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**Spolu/Cordaid/mine Pilot Project:**

# Mother Centers in Roma Communities - Mother Centered Development in Europe

**End Report – July 2007**

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This report has been sponsored by Cordaid.  
All portraits by Valbona Dervishi, RAA (Roma Active Albania)



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## Introduction

*"The Mother Center movement has many principles in common with the grassroots Roma movement that Spolu and its partners try to establish. Both aim at supporting self-organisation and mobilisation of excluded groups. Therefore, it is interesting to see if the two approaches can be combined, so both movements can learn from each other."* (Project leader Spolu International)

The pilot project "Mother Centers in Roma Communities – Mother Centered Development in Europe" was initiated as a cooperation between the organisations Spolu International, Cordaid and the Mother Centers International Network **mine**. It was conducted between May 2006 and July 2007 in partnership with the local Roma organisations Roma Active Albania (RAA), Integro Bulgaria, Bairska Svetlina in Macedonia, Khetane Zajedno in Serbia, and Klub Spolu Detva in Slovakia, as well as with the Union of Slovak Mother Centers, the network of Mother Centers of Baden Württemberg, Germany and the Mother Center "Plamen" in Zavidovici, Bosnia, which serves as a model Mother Center in the region.

This report presents the results of the pilot project. It is based on oral and written reports sent in by the **mine** trainers on the site visits, trainings and consultations they conducted in each country, on interviews conducted with participants by the author and by the external evaluator throughout the project, on reports given by the Spolu partners, on the results of the peer learning and end evaluation seminars conducted with all participating groups towards the end of the project, as well as on debates and analysis undertaken during the **mine** trainers meetings as well as during bilateral consultations and meetings between Spolu International and **mine** throughout the project.

The report focuses on the guiding questions as well as the success indicators developed at the beginning of the project and presents how the project developed and what lessons were learned in the process.





## Goals and Objectives

*"In the Mother Centers we develop our own culture and show and share our own culture with pride to the general community. It would be nice to have a big window, where people can look in, where also the Non Roma can see what we have achieved. And we can welcome them in to join us."* (Mother Center Razgrad, Bulgaria)

The objective of the pilot project "Mother Centers in Roma Communities – Mother Centered Development in Europe" was to support the empowerment of Roma women in Slovakia, Bulgaria, Albania and Serbia and to test if the concept and practice of Mother Centers is of value to Roma communities and the Roma movement. The emerging Roma network in Europe has a predominantly male leadership with little experience in dealing with gender issues. The project aimed at creating structures that foster the participation and activation of Roma women in addressing the issues of Roma communities.

An integral objective of the project included the development of tools, materials and human capacity for the transfer of the Mother Center approach into Roma communities in Eastern European countries, thus developing training capacity as well as tools of transfer for the further replication and dissemination of Mother Centers.

The pilot set out to initiate Mother Centers in selected countries and document the experiences and lessons learned. The pilot was planned for the countries Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Slovakia. During the pilot Macedonia also joined some activities.

The following success indicators were defined at the beginning of the pilot:

**The pilot succeeds, if the following results are attained:**

- Mother Center initiatives have come to existence in all pilot countries and function according to the Mother Center principles;
- Mother Center "Start up materials" have been developed for the region and translated into the local languages;
- The method of grassroots linking and learning through peer exchange, peer learning and peer networking in Central and Eastern Europe has been tested, demonstrated and further developed for the **mine** network and Spolu's partners;

- Cooperation has been developed with local authorities and other stakeholders in the communities;
- Lessons have been learned and documented on the development of women-led grassroots self help initiatives and movements in the region, specifically in relation to Roma communities;
- A strategy has been developed of how the pilot Mother Centers and further Mother Centers can be implemented and anchored in a sustainable way in Central and Eastern Europe.

**The pilot also aimed at generating knowledge on:**

- Whether emphasizing their collective identity as mothers mobilises and empowers women in Roma communities;
- Whether Mother Centers are a good approach to promote and strengthen the integration of Roma and non Roma communities;
- Whether there is added value of the Mother Center's concepts of leadership for the Roma movement;
- Whether there is added value in connecting the Roma and the Mother Center movements.





## Project Steps and Implementation

*"We have created Mother Centers in several Roma communities. In the different steps of the project we focussed on activating Roma women, on strengthening their position with the local government, on addressing issues in the community, on saving cultural roots and on motivating new communities. Altogether this was a very rich process. Maybe in some years we will even have a network of Roma Mother Centers." (Klub Spolu Detva, Slovakia)*

The following steps were carried out in implementation of the project:

### Kick off seminar in Plovdiv, Bulgaria

A kick off seminar was conducted by Spolu International in Plovdiv, Bulgaria in May 2006 with Roma organisations interested in partnering in the project.

The goals, design and implementation steps of the pilot were presented by the **mine** project leader as basis for Spolu partners to join and commit to the project and the value of the project for the Roma movement was discussed among participating groups. The participating Roma organisations from Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia were identified during this seminar. Two Roma partner organisations joined the pilot at a later stage, the Roma partner organisation from Slovakia in September '06 and from Macedonia in November 2006.

### Recruitment of mine trainers

Trainers for the project were recruited by **mine** from several European countries with long term experience in the Mother Center movement. A call for participation resulted in 15 applications from 5 countries, out of which a pool of trainers was put together consisting of 10 experienced Mother Center activists from Bosnia, Germany, Slovakia and The Netherlands.

### Recruitment of participating Roma communities

The Spolu partner organisations RAA, Integro, Zajedno, Klub Spolu Detva and Bairska Svetlina identified local Roma community groups with an interest in initiating a Mother Center. The process included contacting informal leaders in the community, looking for interested mothers, translating Mother Center materials and presenting the Mother Center approach and concept.



### Study Visits and Initial Trainings in Zavidovici, Bosnia

Start up trainings with Mother Center initiatives as well as their local Spolu partner organisations from Bulgaria and Serbia were conducted in July and August 2006 in the Mother Center Plamen in Zavidovi, Bosnia. The Albanian initiatives had conducted this visit and training previous to the pilot project. The Macedonian group visited the training center in Zavidovici in December 2006.



The trainings consisted of a 1 day demonstration training of the functioning of the model Bosnian Mother Center "Plamen" conducted by a team of trainers from the Mother Center "Plamen" and a Mother Center start-up training, conducted by the **mine** project leader.

The trainings introduced the participants to the concept and practice of Mother Centers and discussed their relevance to Roma communities. First steps and plans to start up Mother Centers were developed for each participating community.

The Slovakian Roma Mother Center initiatives visited the Roma Mother Center Matko in Detva and received a start up training by the Slovak **mine** trainers.

### First Train the Trainers Seminar in Zavidovici, Bosnia

A first train the trainers seminar was conducted in August 2006 in Zavidovici, Bosnia by the **mine** project leader. 7 **mine** trainers participated in this first training that consisted of participative observation during the start up training given by the **mine** project leader as well as of a trainers meeting in which the goals and steps of the pilot project as well as the role of the **mine** trainers in the project were outlined.

### Second Train the Trainers Seminar in Den Haag, Netherlands



The second train the trainers training consisted of a three day meeting in September 2006 in Den Haag, Netherlands with the full **mine** trainers team to give orientation and background information to the trainers on the situation in Roma communities and capacity building on methodologies to transfer and adapt the Mother Center concept to Roma communities. A set of training tools were developed to guide the process of consultation and implementation. The training was conducted by the **mine** project leader.

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### **First Site visits to participating Roma Communities**

Consultation visits of **mine** trainers to Roma communities in Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia and Slovakia were conducted during October and November 2006. The visits lasted one to three days in each community where Roma Mother Centers initiatives had been established.

The visits included visits of the Mother Center premises as well as the surrounding Roma communities and neighbourhoods and focussed on drawing out how the Mother Center concept could be adapted to the specific needs and context in each community. Meetings were conducted both with the participants of the Roma Mother Center Initiatives as well as with local authorities and relevant stakeholders in the communities.

The consultations included a focus both on needs, ideas and visions of what the Mother Centers could contribute to the lives of participating families and communities as well as on the challenges and barriers to be overcome. Next steps, activities and timelines were discussed and agreed upon.

### **International Mother Center Conference in Bratislava, Slovakia**

Representatives from the Roma Mother Centers from Bulgaria and Slovakia participated in the International Mother Centers Conference "How do we want to raise our children?" in November 2006 in Bratislava. This conference brought together Mother Center activists from 20 countries and provided an opportunity for the Roma participants to experience



the international scope of the Mother Center movement as well as participate in detailed debates on parenting issues, advocacy issues, the role of Mother Centers in society and peer learning approaches. The conference resulted in the compilation of a Platform of Action to which the Roma Mother Centers also contributed.

### **Mid term evaluation meeting in Bratislava, Slovakia**

The mid term evaluation meeting in Bratislava in November 2006 directly after the international conference brought together the **mine** trainers team, representatives of the Spolu partner organisations as well as representatives of Roma Mother Center initiatives to reflect on first trends and results of the pilot project and to plan the further course of the project.

## **Second site visits to participating Roma communities**

The second site visits to the Mother Center initiatives in Roma communities were undertaken during the period from March till May 2007 to the Mother Center initiatives in Albania, Slovakia and Serbia and in July 2007 to the initiatives in Bulgaria. These visits focussed mainly on practical issues in implementing and running Mother Centers: how to develop the group and participatory leadership, how to reach out to the community, how to initiate activities and develop strategic planning. A special focus especially in Bulgaria was also undertaken in a joint evaluation of the meetings with local authorities that the **mine** trainers attended.

## **On going monitoring, training and coaching**

Throughout the whole project the Spolu partners were involved in local monitoring and coaching of the Mother Centers initiatives, focussing on providing technical support to the Mother Center initiatives. This included support in finding rooms, registering as a legal entity, fundraising and negotiations with local authorities.

Roma Mother Center participants participated in trainings conducted by Integro Bulgaria on proposal writing and negotiating with local authorities and by the Union of Slovak Mother Centers on the themes: "Working in a Group", "How to write a Project Proposal", and "Advocacy and Lobbying".

Between the site visits the **mine** trainers conducted regular consultations by phone, e mail, skype and in the case of Slovakia by face to face meetings focussing on questions and challenges participants were encountering in the process of setting up their Mother Centers.

## **Peer learning seminar in Bratislava, Slovakia**

Learning from each other is one of the core issues in the pilot. The peer learning seminar in July 2007 brought together participants from each of the Mother Center initiatives from all of the countries participating in the pilot. The seminar included study visits to the Roma Mother Center "Matko" and the Non Roma Mother Center "Kubko" in Detva as well as the Roma Mother Center "Little Flame" in Kremnica to "catch the everyday life in Mother Centers." Points of discussion included activities in Mother Centers, co-operation with local authorities, attracting more participants from the Roma communities, division of tasks and responsibilities and the future of the centers. The seminar was co- facilitated by **mine** and Spolu trainers. The seminar supported links between the Roma Mother Center initiatives to be established.

## End evaluation seminar July 2007 in Bratislava

The end evaluation seminar brought together all partners and levels of the pilot at the end of the project around one table to reflect and evaluate together on achievements, successes, challenges and lessons learned during the project as well as further perspectives and opportunities for the future of Roma Mother Centers in the region.

### ***Evaluation***

The evaluation was conducted by an external evaluator and included the introduction of **mine** trainers to the evaluation goals and methods, the development of an evaluation format, interviews with participants from all participating partners and compilation of an evaluation report.

### ***Reports and materials***

The following reports and training materials were compiled during the project:

- Cordaid Grant Project Report
- Training Tools Number 1: Mother Center concept points
- Training Tools Number 2: Guidelines for site visits and consultations
- Training Tools Number 3: Self Evaluation in 5 Steps
- Training Tools Number 4: Concept Implementation
- Training Tools Number 5: Guidelines for Individual and Group Interviews
- Report on the International Mother Center Conference: "How do we want to raise our children?"
- Platform for Action
- Mid-term Project Report
- Peer Learning Seminar Report
- End evaluation Meeting Report
- Mother Centers Start-up Package
- Methodological Guidelines
- Evaluation Report







## General Situation in Roma Communities

*"Most children play outside on the streets. Playgrounds for children do not exist in Roma neighbourhoods. Since many Roma families speak Roma at home, the children have difficulties speaking the local language in school. School books are expensive. Teachers send children without school books in extra classes for retarded children. Many Roma children only participate in basic schooling, so that the level of education is not very high. We want a better future for our children." (Khetane Zajedno, Serbia)*



Unemployment, poor housing conditions, health and hygiene problems, lack of access to adequate health care, illiteracy, prostitution, drug abuse, petty criminality and other indicators of poverty constitute major problems in Roma communities. Education levels are low and employment can often be found only in low qualified sectors of the labour market.

Roma families and communities are characterised by patriarchal structures. Many women are unemployed or work in the informal sector, because they are expected to take care of the family, because they are not allowed to find a job by their husbands out of issues of jealousy, or because they cannot access jobs in the labour market, due to discrimination, and a lack of education and the professional skills required.

Children are often with mothers on street markets the whole day or in the streets begging, or out on the streets on their own. Old people try to earn money as long as possible. If they cannot find money they stay at home and take care of small children so the parents can try to find some work.

Women deliver their children at a very early age, teen pregnancies are a common pattern. Because they have no money the young families often live with their parents. The grandmothers often seem to keep the families together and are key figures in Roma families.

Many Roma children do not attend kindergartens and schools. Their parents think that schools do not have any value, because there is a high level of unemployment (also among educated people). Roma children are often faced with discriminating and discouraging attitudes of teachers in public schools. Only few Roma children finish secondary school and an even lower number go to university.



Children in big cities often do not learn the Roma language and children from the Roma settlements often do not learn to speak the local language properly.

Integrated Roma communities living in larger cities have more possibilities of contact and interaction with the majority population. The quality of housing conditions and access to basic infrastructure and services is higher, but still not optimal.

There are several active Roma groups and organisations in the communities, mostly linked to charismatic Roma leaders who know the Roma mentality, have communication and negotiation skills and can articulate and map the needs of the community.



## Results



*"It is necessary to create the network between the Roma Mother Centers from the beginning. When you have a model you can easily learn. You need an example to see what you can do. As mothers learning from each other is not bound to a nationality. It was very exciting to see the women from all the countries at the international conference. The African women and women in Latin America have similar problems, to feed and to bring up their children. To see that mothers take care of their children in all countries with a lot of power. This gave a push forward to us. We can learn from each other and we can support each other." (Mother Center Sandanski, Bulgaria)*

The idea of Mother Centers was presented to the Roma communities by the local Spolu partners. Where the communities responded with interest trainers from the **mine** network did introductory consultations and trainings on the concept and methodology. The following presents the results of the pilot project. A summary process description is given country by country followed by an analysis of common issues, conclusions and lessons learned. The project resulted in the creation of nine Mother Center initiatives in Roma communities, four in Bulgaria, three in Slovakia and one each in Albania and Serbia.

The Mother Center concept was presented to two further Roma communities in Slovakia (Ziar and Chminianske Jakuboavany), three further Roma communities in Albania (Kucova, Durres and Elbasan) and one community in Macedonia (Bitola), which, however, did not result in the initiation of Mother Centers during the pilot phase. The reasons expressed included extreme poverty, lack of preparation for the project, lack of human resources (initiators got into employment and did not have time anymore), opposition by husbands and families, and issues of competition between Roma organizations.

According to the local partners the potential for a further spreading of the Mother Center concept to other Roma communities in the participating countries as well as in other countries of the region is high. Several other Roma communities in each of the participating countries expressed their interest in Mother Centers. All Spolu partners in the participating countries expressed their intention of further supporting the existing Roma Mother Centers as well as the further development and dissemination of the Mother Center approach in the Roma movement. All Mother Centers expressed their interest in continuing their activities and further developing and consolidating the centers. They were especially interested in keeping contact among each other, and in regularly exchanging experiences and engaging in country wide as well as cross country peer learning activities.



## Country Reports

### **Albania<sup>1</sup>**

*"Thanks a lot for the training and starts up materials. They are really useful. I'm working on them to translate something for the women." (Roma Active Albania, RAA)*

The Albanian group was the first Roma group that was interested and introduced to the Mother Center concept. A delegation from different Albanian Roma communities conducted a study visit to the model Mother Center in Zavidovici, Bosnia, already in 2005, previous to the pilot project. Due to organisational changes in the partner organisation, which resulted in the formation of Roma Active Albania (RAA) the process got delayed, so that implementation started in 2006, together with the other countries of the pilot.

### **Mother Center „Swallow“ in Tirana, Albania**

#### **Process:**

It is quite impossible to find rent free space in Tirana, and even finding appropriate space to rent is not an easy task. This constituted a big challenge for the Albanian group, which they struggled with for quite some time before they were able to find a solution and start their Mother Center initiative in February 2007. By then the group had changed but one woman of the original delegation



that had been on the study visit to Bosnia and several women who participated in the first site visit of the **mine** trainers end of October 2006 are still active in the group.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on written reports by Elena Kasiakova, Karin Paulsen-Zenke and Valbona Dervishi

The initiative group was formed by active women in the Roma community who have a lot of experience in and are respected by the Roma community. The initiators are employed women, so one of their first tasks was to look for women to join the group who are unemployed or housewives and have more time to dedicate to running the Mother Center. The active group is now formed of women with employment as well as of women who are at home with their children.

**Group:**

The active group in the Mother Center "Swallow" consists of 10 active women, and about as many regular visitors. The group is a mixture of older and younger women (age 29 to 50), some are employed, others are unemployed or at home with their children. About 15 children visit the Mother Center regularly, some whose mothers do not participate in the center. The women are Roma, non Roma and Egyptians. It was the decision of the women to have a mixed group. This is how the individual women express their motivation for participating in the Mother Center:



- *"I have fulfilled my dream about opening a Mother Center. It is what we need in our community".*
- *"I am unemployed and at home all day, feeling very lonely. The Mother Center gives me a place where I can always find somebody I can talk to."*
- *"I am very satisfied that we have convinced the women to come to the Mother Center. In the beginning I had some doubts, but now I am very optimistic."*
- *"I like to talk to the other women in the Mother Center. I have 7 children, I can pass on a lot of experience. My role in the Mother Center is to be a host and welcome new women to the center."*

- *"I am unemployed and have a lot of stress at home. I have 5 children. The Mother Center is a relief for me. I take care of the coffee in the center."*
- *"I am unemployed. I have two sons. It helps me to be with the other women".*
- *"I am already older, it is good to spend time with the other women and to help with the younger women."*
- *"My role in the Mother Center is to take care of the children. I have a lot of patience with children. It is something I like to do."*

### **Rooms:**

The Mother Center "Swallow" is a small house situated in the Roma community of Lagjia, a neighbourhood of Tirana, of about 50 square meters consisting of two rooms and a toilet. The rooms are rented for Euro 180 per month. The first and larger room is used as meeting room and includes a small kitchen to make tea and coffee.



The women have divided a part off with a curtain to create space for a "hairdressing/cosmetics" corner (picture left). The second room is used as children's room. There is a window between both rooms making it an ideal space for a Mother Center, as the women can easily keep an eye on what is happening in the children's room. The roof can be used as terrace, with steps going up from the outside.

The initiative group renovated the rooms and provided furniture (chairs and tables for the children) and a carpet from their own means. They receive support from the Spolu partner RAA to pay the rent for the rooms. For the first month they have managed to forward the money, since the funds were not available yet. This shows the big motivation and dedication of the group to their Mother Center.

### **Opening hours:**

The center is open four days per week with activities for the mothers and the children.



***Division of tasks and responsibilities:***

Work in the center has been organised by identifying women who are responsible for the following tasks: Childcare, host of the day, café, keeping order, voice in the community, fundraising, and activities in the center. Every woman in the group has responsibility. The role of the woman was share according to their wishes and skills.

Some of the women have one responsibility some other more than one.

The Mother Center “Swallow” has created a set of behavioural rules for their center that include:

- No smoking in MC
- Every woman has the right to speak
- Every woman has the right to express her opinion
- Transparency between each other is very important
- Every woman is welcome to MC
- Children are part of the MC
- MC has regular opening hours
- Decisions are taken by the whole group
- Woman have to take care about MC
- MC each week will be cleaned by the women
- Every woman will have the key of the MC

***Activities:***

So far the activities in the center have not diversified. The group meets regularly in the center and childcare is offered during meeting times. During the first weeks the group was very active in renovating and refurbishing the center. Preparing for the opening celebration to which many participants from the community came was the next highlight. Further successes of the group included a wonderful celebration of Roma international day in the Mother Center, in which many families from the community participated. The group also succeeded to get a one hour programme on public television about their Mother Center, where they explained the idea and presented their activities. This was a big step because to attract the attention of the media also means to attract the attention of women that have an important role in the government.

An interesting feature of the Albanian Mother Center initiative is the activity called “Voice in the community”, where the women discuss issues they care about in the community and how to raise their voices and get engaged as women in regard to these issues.







## Bulgaria<sup>2</sup>

*"I do not make compliments but this is from my heart. Friendship united us. Without knowing English I could understand you. We smiled a lot. Yes, you are not Roma but our hearts opened. My message to other trainers: do everything with love because this breaks all the barriers, language and other. We feel like people who have equal rights and that is important for us Roma to feel that." (Mother Center Provadia, Bulgaria)*

Bulgaria started very early in the pilot project with 4 Mother Center initiatives. This was due to the very good contacts and strong engagement of the local Spolu partner Integro, who gave strong content and organisational start up support to the initiatives. Unfortunately in the second phase of the project a staff change and vacancy created a lapse in counselling and communication during several months. The peer learning seminar and end evaluation seminar in June 2007 in Bratislava and the second site visit of the **mine** trainers which was conducted in July 2007 gave a boost to the groups and strengthened their plans for the future.

### Mother Center "Mother's Care" in Razgrad

#### **Process:**

The Mother Center "Mother's Care" in Razgrad is founded on the very good contacts and cooperation of its initiators with the municipality, which led to easy access of rent free rooms and a generally positive attitude in the community towards the Mother Center. Communication conflicts have led to group changes which have created a set back in the level of regular activities in the Mother Center.



#### **Group:**

The group consists of 10 women who participate regularly in the Mother Center activities. Almost all women are employed, so that the time they can spend in the center is limited.

<sup>2</sup> Based on written reports by Gabika Dunajcikova and Liliya Makaveeva

This is how the individual women express their motivation for participating in the Mother Center:

- *"In the Mother Center we have an opportunity to meet, to discuss what is going on and to exchange our ideas and views."*
- *"The center is a place where we can gather information about the community and see what is needed. We can evaluate the situation and develop solutions and bring them in front of decision makers."*
- *"We would like to become a partner for projects done for instance by schools, or the municipality, or even the European Union."*



#### **Rooms:**

The center consists of one room with a nice kitchen and toilet that the municipality has provided rent free. For the occasion of the first site visit of the **mine** trainers the municipality could be convinced to renovate the toilet "for the international visitors." The center can also use a large municipality room for meetings, sports, dancing and celebrations rent free. The municipality has promised the center use of a bigger house very close to the center of town. Negotiations of renovation and use of this larger space were in process at the end of the pilot.



#### **Opening Hours:**

Opening hours are irregular in the Mother Center due to the fact that most of the participants are employed.

#### **Division of Tasks:**

Leadership in the group is taken by two initiators who also have very good contacts to the local authorities. Continuity of presence in the center is provided by the only person in the group who is not employed.





**Activities:**

Activities focus on the “opportunity to meet” , there is no regular program, meetings are called as needed. Activities that have taken place in the center include cooking lessons , hair dressing lessons and activities for children, as well as seminars on health issues. The group also engages in systematically collecting basic information on the families in the Roma community. There are plans to prepare a camp in cooperation with the town for Romas from social weak families.

**Mother Center “Hope for Provadia” in Provadia****Process:**

The Mother Center initiative in Provadia faces strong discrimination against Roma in the municipality ( some restaurants in town refuse to serve Roma). Negotiations and relations to the local authorities also prove difficult, their letters are not answered and they were not granted a meeting before the site visit of the **mine** trainers was announced. International presence and support proved especially important in this community. Rather than wait for the municipality to provide rooms, which did not seem very likely in the near future, the initiator decided to build out her own garage as a meeting space for the Mother Center.

**Group:**

The group consists of 10 women with small and older children. This is how they express their motivation to participate in the Mother Center:

- *"We need to encourage our children to go to school and to support them in developing skills."*
- *"We want to support mothers in building up their self-confidence. They also need education and training in different skills."*
- *"It is important to show the women how important education is and how they can be more responsible parents."*



**Rooms:**

The Mother Center “Hope for Provadia” consists of a one room former garage.



The group decided to start in these premises so that they could get the initiative going rather than be blocked and discouraged by the negative attitude of the municipality and the local authorities. Negotiations for municipal rooms are still in progress and the group hopes that the meeting with the municipality together with the **mine** trainers on the occasion of the second site visit will have had a positive effect in this respect.

If not, the group has decided to build a second room on the first floor of the existing center from their own sources.

**Opening Hours:**

There are no regular opening hours yet as the renovation of the garage was only accomplished shortly before the end of the pilot. The official opening of the center was held during the site visit of the **mine** trainers end of July 2007.

**Division of tasks:**

The initiator is a driving force in this Mother Center and plays a strong role in shaping the process. Her commitment and dedication to the idea has been the inspiration of the group and allowed them to continue for a year even without rooms and in the face of the rude and dismissive behavior of the municipality.

**Activities:**

Activity plans include Bulgarian language classes for children and adults, sewing lessons, dancing classes for children and after school activities for school children. The group also plans to open the Mother Center for young people in the evenings.

## Mother Center “Mother’s Love” in Simitli

### Process:



The Mother Center “Mother’s Love” was initiated by a Roma woman who works in the municipality. This made the contacts and relationship to the local authorities very positive from the start. The mayor and the media played an important role in the opening of the center. The center targets very young mothers and supports them with courses and information.

### Group:

The group consists of a core of 3 active women and about 15 Mother Center visitors with their children, many of whom are very young. 4 members of an active group of youth have decided to support the Mother Center as volunteers.

This is how the participants express their motivation to participate in the Mother Center:

- *“Our young mothers and our children need support and education.”*
- *“We want to be a part of society, we need to start to get active for that.”*
- *“The Mother Center can help with problems in the family”*

### Rooms:

The Mother Center space consists of one room with an integrated kitchen, which the group feels is too small for the activities they would like to do there. The municipality has promised a bigger building in the future.

### Opening Hours:

The center is opened three times a week.

### Division of tasks:

The main tasks are divided among the core team. Leadership is shifting in the center since one of the main initiators has a job out of the country for half a year. The core team is consciously working on guiding the young Mother Center participants to take on responsibilities in the center and to learn how to negotiate with the municipality.



**Activities:**

The center offers lectures and information on parenting issues, health issues and the prevention of drug addiction. Free English and computer lessons are offered to the mothers as well as children and young people.

In cooperation with a partnering NGO a magazine is being planned where there will also be space for reports on the Mother Center in Simitli as well as the Mother Centers in the other Roma communities.

**Mother Center "Good Mother – Good Children" in Sandanski****Process:**

Due to good negotiations with the municipality during the first site visit of the **mine** trainers the group was able to access rent free rooms. One of the main goals of the center was contact and cooperation with the non Roma population, which was successful to the point that non Roma women took on leadership roles in the center. This has caused some controversy and debate inside the Roma community, who think that the leadership roles in the Mother Centers should hands of Roma women.

**Group:**

The group consists of a core of 10 active women. In all 20 women and 30 children have participated in Mother Center activities. 3 grandmothers have taken on active roles in the group. There has been some fluctuation in the group, some business ideas and plans could not be implemented due to the constricted space and some very active Roma participants have left the group since non Roma women have taken over leading roles. This is how the participants express their motivation in joining the Mother Center:

- *"There are many issues in the Roma community that need to be solved. Children are dropping out of school, many women marry at a very early age. These kinds of things can be addressed in the Mother Center."*
- *"Our motivation is expressed in our name, we feel that if mothers are supported and feel good, then also the children will grow up in a good way. So it is important to work with the mothers and the children."*



**Rooms:**

“Dobra Maika – dobri deca” (Good Mother – Good Children) was opened on the 16th of December with a charity concert in the Roma Culture House in Sandanski with the support of the municipality and the Roma partner organisation Integro. The center consists of one room of 17 square meters. It is provided rent free from the municipality. The center is not situated in the Roma community, which some feel is a barrier for more Roma women to participate.

The municipality has offered to give land free of charge to the Mother Center, provided they find a donor that would sponsor building a Mother Center on the land.

**Opening Hours:**

The center is opened 4 days a week. Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 16.00 -18.30h and Saturdays and Sundays from 11.00 -16.00h.

**Division of Tasks and Responsibilities:**

The division of tasks and responsibilities has changed throughout the process of the group. In the beginning Roma women were more active, but have stepped back or left the group altogether when non Roma women took on leadership roles.

**Activities:**

Activities include dancing classes for children, preserving Roma traditions through oral history, games with mothers and children, and after school lessons for children who have problems in school, and celebration of birthday parties in the center. The center also has a focus on humanitarian activities, helping poor families in the segregated Roma communities. They distributed clothing donated by churches to poor families and are engaged in collecting bricks for families in the Roma impoverished Roma communities to build more appropriate housing for themselves. Activities have also involved giving interviews for the local radio and the regional newspaper, who responded very positively to the Mother Center "Good Mother – Good Children".

## Serbia<sup>3</sup>

*"I had a feeling that a non ending stream of young women were entering the room and that they had hundreds of questions for me. The atmosphere was great!" (Bosnian mine trainer)*

*"The stories of the trainer from Bosnia were convincing, because the situation there is very similar to our own." (Mother Center Beocin, Serbia)*



In Serbia the Roma organisation Khetane Zajedno introduced the Mother Center approach to the Roma community. Although both the communities of Novi Sad and the community of Beocin were initially interested early on in the project the decision was taken to only initiate one Mother Center in Serbia during the pilot period due to lack of time and human resources. The Mother Center initiative in Beocin got off to a promising start with the perspective to get use of rooms in the Roma community center, which however in the end did not materialise. Towards the end of the pilot phase a new start was undertaken with new rented rooms.

### Mother Center "Open Heart for Beocin" in Beocin, Serbia

#### **Process:**

Initially the Mother Center Beocin wanted to use rooms inside the Roma cultural center that is also used by two Roma men's groups. Unfortunately this plan did not work out as the Roma men proved to be too dominant and interfering in the center and did not keep their promise of giving the Mother Center initiative rooms in the cultural center that they could use autonomously. Also the atmosphere in the center included drinking and partying and was not suitable for mothers with children. In the end the women decided not to start their center in the Roma cultural center but to look for their own rooms. This showed a high motivation of the group to really create a place of their own.

<sup>3</sup> Based on written reports by Senada Dzankic



Nevertheless the room question was a major set-back in the development of the Beocin Mother Center initiative as it proved not that easy to find suitable rooms in Beocin. At the second site visit of the **mine** trainer to Beocin in April 14-15 2007 the group still did not have rooms for their Mother Center, so that part of the consultation visit was used to look at possible options together with the women.

Several unsuitable rooms were inspected, most landlords expected the women to do major renovations of the rooms without giving them a long term contract. In the end and at the last minute of the site visit suitable rooms were found and rented, so that the second site visit ended in a big success.

### **Group:**

The Mother Center Beocin consists of a group of about 25 - 30 women and about as many children. Most of the women are young women aged 15 – 22 who are not employed. The initiating team is a core group of 5 women, many of whom participated in the study visit to the Bosnian model Mother Center and in the first on site trainings of the **mine** trainers in Beocin end of October 2006. Once a week the center organises a disco for young people which is regularly visited by 70 youth.



This is how the individual women express their motivation for participating in the Mother Center:

- *"I love children. I want to do the childcare in the Mother Center."*
- *"I love sports, I want to organise sports for the mothers and the children."*
- *"I would like to do something with sewing. I love handicrafts."*
- *"It is marvellous to have a place to meet and do our own things. This gives such inspiration to us all. I want things to change for Roma women."*

- *"It is important that we do something for our children, that we support their development. They need to learn the Serbian language. They need to get to know and play with non Roma children. The number of children in the special classes has to be reduced."*
- *"I would like my children to learn computer and English in the Mother Center."*
- *"I like the Mother Center as a safe place for my children and myself. There are women in the community who face violence and sexual harassment. There needs to be a safe place to be."*
- *"I expect to find some inner peace and contentment in the Mother Center, a place where there is less conflict and fighting."*



### **Rooms:**

The Mother Center „Open Heart for Beocin“ has found rooms in a former pub, which they rent for Euro 100 a month. The space is a room of 42 square meters with a counter which the women have divided into two rooms with a partition wall, one room for the mothers, one room for the children. The premises include a bathroom, a storage room and a small garden where the children can play outside. Tables and chairs could be used from the former pub.



### **Opening Hours:**

The center is open daily. Once a week a disco for young people is organised by the participants of the center.



***Division of Tasks:***

Different women take charge of the activities in the center every day. Regular tasks include childcare, cleaning, and making coffee. Other tasks are connected with special activities like courses, sports and organising celebrations. The group has elected a leadership team consisting of a president, a vice president and a secretary.

***Activities:***

The women and their families went to work to renovate the rooms of their center with great enthusiasm after they had finally found rooms of their own.

After opening the activities in the center include regular meetings of the women, childcare, sport activities, designing of T shirts, course for children in the Serbian language, course in folklore dance, disco for young girls and birthday celebrations where the women prepare pizza, pancakes, cake and coffee for the visitors.

The women of the center also invited their mothers and mothers in law to visit the center and feel welcomed to take part in activities there as well.





## ***Slovakia<sup>4</sup>***

*"When working with children we found that not only children need to learn, but also parents need to learn some skills and how to take more responsibility for children. The Mother Center is a perfect place for this to happen." (Mother Center Matko in Detva, Slovakia)*

Slovakia joined the pilot project in September 2007. The initiative for a first Roma Mother Center had been taken before by Klub Spolu in Detva who then became the local Roma partner organisation for Slovakia in the pilot project. The initiator of both Klub Spolu and the Roma Mother Center "Matko" in Detva took on the role of reaching out to other Roma communities and presenting the Mother Center approach and experience to Roma women's groups in other municipalities. The fact that there was already a self initiated Roma Mother Center in Slovakia as well as the fact that there is a strong Mother Center movement and Mother Center network in Slovakia provided enabling conditions for the development in Slovakia.

## **Mother Center "Matko" in Detva, Slovakia**

### ***Process:***

Detva harbours one of the Non Roma Mother Centers organised in the Union of Slovak Mother Centers.<sup>5</sup> This Mother Center is called "Kubko". A group of women from the Roma community in Detva approached the women of the Mother Center Kubko in 2005 if they could join their activities. During these first meetings the women from the Roma community and the women from the Mother Center Kubko together decided that it would be best to create an own Roma Mother Center inside the Roma community in Detva. Thus the Roma Mother Center "Matko"<sup>6</sup> was born. The idea was that having an own

<sup>4</sup> Based on written reports by Jana Gregusova

<sup>5</sup> Currently about 100 Slovak Mother Centers are members of the Slovak Union of Mother Centers, the national network of Mother Centers in Slovakia.

<sup>6</sup> "Matko" and "Kubko" are two figures of a well known Slovak children's story.

Mother Center in their own community would be a stronger support for the activation and leadership development of the Roma women. The two Mother Centers in Detva have built up a strong collaboration and organise many activities together. The Mother Center is an active member of the Union of Slovak Mother Centers and participates in trainings and regional meetings of the Slovak Mother Center network.

**Group:**

The Mother Center Matko has an active group of 10 women, mostly young mothers in their teens or twenties with their children. This is how the individual women express their motivation for participating in the Mother Center:

- *"We want a better future for our children, that is why we come to the Mother Center."*
- *"I am often nervous at home because there are so many demands on me at the same time. In the Mother Center it is more relaxed. There, I have learned to play with my child, something I never really took the time to do before."*
- *"I love our Roma dances. I want to teach them to my children."*

**Rooms:**

The Mother Center has two rooms in the Roma community center in Detva. The rooms were in very bad shape, damp and humid. With the start-up funds provided by the pilot project and the work of several volunteers from the Mother Center Matko and the Roma community the Mother Center rooms were renovated. Toys and furniture were donated by a church in the community of Detva. Klub Spolu also provided equipment and furniture, and things needed in the center were also donated from families in the Roma community.

**Opening hours:**

The Mother Center Matko is open Monday to Friday from 8.00 – 12.00h and from 15.00 – 17.00 h

**Division of tasks:**

Participants of the center take turns in providing childcare and coffee in the center. The regular activities like counselling, the Roma dance group and the aerobic course for women are offered by different women of the group. The initiator of the Mother Center, who also is the initiator of the Klub Spolu, Detva takes on a leading role in the center.

**Activities:**

One of the first activities of the of the Mother Center Matko was a trip to the Zoo for parents and children. They also organised a competition: we look for the most beautiful mother, but the make up was done by her child.

Once a week mothers meet over coffee, they talk about their problems in the family or with the children and try to find a solution together.

Childcare is offered on a regular basis. Mothers can leave their children for a small fee in the playroom while they take care of important issues without having to worry about their children.

"I play with my mom" is a weekly program of contact games for mother and children that support the development of children's skills with the active help of their mothers.

Several of the women from the Mother Center are active dancers of traditional Roma dances and teach these dances to the children in the Mother Center. They are proud to pass on this tradition to the next generation.

Aerobic for mothers also constitutes a weekly activity in the Mother Center Matko.

The "Small school of image" is a course where mothers learn how to look better which raises their self-confidence.

Consulting to help with the contact with different authorities, and with writing formal letters is also available in the Mother Center.

Joint activities with the non Roma Mother Center Kubko in Detva include a training in anti-discrimination where mothers and children from both Mother Centers spent a weekend together, a celebration of St. Nicholas Day, a cultural activity for children financed by donations and parents contributions, participation on the annual general assembly of



the Slovak Union of Mother Centers, participation in the international Mother Center conference "How do we want to raise our children", and a "First Ball of Mother Centers" that was organised jointly in Detva.

Planned activities include computer trainings and a Roma language school.

One of the successes is to be seen in the positive relationship to the local authorities of Detva. The cooperation of the two Mother Centers Kubko and Matko in Detva has impressed the local authorities, who expressed very positive opinions about the Mother Center approach for their municipality. They see Mother Centers as a good way to give mothers and children strong support in the early years of childhood and motherhood and as a good way to support the integration of the Roma and non Roma community in Detva. Both centers receive rent free rooms from the municipality.



### **Mother Center "Little Flame" in Kremnica, Slovakia**

#### ***Process:***

Women from the Roma community in Kremnica showed interest for the Mother Centers after hearing about the Roma Mother Center in Detva. They have a long history of cooperation with Klub Spolu and Detva and immediately liked the idea.

After initial talks with Klub Spolu in Detva and participating in the start up training given by the Slovak **mine** trainers active women of the Roma community in Kremnica decided to also initiate a Mother Center in their community.

#### ***Group:***

The initiators of the Mother Center "Little Flame" in Kremnica are a core group of 6 active Roma women. Two have a professional education in social work and a long experience of working with Roma communities. This is how the individual women express their motivation for participating in the Mother Center:



- *"Education is important for Roma women, because young mothers have mostly only basic school. So when they finished maternity leave they have a very low chance to find job. In the Mother Center they can find support to get education both for their children and for themselves".*
- *"In a Mother Center a mother can be a mother and an active person at the same time and in the same space."*
- *"The Mother Center is a good place for both the mother and the child to relax and feel safe."*
- *Young mothers need support. Mother Centers are a place where they can find it."*
- *The Mother Center could be place for both Roma and non Roma women. It is a place for everyone."*

### **Rooms:**

The Mother Center "Little Flame" opened in a little house owned by Klub Spolu Kremnica in the centre of the community. The house has a little kitchen, a room for the mothers and a playroom for the children in the attic. The space used to harbour a kindergarten, that



has discontinued. The Mother Center can use the space for free, but necessary renovations needed to be done, {securing stairs to the attic, repairing the toilet} for which start up funds from the pilot project were used.

### **Opening hours:**

Opening hours are still irregular in the center. Once the group has gotten larger and a regular activity schedule has been established the group will decide on the opening hours of the center.

**Division of tasks:**

Tasks are divided ad hoc between the members of the group.

**Activities:**

Activities have not started yet on a regular basis. The women have conducted a survey on the interests of the women in their community and plan to design the activities in the Mother Center based on the results of this survey. A major focus will be put on parent education activities and on regular children's activities in the playroom.

**Mother Center Initiative Banska Stiavnica****Process:**

The group in Banska Stiavnica heard about the Mother Center idea from Klub Spolu Detva and attended the start up training that presented the core concept and methodology of the Mother Center approach.

They were interested in joining the pilot and also joined other trainings offered by the Union of Slovak Mother Centers. At the last minute they did not attend the peer learning seminar and the end evaluation seminar of the pilot, because two of the key players in the group had found employment. This has been a set back for the group and poses the need to recruit new women into the group.

**Group:**

The core group are 4 women that were active in a non-formal kindergarden in the Roma community. This is how the individual women express their motivation for participating in the Mother Center:

- *"There is no place for mothers and children, and no kindergarden in our community. Mothers only sit in front of the flats and drink coffee."*
- *"Children have bad education in the families, and no opportunities to spend free time in a good way."*
- *"The Mother Center could be prevention of alcoholism and too many cigarettes."*

**Rooms:**

The Mother Center initiative in Banska Stiavnica is situated in the Roma community in Sobov, a quarter of Banska Stiavnica about 6 kilometers from the center of town.

Spolu Slovakia rents a building that was before a cultural house for workers at the **mine**: “black hole”. They have offered to the Mother Center initiative to use part of these rooms. There is very big hall, that could be divided into two rooms. The rooms are rent free.

**Opening hours:**

The Mother Center in Banska Stiavnica has not opened yet.

**Division of tasks:**

Tasks are divided between the members of the group on an ad hoc basis.

**Activities:**

Activities have not started yet as the Mother Center group is in the process of regrouping. Plans are mainly focussed on activities for children including sport activities for school children and excursions for children and their families.







## Lessons Learned

*"It was a surprise, it was something revolutionary for me. I changed my opinion on the Roma problem. I never worked with Roma before, in our city the situation is very segregated. Working together did not sow differences between our girls from our Mother Centers and the Roma girls. There was no communication barrier. And for me it was a stimulation to work more together. A better understanding of each other is evolving through our meetings and working together."* (Slovak **mine** trainer)

The pilot project generated results also on the level of creating a better understanding of key issues and questions posed at the beginning of the project. The following sums up some of the major lessons learned and knowledge results of the project.

## Motivation of Roma Communities for Mother Centers

The following quotes give an overview of the main motivations that led to the creation of Roma Mother Centers:

*"It is good to give help for the family in Roma communities. Often the mothers are very young, there can be a lot of stress in the family and it is good to have a place to escape the stress at home. It is important also for the children that there is less stress for the mothers. In the Mother Centers mothers and children can relate to each other in a more positive way. Women can find guidance as mothers, how to play with the children, take time for them and give them attention, how to give them good education and even guidance in basic things like clean clothing, good eating habits and understanding the importance of sending the children to school. The Mother Center approach is very good for Roma families, since it addresses the children and their future. It can help to motivate the families to send their children to kindergartens and schools and receive education. That is very important for our integration into society. Also for the children it is good to have a safe place, they are often on their own in the streets. They need support to get off the streets, to find guidance, to be supported to learn."* (MC "Matko", Detva, Slovakia)

*"It is a wish to have a place to meet, where there is less control from the family, where mothers can relax and do activities for themselves, where they can gain confidence and become more active, to spend time in a more effective and purposeful way, to learn skills for themselves, like computer trainings, further education. Mothers are often alone with their problems"* (MC "Open Heart for Beocin", Beocin, Serbia)

*"Mother Centers are a place for women to meet and support each other. It should also be a place for activities for women so they will better know their community and can become active in their community."* (MC "Swallow", Tirana, Albania)

*"Many women see the need and are also willing to change the situation of Roma communities, but they need help and support to work on their ideas, to develop hope and confidence that it is possible to improve their situation. Having a Mother Center gives an immediate experience of a better life and therefore the motivation to change things and not to resign."* (MC "Mother's Love", Simitli, Bulgaria)

### **Cooperation with Local Authorities and other stakeholders**

Good relations with local authorities and other stakeholders in the municipalities has proven a key factor to accessing rent free rooms. To this end, especially in Bulgaria and in Slovakia the site visits of the **mine** trainers were also used to strengthen the negotiating power of the Mother Centers by setting up meetings with the mayors and

deputy mayors of the municipalities with participation of the international visitors.



Cooperation with local authorities has been established in several centers who thereby receive support from local authorities, mainly in form of rent free rooms. In other communities negotiations with the local authorities have been very trying and cooperation and support has not yet been established.

In Albania a local church initiative behaved in a very competitive way which created a big challenge to the Mother Center initiative. The church provides a food program for Roma children and those children going to the Mother Center were excluded from the food program. This challenge was taken up by the women who arranged meetings with the church group in which things were talked over and resolved.

In other instances positive cooperation has been established with churches, who make donations of clothes for poor families (Bulgaria) and have established a continuous collection of toys for the Roma Mother Centers (Slovakia).

In some cases (in Slovakia and in Serbia) positive relationships and cooperation has also been established with companies and businesses.

Coaching on partnership building with local authorities and other stakeholders was a central theme during the consultations and site visits and continues to be an area of focus and attention. Possible partners next to the municipality can be schools, hospitals, other NGOs, foreign embassies or also interns from foreign organisations.

### Cultural Differences



The Roma Mother Centers operate in communities with a greater level of poverty and discrimination than most of the other Mother Centers in Europe. There are also cultural differences relating to the Roma culture. The lack of emphasis on schooling, a culture that subordinates women, early marriage and high birth rates, have all contributed to the vulnerability of the Roma community. It is important to understand these differences and to take them into account.

Differences that were identified by participants during the project related to differences in the coverage of basic needs, questions of prostitution and teenage pregnancy, differences in the approach to childcare, differences in the integration of grandmothers, and differences in religious background.

For many of the Mother Center initiatives maintaining and cultivating Roma traditions plays an important part in the activities of the center (Roma language classes, Roma dance classes, oral history).

On the other hand it was striking to see during the peer exchanges in the pilot project and in the participation at the international conference that many issues concerning motherhood and the raising of children are international and can create a bonding between very different countries and cultures.

## Integration

Do Mother Centers contribute to strengthening integration between Roma and non Roma?

All Roma Mother Center initiatives of the pilot project expressed the wish to open their Mother Center to the participation also of non Roma women and to cooperate with non Roma Mother Centers, and in many cases non Roma women participate in the



centers. For most initiatives, however, it was important to first start with a group of Roma women as initiators and to have the Mother Center located in the Roma community. One center in Bulgaria made the decision to have their Roma center be located in the center of town as a sign and incentive for integration.

There were some cases where the initiator group was mixed between Roma and non Roma women. Where this led to non Roma women taking leadership roles (in one center in Bulgaria) it created tension and controversy and a pulling back of Roma participation. For the activation of Roma women in Mother Centers and the development of self confidence and an identity with Roma issues and a Roma movement it is important that leadership in the centers is taken by Roma women.

In Slovakia the Roma Mother Centers participate in the national network of Slovak Mother Centers and the modalities of cooperation and joining forces between the two movements are being worked out in close cooperation between the Union of Mother Centers Slovakia (UMC) and Spolu Slovakia. Further steps of cooperation have been undertaken by asking an experienced Roma trainer from Spolu Slovakia to give a training to the Roma Mother Center initiatives and by inviting the coordinator of the Roma Mother Center in Detva to present the Mother Center concept at an international Roma conference in Hungary. The Roma and non Roma Mother Centers in Detva have conducted anti discrimination seminars together to work on creating a greater sensitivity around the issue of discrimination of the Roma population.

The Roma women welcome the opportunity of more contact and cooperation with the non Roma population through the Mother Centers. The participants from the non Roma Slovak Mother Centers also express more integration happening on their end. They are more aware of the prejudices in their society and also – often unnoticed – in themselves

towards the Roma population and how these prejudices can be overcome through direct contact between the women from the Roma and non Roma Mother Centers. The Slovak Mother Center Network is seen by both groups as a place to address Roma issues on a higher level, not only on a community level.

Mother Centers have proved a good means and strategy towards integration. However conscious efforts are needed to create sensitisation and awareness building on discrimination mechanisms, as well as on ways to create equitable partnerships and to develop and maintain Roma leadership as part of the process.

### Peer Learning and Networking

Peer learning and networking among the Roma Mother Centers as well as in the national and international Mother Center network is seen as very positive and as a possibility for exchange and support and in some cases in fact as a necessity to start up Mother Centers. In Albania and Slovakia Roma communities expressed experiencing a functioning Mother Center in another Roma community as a necessary requirement to start a similar initiative in their own community.



Study visits to existing Mother Centers (the model Mother Center Plamen in Zavidovici, Bosnia, but also between Mother Centers in Slovakia and Bulgaria) proved an important element in spreading the Mother Center approach and initiating new Mother Centers. Peer learning was an integral part of the site visits as well as the trainings organised during the pilot. Peer exchange and support also included a very concrete level, for instance the contribution of toys and equipment between Mother Centers from different countries.

Country wide peer support was an important element in Bulgaria and Slovakia, where several Mother Center initiatives were created. Peer learning and support focused especially on supporting each other in negotiations with the local authorities. Referring to the support other municipalities give to the Mother Center in their town is a strong negotiation argument used in several cases during the pilot. In Bulgaria the Mother Centers asked Integro to organize exchange meetings between the 4 Bulgarian Roma Mother Centers every three months, as they found this form of peer learning very supportive and effective.



In Slovakia the Roma centers could make use of the strategies and reference materials for lobbying with the municipality, created by the Slovak Union of Mother Center, who have created an agreement with the Association of local authorities which can help with local negotiations.



During the last site visit to the Bulgarian Mother Centers participants found out that one municipality was a partner town with a municipality in Slovakia, which also supports a local Mother Center. An exchange and partnership between the two Mother Centers is being planned in the frame-work of the sister city program of the two municipalities.

Taking part in the international Mother Center conference on the theme “How do we want to raise our children?” in November 2006 in Bratislava was experienced by the participants from the Slovak and Bulgarian Mother Centers as an important highlight, because they saw women’s groups from other parts of the world like Africa, or Latin America, whose living conditions and family situations and issues are more similar to those in Roma communities.

## Problems and Challenges

A central challenge for the Roma Mother Center initiatives is to gain the support or at least the tolerance of the husbands and families of the participating women, who are used to their wives to being at home and available at all times. Patient explaining of what the Mother Center is about and what is happening there, stressing the benefits for the children as well as in some cases a certain degree of defiance are needed to face this challenge.

Another challenge concerned the issue of how to create equal participation, how to ensure that participants are not hesitant and shy to express their opinions and ideas, and how to avoid that all responsibilities and power is taken and/or delegated to the initiator group or some few leaders.

In Albania and in Serbia finding rooms at affordable prices proved a big challenge, while in Bulgaria the hostility or unreliability of local authorities in some cases caused a lot of stress and difficulties.

The issue of how Roma and non Roma women can cooperate in the centers on an equal basis is a challenge that takes careful consideration and constant awareness.



## Conclusions

This section summarises the major conclusions of the pilot project and addresses the following questions: How far can you come in one year? What can be considered major accomplishments? What is not accomplished? What further steps are needed? And what support is still needed?

Major conclusions:

- Focussing on children is a good way to activate and organise Roma women.
- Mother Centers are a concept that Roma women are interested in and respond to.
- Mother Centers are a contribution to the issue of integration.
- Inside of one year the following has been accomplished:  
Identifying interested communities, understanding and adapting the concept to local conditions, finding Mother Center initiators, finding rooms and renovating them, developing a core group and first activities, developing positive relations to local authorities and other partners in the community.
- What has not been accomplished inside a year and still needs to happen includes:  
Developing a up and running Mother Center with daily opening hours and a regular program, attracting new visitors, securing sustainability of funding and of rooms, and developing a voice and a role in the Roma community and Roma movement.

Lessons learned in regard to strategic issues when implementing the Mother Center concept in Roma communities include:

- It is important to start with people who are respected in the communities.
- It is important to involve and convince also the grandmothers.
- It is important to work on acceptance of the husbands and the Roma communities.
- To start Mother Centers you need women who have the time to be initiators and to run the centers (housewives, unemployed women, women on maternity leave, grandmothers).
- It is best if initiators want and need the centers for themselves rather than for other women.
- It is important that Mother Center rooms are easily accessible, preferably in the Roma community.
- It is important to develop good strategies of negotiation with the local authorities.
- It is important to keep the right pace, not to run ahead of the initiatives, to acknowledge that things need time and do not develop over night.

The pilot project “Mother Centers in Roma communities” does not represent a bottom up spreading of the Mother Center movement but takes a more top down approach of jump starting Mother Centers through a funded program. This involves a special set of guidelines in the implementation process:

- Mother Centers can not be facilitated “from outside”. Contacts and trustworthiness inside the Roma communities are a necessary pre-condition.
- Facilitating an exploration process for the initiator group to find out what they really want and to adapt the Mother Center concept accordingly to their own needs and situation is crucial. It is important that the Roma community develop and express an own interest, motivation and vision for the Mother Center.
- Mother Centers need to be based on an intrinsic motivation. They will not work if participants are in it for external reasons, for instance primarily for money.
- Mother Centers develop step by step and over time. The process requires patience as well as continuity and a long range focus.
- Continuous support and accompaniment is needed for a longer time until Mother Centers are fully established and “self sufficient”. In places where there are regional and national Mother Center networks they can provide this support. In places where Mother Center initiatives are only starting this needs the support of NGO partners and organisations.
- Teams of trainers from different countries allow for a wider scope of experience and know how in the consultation process.
- Trust building and the development of equal partnerships is an important part of the consultation process. This requires careful and respectful listening as well as mutual acknowledgement and appreciation. This process cannot be taken for granted but needs attention and the willingness to work on the partnership relationship by both sides.





## Open Questions

At the beginning there were many questions posed to the project. Some answers evolved during the pilot. Many questions are still open:

### **Do Mother Centers fit into the Roma culture?**

The experience that emerged during the pilot is that there is not one Roma culture, but that the situation is different in different communities and different countries and that it very much depends on the specific conditions in the community if initiating a Mother Center is appropriate and successful or not. The local Roma organisations are best suited to assess this.

#### ✓ **Are Mother Centers also of interest in a culture where isolation is not the issue?**

In many countries Mother Centers come into existence to confront the feeling of isolation that families are increasingly experiencing. The context in Roma communities is different, as generally speaking there is a lot of social interaction between them. What emerged in the pilot project is that on the one hand young women in Roma communities can feel left alone and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of mothering, and on the other hand Mother Centers can imply an escape from the social control they experience from husbands and in-laws at home. For them Mother Centers are a place to relax and to find their own way.

#### ✓ **Is the focus on childcare appropriate for Roma communities?**

The focus on how to raise children and how to create a better future for the children has proved to be a strong motivating force for creating Mother Centers in Roma communities. For women this constitutes an important element and incentive to become active. In the Mother Center approach this motivation is linked to self development and self organization of the mothers themselves which further adds to their empowerment and mobilisation.



#### ✓ **How much coaching and consultation is needed?**

The level of on-going coaching and consultation differed in the different countries.

It was carried out by the local Spolu organisations in the different countries in varying degrees, due to staff changes and shortages.

In Slovakia there was the highest level of contact and consultation with continuous site visits and a series of thematic trainings as well as involvement in regional and national

Mother Center network activities. In Macedonia there was only the study visit to the Mother Center in Zavidovici, Bosnia but no on site consultation.

**Mine** and Spolu trainers both express the opinion that in all countries the potential for the MC initiatives to succeed is high, but that there is the need for continuous contact and coaching for a longer period of time, up to 3-5 years, depending on the local situation. This involves support and consultation on issues like registering as a legal entity, writing proposals and general fundraising and PR strategies, building up equitable and long term partnerships with local authorities and other stakeholders in society, group dynamics and leadership issues in the centers, the development of networking strategies, income generation strategies as well as the development of advocacy strategies to gain visibility and a voice as Roma women in the Roma communities, the Roma movement as well as in the society at large.

- ✓ **What are the positive and negative potentials of starting Mother Centers as part of existing Roma community centers? What conditions need to be in place for this to be a successful experience and strategy?**



In Serbia the women changed their original plan of using rooms in the Roma community center because they experienced too much male domination and control. In Slovakia the experiences are more positive. This is mainly due to the fact that in the Roma community centers that opened their doors to the Mother Center initiatives women already had strong influence and a leadership role.

The following outlines some questions that after the pilot still seem to be pending:

- ✓ **What are the chances for income generating projects in Mother Centers?**

Opinions about income generating projects differed between the countries and centers in the pilot project. In some cases the “traditional” Mother Center income generating projects like childcare and second-hand shops were questioned.

Taking care of each others children is implicit in the Roma culture and it goes against Roma tradition and mentality to charge money for it. Second hand clothing is a business many Roma engage in on the market and therefore it would be difficult and could be seen as competition to establish it in the Mother Center.

Other forms of income generating projects that have been envisioned in the Mother Centers include hair dressing and cosmetics as well as activities like dance, aerobics, language and computer classes as well as social counseling.



In Bulgaria two centers were required as a condition to obtain rent free rooms to sign an agreement with the municipality that they do not use the rooms for income generating activities.

In general establishing income generating projects in poor communities is a difficult task as it involves finding access to the more affluent parts of the community.

What are services that can be offered in the Mother Centers that cater to customers with income and spending power is a question that has not been answered during the pilot period.

✓ **Does the self organization involved in initiating and running Mother Centers stimulate Roma women to raise their voices and to participate actively in the Roma community and movement?**

During the pilot project only the potential for this could be traced, it will take much longer for it to become a reality in the Mother Centers and the Roma communities and to see how far the potential can be developed and carry in the Roma movement.

What became visible during the pilot was the interest the women take in addressing community issues like poverty and the lack of education as well as the willingness to confront male dominance in families and Roma organisations that are blocking Roma women in developing their potential.



## ***Sustainability***

*"We are very motivated to continue supporting Mother Centers in Roma communities. We see them as a good way forward in communities where it is best to start with activating the women. In other communities it is best to start with youth or with the whole community. We see the Mother Center approach as one of the approaches we apply in Roma communities." (Integro, Bulgaria)*

Sustainability perspectives differ for the different pilot countries:

In Slovakia, where the centers have rent free rooms and are connected to a very active national network of Mother Centers sustainability of the Roma centers seems secured. Together with the Union of Slovak Mother Centers the Roma centers have developed concrete plans for the financial and political sustainability of their centers, including

taking part in national fundraising projects as well as preparing proposals specified for the Roma Mother Centers.

Also in Bulgaria the future and sustainability of the centers is well established in most cases. The negotiation successes with the local authorities to provide rent free rooms and the strength of the Roma partner organisation Integro provides a solid basis for sustaining the centers beyond the pilot stage.

In Albania and Serbia the situation is more complicated since in both cases local authorities do not provide rent free space. How to create sustainability for Mother Centers when there is no possibility to access rent free rooms is a further open question not resolved inside the period of the pilot project.

Income generating activities and membership fees are not a realistic option to guarantee the rent on a long term basis in poor communities as can be seen from the experiences so far in the pilot project, but also from the experiences of implementing Mother Centers in other countries.<sup>7</sup>

All centers are engaged to some degree in the following sustainability activities:

- Grants, proposals and projects,
- Donations from NGOs or companies
- Membership fees and voluntary work
- Support from the municipality and the city budget
- Income generating projects (like dance group, paid exhibitions)
- Use of financial support schemes for unemployment



From the perspective of gaining independence from donor support, however, accessing rent free space seems an indispensable requirement. In countries where local governments are unwilling or unable to provide rent free space for community initiatives like in Bosnia, Serbia or Albania finding an alternative strategy becomes a basic requirement for the development of civil society. Claiming space is a critical organising strategy among women's groups throughout the world. Access and control over public space is a key asset to grassroots empowerment. Women-controlled spaces help women organize around their practical needs, access resources, participate in governance and gain and maintain institutional recognition.

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<sup>7</sup> See the final report of the Mother Center start up project 2003-2005 in Bosnia, commissioned by the Robert Bosch foundation and the Heidehof Foundation.

In the absence of the provision of public space to grassroots initiatives by the public sector due to the increasing privatisation of public space, other stakeholders in society have an important role to play in maintaining this basic requirement of democracy.

As in the above mentioned Mother Center start up project in Bosnia supported by the Robert Bosch Foundation, the results of the pilot project “Mother Centers in Roma communities” also point to the need to establish funding procedures for Mother Center initiatives to purchase space as a sustainability strategy. In the case of Beocin in Serbia for instance, space suitable for the Mother Center can be acquired for Euro 5000 – 6000, the equivalent of 5 years of paying rent. In Sandanski in Bulgaria the municipality has offered to donate land to the Mother Center, if they find a sponsor who will build a Mother Center on the premises.

In Bosnia the model Mother Center “Plamen” in Zavidovici. Bosnia portrays this strategy of sustainability. The German foundation Heidehof Stiftung purchased the rooms for the Mother Center after the group had given evidence of their ability to build up and run a Mother Center. On this basis the center is able to raise the funds for the running costs of the center on their own and has become self sufficient.

Other organisations, for instance the Huairou Commission, a network of grassroots women’s organisations and their partners, are also taking up this recommendation and are promoting the creation of a fund for grassroots women’s groups to acquire their own spaces out of the recognition of the importance of owning and managing space to grassroots women’s ability to organise and work and the analysis that renting space often perpetuates grassroots women’s organizations’ vulnerability.

This analysis points towards the creation of a broader coalition of forces in society that goes beyond the parameters of a pilot project. It is a result, however, that reveals a basic trend and need in current development policies that demands to be addressed.

