

# A journey towards social inclusion

**Empowering Vulnerable  
Local Communities of Albania  
(EVLC) Programme**



United Nations  
ALBANIA



Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.

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**PARTICIPATING UN AGENCIES:**

UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNV and UNHCR

**IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS:**

The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MoLSAEO), Technical Secretariat for Roma, The Municipality of Tirana, The Municipality of Durres, The Municipality of Elbasan, The Municipality of Fier, Ministry of Interior (MoI), The Ministry of Education and Science (MoES), The Ministry of Health (MoH), The General Directorate of the State Police, Regional Employment Offices, Vocational Training Centers, Tirana Legal Aid Services (TLAS), Roma and Egyptian organizations etc.

# The journey towards social inclusion

This booklet contains stories about change, successes achieved and challenges encountered on the way, reflections and lessons learned of all those engaged in bringing about social inclusion throughout the programme: “Empowering Local Vulnerable Communities in Albania”. As such, the booklet presents the experience and wisdom of project participants and community members.

Being a local organization, a social activist, a government worker or entity, a UN Agency or staff, a community member or a high official aiming to contribute into the development of an inclusive society, you will find this booklet inspiring and helpful. It is designed to support everyone who strives to enhance the work, improve practice and achieve the desired dream of equality and inclusiveness.

Above all, this learning is a contribution of the Roma and Egyptian communities that participated in the project themselves, whose experience throughout the project and their genuine desire to change things for better have largely informed the lessons learned outlined in this booklet.

These lines are dedicated to all these people who took the time to share their life stories for writing this booklet. Special thanks goes to community representatives, volunteers, civil servants and UN staff, for their dedication, generosity and courage to share with others the pains and gains of this journey of working together.

THANK YOU

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

While there is a discrepancy in numbers of R/E population in Albania, research studies provide reinforcing evidence that Roma and Egyptian communities are both marginalized and socially excluded and their living conditions are deplorable with limited access to potable water and sewage system. They are not politically represented in Parliament and have quite limited representation at local government. Roma and Egyptians suffer massive unemployment with 72% of them unemployed vs. 15.8% of non Roma (UNDP 2006) due to low education, prejudices and discrimination in the labor market. They work mainly in informal sector and 70% of their sources of income are from casual work and self-employment. Roma and Egyptian average household income is 68 Euro vs. 175 Euro of non-Roma household in the same vicinity (UNDP; 2006), life expectancy for Roma is 10 years lower than that of the rest of population (WB, 2005), illiteracy rate of Roma aged 15 and younger is 55% compared to 2% of non-Roma population (UNDP; 2006) and overall illiteracy rate among Roma is 62% and 24% for Egyptians (WB 2005) vs. 98% for non-Roma. School enrolment rate is very low at 13.5% of Roma children aged 3-5 years (UNICEF, SCA, 2006) and only 5% of children of age group 15-16 pursue high school. Lack of civic registration documents prevents them from accessing public and social services such as employment services, health care services, and enrollment to compulsory education and vocational training, registration as homeless, etc.

It is within this context that the Joint Program on Empowering the Vulnerable Local Communities (JP-EVLC) was developed as part of “One UN” Program, which aimed to enhance efficiency and responsiveness by bringing UN Agencies together with one program, one budget and one leader, while maintaining the distinct mandates and missions of the different UN agencies.

The overall goal of JP-EVLC is to improve the human security and access to rights of vulnerable Roma and Egyptian minorities, particularly of women and children.

The program was designed to support three main objectives including:

1. *Supporting participation of vulnerable communities in local decision-making* - through identification of priorities and preparation of Community Development Plans, implementation of community upgrading projects in partnership with local governments, strengthening capacities and cooperation between Roma and Egyptian NGOs and their respective communities.
2. *Enabling vulnerable communities to access their rights and public services* – through civil registration, community policing, establishing and strengthening a network of Roma Mediators in areas of health, education, and child protection, and facilitating vocational training and employment.
3. *Promoting policies and institutional strengthening for social inclusion of vulnerable communities* – through capacity building and assistance to local and central government institutions and capacity building and partnership strengthening for Roma and Egyptian NGOs.

JP adopts a cross and multi -sectorial approach with a combination of expertise from UN agencies, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNV and UNHCR, which are best positioned to address the relevant issues.

The main Government partner responsible for coordination of the planned actions is the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MoLSAEO), Technical Secretariat for Roma, whereas at the regional and local level the authorities of Tirana, Durrës, Fier and Elbasan are key partners in implementing the JP activities at the local level.



#### **OVERVIEW OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF EVLC PROGRAMME**

Joining efforts in this programme, the government, UN Agencies, Roma and Egyptian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including community-based organizations (CBOs) and Albanian civil society organizations (CSOs) helped:

#### **ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES- BECOME ACTORS IN THEIR OWN DEVELOPMENT**

This included mobilization and involvement of Roma and Egyptian communities in developing

local development plans and influencing local government entities to address priorities and improve basic services for these vulnerable communities in four regions of the country where the programme was implemented.

#### **IMPROVE BASIC LIVING CONDITIONS OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES**

Following advocacy efforts of Roma and Egyptian communities, the local government entities in programme areas in collaboration with the EVLC programme implemented infrastructure projects that provided

vulnerable communities with health centers, kindergartens, social centers, improved roads, drainage and sewage systems etc. thus, improving basic services and quality of life.

### **STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITIES OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN NGOS**

The EVLC programme provided training to Roma and Egyptian NGOs to increase knowledge and skills in areas they needed most support. The EVLC programme followed a learning approach that combined the training in classroom with practical application of the learning gained. Roma and Egyptian NGOs developed small projects which were funded by EVLC programme following a competitive process. The EVLC programme staff walked alongside these NGOs and mentored them. This experience resulted in successful projects that impacted the lives of Roma and Egyptian communities while those NGOs increased their capacities and improved the practices of serving their own communities.

### **ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES LEARN ABOUT RIGHTS AND ACCESS TO SERVICES**

Embracing a rights-based approach, the EVLC programme increased awareness of Roma and Egyptian communities on their own rights and responsibilities as citizens of the country. UN agencies, CBOs, NGOs, volunteers from Roma and Egyptian communities, civil servants in local government entities worked together on civil registration as a precondition for Roma and Egyptian Communities to access the benefits deriving from their rights, such as: health cards, social assistance, registration as unemployed etc.

The EVLC programme influenced the legal framework to improve especially the registration of children at birth. Accessing health services and education has been at the heart of the programme efforts while community volunteers and mediators continuously helped their community members

to overcome challenges.

### **ROMA AND EGYPTIAN PEOPLE GAIN SKILLS TO INCREASE EMPLOYABILITY IN THE LABOR MARKET**

The EVLC programme participants from Roma and Egyptian communities were enrolled in vocational training courses, earned certificates and received tools and materials to enter the labor market. They made use of internships, placements for practice in businesses, job fairs and competitions to promote themselves. With dignity, they have started to influence the employers' mindset on the employability of Roma and Egyptians as skillful and responsible employees. Many are still exploring the market while the program has facilitated their registration with Regional Employment Offices.

### **ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES COOPERATE WITH POLICE TO PROTECT THE MOST VULNERABLE PEOPLE.**

This included the development of social contracts between the vulnerable communities in the four regions and police forces. Trained community mediators collaborated with police forces to ensure that law and order prevails and community members enjoy the right to protection. Both, the police and the community mediators learned to work together. In addition, Roma and Egyptian Communities became aware of the reporting mechanism established by the Ministry of Interior to ensure that appropriate quality services are provided by Police to all communities especially those facing discrimination. The Roma and Egyptian communities learned how to use the system for their own protection.

### **GOVERNMENT INCREASED ITS CAPACITY TO REPORT ON OBJECTIVES SET IN THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN (NAP) FOR ROMA**

Due to the collaboration of the EVLC programme with the government, a web-



based monitoring system was developed. The programme also assisted the government to train the staff on how to operate the system and produce customized reports. The monitoring system was initially established in four programme areas but it expanded to six additional regions highly populated by Roma and Egyptian communities. This expansion took place based on the request that EVLC programme received by the Technical Secretariat for Roma.

A draft Decision of the Council of Ministers was prepared in a participatory manner with the contribution of government employees that operate the monitoring system. This draft decision is expected to make the system function to its full capacity and position the government and the Technical Secretariat for Roma to report as needed on the progress of Roma Decade in the country.

#### **COORDINATE EFFORTS FOR THE INCLUSION OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIAN SOCIETY**

Institutional changes took place in the regions of Tirana, Fier, Durres and Elbasan. Regional Committees for Planning and Assessing Social Needs (RCPASNs) emerged due to the intentional work to solve problems and coordinate efforts for increased effectiveness and accountability. The RCPASNs were supported by multi-sectoral groups composed of technical specialists who came together as Regional Technical Committees. These structures soon proved to work, therefore this practice expanded in six other regions highly populated by Roma and Egyptian communities.

## **ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES- BECOME ACTORS IN THEIR OWN DEVELOPMENT**

***“Putting people at the center of development is much more than an intellectual exercise. It means making progress equitable and broad-based, enabling people to be active participants in change”.***

EVLC programme put Roma and Egyptian Communities at the center of their development and enabled Roma and Egyptian Communities to become active participants in bringing about the desired changes. Additionally, the EVLC programme believed in the power of dialogue for educating adults. Therefore, conversations were utilized to help people learn together. In a series of conversations, Roma and Egyptian community members exchanged ideas, identified and prioritized their needs and developed the community development plans. CBOs evolved over time. Groups of committed community members took the responsibility to influence various actors in order to start the implementation of community development plans. They incrementally strengthened relations between each-other, voiced the community needs and priorities and advocated on behalf of their community to get the support needed for bringing the development plans to life. They realized in this process that their opinions mattered and their thoughts were important.

The community members voiced their issues, negotiated with each-other, decided together about what was important to them as a community and presented their communities' concerns as they engaged with local government and other actors aiming to jointly address these issues. Determining their steps, taking responsibility in front of the community, mobilizing people to implement self-help initiatives, speaking to authorities

## The story of a CBO from Nishtulla, Durrës

Vera, Joana, Shpresa, Landa, Klara and Xhemal are community members who came together around the table regularly for the past three years in Nishtulla, Durrës to address issues of their community. Thanks to the approach followed by EVLC programme, the community members were convinced of the programme seriousness to truly help the most vulnerable communities. This enabled them to join the programme and contribute to the changes in their own communities. This is what they share:

“We came together in a number of meetings and made a long list of things we wanted to see changed in our community. But knowing the we had limited resources, we had to prioritize. It was not easy say: “This is not a priority”. Finally we reckoned to select what was good for our children, their health and their growth. We decided to prioritize and focus on the construction of a Community Center that would have a health center, a kindergarten and a room for young people to use for their activities. All of us together, the Local Government and the EVLC programme did our part. We negotiated with the local government and the Community Center project is finalized now. We have the keys and we are looking forward to inaugurate the center.

At first we were shying away from meetings and activities and look at us now. We have learned a lot in the past three years and we have become different people. We come together every time there is something that concerns our community. Believing in our own efforts is among the biggest changes we have experienced. We know we can solve issues together. We have come a long way.” Similar stories one hears among groups in Valias and Kamez in Tirana region, in Peqin, Cerrik and Elbasan region, in Levan, Mbrostar-Ura and Qender Commune in Fier region and in Fushekruje and Durrës city in Durrës region. The CBOs have become important actors in the development of their own communities influencing significant changes.

on communities’ behalf were experiences that transformed the community members from Roma and Egyptian Communities. Many of the programme participants experienced drastic changes in their lives. They said “from being hopeless and powerless we feel strong, able and capable to change things for ourselves and our communities”

The programme staff faced lack of trust and skepticism at first, and these were the biggest challenges they had to overcome. The EVLC programme developed close relations with UN Volunteers who were community members from Roma and Egyptian Communities. These volunteers worked hand in hand with programme staff and approached the community together. Sometimes they had to go door to door to introduce themselves and spend time in building relations with the community members. This helped to gradually demolish the barriers the community members had built to participate and they joined the programme teams in the various activities.

Semi, a young Egyptian girl worked in Tirana region. She has a nice way to talk to people and find the way to enter their hearts. “I have grown significantly in this work as a person and as a professional. This experience has been a university for me. Now I will go to school and study abroad. I am excited about it but I am looking forward to come back and help my own community. I know many boys and girls from my community who want to volunteer. They need inspiration and organizing and I can do that very well. This experience has been great learning and rewarding for me.”

### LESSONS LEARNED

The secret of success was in the programme’s approach to establish mixed teams and enable them to carry out their work in the community. Recruiting staff who built collaborative relations with the Roma and Egyptian volunteers was key to programme’s success. As the programme continued its implementation, the staff and volunteers grew in understanding, skills and abilities and became great facilitators of processes helping the community groups to carry out self-help initiatives and address issues of importance to the communities.

## IMPROVE THE BASIC LIVING CONDITIONS OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES

***“Where the asphalt road ends, you will find Roma communities. Improvement of infrastructure is absolutely needed, if we want to see improvement in basic services and in the quality of life in these communities.”-says Blendi Gremci, the Regional Director for Culture, Education and Social Services in Elbasan.***

While infrastructure and basic services still are to be improved, the EVLC programme aimed to create a culture of dialogue and negotiation between the local vulnerable Roma and Egyptian communities and the local government authorities. Roma and Egyptian CBOs were encouraged, supported and trained to advocate on behalf of their communities, present their plans and demand support from Local Government to improve their lives. Increasingly their voice was heard and their suggestions were considered by decision makers in Local Government. Sometimes it was hard for the CBOs to engage with local authorities due to the attitude and perceptions they had about Roma and Egyptian communities. Thus, the programme increased awareness of both, local government leaders and local community members on the anti-discrimination law involving in these efforts the inspector from the People's Advocate office and other specialists. While behaviours and attitudes of government officials remain to be observed in the future, it is important to point out that EVLC programme contributed to an increased awareness of Roma and Egyptian community members on their rights and they learned about ways to demand equal treatment.

*A great example of the cooperation between the local Community Based Organizations, the Municipality and EVLC program was in Peqin. The community, composed of 250 families in Xhami neighborhood, out of which 220 were*

*Roma and Egyptian was isolated. The bridge that linked them with the rest of the town was narrow and lacked the safety and security standards needed. The bridge passed over an irrigation canal which was used as a garbage dumpster becoming a danger for people's health. The Community Group from Xhami neighborhood in Peqin prioritized the rehabilitation of the road, the repair of the lightening system as well as the rehabilitation of the bridge as the most important change they wanted to see in their community. While they made a contribution as a community during the repair works that were taking place, the Municipality of Peqin endorsed the development needs prioritized by the community members, and covered 20 % of the project cost. The municipality took responsibility to maintain the bridge, the road and the lightening system. In addition they contributed in the construction of the Community Center which communities also demanded as they identified their priorities.*

Such collaboration was promoted in other regions. This component of the programme helped local communities improve their living conditions. In addition CBO members gained some self-confidence, trust and learned about the ways to negotiate and influence the decision makers to benefit the most vulnerable.

Challenges were faced in the life of the programme. The co-financing of the projects from Local Government was not smooth despite the agreements signed between the Local Government and EVLC programme. This was due to inherited budget deficits of some of the municipalities. Sometimes land was needed and the local government struggled to find the plots of land.

The challenges presented delays sometimes in completion of the infrastructure projects. However, creative ways were found to fill in the gaps when the Local Government had budget limitations. The collaboration of the programme with the businesses helped sometimes to overcome the financial obstacles.

## KEY FACTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Overall the EVLC programme counts about 150 community mobilization and self-help activities that have helped the CBOs to bring changes in their own communities in alignment with the communities' vision for the future.

20

infrastructure projects identified as priorities were completed with co-financing from Local Governments and the EVLC programme. Where possible, Roma and Egyptian community members have been employed by the companies that carried out the construction works in these infrastructure projects.

over 50

Roma and Egyptian households and many other Albanian families living in Kamza have benefited from the rehabilitation of the health center and improvements of its surroundings. Municipality prepared the project design in close consultation with health authorities and they have co-financed the project with EVLC program.

500

In Levan commune (Fier Region) 500 families who lacked access of basic services and 223 families (majority Egyptian) in Cerrik (Elbasan region) have a social center that functions as a health clinic, community meeting space and kindergarten.

70

In Peqin (Elbasan region), 70 Roma and 150 Egyptian families have benefited from the reconstruction of a community bridge, repair of drainage system and rehabilitation of the main town square.

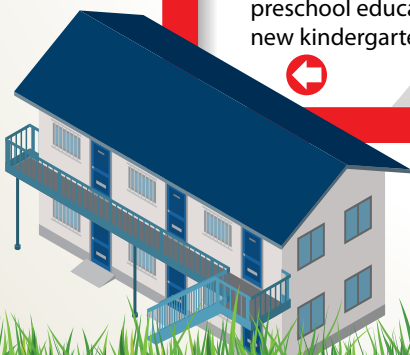
150

200

In Rapishte about 200 Roma and Egyptian families benefited from the new Community Center and their children started to access preschool education in a new kindergarten.

100

The reconstructed "Shtepia e ngjyrave" center in Tirana offered better services to about 100 children a day.





## STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITIES OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN NGOS

Roma and Egyptian NGOs are instrumental for advocating on behalf of vulnerable communities. To continue to do this work effectively, the Roma and Egyptian NGOs needed to strengthen their capacities and their cooperation. The EVLC programme contributed towards this objective.

The program used training as an opportunity to help these NGOs to connect with and learn from each-other. The program also connected these NGOs with Albanian NGOs that were willing to share with and learn from the Roma and Egyptian NGOs.

The EVLC programme carried out an in-depth assessment of the Roma and Egyptian NGOs, and collaborated with the National Center for Community Services to design a training program tailored to the needs of these NGOs. The training program included topics such as: NGO management, strategic planning, human resources management, fundraising, project cycle implementation, networking, advocacy and lobbying, community development.

The training involved 121 NGO members and leaders, 66 of whom were women. The training was interactive and enabled the participants to understand the topics easily in a friendly and conducive learning environment.

Once the NGOs completed their training in the classroom they were given the opportunity from EVLC programme to apply for getting their projects funded through a competitive process.

These projects served to help Roma and Egyptian NGOs to deepen their knowledge and skills and learn by doing. 12 Roma and Egyptian NGOs were selected to access funding for their projects in two rounds of applications.

These projects addressed issues such as:

### Key lessons learned to share

Rexhep Shaka, The head of the Egyptian NGO called “Jemi dhe Ne” (Count us as well), operating in Librazhd, shared how by working very closely with the EVLC programme coordinator, the NGO he lead overcame challenges and successfully completed the project.

“Our NGO was newly formed. We learned about the possibility to access funding through EVLC program three four months after we were registered. I contacted representatives of Egyptian NGOs in Tirana who helped us put the proposal together. We intended to assist 50 students from the poorest families in our community by providing tutoring after school and food packages for a period of five months. Few weeks later, we heard that our proposal was approved. Our project budget was 700,000 Albanian Lek. This was a small amount for other NGOs but it was not small for us.

Until we got this project we managed our funding through a cash box. Now we needed to operate differently. This created confusion among group members. The relations were also affected and so was the progress of the project. I decided to ask for help. The EVLC staff helped our group to establish rules and regulations for how to manage funds and how to keep track of expenses. We learned also about the importance of setting criteria for selecting people that would offer certain services in the project. We learned that transparency and integrity were two important features of maturing NGOs.

With help, we were able to close the project successfully. For the first time, we did something significant in our community. It was good to have the resources to help these children do better in school. The support we received was a key success factor for the project we implemented. The road was bumpy at start but reaching the destination gave us a great satisfaction”

improving children's learning outcomes, increasing access to school for Roma and Egyptian communities, educating mothers on sexual and reproductive health, raising awareness on risks of child trafficking, exploring possibilities to prepare youth for employment, enhancing communities' understanding and pride for Roma/Egyptian Culture, presenting community issues to local



## LESSONS LEARNED

The programme aimed to increase the collaboration between the local government and the CBOs from Roma and Egyptian Communities. It was observed that the transparency of the local government to share their problems with the CBOs was key to their long term relationship with the Roma and Egyptian Communities.

A change in practice observed during the life of the programme: In Fier and Elbasan regions there are examples of Roma CBOs participating in the meetings of Commune or Municipality Council to monitor the expenditure of Local Government funds and influence the decisions for future investment.

Involving in training one or two members from an NGO has limitations as the trainees may face difficulties to educate others in their organization. However, if a group of people from the same NGO are trained, there is a higher likelihood for the group to influence the organization and embrace and implement the new learnt practices.

Small grants in the EVLC programme were utilized to help Roma and Egyptian NGOs apply learning and adopt new practices, thus increasing their capacity to serve better to their communities.

However, a change of practice takes time to take place. Roma and Egyptian organizations expressed that a short term project helps to put in practice the learning received in classroom but it is not sufficient for these NGOs to fully embrace the new practices. Therefore they suggested that programmes like EVLC include more rounds of small grants. This will enable Roma and Egyptian NGOs to practice more and adopt changes in practice more naturally and sustainably.

Roma and Egyptian organizations also suggest that other programmes aiming to promote and support social inclusion build on the good work done by EVLC and continue to strengthen the linkages between the Roma and Egyptian NGOs and help them become integral part of the Albanian Civil society organizations. It is thanks to these linkages and practices of joint work that Roma and Egyptian NGOs will be able to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable communities influencing policy and social changes.

government and demanding better and non-discriminatory services etc.

National Center for Community Services and EVLC programme staff walked alongside these NGOs and mentored them on site and in distance during the implementation of the projects. This helped the NGOs engage in problem solving, apply their learning in practice and achieve their project objectives. The combination of the in-classroom with on the job learning proved to be effective and influenced lasting changes in the practices of Roma and Egyptian NGOs.

The EVLC programme created the space for Roma and Egyptian NGOs to work collaboratively and voice the concerns of the most vulnerable communities they represented.



## ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES MOBILIZED TO GET REGISTERED

The EVLC programme focused on civil registration of Roma and Egyptian people as a precondition, pivotal to accessing and enjoying their rights.

Depending on the situation, the registration process varied in complexity, time and cost. To resolve these issues, in many cases legal assistance was needed. EVLC programme

cooperated with Tirana Legal Aid Service (TLAS) to start the registration process of Roma and Egyptians in regions of Durrës, Fier, Elbasan and Tirana.

With more learning from practice and with advice from UNHCR, the programme established wider partnerships that included volunteers; Roma and Egyptian CBOs and NGOs, police, UN agencies and civil servants who were trained to help with the registration and confidently navigate through the system to accomplish the task regardless of its complexity.

Roma and Egyptian NGOs and their volunteers

had a wealth of knowledge on issues and challenges surrounding the vulnerable communities, therefore they were important community assets to more effectively provide support to people in need for registration and access to services.

## Table of Registration broken down per registration category

Types of registration	Number registered	
<b>Birth registration (individuals)</b>	<b>Completed</b>	<b>121</b>
	<b>In Process</b>	<b>70</b>
Transfer of residency (families)		10
Certificate of birth		48
Certificate of death		4
Child custody		10
Registration as unemployed		289
Divorce in court (couples)		27
Certification of marriage (couples)		32
Homeless applicants for social housing (families)		16
ID Cards (individuals)		266
Health Cards		632
Application for health insurance		32
Economic Aid		83
Property Cases/Heritage		2
Children Registered in Pre-School Education		2
<b>TOTAL OF RESOLVED CASES</b>		
<b>1525 registered by Roma NGOs</b>		
<b>119 registered by TLAS</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1644</b>

## KEY FACTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

TLAS addressed 119 cases and trained 5 Roma NGOs to provide direction to their own community members for getting registered. Following the training, Roma NGOs completed 1525 registrations in various categories. Overall TLAS and Roma and Egyptian NGOs addressed 1644 cases of registration in four regions. The following table provides a breakdown of types of registrations covered.

Joining forces to address civil registration, UNICEF mobilized its implementing partners and child protections units. It introduced technology to map geo-tagged locations inhabited by Roma communities. The mapping process led to development of profiles per community with specific data on number of persons who received social assistance, number of children in and out of school, distance to crèches or pre-school etc.

The mapping resulted in the identification of 108 geo-tagged locations that had 15,000 people and 121 children (mostly born out of the country) that needed to register. The findings highlighted the knowledge gaps of Civil Registration officers in using the new administrative acts and applying the law on registration of children. Therefore, 200 census officers were enrolled in a training that enabled them to do their work better.

## LESSONS LEARNED

This use of technology in registration process highlighted that current gaps in registration do not require policy changes but they rather need an engagement of local institutions to address cases. By making information publically available, the technology allowed institutions, community groups, CBOs and NGOs to use information for holding duty bearers to account for doing a better job in addressing cases.



## INFLUENCING CHANGES IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK MADE REGISTRATION AT BIRTH EASIER FOR MANY

The EVLC programme supported a series of expert consultations amongst service providers to find practical solutions to the problematic issues of civil registration. They were assisted to understand and appropriately apply the Albanian legislation at the local level.

These consultations led to recommendations for changes in the relevant secondary legislation. The government approved the Decree No 508 dated 07/12/2011, that facilitated registration of newborn children in maternity homes using a new form of birth certificate. Along the same lines the government mandated the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and specifically the Consular Services of Albania to operationalize the Law No 8372, date 09/07/1998 “On the functions of Consular Services and Diplomatic Bodies of the Republic of Albania”. As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked on guidance for consular services during 2011, it also signed an agreement with TLAS, an NGO specialized to offer free legal assistance to those in need, to provide guidance to those parents who needed to register their children born abroad.

Lastly the government also issued a Decree No 7 dated 10/01/2012 which provided guidance to police forces and other civil registration officers on registration of children abandoned by their mothers.

These three changes in secondary legislation in 2011-2012 have significantly impacted the civil registration process; have facilitated the solution of many complex cases and prevented new child-births from going unregistered. The programme made a significant contribution to civil registration in the programme areas. However, the issues of registration are likely to continue due to social norms, cultural characteristics of Roma and

Egyptian communities, such as early marriage. Registration issues that derive from early marriages relate to divorce, child custody, child care etc. and in many cases require court decisions in order to be properly addressed. While the Roma and Egyptian volunteers, CBOs, NGOs may know the process to go through to resolve the issues, there are high costs involved which become an obstacle for registration.

### ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES A CONCERTED EFFORT OF A NUMBER OF AGENCIES

UNFPA worked with community based health mediators and other community volunteers training them to serve their communities on accessing health services, receiving health cards and sharing health information as appropriate with others in the community.

Community health mediators were initially trained to understand the system for accessing health services and later they assisted Roma and Egyptian most vulnerable people to receive health cards which allowed community members to access free health services.

### LESSONS LEARNED

In order to address issues of registration, it is imperative to consider designing interventions that address the cultural and social norms especially focusing on early marriage. The experience suggests the need to explore and make use of the current legal framework for provision of free legal services to people who cannot afford it. Working to put the legal framework to practice will help address the issues of civil registration in the long run. This will ensure that Roma and Egyptian people continue to access the services and enjoy their rights as citizens of the country.

UNFPA in cooperation with its implementing partners and health workers in Directories of Primary Health Care in Fier, Durrës, Tirana and Elbasan designed and conducted training for mothers and young people on child care, healthy lifestyles, hygiene, birth control, sexually transmitted infections, gender based violence, drugs etc. Such training sessions were done with creative, practical, simple and culturally appropriate methods which were soon embraced by other health workers in various regions.

*“In collaboration with UNFPA, and their implementing partner we conducted trainings for mothers from Roma and Egyptian communities. We also brought to the training other health professionals to understand the methodology and replicate such training in other settings. We*

## Health mediators find service a life changing experience

**Nexhi dhe Diella, two women in their mid-fifties served as volunteers and health mediators for their community in Elbasan.**

I never went to any meetings in the community-Nexhi says. My husband did not approve. He was jealous and I knew that he would hit me if he learned about my participation. One day, I was invited to participate in training for health and health benefits. I went because I have a son who needs help. I learned some things in this meeting which if I knew earlier would have saved me a lot of trouble for my son. I knew others needed help and I decided to become a health mediator. Now I help people to get their health cards and they get the health services for free. Believe it or not, when I started to have the respect of people and when they kept coming at home to ask for help, my husband started to see me differently. He was no longer grumpy; He started asking questions to learn about my work. Things have changed so much for me and my family since I started. I felt as if my brain expanded suddenly and I could learn more things. When you stay at home you feel isolated. You think your thoughts are of no importance. I have now understood that I can do a lot of things. I have no fears like I used to have in the past and I can face every issue and person. I have become strong. Helping others makes my life meaningful and I feel accomplished.

*wanted to cover the needs of as many mothers as possible and we did it.”*

**Evelina, The Department of Primary Health Care, Durrës**

It is estimated that 600 Roma and Egyptian community members (mostly young people and mothers) were reached by interventions related to health such as information sharing sessions, theatre shows and other awareness building activities.

## PREPARING A FERTILE GROUND FOR A BETTER INTEGRATION OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS

Focusing on integration of Roma and Egyptian children, UNICEF worked on a groundbreaking model in Saver, Lushnje District called: “School ready for children and children ready for school”. The project enables teachers, parents and children (Albanian, Roma and Egyptian) to prepare for enrollment of Roma and Egyptian children in schools. It is expected that the learning from this model will inform practices and policies in Pre-School Education. If successful, this model will be scaled up by the Ministry of Education and will be replicated in other regions of the country.

## PROTECTION LEADS TO COLLABORATION OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES WITH POLICE FORCES

The EVLC programme served as a catalyzer for the development of the relationships between the communities and the local police forces. Awareness sessions were conducted repeatedly in the life of the program aiming to help as many people as possible to understand the value of the collaboration with police, to learn about the channels and means to make use of the police forces to ensure protection of children, women and other people in the community whose rights were violated or were about to get violated. It is estimated that 800 people participated in such activities.



Issues of confidentiality, trust, treatment for victims or offenders were discussed at length during such activities. The conversations helped the police and the community members to better understand each other's perspective and agree on the practical ways of collaboration and interaction. Community mediators were found to be very helpful to steer this collaboration contributing thus, to ensuring the application of law and order in the Roma and Egyptian communities.

*"It is in our interest as state police to continue to strengthen the relations with the communities beyond the life of EVLC programme.*

*Collaboration makes our work easier. Police forces are trained on human rights; have performance standards and an ethical code that are closely monitored. There is also a reporting mechanism in place and structures that do the proper follow up to ensure the well-functioning of this mechanism. While these measures and systems in place contribute to increased performance of police forces, the community mediators and other community members in programme areas are aware of their rights and know to use the system in place to ensure that their rights as citizens are respected".*

***Blerina, Domestic Violence and Child Protection inspector in Tirana Regional Police Directorate***

## ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITY MEMBERS GAIN SKILLS AND INCREASE EMPLOYABILITY IN THE LABOR MARKET

Roma and Egyptian communities in Albania are often excluded from the job market and their income generating activities occur in the realm of the informal market. Mostly involved in collecting recycling materials such as cans,

### Learning together proves to be rewarding beyond expectations

**Agron and his wife run together “Agron Center” in Fier. A for profit center, “Agron Center” worked for years to train and assist people to re-enter the job market. The center collaborated with EVLC programme and trained over 50 people from Roma community living in the surrounding areas of Fier. Initially reserved in conversation, Agron shared how this experience affected the lives of all.**

At the beginning the young men and women from Roma and Egyptian communities were shy. They entered the training rooms with fear. I felt, they did not trust us. They did not believe that we genuinely wanted them to succeed in these courses. Gradually things changed but not only for them. Things changed for instructors and for students. Swiss Contact has helped us to train instructors to be effective as we prepare students for the market. This was the first time that we had Albanian, Roma and Egyptian students in the same room. We had spoken in the past about creating an enabling learning environment but now this environment needed something more. It needed to be “discrimination free”. I had my own fears on whether we were all ready for this change but after a while I realized that the results were incredible. People initially had difficulties to mingle but soon they started helping each-other in many fronts in addition to learning. They spoke about clothes, hair, shops, birthdays and weekend activities. I could not believe it at first. What happened was beyond my imagination. Certification-I thought-was the rewarding time for all. But this experience made me believe that the friendships and connections, the changes we went through, the fears and the laughter were the best reward for everyone involved.

plastic, iron, etc., as well as selling second hand clothes, these activities are far from ensuring them sustained employability and socially accepted jobs. Therefore the EVLC programme aimed to address the issue of employment of Roma and Egyptians as an important factor for social inclusion and contributed to make the employment services become minority friendly. A rapid labor market survey helped the program team to identify the professions that were most needed in the market and map out vocational training services provided in programme areas. Lack of knowledge and skills of Roma and Egyptians was identified as the main obstacles which if addressed would increase their employability possibilities.

The programme established relationships with the Regional Centers for Professional Education and other private entities that offered vocational training. In close collaboration with CBOs, Roma and Egyptian NGOs, other partner organizations working with the vulnerable communities, the EVLC programme identified the candidates for enrollment in courses of their preference, paid for their transportation when attendance required travel and upon the completion of the courses, provided the certified trainees with tools and materials to use as they prepared to enter the labor market.

The programme assisted the Roma and Egyptian certified trainees to register with the Regional Employment Offices, created links with the businesses to enroll Roma and Egyptians in internship programs, organized Job Fairs in collaboration with businesses and Chambers of Commerce in regions, and assisted groups of trainees to promote their own work through various celebrating events where they presented and shared their own products.

*As a result of these efforts 200 young Roma and Egyptians (respectively 50 per region) have completed the courses and received certificates as electrical repair, welder, tailor, hairdresser, cook, computer, and solar panel repair. 16 Roma and Egyptians were employed during 2012, either in public or private businesses or have*





opened their own business. 9 Roma and Egyptian students attending universities are placed as interns in various institutions that provide social and public services such as municipalities, employment offices, vocational training centers, line ministries etc. 8 Roma and Egyptians enrolled in a training offered by the World Bank funded YECD Project – “Small grants-to start a business”. After a competitive process at the end of the training, these 8 Roma and Egyptian participants were shortlisted to receive a support of 2500 USD upon submission of their business plans. Two of them succeeded and now they manage their own businesses.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Testimonies from community members engaged as volunteers or mediators in health, education, protection etc. underline one important message. The message is: “Even in the worst situations, the most vulnerable people have something to offer. Providing them with the possibility to do things for themselves and others in their communities is deeply empowering and transformational. Roma and Egyptian community members participating in EVLC programme have reinforced this learning during the life of the programme.

## **LEARNING TO GET A PROFESSION TURNED OUT TO BE LEARNING FOR LIFE**

*Panajot, 24 from Drize village in Fier shares his story:*

*I joined a course to become a welder. I was not sure on whether these courses were for real or they were another scam to trick Roma people. The course started and I realized it was not easy. I had to study and perform in order to receive the certificate. The theory required many hours of study. I had friends who struggled because they did not know how to write and read well. I did not have that challenge. My challenge was the shortage of money at home. I had to collect bottles after the course to keep my family. I have two kids and my wife works in the market selling second hand clothes. She did not make enough to cover for our needs. I was anxious and concerned.*

*Frequently my hands were trembling when I was using the equipment. Agron came to me one day and he held my hand. I was shocked and I wept because I never expected anyone, let alone an Albanian to help me, holding my hand. But he did hold my hand many times during the course until I learned how to keep the equipment in the right way. I learned during the course that cooperation comes through mutual efforts from Roma and Albanian people. Both parties need to overcome their perceptions. I surely had to overcome mine. Acceptance of the other is a two way street. It requires people to make a step forward and get to know the other person. Courage is needed from both sides. My relationship with Agron taught me this much.*

*Now, I have the skills, I have the certificate but it is not easy to find a job. I am registered with the employment office and I am waiting to hear from them. I encourage myself every day to not lose heart. So far, I have learned a lot and I need to trust that things will work just fine. Maybe with some collaboration, creativity and some funds, my friends and I can start a small business. I still do not know what to do but surely I am going to make use of my learning and will not give up. I have nothing to lose, but gain.*

Getting women into courses has been a double battle for the EVLC programme. Research and experience have shown that when women have income they have a higher likelihood to spend their money on children. Hence the programme prioritized women and helped them get skills and jobs when this was possible. However, it was hard to get them into the courses as they faced pressure to remain within the home. Women in vulnerable communities are expected to obey and be submissive. Domestic violence is present almost everywhere. Women married very young, are beaten by their husbands and other family members especially by the mother in law. The programme encouraged women to participate in vocational training and helped create a safe environment to avoid gossip and violence. For many the enrollment was a sacrifice.

*"I am a divorced woman, with a daughter. We both live with my parents and my two brothers in two rooms. I got married too young and my life soon went to pieces. I collect cans and plastic bottles to make my living. When I heard about the opportunity to attend this course I jumped and said: "I will go". My parents and my brothers were not very supportive. There are gossips in the community about women that go to Tirana very often. Despite of the tensions at home, I decided to take this opportunity and not let it go. I had to get on the bus every day to go to Tirana and be in the training room at 7.30 am. Before doing so, I had to make things ready for my daughter and prepare her for school. The course finished at 4p.m every day. I did not have money to buy any food or water during course hours. Luckily the bus ticket was paid by the program. Regardless of all these difficulties I did not give up. Upon coming back home I went the garbage collection point to collect cans and plastic bottles so that I could pay for myself and my child. I struggled for 6 months doing this every day but now I have the skills, I have a certificate and I am good at this job. This is why I am proud of myself and I so much want to open the shop. I know one day I will.*

*A woman from Valias Community*

The discussion with Roma and Egyptian groups participating in courses helped to draw some learning that may be of value to other organizations and programmes working with most vulnerable communities.

There is still a lot to be done to educate the wider society on their perceptions and attitudes towards the employment of Roma and Egyptian people. This is an area that needs attention and intervention in order to continue the journey towards social inclusion in Albania.

### **GOVERNMENT INCREASED ITS CAPACITY TO REPORT ON OBJECTIVES SET IN THE NATIONAL ACTION PLAN (NAP) FOR ROMA**

The EVLC programme contributed to the journey of Albania towards social inclusion of most vulnerable groups. As the programme is winding down, the journey towards social inclusion will continue. The Government of Albania will continue to steer that process. The EVLC programme helped strengthen the Government's efforts on social inclusion, as the Government undertook action in the frame of the National Action Plan for Roma Decade. Working alongside the government and contributing to institutional changes was an important sustainability measure for EVLC programme achievements.

The programme supported the Technical Secretariat for Roma to develop a web-based system called ROMALB. The aim was to collect data efficiently from the local government units close to the Roma communities where the data units were generated. The system included the development and utilization of standard operating procedures and instruments which ensure rigor, quality of data as well as the needed disaggregation.

The system enabled various government entities to generate customized reports as per set indicators and disseminate timely, relevant and accurate information to all interested parties.

The programme helped prepare the government

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

It is of value to budget for covering the opportunity costs of project participants especially for courses that are four to five months long. It is a struggle to introduce incentives of this kind as they may create dependency or encourage artificially the enrollment of most vulnerable people in vocational training courses. However, programme teams implementing similar interventions need to work closely with the most vulnerable to find viable solutions and meaningful incentives and reflect these solutions in budgets from the start of the programme. Alternatively, programmes need to explore possibilities to offer mobile courses close to people's locations and during the weekends. This may be a viable solution to achieve the objective and yet have reasonable budgets.

Some of the project participants faced difficulties and shame when they faced the language, reading and writing issues during courses. Working with the cohorts of students on rapid literacy boost programs prior to the startup of the vocational training will reduce embarrassment and shame and will increase students' retention and completion rate. This will make the work of the instructors easier too.

Agron Center in Fier reported to have simplified the course materials in order to have participants better understand the content. The state run centers may be assisted in the future to simplify their course materials too. This would help the Roma and Egyptians to overcome the barriers of lower education or issues with functional literacy.

Roma and Egyptian people are entrepreneurial in spirit. Given this trait, they can be encouraged to think about self-employment in addition to employment. This can be done by exploring possibilities to help them learn how to develop business plans, carry out basic finance and access credit. This will boost their confidence and provide with dignity for their families and children. The example of Roma who accessed credit and started their business indicates that they can learn how to develop businesses and they can be bankable regardless of the fact that they are poor.

staff to use the ROMALB system appropriately and with confidence. While the programme operated in four regions, the Technical Secretariat needed support in six other regions. Therefore the programme worked to establish the system in these six additional areas and train government staff to use it.

At this stage, ROMALB system operates in 10 regions which are highly populated by Roma and Egyptian communities while Training Institute of Public Administration (TIPA) developed and utilized training modules as they trained 77 staff from various institutions in these 10 regions of Albania.

### What is ROMALB?

ROMALB - is a web-based monitoring and reporting system for local and central authorities which were mandated to report the progress against indicators set in National Action Plan as per Roma Decade. The system is designed, tested and established in 10 regions of the country allowing authorized users to enter data and process these to produce customized reports helping the Technical Secretariat for Roma and other relevant government entities to see how things have changed (or not) over periods of time and how much progress is made towards the set indicators in the National Action Plan for Roma Decade.

*"We have started to use ROMALB system. The various local institutions enter their information which is reviewed by their line Ministries for validation and accuracy. Once verified, the Regional Council can have access to that information. In the regional council we have staff who can print customized reports based on the issues that need exploration. This information is powerful as it helps to see the services offered and the effect of such services on Roma and Egyptian over periods of time. This is encouraging as now we will be able to make evidence-based decisions and policies"*  
Entela Lila, Regional Council, Tirana

Albania, along with other 9 countries of Central and Eastern Europe working to implement Roma Decade is able to report on the progress made in various domains of change as per the National

Action Plan of the Roma Decade.

Reporting along other countries and embracing institutional changes indicate that Albania's Government strengthened its capacity to better use evidence in decision and policy making, benefiting the most vulnerable communities. Making steps forward in the journey towards the social integration of most vulnerable communities brings Albania closer to achieving its objectives regarding European Integration.

### REGULATE THE FUNCTIONALITY OF THE MONITORING SYSTEM

The EVLC programme facilitated a process whereby the users of the web-based monitoring system and the leaders of relevant institutions worked together to articulate the measures and guidelines needed to utilize the system and get reliable and valid reports. Series of consultations took place to which allowed the various stakeholders to deliberately think about what it takes to make the web-based monitoring and reporting system work properly. The Ministry of Labor Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, in consultation with EVLC programme, government representatives of relevant institutions that will collect and enter data into the system, the legal and IT specialists drafted a Decision of Council of Ministers (VKM). This decision helps to legitimize the use of the web-based system and the work that will be done for monitoring purposes and providing a set of regulations for the monitoring process and system to work properly.

The approval of this draft Decision of the Council of Ministers is still in process but it is clearly an important milestone for regulating the functionality of the monitoring process and the web-based system.

### COORDINATE EFFORTS FOR THE INCLUSION OF ROMA AND EGYPTIAN COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIAN SOCIETY

The programme contributed to the establishment of four Regional Committees



for Planning and Assessing Social Needs (RCPASNs) in Tirana, Fier, Elbasan and Durres regions. They emerged due to needs for harmonizing efforts and finding solutions to complex problems that needed a multi-sectoral collaboration to get resolved. The RCPASNs were supported by Technical Committees for Roma which were composed of representatives from institutions covering domains of change as per National Action Plan for Roma like Education, Employment, Social Protection, Housing and Infrastructure, Health, Social Inclusion and Equal Opportunity and Cultural Heritage. The Technical Committees gathered quarterly. Each institution reported about the progress made in their own area, the challenges faced and issues that they needed to resolve. They discussed issues and when possible they found solutions. For issues that needed budget or issues that required the involvement of the RCPASNs the Technical Committee prepared the documentation needed and RCPASNs made decisions. The model of work at regional level worked as Elbasan experience indicated. Therefore, this model was adopted by six other Regions in the country which are highly populated by Roma and Egyptian populations. This expansion allows the Technical Secretariat for Roma to have the regional bodies that helped to better harmonize efforts for implementing the National Action Plan for Roma. Due to such bodies in regions, the Technical Secretariat is better positioned to achieve the agreed objectives in the National Plan of Action for Roma. The experience thus far has indicated that linking the work done at the grassroots level with the work of the government at community, regional and national level are key to bringing the needed changes and increasing the likelihood for such changes to be long lasting. The UN Agencies are uniquely positioned for enabling bottom up and top down changes to take place in harmonized manner triggering social changes of great magnitude.

### **NEXT STEPS**

The EVLC Programme is winding down but the journey towards Social inclusion

### **Roma interns inspired by the work of Technical Committee**

In Elbasan, the Technical Committee and the Regional Committee for Planning and Assessing Social Needs (RCPASNs) work very well-says Blendi Gremci the Regional Director of Culture, Education and Social Services in Elbasan Region. We have clear parameters for collaboration, which we agreed on from the start. We meet quarterly and each of the members of the technical committee comes to the meeting with prepared information that they share with others issues that require multi-sectoral collaboration to be resolved. The information they share on their actions and achievements for the quarter are helpful to others to understand and learn from. In many cases we have been able to harmonize the actions and have come up with a great synergy. We have Roma interns that work in the directory I lead. They work, engage and learn by doing. Initially, they thought that committees were just groups of people, who came to share information. But later as they observed the meetings they realized that there is a lot of work that goes into resolving some issues. They saw how many hours of work and effort were needed for specific issues to get resolved. In many cases we asked Roma and Egyptian people to come and help because sometimes we do not know what is appropriate for them. Seeing these efforts, they have understood that the Technical Committee has an important role and takes issues seriously. They saw the technical committee discussing the issues from different angles and this inspired them. They respect the work done and they have expressed their commitment and desire to remain for a longer period with our entity. We are thrilled to have them as they increasingly have become a great asset to our team.

continues. This booklet is an effort to document some of the processes followed by the EVLC programmes, the achievement, challenged and lessons learned during the implementation of this programme. The aim is to document and give recognition to all these that contributed to achieve the desired results as well as to help guide other groups and organizations to make use of the learning in this programme to maximize their work in the future with the most vulnerable groups. The journey still continues as EVLC programme closes its operations but others will support such efforts where Roma and Egyptian communities will continue to be put at the center of their development efforts.

