



Combating Inequalities through Innovative Social Practices  
of and for Young People in Cities across Europe

**WP7 Case study: Innovative Practice  
‘Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement  
of employment prospects among Roma youth’**

Date: June 2015

**City: Sofia**

Author: Marko Hajdinjak

## Cover page

<b>INNOVATIVE PRACTICE/PROJECT TITLE</b>	
<b>Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth</b>	
<b>City</b>	Sofia
<b>Pilot type</b>	Transfer of a project from IQ Roma Service (Brno, the Czech Republic) to HESED (Sofia, Bulgaria)
<b>Type of target group</b>	Motivated for integration into mainstream society but in need of support
<b>Type of practice</b>	Learning and counselling; social capital; matching/bridging
<b>Aims/objectives in brief</b>	<p>The project's main goal is to increase the capacity of young Roma to find and retain employment. The objectives for achieving this goal are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the needs of young unemployed Roma and the needs of employers;</li> <li>• Building and strengthening the job orientation, job search and job retention skills (soft skills) of young Roma;</li> <li>• Decreasing negative attitudes of employers towards hiring Roma and build a network of employers open to hiring them.</li> </ul>
<b>What needs, what inequalities</b>	<p>Over two thirds of the young Roma (under 30) in Bulgaria have never had a job, which is much more than any other ethnic community. Among the main reasons for this inequality are the social isolation of the Roma, the low level of education and lack of competences, and the discriminative attitudes towards them by employers.</p> <p>According to the young Roma interviewed during the previous stages of the Citispyce project, unemployment is by far the most important problem they face. It reflects negatively on all other aspects of their lives – education, housing, access to adequate health care, standard of living, and leisure. Young people in Fakulteta (the largest Roma neighbourhood in Sofia, where the project takes place) feel abandoned by the state and many believe that they are victims of deliberate discrimination. They distrust the official institutions, including employment bureaux and social services. Due to the low level of education and competences, many young Roma lack key knowledge on where and how to look for a suitable employment, how to apply for a job and how to communicate with employers. Furthermore, they often lack the resources needed to apply for jobs (computer, Internet, email, printer, phone).</p> <p>The pilot <i>Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth</i> provides a new and effective measure to address this crucial social need – employment. It helps the young Roma to improve their skills for job seeking, so that they become able to look and apply for jobs independently. It also provides information on relevant job openings. The project also deals with the issue of social isolation and discrimination through the building of cooperative ties with a network of employers.</p>

<p><b>What (activities in brief)</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>A visit from Sofia to Brno of 4 HESED members (2 full days)</b> A study visit to observe and learn from the original project run by IQ Roma Service in Brno.</li> <li>2. <b>A visit from Brno to Sofia of 2 IQRS experts (2 full days)</b> A visit to check on the implementation of the transferred practices, and to provide feedback and additional context-dependent guidelines.</li> <li>3. <b>Individual employment counselling with Roma youth (8 participants)</b> A series of individual counseling sessions with each participant, ranging from 5 to 20 per participant, with an average of 10 sessions per participant over an average period of 7 weeks.</li> <li>4. <b>Creation of a database for young Roma people (14-29 years old) in need of support for finding employment</b> A database with relevant information on Roma youth from the Fakulteta neighbourhood, employers and suitable job vacancies.</li> <li>5. <b>Search for suitable employers for Roma youth</b> Contacts with potential employers and dissemination of information about the project.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Who (actors)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health and Social Development Foundation (Sofia)</li> <li>• IQ Roma Service (Brno)</li> <li>• Unemployed Roma youth from the Fakulteta neighbourhood (18-29 years old)</li> <li>• Employers reached through different channels, e.g. employers who have a corporate-social responsibility programme and are socially active.</li> </ul>
<p><b>How (involvement of the actors, their roles)</b></p>	<p>Health and Social Development Foundation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adapted the Czech experience to the context in Sofia in cooperation with IQRS;</li> <li>• selected participants, planned and carried out the counselling sessions;</li> <li>• created and maintained a database of young Roma who need support in finding employment;</li> <li>• searched for relevant job ads and organised them into an up-to-date job ad board in the Health and Social Centre in Fakulteta neighbourhood;</li> <li>• provided technical assistance and equipment for job searching (phone, printing and copying facilities) to Roma clients of the Health and Social Centre;</li> <li>• contacted employers in search of potential employment opportunities for Roma clients.</li> </ul> <p>IQ Roma Service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hosted the visit of the HESED team to Brno;</li> <li>• presented their socially innovative practice to the HESED team and trained them to transfer the practice to Sofia;</li> <li>• gave feedback, advice and relevant materials to HESED on the pilot implementation during the visit to Sofia and over email and phone communication.</li> </ul> <p>Unemployed young Roma attended the training consisting of 1 to 20 individual counselling sessions for each participant.</p>

	Employers / companies with a potential interest in hiring Roma people with the relevant skills and background were provided with information on the pilot's activities, participants' profiles and ways of getting involved.
<b>Scope: number of the participants of practice(s)</b>	<p>18 unemployed young people were selected for the training, of which 8 completed a series of 5 to 20 sessions: 20 sessions (1), 12 sessions (1), 10 sessions (3), 7 sessions (2) and 5 sessions (1). Five unemployed young people attended only 1-3 sessions.</p> <p>Compared to the pilot plan, not all participants completed a cycle of 8-10 sessions, but some participants completed more than 10 sessions. This flexibility was dictated by the needs of the participants.</p> <p>26 companies were contacted, of which three have openly declared unwillingness to hire Roma. Two companies have employed three pilot participants. Others have expressed interest in employing HESED's clients in the future, provided they have suitable vacancies.</p> <p>29 suitable job ads were found and posted on the board in the Health and Social Centre in Fakulteta.</p> <p>60 young Roma job seekers were recorded in the database.</p>
<b>Duration (when the project/ practice started)</b>	The pilot lasted from February to May 2015.
<b>RESOURCES</b>	
<b>Financial</b>	<p>Total: 9,000 EUR</p> <p>Staff: 4,000 EUR (3,040 HESED, 960 IQRS)</p> <p>Travel expenses: 2,660.21 EUR</p> <p>Training materials and consumables: 439.78 EUR</p> <p>Database development: 1,900 EUR</p>
<b>Personnel</b>	<p>HESED:</p> <p>1 coordinator</p> <p>2 employment counsellors</p> <p>1 officer for partnership with employers</p> <p>1 receptionist</p> <p>1 database administrator</p> <p>IQRS Brno:</p> <p>2 experts</p>
<b>Other</b>	<p>Experts involved in the project have considerable experience in working with the Roma community on various training, consultation and therapy programmes concerning health care, prevention of drug and other addictions, childcare and parenthood, educational support for children, life skills for adolescents and family therapy.</p> <p>A trained team of community assistants (Roma from the Fakulteta neighbourhood, who are respected and well-known in the area) are responsible for establishing contacts with the people from the community, disseminating information among the young Roma and motivating them to participate in the training.</p> <p>HESED's Health and Social Centre is located in the Fakulteta neighbourhood in Sofia, which means that it is convenient for and easily accessible by the target group. Its premises are suitable for both individual consultations and group work.</p>

## Contents

Introduction .....	6
1. Evaluation methodology .....	6
2. Project/Practice Design .....	7
2.1 Social issue(s) addressed .....	7
2.2. Project goals and plans .....	9
2.3 Competences and resources required .....	14
2.4 Degree of organization .....	15
2.5 The logic of intervention .....	16
2.6 Transfer adaptations .....	16
3. Organisational context of implementation .....	16
4. Project implementation and outputs .....	18
4.1 Targeting of the program.....	18
4.2 Addressing needs.....	19
4.3 Empowerment, engagement and choice.....	21
4.4 Stakeholders involved .....	21
4.5 Competences and resources involved .....	22
4.6 Innovativeness .....	22
5. Project results/outcomes.....	23
6. Final reflections.....	26
6.1 The role of the pilot/project/practice .....	26
6.2 Innovation.....	27
6.3 Success factors .....	27
6.4 Policy recommendations, transferability.....	28
References .....	30

## Introduction

The pilot project *Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth* took place between February and May 2015 in the Health and Social Centre, established by the Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED) in Fakulteta neighbourhood in Sofia. It tackles the widespread unemployment among the Roma youth in a new and effective way. The project empowers young people by giving them a chance to fully participate in society and by increasing their skills. As a long-term effect, this project has a potential to increase social capital and social trust.

In essence, the project transfers and adapts a successful and established practice developed by the IQRS in Brno to the context and needs of Roma youth in Sofia. The central activities of the project are job search skills training for the young Roma, creation of a database of job seekers and available work, and setting up of a network of employers interested in hiring the project participants.

Fakulteta is a large neighbourhood of about 35,000 people, more than half of which are below 29. Only a third of the economically active population are officially employed.<sup>1</sup> Compared to the scope of this problem, a project in which eight young persons are counselled and 26 employers invited to participate appears miniscule and insignificant. It has to be underlined, however, that this is a pilot project and that the impressive achievements of the “original” project implemented by the IQRS in Brno are a result of work which started in 2007. The most important value of the Sofia project is therefore its potential and the promise it holds for the future. Moreover, the pilot project complements and reinforces the effects of other programmes implemented at the Health and Social Centre, since employment is a critical step in an integrated approach to breaking the cycle of poverty and social isolation. For example, the pilot’s activities can be very beneficial for the young unemployed parents who attend programmes for early childhood development and parenting skills at HSC.

## 1. Evaluation methodology

Two researchers, Maya Kosseva and Marko Hajdinjak, conducted seven interviews in the second half of April and early May. The respondents included two experts/consultants, one project coordinator and four young people participating in the pilot activities. In addition to the interviews, researchers engaged in participant observation during consultations with the young people. Although she was not interviewed, but answered the relevant question in writing, the person in charge of establishing connection with the employers provided valuable information on how businesses were approached and involved in the pilot. One external expert with a deep knowledge of the Fakulteta neighbourhood and situation of the Roma community in Bulgaria also provided an opinion. Despite being unfamiliar with the project details, he commented on the deficiencies of the existing system and assessed the potential impact and usefulness of a project trying to improve the employment prospects of young Roma in an innovative way.

Interviews lasted from 20 to 50 minutes. All were conducted in the Health and Social Centre (HSC) in the Fakulteta neighbourhood, where the pilot took place. Both experts (one male

---

<sup>1</sup> National Statistical Institute (2012), *Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 година, Том 3, Книга 23: София (столица)* (Census of the Population and Housing 2011, Vol. 3, Book 23: Sofia – the Capital), Sofia: National Statistical Institute, , pp. 136-137, <http://sofia.bg/pictss/T3K23-Sofia-Stolica.pdf>

and one female) are psychologists, with rich experience in working with Roma community, providing different types of consultations and assistance (young people in risk, family therapy, drug addictions). The project coordinator is similarly well experienced in implementing and managing projects dealing with Roma inclusion.

All four young interviewees were women, aged between 20 and 24.

	Age	Education	Previous work experience
Interview 1	20	Primary school	None
Interview 2	22	Secondary school	Several attempts to start working, but in all cases has quit within one week
Interview 3	24	Unfinished primary school (six grades)	Works as a cleaner in a mall, but wants to look for a different job
Interview 4	24	Unfinished primary school (two grades)	Several short-term jobs in the past, but was unemployed when she joined the pilot

Where relevant, the information conducted during the fieldwork for WP3 and WP4 was also used. This was done, above all, to provide background information and present the context in which the project was implemented.

HESED's staff (coordinator, consultants, employer liaison officer) assessed the progress and results of the pilot very objectively, pointing out its strengths, potential and shortcomings. In fact, they were considerably more critical in their assessment than were the pilot participants, who had only very positive things to say about the project.

The HESED team has in place an effective system for internal control and monitoring. Weekly staff meetings provide an opportunity for discussing problems related to the implementation, assessing progress and planning future activities.

## 2. Project/Practice Design

### *2.1 Social issue(s) addressed*

Fakulteta is the largest Roma neighbourhood in Sofia and the second largest in Bulgaria, with a population of 35,000 people according to expert estimates. As reported by Hajdinjak and Kosseva in Citispyce WP3 Case Study, Fakulteta is a "hotbed of social problems, including devastating levels of unemployment, poverty, social exclusion". There are no official statistical data about the unemployment rates in the neighbourhood, but experts estimate that close to 80% of residents are without legal employment (most of those who work are employed in the grey sector). These estimates were confirmed during the WP4 fieldwork. Only about a quarter of 38 respondents from Fakulteta had a job. Many added that all or most of their friends and relatives were without employment.

Over the past two decades, an entire generation of permanently unemployed young people has grown up in Fakulteta. Due to the low level of education and competences, this youth underclass lacks key knowledge about where and how to look for a suitable job, how to apply

for a position and how to communicate with employers. Furthermore, these young people are practically unaware of suitable job vacancies, but even if such information was easily available to them, many lack the technical resources needed to apply (a computer, the Internet, email, printer, phone).

The focus of the pilot project was on building competences (learning). Its aim was to improve the employment prospects of the young Roma by teaching them job seeking and job retention skills. The project also provided the participants with information on the appropriate job openings. They were also able to use the technical equipment in the Health and Social Centre and prepare printed and electronic job application packages and make phone calls in response to job postings.

The pilot tackled the problem of social isolation and unemployment among the young Roma from another perspective as well. Development of job seeking skills among young Roma means nothing if there is no reaction on the other side. An essential part of the project was therefore to establish contacts with employers, who would be willing to consider employing project participants.

The pilot's main goal was thus to improve the prospects of young Roma for successful employment. The objectives for achieving this goal were:

- Better understanding of the needs of young unemployed Roma;
- Building and strengthening the job orientation, job search and job retention skills (soft skills) of young Roma;
- Setting up a network of employers open to hiring young Roma.

The project was implemented in the neighbourhood Fakulteta, which is one of the most marginalised and socio-economically deprived areas in Sofia. The range of social inequalities in Fakulteta is immense. Compared to their peers in Sofia, the young people in the area receive substandard education, are more often without work or are employed in unattractive, low-paid jobs,<sup>2</sup> have fewer opportunities to engage in leisure and cultural activities, and live in poor quality and cramped housing. These circumstances create deep feelings of isolation and neglect among the young people in the neighbourhood.

The young people from Fakulteta interviewed during the WP4 were unanimous in their opinion that the state and municipal authorities have practically abandoned their neighbourhood and people who live there. Young Roma spoke about Fakulteta as a ghetto, which has been forgotten by every single institution, and said that they felt as if they lived in an autonomous region, where laws did not apply.

Massive unemployment among the young discourages them and many do not even attempt to find employment through official channels. The most typical job search strategy among the young in Fakulteta is to rely on friends and relatives who are employed. They can inform them about available work and vouch for them in front of their superiors.

---

<sup>2</sup> There are no accurate statistical data about the employment rates in Fakulteta, but the WP3 and WP4 fieldwork has established that a huge majority (70-80%) of residents are unemployed. Most of those who do have a regular job work as cleaners, garbage collectors, construction workers, taxi drivers, market vendors, and other types of low-skilled manual labour. Young Roma men frequently work in the large Bulgarian shadow economy – especially in the construction sector. Usually, such jobs are for a fixed short period and poorly paid.



There is a widespread opinion that Roma are discriminated on the labour market and many young people in Fakulteta believe they would never be able to find a job just because of their ethnicity. They are convinced that their darker skin, the accent that reveals that Bulgarian is not their mother tongue, and sometimes the mere fact that they live in Fakulteta, are the main reasons they are denied work when they apply for a vacant position. Consequently, they are not motivated to improve their education and qualification, since they think that all such efforts would be in vain. The low level of education, in turn, further decreases their chances of obtaining a decent and well-paid employment.

Discrimination does play a role and there are cases of employers, who openly admit that they do not employ people of Roma origin, despite the fact that by doing so they are committing an act of discrimination on ethnic grounds, which is punishable by law. There may be various motives behind such statements, including the attitude of the employers themselves, their teams or their clients. Among the 26 employers who were contacted in the course of the project, three directly stated that they do not hire Roma.

Discrimination and racism are not the only causes of inequality. The general social-economic situation in Bulgaria – the poorest EU member state –, is bad and has additionally deteriorated during the recent financial and economic crisis. According to a recent study commissioned by UNICEF, Bulgaria has the largest number of NEETs (young people not in employment, education or training) among the EU countries (22% compared to the EU average of 12, 9%). The trend is a negative one and the numbers have been increasing in the recent years (UNICEF 2015). With youth unemployment in the country at 25-30% in recent years,<sup>3</sup> the employment possibilities for low qualified youth from Fakulteta are exceptionally limited. As most of them have been unemployed for long periods or have never worked at all, this creates an additional problem. The long period of inactivity discourages the young Roma and widens the gap between the labour market needs and the (limited) skills and qualification they have obtained in their education. Thus, their chances of finding employment are reduced further.

If discrimination, economic crisis, inadequate education and skills are the most important causes of inequality, the main symptoms are isolation, distrust and discouragement. These symptoms are very hard to treat and in time, they themselves become causes of additional inequality.

## ***2.2. Project goals and plans***

Based on the example and experience of the original project, run by IQRS in Brno, the project targeted those young Roma (18-29 years old) from the Fakulteta neighbourhood, who are motivated to integrate in the mainstream society and want to start working, but are in need of support.

There are no statistical data about the Fakulteta neighbourhood which could be used to draw a social profile of the target group. Based on the WP4 research, most young people in the neighbourhood live in poverty. About half of them are NEETs. University students are a rare exception, and those who have finished secondary education have typically done so in professional high schools where the quality of education is low. Early marriages and early pregnancies are commonplace. Pessimism, apathy and discouragement are widespread.

---

<sup>3</sup> See NSI, (2014). Unemployment Rates of Population Aged 15 Years and Over. Sofia: National Statistical Institute, [http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/data/timeseries/Labour\\_3.2.3\\_EN.xls](http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/data/timeseries/Labour_3.2.3_EN.xls)

**Table: Participants in the counselling programme**

Attended between 1 and 20 counselling sessions	13
Expressed interest, but did not attend any sessions	5

## Education:

University	0
Finished secondary school	3
Attended secondary school, but have not finished	1
Finished primary school	2
Attended primary school, but have not finished	6
Not gone to school at all	1

## Work experience:

Considerable	2
Some	9
None	2

## Skills/qualifications:

None	9
Vocational skills	2
Musical skills	2
Foreign language	2
MS Office	1

It is interesting to note that the five candidates, who initially expressed interest but later did not enrol in the counselling sessions, had secondary education. One explanation is that they had more resources to find a job on their own and therefore decided they do not need the counselling. All of the participants are Roma from the Fakulteta neighbourhood, aged between 18 and 29. Most of them have a very limited work experience and have been unemployed for most of the time since they have finished their education. All those who have been employed before have found work through intermediation of their relatives or friends. One of the participants said that she has been visiting the employment bureau for over a year and that they have never offered her any work and that going to the bureau was a waste of time. She believes that through the project, she will learn how to look for a job on her own, without having to rely on the employment bureau or friends (female, 22, unemployed).

All the young people, who decided to participate in the project and go through the full cycle of consultations and training clearly belong to the group of young people who are motivated to integrate into the mainstream society, but are in need of support. Some of those who have expressed initial interest, but later changed their minds and dropped out, also fall into this type, while some of the others belong to the group “living day by day, opportunistically; given up hope and lacking competences, social support and motivation to change.”

After the project started and two of the participants got a job, this created a surge in interest among the young people in the neighbourhood. Many came to the Centre hoping that they would immediately be offered employment without having to invest any time and effort – these young people clearly belong to the lower left corner of the Citispyce typology (lacking competences, social support and motivation). After they were informed about the nature of the project and the opportunity to attend counselling sessions, they did not display any more interest.

The pilot *Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth* is an innovative project, providing a new and effective measure to meet a crucial social need – employment. It empowers young people by giving them a chance to participate fully in society and by increasing their abilities. As a long-term effect, this project has a potential to increase social capital and social trust.

The pilot's overall aim was to improve the prospects of young Roma for successful employment through the following objectives:

- Increasing their professional competencies in terms of job orientation, job search, job application, and job interview skills;
- Establishing a pool of employers who can offer suitable work to the young Roma in their companies;
- Creation of a database of young Roma in need of support in finding employment, as well as a database of employers with suitable positions.

The preliminary plan defined the following targets:

- 4 HESED members gain understanding on the complex approach developed by IQRS on Roma employment, and specifically on the methodology used in the Centre for counselling and employment
- 10 Roma youths start and complete a series of 8-10 weekly employment counselling sessions
- 20 employers contacted to establish cooperation and provide employment to young Roma either during the pilot or in the near future
- 60 young Roma who need support in finding employment are recorded in a database
- 35 job ads are found and posted on a board in the Health and Social Centre for the duration of 6 weeks
- 20 Roma visitors of the Health and Social Centre supported by being given access to the use of facilities in the Centre (computers, printers, telephones, internet access)

The goals of the project were thus very clearly defined and concrete. A specially designed consultation programme (writing CVs, motivation letters, applying for jobs, preparation for and practicing of job interviews, searching and selecting appropriate job ads), based on practices at the Employment and Counselling Centre of IQRS in Brno, dealt with the lack of job seeking skills among the young Roma. Contacts with appropriate employers and the creation of a database of young job seekers and available job openings was a measure aimed at bridging the gap between the unemployed young and businesses which could hire them.

The pilot represents a socially innovative practice transferred from another city, where it has been running successfully since 2007. The ability to learn from this extensive experience and transfer the valuable know-how to Sofia made it possible to plan the pilot with realistic expectations, to set achievable goals and to avoid many of the “landmines” that could potentially side-track implementation. Learning from the established practice saved time, as strategies, content and tools employed were “copied” and adapted to the local circumstances, rather than created anew.

The crucial activities of the project are: the individual employment counselling with Roma youth and creation of a database of young Roma job seekers, employers and relevant job ads. The main area these activities address is employment, but the project also has a long-term potential to increase social capital and contribute to the social trust, especially between the network of employers and young Roma job seekers.

One of the main problems related with huge levels of unemployment in Fakulteta and other Roma neighbourhoods is discouragement. Too many young Roma have given up and are convinced that no matter what they do, they would not be given a job. Some blame it on discrimination, others point to the fact that many of them lack proper qualifications and education. Whatever the reasons, the outcome is the same – after trying to apply for a job a few times and being rejected, the young Roma lose faith and give up. Unsuccessful job applications are also a consequence of the fact that even those young Roma who are qualified, rarely possess necessary skills to “sell” themselves successfully on the labour market. They are inexperienced in the writing and sending of CVs, motivation letters and applications, and uncertain and ill prepared for job interviews.

Some of these skills could be obtained through courses, which are sometimes offered at employment bureaux. However, for various reasons, Fakulteta residents rarely use the services of employment bureaux and these opportunities largely pass them by.

The activities undertaken in the pilot address this problem and bring these services into Fakulteta. They build and enhance the job seeking skills of the young unemployed Roma and encourage them to engage in active job searches, which is an unavoidable precondition for their (re)entry on the job market.

This is only half of the work. The pilot aims at having an effect on employment in the neighbourhood by also establishing a network of employers, who preferably have a solid corporate-social responsibility programme and are considering either to hire unemployed young Roma or already have such practices. The pilot plays the role of a bridge, connecting the young job seekers and employers willing to hire them.

	February	March	April	May
Visit from Sofia to Brno				
Visit from Brno to Sofia				
Selection of participants				
Individual employment counselling with Roma youth				
Creation of a database for young Roma job seekers				
Search for suitable employers and jobs for Roma youth				

1. The pilot started with a two-day study visit of experts from HESED, Sofia to IQ Roma Service (IQRS) in Brno. The HESED team had an opportunity to look at and learn from the original project. Experts from Brno presented their socially innovative practices and trained HESED experts to work with clients on issues like job skills training and counselling. During the first day, the HESED team were given presentations on the situation of Roma communities in the Czech context, the organisation IQ Roma Service and their programmes for adults and labour market inclusion (Centre for Counselling and Employment, Ethnic Friendly Employer Concept, media campaigns and cooperation with employers, database with clients). During the second day the Gendalos programme was introduced, which targets Roma youth and prepares them for successful education and labour market inclusion. In addition, the HESED experts had a chance to observe the

activities taking place in the IQRS headquarters and were given a tour around the Roma neighbourhood in Brno. The visit helped the HESED team to plan and set up a pilot in Sofia.

2. A return visit of practitioners/experts from IQ Roma Service to Sofia took place one month after the Brno visit. The Czech partners provided very useful feedback on the implementation of the ongoing pilot activities and the transferred practices, and gave advice on how to deal with various problematic issues like fluctuation in the motivation of participants and the initial lukewarm response of employers. The essential topics to be covered during the counselling sessions were restated in view of the Bulgarian context. The database with young Roma in need of support in finding employment was discussed in greater detail than during the Brno visit, and ideas were given on how to improve its initial structure. The first day of the visit was spent in the HESED headquarters, while the second day took place in the Health and Social Centre, where the IQRS experts had a chance to meet more people from the multi-ethnic HESED team, as well as a walk around the neighbourhood.
3. The central activity of the pilot is a cycle of individual consultation sessions. The first 1-2 sessions serve as orientation. Consultants and participants get to know each other and consultants assess participants' skills, motivation, abilities, education and work preferences, and personal situation. In particular, they gather information about their educational background and qualification; previous work experience; motivation and attitude towards employment; family status and attitude of their families towards participants' employment; potential obstacles and support factors; work interests and skills; and participants' apprehensions regarding employment and search for a job.

After the initial assessment is made, an individual work plan is prepared. It includes professional orientation and value clarification, learning standard job seeking skills (looking for information about job postings in the employment bureaux, on specialised internet sites and other job search channels; writing effective and attractive CVs; writing motivation letters; preparation for and practicing of job interviews), but also specific skills different participants are particularly interested in (for example, basic computer skills and job-retention skills for clients who got employed in the meantime, workplace conflict resolution skills, etc.).

The participants can use office equipment of the Health and Social Centre (phone, computer, printer, internet connection) to respond to a job opening, prepare and send documents and conduct other pilot related work. The participants in the counselling sessions were also given USB flash drives with their CVs, motivation letters and other resources saved on them, so that they could use them in their job search at a later point.

After the consultations started, it immediately became clear that considerable attention needed to be devoted to learning one skill that was not foreseen at the beginning – time management. Young persons from marginalised communities, who have never been employed before or have been without jobs for a long time, have literally no sense of timekeeping and being 30 minutes or an hour late for an appointment is something completely normal for them. Being punctual and keeping track of time, therefore, became one of the essential skills to be mastered during the training.

In some cases, consultants also visited participants in their homes. This was especially important in the case of two women, who were offered full-time jobs soon after the start of the pilot. Both women are mothers and it was essential for the consultants to meet with

the families and discuss with them what help and support they were able to provide (for example, looking after the children while the women are at work).<sup>4</sup>

The fact that these two women started working so early into the project came as an exceptionally pleasant surprise to the women themselves and to the HESED team. This development affected their training programme and the rest of their consultations were dedicated to issues like how to “fit in” at the workplace and communicate with the other employees and superiors. They also discussed what constitutes discrimination and what does not, and how to react to those who provoke and insult them because of their Roma origin by standing up for themselves without aggravating the situation.

Consultations with other participants are also designed in a way to accommodate as much as possible their individual needs and preferences. This means that the consultants have to be very adaptive and flexible – a task they easily accomplish due to their ample experience in working with the Roma on a variety of issues. For example, some participants asked for basic instructions on how to work with emails, Microsoft Word, Excel and the other most common programmes.

Another cultural-specific aspect of employment among Roma, which came out of the counselling sessions, was the influence of the man in the family on the woman’s decisions whether to work or not. The Roma community in Bulgaria is still rather patriarchal and having a job may not be culturally acceptable for a woman. For example, women who work may be considered promiscuous. Several female clients reported this issue with their partners and were counselled on how to approach it.

4. A digital database for young Roma in need of support for future employment was created through specialised software. The database includes the relevant information (educational and employment background; relevant skills; preferred employment; areas for improvement; help received during counselling sessions; jobs already applied for; contact information) of 60 Roma youths from the Fakulteta neighbourhood, who are either participants in the pilot counselling sessions, participants in other programmes run by HESED or visitors at the Health and Social Centre.
5. The search for suitable employers for Roma youth and the dissemination of information among potential employers started simultaneously with the consultation sessions. Contacts have been established through different channels: personal contacts, online job search platforms, career websites, company websites, industrial and business associations, branch chambers and job fairs. Special attention was given to companies with a strong corporate-social responsibility programme and which are socially active. The contacted companies are from varied industries, which are both typical and not typical for Roma workers: facility management, garbage recycling, tourism, food and beverages, education, IT and call centres. The contacted and potential employers were recorded in a database.

### ***2.3 Competences and resources required***

The original project run by IQ Roma Service in Brno works only with very motivated young participants, who come to the organisation on their own and ask for support. This is possible because the project has been running for over eight years and is therefore well known and recognised among the target group.

---

<sup>4</sup> It needs to be noted that apart from a small kindergarten operated by HESED in the HSC, there is no municipal kindergarten or any other childcare facility in Fakulteta.

The initial idea of the pilot in Sofia was to follow this model and work only with motivated candidates with education and qualification (finished secondary school), but in need of support. Soon after the start of the pilot, it became clear that this was not possible and considerable effort had to be put into recruiting participants. The criteria for required competences of the participants were also lowered, and most of those who expressed interest were allowed into the programme. Thus of 16 candidates, who applied, only eight have finished secondary education, four primary, while four have left school before completing the eight grades. Moreover, of the clients who finished the counselling program with 5 to 20 completed sessions, only one has finished secondary education, one has completed primary school, five have left school before finishing the eighth grade and one has not attended school at all. The main required competence was therefore the motivation to work and complete the entire cycle of consultation and training sessions.

The essential resources for the implementation of the project were the “know-how” transferred from the IQ Roma Service in Brno and the financial support provided by the Citispyce project. A study visit to the “original” project and the return visit of Czech experts to provide feedback and additional advice were crucial for the successful set up and running of the pilot. Having a “ready-made” and yet adaptable model to follow greatly eased the planning, making the project more realistic and time and cost-efficient..

An essential resource for implementation of the pilot is infrastructure – an appropriate place for holding the consultations and meetings with the participants, and well-trained and qualified staff with experience of working in the Roma community. As will be discussed in more detail in section 3 on organisational context, HESED has both. Its Health and Social Centre is located right in the Fakulteta neighbourhood. The organisation has personnel of over 35 specialists in the fields of pedagogy, psychology, social work, medicine, management and outreach work, including seven health and social community assistants.

## ***2.4 Degree of organization***

Being a pilot, the project is clearly a top-down initiative. It was planned, initiated and implemented by HESED (based on the IQ Roma Service model) and offered to the young people in Fakulteta in a pre-arranged format. However, the consultations were a two-way process. The shape and content of the consultation sessions were determined after the initial interview, but the young participants were able to shift the direction and raise issues they deemed important during the sessions. In most cases, however, the consultants were the more active actors, as some participants preferred the more passive role of responding and receiving.

The realistic expectation is that in time, if pilot as planned turns into a standard service, the participants would become more active in utilising their competences and developing their potential.

The pilot addresses most directly the micro-(individual) level, which is not surprising given that its central activity are the individual skill building sessions. To a lesser extent, the pilot influences also the meso- and on a small scale the macro-level. By helping the individual young participants, the pilot also affects their families and friends, as the young people talk about and share what they have learned. In cases of two women, who started to work as a result of their participation in the project, the consultants visited their families and directly involved them in the process, discussing what kind of support the families could provide to the two women – especially in terms of child-care (both women are mothers).

On the macro level, the pilot tries on a small scale to change the social perceptions and built social trust, especially among the employers and the young Roma job seekers.

### ***2.5 The logic of intervention***

The pilot focuses on strengthening self-confidence, building skills, creating opportunities and setting up social networks. Its central aim is therefore social integration. It is a small scale project implemented on the local level, but can be easily and efficiently transferred and put into practice in other socially and economically deprived neighbourhoods, on condition that necessary resources are available (trained personnel, financing and appropriate facility).

### ***2.6 Transfer adaptations***

The pilot follows the original project quite closely. The most important change that was made regards the participants. In the original project in Brno, the high level of dedication and motivation are a necessary condition for participation in the training programme. The programme participants come to the Centre on their own with clear purpose and goal and there is no need for the personnel to devote time and energy to additionally motivate the clients to participate.

This approach could not work in Sofia, where the service was offered for the first time and people in the neighbourhood were still unfamiliar with it. Due to tight schedule, a planned group of 10 participants had to be assembled rather quickly. For this reason, dissemination and advertisement became a crucial addition to the original work plan at the start of the pilot.

The planned selection criteria had to be altered. Even after the consultations started, the personnel had to deal with problems of lack of punctuality and wavering motivation of participants.

Another difference between the Czech practice and the pilot in Sofia is that clients of the Employment and Counselling Centre in Brno do not have a specific number of sessions to attend (counsellors design individual plans only according to the clients' personal needs and goals, which can be short- or long-term), whereas for the purposes of the time-restricted pilot project in Sofia, initial plans were for the clients to complete a cycle of 8-10 sessions. Nonetheless, with the progress of the pilot activities, this number was adjusted to the needs of the clients (with fewer or more sessions).

## **3. Organisational context of implementation**

The Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED), founded in 1998, has built a reputation as an organisation providing innovative and highly effective services to vulnerable communities in Bulgaria. HESED has been recognised as a reliable partner by municipal and national authorities in Bulgaria, and by numerous international donors and partners. The organisation has implemented many successful projects targeting the Roma community, children, young people and their families in the fields of childcare, education, social support and health promotion.



HESED is managed by a Board, consisting of seven members. Its chairperson is Dr. Elena Kabakchieva, who is also a member of the Board. The multi-ethnic (Roma and Bulgarian) team includes more than 35 specialists in the fields of pedagogy, psychology, social work, medicine and management. Additionally, HESED has a network of over 40 external experts who are involved in certain projects or parts of them. The work is monitored by external supervisors. They include social anthropologists, medical doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers. A very important part of the team are also Roma health and social community assistants.

HESED's funding is mostly project based. Over the years, different donors and funding organisations have contributed to the work of the organisation: PHARE Programme, European Structural Funds, US National Institute of Health, VELUX Foundation, Bulgarian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and Ministry of Health, Sofia Municipality, UNDP, German Federal Ministry of Health, OAK Foundation, EEA Grants, Bulgarian-Swiss Cooperation Programme, the French Embassy and Institute and others.

Among HESED's most important projects are the Health and Social Centres, which represent a new and innovative type of social infrastructure, providing a wide range of social services. The Centres are located in neighbourhoods where most or all residents belong to the Roma community. The pilot *Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth* is implemented at the HESED's Health and Social Centre in Fakulteta and is one of the many programmes targeting Roma children, young persons and adults. In addition to the Fakulteta Centre, HESED has been running a similar Centre in the Roma neighbourhood in the town of Kyustendil since 2013. Another centre is about to open in summer 2015 in the Roma neighbourhood Filipovtsi in Sofia, while the construction of a second larger centre in Fakulteta is due to begin in 2016.

*Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth* is a pilot project with a small capacity, as its duration was only three months with one additional month (May) to conclude activities. The goals and targets were defined realistically, which means that they might appear modest at first glance.

The implementation of the pilot and the progress towards achieving results and success factors was monitored by the internal quality control mechanisms and by Citispyce research team (Kosseva and Hajdinjak). As this is a pilot project, there is no previous quality standard established against which to compare it. The high quality of work and expertise characteristic for other programmes and services provided by HESED at the Health and Social Centre does, however, apply for this project as well.

The financial resources were sufficient for the three-month pilot project. In order to continue the project after the pilot phase concludes, funding will have to be secured through other sources. Possible future funding may come from the Bulgarian state and international donors, which are the main source of financial support for HESED's projects.

The available personnel are sufficient for a small-scale project with similar or slightly larger capacity than the pilot project. If funding is secured and allows expansion of the project not just in number of participants, but also its transfer to other Bulgarian cities and towns (for example Kyustendil, where the second HESED's Health and Social Centre is located), additional personnel might be needed.

The pilot fit exceptionally well into the mosaic of practices / services provided at the Health and Social Centre. One of the interviewed experts said that their organisation has been working for years towards the social integration of the Roma community through an

integrated approach addressing a wide range of issues (Male, NGO, project manager – consultant). The organisation has been actively working on the development of social skills among the Roma youth, providing different programmes which offer them support from the cradle to adulthood. Until now, however, projects tackling the problem of unemployment have been the missing ingredient, despite the awareness that employment is the key to success in numerous other areas, especially in a marginalised and deprived area where 4 out of 5 people are officially unemployed.

By including a service aimed at the improvement of employment prospects of the young Roma among the services provided in the Health and Social Centre (HSC) in Fakulteta, HESED will be able to provide an all-embracing assistance to young people in Fakulteta. Moreover, having a culturally tailored programme for support of employment directly in the Roma neighbourhood, as the HSC allows, adds to the government's efforts to include the hard-to-reach low-qualified and long-term unemployed young people from isolated Roma neighbourhoods in the job market.

## **4. Project implementation and outputs**

### ***4.1 Targeting of the program***

Participants were approached and invited to join in three main ways:

1. Some participants are involved in other services provided by the HSC. They were told about the forthcoming initiative by the Centre's staff and those who expressed interest were interviewed to determine whether they were appropriate and motivated enough for the training. According to one of the experts, this selection strategy has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, this approach means that you work with people you know and that you are well acquainted with their background, preferences, needs and motivation, which makes the work easier. On the other hand, this creates complicated correlations, as consultants and participants enter a matrix in which they perform multiple roles, which reflect on each other. Unfulfilled expectations and other problems in one role/service might spill over into another role/service.
2. Several participants have never before used the services of the Centre. They were recruited by HSC community assistants, who carried out an information campaign in the neighbourhood and disseminated the information about the project. This is probably the most appropriate recruitment method, as the participants and consultants are not "burdened" by the past history of interaction and the participants come to join the programme well informed and motivated.
3. After the start of the project, the information about it quickly spread around Fakulteta. Especially after two of the participants started working, the pilot became "a hot topic" in the area and numerous people came to the Centre, asking whether they too could join. A large majority of them came with unrealistic expectations that a knock on the door will automatically result in a job, and left disappointed.
4. One participant enrolled in the program after visiting the Health and Social Centre to look at the job ad board. Upon showing interest in the board, she was informed by a HESED staff member about the pilot activities. She started attending counselling sessions on a regular basis, and eventually found employment as a hygienist at a furniture company.

Initially, 16 people expressed interest and motivation for participation. Five changed their minds before the start of the training for various reasons (they found work through other channels, were restrained by family obligations or simply did not show up for the first session without providing an explanation). At a later phase of the pilot two more people joined the employment counselling programme. Of all participants, who went through the process of initial interviews and evaluation, five dropped out with 1, 2 or 3 sessions, due to reasons similar to the above (found employment through other channels, had to take care of their children or lost motivation). The remaining 8 participants went through an average of 10 sessions: 1 client attended 20 sessions, 1 client attended 12 sessions, 3 clients attended 10 sessions, 2 clients attended 7 sessions and 1 client – 5 sessions.

One of the biggest challenges the HESED team had to deal with was the motivation of participants to be involved in a training, which is supposed to last from two to three months (the initial plan was that clients would have on average one consultation per week, 8-10 consultations in a cycle). As already discussed, the participants were very different in this respect. While some had a very clear idea about what they wanted to learn and achieve, and sometimes even took a very active role in setting the agenda and content of the consultation sessions, others sometimes questioned their usefulness and appeared unmotivated.

In Brno, the high level of dedication and motivation are a necessary condition for participation in the training programme. Clients lacking the necessary motivation to visit the Centre for Employment and Counselling naturally discontinue their visits, or are not given access to all available services. The personnel do not engage in efforts to additionally motivate the clients to participate. Moreover, since the focus is on motivated clients, Roma job-seekers usually enrol in counselling sessions after coming to the Centre on their own.

Since for the purpose of the pilot in Sofia a given number of people had to be reached within a limited period of time, this was not yet possible, hence the high share of dropouts. HESED experts believe that after the project gets through the pilot phase and “*the wheel starts turning,*” attracting motivated candidates will be less of a problem. Of course, for this to happen it is essential to have a successful pilot phase and to disseminate the information about it across the neighbourhood.

## ***4.2 Addressing needs***

The pilot plan has foreseen the following success factors:

1. Successful adaptation of social innovative practices from Brno to the context and needs of Roma youth in Sofia.
2. Development of relevant job skills for Roma youth through the design and implementation of a pilot counselling program, which can be successfully expanded and replicated.
3. Development of trust between Roma youth and the HESED team based on mutual respect and helpful support.
4. Building of a trusting relationship between a network of employers and HESED, which will act as a bridge between employers and Roma workers.

The SIP, developed by IQRS in Brno, was successfully transferred to Sofia and appropriately modified to fit the context of Fakulteta neighbourhood and the needs of the young Roma who

live there. The process of disseminating information, reaching the target group and selecting the initial targeted number of 10 participants for the consultations was relatively smooth. Not counting those who initially expressed interest in participating, but later changed their minds, and those who dropped out after 1 to 3 sessions, the remaining participants were visiting consultations regularly and appeared very motivated.

According to the initial plan, each participant should attend eight to ten individual training sessions. In practice, the number varied, depending on the particular needs of each participant. Some needed to learn only technical skills, while others needed a more comprehensive counselling. For example, one of the clients attended 2 more sessions in addition to the planned ones, while another attended twice as many (20). This flexibility also closely follows the Czech model. HESED experts noted that unlike the work in groups, the very essence of the individual consultations allowed for an adaptable and accommodating planning and implementation.

Consultations started with high optimism and expectations on the side of the experts/consultants. This initial enthusiasm was given an additional boost when very early into the project, two of the participants were offered jobs. The news that two women found employment “through the project” spread rapidly across the neighbourhood, creating a wave of interest in the programme. A considerable number of people came to the Centre asking whether they could also participate. The subsequent developments somewhat cooled down the optimism of the consultants. Most of those who came to the Centre “looking for jobs” lost their interest the moment they realised that it took much more than just showing up to find work.

In addition to these two women, another young woman found work during the programme. She was the last person to join the project. She was invited to join while looking at the job ad board in the Health and Social Centre. Together with a counselor, she searched through a job ad website and applied for several positions she was interested in. After receiving a few interview invitations, she chose a hygienist position at a furniture company because it offered the best working conditions.

Training and consultations with those who decided to go through the entire programme, aware that there were no guarantees that they would find employment in the end, was very rewarding – both for the consultants and for the participants. Asked to provide her opinion on the training, one participant said that she has learned many things she was not able to do before (write a CV, send emails, look for job offers online). She added that the sessions “*go by so fast, I do not feel the time, and when it is time to go I even feel bad – this hour has gone by so fast. It is so very interesting*” (Female, 22, unemployed).

The interviews with HESED experts and the young participants, as well as the observation of the consultation sessions and of one interview with a potential new participant gave sufficient ground to positively evaluate the implementation of success factors 1, 2 and 3. It needs to be noted that the fact that the Health and Social Centre has been operating in the neighbourhood since 2002, and that it is a well-known and trusted institution in the community, contributed considerably to this positive development.

The implementation of the fourth objective (building a trusting relationship between a network of employers and HESED) also demonstrated promising results. Despite the short time for implementation of the pilot cooperation with employers, a small network of potential employers has been built. Twenty-six companies have been contacted during the pilot's duration. Out of the 26 companies, three openly declared their unwillingness to hire Roma, evidence to the deep prejudice and stereotypes characteristic of Bulgarian society. The others have expressed serious or a more cautious interest in employing HESED's clients, provided

they have suitable vacancies in the future. Overall, positive relations have been forged with companies in facility management, waste recycling, tourism, education, IT and call centres. One IT company and one call centre have offered to present their businesses to Roma clients at HSC in the future. Moreover, the greatest success of this activity so far has been the hiring of three project participants (initially for a six-month trial period, with the possibility of turning it into a permanent employment): 2 by a facility management company and 1 by a furniture company.

### ***4.3 Empowerment, engagement and choice***

The training programme is devised in such a way as to prevent the creation of a dependent relationship. While participants' self-confidence is boosted by knowing they have a trusted person they can turn to for help and advice, the main goal of the programme is to empower them to act independently and confidently, i.e. to be able to search and apply for suitable jobs through official channels on their own. While it would be too optimistic to expect that all participants will achieve this goal, the interviews with some participants showed that they feel more positive and self-assured by what they have learned. Some of the participants have entered the programme with a very clear objective they wanted to achieve. Far from being passive receivers, they actively participate in setting the agenda, telling the consultants what skills they are particularly interested in and what they see as unnecessary.

### ***4.4 Stakeholders involved***

The key stakeholders in the project are the Health and Social Development Foundation (Sofia), IQ Roma Service (Brno), Roma youth from Fakulteta neighbourhood and employers.

Cooperation between HESED and IQRS has been evaluated as excellent. The visit to Brno and the return visit of IQRS experts to Sofia provided the HESED team with valuable know-how and inspiration for setting up the pilot project. The fruitful and valuable exchange of views and opinions continued also after the visits over email.

During the implementation of the pilot, cooperation with the employers was developing in an overall positive direction. One company was very forthcoming towards the idea and provided work to two of the participants relatively early into the project, which served as a positive indication for the potential of the pilot. Following this early high start, the majority of contacted employers have also appeared open to cooperation, but the lack of suitable vacancies has prevented them from taking more concrete steps for hiring. Another positive indication is that two months after hiring the Roma participants, the CEO of the facility management company recommended to a colleague running a clothes chain in a mall to also hire a pilot participant. One of the young women went successfully through the application process for a hygienist position and was practically hired, but eventually decided not take the job because she did not like the contract conditions.

In the Czech Republic, IQRS has succeeded in making the "Ethnic Friendly Employer" label a recognised and respected trademark, certifying employers who embrace the principle of equal treatment and do not discriminate against job applicants and employees based on their ethnic origin. Since the start of the project in 2007, 60 employers in the Czech Republic have received the label. In Bulgaria, the initial response of most employers to such an idea was quite warm, although there are still employers who are reluctant to hire Roma because they

worry that the prejudice-ridden public in Bulgaria would most likely react negatively to such an initiative. An example of such an employer was a company, where they simply stated that they do not hire Roma. It needs to be noted that the efforts of IQRS bore fruit after several years of continuous hard work, and that the positive contacts, which have been established with 23 employers in Sofia in less than three months after the start of the pilot are a good indication that these relations can turn into successful long-term cooperation in the future.

#### ***4.5 Competences and resources involved***

Experts involved in the pilot have considerable experience in working with the Roma community on various consultation and therapy programmes concerning health care, prevention of drug and other addictions, childcare and parenthood, educational support for children, life skills for adolescents and family therapy. However, the activities in the pilot differ from their previous work in two important aspects: the focus on employment and the individual character of the work with clients.

Consultations and direct work with the participants is a responsibility of two experts. One expert is working on establishing contacts with employers. A database administrator is in charge of setting up a database of job ads. The HSC has a trained team of community assistants – Roma from the Fakulteta neighbourhood, who are respected and well-known in the area. The community assistants are very important for establishing contacts with the people from the community and attracting them to participate in the activities of the Centre. In the case of the pilot, they also helped disseminating information among young Roma in the neighbourhood and motivated them to enrol.

The Health and Social Centre (HSC) was established in 2002 by the Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED) with the cooperation of Bulgarian institutions and international co-funding. The Centre is located in the Fakulteta neighbourhood in Sofia, which means that it is convenient and easily accessible by the target group. Its premises are suitable for both individual consultations and group work. They consist of a large hall for the kindergarten, trainings and events, a smaller room for group trainings, a counselling room/office, a tutoring room for children, a kitchen operating on the principles of healthy nutrition, a distribution point for children's food and an office space. The Centre represents an innovative approach to the creation of a supportive environment for development and integration of the Roma community in Bulgaria, based on modern programmes approved and developed over many years by the Health and Social Development Foundation.

#### ***4.6 Innovativeness***

The pilot project *Transfer of an integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth* puts into practice a new and effective measure to meet a crucial social need – finding and retaining employment. It empowers young people by providing them with a chance to fully participate in the society and by increasing their abilities. As a long-term effect, this project has the potential to increase social capital and social trust.

Projects and initiatives addressing the widespread unemployment among the Roma youth are considerably less developed than projects targeting other social problems (education and training, health care, housing) despite it being a root cause of inequality of the young Fakulteta residents. The focus on employment and development of job orientation, job search

and job retention skills is therefore an innovative element, contributing in an important way to the work HESED has been performing in Fakulteta (and other areas with large Roma communities) over the years.

Another innovative element, transferred from the IQRS, is individual consulting. The individual approach, not counting the social workers' case management, is a novelty for HESED.<sup>5</sup> Typically, working with large groups is considered most efficient and cost effective, and is consequently preferred over the work with small groups or individuals. One of the interviewed experts felt that an individual approach is an “*exceptional experience*,” as it allows the consultant and the participant to establish a symmetrical partnership in which both parties are stimulated to be active, to react to each other and to work together towards reaching the goal. The expert found this approach to be “*professionally rewarding*,” as the disadvantage of reaching a very limited number of people is richly compensated by the depth and quality of a relationship with the person you work with (Female, NGO, psychologist – consultant). The individual approach gives the consultant and the participant alike a chance to learn from each other, overcome their deficiencies and fully explore and utilise their strengths and resources.

## 5. Project results/outcomes

The pilot *Integrated approach for the improvement of employment prospects among Roma youth*, transferred from IQRS in Brno to Health and Social Development Foundation in Sofia has a considerable potential to address some of the most pronounced social inequalities the young people in the Fakulteta neighbourhood have to cope with. In a large neighbourhood where 4 out of 5 young persons are officially unemployed, a project in which eight young persons are counselled how and where to look for work and 26 employers invited to participate might seem like a drop in the ocean. On the other hand, the pilot represents an innovative measure, which can be developed and applied on a larger scale after the successful piloting. Moreover, the pilot project complements and reinforces the effects of other programmes implemented at the Health and Social Centre, since employment is a critical step in a comprehensive integrated approach to breaking the cycle of poverty and social isolation.

The focus of the pilot project was on building competences (learning). Its aim was to improve the employment prospect of the young Roma by teaching them job seeking and job retention skills. The project also provided the participants with information on the appropriate job openings. In addition to the direct work with the unemployed young Roma from Fakulteta, the pilot addressed the problem of their social isolation by also establishing contacts with employers, who would be willing to hire the project participants.

The pilot had the following preliminary targets:

- 4 HESED members gain understanding on the complex approach developed by IQRS on Roma employment, and specifically on the methodology used in the Centre for counselling and employment
- 10 Roma youth start and complete a series of 8-10 weekly employment counselling sessions

---

<sup>5</sup> Employment bureaux also offer individual consulting, assistance in writing of CVs and motivation letters and similar services. In this sense, the practice itself is not innovative for Bulgaria per se. However, young Roma rarely use this assistance. Offering such services specifically to young Roma and above all within their neighbourhoods is an entirely new approach.

- 20 employers contacted to establish cooperation and provide employment to young Roma either during the pilot or in the near future
- 60 young Roma who need support in finding employment are recorded in a database
- 35 job ads are found and posted on a board in the Health and Social Centre for the duration of 6 weeks
- 20 Roma visitors of the Health and Social Centre supported by being given access to the use of facilities in the Centre (computers, printers, telephones, internet access)

The goals of the project were largely accomplished and all the targets have been achieved or exceeded. Four HESED experts visited IQRS in Brno where they learned from the original project. They obtained an insight into the IQRS's programmes, which target young Roma and prepare them for successful education and labour market inclusion. The visit helped the HESED team to plan and set up a pilot in Sofia. A return visit of IQRS experts to Sofia provided additional knowledge and feedback on the implementation of the ongoing pilot activities.

The pilot was successful in reaching the intended target group. Given the short time frame for the implementation of the pilot and limited financial resources, the targets had to be set modestly, and the enrolment of 10 young persons in the programme was planned. At the beginning, 16 candidates expressed interest, but for different reasons, five changed their minds and did not start with the training. Some lacked motivation for regular attendance of the consultations and training sessions, and/or had very unrealistic expectations about the project. One of the HESED experts noted that often the perceptions of experts/providers of service and of clients greatly differ. In this particular case, while experts were convinced that the training would be very beneficial for the young Roma looking for employment, not many young people shared this view. According to experts' observations, the lower the education level and the longer the period of unemployment, the more likely it was that the person would have very concrete and at the same time unrealistic expectations, and would want to see them realised immediately (Male, NGO, project manager – consultant). It is very difficult for such people to plan ahead and they find the idea that they need to invest time and energy over a relatively long period of time (several months) into something that will not necessarily lead to a tangible result (a job) too abstract. Many therefore lost motivation after the first interview.

Another obstacle the consultants had to deal with was poor time management and the failure to take commitment seriously. Both are most noticeable among people who have been unemployed for a long time or have never worked. Even the participants who regularly visited sessions were often late (sometimes up to one hour), which disrupted the work, and occasionally they did not show up. An expert said that it took time to build a proper partnership, which was essential for making the project truly meaningful, but that through trial and error and with temporary setbacks, both the consultant and the participant were learning "*the proper steps of this dance*" and moved forwards towards the goal (Female, NGO, psychologist – consultant).

Two more young people joined the counselling sessions at a later stage. One of them was able to find a job thanks to the support of her counsellor. With the two latecomers, the total number of participants who have started with the consultations reached 13. However, five participants stopped visiting the consultation sessions soon after the first few appointments. The remaining eight participants visited the sessions regularly and appeared very motivated. This is also valid for the two women, who have started to work at the beginning of the counselling cycle. The format and content of their consultations had to be considerably altered to focus less on job finding skills, and more on the abilities needed for successful integration into the working environment.



According to the preliminary plan, each participant was supposed to attend 8-10 weekly employment counselling sessions. In reality, these numbers were very different.

1-3 sessions: 5 participants

5 sessions: 1 participant

7 sessions: 2 participants

10 sessions: 3 participants

12 sessions: 1 participant

20 sessions: 1 participant

The motivation of participants was a very important issue and varied considerably. It was closely linked to the unique life situation and value system of each participant. Attitudes and concerns of the family also played a role. In case of female participants, the opinion of male partners carried a sizeable weight. Some women dropped out of the programme due to objections of their partners.

Most of the participants, who completed the entire cycle of sessions, reported that they felt much more confident and calm regarding their ability to search for work. The consultations have visibly increased their self-esteem.

Some participants needed a larger number of sessions than others to accomplish this result. On the other hand, staying motivated and committed to visiting 10 consultations was a challenge for some, while for other, this was only a beginning and they expressed a desire to attend more consultations.

Participants do not only have difficulties with finding work, but also retaining it. As most of them have a low level of education and qualification, the work most typically available to them is not very rewarding and interesting. Finding satisfaction and self-realisation through work is also a challenge. Those participants who have found work through the project have shared their need to receive support and advice on how to adapt to the work environment and establish relationship with co-workers. The issues of work discipline, discrimination, conflict resolution, changes of attitudes and stereotypes also came up.

In addition to employment consultations and psychological support, some participants also needed counselling in the field of labour law. This again shows how flexible and well qualified the experts need to be.

The target of 20 employers was exceeded and 26 companies were contacted. Contacts have been established through different channels: personal contacts, online job search platforms, career websites, company websites, industrial and business associations, branch chambers and job fairs. Special attention was given to companies with a strong corporate-social responsibility programme and which are socially active. The companies were from different sectors: facility management, waste processing and recycling, tourism, food and beverages production, education, IT and call centres. The contacted and potential employers were recorded in a database.

Among the 26 contacted companies, two offered employment to pilot participants and hired three of them. One of these two employers later recommended HESED as a reliable organization to a colleague in the clothes sector, who was ready to hire a participant in the pilot. This is a positive example of how the trust, which has been built between HESED and employers, can lead to popularization within their own networks. This effect can be very powerful if the program scales up and gains momentum. An additional seven employers stated they were willing to provide work to young Roma from HESED's database, while 14

agreed to be contacted again in the future and to inform HESED in case they have appropriate vacancies. Two employers have offered to present their companies at HSC during a Day of Open Doors, which could be organised in the future. Among the approached companies, only three have rejected any cooperation and declared that they do not hire people of Roma origin.

By the end of the pilot project, 29 suitable job ads were found and posted on the board in the Health and Social Centre in Fakulteta, which is slightly less than the planned 35 job ads. However, the search for job ads and adding them to the database is an ongoing process and it can be expected that the target will soon be met. In addition, 60 young Roma job seekers were recorded in the database.

## **6. Final reflections**

### ***6.1 The role of the pilot/project/practice***

Over two thirds of the young Roma (under 30) have never had a job, which is much more than in the case of any other ethnic community in Bulgaria. According to the young people interviewed in Fakulteta at the previous stages of CITISPYCE project, unemployment is by far the most important problem they face and which reflects on all other aspects of their lives – education, housing, access to adequate health care, leisure. Young people in Fakulteta feel abandoned by the state and often have predominantly negative experiences with official institutions, including employment bureaux, and rarely try to find work through official channels.

The civil society and the non-governmental sector try to fill this gap. Over the years, NGOs have implemented numerous projects – mostly focused on the areas of education, health care (promotion of immunisation, childcare, prevention of infectious and sexually transmitted diseases), prevention of social and health risks for young families, social work with families in risk, various vocational training courses, and cultural activities. Somewhat less developed have been projects aimed at helping young Roma to find employment. The current project therefore represents a valuable addition to the efforts to fight inequalities.

Successful implementation of the pilot and above all the positive example of the pilot participants can motivate and encourage scores of other young Roma from the Fakulteta neighbourhood. Gradually, the project could bring about a visible and meaningful change in Fakulteta – an area characterised by prevailing poverty, massive unemployment and deep pessimism.

The participants who have received training and support in the pilot phase feel empowered and able to assume control over a very important aspect of their lives – looking and applying for employment on their own. Having a job is crucial for a person's self-confidence and for their standing in the society. In a neighbourhood with such enormous levels of unemployment, those who work can provide a glimmer of hope to others and be their role models. Eight people might represent a modest beginning, but their eventual success carries a potential for achieving a much wider impact.

## ***6.2 Innovation***

The pilot introduces a new and effective measure for empowering young people to meet a crucial social need – finding and retaining employment. Professional orientation and counselling are not a novelty for Bulgaria. For example, employment bureaux offer individual consulting, assistance in writing of CVs and motivation letters and similar services to the unemployed. However, young unemployed Roma rarely use these services. For numerous reasons (red tape and unfriendly attitude of officials, distance from the neighbourhood where they live, language and communication problems), many young Roma have a negative attitude towards visiting official institutions, including the employment bureaux. Especially those who have been out of work for prolonged periods, or have never been employed at all, do not know about these services or are too insecure to use them.

Consultations and training aimed at building job searching skills are therefore not an innovation as such. However, a project designed specifically to target young Roma and above all providing these services within their neighbourhoods is an entirely new approach. It empowers young people by providing them with a chance to fully participate in the society and by increasing their abilities. As a long-term effect, this project has a potential to increase social capital and social trust.

Individual consulting is another innovative element transferred from the IQRS. The work with people from the Roma community is typically done in groups, as the group work is most efficient and cost effective. On the other hand, the individual approach makes the interaction between the consultant and the participant much more dynamic. It makes it possible to establish a symmetrical partnership in which both sides can utilise their full potential, be active, learn from each other and work together towards reaching the goal.

## ***6.3 Success factors***

The pilot plan has foreseen the following success factors:

1. Successful adaptation of social innovative practices from Brno to the context and needs of Roma youth in Sofia.
2. Development of relevant job skills for Roma youth through the design and implementation of a pilot counselling program, which can be successfully expanded and replicated.
3. Development of trust between Roma youth and the HESED team based on mutual respect and helpful support.
4. Building of a trusting relationship between a network of employers and HESED, which will act as a bridge between employers and Roma workers.

The socially innovative practice developed by IQRS in Brno has been successfully transferred and adapted to the context and needs of Roma youth in Sofia (success factor 1). Cooperation between the two organisations was productive and cordial.

Interviews with the HESED experts and the young participants, as well as the observation of the consultation sessions and of one interview with a potential new participant give sufficient ground to positively evaluate the implementation of success factors 2 and 3. Eight young people completed the consultation course (with different number of sessions) and three of them found work during the project, which can be considered a huge success.

The implementation of the success factor 4 takes considerably more time compared to the other success factors, but here too the results after the four months of work are very encouraging. Among the 26 employers contacted, two have decided to hire three pilot participants (encouraged by the positive experience, one of them have made a similar recommendation to another employer), most have expressed positive interest, and only three have rejected the idea of employing young Roma. Overall, the results achieved during the relatively short duration of the pilot are encouraging for the further development of HESED's cooperation with employers.

#### ***6.4 Policy recommendations, transferability***

- a) Numerous studies, including the research conducted in the frame of the CITISPYCE project, have shown that young people who live in isolated, marginalised and socially-economically deprived neighbourhoods rarely use or are even aware of social services available at institutions located outside their neighbourhoods. Consequently, those who are most in need of these services are at the same time least likely to use them. This deepens their exclusion and intensifies the social inequalities they are victims of. The pilot showed that a very effective (and potentially the only) way to bridge this gap is to bring these services into the deprived neighbourhoods. Most young people who live on the margins of the society do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and self-confidence to take advantage of available mechanisms, and will benefit from them only if they can access them in a familiar environment and through institutions and people they know and trust. It is therefore essential to offer vocational training, professional orientation and employment counselling inside the neighbourhoods such as Fakulteta.
- b) The net of social inequalities in which young people from Fakulteta are caught is thick and complex. The usual practice in Bulgaria for the past 25 years has been to address one problem at a time, which is an approach that cannot break the vicious circle and achieve progress. Efforts for reducing unemployment among the young Roma have to be undertaken as an inseparable part of a comprehensive integrated strategy for overcoming the multiple inequalities in the fields of education, labour, health care, housing and infrastructure, and quality of life.
- c) In addition to the problem of piecemeal work, most of the existing measures, undertaken in Bulgaria on national and local levels to reduce unemployment among the young Roma, fail to take into consideration the specific features of the large number of Roma youths. As such, these measures are unattractive and ineffective. Before being included in programmes for professional development and vocational qualification, young Roma need to undergo a specific training for development of their social skills and personal potential. This includes life-planning support, learning of key competences for better education and successful inclusion in the labour market, family planning and responsible parenthood and prevention of risky behaviour.
- d) Systematic and purposeful work with the unemployed young persons from the Roma community is only one half of the solution. Employers have to be stimulated and encouraged to embrace the principles of corporate-social responsibility and be open towards employing qualified young Roma not just in hard manual labour and low quality jobs, which are typically offered to them, but in other sectors as well.
- e) The piloted approach is most suitable and effective if applied on the local level. As mentioned above, it is essential to provide the services inside the marginalised and

deprived neighbourhoods, taking into consideration local specific features. The service providers have to be highly experienced, adaptable and flexible, but the most important condition is that they are well known and trusted by the people in the neighbourhood.

## References

NSI, (2012), *Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 година, Том 3, Книга 23: София (столица)* (Census of the Population and Housing 2011, Vol. 3, Book 23: Sofia – the Capital), Sofia: National Statistical Institute, <http://sofia.bg/pictss/T3K23-Sofia-Stolica.pdf>

NSI, (2014), Unemployment Rates of Population Aged 15 Years and Over. Sofia: National Statistical Institute, [http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/data/timeseries/Labour\\_3.2.3\\_EN.xls](http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/data/timeseries/Labour_3.2.3_EN.xls)

UNICEF, (2015), Assessment of the Status and Analysis of the Profile of Adolescents and Young People Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEETs). Sofia: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). [http://www.unicef.bg/assets/Conferences/NEETs/NEETs\\_ENG\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.unicef.bg/assets/Conferences/NEETs/NEETs_ENG_Summary.pdf)