

# Roma Organisations: capacity building

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Oxfam Novib, in co-operation with Oxfam GB, started the Roma Programme in Serbia in 2003. When it was launched, the programme had the following key components: a small project fund for supporting direct work of Roma groups in Roma neighborhoods; a training programme for organisational development of Roma NGOs; and the formation of a Roma Forum for linking and learning and joint lobbying activities. When Oxfam GB closed its Belgrade office in 2004, Civic Initiatives (CI), a local NGO in Serbia, took over responsibility for managing the entire programme.

The CI project aims to strengthen Roma organisations in order to promote and advance equal opportunities and empowerment of the Roma population, which is the poorest community in Europe. The Roma suffer from both material poverty and social exclusion, due to discrimination and neglect. Women and children are particularly affected.

The purpose of CI's capacity building work is to strengthen the organisational and implementing capacities of selected local initiatives with Roma groups and organisations, to increase their negotiating and lobbying skills and to improve their ability to build coalitions and undertake joint campaigns.

The programme is facilitating a continuous process of transforming the Roma organisations from being charity-oriented service providers to developmental actors that engage in mobilisation and advocacy. As a result of this, more young Roma people are joining and engaging with those organisations. The programme has also led to women assuming more leadership positions within the targeted organisations.

In terms of advocacy, a number of the involved Roma organisations have begun to engage with local authorities and other state bodies involved with the Roma population. At the end of the second year of the programme, most of the Roma organisations concluded agreements of cooperation with these institutions. One organisation from Valjevo/Serbia succeeded in linking all key actors involved in Roma education issues at the local level and worked with them to design a local action plan. The municipality officially adopted the plan and allocated funds from the budget for implementation of initial activities. This sets an important precedent in Serbia and the good practice stimulated the initiation of a similar process in five more municipalities that were not originally included in the CI programme, thus demonstrating the programme's multiplier effect.

Another success was the linking by one of the Roma NGOs supported by CI into the government working committees for education and employment, leading to the formation of the 'League for the Decade,' a body for monitoring and lobbying at the national level for the implementation of the Roma Decade.

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Advocacy efforts of the CI programme aim to influence public opinion and officials, as well as media representations of Roma issues. The objective in promoting more contacts and working relations between the Roma organisations and local authorities and state bodies is to build towards initiating changes in law that address discrimination against the Roma population.

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