Community coaching in Pata Rât

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What is community coaching and why is it important?

The benefits of contributing to the 'common good' or of developing 'social capital' are being lost in many of the communities we work with. Community coaching is a development tool to encourage the communities and their members to achieve their full potential and to accumulate social capital by working together. Community coaching takes a holistic view of society and work to balance the economic, the environmental, the spiritual, and the political forces that constitute it.

Members' involvement is extremely important when we work with marginalized communities. It makes useful and responsive intervention possible. Without people's active involvement there is a risk to provide only nonviable interventions people cannot identify with. Every community intervention which neglects the involvement of those who are directly affected by it produces further isolation instead of support or better understanding.

Consequently, our work is founded on a bottom up approach. This means that every intervention and every project targeting these communities is based on a deep understanding of the

communities' needs and visions. Mainstream public services often neglect the fact that the communities which are marginalized, isolated, and discriminated have more complex needs and different experiences from the majority population in the city. Thus, the aim of this bottom up approach is to open a space of reciprocity for the local institutions, the marginalized community, and the majority of the population. This space would make real cooperation for social inclusion possible. Therefore, community facilitation must parallel institutional facilitation in this process.

How did we work?

I. The preparatory phase

In the first phase, our aim was to develop trust, to evaluate needs, to understand people's visions of the future, and to assess their problems. We realized a complex evaluation of the four communities (Dallas, Cantonului, ex-Coastei, Garbage Dump). Our research combined quantitative data with field observation. This approach made visible the structure of the communities, the types of leadership manifested in the communities, their power dynamics, their most urgent needs, their existing resources, and their most pressing problems. We noticed that there are significant differences between communities which need to be taken into account in any future planning and intervention actions.

We started the creation and the consolidation of several forms of democratic participation for all members of the communities. We emphasized the need to disseminate our information broadly, to develop common thinking, and to enlarge our consultation basis. This way, we replaced a previous approach according to which only the leaders of the four communities were involved in consultations.

The results of this phase materialized in the drafting of the *Fact finding report regarding the needs and the resources of the Pata Rât communities* and the development of the *Urgent needs plan*, with a consistent contribution from every community.

II. The intervention phase

The second phase was based on the results of the evaluation realized in the preparatory phase. Its aim was to mobilize the members of the communities for different forms and levels of participation. We worked both on urgent needs and on envisioning the future, constantly using democratic representation in both processes.

With regard to the urgent needs of the communities, various actions were organized with the active participation of their members (installing the children's tent, drafting the regulations for the use of the common toilets, making the fence, setting electricity meters, cleaning the area, etc.).

Envisioning future entailed community consulting on various topics like education, employment, health, and housing, in order to understand their needs and to clarify the necessary conditions for getting the maximum benefit from the proposed development projects. The results of these consultations were utilized in the process of developing the package of integrated housing projects and the social capacity building project submitted for funding. Other ideas were collected in order to be integrated in project proposals. Mobilizing people and consulting them became entangled processes meant to support and to empower communities to develop their own internal organization and to represent their own interests.

Preparing democratic representation is a horizontal objective which refers to the ways in which the community develops a space for reciprocity by itself. We undertook the following actions for supporting democratic representation:

- Identifying the current leaders and the existing power relations within the communities;

- Supporting the communities to select their representatives for public meetings (e.g. launching meeting in Pata-Rât);

- Preparing the leaders to speak-up for the needs of their communities;

- Preparing a more democratic approach of leadership (improving the communication between leaders and community members, promoting internal consultation, and ensuring transparent communication);

- Supporting the development of the community NGO from Coastei, (e.g. training, consultation, mediation);

- Ensuring access to public meetings (e.g. urgent needs working group).

Methodological reflections

As we well know, every intervention involves changes and reorganizations which create hopes and tensions within the communities. For minimizing these tensions, we tried:

- To work on the needs of the communities' using a small steps method;

- To ensure access to information to everyone;

- To support a (self)-organization process, based on the specificities of the internal organization of every community;

- To ensure the coordination and the predictability of the interventions;

- To create and maintain a safe environment in the communities and to support cooperation between members.

Where are we?

The four communities are active entities, having their own history, organization, dynamic, and ways of functioning. Consequently, they are in different phases of the process. Some of them are in the stage of facilitating the creation of the initiative groups or of identifying the members who are motivated enough to have an active role in their relationships with the local institutions. Others need support for the structure of representation already created (NGO, organizational development) and others in the development of a safe space in the community.

Lessons learned

- Marginalization of the Roma needs to be recognized as a systemic problem, instead of localizing the problem at the level of the Roma communities.

- Facilitation and mobilization must target both the communities and the institutions involved in the process. Moreover, these isolated and self-regulated systems must become receptive to create relations of exchange and reciprocity;

- The complementarity of the bottom up and of the top down approaches must be translated in a double process: on one hand, connecting communities to the local institutions and to the authorities through a bottom up approach; on the other hand, producing inclusive mechanisms through a top down approach.

- The starting point of our interventions must be the avoidance of creating any structure which would deepen the fracture between the local institutions and the communities.

- Partnerships between the local institutions and the communities should start with those who are the most motivated and prepared for the mutually agreed upon changes.

- In the first phase, the emphasis must be shed on common values and similarities from a culturally sensitive perspective. The particularities of the communities and of their members must be addressed in later phases of the project.

- Community facilitation does not always mean mobilization. Stabilization, safety, and empowerment could lead to a better planning of the future which would involve the community members more and more.

- The creation of safe spaces for the cooperation between local institutions and communities where people would not feel judged or traumatized is absolutely necessary.