family members. As a result of this approach, on numerous occasions we identified families with special needs who, because of fear or of a restraint hard to explain, did not take part in the community

dialogue. As we listened to the problems of each citizen, we empathized with them, we were invited inside their homes and presented the problems and needs each extended family encounters. From this very moment we start making an exhaustive list of needs, which we classify into community needs (that most citizens have) and specific needs, with which we do not plan to interfere on a first level, but which still get our attention, insuring the citizen information and counseling. Our purpose is to identify the community needs that affect the living standard of the Rroma community and to search for ways to solve them together with the direct beneficiaries. An eloquent example in this sense is the case of the Rroma communities from the village of Cordău, where at the first field visit the most acute need of the citizens was outlined: the branching of the 34 households to the electric current network. We also have to mention that in this community there has never been electricity, the electric current poles stopping at the periphery of the Rroma community. The citizens complained of the difficulties they encounter every day because of the lack of electrical current; they have to resort to improvisations that are difficult to imagine and anachronic. As we asked them which was the main reason why they need electric current, the Rroma people said that their children come home quickly after school, especially in wintertime, in order to be able to write their homework and read the lessons before it gets dark, because the petrol used for lamps is very expensive. As a result of these visits in the households, the list of the Rroma community needs from the village of Cordău could already be opened: the lack of the electrical current in households. This is though an exceptional case, where the most important communitarian need is outlined from the first encounters and discussions with the citizens. Yet, in most cases sustained and long-time action is needed to identify the common needs that most citizens perceive as being the most important. The first visits the work team made in the other two villages did not outline any problem that most of the citizens consider to be of utmost importance. We registered a series of different needs, on more than just one rural community development direction.

The effects of these first visits in the community are easy to observe: fervor is induced among the citizens, and their opinion on the communitarian needs is asked for the first time. The citizens make an exercise to evaluate the needs of their own community and often discover major problems they couldn't express until that moment. The role that was attributed to each individual in the exercise concerning the identification of needs gives to each one of them a certain satisfaction, as if a part of the problems were already solved. The degree of trust in our team from the part of the citizens increases in direct proportion with the degree of their involvement in this exercise. When we leave the community, although we try avoiding making vain promises, the Rroma citizens ask us when we would go back there. The process of active citizen participation must start with this stage of citizen involvement in the process of identifying their needs.

Before putting an end to this stage of communitarian approach it is necessary for the citizens to know the purpose for which we initiated this project. They are told that the most important needs they identified there will be intervention and solving modalities that will be sought for, involving them, the local resources and the search

for complementary resources outside the community. This is the only promise the social worker can make to the potential beneficiaries. Any hazardous prevision is dearly paid, and the price is often the loss of the difficultly gained trust and the refusal to cooperate from the part of the citizens. The social worker is not allowed to give in to the great pressure coming from the citizens, who want to hear concrete promises and who look disappointed in the first stage by the abstract character of the intervention.

If the stage of community approach came to a successful ending, the next stage that comes immediately after is the preparation of the second one: the citizen consulting session to identify the community needs. The citizens are informed about issues that concern the date of the next visit, during which the citizen consulting session will take place and they are told roughly what this session will consist in. The time distance between stages I and II does not have to be longer than a week, delay that is necessary in order to prepare the work team and to let the citizens some time to meditate over the facts that were discussed during the first visit and even to debate this issue inside the community. The relevant information on what happens in this period is furnished by the key-persons: the priest, the schoolmaster, the gypsy chieftain (bulibaşa).

A secondary result of the first stage is the identification of community informal leaders, who are easy to detect in such public discussions. The informal leaders are the future social agents of the communitarian development process we started and they will represent the interface between the community and the local governance, in a narrower sense, and between the community and the outside world, in a larger sense.

Bringing people together

The second major visit of the work team in the community took place at the same time with the citizen consulting session, event to which all the adult citizens from the reference community are invited to take part to. The meeting is organized in an open space, where the individual does not feel confined. The work team's previous experience showed the risk of a confined space in the case of the debates with the Rroma citizens. They do not feel at ease behind closed doors and can be easily influenced; they can also become irritable, embezzling thus the initial sense of the action. Once the location is chosen, the participants are explained what the meeting consists of, by means of using a usual language, without specialty terms. When we are sure all the citizens understood the purpose of the meeting, we can have free talks with them, the discussions being moderated by a member of the work team. The participants are encouraged to enumerate the needs of the community they live in, the needs being monitored by the work team on paper and tape.

A frequently encountered error in these citizen-consulting sessions, error we made too at the beginning of our activity, is resorting to the option "counting" technique and establishing final scores for each need from the list. As the communitarian needs were hierarchized in accordance with the citizen's votes, the most important needs are outlined. This is a superficial technique because it eliminates

the interaction between citizens and does not leave any place for cooperation and consensus. Whichever the need having the most votes may be, there will be a group of dissatisfied people who did not vote for it and they can become a detracting group that can influence the process in a negative way. And maybe the most important aspect is the elimination of the possibility that the citizens "negotiate" the most important community needs and finally get to a unanimous opinion – the greatest advantage of these citizen consulting meetings.

The optimal solution fir the community needs identification is, in our opinion, the open citizen consulting session, during which the most important communitarian needs are established by citizens within a discussion to which everybody participates in an active way. Those who present their opinions also have to bring arguments and will have to answer the other people's questions. This technique, a sort of group maieutics, functions as a sieve for separating the unimportant problems, so only the problems that all the community perceives as important remain on the list. For example, we organized a citizen consulting session in the Rroma community from the village of Rontău; the discussion took six hours, and the common needs that had been mentioned at the beginning of the discussion dropped one by one, and new needs came out from the dialogue, needs that nobody had mentioned before. Thus, if at the beginning the Rroma population stated that the lack of drinking water network and the lack of financial aid from the state are the most important communitarian needs, at the end of the session the following communitarian needs all the citizens had agreed upon were marked on the flipchart: the lack of a space for the natural products the Rroma citizens gather (mushrooms, forest fruit, medicine plants), the lack of profitable selling contracts for these products and the need of increased pedagogical assistance for the Rroma children. As for the village of Haieu, the Rroma citizens initially mentioned the lack of workplaces for the Rroma adults, so that they can be employed in better positions. In the village of Cordău, the citizen consulting session didn't bring up anything new from the first visit: the most intensely felt need was the lack of electrical current in their households.

Although for us the most important problem of the three communities was the need of the Rroma citizens to associate in order to represent the community interest, this need didn't come out in the citizen consulting sessions. Nevertheless, we integrated it in the final project as a desiderate coming from the Foundation; in our approach, we used information in accordance with the national studies that present the Rroma association as a solution for a lasting communitarian development. Even if the needs that were identified and prioritized with the help of these methods do not coincide with the initial ideas of the social workers, they are more important and they have to be regarded as such. The method of open citizen consulting sessions is the method that has the best results, as it has side effects that sometimes surpass the purpose of the action. The negotiations between citizens, the open dialogue and the pro and cons arguments for a communitarian need often involve the citizens in an active way in the process of need identification. The side effect is the increase of the cohesion and cooperation factors between citizens, the identified needs being those who meet the sheer consensus of the community members. The citizens have now the

cooperation exercise for the identification of common needs and of other needs too and they are aware of their active role in the process of communitarian development. The fact that they can influence and get involved in an active way in the communitarian development process through their decisions makes them participate more in the social life and look for solutions to influence the decision-making process at a local scale.

We can fully understand the role of these collective "games" only by taking into account the fact that all these stages are part of an intervention strategy at a communitarian level, of a more elaborate communitarian development strategy. After finalizing a social project, the community has to maintain the project results, and the informal leaders must turn into social agents of the communitarian development. As the citizens already have the model of these creative talks and of generated consensus, in the future it will be much easier for them to discuss any local decision for the local welfare.

In order for this cooperation to have the expected results and not remain a simple concept, they need to get involved in the decision concerning their community. A second citizen exercise is the participation to the process of finding the optimal solutions for the previously identified needs. This public debate follows à la lettre the model of the one presented above and can even continue it without interrupting the discussions.
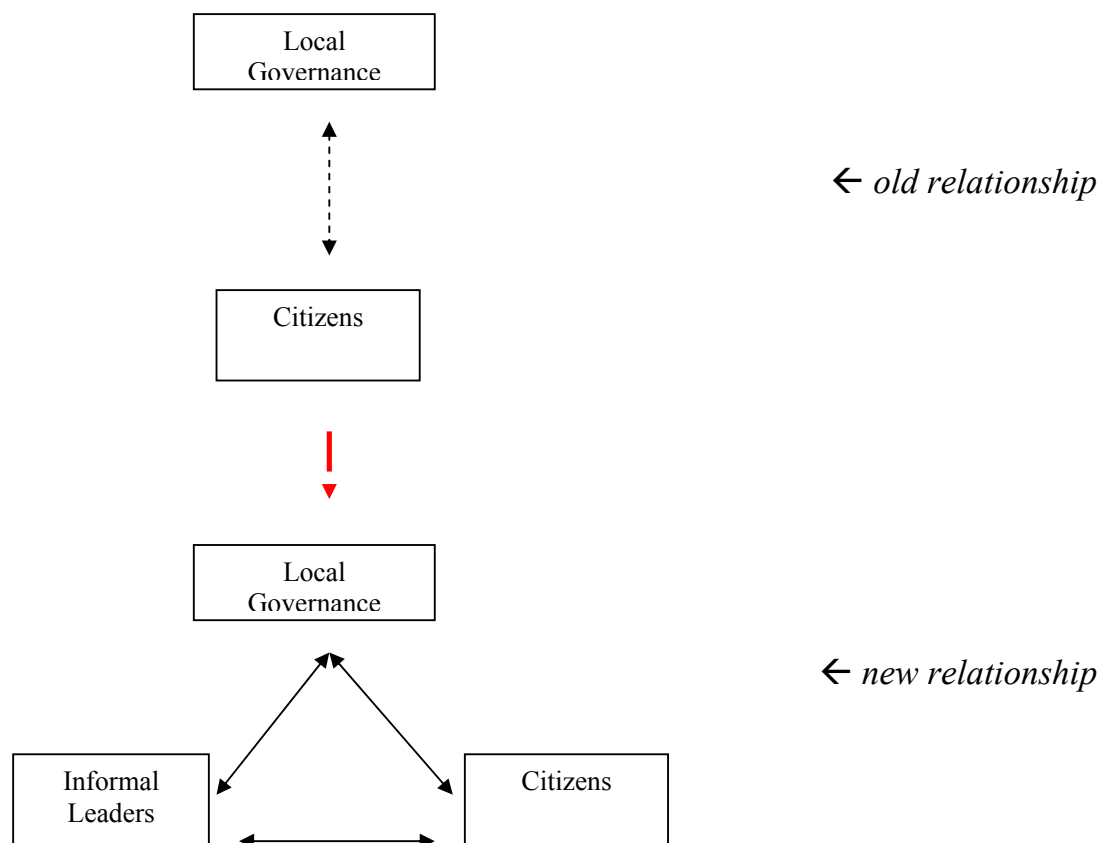
Finding solutions for the main citizens' needs

As they are already accustomed to the exercise of social dialogue, the citizens take their roles and together they try to find solutions for the community's main needs. Even if during the public debate hours we may hear a lot of childish suggestions, some valuable ideas rose from the "negotiations" between the community members, these ideas being highly viable. The citizens are encouraged to take into consideration simple proposals, economical from the point of view of the resources and which are easy to implement. Our role is to use the proposals for communitarian problem solving in starting a grant project, transforming the needs the community identified into project objectives; also, the activities mentioned in the project will have to illustrate the solutions found together with the citizens.

It is very important that each citizen finds himself (herself) in the solution that is finally accepted for solving the essential problems of the community. Each citizen must feel that the solution is in a certain way his (hers) and that he (she) got thus involved in the decision-making process and contributed to the community development.

At this stage, we have to underline the importance of the presence of the local governance representatives at the public debates. If they are cooperative, the Local Public Administration representatives can build together with the citizens a long-term and medium-term community development strategy and they can even find out about problems they didn't know or they simply ignored their importance. This is where the role of the informal leaders is outlined; they have the tendency to mediate "the

negotiations" between the local administration and the citizens, avoiding the open conflicts.

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Their interface role between the community and the local governance representatives becomes obvious and it is the first step to the making of a pressure mechanism for the representation of the reference community interests.

At the end of the public debates, the local governance representatives establish the resources that the Local Council can contribute with in order to solve the most urgent needs of the community. Taking into account these estimations, the work team conceives a grant project whose specific objectives are the same with the needs of the community. For instance, after finishing the citizen consulting session from the three villages, the above-mentioned IRCD project was elaborated, its objectives are the basic communitarian needs the citizens identified. Thus, the project aims at branching the 34 Rroma households from the village of Cordău to the electrical current network, to assist the Rroma children from the village of Rontău in their school education, to start a Gathering center for natural products, to organize meetings, information sessions and exchanges between the target Rroma community and successful Rroma organizations from Romania and Europe.

Rebuilding the community

The stage that combines the activities presented so far consists in starting the properly so called actions within which the social actors identified in the process of local human resources mobilization concentrate their efforts in order to build communitarian structures that take over the community development process and at the same time act as its propellers.

The Rroma citizens association is a desiderate which, once accomplished, will generate the levers through which the Rroma communities will gradually change from individuals with singular problems into action-taking communities characterized by common will. Thus, in each community we interact with, we encourage and sustain the evolution of local initiative groups ranging from the informal to the formal level by founding communitarian development foundations and associations – (NGO's). This is how the legal formation procedures of the Rroma Association for Community Development, which will soon become a juridical body, were carried out.

The Rroma communities begin to understand more the role and importance of social life participation. Attributing responsibilities to the community leaders makes them have a responsible attitude, which is determined by the pressure they feel on the one hand from the part of the community they represent and on the other hand from the formal structures with which they interact.

Under these circumstances, the community development process depends on each of the local social actors or on those from outside the community, which aim at taking focused action concerning the economic and social priorities of each target group aimed at. This is why, within the IRCD project, together with the local initiative group, we founded the following communitarian structures and services: The Community Citizen Information and Advice Center, 2 Daily Centers for Rroma Children, The Natural Product Gathering and Capitalization Center, Alphabetization Courses for Adult Rroma Citizens, the Branching of 34 Rroma Households to the Electrical Current Network. Another result of the community mobilization process is starting and writing two communitarian development projects made with the help of Rroma leaders, members of the newly created Association. Under these circumstances, our role is to assist the Rroma community, to offer expertise and support to the newly founded formal Rroma structures and act as a reliable social actor for the Rroma communities.

The methodological approach and intervention frame in the Rroma communities that our organization has developed proves thus to be valid both in theory and practice and also to have an increased efficiency degree in producing positive side effects.

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