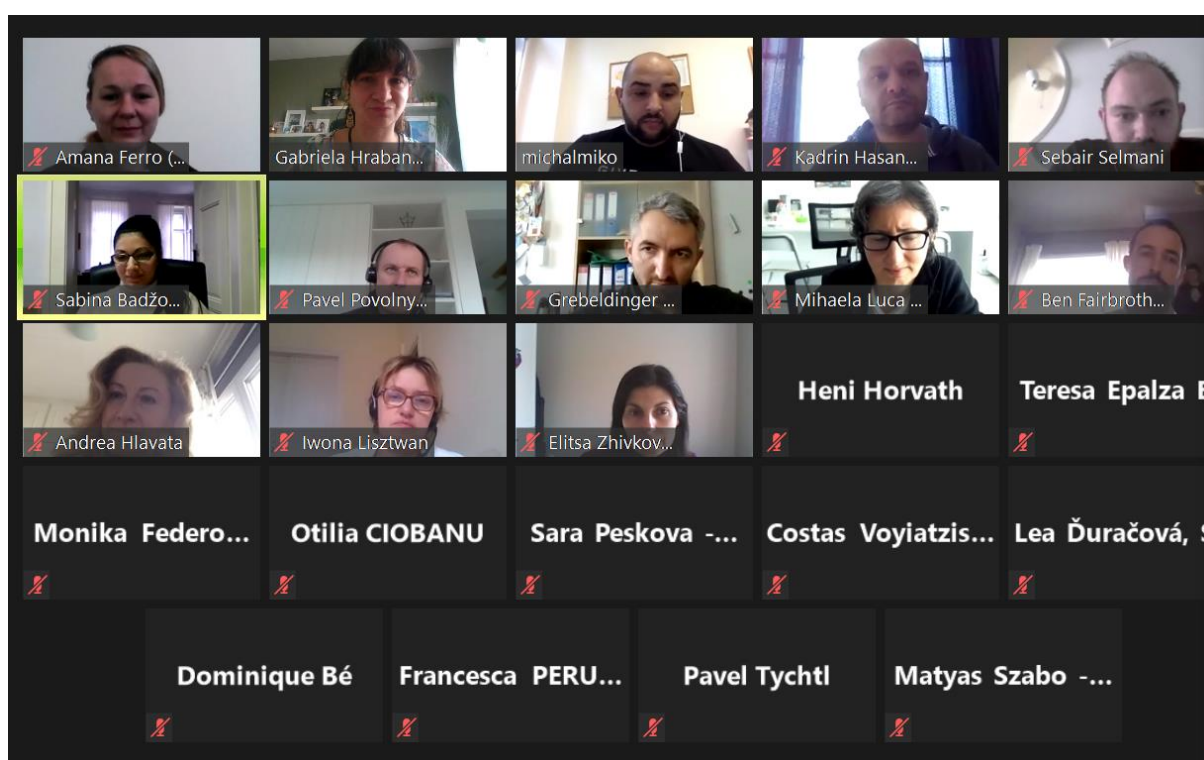


*Lessons learned for Roma rights and inclusion
from the Community-Led Local Development
(CLLD) cycle 2014-2020 in
Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Romania*



Online exchange meeting with desk officers in DG EMPL, REGIO, AGRI

11 March 2021



Attending:

- **European Commission:** Dominique Bé (DG EMPL), Francesca Perulli (DG EMPL), Teresa Epalza (DG EMPL), Costas Voyiatzis (DG EMPL), Andrej Pavešić (DG EMPL), Henriett Horvath (DG EMPL), Pavel Tychtl (DG EMPL), Paul Molocea (DG EMPL), Monika Federowicz (DG EMPL), Otilia Ciobanu (DG REGIO), Andrea Hlavatá (DG REGIO), Sára Pešková (DG REGIO), Roxana Laiu (DG REGIO), Iwona Lisztwan (DG AGRI), Benjamin Fairbrother (DG AGRI), Elitsa Zhivkova (DG AGRI), Pavel Povolný (DG AGRI), Mihaela Luca (DG AGRI), Mátyás Szábo (DG AGRI).
- **ERGO Network:** Kadrin Hasanov (Integro Association, Bulgaria), Sabina Badžová, Lea Ďuračová (Slovo 21, Czech Republic), Michal Miko (RomanoNet, Czech Republic), Jan Husák, Nikola Taragoš (Romodrom, Czech Republic), Daniel Grebeldinger (Nevo Parudimos, Romania), Jamen Gabriela Hrabáňová, Amana Ferro, Sebair Selmani (ERGO Network Brussels staff).



On 11 March 2021, the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network facilitated an online exchange meeting between its national members in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Romania, and their counterparts in the country desks of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), DG Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO), and DG Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI). Other EC staff responsible for related affairs was also in attendance.

The objectives of the meeting were:

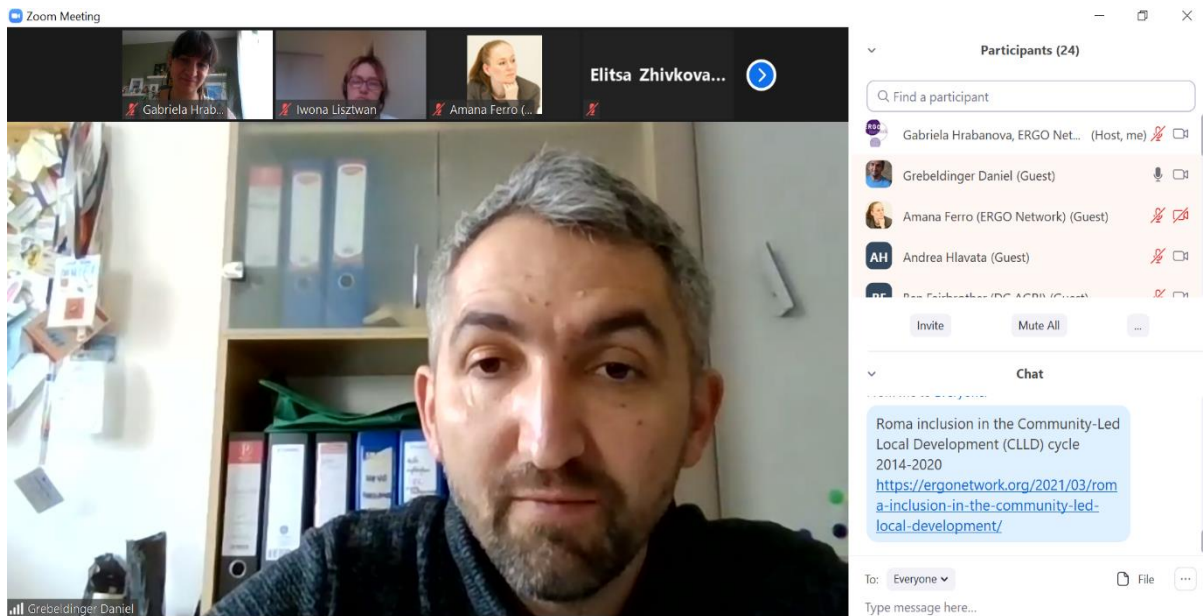
- *Presentation of the main findings of the ERGO Network evaluation report of the CLLD cycle 2014-2020 in the three countries.*
- *Updates on the possibility to introduce the Roma indicators in connecting the EU Roma Strategic Framework with EU funds.*
- *Updates on how to best feed Roma realities and proposals (particularly with a view to the pandemic and recovery) in the current MFF negotiations.*
- *Updates on the preparation of the National Roma Strategic Frameworks and National Recovery and Resilience Plans.*

Introduction and welcome

Jamen Gabriela Hrahaňová, *ERGO Network Director*, welcomed participants and reminded everybody of the aims of the exchange. She equally recalled that the organisation had been engaging extensively with CLLD processes since 2014, given the key role these processes can play in empowering Roma communities to identify bottom-up, beneficiary-led solutions that can tackle Roma poverty and social exclusion. Ms Hrahaňová pointed to the comprehensive synthesis report ERGO Network produced this year, evaluating the CLLD cycle for its entire duration (2014-2020) from a Roma perspective in three countries: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and Romania. She highlighted that the main findings and recommendations would be presented in the meeting, while the report equally featured good practice examples and lessons learned from grassroots experiences. Ms Hrahaňová further appreciated that the exchange was very timely, as MFF Programmes were currently being negotiated and dots needed to be connected to ensure that Roma rights and inclusion were delivered on. She concluded by thanking both European Commission officials, as well as ERGO Network national members, for their work and availability to exchange in the framework of the present meeting, before inviting all participants to introduce themselves in a *tour de table*.

Presentation of the ERGO Network CLLD 2014-2020 evaluation report (BG, CZ, RO)

Daniel Grebeldinger, *Nevo Parudimos (Romania)* and ERGO Network CLLD expert, presented the main findings of the ERGO Network evaluation of the CLLD cycle 2014-2020. From these findings, he highlighted that Roma involvement in CLLD and in LAG structures remained unequal and varied even within the same country. It is dependent on the openness and availability of each Local Action Group (LAG), he added. Mr Grebeldinger explained that there was a lack of understanding of bottom-up approaches and involving the communities, while more work needed to be done also to build the capacity of small Roma NGOs and community leaders to engage with these processes. Progress had been made, he underlined, as there were now more Roma representatives, but their input did not visibly correlate with the number and quality of initiatives aimed at Roma inclusion.



In Romania, he explained, Nevo Parudimos developed a training package for LAGs in order to try to remedy some of these issues, currently being rolled out. The training was initially conceived for Roma stakeholders, but it was noticed that there was a serious need for such trainings also for the LAGs themselves. Mr Grebeldinger further pointed out that all ERGO Network members also worked closely with the national LAG networks or federations.

However, he added, the cooperation with the Managing Authorities was not always smooth, as there were always great delays in launching the calls, the evaluations etc, and the whole process was complicated. He explained that, because CLLD is a relatively small amount of money in the big picture of EU funds, these projects were not prioritised by Managing Authorities, as they admitted themselves. Respecting timelines was very important, otherwise it is impossible to plan sustainable projects, he underlined.

Mr Grebeldinger stressed that more and more local development strategies had included Roma as priority beneficiaries, and that ERGO Network members would continue to work closely with the LAGs, in an effort to continue this positive trend in the new programming period. He expressed the hope that social inclusion itself would continue to be prioritised in these strategies, which is also not guaranteed. He pointed to rumours that the budget for CLLD projects in the three countries would decrease, which was very worrying, because despite difficulties, this approach was actually working and making a difference. This might also lead to less CLLD funds being allocated for social inclusion projects, he added.

Finally, Mr Grebeldinger highlighted that there was no real consultation process between Governments and civil society overall, as stakeholder engagement was done superficially, mainly to tick a box. He concluded by reminding that the ERGO Network report presented concrete recommendations for the Managing Authorities, for the LAGs, and for Roma communities themselves.

Access the full ERGO Network report “Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) for Roma inclusion. Evaluation Report 2014-2020” [here](#).

Questions and Answers with the European Commission representatives

Following the presentation of the report, co-author Daniel Grebeldinger (Nevo Parudimos, Romania) answered follow-up questions from the European Commission representatives present. Please find below a brief overview of the discussion.

Teresa Epalza, DG EMPL: *How can we improve the quality of Roma participation, in a context where the participation and involvement of Roma has grown in numbers but remains limited in terms of active participation? What are some of the concrete needs on the ground, and what specific measures that could work?*

- ⇒ ERGO Network designed a training package which is already being delivered in all three countries, to train the LAG teams to understand both CLLD, as well as what participatory processes mean. We also have local authorities attending the trainings. In Romania, with the national LAG federation, Norway Grants funding was secured to deliver trainings for 200 Roma NGOs and 200 LAGs. But this was a lucky break, in other countries they may not have access to such funding. Civil society development support could include such specific measures for capacity-building on CLLD.

Iwona Lisztwan, DG AGRI: *How could the Roma benefit in real terms from LEADER support? What could be next step to make CLLD more relevant for Roma, and what would be the most efficient ways to achieve this?*

- ⇒ The functioning of the programme is an important issue. On the one hand, we need to capacitate stakeholders, so that they are able to understand the process. Many LAGs act more like project managers, they don't understand all the implications. On the other hand, if the Managing Authority plans well and the calls are open on time and the evaluation is also timely, this will significantly increase the benefits to the community. Right now, NGOs like the ERGO Network are doing both jobs at once. This needs to be a partnership between European Commission, national Governments, and local civil society. But the Commission can push, for example, for an intermediary evaluation, which would help increase the accountability of both Member States and LAGs in the implementation process. In Romania, such an approach is already working.

Dominique Bé, DG EMPL: *Both good CLLD practices highlighted in the ERGO Network CLLD report took place in municipalities where the ground had been prepared by the ROMACT programme and with the support of ROMACT experts. ROMACT is a DG EMPL / Council of Europe capacity building programme. Is ROMACT not the key success factor for CLLD? CLLD and related trainings are essentially approached as a funding mechanism. Should CLLD not be seen as part of the wider local governance issue and trainings include this dimension too?*

- ⇒ ROMACT is one of the supporting processes which contributed to the implementation of the CLLD at local level in some localities, especially in urban areas, together with many others. It is clear that, in ROMACT localities, even if sometimes a bit superficial, the consultation and community participation were easier to implement, comparing to the localities where they did not have a similar exercise in the past. Definitely CLLD can be seen as a part of a wider local governance component, which needs to be strengthened for both local authority representatives and community members, through tailored trainings on this topic.

Otilia Ciobanu, DG REGIO: *There are some “structural difficulties” you mentioned in your presentation and in the report. For instance, that the “LAGs and local authorities often use this funding opportunity for projects that are not necessarily relevant for poor communities, such as the Roma” (page 20), that “real consultation processes are absent even in the case of social inclusion projects where the Roma are named among the main beneficiaries” (page 20) etc. At the same time, in the recommendations you include to “increase the funding available for the planning and implementation of CLLD strategies, and/or allow LAGs to apply for additional, external funding for the delivery of the strategies” (page 21). How would the increase of funding address the difficulties mentioned?*

- ⇒ What we realised, working on the ground, is that there were positive changes from one year to the next in the same LAG, after attending a simple two-day training. These trainings don't only offer theoretical knowledge, but also serve as networking opportunities between Roma communities and LAG representatives and local authorities. This is the key to building real participation. But this needs to be a process of scale, not one NGO delivering some trainings – what is needed is a systemic approach at national level. This can be done in many ways, including through Technical Assistance or other means.

Mihaela Luca, DG AGRI: *The rural development programme will be extended by two years, and so will the development strategies. Do you intend to have a new such report at the end of this implementation period? It would be interesting for us to know your assessment and recommendations.*

- ⇒ We will monitor the number of projects targeting Roma. Originally, under LEADER, there are very few which mentioned the Roma, about 7 in 7000. Now, after we have worked much more closely with the LAG networks, we hope to have 3-400. However, it is still too few, in a field of 7000. It is a very good beginning, but we need more, given the challenges on the ground that we are trying to solve. In Romania, in 2023 we will take a closer look at these issues and the implementation of the strategies.

Pavel Povolný, DG AGRI: *What is behind the request for a dedicated Managing Authority for CLLD? Is this about the multi-fund approach like in CZ? This is a decision ultimately belonging to Member States. Are you lobbying for this at the national level? Improvement of the cooperation is necessary, but would this step really make a difference?*

- ⇒ I am not sure about other countries, but in Romania we will be including this aspect in our lobbying. The reason it is needed is that every CLLD project takes twice the time to get approved and get started. Maybe in the Czech Republic you managed to put in place a faster process, but in Romania, for a simple request, you need minimum three months to receive a response. The Ministry of EU Funds said it was not possible, because the amount of money is too small for CLLD to have its own Managing Authority.

Pavel Tychtl, DG EMPL: *Are there any examples of municipalities where Roma are represented within the local authority itself, as mayor or other staff? Does this help? Are there any developments regarding improving Roma political participation in local politics?*

- ⇒ We have not identified any local Roma mayors, at least in Romania, I am not sure about other countries.

After the opening plenary, participants split into breakout rooms according to countries, in order to be able to exchange bilaterally more in detail about specific national concerns.

Once participants reconvened once more in the main virtual room, **Jamen Gabriela Hraňaňová**, *ERGO Network Director*, thanked everybody for their participation and very useful contributions. She ended the meeting by reassuring desk officers that ERGO Network national members and staff stood committed, willing, and able to provide all necessary input and feedback from their work directly at grassroots level, to make sure that the voice of the Roma was being heard.