



Local engagement for Roma inclusion

Locality study Rakytník (Slovakia), 2016

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1. Executive summary

Rakytník is a village in southern Slovakia. The population of Rakytník is 317 people, 87 of whom self-identify as Roma. The most common language in Rakytník is Hungarian, used by both Roma and non-Roma. The entire micro-region suffers from high unemployment rates and a general lack of infrastructure, including no educational facilities and no municipal water supply. Most Roma live on the edge of the village in low-quality housing, however some level of economic and social stratification is observable among the Roma. Because of the mayor's initiative, housing ownership rights have been legalised.

The focus of the LERI research in Rakytník was oriented toward the formulation of a micro-regional strategy, the result of which may lead to increased funding opportunities for Rakytník, including funding opportunities for the main issues facing the community, which are employment, housing and general infrastructure (e.g. access to drinking water).

Another priority was the support of young people and children. No less important was the activation of the local community, which was triggered by construction of the local meeting place together with a traditional, built-in, brick stove. Capacity-building activities complemented all these activities.

The key research questions for LERI activities in Rakytník were formulated as follows:

- How can local people be empowered to develop their abilities to better formulate their expectations and priorities and utilise the opportunities given by public policies implemented either on a local, regional or national level? How can they be encouraged to start their own initiatives?
- How can small and marginalised municipalities be empowered to facilitate the recognition of their needs within centrally-planned policies, out of which the majority is focused on the support of innovation, IT skills or research?

On the ground, relations between the Roma and non-Roma populations in Rakytník are good and friendly in general, and the inclusion of Roma is not a problem that would resonate at a local level. However, the main barriers to Roma inclusion at the local level are (i) a lack of financial resources, (ii) a lack of innovation in approaches undertaken, and (iii) a lack of political interest in local development from a national level.

Given these obstacles, the improvement of socioeconomic integration of Roma in Rakytník (from Rakytník) is beyond the possibilities and resources of the local municipality and local stakeholders, as they are connected to the marginalised region's structural problems.

Based on the LERI research experience, the main drivers of Roma inclusion in the locality can be defined as (i) the good cohabitation between the Roma and non-Roma communities, (ii) an unbiased approach to all inhabitants of the village, and (iii) the political will of the mayor to improve the situation of all people living in the village.

Keywords/tags: Roma empowerment, youth activation, micro-regional development, strategy making

2. Description of the local context

Rakytník is a village in southern Slovakia. It is located 4 km from the main road between Bratislava and Košice, close to the village of Bátka, which provides Rakytník with access to a basic civic infrastructure (post office, general practitioner, educational facilities, public employment services, etc.).

In 2011, the population of Rakytník was 317 people, 15 % of whom self-identified as Slovaks, 57 % as Hungarians, and 27 % as Roma, according to the Census. The most common language in Rakytník is Hungarian, used by both Roma and non-Roma; local Roma do not speak Romani language.

The entire micro-region suffers from high unemployment rates and few job opportunities. The level of registered unemployment in the Rimavská Sobota district was 26.4 % in May 2016, which is the highest registered unemployment rate in Slovakia (data on the municipal level are not published in Slovakia).¹

The region has a strong agricultural tradition, but since the collapse of 'collective farming' in the 1990s, employment in the agricultural sector has decreased starkly and only a few alternative employment opportunities have been created. In Rakytník, there are two active micro-entrepreneurs, but their impact on local labour opportunities has been minor. A few new jobs, subsidised by the national employment policy, were created by the mayor of the municipality.

Rakytník faces a general lack of infrastructure, including no educational facilities and no municipal water supply, which leads to difficulties accessing drinking water. Most Roma live on the edge of the village in low-quality housing, however some level of economic and social stratification is observable among the Roma. As a result of the mayor's initiative, housing ownership rights have been legalised.

In general, relations between the Roma and non-Roma populations in the south-eastern regions of Slovakia, and likewise in Rakytník, are much 'smoother' than in other regions. One of the reasons might be the difficult economic situation in the region experienced by everyone.

Before the start of the LERI research, the LERI field experts in Slovakia had not conducted any community activities in the village previously, as neither of them are based locally in Rakytník, therefore the project could not build on previous cooperation. The LERI field experts thus had to start with establishing initial contacts with inhabitants and local stakeholders. The fact that the LERI team did not speak Hungarian and locals' ability to express themselves in Slovak is limited was a considerable challenge. The LERI team therefore engaged a co-researcher from the region, a young Romani woman speaking both Hungarian and Slovak and having experience with youth work. She and the mayor were the main linguistic and cultural interpreters at the local level.

The mayor was the main LERI counterpart. He immediately identified the LERI research as one of the very few accessible development opportunities for their small municipality in one of the most marginalized regions of Slovakia.

¹ Slovakia, Central Labour Office (*Ústredie práce, sociálnych vecí a rodiny*) (2016), *Mesačná štatistika o počte a štruktúre uchádzačov o zamestnanie za mesiac máj 2016. Poradie okresov podľa miery evidovanej nezamestnanosti SR*, accessible at: www.upsvar.sk/buxus/generate_page.php?page_id=582328.

Therefore, he provided the LERI research with all the necessary local support. At the same time, he clearly expressed that the LERI in Rakytník should have a sustainable effect and had to include strategic planning and capacity building of local stakeholders to stimulate further development beyond the LERI research implementation period. For this purpose, the mayor of Rakytník contacted other municipalities of the micro-region to engage them into some of the LERI local activities.

3. PAR methodology employed

The LERI in Rakytník started in 2015 with a needs assessment phase, employing participatory methods to identify local needs and possible activities in collaboration with inhabitants and stakeholders. Based on the needs assessment the draft LERI local project plan (LPP) was revised and finalised. This plan included community activities concentrated around construction of an outdoor meeting-place (inaugurated in August 2016) and youth activities (including an international youth exchange to Finland in May 2016) – both aimed at immediate improvement of the situation in the village and at increasing local population's participation as well as a more strategic activity of building the village's and the micro-region's further development capacities. This process went through the whole year of 2016.

Opportunities for accessing national financial resources or to the EU's Structural and Investment Funds (hereinafter referred to as ESIF) are limited due to the small size of the village. LERI research in Rakytník therefore focused on supporting the establishment of micro-regional cooperation with neighbouring villages, with the objective of promoting more participatory strategic planning in local development activities.

The elaboration of the micro-regional strategy within the LERI research, substantially increased the potential of the village and of the whole micro-region to access funding to tackle the main issues in Rakytník: unemployment, housing and general infrastructure (particularly, access to drinking water). These issues are perceived as the most serious ones by local inhabitants, but due to their structural nature, they could not be effectively addressed through interventions of the LERI research's size and type. By including the strategic development planning activity into the LERI in Rakytník, however, the community-focused LERI research could be linked to the sustainable development, in accordance with the local preferences as expressed by stakeholders in the needs assessment phase.

Beyond the long-term strategic development, local stakeholders and inhabitants identified several specific priorities, which could be addressed through the LERI – among them, opportunities for young people in the village. The dropout rate in secondary schools is high in both Roma and non-Roma populations; the prospective of young people obtaining solid employment or better quality facilities for leisure-time activities is very small, and the so-called lost generation of young people is becoming very visible in Rakytník.

Despite the small size of Rakytník, the level of community organisation and the involvement of the locals in community life is relatively high in comparison to other similar communities. Based on interviews and micro-narratives conducted with local inhabitants and representatives of stakeholders (two local government representatives, two local NGO representatives and field social worker) during

the needs assessment phase, building/organising something that would be visible to all the people from Rakytník and neighbouring villages was one of the main priorities for LERI. Such tangible result was to counter-balance the strategic, yet too abstract strategic planning activity, which was about to bring practical results only in the future. Therefore, the local municipal council in cooperation with a group of local citizens decided to devote their attention to the design and construction of the local meeting place, which is used for the needs of the community and family meetings. An important part of this central place is a traditional built-in brick stove.

The municipal council in Rakytník has five members and a mayor. Due to the size of the village, these people are also considered to be key leaders, thus when the LERI team tried to contact possible stakeholders/leaders outside of the municipal council, the locals always directed the researchers back to the members of the municipal council. Despite initial concerns, this outcome cannot be judged negatively as potentially indicating an over-dominance of the local council on possible initiatives. Rather, it simply illustrates the situation in small villages, where almost every stakeholder/leader is also elected to be a member of the local council.

Within the needs assessment phase of the LERI research, several PAR techniques were used. The main techniques were **interviews and micro-narratives**. They helped to establish the initial contact with the local inhabitants and stakeholders, for whom the LERI research and the LERI team were unknown. These techniques, applied through informal but semi-structured talks, seemed to be the most natural way to establish communication and the involvement of the interviewees. Access to locals was slightly complicated because of the language barrier, as most people in Rakytník speak Hungarian. Interestingly, the strongest language barrier between researchers and local people was identified during communication with the young people and children.

The other widely used PAR technique was **focus groups**. As it would not have been attractive for locals to participate in focus groups if presented only as a research tool, the actual focus groups took place in local council meetings, meetings focused on the planning of the micro-regional strategy or meetings with local youngsters, e.g. participants of the international youth exchange. Within the meetings, the participants were guided in discussions about the needs of their village and community, and the limits and possibilities of overcoming them. The focus group with local youngsters was extremely difficult as they were not used to meeting people from outside the village or discussing the given topics and level of their soft skills (e.g. communication, interaction within the group, formulation of their thoughts, etc.) is surprisingly low.

Further PAR techniques were used during the later stages, e.g. the **charette technique** during meetings with stakeholders from the micro-region. The local LERI team organised these meetings with the aim of formulating the priorities of the micro-regional strategy and cooperation. The charette technique may be simply explained as a brainstorming involving high number of participants, who instead of working together are divided into groups and then presenting their ideas as a group.

During the LERI activities aimed at preparation for the youth exchange, the method of **'learning by doing'** was also planned. Unfortunately, expectations for the local participants of the youth exchange were too ambitious; the LERI team's expectations of their involvement in the logistical preparation of the

exchange were unrealistic (for more information see p. 10–12), and the preparatory meetings were finally focused on the logistical preparatory activities and on developing their social skills and on personal encouragement rather than on their real involvement and co-organisation of all these activities.

Given the above-mentioned factors, the key research questions for LERI activities in Rakytník were formulated as follows:

- **Empowerment:** How can local people's ability be developed so as they can better formulate their expectations and priorities and utilise the opportunities given by public policies implemented either on local, regional or national level? How can they be encouraged to start their own initiatives?
- **Strategic positioning:** How can small and marginalised municipalities be empowered to facilitate the recognition of their needs within centrally-planned policies, out of which the majority is focused on the support of innovation, IT skills or research?

4. The local intervention description - Goals, partners, process and results

During the preliminary needs assessment in Rakytník, the participants always mentioned several of the village's needs. The **shortage of financial resources in the municipal budget** was always among the first issues articulated. The **lack of employment opportunities and lack of opportunities for local youth and children, including education (especially pre-primary education), as well as housing and basic infrastructural needs (such as access to drinking water)**, were also commonly cited. Attempts to promote rural tourism were mentioned as an opportunity for the region, which could increase the standard of living in the village and bring new job opportunities. The possibility of cross-border cooperation with Hungary was also identified as an opportunity for the village.

Solutions to most of the issues were beyond the possibilities and resources of LERI, as they are connected with the marginalised region's structural problems. However, despite structural problems, some of the articulated issues could be addressed through the modification of the municipality's role by becoming a member of a larger entity e.g. a micro-region, and then to **support local capacities to participate in the existing national development policies and measures**. Thus, the main intervention of LERI in Rakytník was focused on overcoming the limits of the village caused by its size. The approximate yearly budget for the municipality is €28,000.² Such a budget barely allows initiation of any development-focused activities in the village, or participation in the calls open by the ESIFs, as the level of obligatory co-financing often exceeds the total yearly municipal budget.

The main stakeholders in Rakytník, who are mostly associated with the municipal council, quickly understood the need to actively search for additional sources of funding, which could also come from participation in the rural development policy framework. However, eligibility to participate in this is conditional on having a

² Mayor, personal interview, 22 March 2016, non-Roma male.

micro-regional strategy in place and connections between the implemented actions and the priorities of the approved micro-regional strategy are required.

It is also important to mention that there are certain criteria for such a strategy, such as the size of the region targeted by the strategy, the minimum/maximum size of population covered by the strategy, or the balance between the involved stakeholders representing various sectors. Given the specific situation of the region where Rakytník is located and particularly the average size of municipalities, there is a need to cooperate with a broad set of municipalities. In order to meet the requirement of the 'minimum size of population' covered by the microregional strategy, Rakytník needed to reach out to at least 23 municipalities and from each of them at least to one representative of the public sector and to one representative of the private sector. In other words, beyond the stakeholders from Rakytník, involvement of at least 44 stakeholders from other 22 villages was necessary to enable access to ESIF funding opportunities. Such a high number of stakeholders required professional facilitation of the process, of the formation of partnership and subsequently very efficient planning.

It is also important to note that most of the local stakeholders involved in the process of micro-regional strategy formulation had no previous experience with participatory or strategic planning. Thus, **the facilitation of the micro-regional development strategy was identified as the key objective of the LERI research in the locality**, as it had the potential to trigger and advance other activities and would encourage the involvement of local population in a variety of areas. The LERI field expert, along with an external expert on regional development hired within the LERI research, put a lot of effort into reaching out to as broad a set of local actors in the micro-region as possible. It was a lengthy, time-consuming process (direct phone calls, personal meetings while collecting information and ideas from stakeholders in an intensive one-week study trip and during follow-up inquiries). The external expert developed a questionnaire and reached out to local stakeholders in person. Unfortunately, the response rate was very low, which is why more direct, personal contact and the study trip later replaced this technique. (For more on the whole process, see below.)

In the early stages of the stakeholder group formulation, the LERI team faced **the challenge of identifying and involving a facilitator willing to travel on a regular basis to Rakytník and facilitate the whole process**. This was a challenge for a variety of reasons including the **marginalized geographical location of the region**. The mayor clearly realizes the lack of necessary human capacities in their marginalized region as one of the effective barriers to local development:

"All people with education, skills and experience that we need for development left the villages and moved to other regions, where they have work opportunities. What would they do here? Mostly elderly people and people without skills and education remained in the villages. In consequence, even if we had financial resources to pay expertise, there is no one we could hire in the region."³

³ Mayor, personal interview, 14 January 2016, non-Roma male.

Other barriers identified included **the financial resources available for such long and expensive process of strategic planning and the resistance shared by the LERI field experts and the local government to cooperate with well-established grant consultancy agencies**. Based on anecdotic evidence, the LERI team thought that these agencies did not always guarantee quality and were often involved in unfair and non-transparent influencing of decision-making processes at several levels of public administration:

"We could hire a remote consultancy company, but we do not know them, thus there is no guarantee that the spent money would lead to any result. All of them claim that they are able to 'arrange' that the funds will come, but we cannot know it in advance. Moreover, typical consultancies even do not come to see the place, they just produce a generic document, which seems to be copy-pasted for any region or village and you have to pay for it".⁴

For several weeks, the LERI field experts communicated with a potential expert and facilitator who expressed her willingness to cooperate with the strategy. She also travelled to Rakytník twice. However, for reasons unknown to the LERI team, this cooperation was never utilised. At the beginning of January 2016, the new expert and facilitator, Mr. Juraj Zamkovský, was finally recruited for the LERI activity aimed at strategic planning. He is a top-class expert with numerous years of experience; beyond the topic of strategic planning, he is also an expert on the energy self-sufficiency of local communities and the development of local communities. Beyond Mr. Zamkovský's expertise, another argument for his involvement was his membership in the recently established national-level task force focusing on the development of less developed regions. This task force was established in Slovakia in December 2015 following the adoption of a Law on development of marginalized regions.⁵ Its role is the formulation of developmental strategies defined at a district level that should bring additional resources to the target localities. The district of Rimavská Sobota is listed among the target localities, thus the involvement of Mr. Zamkovský in the creation of the micro-regional strategy brought added value in the form of better adjustments for the micro-regional priorities and specific measures within the governmental strategy formulated at a district level.

The micro-regional strategy was widely communicated with all involved stakeholders. During the strategy preparation phase (before August 2016), seven micro-regional meetings between local stakeholders and the external expert took place, and the external expert has travelled to the locality for one- or two-day trips during which he has conducted many group and individual meetings. Despite some issues and challenges related to the stakeholders' attendance at the planning meeting (not all expected stakeholders always attended the meetings, probably because at the beginning they did not always believe that the process can lead to meaningful outcomes, or because of a very high load of administrative, legal and managerial tasks that small municipalities with very limited human resources must fulfil), the work on the micro-regional strategy was warmly welcomed by all involved stakeholders. If a specific

⁴ Mayor, personal interview, 14 January 2016, non-Roma male.

⁵ Slovakia, The Act on support of the least developed regions as amended (*Zákon č. 336/2015 Z. z. o podpore najmenej rozvinutých okresov a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov*), 11 November 2015.

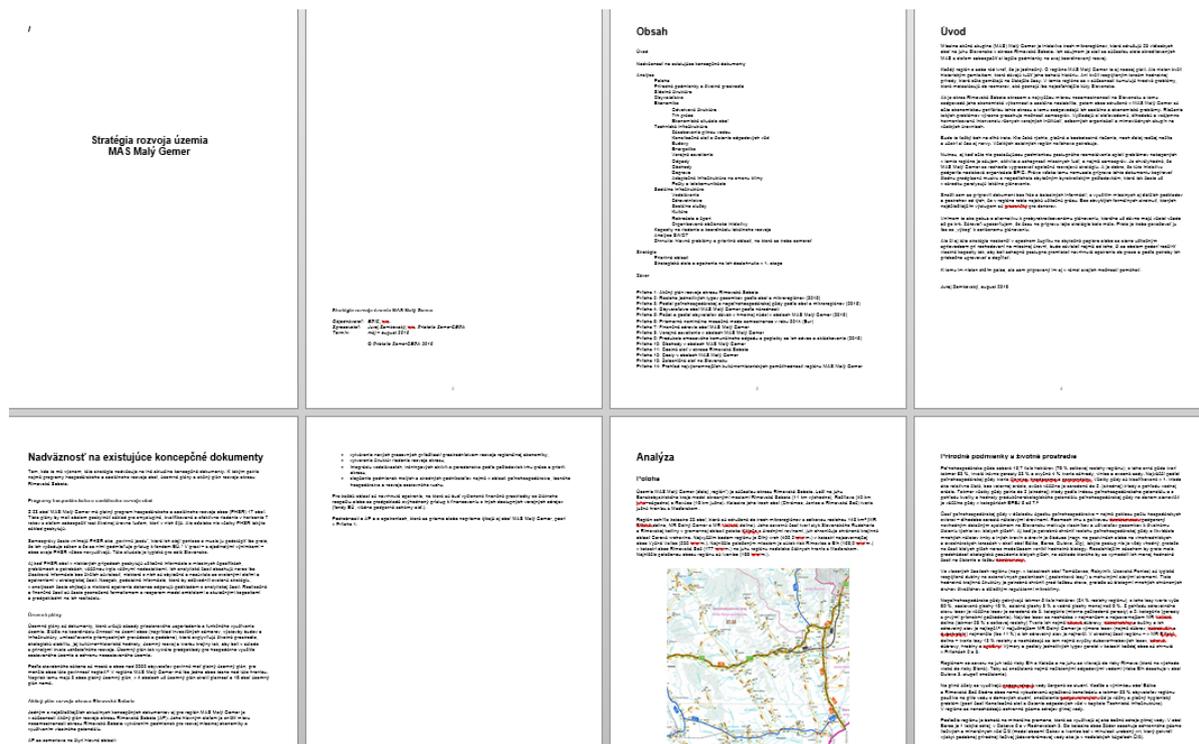
stakeholder did not attend, s/he was always contacted by phone or in person and the necessary information was collected or shared. The mayor of Rakytník played a key role in the coordination of the stakeholder group thanks to whom the positive reputation of Rakytník in the whole micro-region has grown quickly.

Between 15 and 20 August 2016, the external expert organised community meetings in all 23 involved municipalities, including Rakytník. The purpose of the meetings, except the micro-regional strategy presentation, was the verification of the proposed and identified measures. Despite a plan to lead all meetings in an identical fashion, the situations required lots of improvisation, as the attendance, focus of interest and level of understanding varied a lot.

The meeting in Rakytník was organised slightly differently than in other municipalities, as in Rakytník the proposed measures were also discussed with members of the local community. The proposed measures were discussed during the opening ceremony of the community meeting place, in a very informal atmosphere. The LERI field expert simply asked people what they thought about alternative activities and plans. Unfortunately, the feedback was always "it would be very good" or "it would be super". The difference between Rakytník and other villages is that in Rakytník the LERI field experts informally discussed/introduced the possible activities to the local people during the opening ceremony. In other villages, the LERI field experts discussed them mainly with the local government (the mayor and members of the municipal council) and only in some cases with local stakeholders who attended the meeting (all local stakeholders were invited to all meetings).

The micro-regional strategy was adopted by local stakeholders before the end of August 2016 (the final version was distributed among all involved stakeholders who were given the opportunity to comment). The strategy will be officially approved during the next formal meeting of the stakeholders group already registered as Local Action Group, *Malý Gemer* (registered as the association of legal entities). After that, when the call is open, it may be submitted to the Rural Development Programme for financial support.

Photo 1. Micro-regional strategy Malý Gemer



Source: LERI field expert, 2016

Despite the strategic importance of the existence of the micro-regional strategy/micro-regional cooperation and a general understanding of this priority, the presence/process of formulating the strategy for most of the local inhabitants has proved a very intangible activity. With the aim of also involving local people, regardless of whether they were of Roma or non-Roma origin, locals decided to devote their attention to the **design and construction of the local meeting place/shelter** that will be used for the needs of the community and family meetings. An important part of the shelter is a traditional built-in brick stove, which represents a part of the history of the local people and local villages (in the past, such stoves were constructed in public places and used by the community). It also offers a possibility for community open-air cooking, which is always popular and attractive to locals. No less importantly, the meeting place and the brick stove were fully built by local people who are rightly proud to have been a part of such a project.

The whole idea of a local meeting place/shelter and a built-in brick stove was triggered by the experience of one local man, who saw such a place in another village in Hungary. The idea was discussed by the municipal council and support was granted.

Once the idea was approved by the local council, a group of four locals proposed a design for the meeting place, which basically copied the one in a cross-border village in Hungary. Accordingly, a meeting with the local LERI co-researcher and an independent architect was organised. The architect tried to encourage the locals to modify the proposed design to be more innovative and more architecturally interesting. All external proposals failed and the locals decided to follow their own design, which had already been illustrated on squared paper. Thus, the local LERI co-researcher and architect understood the locals' commitment to the initial design and expressed their full support. Afterwards,

the architect explained the technical documentation needed to obtain all necessary permissions and the mayor submitted the document to the relevant authorities.

In the meantime, information about the intention to build a meeting place/shelter, together with the traditional built-in brick stove, spread around the village and once the weather allowed, at the beginning of April 2016, work started. It is also important to note that construction work is not common in the village. Thus, the plan to build a shelter raised a high level of interest and excitement:

"It is very good to have these kinds of activities; otherwise we would do nothing and get bored at home."⁶

The core group of locals involved in the construction work consisted of six people involved through the system of 'activation' work; in addition, about 10 more people were involved on a voluntary basis. The construction is located in the garden of the municipality's office, which is a very central and easily accessible location, thus, when work was underway (mostly Mondays and Tuesdays) people walking around came in and out. In a relatively short amount of time, the construction site became the heart of activity in the village.

Special importance was placed on the traditional built-in brick stove, which was constructed according to a traditional design. It is built from second-hand bricks collected from several neighbouring villages. Thermal isolation was achieved with broken glass bottles and the bricks are connected using a special clay mass, used in the region in the past. The whole stove is an impressive construction with a weight of about three tons. The construction techniques used is the result of the survey conducted by locals and common wisdom. The mayor, together with three other locals, also travelled to Hungary to see a similar stove built in a nearby village.

Such a stove was used for baking bread in the past, thus local people are very much looking forward to preparing their own bread and the stove is already generally known as 'the community stove'. Furthermore, some of the men in the village are looking forward to using the stove for experimentation with their own clay brick production/firing as they found evidence of a former brickfield in the region.

A very positive aspect of the shelter and traditional built-in stove construction is that no one pays any attention to the fact that it was built by Roma. It is not as important as the fact it is useful, appreciated and a source of pride for the whole community. Although Roma in the village may, in general, be considered to be poorer, the cooperation is the same between Roma and non-Roma in the village without any tensions. The place is perceived as communal part of the village for both Roma and non-Roma:

"Rakytník is a very good village, we are very happy here, we have opportunities like this [to build a meeting place] and we are very proud of that!"⁷

⁶ Local community representative, personal interview, 2 June 2016, young Roma male.

⁷ Local community representative, personal interview, 2 June 2016, non-Roma female.

This supports the hypothesis that the roots of Roma–non-Roma tension are the result of social issues, rather than ethnic issues.

The opening ceremony for the local meeting place/shelter and traditional built-in brick stove was held on Saturday 20 August 2016. The ceremony was organised in the form of a day-long celebration of the local community and its history, during which a variety of local crafts and traditions were presented. The part of the programme, which also featured on the official flyers, was a demonstration of traditional Romany bread baking in the newly built brick stove.

Information about the LERI research can be found on the construction of the meeting place; the LERI research was also mentioned during the official opening speech.

The focus on **activation and the opportunities for young people** was identified as another LERI priority in Rakytník. The dropout rate for students in secondary schools in the region is high, which may be caused by low access to quality job opportunities, as youth unemployment is a real issue. Rakytník is no exception to the region.

One of the main challenges identified during the preliminary assessment was the ability of locals to formulate specific actions rather than identify general areas for interventions. Most of the people approached identified opportunities for young people as key, however none of them was able to develop the idea further and name specific activities which could be undertaken. The same challenge was faced and amplified during interviews with young people.

Therefore, the opportunity to utilise an international LERI network was taken and the international youth exchange in cooperation with the local researchers from Hungary and Finland was organised. Fortunately, the youth exchange was co-funded by EU money through the Erasmus+ programme.

The main motivation for organising this youth exchange, which was initiated by the Slovakian LERI team, was to create an opportunity for youngsters from several LERI localities, including Rakytník, to experience youth work abroad and gain inspiration for future activities in their home communities. Based on discussions with local stakeholders, the LERI field experts believed this type of experience might trigger a change and make a difference to the lives of participants. The youth exchange was built on activities that focused on empowering young participants to participate in community life: on developing their presentation skills, problem identification and solution proposal skills, as well as building a group and organising a small community-based initiative.

The possibility of participating in the youth exchange was introduced in Rakytník in December 2015. Identification of potential participants took almost six weeks. The recruitment of the participants was a challenge and a shock to the LERI field experts. In the end, three males between the ages of 17 and 20 agreed to participate. The main selection criteria were: age limit of 25, ability and willingness to get actively involved in the preparation of community-based activities for young people in Rakytník, willingness to actively participate in the preparation process of the youth exchange and finally the commitment to travel – also expressed via signing an ‘agreement about cooperation’ – which among other things articulated a financial fine for non-participation in the exchange.

Preparation for the participants started on 2 April 2016 and occurred on a regular basis, at the beginning biweekly, later weekly. The selected males were led by a

local, Hungarian-speaking, co-researcher - Ms. Gyongyi Tritontiova - from a nearby village who had participated in the recent training of youth workers, organised outside of the LERI scheme in Armenia. The local co-researcher provided individualised mentoring for the boys, focused primarily on supporting their social and communication skills.

Despite the ambitious plan to involve the selected youngsters in the logistical preparation of the exchange and perform 'learning by doing' processes, the preparation, as already mentioned, focused rather on strengthening their social and communication skills. Their education profile was poor, as all were school dropouts. Two of them left school before graduating from elementary education, and the third was in the first year of his apprenticeship school education. The poor education background and life experience limited to their own community were also reflected in their ability to present ideas, respond to questions and read social situations. It was their first experience of participating in such activities, thus they lost interest in cooperation several times and it was necessary to refocus their attention. These crises usually occurred when certain tasks were required (such as the preparation of a story about Rakytník). Each of the crises was minimised with the argument about the financial fine of €200 for intentional non-participation in the exchange, which was articulated in the agreement about cooperation, signed by the boys before purchasing the flight tickets. The practice of signing the agreement with participants is common within the project financed by Erasmus Plus program and implemented by non-profit organisation EPIC. Once the travel costs are paid and a participant self-willingly decides not to participate the costs remain with the organization EPIC and are classified as loss. The amount of the fine is €200, which is in most of the cases much lower than the real travel costs, thus its role is rather a demonstrative one.

Notably, the real crisis came shortly before their departure and was caused by the terrorist attack on the airport in Brussels. At that point, not only the boys but also their families lost confidence as the fear of another terrorist attack became a very real threat to the boys:

*"I will not travel, because I do not want to die. I am too young..."*⁸

Due to their lack of previous experience, neither the boys nor their families wanted to accept the argument about the low probability of a similar disaster. In their view, the airport was synonymous with terrorist attacks and death. It took several days to overcome these fears and similar projections, which were very much nurtured by their only sources of information, the commercial TV channels, in combination with their lack of previous travelling experience. The seriousness of the situation was too intense for the argument about the financial fine; given the context of the situation that would have been on the verge of unethical behaviour and extortion.

Luckily, the boys, also thanks to the intense communication with the local co-researcher who acted as their leader and mentor, finally decided to go and the whole experience in Finland was successful. During the exchange, which took place in Helsinki, 2-11 May 2016, they were able to create and deliver a concise presentation about Rakytník (the first in their lives, which was also the result of

⁸ Local community representative, personal interview, 22 April 2016, young Roma male.

their preparation on the exchange), identify a youth initiative they would like to organise in the village, which is a local gym, and elaborate on the details of the initiative from a variety of aspects. They interacted easily with the youngsters from the Hungarian group and fully participated in the programme, which they found interesting. The interaction with the other groups (either the group from Hrabušice, the other LERI locality from Slovakia, or with the groups from Finland) was much more complicated, as the language and communication barriers were very present.

Another challenge has related to maintaining their enthusiasm after their return home, to assist them with the materialisation of their plans. The mayor was aware of their proposal to open a gym and contacted them immediately after their return with an offer of cooperation and providing premises free of charge. Unfortunately, the boys have not yet responded to this offer. The intention is to let the boys take the initiative and only after they do that, provide them with any necessary assistance (including the assistance of the local co-researcher), which is also the mayor's intention.

Also, the reaction of the boys to a proposed meeting with the LERI team to film an interview about their experiences for a short documentary about the LERI activities in Rakytník was a surprise. Out of the three boys, the LERI team together with the film-maker only met with one, however, he refused to be recorded. The second one refused to talk or meet with the LERI team at all, nevertheless, throughout the day he made himself visible in the places where LERI team was. The third member of the group disappeared and did not answer his phone. Their behaviour was incomprehensible, not only to the LERI team but also to the mayor and their own mothers, who willingly answered the questions of the LERI team and constantly expressed their sincere appreciation of the experience their sons had gained through participating in the exchange. They also openly mentioned the fear they experienced, but acknowledged the importance of such experiences. The experience of their sons has also encouraged others to participate in similar activities in the future. The local children and youth are also surprisingly well informed about the plan to open a local gym. In the light of everything mentioned above, the reaction of the boys to the visit of the LERI field experts in Rakytník and the LERI team's attempt to interview and film the boys shortly after their return is even more unexpected and perplexing.

The mayor interpreted their reaction as a result of realization of their poor living conditions:

"They have seen that people in other places live much better than them in Rakytník, so they feel ashamed now. Before they had not realised the difference, as they had known only Rakytník. Perhaps they liked some girls in the group [of the youth exchange participants] and they are afraid that the girls would learn in how poor conditions the boys live. This may be the reason, why they refuse to be filmed now."⁹

Thus, they were not willing to appear in the short documentary, even though they would not be filmed in their homes. This interpretation may be very

⁹ Mayor, personal interview, 2 June 2016, non-Roma male.

accurate, especially since all three boys had already been filmed (once in Bratislava before they travelled and a second time in Vienna airport, immediately after they arrived) and they willingly cooperated.

In regard to planned **capacity-building activity**, a two-day long study trip designed for the stakeholders involved in the preparation of the micro-regional strategy was undertaken. The study trip applied to planned capacity-building activity 'Local government's capacity building for the establishment of municipal social enterprise' and three Slovak municipalities where the social entrepreneurship focused on work integration and employment increasing works were visited: specifically, Čierny Balog (a project about self-sustainable energy), Hriňová (agro-cooperation) and Spišský Hrhov (construction and small community-based services). Following an agreement with the stakeholders, the trip took place on 12-14 September 2016. Fourteen people participated in the trip.

Other activities identified within the LERI's initial needs assessment, such as development of a project proposal for the establishment of a social enterprise or pre-/after-school facility, **have not taken place yet as additional financial resources are needed for their realisation**. The initial plan was to apply for additional resources from the call for proposals financed through ESIF. During the planning phase of the LERI research, it was expected that these calls would soon open, however, by the end of the LERI research implementation, the financial resources were still not accessible.

Resources used to implement the interventions

The implementation of LERI research in Rakytník was very much supported by the local municipality and the mayor himself. All implemented activities were received with a high level of enthusiasm and commitment, which was demonstrated through the provision of organisational, political and material support.

Regarding the activities aiming to formulate the **micro-regional strategy**, the personal involvement of the mayor of Rakytník was crucial to the overall success of the initiative. He brought up the very idea of strategic planning as LERI's activity with sustainable effect, and subsequently was the driving force for the whole process and both the main contact and resource person for the LERI team. He also participated as local facilitator of the communication with municipalities and stakeholders. Locations for the meeting and refreshments were always provided by the Municipality of Rakytník or by the municipalities of neighbouring villages (venue and refreshment were always provided by the hosting municipality). The local municipalities also covered the travel costs necessary for the first meetings with the external expert in regional development as this took place in his office, some 120 km from Rakytník. The LERI research budget covered honoraria for the external expert.

Regarding the **meeting place/shelter** and the traditional built-in brick stove, the LERI research budget covered 90 % of the construction costs, – the purchase of wood and roofing materials. The rest (concrete, screws and nails, paint, etc.) was paid for by the municipality. It should also be noted that a good portion of the materials were second-hand, collected locally (most of the materials needed for the stove) or locally produced from donated, second-hand materials. The transport costs were also covered by the municipality.

Another significant contribution of the municipality was the organisational support, as most of the organisational work was undertaken by the municipality, and the land where the shelter is built is owned by the municipality. The cost of the opening ceremony was covered by the municipality with the support of a small grant from the Government Office of the Slovak Republic.

Regarding the **youth exchange**, most of the costs were covered by external resources fundraised through the EU-funded Erasmus+ programme. The only cost paid for by the LERI research budget related to the youth exchange was reimbursements for the local co-researcher who led the group of boys.

Regarding the **capacity-building activity**, the cost was shared between the participating municipalities (cost of travel and food) and the cost of external resources was raised through the EU-funded Erasmus+ programme.

Despite the initial plan to utilise also ESIF resources, mainly for the purposes of a planned social enterprise and a pre-/after-school facility, this plan has not yet been fulfilled. This situation has been caused by significant delays on the part of the relevant authorities responsible for administrating ESIF money in opening the relevant calls for proposals. At the time of the planning of the LERI research, these were expected for spring 2016; however, at the time of writing, the financial resources were still not accessible.

Stakeholders involved

Rakytník has only 317 inhabitants, thus the portfolio of local stakeholders in villages of this size is naturally smaller than that of larger municipalities.

The main stakeholder regarding all implemented activities was the local municipality, personalised by the mayor and the five members of the council.

In Rakytník, there are two active local NGOs, however their leaders also represent the local municipality (as a member of the local council and as mayor), thus, the civic associations were not officially involved, despite their role in the whole process being irreplaceable.

At the beginning of the LERI process in Rakytník, the LERI field experts counted on the participation of the local community social field worker who was very engaged with the Roma community. Unfortunately, this position was project based, and due to new rules set out by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, the municipality was unable to sustain this position.

There is no school, nor are there other public institutions or churches, so the number of the local stakeholders is limited.

The local community, Roma or non-Roma, may be considered to be among the key stakeholders, however when approaching the individual members of the community, the LERI team was directed to the mayor or members of the local council. Despite initial concerns, this fact cannot be judged negatively as indicating the over-dominance of the local council on any possible initiatives. Rather, it simply illustrates the situation of small villages, where almost every stakeholder/leader is also elected as a member of the local council.

Regarding the specific activities, the distribution of roles was as follows.

- Micro-regional strategy definition – the main driver of the strategy was the mayor of Rakytník who networked with the necessary number of municipalities and representatives from the private and civic sectors. The

attitude from other municipalities and involved stakeholders was positive, although slightly passive. Most of the involved stakeholders willingly participated in the meetings and provided the hired facilitator with the requested information, however only a few of the involved stakeholders were involved proactively.

The external facilitator may also be considered as a key stakeholder. Although he was contracted and paid for his services, his role was crucial for the success of the process, and his personal involvement exceeded the commitment of a hired consultant. He is also considered to be one of the main linkages between the micro-regional strategy and the strategy designed for the Rimavská Sobota district, which was initiated by central government.

- Meeting place/shelter with the built-in stove – again the main stakeholder was the local municipality, however the group of four local men who proposed the design of the shelter and were also actively involved in its construction and research on construction techniques of a traditional stove, may also be considered as a group of stakeholders.

Given the enthusiasm of all the locals about this development and their willingness to participate in the construction, the extremely positive recognition of this activity from the potential beneficiaries is easily reported.

- Youth exchange and youth activities – despite high expectations, this activity is the most controversial among all implemented activities. The main stakeholders, the young people from Rakytník, remained rather passive. The three who were brave enough to participate in the international exchange were, at the time writing, still passive and unable to utilise their experiences even though they all assessed it as positive. The young people who were in the beginning considered to be stakeholders should rather be considered as beneficiaries in the target group. In contrast to expectations, their involvement was very passive, which may be interpreted as due to a lack of previous experience with similar activities.

The local co-researcher may be listed as another stakeholder of the youth exchange who guided the boys during the preparation and implementation of the exchange and will also be involved in the follow-up activities initiated by the boys, however they need to first show a proactive approach.

- Capacity-building activity – this activity was implemented in addition to the initial plan of LERI activities and was fully initiated by the members of the newly established Local Action Group, *Maly Gemer*, thus the stakeholders of the micro-regional strategy. The initiative was driven by the will to make examples of good practice a reality, to understand the essence of the success and consider the replication of these examples to the setting of Rakytník and its neighbouring region.

The not-for-profit organisation, EPIC, from Bratislava, which was also the recipient and intermediary of the LERI research local funds, is also among the key stakeholders involved in activities held in Rakytník. The organisation established cooperation with the municipality some two years ago and has been involved in several developmental activities in the municipality, aimed primarily at the issues of employment and employability in the village. Also the implementation of the youth exchange was facilitated through EPIC, which covered all necessary administration.

In regard to LERI activities in Rakytník, it is hard to identify any stakeholder who played an obstructive role, as the whole initiative was warmly welcomed and supported by all involved. Any inconveniences identified during the process were caused by the lack of previous experience rather than any negative intentions. The main inconveniences met during the process were the lack of ability of local people (either in the Roma or non-Roma community) to formulate their visions/expectations/thoughts beyond the known reality, and to take the initiative into their own hands. The most constructive role was always played by the mayor together with the members of the local council.

5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

In general, the experience of the LERI implementation in Rakytník may be assessed positively and very much driven by the local actors:

"We are very grateful for the support and possibility to build this meeting place, it is something we will have and we may build ourselves. To have some activity is wonderful, otherwise we would do nothing. It is also good for young people, they may see a bit of the practical work and learn some new skill."¹⁰

The list of implemented activities is diverse, each focused on a different target group, thus requiring different levels of involvement from the local community. Therefore, the implemented activities cannot be considered as one uniform package.

The people from the region, both Roma and non-Roma, were also constantly voicing their expectations regarding development opportunities from the support of a tourism industry. Unfortunately, after a detailed assessment of the local conditions and capacities by the external expert and discussions with local stakeholders, the LERI field experts considered tourism to be an **unrealistic dream**, a result of the community's lack of critical judgement and knowledge of the sector. Rakytník, similarly the whole region, offers few (if any) tourism supporting facilities and has little sense of the provision of services designed for tourists. The initial intentions of the LERI in Rakytník to focus on activities supporting local tourism can be considered unrealistic.

One of lessons learnt was during the LERI research that for inhabitants, but even for local representatives, it is not automatic to participate in such activities as strategic planning or participatory decision-making and particular attention must be devoted to ensure their involvement.

The main challenge faced during the LERI implementation had been however the involvement of young people. The education profile of the younger generation, as well as their prospects of getting a solid job offer, is very low. The region suffers from serious '**brain-drain**' tendencies, especially with regards to young people. The capacity of the region to absorb investment, if it existed, to support the knowledge economy or creative industries that would keep the young, educated generation in the region, is weak. The main investment priorities are in the provision of low-skilled, subsidised jobs or investments in basic infrastructure,

¹⁰ Local community representative, personal interview, 2 June 2016, Roma female.

which reflect the actual, most pressing ad hoc needs of the region, while ignoring the necessity of investing in the development of the region.

There are significant differences in **competence and social skills** between the generation of people aged 35+ and the young people in their teenage years and twenties in Rakytník, and across the entire region. The differences may be interpreted through the quality of public education, access to quality youth work encouraging proactivity or the civic engagement of young people, or other opportunities, which is very complicated in localities like Rakytník.

One of the LERI team's findings was that young local residents do not speak Slovakian in a proper way – an observation that can be observed also in most of the marginalised regions of Slovakia. This clearly represents an additional barrier to the development of such regions and to the successful participation of their inhabitants in the mainstream society. One further consequence is that inhabitants, but even representatives of local stakeholders, do not have access to necessary information distributed at the national level for example on availability of development funds, therefore their participation in national and international social and professional networks are limited and their ability to employ common policy tools is short. These activities require namely good command of the country's official language, a good command of the often highly technical and/ or administrative terms of national/ EU grant schemes.

According to the Slovak Constitution, the members of the national minorities have the right to attend the education in their mother tongue, and the Slovak language as the country's official language has been integral part of the educational curriculum. But the decline of the quality of education, and consequently, that of the cultural capital of marginalized regions' population, can be easily assessed on the level of command of the country's official language by members of those minority groups. Most of the local people above the age of 35 have a good command of Slovak, acquired during their education. In the LERI research, the communication with them occurred directly - between researchers and locals. However, in Rakytník the LERI field expert's experience was that the communication with the younger generations had to be facilitated either by the mayor or a local co-researcher. On one hand, they translated between Slovak and Hungarian, but on the other hand they also needed to encourage them to communicate at all with strangers, as young people from marginalized regions and communities live in isolation, what even decreases their chances to be successful in the society outside of their own community.

Young people tend to be beneficiaries and passive receivers of services and activities, rather than active promoters. Interventions that aim to change this situation must be intense and, at the beginning, should not have many expectations regarding the capacity of the young people to articulate their interests and engage in a bottom-up approach.

It is also a mistake to expect appreciation from the youngsters for the implemented activities. The LERI field expert expected enthusiastic willingness to participate in the international youth exchange and perhaps a competition for the limited number of places. In reality the LERI team experienced a challenge of recruiting three participants, despite the availability of four places. The possibility to take part in the free-of-charge, almost ten-day-long trip abroad was not rated highly by the youngsters at all. Their approach to the existing opportunities was different than in the older generations. The expectations of the LERI team regarding their willingness to participate and become local young leaders were

too high, which caused a certain level of frustration among members of the LERI team. High expectations from the organisers may influence their commitment to continue in their activities, or to perceive their own results negatively, which would certainly be a mistake.

Therefore, the main lesson taken from this experience should be about **realistic assessments of the situation**, the previous experiences of the involved young people, and maintaining realistic expectations for the results. In a specific situation, such as in Rakytník, the fact that the boys finally travelled may be considered a real success, comparable with the results of much more visible and sustainable actions, undertaken with different groups of young people coming from a totally different background.

In organising similar activities, the fears and stereotypes of the participants must be taken seriously. The situation when the trip was endangered by the terrorist attack on the airport in Brussels and the participants' belief that every flight would end in a terrorist attack came as a complete surprise to the LERI field expert and local co-researcher.

This experience was also communicated to the national agency coordinating the Erasmus+ programme in Slovakia, and became an important lesson learnt.

The other important lesson learned is about the necessity of involving the youth workers, preferably as local co-researchers in the preparation, implementation and follow-up activities. If the local co-researcher's individualised assistance had not been provided in the case of Rakytník, the local boys would definitely not have been able to travel and participate in the youth exchange.

Another challenge the LERI field experts faced was the **ability of the local people to articulate their needs**, priorities and wishes. The imagination and expectations of the locals are often very limited, and the ability to raise their ambitions is low as they are not used to answering such kinds of questions and to think in abstract categories. On the other hand, this may be a rational reaction to the situation they face on a daily basis in the region with the underdeveloped infrastructure (either heavy infrastructure such as transport and roads or the presence of the institutional infrastructure providing support). To materialise any ambition is much more difficult in this kind of region than in other economically better-off regions. Thus, conducting a needs assessment or understanding better the opinions of local people was extremely difficult.

In most cases, the people were not able to articulate specific actions that would improve their lives in Rakytník, but they always approved and supported the suggestions they got from the LERI team. The interviews during the needs assessment often played out as follows:

Field expert (hereinafter FE): *"If you had a possibility to improve the situation in Rakytník what would you change/improve?"* (or other versions of the question: *"If you had lots of money and could invest them in Rakytník, what would you do?"* or *"What do you miss in Rakytník?"*)

LOCALS: *"All is nice here" or "I am happy here" or "I think all is good."*

FE: *"Would you like to have more jobs?" or "Would you like to organise something for young people?" or "Would you like to organise something for the children?"*

LOCALS: *"Yes, more jobs would be good.... "*

FE: "What kind of jobs?"

LOCALS "Jobs, to work..."¹¹

The interviews with the locals were extremely difficult, and despite the will to involve them in the planning process, this proved ineffective in several cases. To expect a real bottom-up approach was rather naïve in the case of Rakytník. The methodology which worked best in Rakytník was a semi-top-down approach, where the general ideas were proposed by the mayor or members of the local council and then verified by the locals. This approach was also used for the purpose of defining the micro-regional strategy when, after the initial interviews and assessment of the localities, the external facilitator came up with a set of proposals, which were consequently discussed with involved stakeholders and locals.

Given the above-mentioned points, the main lesson taken from the initial needs assessment and use of purely participatory approaches is that participation and the ability to formulate expectations is not automatic. This should not be taken as the only mantra for a fair and right approach. The ability to fully participate in the planning processes should be taken as the result of previous experiences.

It may also be presumed that participation in public life is preconditioned, not so much by accomplishing a certain level of education or a person's economic situation, but primarily as a result of the personal experience of being accepted and of individual personality characteristics. People who have been living on the edge of social acceptance may not have the self-confidence to articulate their visions openly and publicly. One reason may be the fear of not being accepted again and the second may be, as already mentioned, the rational reaction to the situation they face on a daily basis in the region with the underdeveloped infrastructure. To materialise any ambition is much more difficult in this kind of region than in other economically better-off regions. No less important is the fact that the paternalistic culture and belief that the mayor or public offices or politicians should make the decisions and ensure a good quality of life.

On the other hand, local people are extremely **happy to participate in community life** and also, to a certain extent, in voluntary work, which may be also considered as a form of participation. In these cases they are willing to take responsibility for a specific task, however they are extremely hesitant to initiate any new activity or to take overall leadership. The lack of previous experience of any leadership/managerial roles among the local inhabitants is very apparent in the locality. This finding was proved both during the activities related to the construction of the meeting place/shelter and during its opening ceremony.

Certain reservation from the locals towards **external expertise** was also an interesting observation. On the one hand, the external experts were more than welcome for activities that the locals did not feel confident in performing (e.g. in the case of the micro-regional strategy the local actors expressed great interest in obtaining assistance for adopting an in-depth planning approach to this strategy). On the other hand, in the activities they felt enthusiastic about, any external advice was refused: for example, in the process of designing the meeting place/shelter. The LERI team was keen to build a low-cost but

¹¹ Local community representative, personal interview, 4 February 2016, Roma and non-Roma men.

architecturally interesting construction, which could be of interest to potential tourists and visitors. These ideas were completely ignored by the locals who expressed a strong wish to follow their design. The ideas about the possible added value presented at the planning meeting were not understood and were far removed from the plans and preferred aesthetics of the locals.

In relation to this experience the question about the proper and sensitive ways of channelling external knowledge into the locality may be raised. According to the 'learning regions theory',¹² development is stimulated by the adoption of new skills and knowledge through the learning processes of (i) learning by doing, (ii) learning by using, (iii) learning by searching, and (iv) learning by interacting. In the case of Rakytník, the local knowledge was intended to be strengthened by learning by doing and learning by interacting. However, it is not clear to what extent this was fulfilled, as locals were fairly resistant to external knowledge.

The intention was also to **identify individuals** whose capacities could be strengthened in order to drive a learning process throughout the community. The presence of more individuals willing to act as leaders could significantly influence the social capital of the locality and have a noticeably positive impact on the overall situation in the municipality. Unfortunately, during the whole LERI operation in Rakytník, the LERI team failed to identify individuals with the will and capacity to become new leaders; the LERI team worked only with those leaders who already held positions of authority and were respected. As a result of this experience, the feasibility of 'making' leaders may be raised. The LERI field expert assumes the hypothesis about leadership not being teachable, rather something that must emerge as a natural characteristic of an individual, and only the specific skills necessary for good leaders may be cultivated.

Despite the Roma population still representing the poorer part of the village, challenges regarding Roma and non-Roma cohabitation in the village were not observed. The main and most respected leader in the village is the mayor, who has an unbiased approach toward Roma and non-Roma. This was noted several times during talks with locals and was expressed with a certain level of respect. Nevertheless, another proof of the Roma inclusion in the village is the composition of the municipal council: the fact that two out of five members are of Roma origin. This may be taken as an argument for the hypothesis that the roots of Roma–non-Roma tension are often more social than ethnic, and comprehensive, territorially based, approaches with an explicit focus on marginalised groups of inhabitants are needed.

Another finding relates to the willingness of the local people to participate in the construction of the meeting place. The local people took it as an opportunity to not sit at home and be bored, but to have social contact and entertainment. According to talks with locals, the opportunity to be involved in the construction (even on a voluntary basis) was very much appreciated. However, according to discussions with the mayor, the quality of the work performed was not always perfect, thus the willingness of locals to participate was not driven by the will to provide high-quality work, but rather to have a chance for social contact connected to a specific activity. Based on that, it may be presumed that the

¹² See e.g. Lundvall, B. A. (1992), 'Introduction', in Lundvall, B. A. (ed.), *National System of Innovation*, London, Pinter, pp. 1-19.

performance of similar initiatives in villages like Rakytník may trigger a variety of community development processes, empowerment of people and consequently social capital, and cultivate the social skills and work habits of the involved participants. This may be more effective than traditional research-based techniques (such as focus groups or interviews). However, the success of a project may be dependent on the **visibility of the performed project** (e.g. it may be presumed that the initiative would not have raised such high levels of interest if it had been undertaken inside or in a less visible place) and the identification of the locals with the project (e.g. it may be presumed that the construction would not have been received so well if the LERI team had prevailed with its ideas about the design).

Communication and use of the Slovak/Hungarian language were challenges faced by the LERI field experts. As mentioned already, this was considered a challenge mainly in the communication with children and young people who may have a basic understanding of the Slovakian language, but are unable to speak it. Regarding the generation that is 35+, the language barrier was minimal, as most people in this age category have a good command of Slovak, acquired during their school education. Communication with children and young people was always facilitated by the mayor or the local co-researcher involved in the activities related to the youth exchange. The inability to speak Slovak doubles the marginalisation of the younger generation in the locality, as their chances of finding further educational/employment opportunities in the region are extremely limited, and their mobility is limited to Hungarian-speaking localities or to Hungary, where they are considered to be foreigners.

Regarding **sustainability**, all implemented activities were undertaken from the perspective of continuation and further utilisation. The presence of the micro-regional cooperation formalised to the micro-regional strategy has strong potential to increase funding opportunities for Rakytník, including funding opportunities for the major issues identified in Rakytník: employment, housing and its general infrastructure (such as access to drinking water and sanitation).

The micro-regional strategy also brought one specific measure proposed by the external facilitator in the form of the 'Constructed Plant Treatment Wetland', which, if successful, may be a great innovation for the water and sewage systems in economically marginalised regions, with the capacity to increase the number of low-qualified 'green' jobs. The project for the construction of such a wetland in Rakytník is now formulated not only in the micro-regional strategy, but also in the government strategy for the empowerment of the Rimavská Sobota district (thus the necessary financial resources are allocated) and the technology is currently being discussed with the Ministry of the Environment of the Slovak Republic, backed by the support of the Agricultural University in Nitra.

It must be pointed out that the idea to integrate this measure did not come from locals, but was very much driven by the external facilitator who is specialist in energy efficiency and energy self-sufficiency. Thus, in this case the local stakeholders are receivers and supporters rather than initiators. On the other hand, the creation in Rakytník of the first such wetland in Slovakia, may raise up Rakytník among the villages as having the ability to demonstrate a very specific and unique example of good practice on the field of green jobs for the low-qualified, which may also generate income for the municipality in the future.

The youth exchange was organised from the perspective of empowering the local young people to lead similar activities in the future. The youth activities are

certainly not financially self-sustaining, however activities initiated and organised by young people are still at the centre of a variety of funded programmes. Thus, were young people to become activated, some financial support would surely be identified.

As for the meeting place/shelter, additional investment, except maintenance costs, will not be required for a while. The idea of the municipal council is to also use the meeting place for commercial purposes and offer its use to other neighbouring municipalities for a small rental fee, thus its maintenance could be covered by this income.

As for the capacity-building activities, the budget is not as important as the network of good contacts. Study visits, such as the one organised for the stakeholders of the micro-regional strategy formulation, can be organised at very low-cost, which could be covered by the municipal budget. For organising the next series of capacity-building activities, the network/contacts for the projects/municipalities/experts able to present examples of good practice are more important than money. And this network, also thanks to LERI, is currently being built.

Rakytník's access to EU funds remains difficult, as the capacity of the municipal budget to cover the required obligatory co-financing is very limited, as is the capacity to administer such a project. The previous opportunity (autumn 2015) to submit the micro-regional strategy for an assessment to the LEADER programme was missed because the strategy did not exist at the time. This could have channelled money into the region which would not have required strong co-financing; however, all involved believe the micro-regional strategy will be submitted to the first upcoming open call, the timing of which is unknown.

Based on the observations and experiences while running the LERI research activities, it may be argued that the **relations between the Roma and non-Roma** populations in Rakytník are good and cooperative in general and the inclusion of Roma is not a fundamental problem that would resonate at local level. However, several factors do arise as barriers to Roma inclusion, which also have an effect at local level:

- Lack of financial resources:

While Roma and non-Roma relationships in Rakytník, in general, can be assessed as very easy and without any significant tensions, it must be also pointed out that most Roma live on the boundary of the village in poorer conditions than the majority population. However, the social and economic differences between Roma and non-Roma parts of the village are not as visible as in other parts of Slovakia, such as the south-eastern region of Slovakia, generally considered to be the poorest part of Slovakia where poverty is present in both Roma and non-Roma communities. When mentioning the lack of financial resources, the money should be invested in the region in general (regardless of the ethnic origin of the inhabitants) and a territorial approach should be strongly recommended. The financial investments aimed at improving the situation of exclusively Roma people could be counterproductive; such affirmative actions towards exclusively Roma would not be appropriate in Rakytník. When it comes to the additional financial resources (primarily ESIF) the eligibility criteria in most cases are designed in such a way as to disqualify villages like Rakytník from accessing the funds.

- Lack of innovation in performed approaches:

In general, the sincere will to improve the situation of the local people, either Roma or non-Roma, can be easily identified in Rakytník. Unfortunately, most of these intentions are not realised as the project proposals are not awarded financial support. In general, the situation in Rakytník requires very basic interventions, which on a national level (from the perspective of selection committees) could be considered old fashioned and lacking innovation, therefore not very competitive with projects submitted by other municipalities that have more human/social capital concentrated in the locality.

- Lack of political interest in local development from a national level:

Rakytník, with a little exaggeration, may be characterised as the 'periphery of the periphery'. The chances of any significant (central) interventions targeted at this region are small. The political priorities in relation to Roma integration in the region where Rakytník is located are, in comparison to other regions of Slovakia (e.g. Spiš) incomparable. The most significant obstacle is the size of Rakytník with less than 400 inhabitants; from a national perspective, municipalities like these are not at the centre of general interest and most of the policy interventions are designed for larger municipalities/localities.

These obstacles to improving socioeconomic integration of Roma in Rakytník (from Rakytník) are beyond the capabilities and resources of the local municipality and local stakeholders, as they are linked to the structural problems of marginalised regions, such as the micro-region of Rakytník.

Based on the LERI experience, the main drivers of Roma inclusion in the locality may be defined as the (i) good cohabitation between the Roma and non-Roma community, (ii) a very unbiased approach to all inhabitants of the village, and (iii) the mayor's political will to improve the situation of all villagers.

- i. Good cohabitation between the Roma and non-Roma community:
The main precondition for better integration of Roma in Rakytník, which can be characterised by good relations, is fulfilled. In general, no differences in the approach to Roma and non-Roma inhabitants were identified. The good position of Roma in the village can also be illustrated by the composition of the local municipal council, which counts two members of Roma origin out of a total number of five.
- ii. A very unbiased approach to all inhabitant of the village:
Following the previously mentioned driver, the approach undertaken by the local municipality to the Roma and non-Roma parts of the village seems very fair and equal. The activities implemented in the village do not appear to have been done at the cost of any member of the community. The mayor attempts to undertake the activities addressed specifically to the needs of Roma exactly as the needs of non-Roma. All cultural events organised in the village are equally attended by both communities and both cultures are represented.
- iii. The political will of the mayor to improve the situation of all people living in the village:
The sincere will to improve the situation of all people living in the village is significantly visible not only in relation to the mayor but similarly in

relation to other stakeholders (e.g. municipal council). However, the position and enthusiasm of some of the stakeholders (e.g. members of the local community) can be considered to be rather passive, nevertheless the level of proactive involvement is a result of personal experience and personal capacity rather than a lack of commitment.

6. Conclusions and recommendations:

Despite the size of Rakytník, two civic associations exist in the village, which may also be considered as proof of the relatively strong willingness to participate in the life of the community. The cohabitation of Roma and non-Roma inhabitants also seems very easy, and the personal commitment of the mayor and members of municipal council is remarkable.

Rakytník itself fulfils most of the conditions needed for successful development, however the development stagnates because many challenges Rakytník faces are structural and beyond the control of the municipality or small community-oriented projects such as LERI.

The first issue is its location. The district of Rimavská Sobota is one of the most **marginalised regions** with few prospects of improving the overall situation in a short-/mid-term perspective. The Rimavská Sobota region is, from a national point of view, considered to be a periphery of national interest. Moreover, the locality of Rakytník is, in a district context, considered to be on the periphery. Thus, Rakytník and the whole micro-region may be on the periphery of any political/economical interest.

The other complication is the capacity of small municipalities – particularly the very **limited human and financial capacity** due to the model of municipal budgeting applied in Slovakia. The public administration in Slovakia is highly fragmented and decentralised, currently counting 2,927 municipalities. The process of administrative decentralisation has never been complemented with financial decentralisation, thus the specific competencies were moved to the municipality level, but the financial resources remained at central level.¹³ The yearly budget of Rakytník is €28,000, which is supposed to be sufficient, but does not cover the overall operation of the municipal office or key roles of the municipality such as road maintenance, lighting, waste management, social services, etc.

The central government argues that financial resources can be supplemented by income from the ESIF. However, obstacles to achieving this are significant. One such obstacle is the EU cohesion policy implemented in Slovakia's strong focus on the 'poles of growth', as defined in the Partnership agreement of the Slovak Republic for the years 2014-2020,¹⁴ meaning financial assistance should be concentrated in bigger centres. The concentration of resources in bigger centres instead of being dispersed across a number of smaller places should create economic acceleration in the neighbouring territories. Based on the

¹³ Representative of *Zväz miest a obcí Slovenska* (Association of towns and municipalities of Slovakia), personal interview, 3 March 2016.

¹⁴ Available at www.partnerskadohoda.gov.sk/dokumenty/.

implementation of this approach, villages with the size of Rakytník remained outside of the intervention's main geographic focus.

Even if this policy were to change, the possibility for Rakytník to apply for significant financial assistance from ESIF would still not be increased because of further obstacles, e.g. the yearly budget of Rakytník and its inability to provide the obligatory co-financing, which in most cases exceeds the total annual budget of the municipality. The limits of the yearly budget in comparison to the obligatory co-financing cannot be overcome even through the assistance of relatively easily accessible commercial bank loans, as the national legislation does not allow municipal debts to be higher than 60 % of the yearly budget of the municipality.

To create real opportunities for development in municipalities such as Rakytník, the model of EU funds distribution needs to be changed, not only in the sense of the technical criteria, but also in the sense of accessibility and provision of solid technical assistance providing ad hoc services with long-term perspectives. More focus should be paid to the Community Lead Local Development (CLLD)¹⁵ approach, which is strongly emphasised by the European Commission, but also understated by the national authorities in Slovakia and not implemented to the extent it is expected. The reasons for not using such an existing instrument, despite a consensus about the existence of the problem of marginalized regions and the lack of bottom-up initiatives, could become a matter of an extensive public and political discussion.

To trigger more local initiatives at a local level and build the capacities of local municipalities/civic associations/independent initiatives, the existence of a **fund for small civic initiatives** (although triggered by the municipalities) distributing assistance in amounts up to €5,000 could be instrumental. This kind of fund created at a national or county level, designed for the needs of the most marginalised regions/localities may be also an effective tool for boosting the confidence and activities of people living in these regions. The argument against establishing this kind of assistance might be the existence of several corporate foundations operating at a country level and focusing on the same kind of intervention. However, the competition for these calls is very high and proposals coming from villages like Rakytník often fail because their level of innovation or invention in comparison to other projects is very low. Moreover, grant-makers should take into consideration, that local capacity to develop a project and apply for funding in small marginalized communities is almost non-existing. People living in such communities lack the very information about the existence of funding opportunities. In areas, where the commonly spoken language is different than the country's official language, the barrier is even stronger.

Therefore, funds exclusively supporting regions with similar socioeconomic characteristics with a budget allocated for each region should be in place. Such funds may appear, as pilot initiatives, based on the new legislation approved in December 2015 focused on the channelling of public financial resources to the most marginalised regions.¹⁶ Information about such opportunities should be

¹⁵ For more information see e.g. European Network For Rural Development, available at https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/themes/clld_en.

actively disseminated among the target groups, taking into consideration their communication skills and language – the information should be provided in clear style, rather than administrative style, and translated into minority languages.

However, to make small communities in marginalized regions able to benefit from the existence of such development opportunities, a national/regional-based structure providing free-of-charge **technical assistance** focused on capacity building (e.g. organising a variety of study tours, learning opportunities, supporting the specific skills and offering lifelong learning opportunities related to regional development issues) designed for the needs of municipalities/local civic association/independent initiatives should exist. Such a structure (either formal or informal, but certainly coordinated and subsidised) could provide the necessary inspiration, peer-cooperation, networking and support for the local leaders who often feel isolated in their activities. In the previous EU funds' programming period, similar technical assistance was planned to design and implement a special integrated territorial instrument focusing on marginalized Roma communities. A network of regional branches of the Office of SR Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities (*Úrad splnomocnenkyne vlády SR pre rómske komunity*) had to provide local governments and stakeholders with assistance in planning, fundraising and implementation of local inclusion and development initiatives. This attempt, however, failed due to the mismanagement on the central level.¹⁷

Special attention must be paid to the younger generation. Large-scale and long-term interventions provided in a tailor-made, individualised format must be implemented, otherwise the prospects of young people, especially those staying in the region are extremely poor; thus, the already fragile and relative economic stability of the region is very much endangered. Large-scale youth work in these localities is a must; the services should be financed through public resources; however, provision should be open to both public and private providers.

The youth work should not be focused only on prevention of school dropout and increasing employment, but primarily on the development of soft skills, communication and the personal qualities of the young people (such as curiosity). Due to a life in isolation, with few contacts outside their own communities and a lack of diversified and credible information resources which are, as in case of marginalized regions limited to popular media, such as tabloid-TVs, many young people lack developed **communication and cognitive skills**. This may be an important barrier to the use of existing opportunities. Therefore, intense mentoring/coaching is necessary if actions are targeted at youth and should be designed accordingly to ensure sustainability of any interventions.

The younger generation represents the group at most risk, which could be considered a 'lost generation', i.e. a generation educated in a very poor-quality educational system, with an absence of positive examples regarding employment or entrepreneurship, living in multigenerational poverty and with no ambition.

¹⁷ Salner, A., Košťál, C., Hojsík, M., Polačková, Z. (2013), *Lessons from Slovakia's Comprehensive Approach Assessing the feasibility of designing and implementing integrated territorial programs targeting marginalized Roma communities*, Bratislava, Slovak Governance Institute. Available at: www.governance.sk/assets/files/publikacie/SGI_ACA_EN.pdf.

The whole situation is illustrated by the answer of one of the young people to a question about their career ambitions:

"I very much hope, one day I will have a chance to work on the activation work in the village."¹⁸

In general, the situation in the region where Rakytník is located is rather hopeless from a socioeconomic aspect.

As far as the EU professes the principle of subsidiarity, their interventions will not have a real impact in the regions, as their scope and impact is always regulated by the national governments. Nor do local or regional structures demonstrate sufficient **independence** in their interventions, as most of their competence is regulated centrally at national level. Accordingly, it may be presumed that the situation in the locality (and other localities in this or similar regions) will not be improved unless the large-scale interventions (financial, personal, or political) will not be recognised and undertaken on national level.

Conditions for local development and participation can be supported by external agents, such as NGOs engaged in **community work**. They can bring new development momenta, innovative ideas and motivation. External agents must be prepared to face a high level of passivity of the locals or perceived shame to participate. Such experience should not discourage them, and probably after a longer presence in the community, the barrier can be overcome. In any case, they can use openness of local governments, which are likely to welcome and support any initiative, as they feel long-term frustration from being forgotten by the country's mainstream development.

The experience from the LERI research has shown that the local government – such as the office of the mayor and local council, usually includes the most active personalities, who enjoy the local population's trust and mandate to represent the community. The representation principle is particularly effective in small communities where the leadership is under daily and detailed control of the community. In communities where no serious cleavages (such as interethnic) exist, it is likely that all social groups' interests are represented.

7. Additional Information

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¹⁸ Local community representative, personal interview, 18 April 2016, young Roma male.