

“Elpida”
the Roma Women’s Association of Drosero, Xanthi
(Thrace, North Greece)

The “Elpida” ID

“Elpida” (in English means “Hope”), the Roma Women’s Association of Drosero is a Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) which was founded in 2006 by 20 Roma women who live in Drosero.

The “Drosero” ID

Drosero is a Roma community of approximately 3500 men, women and children south east of the town of Xanthi, Thrace, North Greece. It is located approximately 1km from the city centre.

What are the main objectives of “Elpida”:

- ✓ to empower women of the community to support their role in their families, but also in the community
- ✓ to assert their rights for better livelihood conditions
- ✓ to mobilize around the rights of the Roma people
- ✓ to create opportunities for a better future for their children
- ✓ to fight illiteracy
- ✓ to build networks with other Roma NGO’s
- ✓ to develop a social consciousness different than the existing one which wants Roma people to be dirty, lazy and unworthy for respect.

Focus on children & their proper education

In order to achieve those goals and to support their dreams for a better future for their children, the women of “Elpida” decided to focus initially on their children. They prioritized the need for proper education and along with the help of non Roma volunteers, they developed practices for reducing the number of children who are out of school.

What are the “Elpida” main activities?:

1. Nursery school

Two years ago, an all day Nursery school was established for first time in the community. The number of children who attended school every day ranges from 30 to 40. Apart of the two trained teachers who are responsible for the children’s education, two women of the association work also for the school as mediators. As the majority of children do not understand Greek and speak Romane, mediators play a very important role for the children’s communication with the teachers (who are non-Roma).

The school provides two meals per day, starts at 8:30 and closes at 3:30. Teachers and social workers are also responsible for children’s vaccination. The age of children who attend the school is 5-7 years old.

2. Evening lessons in Greek language

For those children who are over 7 years old and go to primary and secondary school, the association organized daily supplementary evening classes in Greek language. Students are divided into groups based on their level of Greek language.

By the end of each lesson, they are provided with a fruit and a snack. On Friday evenings they have also theatre and music lessons. The total number of children who participate in the program ranges from 70-80. The work of teacher is supplemented by a mediator who is responsible in creating a friendly/familiar learning environment for the children. Twice a week a psychologist observes the lessons and provides physiological support to those who need it. Finally, parents are invited (by the staff) in group meetings once per month in order to get informed about the progress of their children.

3. Training for women

Apart from children's education, the "Elpida" wished to create and developed educational opportunities also for its members, the adult women. In a very short time, the Association organised lessons in Greek language for adults. After five months of intensive daily lessons, 10-12 women/members of the association took exams in order to acquire the Primary School Certificates. Now, for the time being, 15-20 women participate, twice a week in Greek lessons.

Since 2006 around 120 women of different age, participated in training classes for hairdressing, tailoring, cooking and pastry-making lessons. Some of them managed to generate income that based on their new skills.

4. Infrastructure projects

The last two years, women of Drosero try collectively to change the stereotypical perceptions about them. They organise group meetings in order to talk about the problems of the community and at the same time invite (and push) their husbands to take further action for those problems. They attend city council meetings, and demand to participate actively in decision making processes. As a result, they have recently managed to convince the Mayor of Xanthi City to construct a square in the community. The Square's new designs are based on an architectural plan which that was designed on behalf of "Elpida" Association by a team of experts from the Architectural Department of Democritus University of Thrace, Greece, by using participatory methods.

5. Networking and Political Involvement

In November 2007, Mr Karolos Papoulias, the President of the Hellenic Republic (Greece) gave an award to the President of the Roma Women Association of Drosero, Mrs Sabiha Souleyman as recognition for the work of the Association. It was the first time that a Roma woman talked in the Hellenic Old Parliament Building and invited publicly the Greek society to treat Roma children as its own.

After that, Sabiha Souleiman travelled in Europe (Brussels, Budapest) and Turkey (Istanbul-Sulukule) to participate in conferences in order to build networks with other Roma NGO's and EU institutions and to be informed about successful practices of other organisations. At the same time she created new relationships with other Greek Roma organizations.