

Local engagement for Roma inclusion

Locality study Megara (Greece), 2016

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1. Executive summary

In Megara, the peaceful coexistence of the Roma and non-Roma communities has been challenging in the recent years and today the Roma community lives isolated in the Vlycho settlement, about 1 kilometre away from the city centre. Discrimination, lack of cooperation with the municipal authorities, inner-community tensions and the lack of involvement of the Roma community in decision-making process have constituted barriers to the equal participation of Roma in the past in local socioeconomic life. The LERI research focused on bringing together the Roma community and the municipal authorities, as a first step towards breaking the isolation of the Roma community. In this context, the research project acted as a bridge between the Roma community and the municipal authorities.

However, the level of engagement in the project activities, the limited direct cooperation between the Roma community and the municipal authorities, and the level of trust towards the LERI field experts varied during project implementation. It challenged the timely and efficient implementation of the research activities, providing evidence as to what works and what does not work in the implementation of Roma inclusion actions.

As a result, several revisions and adjustments to the planned interventions took place over the course of the research, reflecting and corresponding to the developments at local level. In the end, three interventions were implemented: (a) the establishment and operation of a mediation office in the settlement of Vlycho; (b) the organisation of a cultural event with the aim to award Roma children who successfully completed school, and inform as well as motivate Roma parents to enrol their children in schools; and (c) the methodological support of a survey in Vlycho. The implementation of the project interventions facilitated the interaction and cooperation between the local Roma association and the municipal authorities; strengthened the position of the Roma association within the Roma community; supported methodologically the implementation of a survey in Vlycho; supported members of the Roma community in their transactions with the public services on various administrative issues; and informed and motivated Roma parents to enrol their children in school. Yet, further efforts are needed to maintain and strengthen the cooperation between all relevant parties, while capacity building activities, targeting not only the Roma community but the local authorities and other local stakeholders as well, is a prerequisite for the active and meaningful collaboration of all parties and the participation of the Roma community in social inclusion actions.

Keywords/Tags:

Trust building, cooperation of local actors, mediation, survey, empowerment.

2. Description of the local context

Megara is a historic city located in the western part of Attica, 42 km from the centre of Athens. It is bordered to the north by the Corinth Gulf and to the south by the Saronic Gulf. According to the 2011 Census¹, the total population in Megara stands at 36,924. As to the structure of the population, 52.8% of the population are men and 47.2% women. The economically active population stands at 40.7%², while 3,365 people are recorded as being unemployed. However, according to the available data of the local office of the Greek Manpower Employment Organisation (OEAD), in October 2014³, the number of unemployed was much higher (i.e. 4,141), a number which is 24.4% higher than in January 2011.

With regard to the educational level of the employed⁴, 21.7% are tertiary education graduates, while 37.2% are graduates of post-secondary or secondary education. On the other hand, almost half of the unemployed (51.1%⁵) have completed secondary or higher education. Concerning the structure of the local labour market, the service sector employs 47% of the economically active population, the secondary sector employs 19% and the primary sector employs only 11% of the economically active population⁶.

With regard to the Roma community, it is noted that it has a long presence in the locality. According to the representatives of the Roma Association of Vlycho, Aghios Christoforos, Roma people have resided in Vlycho for decades, a settlement which is situated in the eastern part of the city, approximately 1 km away from the city centre, as depicted on the map below.

¹ Hellenic Statistical Authority (2011), *Demographic characteristics/2011*, Athens, Hellenic Statistical Authority, available at: <http://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SAM03/> (access on 26/05/2016)

² Hellenic Statistical Authority (2011), *Economic characteristics/2011*, Athens, Hellenic Statistical Authority, available at: <http://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SAM04/> (access on 26/05/2016)

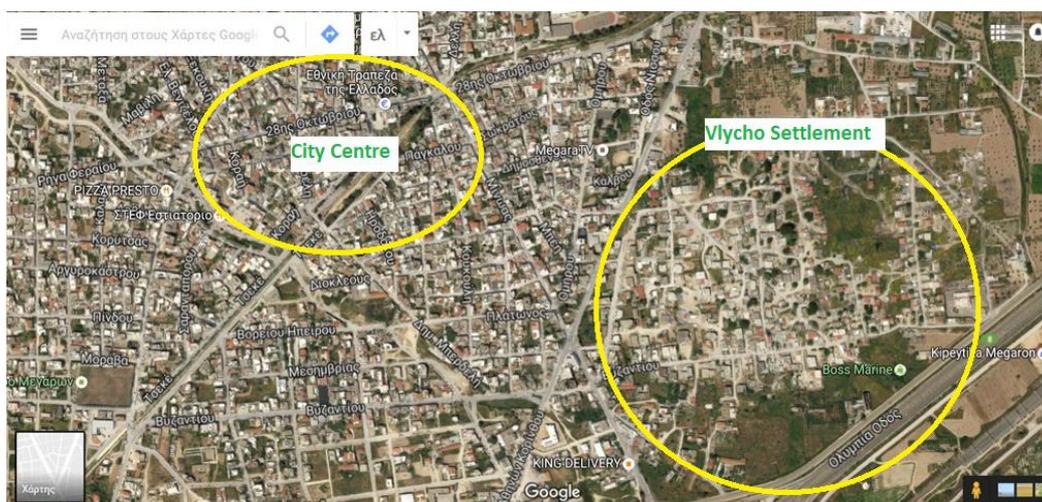
³ Municipality of Megara (2015), *Local Operational planning: 2015-2019* available at: <http://www.megara.gr/portal/images/pdf/10-DIAVOULEYSI/2016/05-05-2016-epixirisiako-programma-2015-19.pdf> (access on 05/09/2016).

⁴ Hellenic Statistical Authority (2011), *Economic characteristics/2011*, Athens, Hellenic Statistical Authority, available at: <http://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SAM04/> (access on 26/05/2016)

⁵ Hellenic Statistical Authority (2011), *Economic characteristics / 2011*, Athens, Hellenic Statistical Authority, available at: <http://www.statistics.gr/el/statistics/-/publication/SAM04/> (access on 26/05/2016).

⁶ Municipality of Megara (2015), *Local Operational planning: 2015-2019* available at: <http://www.megara.gr/portal/images/pdf/10-DIAVOULEYSI/2016/05-05-2016-epixirisiako-programma-2015-19.pdf> (access on 05/09/2016).

Figure 1. Map of Megara



Source: Google maps, 2016

According to the most recent survey, conducted in 2001 by the municipal authorities in Vlycho⁷, 1,434 people reside in the settlement, the vast majority of which is of Roma origin (92 % of the total population in Vlycho). Although there are no recent official data, the municipal services estimate that 1,300–1,800 Roma people live in Vlycho, constituting about 3.5 % of the total population in the city. However, the actual number of Roma in the area is an issue under discussion among the local authorities and Roma community. The Roma Association counts 3,500 members, a number, which is significantly higher if the children and elderly people are counted, raising thus the total population of Roma in Vlycho to possibly 5,000, according to the estimation of the President of the local Roma Association.

As to the socioeconomic situation of the Roma community, the majority of Roma own in their own houses or rent them and most of them have access to electricity and running water. The quality of the basic road infrastructure is significantly lower compared to the other parts of the city, while only a few streetlights are in place.

Regarding employment, the lack of available official data hinders the evaluation of the access of Roma to the labour market. Yet, as stated by the representatives of the Socio-medical Support Centre for Roma during a fieldwork visit of the LERI experts to the settlement in July 2015, the unemployment rate of Roma over the last years appears to be high. The main factor that has contributed to this is the changes in the local labour market, resulting from the fact that in the 90's immigrants, mostly from Albania and Pakistan, have settled in the locality. While in the past, Roma and non-Roma worked together in the agricultural sector, the immigrants, who constitute a cheaper labour force, have gradually replaced Roma. Nowadays, the majority of Roma work in the breeding and rearing of poultry as well as in itinerant commerce.

⁷ Municipality of Megara (2001), *Survey on the Roma population in the area of Vlycho in Megara*, Megara, Municipality of Megara.

With regard to education, the majority of elderly Roma are illiterate according to the unofficial estimations of the local Roma Association and the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators. On the other hand, the participation of Roma children in the educational system has been improved in recent years, mainly because of the programme 'Education of Roma children', which was implemented by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.⁸ However, through the LERI implementation, it was observed that many Roma children do not understand or speak Greek, only Romani. According to the available data, 146 Roma children were enrolled during academic year 2012–2013⁹, mainly in the local kindergartens and primary schools. Yet, many of them do not frequently attend school due to the distance between the settlement and the schools, according to their parents. Although in Megara there are eight nursery schools, four kindergartens, seven primary schools and five high schools (three junior high schools and two high schools)¹⁰, only two of them are located close to the settlement, at about 600 metres distance. It is noted however that, recently, the Region of Attica (Regional Unit of Western Attica), put into operation a bus to transport the students to school.

One of the main challenges that the Roma community faces is discrimination. As stated by the Deputy Regional Governor of Western Attica during one of the regional forums on Roma issues in 2015,

*"there are widespread opinions such as 'there is no reason to try, Roma do not learn' and 'Roma people remain the same and do not really like learning, they are lazy and frauds' or 'Roma only want money and do not care about education' in the region."*¹¹

The participation of the Roma community in public life, ranging from participation in decision-making processes to the participation in social and cultural events, has been limited. The engagement of some of the community members in illegal activities, such as the drug trade and robberies, has largely influenced the image of the Roma community. The existence of inner-community tensions unsettle the community and cause significant difficulties not only in the cohesion and everyday lives of the Roma, but in its relation with the wider local community as well. In particular, as stated by members of the local community and presented in the local media, the participation of Roma people in robberies over the recent years has increased. One characteristic example, which has unsettled the non-

⁸ National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Centre for Intercultural Education, "Education of Roma children project 2010-2014," funding under Operational Programme "Education and Lifelong Learning" of the Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs, project website available at: <http://www.keda.uoa.gr/roma/> (access on 5/9/2016)

⁹ National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (2015) "Education of Roma children project: Description of interventions and mapping of qualitative and quantitative data, school years 2010-2013" (Πρόγραμμα: Εκπαίδευση των παιδιών Ρομά 2010 - 2013. Περιγραφή Παρεμβατικών δράσεων και αποτύπωση ποιοτικών - ποσοτικών δεδομένων για τα σχολικά έτη 2010 – 2013"), Athens, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, available at <http://www.keda.uoa.gr/roma/index.php/mmedia/formspublications/12-mmedia/publications-press/101-romabookmap2012-2013>.

¹⁰ Municipality of Megara, Strategic planning: 2015-2019 (under consultation), Megara, Municipality of Megara available at: http://www.megara.gr/dimosmegaron/PDF_ATTACHMENT_FILES/01_DIAVOULEYSI/stratigikos-sxediasmos-2015-2019.pdf (access on 31/5/2016).

¹¹ Region of Attica, Regional Unit of Western Attica (2015), minutes of 4th meeting of the Network of Cooperation on Roma issues titled "Lifelong Learning and Roma in Western Attica", Elefsina, 14 October 2015, available at: http://www.patt.gov.gr/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16499:pragmatopoiithike-to-4o-forum-gia-themata-roma-sti-dytiki-attiki&catid=288&Itemid=305 (access on 31/05/2016).

Roma community over the last two years, is that Roma people during peanut harvesting period (a local cultivation) snatch the peanuts from the local fields to sell. This issue was brought up in a municipal forum, called 'Citizens' time', held on 10 June 2016¹² where the Mayor meets up with citizens and hear their views. The same issue had also emerged the previous August at the same forum.¹³

However, over the last two years, regional and municipal authorities have demonstrated an openness and motivation to get involved in Roma-related actions. In particular, the region of Attica (Regional Unit of Western Attica), where Megara is located, is very active and implements many actions with the aim of supporting Roma social integration. In particular, among others, the regional authorities have planned to finance, using their own resources, the implementation of three actions targeting Roma in the municipality of Megara: a) a social survey aimed at mapping the current situation in the settlement of Vlycho, b) a project aimed at promoting literacy among Roma, and finally c) a project to promote Roma culture. All of these actions are part of the 'Regional Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction'¹⁴.

Concerning the municipality of Megara, actions specifically targeting the Roma community have been included within the five-year term municipal strategic planning, 2015–2019¹⁵. In its Local Strategic Plan the municipality highlights the need to promote the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, giving particular emphasis to the Roma population, and foresees, under Measure 2.2, a 'Programme for the Social Inclusion of Roma'.

To conclude, what was observed in the locality from the very beginning of the LERI implementation was that, on the one hand, there were many urgent needs in the fields of employment, public infrastructure (mainly roads and electricity) and education, while on the other, various factors identified as potential barriers for the implementation of the LERI project in the locality. In particular, the relationships between the Roma and local stakeholders were not always based on trust and the Roma community was isolated and showed a lack of trust of the non-Roma. Moreover, the limited number of relevant stakeholders, as well as the inner-community tensions, because of inner-community differences and the consequent police raids in the settlement, have also been acknowledged right from the beginning as potential barriers for the implementation of the research.

¹² Municipality of Megara, "What the locals requested by the Mayor on the "Citizens forum (Τι ζήτησαν από τον Δήμο Μεγαρέων οι δημότες την «Ωρα του Δημότη»)", 10 June 2016, available at: <http://www.megara.org/dimos-megaron-ora-toy-dimoti/>

¹³ Municipality of Megara, "The robberies of peanuts at the local fields shows a high increase- The thieves are known" (Σε έξαρση οι κλοπές φιστικιών μέσα από τον χώρο παραγωγής – γνωστοί οι κλέφτες)", 25 August 2015, available at: <http://www.megara.org/> (accessed on 05 September 2016)

¹⁴ Region of Attica (2015), *Regional Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction (Περιφερειακή Στρατηγική για την Κοινωνική Ένταξη και την Καταπολέμηση της Φτώχειας)*, August 2015, Elefsina, Region of Attica, available at http://www.pepattikis.gr/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/%CE%A0%CE%95%CE%A3%CE%9A%CE%95_%CE%91%CE%A4%CE%A4%CE%99%CE%9A%CE%97%CE%A3_v1.3.pdf (access on 10/06/2016)

¹⁵ The five years term local strategic and operation plan (Στρατηγικός και Επιχειρησιακός Προγραμματισμός Ο.Τ.Α. α' βαθμού) is obligatory for all Greek Municipalities under the Greek Law 3852/2010 (OJ A 87/7.6.2010) 'Reorganisation of Local Government - Kallikratis Program' (Νέα Αρχιτεκτονική της Αυτοδιοίκησης και της Αποκεντρωμένης Διοίκησης - Πρόγραμμα Καλλικράτης), 7 June 2010.

Yet, at that time, there were a few local stakeholders who were willing to support actively Roma social integration actions. The positive political context and the actions that the regional and local authorities were planning, during the LERI implementation, in favour of Roma also strengthened LERI efforts. Thus, the LERI field experts, by taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the local conditions at that time, decided that in order to effectively implement the project activities, the establishment of a project team needed to be the first step, as further described below. Concerning the engagement of local stakeholders in the implementation of the project in the locality, the LERI field experts collaborated with the Municipality, which issued a Decision of the Municipal Council for the provision of support to the LERI project in Megara¹⁶. In particular, the support of the representatives of the municipal Legal Entity of Public Law, Hrodoros, which operates the Roma Socio-medical Support Centre in Vlycho, the Roma Association of Vlycho, Aghios Christoforos, as well as that of the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and collaborators was crucial for the project implementation in the locality.

Findings of the PAR needs assessment and thematic focus of the LERI research

The LERI field experts began the implementation of the research by conducting a participatory needs assessment, with the aim of verifying the primary needs and core problems in the locality as a first step in preparation. The initial participatory needs assessment was conducted within a limited period, based mainly on informal discussions and the participation of the LERI field experts in local events related to Roma issues. It was due to the fact that the implementation of the LERI research in Megara started in July 2015, a year later than in the other LERI localities,¹⁷ and following the decision of the municipal authorities to support the implementation of the project in the locality,

The implementation of the PAR needs assessment was conducted in such a way as to offer as much information as possible in that limited time, and finally provided a thorough reflection and record of the main needs of the Roma community. As mentioned above, the limited number of the Roma-related stakeholders in the locality was one of the first challenges that the LERI field experts had to cope with. Thus, priority was given to the establishment of a local research team as a means to ensure and promote cooperation. The team consisted of the LERI field experts, one Municipality representative, the President of the local Roma Association, one Roma woman mediator, and was further supported by the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and collaborators due to the lack of other stakeholders in the locality.

Once the team was established, frequent visits and informal meetings to the locality were organised. One of the most urgent problems identified right from the first field visits of the LERI field experts to the locality was **the lack of available statistical data** regarding the size and socioeconomic situation of the

¹⁶ Municipality of Megara (2015), Municipal Council Decision No 108/2015 of 11 August 2015, on the participation in LERI implementation, Megara

¹⁷ Megara was selected as a locality for the LERI research in early 2015, after the previously selected municipality in Greece dropped out of the LERI. As such, the local research team was faced with the challenge of implementing the same research process within a shorter timeframe.

Roma community. During the initial discussions with the identified stakeholders, it became obvious that there are different estimations of the size of the Roma population in Vlycho. According to the President of the Roma Association of Vlycho “there are 3,500 registered members in the Association, without counting our children, but the municipality estimates that there are no more than 1,800 persons.”¹⁸ The discussions with all local actors, including the regional authorities, led to an agreement as to the importance of conducting a census in the Vlycho settlement, which would be financed with their own regional resources and methodologically supported by the LERI research.

The second core priority identified was the **high illiteracy within the local Roma community**. Although Roma speak Greek, only a few of them can read or write in Greek, causing them practical difficulties in their daily activities, including entering the labour market. To this end, the need to enhance their skills through the exploitation of existing relevant programmes was considered of high importance. The LERI field experts, in collaboration with the municipal authorities, informed the representatives of the local Roma Association that the ‘Lifelong Learning Centres – Programmes at National and Local Level PA7 & PA8’ running and was open for applications at that time (September 2015). It formed part of the Operational Programme ‘Education and Lifelong Learning’ of the Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs. Following an exchange of information with the officer of the programme in Megara, an agreement between the LERI field experts, the municipal representatives and the representatives of the Roma Association was reached concerning the provision of support by the LERI research to the members of the Roma community. This meant help in applying to the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), as a means for building their capacity. The vast majority of Roma people were not aware of this educational programme, which also included a thematic area indicated to Roma for learning Greek, while those who knew about it stated that they did not know the procedures for applying. In this context, following the suggestions of some Roma members and in consultation with the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, the LERI field experts decided to support the interested Roma applicants in filling in and submitting their applications along with all requested accompanying documents i.e. identity card, school certification, etc.

However, the implementation of this intervention was linked with the continuity of the LLP at national level. The programme stopped in January 2016 and it was unknown when and if it will resume. Thus, the LERI local research team reconsidered how they could support Roma educational needs in Megara and an alternative intervention was planned with the active participation of Roma members, as further analysed in the next section. Briefly, the alternative intervention was based on the observation and statements that there were several members of the community who faced various problems in their daily life regarding their transactions with the public services on administrative issues. Thus the LERI field experts together with the representatives of the Roma Association agreed to provide, as an alternative intervention, support to the Roma community members on administrative issues, which finally took the form of establishing and operating a ‘mediation office’.

¹⁸ President of Local Roma Association, informal meeting, 21 July 2015, male, age 33.

In addition, the LERI field experts were informed from the beginning of the project's implementation about the existence of tensions within the Roma community and their negative consequences with regard to their relations with the wider local community and the local authorities. Following discussions with the local Roma Association and with members of the Roma community, it was agreed that activities that would improve inner-community relations and the relations with the wider community were crucial, and would also contribute to combating discrimination towards Roma. In this context, the representatives of the local Roma Association proposed and agreed with the LERI field experts that the LERI research could support the local Roma Association in the organisation of a cultural event that would give the Roma an opportunity to work together in its preparation. This process aimed to directly contribute to resolving conflicts and provide the opportunity to invite the local community to meet Roma and learn about their customs and culture.

Finally, one of the major concerns expressed by the representatives of the local Roma Association and members of the Roma community to the LERI field experts and to the representatives of the regional authorities, during a regional consultation forum on Roma issues, was that although the majority of the Roma are engaged in peddling, they lack the necessary peddling licence. Taking into consideration the difficulties they encounter in obtaining this licence, they asked for the project's support. However, the LERI field experts informed them that the issue of the peddler's licence could not be resolved at local but at national level as it is regulated by national law. Taking into consideration also the fact that, as informed during one of the consultation forums of the Network of Cooperation on Roma issues in Western Attica, the Deputy Regional Governor of Western Attica had already sent an official letter to the relevant ministry, informing the central government of the problem that Roma peddlers face in obtaining the relevant licence. At the end, it was agreed that the LERI research would not address this need.

To this end, through the PAR needs assessment phase of the project all the above-mentioned needs were further discussed and examined by the LERI local research team and the interventions designed in a way to meet them in the most efficient way, as further described below.

3. PAR methodology employed

As mentioned in the previous section, the PAR needs assessment phase started in parallel with the late launching of the research in the locality in July 2015. Given that the LERI field experts had had no prior contact with any of the local stakeholders in the area, the experts organised frequent visits to the locality with the aim of building trust with local actors. Between early July 2015 and the first half of November 2015, the LERI field experts visited the locality 10 times, arranging multiple meetings with local stakeholders. Thus, in Megara the PAR methodology was constructed progressively where each step and activity was dependent on the results of the previous activity. Because of the local conditions and the relations among the local actors were unknown in the beginning, the choice of this inductive methodological approach in the implementation of the PAR was also the most appropriate. The LERI field experts chose to build the methodology step by step and allow each activity to lead to the next one, rather

that choosing techniques from the start that might not finally meet the local needs in an efficient and effective way.

This approach, which derives from the participatory nature of the LERI research, resulted in postponing or changing the direction of the project activities several times. Hence, what had initially been planned differed in some cases with what was implemented in the end with the aim of meeting the current needs and at the same time observing what works and what does not work in a reliable way. The LERI research's implementation in Megara was finally carried out in three PAR cycles. The first cycle was completed once the LERI field experts gained the trust of the local stakeholders and lasted from July to September 2015. The PAR technique applied was informal discussions, through which local needs were examined. The second PAR cycle was implemented from October 2015 to November 2015. The second PAR cycle ensured the participation of as many stakeholders as possible at local level and resulted in the establishment of the local research team, while the PAR techniques applied were the local research team per se, the informal discussions as well as informal meetings. The second PAR cycle completed with the first selection of the interventions even though some of them did not finally take place as planned. Finally, the third PAR cycle was launched in December 2015 and lasted until September 2016. The third PAR cycle included the implementation of three interventions each of which was connected with a PAR technique, as described in detail in the next section. The table below depicts the three PAR cycles in chronological order along with each PAR technique, intervention and obstacles encountered; a detailed description of the research process divided into the three PAR cycles follows.

Table 1. PAR methodology applied

PAR cycle	Duration	PAR technique applied	Activities/ Interventions	Barriers
1	July 2015–September 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of local needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inner-community tensions
2	October 2015–November 2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal discussions • Informal meetings • Local research team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Census • Support to apply for the LLP • Cultural event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tensions in the Roma community as well as between the Roma and the local community
3	December 2015–September 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal discussions & meetings • Photovoice (planned but not applied) • Participatory video (planned but not applied) • Local research team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Census • Establishment of a mediation office • Cultural event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ending of the Life Long Learning Programme (LLP) • Delay in the procedures for conducting the census • Non-participation of a high school in

PAR cycle 1

The first PAR cycle aimed at gaining access to the Roma community and building trust with the local actors, while focusing on the following main research questions:

- What are the main barriers/obstacles to Roma engagement?
- What are the main needs of Roma communities?
- In what specific policy field?
- What interventions could be feasible under LERI given the current circumstances and time limitations?

The first technique that was selected by the LERI field experts was informal discussions; based on their outcome, the LERI field experts then chose the next PAR technique to be applied. The aim of those meetings was to elicit the participants' thoughts, needs and expectations, as well as to familiarise and integrate them (especially Roma) into the research process to act as collaborators and co-researchers. This technique allowed the LERI field experts to be perceived not as 'pure' researchers, but as a team that aimed to discuss issues with the participants in an open way, inviting them to co-decide and co-design interventions based on their input. To this end, many informal meetings were scheduled with representatives of the municipal, regional authorities, and local Roma Association as well as with members of the Roma community, which led to the initial identification of the Roma community's main needs and to local collaborators. However, an inner-community tension emerged in Vlycho settlement in August 2015, which caused the PAR needs assessment activities to be postponed, hindering the design and application of other PAR techniques at that stage of the project implementation.

Initially in July 2015, the LERI field experts participated in a local consultation forum on Roma issues organised by the Municipality of Megara. The aim of the forum was to exchange opinions and ideas that could lead to specific local actions for the promotion of Roma integration. After the forum, the LERI field experts had a bilateral meeting with officials from Megara and discussed the participation of the municipality in the LERI research. A few days later, the Mayor of Megara officially informed the LERI field experts that the Municipality agreed to support the LERI research¹⁹.

Following the formal approval of the Mayor, the LERI local research team had an **informal discussion** with three representatives of the Municipal Legal Entity of Public Law, Hrodoros (*Ν.Π.Δ.Δ.-Κοινωνικής Αλληλεγγύης & Αθλητισμού, Ηρόδωρος*), which is responsible for the operation of the local Socio-Medical Support Centre for Roma (*Ιατρο-κοινωνικό Κέντρο Ρομά Βλυχού, ΙΑΚ*) in Vlycho. In this meeting, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and a Roma

¹⁹ Municipality of Megara (2015), Municipal Council Decision No 108/2015 of 11 August 2015, on the participation in LERI implementation, Megara

mediator, collaborator of the programme 'Education of Roma children' also participated. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the framework of the cooperation between the LERI research and the municipality. Moreover, the current local needs as identified by the municipal authorities and particularly by the two social workers who work closely with the Roma were discussed, along with some potential interventions.

Having gained a first insight into the situation in the settlement from the representatives of the Municipality, the LERI field experts together with the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, and one Roma woman mediator from the University of Athens, had an informal meeting with the President of the local Roma Association, Aghios Christoforos, and two Roma women mediators of the settlement, who had participated in the ROMED project. Prior to the field visit, the field expert contacted the President of the local Roma Association and asked him to inform and invite other members of the local community to the meeting. The meeting, which took place in front of the building of the local Roma Association in Vlycho, lasted three hours and finally took the form of a community gathering since more Roma participated. In particular, while at the beginning of the meeting three Roma were participating, the President and the two women Roma mediators, during the course of the discussion other Roma joined the meeting during which they were informed about the LERI research and shared their experiences.

The President of Local Roma Association stated his willingness to support and actively participate in the LERI research, and agreed to prepare a list that would include some of the most urgent needs of the Roma community. Subsequently, a meeting was scheduled to discuss those needs in detail.

On 7 August 2015, the LERI field experts visited Vlycho settlement and had an informal discussion with the President, the Deputy President of the local Roma Association and one member of the local community, who was selected by the President. Furthermore, in the meeting, the President of the National Union of Greek ROM (Συνομοσπονδία Ελλήνων Ρομά) was present at the meeting. The LERI field experts firstly presented once again the aim and the context of the LERI research. Then, the President of the National Union of Greek ROM (who presented himself as the 'leader' of all Roma at national level) stated that the main problem of the projects targeting the Roma community is that the Roma community does not participate in decision-making processes. The fact that more Roma from other localities were invited by the President of the local Roma Association to attend the meeting revealed the lack of trust towards the LERI field experts. Thus, several discussions and meetings had to take place in order to gain the trust of the local Roma community. Overall, the LERI field experts organised 10 field visits and 12 informal meetings, in which 21 people participated in total, which led to an initial identification of the main needs (*first PAR cycle*).

PAR cycle 2

Once the main needs were identified, the second PAR cycle started, which focused on the design of interventions corresponding to the identified main needs. The interventions initially planned were (a) the provision of support for the design of a census in the locality, (b) the promotion of the participation of Roma in the Lifelong Learning Programme, and (c) the organisation of a cultural

event. However, for reasons, which are further analysed below, the intervention aimed at the promotion of the LLP was replaced in PAR cycle 3 by the establishment of a mediation office at the local Roma Association Office in Vlycho. The PAR techniques selected were the same as in PAR cycle 1, i.e. informal discussions and meetings, but also supported by the establishment of the local research team. The main research questions of the second PAR cycle were as follows:

- How should the actions be designed to address the main identified needs of the local Roma community?
- Which PAR techniques are appropriate for activating the Roma community and supporting cooperation?

PAR cycle 3

During PAR cycle 2, it was noted that the informal discussions had to a certain degree facilitate the process of building trust with the local actors. Thus, through the previous PAR cycle the LERI field experts acknowledged that during the implementation of the project interventions (PAR cycle 3), “more in-depth” PAR techniques were needed to achieve higher levels of participation and motivation from the Roma community. Thus, during the third PAR cycle and with the aim of enhancing the realisation of the selected interventions and implementing them in open and participatory way, the photovoice and participatory video techniques were selected.

The main research questions in the context of the third PAR cycle were as follows:

- How many Roma live in the settlement?
- To what extent can the Roma people increase their capacity through participation in the Lifelong Learning Programme?
- Is the wider local community familiar with the Roma culture and daily life?
- Can the operation of the pilot mediation office enhance the capacity of the Roma community, including of the Roma Association?
- Are the Roma parents motivated and informed as to the procedures and the deadlines for enrolling their children at school?

To this end, four PAR techniques in total were initially planned for the implementation of the project interventions, namely the local research team, photovoice, the participatory video and last but not least the informal discussions and meetings. From the above techniques, the participatory video and photovoice techniques were not finally employed, as described below.

- 1. Establishment of a local research team:** The technique aimed to establish the participants as joint contributors and investigators in the process of gathering and interpreting research data. The team consisted of the LERI field experts, one municipal representative, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and collaborators and two local Roma women mediators. For the purposes of data collection during the implementation of the census in Vlycho, the team was supported by four members of the local community, both Roma and non-Roma. The participation of both Roma and non-Roma also aimed to enhance cooperation and a better understanding between the participants.

In the beginning, the initial plan to set up the research team was through an initial meeting, in which representatives of the municipal authorities, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, the President of the local Roma Association and the two local Roma mediators participated. The aim was to discuss the objectives and the steps towards the implementation of the intervention 'Support for the design and implementation of a census of Vlycho'. In addition, the selection of interviewers that would participate in the local research team as co-researchers was considered. During the implementation of the intervention, the LERI field experts also designed the training that would be provided to the co-researchers and interviewers. It was to provide information on the research methodology, giving particular emphasis on the stages of a survey, the tools that could be used (focusing mainly on the questionnaire that would be used for conducting the survey in the area of Vlycho), the elaboration of research data, and ethical issues concerning the research process.

However, in the end, the local research team consisted of one municipal representative, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, who worked as the local collaborator, and the President of the Roma Local Association. It should be noted that the lack of cooperation between the participants did not allow frequent meetings with the participation of all team members at the same time and, consequently, to overcome this the LERI field experts in collaboration with the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators arranged several meetings with each team member separately.

- 2. Photovoice:** The PAR technique was initially selected for the intervention aimed at the organisation of a cultural event. The application of the Photovoice technique would reveal real life experiences and involve Roma into all aspects of the research process. More specifically, the application would enable Roma to record and reflect aspects of their culture that they would like to promote in the local community, their concerns related to the wider community, as well as their experiences from participating in the research process. Through group discussions, the dialogue on these issues would be promoted by informing and providing evidence to the local authorities for the implementation of future actions.

Nevertheless, the final desired output of the intervention, namely a cultural event, changed focus several times. In the end, the experts and local collaborators, the municipal representatives and the local Roma Association agreed that non-Roma should also participate as co-researchers in one of the two smaller interventions, a decision that resulted in the redesign of the thematic focus of the cultural event. Hence, the technique intended to involve both Roma and non-Roma young people with the aim of taking pictures of certain aspects of the daily life of the Roma and non-Roma communities. The photos would be used as means for discussing and considering everyday life in Megara, which would lead to an exchange of experiences among participants and overall, was seen as a way to combat discrimination and negative stereotypes.

From a process point of view, the plan was for a local team of six Roma and non-Roma young people to be established and two Roma facilitators to be selected by the local Roma Association. The next step were to organise an initial meeting with the participation of the local team and the two Roma facilitators, in which the photography theme 'living and working in Megara' would be discussed and defined. Taking and collating the pictures from everyday life would be the next step, which would be completed within a week. Following this, the local team and the two Roma mediators would discuss the photographs and present them in a community meeting in which representatives of the local Roma Association and community members would be invited. Finally, a report would be prepared by the local team with the support of the LERI field-experts, the representative of the municipal authorities and the President of the local Roma Association. The photo reportage would be published in a local newspaper, targeting all citizens and stakeholders in Megara with the aim to promote a different perception of Roma people.

However, in the end, the photo reportage was not implemented and, as a consequence, the photovoice technique was not applied. The reason for this was due to the decision of the administration and teaching personnel of the selected school to not participate in the implementation of the intervention. This prevented the continuation of the activity altogether, and so the local research team had to reassess and replan.

- 3. Participatory videos:** Initially, the LERI field experts had planned to employ participatory videos for the implementation of the intervention 'Provision of support for applying to the Lifelong Learning Programme'. The main reason for the selection of this technique was that it would be accessible to all participants, irrespective of literacy or background. Through this technique, the LERI field experts aimed to mobilise the community while simultaneously documenting the dynamic process of community research, analysis and change by enabling the participants of the LLP to express their thoughts and previous experiences, during and after their participation in the programme. The participatory videos would have provided a channel through which local knowledge and experience could be shared with other communities, as well as with decision- and policymakers.

However, the intervention was ultimately not implemented and, as a consequence, the participatory video technique was not applied. The reason for this was due to the end of the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) in January 2016, which was not continued as expected. Thus, the implementation of the alternative intervention 'Provision of support for the establishment and operation of a mediation office in Vlycho' resulted in a change to the applied PAR technique as described below.

- 4. Informal meetings and community discussions:** In the context of the implementation of the intervention titled 'Provision of support for the establishment and operation of a mediation office in Vlycho', many informal meetings and community discussions were conducted with the aim of understanding and highlighting the most efficient way through which the mediation office could be operated. The LERI field-experts had

extensive discussions with the two women (one Roma mediator and one representative of the local Roma Association) as well as the President of the Roma Association and some members of the association. Moreover, many discussions occurred that allowed for better understanding and documented why the members of the Roma community had contacted the mediation office, what issues they wanted to solve and to what extent the mediation office had enabled them to do so. The responsibility for the operation of the mediation office lay with the two women who started working in the mediation office in the LERI research and had the responsibility, with the support of the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, of assisting the Roma community members in their cases. Among their responsibilities was to record the what, why and how of the requests in order to monitor and evaluate the entire process. The main questions that have been asked were as follows:

- Why did you contact the mediation office?
- What is the problem that you are facing?
- How can the mediation office assist you?
- Has the office assisted you to deal with the problem you were facing?
- Have you learned how to deal with relevant issues by yourself?

It is worth noting that one of the two women who work for the mediation office and was chosen by the President of the Roma Association is non-Roma, was supporting the Association as a volunteer. Finally, it is noted that from the beginning of the implementation of the project in Megara and as an integral part of the research design and process, the LERI field experts considered various ethical issues that could be raised during the project implementation. In particular, the LERI field experts paid particular attention to the process of approaching and engaging with the Roma community. In close collaboration with the local Roma mediators, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and the representatives of the local Roma Association, the experts aimed to ensure that the Roma community would not be harmed, directly or indirectly, by the project activities. Due to the discrimination and stereotypes they face at local level, in the beginning of the project implementation the majority of Roma who live in Vlycho settlement had serious reservations and did not trust the LERI field experts. They could not understand the project aims and how they could benefit from their participation. Once these fears were recognised by the LERI field experts, the next step was to ensure the active and constant support of the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators as a way to build trust between the community and the LERI field experts. Once he started working as a LERI local collaborator, frequent visits to the settlement took place and further discussions on a bilateral level with many Roma people occurred. Through this, the LERI local research team gained the trust of some Roma representatives which resulted in opening additional communication channels with other Roma community members in Vlycho. However, it is worth noting that the majority of Roma people preferred not to speak in public but rather to leave it to a few official Roma representatives to speak on their behalf.

By considering this situation, the LERI field experts paid particular attention to the protection of personal data, according to the relevant national legislation. To this end, the LERI local research team requested, right from the beginning, the

consent of all participants for the collection of the necessary audio-visual material and informed them that this material would be used only for the purposes of the project.

4. The local intervention description

As mentioned in detail in the previous section, the finalisation of the interventions that were implemented in the context of the local LERI research occurred progressively through several informal and formal discussions and meetings with many local stakeholders. The identification of the local needs resulted in designing the most appropriate interventions in close collaboration with the Roma community and with the active involvement of the regional and local authorities. In total, four interventions were designed, but in the end only three of them were implemented. The first intervention aimed to support the Municipality to design a census at Vlycho settlement and collect data with the active participation of the Roma community. The second intervention focused on culture and education and the coexistence of Roma and non-Roma people in Megara by utilising the PAR technique of photovoice, which finally took the form of organising an event/ceremony for Roma children who successfully completed school. The third intervention aimed to support Roma to participate in the LLP. However, during project implementation this intervention stopped for the reasons already explained, and was replaced by the fourth, which successfully established and operated a mediation office in Vlycho.

Intervention 1: Support for the design and implementation of a census of Vlycho

The lack of recent socioeconomic and demographic data for the local Roma community was one of the main needs identified during the PAR needs assessment. The only available data were from a survey conducted by the municipal social services in 2001, which did not reflect the current situation in Vlycho. During the informal meetings held with the participation of the municipal and regional officials, as well as of the local Roma community, it became obvious that the need to have accurate and up-to-date data for the local Roma community was of high importance. According to one of the representatives of the municipal authorities, up to date and accurate data are essential as,

“these will be used not only for planning future interventions in the settlement, but also for evaluating the effectiveness of the activities implemented by the local authorities in favour of Roma during the last 15 years (2001–2015).”²⁰

Moreover, the findings of the study could also be used in the future from any other related stakeholders who wish to implement Roma-related actions in the locality.

Following various informal discussions with all relevant actors during the period September–October 2015, it was agreed that the LERI local research would support the design and implementation of a survey/census of Vlycho. This would also be used as a mean to strengthen Roma capacity building through their

²⁰ Municipal representative, municipal forum, July 2015, male.

participation as co-researchers and interviewers in the survey, enhancing at the same time the capacity of the municipal officers to design and conduct the survey by applying reliable tools and techniques that could meet the specific Roma conditions. Because of tension within the Roma community in August 2015 that lasted until the end of September 2015²¹, it was difficult to approach the Roma community. The intervention was designed in close collaboration with the representatives of the municipal authorities, while the Roma Association was approached only after the tension cooled with the aim of discussing the planned intervention and seeking its support and collaboration for the implementation of the intervention.

During the design stage, the LERI field experts and municipal representatives decided that a local research team with the participation of Roma people needed to be established to facilitate the design and implementation of the survey. By taking into account the inner-community tension and the delays that had occurred within the LERI research, the active participation of Roma people in the research team was considered as an essential mean of ensuring access of the research team to the settlement. The team would consist of three representatives of the municipal authorities, the LERI field experts, two Roma women mediators, while four members of the Roma and the non-Roma community would be invited to participate as co-researchers, the selection of whom would be discussed and decided during the kick-off meeting of the intervention.

With regard to the main methodological tool to be used in the survey, it was agreed that this should be a structured questionnaire with closed questions. The questionnaire had to be as short as possible with the aim of being easy for the interviewers and the interviewees to complete, and at the same time to cover all policy fields concerning Roma inclusion (education, health, employment, housing and infrastructure). As mentioned by Roma representatives, including the Presidents of the Roma Association and the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, the Roma people would not be able to participate in a questionnaire for a long time. So, in order to collect reliable data the questions should be closed and the questionnaire had to be short. The collection of data would be conducted through door-to-door visits, within a short period, while a recent aerial photograph would be utilised to accurately illustrate the current layout of the settlement, including any new housing constructions. Concerning the issue of data protection, the survey would be designed to focus on the geographical area of Vlycho and would be based on the self-identification of Roma people.

The implementation of the intervention started with an informal meeting of the LERI field experts and the municipal representatives, during which the local research team was established with the participation of the local Roma Association, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and municipal representatives. The LERI field experts were given a copy of the methodology and findings of the survey conducted in 2001 by the municipal services, materials that were used to develop the questionnaire. During November–

²¹ During August and mid-September 2015 an inner Roma community tensions pushed back the LERI local research's implementation in Megara. As the LERI field-experts informed by both Roma people and municipal representatives there was a conflict between two powerful Roma families in the settlement. As a result, many families fled from the settlement and the LERI field-experts could not contact any Roma representative from the settlement during this period.

December 2015, the LERI local research team collected Roma related questionnaires while the municipality submitted their proposal/technical fiche for the implementation of the survey/census in Vlycho to the regional authorities.

Following the design of the methodological tools the LERI field experts in close collaboration with all the other members of the local research team, designed and pilot tested a draft questionnaire. The final step in the implementation of the intervention was to conduct the survey in the area of Vlycho and analyse the questionnaires. However, some delays due to administrative procedures postponed the launching of the survey and thus, the LERI research only took part in the preparatory and pilot stages of it. The intervention was intended to be monitored and evaluated by the local research team and the local Roma Association, while the planned duration of the intervention was eight months, starting in November 2015.

In January 2016, the LERI local research team started to draft the questionnaire and was informed by the municipal representative that the implementation of the survey/census would be delayed due the replacement of the responsible person for the survey in the regional authorities.

In February 2016, the first meeting of the local research team was held to discuss the draft questionnaire. However not all members of the local research team attended the meeting. The discussions that took place during this meeting between the municipal representatives, the LERI field experts and the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, focused on the structure and content of the questionnaire, and data collection was considered. Based on the comments made by the co-researchers, the questionnaire was revised and another meeting to finalise it was scheduled for the end of February. In the next meeting the revised questionnaire and the need to pilot it was discussed by representatives of both the municipal and regional authorities.

In March, with the support of the local Roma Association, the LERI field experts and the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators piloted the questionnaire with three Roma people proposed by the President of the local Roma Association. The aim was to identify potential difficulties related to the language and understanding of the questions, the cohesion of the questionnaire, and the time needed to complete it. The pilot showed that small adjustments were needed, especially with regard to the length of the questionnaire and specific questions. For instance, Roma people proposed adding an additional question, which referred to the surname of the children and other information to cross-check the family status of the households. The questionnaire consisted of five pages, one per policy field (socioeconomic status, education, housing, employment, health) and the respondent would be the head of the household. The Roma respondents, all male and heads of households, found the questionnaire easy to answer and not too long. Following the pilot, the LERI local research team visited the settlement and a meeting with the representatives of the local Roma Association was held with the aim of discussing the progress of the implementation of the intervention. As the President informed the LERI field experts, preparatory steps for informing the community as to the implementation of the survey/census are essential. At this pilot phase, some Roma people raised some concerns about the survey, mainly because they could not understand how the regional and local authorities would use the data. Moreover, the fact that

many projects and organisations had conducted surveys and research in the settlement without going back and presenting the findings or offering a general follow-up to the Roma people resulted in the Roma people being sceptical about the usefulness of the survey and unwilling to take part. By considering these doubts and with the aim of overcoming these obstacles the President of the local Roma Association expressed his intention to inform the community, prior to the start of the census, as to the objectives and the needs that this survey would address, thus motivating the Roma community to participate in the survey. As he highlighted:

*"I estimate that 10 % of the 4,000 Roma might decline to respond because they might be afraid of providing data, and this is why a full understanding of the reasons for conducting the survey is needed."*²²

In order to avoid such misunderstandings and doubts, the survey in Vlycho planned a survey launch event.

In April 2016, the Regional Council of Attica approved the implementation of the census in Vlycho²³. Two weeks later, during an official meeting organised by the local Roma Association in Vlycho with the support of the LERI field experts and the participation of the Deputy Regional Governor, the Mayor of Megara, a representative of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and members of the Roma community, the official announcement of the census to the Roma community was made. All participants expressed the need of the local community's support in regards the implementation of the survey/census and the collection of reliable and accurate data.

However, in early May 2016, one of the representatives of the Roma Association informed the LERI field experts that, following the meeting in April, several members of the community had expressed their continued concerns regarding the objectives of the census and the way that the data could be exploited by the municipal authorities. To this end, and with the aim of facilitating the provision of information by the representatives of the association to the Roma community, the LERI field experts shared a hard copy of the revised questionnaire with the representative of the Roma Association and explained the content of the questionnaire. The President of local Roma Association stated, "I have worked on two censuses and I understand the questions."²⁴

At the end of May 2016, the LERI field experts held two meetings: the first with the municipal representative, during which the experts were informed that the administrative procedures had been completed and that the contract between the regional and the municipal authorities for the implementation of the census had been signed. The second was held with the representatives of the Roma Association and focused on the time plan of the intervention, as well as the identification of the Roma members who would participate in the census as co-researchers and interviewers. The President of the Roma Association proposed

²² President of Local Roma Association, member of the LERI local research team, March 2016, male, age 33.

²³ Region of Attica, Western Attica Office, (2016) "Decisions of the 12th meeting of the Regional Council on 5 April 2016", Elefsina, Region of Attica, available at: <http://www.patt.gov.gr/site/> (access on 07/06/2016).

²⁴ President of local Roma Association, member of the LERI local research team, March 2016, male, age 33.

one of the two women Roma mediators residing in Vlycho, as well as the non-Roma woman, who worked for the Roma Association. During this meeting, the President proposed some minor changes to the questionnaire, contributing thus significantly to the finalisation of the content of the questionnaire.

Finally, the census in Vlycho started in September 2016, while the launch event organised on 10 October 2016 with the participation of representatives of the regional and municipal authorities, representatives of the local Roma association and members of the Roma community. According to the work plan, the final event is expected to be organised in May 2017, where the results of the survey will be presented to representatives of the national, regional and municipal authorities, as well as to the local community.

Intervention 2: Provision of support for the development and implementation of a photo reportage

The arrangement of a cultural event as a means for promoting the Roma culture to the wider community was one of the main proposals made by the representatives of the local Roma Association to the LERI field-experts during the PAR needs assessment in July 2015. The inner-community tension that arose in the settlement in August 2015, an issue, which was publicised by the local media and discussed widely in the locality, proved that activities for improving inner-Roma-community relations and the relations with the wider community were greatly needed. As a result, the LERI field-experts and the representatives of the local Roma Association agreed that one of the interventions of the LERI local research should be the organisation of a cultural event that would give the opportunity for Roma to work together for its preparation, contributing thus to the resolving of conflicts. In addition, it would provide the Association with an opportunity to invite the local community to meet Roma and learn about their culture, contributing thus to combating discrimination towards Roma.

The negative stereotypes and the discrimination from the local community, which Roma face in Megara were the main reasons why this intervention was considered of high importance. A stark example of such discrimination is the following: the non-Roma woman who recently started working for the Roma Association was interested in buying a dress from a local shop, a dress that had also been previously bought by a Roma woman. When she entered the shop and informed the owner that she wanted to buy the same dress as the Roma woman, the owner replied, in front of two non-Roma customers, that no dress was sold to a Roma woman and that "I do not allow gypsies to enter my shop". When the two non-Roma customers left the shop she admitted that she had lied and implored her "please do not say that the Roma woman bought it from me, because I will lose all my [non-Roma] customers!"²⁵

In this context, the design of the intervention, in which the local Roma Association played a key role, was based on the fact that the Roma culture was unknown to the wider local community, and certain aspects of local Roma history were also unknown to the Roma themselves (i.e. roots, origin, old professions, etc.). The aim of this intervention was to strengthen the capacity and trust

²⁵ Local shop owner, interview, May 2015, female.

building of Roma by supporting them to collect and construct information on their local history and presenting it to the wider community as a way to combat discrimination and negative stereotypes.

According to the initial plan of the intervention, the Roma Association would coordinate the activities while the engagement of the local Roma mediators was expected to minimise the risk of tension during its implementation. Further to this, the participation of the municipality in the implementation of the event was expected to ensure the participation of the wider community. As to the process of implementation of the cultural event, the first step would be the collection of ideas and the finalisation of the content of the cultural event. According to the first plan, the ideas would derive from pictures taken by Roma community members, while the finalisation of the content would be achieved through discussions between members of the Roma community. Following this, the event would be organised, while the experiences and lessons learned from the organisation of the cultural event would be shared with the local authorities. The intervention would last seven months, starting in December 2015.

Hence, the first meeting in the context of the intervention was organised on 8 January 2016 with the participation of the President of the local Roma Association and one of the two local Roma mediators, aimed at discussing the steps to be taken in the upcoming period. The discussion focused on the selection of the Roma people who would participate in the intervention as co-researchers, in the context of the application of the photovoice technique, and it was agreed that the final decision on this would be taken during the next meeting. However, the continuous cancellation of meetings delayed the organisation of the next meeting, which was eventually held on 30 March 2016. During this meeting, the representatives of the Roma Association informed the experts and the local collaborator about their intention to participate in a regional art/cultural event that is organised by the regional authorities every year. In this context, they proposed an adjustment to the support of the LERI research, which could take the form of assisting the Roma Association in the preparations for the Association's participation in that Folklore event. The LERI field experts and local collaborator agreed to the revision of the research intervention and proposed to hold another meeting to provide the Roma Association with the necessary time required for coming up with their proposal as to the final content of the intervention.

The next meeting was scheduled for 12 April 2016. Although the representatives of the Roma Association proposed some ideas with regard to the content of the intervention, such as taking pictures from the daily lives of Roma promoting Roma culture, a final decision was not reached. The final decision on the content cultural event was made at the end of May, in a meeting held in the settlement with the participation of three representatives of the local Roma Association. In particular, the decision was made to divide the intervention into two smaller activities, falling under the areas of culture and education, as follows:

- In the context of the first small intervention an event organised at the end of June 2016 in which all Roma children attending school and especially the best Roma students were awarded, as a means for motivating children to attend school, while Roma parents were informed and motivated to enrol their children at schools. The current intervention was proposed by

the representatives of the local Roma Association, as a mean to increase the number of Roma children attending nurseries and kindergartens. As stated by one of the representatives "this is one of the main concerns and aims of the local Roma Association."²⁶ To this end, the LERI field experts, the local collaborator and the Roma Association approached the municipal authorities, which agreed to support actively the intervention and offered the use of the municipal hall. On 26 June 2016, the event took place with the participation of more than 200 Roma people (children along with their parents). The Mayor, the Deputy Regional Governor (Regional Unit of Western Attica) along with his advisor and three representatives of the municipality attended the event. The President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and collaborators, as LERI local collaborator, coordinated the event. First, the Roma Association welcomed people and the LERI field expert briefly presented the project and explained the scope of the event. Following this, the Mayor congratulated the children and, among other issues, mentioned the important role that the Deputy Regional Governor (Regional Unit of Western Attica) for Roma inclusion plays, since "he has taken your [Roma] problems more serious than any other" (the Mayor). After the Mayor, the Deputy Regional Governor (Regional Unit of Western Attica) congratulated the parents and the children and pointed out that,

*"it is a very positive sign that while only 50 children were expected to have completed school, finally you are more than one hundred" and that "the cooperation of the municipal authorities is crucial for the successful implementation of any action at local level."*²⁷

Moreover, he promised that the regional authorities would continue to support the school bus next year, while he stated that the road infrastructure in Vlycho was a high priority on his agenda. The awards were then given to the 10 best Roma students, while all the other students who had completed school received gifts. In parallel, there was a creative play by two animators. Before the end of the event, a municipal representative informed Roma parents about the procedures to register children at school and invited them to inform any others who might be interested. Among the positive results from the event was that it was publicised in the local media.

- In the context of the second small intervention, a photo reportage was planned. The aim of the photo reportage was twofold: on the one hand, it would aim to combat discrimination, while on the other it would provide the Roma Association with visual material that could be promoted in the regional art/cultural event. From a process point of view, the planning of the intervention foresaw that an initial meeting would be organised with the participation of the local team, consisting of three Roma and three non-Roma young people and two Roma facilitators, in which the photography theme 'living and working in Megara' would be discussed and defined. Following this, the local team would take pictures of the daily lives of the Roma and non-Roma community, focusing on the similarities

²⁶ Roma representative, informal discussion, May 2015, male.

²⁷ Deputy Regional Governor, speech at cultural event, June 2016, male.

between Roma and non-Roma present in terms of their working and family mentality. The support of a local journalist would also be requested. The local team and the two Roma mediators would discuss on the pictures and present them in a community meeting, in which representatives of the local Roma Association and community members would be invited. In addition, a narrative would be prepared to accompany the photos. The participation of a local journalist was proposed by the municipal representative as a response to a provocative article published in one of the local newspaper against the Roma community.²⁸ This article was published despite the efforts of the municipal authorities to persuade representatives of the local media of the need to present the Roma community in the media not just in a non-discriminatory but in a positive way. The representatives of the local Roma Association agreed in principle with the proposed intervention and confirmed their full support. As the President of the local Roma Association stated "we need to show that we are not lazy people who stay at home in the morning, but rather that we also go to our work, as the non-Roma do."²⁹ Finally, the photo reportage would be published in a local newspaper, targeting all citizens and stakeholders in Megara.

In September 2016, the LERI field-experts and the representatives of the Roma association and the municipal authorities discussed on the implementation of the photo reportage. Following a proposal by the municipal representative, it was agreed that six Roma and non-Roma students from a selected school in Megara should participate as co-researchers, in the context of the photovoice technique. Furthermore, it was decided that the municipal representative would contact the Principal of the high school requesting for its support for the implementation of the photo reportage. However, some days later, the municipal representative informed the LERI field experts and the representatives of the Roma association that the school administration and the teaching personnel decided not to participate in the photo reportage, as this would be an additional extracurricular activity for them. This led to a cancellation of the intervention altogether, as without their participation the implementation of activities was not possible.

Intervention 3: Promoting the participation of Roma in the Lifelong Learning Programme

As identified during the implementation of the PAR needs assessment, illiteracy is one of the major obstacles Roma people face. Although Roma speak Greek, few of them can read or write in Greek, which hinders not only their entrance into the labour market but also the exploitation of integration opportunities, such as any lifelong learning training opportunities for personal development. Following discussions with the municipal representatives, the Roma Association, the two local Roma mediators and the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, it was agreed that the LERI local research would support the local Roma community in their participation in the LLP. This was an EU-funded project, which

²⁸ Local newspaper "Aixmi", (2016), "*Gypsies sow the panic.... they threat, blackmail, hit and steal*", 26 May 2016, available at: <http://aixminews.gr/aixmi/index.php/proto-thema/2494-2016-05-26-07-36-30> (accessed on 10/06/2016)

²⁹ President of the local Roma Association, comment at project meeting, April 2016, male.

had been open for applications since September 2015, as a means for building the capacity of Roma. This particular project, among many other learning courses targeting the general population, had three courses especially for Roma people. The thematic learning areas targeting Roma specifically at that time were the following:

- Greek language level A (50 hours)
- Greek language level B (50 hours)
- Skills for everyday life (25 hours).

However, what was observed throughout the PAR needs assessment stage, from September to December 2015, was that Roma people had not applied for the courses. The reasons for the low participation of Roma were the lack of information as well as the lack of capacity to fill in the application form. Thus, the decision was made for the LERI local research to support the collection and submission of as many applications as possible for any course within the programme (not only for those indicated for Roma people), and ensure a high participation rate in the learning process that would result in their capacity building.

The design of the intervention planned that the Roma Association, the Union of Greek Roma Mediators and the two Roma mediators, with the support of the LERI field-experts, would inform the members of the local Roma community of the programme, its thematic areas, its application processes, as well as its objectives. The involvement of the above-mentioned stakeholders was expected to maximise the number of applications. The next step was to collect the applications and submit them to the official of the LLP (milestone activity). Taking into consideration that the LLP was planned to end in January 2016, as well as of the risk of the programme not being completed or some thematic areas being cancelled; the participating stakeholders agreed that it was crucial to collect as many applications as possible from the Roma people. Doing so would provide evidence of their interest in learning and could result in the organisation of at least one course for Roma. The lack of Roma applicants created the false impression to the local authorities that Roma are not interested in learning. Thus, the participation of Roma people in the LLP could be seen as evidence that Roma people are interested in learning and in this way combat negative stereotypes.

Following the organisation of the course(s), the LERI field experts, local collaborator and the stakeholders would support the Roma community to ensure high participation rates in the learning process, while the local Roma Association would monitor and evaluate the intervention from the beginning. The planned duration of the intervention was six months, starting from November 2015.

The implementation of the intervention began with the LERI field experts contacting the officials of the LLP and being informed on the current state of play of the programme in the locality, as well as that no applications had been submitted until that time by Roma.

Based on this information, the LERI field experts and the local collaborator, the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators scheduled a series of bilateral meetings in the settlement with the aim of discussing ways of informing and motivating the Roma community to apply to the LLP.

At the beginning of November, the officer of the LLP informed the LERI field experts that there were still no applications from Roma and that as a result, the implementation of a course for Roma might not be possible, given that priority would be given to other thematic courses, in which applications by non-Roma people had already been collected. In order to have some more accurate information, the official requested instructions from the Managing Authority of the Programme as to the number of the courses that could be organised until the end of the programme.

Following intensive and continuous efforts, the representatives of the local Roma Association, the President of the Union of the Greek Roma Mediators and one of the two local Roma mediators started collecting applications from members of the Roma community. As a result, by 9 November 2015, the President of the local Roma Association had collected 30 applications.

However, the applications, which were submitted by the Roma representatives in mid-November, were not accepted given that they were not accompanied with the necessary supporting documents, mainly the identity card, and contact details were missing (address and telephone). Further to this, the lack of available trainers in Western Attica, including Megara, as stated by the programme official, eventually hindered the organisation of training for Roma.

With the aim of discussing the steps forward, the LERI field experts and local collaborator met in December 2015 with the Roma and municipal representatives as well as mediators and decided that the intervention could not be implemented and as a result, alternative interventions were explored.

Intervention 4: Provision of support for the establishment and operation of a mediation office in Vlycho

Following the discontinuation of the intervention promoting the participation of Roma in the LLP, the LERI field experts and local collaborator arranged several meetings with the representatives of the municipality and the Roma community to discuss the possibility of implementing an alternative intervention. The representatives of the Roma Association suggested that the alternative intervention discussed in October 2015 could be implemented. The municipal authorities supported this proposal and agreed that the local research would support the Roma Association for the establishment and operation of a mediation office in Vlycho. The objective of the intervention was to increase the capacity of the Roma for participating in and implementing Roma inclusion actions, as well as to increase the knowledge of the Roma community regarding the structures and responsibilities of the municipal services.

According to the design of the intervention, which took place in January 2016, one local Roma woman mediator and a representative of the Roma Association provided support to interested members of the Roma community. This support focused on the difficulties they encountered in their interactions with the municipal authorities regarding administrative issues. The main issues recorded were connected with the registration of births by Roma with the municipal authorities, which, in turn was linked to their type of marriage. In particular, what was observed was that many Roma are married in their own traditional marriage, which is not recognised by the Greek authorities, and consequently

they cannot register their children in the proper way. One more reason for not registering children officially, or declaring whether they are divorced or a single-parent family, is related to applications to get social benefits. However, the inappropriate registration of Roma over the years has had serious consequences for Roma people in many aspects of their everyday life, from registering in schools, to applying for jobs or even for men fulfilling their military obligations. The mediation office was established in the building of the local Roma Association and was open two days a week for four months, from April to July 2016.

However, during the period February–March 2016, difficulties in the communication and the extended dialogue between the LERI field experts and the Roma Association as to the renovation of the building and the equipment that was required for the establishment and operation of the mediation office, delayed the implementation of the intervention. Overall, the LERI field experts took responsibility for finding, buying and delivering the equipment (i.e. computer, printer, desk, chairs, etc.) to the Association's office. However, what was revealed in the end was that this process was not as easy as envisaged, since many minor but significant obstacles had to be overcome. For instance, the lack of an official postal address for the delivery of the equipment and the lack of electricity at the Association were two of the many difficulties the LERI field experts had to handle. Hence, in order to implement the intervention successfully, communication had to be adapted so that all involved parties had the same understanding, and all steps of the process had to take into consideration and understand the living conditions in the settlement, including the social and financial barriers. Clarifying aspects of the activities and speaking with the Roma in a language or way that they understood was important to ensure that the intervention was carried out successfully.

In April 2016, on the renovation and the operation of the mediation office, the Roma Association, with the support of the LERI research, organised a working meeting on 20 April to which representatives of the regional and municipal authorities, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the Union of Greek Roma Mediators were invited. Although the meeting was scheduled for the morning, many members of the Roma community who are usually out of the settlement in the mornings also attended the meeting. During this meeting, the President of the Roma Association announced the establishment and operation of the mediation office.

From May to July 2016, with an initiative of the Roma Association, the mediation office was open daily, providing support to all interested Roma people in Vlycho. In particular, the office was open three hours in the morning and around two hours in the evening with the aim of being accessible for people who work. Most Roma people who visited the office requested support in solving administrative issues related mainly to the birth registry in the Municipality. Moreover, many Roma men requested support with issues related to the obligation to serve in the Greek Army, while some others needed legal advice for various personal cases. It is noted that overall, by mid-May more than 30 Roma had visited the mediation office asking for support. Some of the cases recorded referred to:

- obtaining a marital status certificate from the municipal services;
- renewal of an unemployment certificate for applying to an open call for new entrepreneurs;

- obtaining various administrative certificates for submission to the military services;
- appointments for medical check-ups.

Based on the fact that the mediation office brought tangible results not only for administrative difficulties that members of the community were facing in their daily lives, but also for the resolution of some of these problems, the local Roma Association is trying to find the financial resources to sustain its operation in the future.

5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

Through the project implementation in Megara a number of barriers as well as drivers of Roma integration at the local level were identified, as analysed in detail below.

The political context as a factor for the promotion of Roma social inclusion

The implementation of the LERI research in Megara coincided with a significant positive shift on behalf of the regional and municipal authorities to promote Roma inclusion. This was expressed by the regional and municipal authorities since the beginning of the project implementation in the locality and verified during the course of the project. The establishment by the regional authorities of the Network of Cooperation on Roma issues (regional consultation forum) at regional level as well as the decision of the regional authorities to allocate their own resources for the design and implementation of Roma inclusion projects in Megara clearly showed how political will could be translated into action. For instance, the Region of Attica plans to set up a Regional Office on Roma Issues for Western Attica, taking into consideration that the majority of Roma live in the Western Attica region. Moreover, it will fund two pilot Roma social integration local plans; one for the Municipality of Megara and one for Municipality of Chalardri. In addition to that, the region recently funded the Municipality of Megara in order to conduct the census in Vlycho, as planned in the local LERI research. It is also noted that this political will to promote Roma inclusion motivated and engaged the Roma community in processes that they had not participated in before. Many Roma representatives who took part in the regional consultation forum expressed this view and stated that it was the first time they had been given the opportunity to speak in public and exchange ideas and experience with other stakeholders. The openness of the authorities to discuss and work together with the community is particularly important for the social inclusion of Roma.

Capacity of the municipal authorities and administrative barriers

During the PAR needs assessment it became apparent that the experience of the municipality in implementing integration projects is limited, while the limited human and financial resources of the municipality is clearly one of the main barriers for social integration at local level. In particular, in the municipality of Megara few people who have experience in the design of social policy projects are employed. This became clear from the beginning of project implementation.

The lack of administrative personnel with experience in the implementation of social integration actions and projects, together with the large workload due to the local administrative reform under the Kallikratis programme³⁰ reduced the ability of the local authorities to provide social services in an effective way. Latter had moved many responsibilities and services from central to regional and municipal level, resulting in.

In addition, following the submission of the proposal/project fiche for the survey in Vlycho by the municipal authorities to the regional authorities, it took five months until the contract between the two authorities was finally signed. This delay mainly occurred because time was needed for the final regional and municipal decisions to be taken. The administrative procedures, such as the terms of reference, the kind of municipal decisions that were needed, which local committees should sign, were not clear. Therefore, it resulted in a delay in the implementation of the survey/census in Vlycho, despite the continuous efforts of the municipal personal and the desire of the regional and municipal authorities to start as soon as possible. This mainly occurred because municipality lacks technical know-how in the development and preparation of procurement that do not involve infrastructure.

Difficulties in approaching the Roma community and the role of Roma collaborators

The LERI field experts had no prior connections in the locality, and as a result, the process of approaching and engaging the Roma community proved to be difficult. The isolation of the community, negative experiences of the past, and the consequent defence mechanisms that the community had created against any 'outsider' caused extra difficulties not only in the beginning, but also during the first months of the research implementation. Building trust and developing relations with the Roma community was a time-consuming activity, which was facilitated by the presence and collaboration of the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators. As one of the members of the community said to the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, "I trust you, not them [the LERI field experts]."³¹ The importance of the presence of the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators became more obvious in August 2015, when intra-community tensions arose within the settlement. Despite multiple efforts to communicate with the Roma representatives, this was not possible and was achieved only when the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators intervened. Despite the fact that he had not established relationships with many Roma in Megara, the fact that he is of Roma origin and speaks Romani played a significant role in building trust. For instance, in many cases, he needed to intervene in order to clarify various aspects of the research activities, objectives, and communication of other issues for the Roma people, and sometimes he had to speak in Romani since many people could not really understand the situation. Overall, he assisted in making things clear to the Roma people in the community, who sometimes showed a lack of trust towards LERI field experts. His role was crucial, mainly because he was able to clearly explain the project rationale and objectives to the Roma community in a more tangible and understandable way

³⁰ Greece, Law 3852/2010 (OJ A 87/7.6.2010) 'Reorganisation of Local Government - Kallikratis Program', 7 June 2010.

³¹ Roma community member, informal discussion, October 2015, male.

by using more accessible terms and language, adapted to the community. Overall, the acceptance of the LERI field experts was achieved through their continuous presence and dialogue with the community, convincing them that the LERI research aimed to give Roma people the opportunity to express themselves and be heard.

PAR methodology

In Megara where the local actors had no experience in the implementation of participatory approaches and no prior established working relations, the selection of 'light' PAR techniques proved to be successful. The informal discussions allowed the LERI field experts to interact in an informal way with the participants, giving them the opportunity to express themselves freely. During the course of the project implementation, more in-depth PAR techniques were employed, which were chosen by the LERI field experts and the participants only when trust, to a certain extent, had been achieved, facilitating thus the dialogue between them and the achievement of a higher participation of the community.

Interaction between the Roma community and municipal authorities

The main success of the LERI research in Megara was that for the first time the Roma and the municipal representatives worked together in designing and implementing interventions for the benefit of the Roma community. The project significantly facilitated the engagement of the participants and promoted dialogue between the Roma community and the regional and municipal authorities. Through the LERI local research in Megara, cooperation emerged as the most important step for making a real change with regard to the social inclusion of Roma. The organisation for the first time of a meeting in the settlement with the support of the project and the participation of the Deputy Regional Governor of Western Attica, the Mayor of Megara, the President of the local Roma Association and members from the Roma community was the outcome of all the efforts made in the context of the project.

However, communication among the municipal authorities and the Roma community happened only when the LERI field experts were present. As the municipal representative replied to a question posed by the experts on whether the municipal representatives communicated directly with the local Roma community, he replied "No, neither we did (i.e. the municipal authorities) nor the representatives of the Roma community."³² Indeed, the LERI local research proved to be a catalyst and mediator between all related actors, but further efforts are needed by both parties for ensuring that the working relationship that has been built will continue and not fade away. It is a fact that the LERI research influenced the local dynamics in a positive way. However, further efforts are needed in order to make these positive efforts a sustainable preparatory step for the future. What is needed is a permanent and sustainable institutional framework, which could give all local actors the opportunity and the motivation to work together. The idea of signing a Memorandum of Cooperation between the local authorities and the Roma community could certainly be a step towards achieving it.

³² Municipal representative, informal meeting, June 2016, male.

Discrimination towards the Roma community

During the course of project implementation it became obvious that the discrimination towards Roma in Megara is profound and a major obstacle to promoting Roma inclusion. The preparation and the limited implementation of the intervention aimed at supporting the participation of Roma people to the LLP clearly showed that perceptions that separate Roma people from the majority society are widespread across Megara. One characteristic example of such perceptions is that many non-Roma believe that Roma cannot participate in courses, which are open to all Greek citizens, as they are not perceived as Greeks, but only in courses which specifically target the Roma population.

The persistence and the extent of these perceptions and stereotypes have clearly also been influenced by the delinquent behaviour of a small part of the Roma community. Illegal activities, such as robberies, in which members of the Roma community have been engaged during in recent years have resulted in the entrenchment of negative attitudes towards the entire Roma community and the pressure by the non-Roma community towards the municipal authorities taking action to deal with this situation. However, as the President of the local Roma Association stated in May 2016, following a provocative article published in a local newspaper,

*"We cannot be blamed for incidents that were caused by some Roma ... we are not all criminals ... they do it for very specific reasons ... they want to make us react and give them the opportunity to further isolate us."*³³

Indeed, the coverage of Roma behaviour in the media is often provocative, emphasising not the incidents themselves, but rather the Roma origin of the offender and the threat that the local Roma community poses to the local society, calling for the municipal authorities to take action for the protection of the non-Roma.

Because of the negative and often discriminatory way that Roma are presented in the local media, the municipal authorities decided to take action and approach the media representatives to discuss the need to differentiate the way Roma are presented and agree on promoting a positive image of the Roma community. However, the publication of the previously mentioned article in a local newspaper indicates that the efforts made thus far have not brought the desired results and that changing perceptions among the media representatives will take time.

Power relations within the Roma community

Intra-community tensions raised during the project implementation showed that the power relations among the Roma community could have a negative impact on the cohesion of the community and its relations with the mainstream community. Moreover, such conflicts create obstacles and serious delays in the implementation of any Roma-related project since they mainly derive from power relations among some few Roma families that usually control the entire settlement. In particular, the tension that rose in August 2015 and lasted until September 2015 created obstacles and delays in the implementation of the LERI

³³ President of the local Roma Association, informal discussion, May 2016, male.

local interventions. The difficulties in reaching the Roma representatives and members from the Roma community delayed the project implementation and raised concerns as to the participation of the Roma community in the LERI interventions, which was the cornerstone of the project. Such tensions clearly raised the question of cooperation among the Roma community members and mitigation measures had to be carefully planned to avoid further tension during the project implementation. It is worth noting that because of the power relations in the Vlycho settlement, some Roma people, who initially agreed to participate in the project activities, refused to participate due to the tensions between Roma families. Those tensions are rooted in the past and may not necessarily be resolved by external projects or policies. Yet, they are indicative of the reality and factors that may affect the participation of the community in various activities or the success of Roma integration efforts.

Finally, the different approaches and ideas between the various members of the Roma community and the Roma representatives made the finalisation of the content of the intervention in the areas of culture and education a real challenge.

Adapting communication to the local community

Although the Roma community showed an interest and expressed their willingness to participate in the project activities, they reported that they found it difficult to understand the objectives of the project, as well as the processes of design and implementation. In particular, the lack of previous experience or participation in similar projects was a barrier to the smooth implementation of the LERI research activities. The perception “what I will get from the project” was widespread and they struggled to understand the research’s logic that they could be empowered to create something on their own for the benefit of their own community. For them, this felt abstract and removed from their own understanding of their situation. One of the most characteristic examples was the difficulty in understanding that no compensation could be made unless there was a valid contract. This might come from the way in which European-funded projects used to be implemented in the past, where participants received compensation as a motivation. As one Roma representative stated:

“In the past, many times I met the same Roma people at a seminar on IT and a seminar on how to make texture ... They did not care about the training itself rather the money that they could gain through their participation in the training ... this has to change if we want to talk for a long-term social integration of Roma people.”³⁴

Through the LERI research, it emerged that building strong trust with the Roma requires time to be spent with them, transparency and the use of clear and simple language.

One challenge faced was to change the mind-set of Roma participants from the ‘receiver’ to empower them to take on an active citizenship approach. Based on the narratives of many of the participants, it emerged that it was hard for the majority of Roma people to understanding the participatory approach of LERI and its aim to co-design, co-plan and co-monitor particular actions. The LERI field

³⁴ Roma representative, informal discussion, August 2016, Male, age 45

experts, with the support of the President of the Union of Greek Roma Mediators, arranged a series of additional informal meetings with the aim of further explaining the context of the research until the community members switched their approach from 'what the project may offer to us' to 'how we can make the project correspond to our local needs'. For achieving this fundamental perceptual shift, the LERI field experts spent a lot of time with the Roma community, discussing many topics of everyday life. Through those talks, the experts gained the Roma people's trust, and at the same time succeeded in supporting them to think creatively, weaving paths of thinking 'outside the box'. For instance, many of the Roma participants realised that the effects of economic crisis, such as cuts on the social benefits, have equally affected all Greeks, and that they have to take actively on actions for themselves if they want to overcome the obstacles and difficulties during this crisis.

Sustainability of results

As mentioned in an earlier section of the report, the objective of the LERI research in Megara was to bring together the local authorities and the Roma community, through the design and implementation of interventions that would meet some of the most basic needs of the community. Indeed, through the project implementation both parties collaborated for the first time and contributed to the design and implementation of the interventions. However, the continuation of this collaboration, following the end of the LERI research, is essential for the participation of the Roma community in the public life in Megara and in the decision-making processes, especially with regard to actions aiming at promoting Roma social inclusion. The collaboration of the municipal authorities and local Roma association for the implementation of the survey in Vlycho clearly indicates that this collaboration can be further strengthened, ensuring its sustainability. However, both parties need to contribute equally to this.

As to the sustainability of the research interventions, it is noted that the survey is at the implementation stage, and is estimated to be completed in May 2017. Regarding the intervention that focused on the motivation and provision of information to Roma parents for enrolling their children at schools, it is noted that although it can result in an increase of the number of enrolled Roma children at schools, more integrated efforts are needed in order to have sustainable results.

Finally, as to the sustainability of the mediation office, it is noted that the representatives of the local Roma association stated, in several discussions with the LERI field experts, their intention to support the members of the Roma community also after the end of the LERI research, by offering guidance and assistance to all interested Roma people residing in Vlycho. However, the sustainability of the intervention could be further increased if a more permanent structure would be established, which would ensure also the participation of the municipal authorities as well as other local related stakeholders.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In Megara, the lack of cooperation over previous years between the local actors working on Roma issues and mainly between the municipal authorities and the Roma representatives has resulted in mistrust, especially on the side of the

Roma community towards the local authorities. However, the current political context, at regional and municipal level, is particularly positive and Roma inclusion has been included in the political agenda as an issue of high importance. The frequent participation of Roma people in the regional consultation forum shows that the Roma community has already started feeling this positive change and many Roma have started realising that without their involvement nothing will change. Those political developments have significantly changed the local context, as a result also of the implementation of the LERI research in the locality, and motivated the Roma community to establish working relations, for the first time, with the relevant authorities. Yet, building trust and working relations requires time and energy from both sides. In this context, a sustainable institutional framework, such as the regional consultation forum, could be established on a permanent basis. This will assist in preventing and overcoming many barriers for Roma social integration which vary from gaining easy access to the Roma community and empowering Roma to fight discrimination and negative stereotypes.

In this context, the LERI research aimed at bringing together the local actors through the implementation of participatory approaches, which ensured the equal representation of both sides in the interventions and built their capacity to participate in processes that will make things work. Combating Roma discrimination, which is particularly strong and persistent in the locality, was a core objective of the LERI research as a means for promoting Roma inclusion at local level.

The implementation of the interventions showed that the personal efforts of both Roma and non-Roma are essential for further developing the discussion between the two parties on how Roma inclusion can be promoted and for shaping a context that will facilitate the wider engagement of both communities. The participation of local stakeholders and individuals who are influencers/opinion-makers in the locality could facilitate and strengthen such processes, although their roles and relations with the local community should be clarified from the beginning.

In any case, the adoption of a participatory approach should be adjusted to the local conditions. To this end, the selection and application of PAR techniques and the 'depth' of participation of the target group needs to be evaluated, not only at the beginning of a project, but also during its implementation. The application of more in-depth PAR techniques, which might be expected to ensure the highest possible participation of the members of the local community, may not be the most appropriate choice, especially during the initial stages of a project and in cases where the project implementers do not have prior experience in the target locality. In addition to this and in close relation to the above, the power relations in the target locality also need to be taken into consideration. Tensions within a community or between a vulnerable community and the mainstream community also need to be analysed and taken into consideration when designing and implementing social inclusion actions.

Moreover, some efforts are needed to boost and motivate the administrative personnel to support Roma integration actions. For instance, a seminar for local authority staff on Roma culture and customs might assist a better understanding of the Roma community and contribute to changing the negative stereotypes of

Roma. In turn, teaching Roma people about their obligations as Greek citizens would also be useful in enabling the Roma to realise, that as they are Greek citizens, they have the same rights and the same obligations as the rest of the population.

Last but not least, note should be made of the fact that the success of the LERI research in Megara is a result of the willingness of the regional and municipal authorities and of the local Roma Association to cooperate, despite the difficulties, and to improve the situation of the Roma community. However, this might change with future elections, and for that reason it is very important to create the conditions for sustainable social integration that cannot be significantly influenced by political change.

7. Additional Information

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