

Empowering the Vulnerable Communities of Albania:

Support to the Implementation of the National
Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions





Photo: Roma family, Lapraka, Tirana

Estimated figures for the Roma community vary from 80,000 to 150,000. ²

80 percent of the Roma community live below the poverty line (18.5 percent national average). ¹

55 percent of Roma children 15 years and under are illiterate, (2 percent national average). ¹

The average monthly income for a Roma household is 68 euro, while non-Roma households, living in the same vicinity, have a monthly income of 174.5 euro. ²

28 percent of Roma families have access to potable water supply compared to 97 percent of non-Roma families. ²

The Roma community in Albania

The Roma are a unique ethnic group that have resided in Albanian territory since the 15th century and have managed to retain their own language and culture. The Roma community's routes can be traced back to what is now modern day India. The Roma place a high value on the extended family. Roma music plays an important role within Albania society as in many Eastern European Countries, particularly within wedding ceremonies and social gatherings. The distinctive sound of Roma music has also strongly influenced contemporary jazz and flamenco music throughout Europe.

Estimated figures for the Roma population vary from 80,000 to 150,000, accounting for about three percent of the total Albanian population. The Roma community is made up of 5 distinct tribes: the Meçkar, Karbuxh, Cergar, Bamill and Kurtof. Although traditionally living a nomadic lifestyle, the majority of Roma tribes have lived in permanent settlements since the 1930s. During the Second World War members of the Roma community fought alongside the majority ethnic Albanian population in the National War of Liberation.

In Albania, as in the rest of Europe, the Roma community has remained marginalized from wider society. This legacy has resulted in the reproduction of disadvantage across generations. During the socialist era, the Roma community's status relative to the Albanian majority improved. The Roma benefited from inclusive health and education policies and found work in state run factories and cooperative farms. Following the transition to a market economy after 1991 and the collapse of state enterprise the Roma community experienced far greater economic and social hardships than the wider population. Due to a lack of transferable skills and discrimination the Roma community went from a state of relative wellbeing to one of extreme poverty.

The Roma community at present have not been able to enjoy the benefits of the recent economic growth in the country and do not receive the same level of public services as the rest of society. The Government of Albania has recognized the need to integrate Roma and overcome the challenges of social and economic marginalization. In addition to signing several international treaties and conventions on the protection of minorities, the Government has officially recognized the Roma as a 'linguistic minority'. In 2003 the Albanian Council of Ministers approved a National Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions which provides a basis for effective development planning. Albania is also a member of The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015, a commitment by governments in Central and Southeastern Europe to improve the socio-economic status and encourage the social inclusion of Roma within a regional framework.

Poverty and Exclusion

Social, political and economic marginalization denies the Roma in Albania the opportunity to fully enjoy their rights, realize their potential and take an active part in wider Albanian society. 80 percent of the Roma community lives below the poverty line. The underlying issues that perpetuate this reality are varied and many, but can be summarized as deriving from:

Cover photo: Community Development Officer / UNV volunteer working in Driza, Fier

76 percent of Roma, compared to 93 percent of non-Roma, have been immunized against polio, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough, 2

As many as 20 percent of Roma households reside in slum areas living in ruined houses, or huts, compared to less than one percent of non-Roma households.

The Roma community is made up of 5 distinct tribes: the Meçkar, Karbuxh, Cergar, Bamill and Kurtof

The Roma community's routes can be traced back to the Indian Subcontinent.

Although traditionally living a nomadic lifestyle, the majority of Roma tribes have lived in permanent settlements since the 1930s.



Photo: Poor housing conditions, Driza, Fier

Sources

1, World Bank Living Standards Measurement Survey (LSMS) 2005

2, At Risk: The Social Vulnerability of Roma in Albania, UNDP, 2006

a lack of legal documentation.

Without birth certificates and other identification documents many Roma are unable to gain access to social services. The registration process has traditionally been regarded as cumbersome, expensive and discriminatory by the Roma community. The lack of legal status for a large proportion of Roma precludes their involvement and influence in Albanian public life. Without the ability to vote, the community is deprived of a platform from which to protect their rights and freedoms in Albanian society. The lack of registration documents is a particular concern for children as they are more likely to be victims of trafficking and also makes locating and repatriating them even more problematic.

a lack of infrastructure and housing.

During the transition period, housing conditions deteriorated for many Roma families. As many as 20 percent of Roma households reside in slum areas living in shacks or in abandoned buildings previously owned by state factories with no provision of basic services. Adequate access to water is a serious problem for a number of Roma households. Only 28

percent of Roma families have access to potable water supply inside their homes, compared to 97 percent of non-Roma families. The use of unchecked water sources by the majority of the Roma community increases the risk of water borne infections. In addition, the availability of healthcare services is limited in Roma areas. 76 percent of Roma, compared to 94 percent of non-Roma, have been immunized against polio, diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough.

a lack of employment opportunities.

The most dramatic change for Roma resulting from the transition to a market economy was their status in the labour market. Low educational qualifications and discriminatory employment procedures have resulted in high unemployment rates that have severely affected the social and economic status of the community. The casual and informal sectors are the main sources of livelihoods. Types of activities the Roma engage in include the trade in second hand clothes, the recycling of cans and scrap iron, musical performance, subsistence agriculture, construction or other menial jobs. The average monthly earning for a Roma household is 68 Euros, while non-Roma households, living in the same vicinity, have a monthly earning of 174.5 Euros.

Photo: Deteriorated Landscape in Driza, Fier



a lack of education.

While education coverage and enrollment were extensive during the socialist era the transition period has witnessed a decline in attendance and increased drop out rates. 55 percent of Roma children 15 years and under are illiterate. In many cases this is a consequence of limited educational services within Roma areas. In addition, the discriminatory attitudes of non-Roma children and language difficulties discourage enrolment. Consequently, Roma children are hindered from fully developing their capacities to contribute in a substantial and sustainable way within wider society, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, poverty and abuse. This is particularly detrimental for girls who are more likely to enter early marriage and work in the informal sector. It also encourages economic and social dependence and limits their ability to make informed and important decisions related to their own lives.

Project Interventions

In practical terms overcoming this status quo is grounded in the provision of social services that guarantee essential human rights. The challenge for the Government of Albania has been to fully develop structures, laws, policies and programmes designed around the premise of the rights of all people, independent of the position they occupy in society or the role they play. Ensuring meaningful social inclusion in Albania is seen as a central test to Albania's aspirations towards joining the European Union. The United Nations in Albania is supporting the Government of Albania in the implementation of the Social Inclusion Crosscutting Strategy as a component of the National Strategy for Development and Integration.

Supporting the Government of Albania in the achievement of these aims the current two year UNDP/UNV "Empowering the Vulnerable Communities of Albania: Support to the Implementation of the National Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions," runs from April 2008 to April 2010 and has a budget of 846,438 US Dollars. Implemented in the regions of Tirana, Elbasan and Fier the project is working to empower the Roma community in Albania to become active citizens and works with local authorities and the communities themselves to improve basic service delivery and local living conditions. In addition, vulnerable groups from within Albania's Egyptian community are also targeted beneficiaries of the project.

The project team, which includes national and international UNV volunteers, is working with local community groups who are participating in activities on the ground in the areas of civil registration (to ensure access to social services) and community infrastructure development.

This will give individuals the opportunity to become engaged within their own communities, making 'in kind' voluntary contributions towards the community's goals. Voluntary involvement of Roma is essential as a means to encourage them to be active agents of change in their communities. This UNDP/UNV project is the pre-cursor to the joint One UN programme that will partner UNV and UNDP with UNHCR, UNFPA and UNICEF. Current project activities fall within the following areas:

Photo: Community Development Officer / UNV volunteer working in Lapraka, Tirana



Civil registration to ensure access to public services

Vulnerable families living in Tirana, Elbasan and Fier are being assisted with civil registration. This can include birth registration, the transfer of residence, divorce, child custody and other types of registration necessary to access public services and legal rights. This assistance is provided in partnership with the Tirana Legal Aid Society (TLAS) an NGO specialized in legal services. A total of 300 individuals are set to benefit from civil registration under the two-year UNDP/UNV project.

Infrastructure development and participation in decision-making

Community based organizations are being formed in each region to identify and prioritize the infrastructure needs of their communities. Chosen priority areas for infrastructure development are being referred to local government for 20 percent co-financing. The remaining 80 percent of project costs are covered by UNDP. A total of 9 infrastructure projects are being implemented, 3 within each region. These include the construction of nursery schools, community centres and water systems. In addition, 60 local and 100 central government officials are receiving training in minority rights and intercultural understanding. In each region, a minority coordination council is being established to provide an effective platform for improved dialogue between representatives of minority communities and those of the municipal authority. The overall purpose of this process is to establish a model of partnership between the community and the municipal government in local decision making.

Enhancing employment opportunities

60 individuals are being targeted for vocational training. Courses are identified in collaboration with employment offices based on the needs of the labour market and the profile of candidates. An awareness raising campaign on the importance of vocational training is being carried out in the three project areas. The process has been reinforced through the training of employment centers staff in minority issues.

Health, education and police mediators

15 health, education and police mediators are receiving training to facilitate information sharing and ensure equitable access to services, liaising between services providers and the community. While receiving training within their specialized areas, mediators are also being guided on minority issues, mediation and conflict resolution. Mediators will conduct follow on trainings within their local community under the supervision of project staff. On the conclusion of this process mediators will identify the scope and needs of follow-up and additional trainings.

Supporting the implementation of the national Roma strategy

The project will support the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Equal Opportunities (Roma Technical Secretariat) and the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination at the Council of Ministers to review the national Roma strategy and its action plan while preparing guidelines for its implementation and monitoring. The revised document will reflect new developments in the area of social inclusion since its adoption in 2003. This includes the identification of data from the UNDP funded Living Standards Measurement Survey to help better assess social exclusion within marginalized groups and the strategy's alignment within the regional Decade of Roma Inclusion initiative.

The UNDP/UNV project is implementing activities based on 6 key intervention goals: enhance social inclusion and access of minorities to social services, support community participation to address development priorities, develop capacities and employable skills, mobilize community volunteer health, education and policy mediators, promote minority issues, the implementation of the national Roma strategy and advocate on minority issues and social inclusion.

For more information on the UNDP/UNV project 'Empowering the Vulnerable Communities of Albania: Support to the Implementation of the National Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions' please contact,

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Photo: Young Roma from the community of Driza, Fier



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