

## Working Session 14-15

### ROMA WOMEN ASSOCIATION OF DROSERO “HOPE” (GREECE)

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#### Aim

**The aim of the following document is to provide a short description of the situation (environmental-socioeconomic) of a Roma community in Xanthi. It also gives information about the practices/strategies developed by Roma Women’s Association (Elpida) in order to confront the conditions of poverty and illiteracy in the community.**

#### Roma Women’s Association of Drosero

Roma Women’s association of Drosero “ Elpida” is a Community Based Organization which was founded in 2006 by 20 Roma women who live in Drosero

The main objectives of the organization are:

- 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 Ngos
- to develop a social consciousness different than the existing one which wants Roma people to be dirty, lazy and unworthy for respect

In order to achieve those goals and to support their dreams for a better future for their children, the women of the association 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.

#### Background

Drosero is a Muslim Roma community of approximately 3500 men and women, south east of town of Xanthi in Thrace, Greece. (1km from the city centre).

The majority of people there live under poor environmental conditions as there is inadequate provision for piped water supplies, for the removal of excreta and household liquid, solid wastes, and drainage. It is suspected that many health problems of the residents are linked to contaminated water and to bad sanitation. In 2007 there was an epidemic in hepatitis A and in 2006, 5 children who attended the public primary school of the area were diagnosed with meningitis

#### Housing

More than two-thirds of the population live in housing units that are of poor quality. Many of them are made by temporary materials which provide inadequate protection against the elements and against extreme temperature conditions. Inhabitants, in order to build their houses, take loans (legal and illegal) which are unable to pay.

Houses which were constructed after 1983 do not have access to “legal” electricity and all of the inhabitants have no property titles for their houses as the neighbourhood of Drosero is not included in the official city plan.

## **Employment**

As it is obvious the majority of people in Drosero are very poor. Some of them are seasonal land workers and merchants. During the hot months (from April- Sep) many families travel to tourist destinations in order to sell flowers and other products to tourists. A small group of men of better social status in the community are sailors.

There are also a subsequent number of people who have no income at all and live under the rules of black market.

## **Education**

In 2007, it was measured that almost 100% of the inhabitants of Drosero are illiterate. Although many people have certificates from primary school, usually they don't know how to write or read. Currently 500 children are registered in the primary school of the Drosero, a de facto Roma – only school, 50 teenagers attend a de facto Roma- only high school and 2 people have university degrees.

The majority of children have poor attendance as they have to drop school just before April in order to follow their families to their summer jobs. However, even for those students who attend regularly school lessons, the quality of learning at school is proved to be very poor. Consequently a lot of children of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade do not know how to write or to read. It is also estimated that a substantial number of children (around 200) are out of school.

## **Community**

Roma people generally are known to have very close social networks within the community. In Drosero usually more than two families (of more than 5 people) live in the same house and share same responsibilities. There is a hierarchy, though between the families who leave together; parents in law (who are usually the owners of the house) are the family leaders.

Women are getting married very young (starting from 13 years old) and are responsible for domestic labour (cleaning, cooking, etc) and childbearing/childrearing. Very often the older children in the family look after the younger brothers and sisters.

The community is segregated from the non Roma citizens in Xanthi. The majority of people get out of the community only when they have to use public services or during the weekends when the local market is on. Children have no contact with non Roma children unless they sell products to them during their summer jobs.

## **Cultural assimilation**

The last few years, apart from the problems mentioned, the Roma people of Drosero are afraid of forced cultural assimilation pursued by segments of the dominant (in numbers) Turkish-origin minority in Thrace, who discriminate against non-Turkish speaking Muslim minority members. Ironically, although they organise events inside the community with a strong Turkish character, in order to impose other identities and cultural customs, at the same time they refuse to register their children in the same schools with Roma children. Unfortunately Muslim Roma identity for the Turkish-origin Muslim minority members is negotiable, not respected and unrecognised.

## **Home learning environment**

According to OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) research, it is estimated that in Europe 20 percent of what the child learns happens at home. When parents do not have adequate conditions for learning, due to poor housing conditions and poverty, it is difficult for children to learn anything at home. At the same time, Roma parent's level of education (which is known to have a strong impact on the education of children) is very low, so home learning is also of low quality.

For this reason the association decided to create a "home learning" environment for the children of Drosero.

### **Nursery school**

Two years ago, an all day nursery school was established for first time in the community. The number of children who attend school every day ranges from 30 to 40. Apart from 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 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.

### **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.

### **Cooperation with social workers**

Two social workers have also been employed by the association in order to "bring back" children in the school class. In two years the number of the registered children in school increased by 200. By gaining the trust of the community they manage to give more motives to both children and parents to participate in formal education.

### **Training for women**

Apart from children's education, the association wanted to create education opportunities also for its members.

In 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 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 cooking. Some of them managed to generate income based on their new skills

## **Networking and Political involvement**

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 manage to convince the Mayor of the city of Xanthi to construct a square in the community based on their own architectural plan \*(Two architects, voluntary and by using participatory methods prepared a new plan of the square, in behalf of the association.)

In November 2007, the President of the Hellenic Republic, Mr Karolos Papoulias, gave an award to the president of the Roma Women Association of Drosero, Ms. Souileman Sabiha as recognition for the work of the organization. It was the first that a Roma woman talked in the old Parliament building and invited publicly the Greek society to treat Roma children as its own.

After that Souleiman Sabiha travelled in Europe and participated in conferences to build networks with other European Roma Ngo's and to be informed about successful practices of other organisations. At the same time she created new relationships with other Greek **(male)** Roma organizations.

## **Future**

The future immediate, goals of the organization are:

- First of all to assure the continuity of the existing education/training programs
- To create one more nursery school in the community
- To organize more lessons in Greek language
- To increase the number of the creative cultural activities (theater, music, drawing) which promote Roma culture
- To buy a small bus (useful for many children's activity).