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Thara – Improving labor market access for Roma

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Carla Weinzierl*

**Case Study N°12
July 2015**

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Table of contents

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 1 | The initiative and its organizers | 4 |
| 2 | Basic information on the (local) context and the emerging problems | 4 |
| 3 | Genesis of the initiative..... | 8 |
| 4 | The activities and organization | 9 |
| 5 | The socially innovative dimension of the initiative..... | 12 |
| 5.1 | Addressing social needs | 12 |
| 5.2 | Transforming social relationships | 12 |
| 5.3 | Empowerment..... | 13 |
| 6 | Institutional mapping and governance relations | 13 |
| 7 | Governance challenges | 17 |
| 7.1 | Mainstreaming social innovation | 17 |
| 7.2 | Governing welfare mix – avoiding fragmentation | 17 |
| 7.3 | Governing welfare mix – developing a participatory governance style..... | 17 |
| 7.4 | Equality and diversity | 18 |
| 7.5 | Uneven access | 19 |
| 7.6 | Avoiding responsibility | 19 |
| 7.7 | Managing intra-organizational tensions | 20 |
| 7.8 | Enabling legal framework..... | 20 |
| | References..... | 22 |

1 The initiative and its organizers

Thara, meaning tomorrow or future in Romanes, is a project that aims at improving the access to the Austrian labor market and the relevant Austrian institutions for Roma and Romnja, and Sinti and Sintize. Although organized as a project and financed on an annual basis, Thara has become institutionalized as a cornerstone in the Austrian Roma policy. Together with another project in the province of Burgenland, it is the only Austrian labor market initiative for this ethnic group (Volkshilfe Österreich 2013). The project tries to compensate a long history of discrimination and stigmatization by means of occupational advice for the Roma as well as sensitization workshops and information events for members of the mainstream society. Thara, located in the city of Vienna, consists of a number of labor market projects that were funded by the EU community initiative EQUAL from 2005 to 2007 and have received annual project support from the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (short: Ministry of Labor) ever since. From the very beginning, issues of labor market integration and ethnic identity have been tackled together. *Volkshilfe*, the project leader, is a non-partisan non-profit organization. Currently, four women are employed for Thara; two belong to the Roma community. One of them is working as project leader, one as project coordinator and two as education and occupation consultants (<http://www.volkshilfe.at/thara>).

2 Basic information on the (local) context and the emerging problems

Roma and Sinti are a rather small and heterogeneous group of the Austrian population. They are divided in an autochthonous group and a larger allochthonous group which has only recently migrated to Austria or are descendents of recent immigrants (about 45.000-60.000 persons)¹. The autochthonous Lovara, Sinti and Roma are an ethnic group of about 10.000 persons who have been living in Austria for generations. Less than 10 per cent survived the genocide during the Nazi regime² and most of these so-called 'Burgenland Roma' live in the province of Burgenland. They were even given official status as an ethnic minority group in Austrian minority politics in 1993³ (Fink 2011, 4-5). Apart from constitutionally codified minority policies, more systematic Roma policies have only been implemented due to incentives from the policy frameworks of the EU.

¹ Other institutions estimate that about 100.000 Roma and Sinti live in Vienna, 60.000 of which would have their roots in the successor states of the former Republic of Yugoslavia (Volkshilfe 2013a). Relatively appropriate estimates of the Roma population are only available for schools in which a Roma school mediator, a service by Romano Centro, is in place.

² The genocide was the culmination of centuries of discrimination (see also Baumgartner/Freund 2007a). In 1995, four Burgenland-Roma were assassinated in Oberwart by a right-wing extremist. The public indignation contributed to awareness raising about the social and cultural situation of Roma in Austria.

³ This is the consequence of a post-war-treaty form 1955 with France, UK, USA and USSR to protect ethnic minorities in border regions to Hungary and Slovenia. It took until 1976 to become effective by a law on ethnic minorities, which recognized Croats, Hungarians and Slovenians. These minority groups are entitled to financial support for activities that aim at preserving their culture as well as forming an advisory council to have their interests represented in politics. Already Article 8 (2) of the Constitutional Law from 1930 mentions the duty of the Republic to acknowledge its linguistic and cultural diversity that manifests in indigenous ethnic communities; these communities must be respected, supported, preserved and safeguarded (Austrian Federal Chancellery 2011, 7). The law was reformed in 1993 to include Roma as ethnic minority.

The second group of allochthonous persons is very diverse. Part of this group has immigrated into Austria during the ‘guest workers regime’ in the 1960s and 1970s. They are hardly seen as Roma in public as well as political debates. They often have Austrian citizenship or at least permanent residence status, which gives them basic civic and social citizenship rights. No statistical data is available on this sub-group.

Many of those who do not come from within the EU (i.e. from Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Macedonia) are either asylum seekers or lack any official status. They are in a very weak legal situation. Another small sub-group, travelling Sinti and Roma from Western Europe mainly comes during the summer months. Finally, much public attention is given to a type of poverty migration⁴: Short-term commuters from South-Eastern European countries come to Austria begging in the streets. They are the stereotypical “Roma” and suffer severe prejudices, legal discrimination and discriminatory treatment by the police. Time and again, there are negative press reports and heated public debates.

In Austria, ethnic group membership is not collected statistically due to the political abuse of data during the Nazi regime, which facilitated the genocide. Furthermore, data on everyday language do not seem to be reliable (Austrian Federal Chancellery 2011, 6). Burgenland Roma are the only group for which empirical analyses on living conditions are available, even if often outdated:

“Overall, it appears that substantial variation in living conditions is present between as well as within different groups of the Roma population. However, common features are a rather low educational attainment and – in case of dependent employment – a rather low occupational status. Within self-employment, which for a long time played a major role for most groups of Roma, traditional market segments are dwindling. Heritage of low educational attainment is rather high (irrespective of gradual improvements made during the last two decades), resulting in above average labor market problems also for young people of Roma origin. The financial situation of many Roma may not be explicitly precarious (with the exception of asylum seekers and of people coming to Austria for short-term begging) in the sense of extreme poverty, but many of them apparently have to live from (sic!) low or very low income (Fink 2011, 4-5)⁵⁶.

Apart from education and employment issues, specific social problems of specific segments of the population are no major concern of Austrian welfare institutions. The public debate on social inclusion of all minorities groups is marginal. Nonetheless, 54 per cent of Austrians believe that Roma and Sinti are particularly disadvantaged in Austria, 43 per cent reject this opinion. Moreover, almost 60 per cent of Austrians would also support special welfare state services for Roma (e.g. social advice, education support, market projects) while 38 per cent believe that this is not required (Volkshilfe 2014). Studies by the European

⁴ With the exception of the province of Burgenland, all Austrian states (*Bundesländer*) have introduced some prohibitions of begging; however, according to a judgment by the Austrian Constitutional Court from 2012, prohibitions are unconstitutional if there are no exceptions whatsoever (ETC Graz 2012).

⁵ Autochthonous Roma seem to have fewer difficulties in the education system than many children of recent immigrants, although this also depends on the country of origin. Some socialist countries such as Bulgaria seem to have been successful in providing sound education to all parts of the population.

⁶ This is also confirmed by one Thara employee who said that at one point she realized that almost all problems their clients have to deal with derive from poverty.

Commission show that Austria is the EU member state where not only knowledge about anti-discrimination laws is the lowest but where the share of the population who would feel comfortable living next to persons who belong to an ethnic minority is also the lowest among all member states (Gneisz 2010, 62-65).

With respect to labor market participation, available data are rather vague. According to *Volkshilfe* (2013a), 18 per cent of Roma are employed as contract workers, 41 per cent work on a part-time basis and a significantly higher share than in the mainstream society are unemployed or work in jobs in which only low qualifications are required. Many Roma deny their ethnic identity in order to avoid discrimination, which seems to be rational. 20 per cent of workers with an ethnic minority background report some kind of disadvantage with respect to wages, worker participation, and training on the job or tasks to be performed. Poll data from 2011 by Riesenfelder et al. (2011) show that 90 per cent of Roma and Romnja work in the service sector. This contrasts with other ethnic minorities who are much more likely to work in construction industry or manufacturing. Every fifth Roma woman holds more than one job, 77 per cent work as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, 9 per cent work as leased laborers, 60 per cent work on weekends and 61 per cent overtime, 14 per cent are only marginally employed (*“geringfügig beschäftigt”* with monthly incomes of less than 400 Euros). All these numbers are (partly significantly) higher than for immigrant groups, which do not belong to an ethnic minority. Freelance contracts (*“freie Dienstverträge”*) and temporary contracts also are more frequent than among other groups of immigrants. All available studies confirm the significantly lower level of formal education as well as marriage and childbearing at relatively young ages, the latter forming an additional barrier to labor market access of women. The Public Employment Service (*“AMS – Arbeitsmarktservice”*) offers important qualification measures, supports employment and gives financial support. However, language barriers seem to exclude part of the minorities from welfare services, despite the relatively high rate of unemployment (13 per cent) when compared with the Austrian average (about 5 per cent) (see ETC Graz 2012 for all numbers, mostly based on Riesenfelder et al. 2011).

The ‘International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination’ includes the requirement of objectivity and proportionality. Article 14 of ECHR states that discrimination on the grounds of race, color, language, national or social origin etc. is forbidden. This article has become enshrined in the Austrian Constitution (ibid., 8). These legal dispositives are the basis of anti-discriminatory policies in Austria. The Federal Chancellery has committed itself to involving an advisory council as well as civil society organizations in its implementation of the Roma inclusion strategy (ibid., 22). Furthermore, it has become the national contact point for the ‘Austrian Roma Strategy’;

“National Monitoring in Austria is performed by a dialogue platform that includes representatives of the Federation and the states, civil society (Roma) associations and experts from the fields of science and research” (Bundeskanzleramt 2013, own translation).

In addition, Roma have been employed by city administrations (such as in Oberwart, the city where four Roma were killed in 1995, and one person in the Department for Integration and Diversity in Vienna) or been included in municipal advisory boards for migration (as has been set up by the city of Linz in 2009) (ETC Graz 2012).

Since 2011, EU member states have been obligated to prepare national Roma inclusion strategies within the broader framework of national social inclusion policies. This has been interpreted by the Austrian Federal Chancellery (2011, 5) as the

“objective (primarily in the four key areas identified by the European Commission: education, employment, housing and healthcare) of creating conditions for all disadvantaged groups which enable their sustainable integration into mainstream society with the help of an institutional framework which supports equal opportunities for all. However, Austria is also aware that recognition of and respect for ethnic communities is also a key factor in the preservation of those communities, and that this respect must be communicated through policies and the media.”

In 2010, less than € 400.000 were spent for Roma on the basis of the constitutional obligations from the ethnic minority law. From this amount, 30 per cent was spent on personnel, 18 per cent on printed matter, 10 per cent on rents and operating costs, 9 per cent on children and youth care, 5 per cent on cultural events and another 5 per cent on conferences and trainings (Bundeskanzleramt 2011, 14, own calculation).

Table 1: Ethnic communities funding for Roma ethnic community associations in 2009

| Recipients of Roma ethnic community funding | Funding in EUR |
|--|----------------|
| ROMANO CENTRO – Roma association (Vienna) | 157 600 |
| Verein Roma-Service [Roma-Service Association] (Burgenland) | 112 000 |
| ROMA (Association for Roma advancement) (Burgenland) | 44 520 |
| Kulturverein österreichischer Roma [Austrian Roma cultural association] - Documentation and information centre (Vienna) | 43 000 |
| Ketani – Association for Sinti and Roma (Upper Austria) | 23 500 |
| Diocese of Eisenstadt – Ethnic communities liaison unit (Burgenland) | 900 |
| Total for all associations | 385 020 |

Source: Austrian Federal Chancellery 2011, 8 (own modifications)

In order to lobby for an improvement of the social situation of Roma and Sinti, several associations have been established in the two decades after the assassination of four Roma in Oberwart/Burgenland, mostly from within the community (ibid.)⁷. The most important initiative is the Romano Centro in Vienna, which offers social counseling, school mediation and teaching assistance itself.

When compared with many South-Eastern European countries it is hard to understand why it took such a long time in Austria until the situation of the Roma was set on the political agenda. Nowadays, the Roma strategy provides an adequate political backing for Thara, although its concrete content is dependent on the political conjuncture, actors and the governing parties. Recently the Roma Strategy has received a prominent place in the National Action Plan against discrimination. In this regard, Thara certainly fills a gap

⁷ The first Roma organization called ‘Verein Roma Oberwart’ – the name of a town in Burgenland where many Burgenland Roma live – was established in 1989 in Oberwart; they offer mainly teaching aid for school children and services for unemployment members of the community (Baumgartner/Freund 2007b, 15).

in the field of employment services, as public bodies have difficulties with these kinds of targeted measures, due to lack of experience as well as low diversity in personnel.

3 Genesis of the initiative

The origin of the project dates back to the turn of the century when a EU Anti-Discrimination Directive was launched and issues of discrimination were included in the activities of the EQUAL program. In 2000, a civil servant in the federal Ministry of Labor had to interpret the ESF guidelines for the national context. He used the lack of interest in this policy field and proposed an open approach to supporting marginalized groups and improving their access to the Austrian labor market. In 2002, a network was constituted to implement this approach in an innovative project for Roma living in Austria. On the one hand, *Volkshilfe* was chosen because of its administrative experience and its nexus to labor market policies. On the other hand, Roma associations such as Romanodrom contributed the community perspective and the contacts to different Roma groups to the network. The original idea for Thara was born out of deliberations by key actors from Roma associations, who then had several contacts with key representatives from the ministry and the managing director of *Volkshilfe*. The first project proposal seems to have been drafted in a rather pragmatic way to integrate diverse interests.

The EQUAL project 'Thara' finally received funding of 2 million Euros between 2005 and 2007⁸. The project deviated in two ways from the mainstream approach in Austrian labor market policies. First, it insisted that there is a difference to be made between ethnic groups. Second, it applied a broader and more open approach to activation, including a focus not only on employment, but as well on education and cultural work. This was considered because many Roma and Romnja have never applied for support from the Public Employment Service due to the history of discrimination by state institutions and language barriers. Moreover, Thara was one of the first initiatives that reached beyond the group of autochthonous Roma and recognized the increasing diversity within the Roma community living in Austria. As the ethnic membership to the Roma community beyond the autochthonous population is neither clear nor officially declared, Thara aimed at providing a service for everybody – even beyond a narrow definition of the target group. None of the sub-groups of Roma immigrants have an interest in defining who belongs to the Roma community and who does not.

Former Thara employees as well as involved stakeholders affirmed that the first project was particularly successful in building up strong Romani women who became important voices for Roma issues in the social sector and in the media. Given secular discrimination and ongoing neglect by policy makers, these successes have compensated the lack of clear results in terms of lasting education and labor market effects. When the EQUAL project was completed, however, it was unclear how to create a sustainable structure beyond EU-funding. 'Thara house', a facility in Vienna's fifth district that was established during EQUAL

⁸ Another labour market project for Roma that received funding under EQUAL was the project Mri Buti in Oberwart in the province of Burgenland that started already in 2003; drawing in national, provincial and local funding, this project could be continued in a cooperation between Caritas and some local actors from 2005 to 2008 (see ETC Graz 2012, Gneisz 2010, 68). Apart from Thara and Mri Buti – which was continued at least for some years –, however, most EQUAL projects did not become institutionalized. In the city of Oberwart, though, there is still a permanent cooperation between the Roma information centre and the Public Labour Market Service (AMS) that aims at providing labour market services to the community (which are often not accepted if provided directly by AMS).

funding as a contact point and office for providing services for Roma youth, was still in place but was struggling to survive when the EU project finished.

At the beginning, a daughter project seemed implausible. The key actors of the Austrian welfare regime tend to privilege the “insider” (esp. the Austrian citizen) and have difficulties to deal with the increasing diversity of the work force. The Public Employment Service follows a mainstream approach of rather standardized support and does not feel obliged to support special target groups with specific measures. Neither did the social partners, specifically the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and the Austrian Chamber of Labor, who are involved in all ESF projects, lobby for a continuation of the project. ‘Thara house’ did not approach the Ministry of Labor for assistance to institutionalize the project. The responsible civil servants learned from the media that ‘Thara house’ was in a difficult financial situation. Given the danger of ending the first attempts at supporting Roma in a holistic way, the ministry – in a joint effort of the bureaucracy and politics – decided to provide national funding to make sure that the rich experiences would not get lost.

4 The activities and organization

From 2007 onwards, Thara has been financed on an annual basis by national funds. Due to the accumulated experience *Volkshilfe* remained the project manager. There was no public tender. Although this time, on a much smaller scale and as a project with slightly different foci and clearly defined target groups – reaching from Roma Youth and entrepreneurs to Roma women. In the first years, an additional problem for clients and employees were the uncertainty and breaks between the annual projects. Furthermore, Thara was also moving frequently, setting up shop in at least five different locations. Over the years, different annual projects with proper names and specific foci have been implemented by the ‘Thara House’. In the next ESF period, the share reserved for measures targeted on Roma and Romnja will be significantly increased as an effect of the Roma strategy. It will thus also become available for initiatives in other Austrian provinces. And Thara will again receive ESF support.

The aim of the first EQUAL project ‘Thara house’ (2007-2009) was to improve life perspectives for young Roma and Sinti, aged mainly between 14 and 25 and living in Vienna. Financed by institutions of labor market policies, the focus was on the access to the labor market. However, the education and activation program consisted of a broad variety of elements, reaching from personal tutoring on career opportunities, computer and media workshops, social counseling, career and business start-up counseling and business behavior trainings to sound projects (hip hop, beat boxing,...). Even workshops on issues such as theatre, music, dancing, Roma history and language courses in Romanes should contribute to the dignity of the ethnic community and the individual and collective self-esteem, thereby also improving the target group’s orientation on the labor market. Furthermore, specific publications were produced: a small dictionary of German-Romanes with frequent expressions in administrative language, brochures on occupations and intercultural project work, and a guideline for youth work with Roma and Sinti in the fields of education, labor market and leisure (see Gaspar 2009, 43-45). In the guideline itself, it was clarified that this should not foster the prejudice that there is anything like a typical Rom or Romni (see also Liegl/ Papai 2006).

The second project ‘Thara.Amarotrajó’ (in English “our life”) received national funding of 210.000 Euros from 2007 to 2008. Four full-time and two part-time employees (one from the community of the target

group) were hired. Agreed targets with the financier were that at least 80 participants consult the service and 10 participants find an apprenticeship. A new location in Vienna's 20th district was rented. During the opening hours (two hours per work day on average) clients could not only consult the specialized project staff but also use PC workstations with telephone and Internet access. According to the project team, service provision for Romnja and Roma follows a different logic when compared with other target groups, as different communication and publication channels are required. Clients not only need to identify with the project, which most easily works via people they already know and by employing a team that at least partly belongs to the community. In addition, oral forms of communication – and thus availability via mobile phone – seem to be much more central than in other labor market projects, where communication happens by e-mail or other online forms of communication. Therefore, Thara has become a center for Roma issues in a more general sense. Due to the close cooperation with the publicly financed debt advice services, the Public Employment Service and other professionals for migration issues, clients could be easily referred to the competent expert.

In an application process ten Roma youth between 14 and 25 years of age were selected for the pilot project 'Nevodrom' (in English "new way") to improve access to the labor market. A 20-weeks workshop was organized, in which application support, motivation trainings, trial days and internships in companies as well as reflections on participant's own cultural identity were provided. Workshop participants could draw on financial support of 360 Euros per month provided by the Public Employment Service. By organizing these trial days and internships, companies should get the chance to meet potential future apprentices and – if they found adequate candidates – offer them subsidized apprenticeships. The project team applied different strategies for winning over business partners. First, they tried to make explicit that they are looking for opportunities for young Roma. Later, they mostly spoke about minorities. They also tried to approach potential employers who dedicated themselves to Corporate Social Responsibility in the first place. However, open and hidden prejudices are still widespread and results were meagre. Out of seven participants who started an internship, two were eventually accepted for a regular apprenticeship. Networking became an increasingly important aspect of professional work. At a later stage, it has even been integrated in the project's self-understanding and work description.

However, much interest on behalf of journalists, researchers and employees of other service organizations was raised. PR-activities were intensified by means of a project flyer, articles in several local periodicals, reports in community formats of local TV stations and the radio of the public broadcasting company as well cross-linking with relevant webpages of partner organizations. The final event with the title 'Divano-Treffen' (Divano meeting) was communicated among all Roma initiatives and members from the community, most participants were from Serbia (Gneisz 2010, Schimanek et al. 2009, 4-5).

The third project 'Thara Romnja/Roma in transition', running from 2008 to 2009, received funding of 200.000 Euros for nine months. In the field of Amaro trajo (see above), individual occupational, educational and social counseling by appointment was offered by an intercultural team with competences in counseling, coaching and training, diversity- and change-management, supervision and cultural management in Romanes, German, English, Serbian and Macedonian – with translations into other required (mostly Eastern European) languages being organized on demand. 'Nevodrom' also aimed at providing young Roma with a better orientation on the labor market by organizing internships. Trainings were again financially

supported by the Public Employment Service. The more general aim of 'Nevodrom' was, however, to reduce asymmetries between Roma and non-Roma by innovative forms of intercultural labor market and diversity counseling. On the one hand, the own cultural identity should be understood as a resource, participants should regard themselves as experts of their culture and for diversity in an increasingly heterogeneous society. On the other hand, Roma culture should be perceived as an integral element of Austrian society. Besides the activities in the fields of Amaro trajo and Nevodrom, the hub for socio-cultural matters of all 13 to 65 year-old Romnja and Roma should make sure that trust within the Roma community is built up by long-term commitment (Volkshilfe 2009).

'Thara Beratung und Dialog' (Thara counseling and dialogue) was funded from September 2009 until August 2010. It included again the Amaro trajo and Nevodrom modules, PR and the hub, but also international networking with projects in Serbia, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The office space was moved again - this time to Vienna's 16th district - and a new multicultural team was built, including persons from Austria, Serbia, Bosnia and Greece and speaking several languages. A special focus was on young mothers and possibilities of childcare. These women should perceive that employment is a right of women. The international conference 'Romani Butji' - success stories and perspectives of Roma and Sinti on the European labor market - received much publicity. From the perspective of the project team, however, the broader project context was more difficult at that time due to the consequences of the economic and financial crisis that reduced confidence among the target group to find a job (Strießnig et al. 2010, 3-4). 'Thara Romani Butji', running from 2011-2012, consisted of four modules: The first was concerned with sensitization by organizing workshops for multipliers and developing a curriculum. The second dealt with empowerment by individual consulting and organizing a workshop for entrepreneurs. The third focused on aspects of community work in terms of providing direct information for the target group, participating in events and mediating between different actors in the field. The last module was about public relations, in the course of which an image brochure and a brochure on Roma entrepreneurs were elaborated. Furthermore, networks and media contacts were strengthened (Botsi et al. 2012).

'Thara Novi Vidici' ran from 2012 to 2013. It focused on community work, individual counseling (occupational, career and social counseling), workshops for multipliers and entrepreneurs as well as public relations. Furthermore, political infotainment and consulting events were organized (Anstiss et al. 2013). 'Thara Roma Biznis' (from 2013 to 2014), besides continuing with the above described activities, focused on the promotion of Roma businesses. It therefore organized a 'Thara Biznis club' with workshops for entrepreneurs (programs of the Public Employment Service, microcredits, public procurement, entrepreneur meetings) and awarded a 'Thara Biznis Prize' for successful Roma entrepreneurs in cooperation with the Ministry of Labor (as the Ministry for Economic Affairs who is responsible for business affairs refused to participate). In addition, an online platform and a Facebook page were established (Anstiss et al. 2014). Today 'Thara e Romengo than' has a special focus on workshops for young mothers who want to (re-)enter the labor market and for girls in the orientation stage for starting a job. It also offers counseling services, sensitization workshops for multipliers, runs the website and a Facebook site and is active in community work. For some time, the location has finally moved to the facilities of Romano Centro, the largest Roma association in Vienna.

5 The socially innovative dimension of the initiative

5.1 Addressing social needs

The innovations introduced by Thara are only new in the specific Austrian context, as they refer to different types of positive discrimination of marginal socio-ethnic populations. These innovations emerged due to new opportunities offered by EU-policies on anti-discrimination, proactive action by key persons working in the labor market section of the Austrian government, competent civil society organizations and the increasing pressure that was being exerted by a growing number of Roma associations.

Formally, the main social need that Thara addresses is the access to the labor market for Roma. Right from the beginning, there was general agreement that this is not a single-issue problem, but rooted in multiple forms of discrimination and uneven access to mainstream institutions in general. Roma suffer from discrimination in job selection, but also from lower levels of qualifications and formal skills. Improve access to the labor market often requires prerequisites with respect to other social domains, like education, health, self-esteem or networks. To identify relevant needs, participation of individuals and organizations of the target group have been used. As a result of these consultations, the long-term focus of the key policy makers has been to increase the access to the labor market by means of multiple strategies and policies.

5.2 Transforming social relationships

Community work has been crucial in the project's day-to-day business. Networking and close contacts with the community enabled to recognize diverse needs and to take elaborate strategies to deal with them. Awareness has also been raised by the change of the general discussion that is also formed by the initiatives of the European Union and their implementation in the form of national strategies. This changing public attitude has contributed to more openness and more consciousness for the problems of Roma.

There were many conflicts between Roma and non-Roma in the first Thara project. From the Roma perspective, part of the Austrians was seen as racists who lack respect and understanding for everyday life structures of Roma. Austrians, in contrast, doubted that Roma are sufficiently reliable partners for a joint project. Moreover, there was criticism that Austrians would receive money that should be reserved to serve the needs of Roma. Although this indicates the lack of understanding for the functioning of institutions on the part of Roma associations, it also reflects the specific power relations in these types of projects. Furthermore, one stakeholder explained that this perception was due to the fact that money was not spent in the most efficient way. Just one indication for the top-down approach of the first project is the fact that the proposal was written by an Austrian civil servant with a clear commitment to anti-discrimination policies, but little experience in Roma affairs. In the original proposal, there was still little understanding for Roma issues and how to build an open and representative, but working consortium.

Many stakeholders justify targeted measures for Roma with reference to the long history of stigmatization and discrimination and the requirement to build up trust between the institutions of the mainstream society and the Roma. Due to their long history of exclusion and persecution on the European continent, Roma and Sinti are often very skeptical to contact public institutions and to ask for services or to apply for financial support. Therefore, despite sound anti-discrimination legislation, discrimination is still an issue in job applications and everyday life. A change in social relationships is a secular challenge, which needs a multidimensional approach. Proactive approaches are therefore required to build up trust on both sides –

the Roma community and the majority society. In the case of Thara, this should be achieved by intercultural mediation and active involvement of community members in policy making. Social relations should be changed and access to public institutions facilitated. Not only the mediation between Roma and the institutions of the labor market as well as potential employers but also between different parts of the Roma community – and networking among them – needs to be regarded as innovative.

There has been some success in raising awareness and changing behavior of key stakeholders. Although Austrian welfare state actors usually defend mainstream approaches to welfare policies, they obviously recognize the value of having targeted measures next to it. The Public Employment Service (AMS) sends job seekers from the Roma community to Thara when they ask for support. Due to the activities that have been going on in the last ten years there is much more expertise available nowadays. A long-term change of attitudes would furthermore require the implementation of large programs instead of small projects funded on a year-to-year basis.

5.3 Empowerment

Empowerment and participation were key issues in the first EQUAL project. Individual empowerment has happened rather informally. A number of Romani women who work(ed) for Thara have even become important actors in the community and started a career in delivering social services or raising awareness in the media. These careers were supported by their involvement in Thara. Individual empowerment aims at creating a cognitive framework to handle the *problématique* of diversity and belonging. It strengthens the pride in belonging to a special ethnic group as well as being a full member of the Austrian society. At the same time it does not exclude personal choices to keep one's ethnic identity in privacy. To strike the balance between these diverging aspirations and life choices, the project actively integrated Roma associations and individual persons from the community.

In Austria, ethnic community funding is only provided for a small part of ethnic minorities with rather limited resources (that, in addition, have not been raised for years), projects such as Thara that receive a certain amount of publicity can have an essential contribution to the definition of discourses and the development of networks. The open governance model in itself fosters collective empowerment of a hitherto weakly organized ethnic community with hardly any links to public administration. The implications of these empowering aspects of the chosen participatory governance model will be discussed in detail in the following section.

6 Institutional mapping and governance relations

Historically, social welfare policies in Austria had a strong side effect of cultural assimilation. The conservative welfare regime has created equal access to welfare institutions after World War II. Until today, social policies aim at supporting “equal opportunities for all”. If – as in the case of Roma – there seem to be hindrances, they are interpreted as cultural issues. The recommended policies are mainly cultural initiatives, not socio-economic policies. A key policy field is currently the mass media, which tend to reproduce stereotypes on Roma and Sinti.

In this overall policy orientation, Thara has to be seen as an innovation. It is a project that has been institutionalized over the years without, however, becoming a proper and coherent program for Roma inclusion. It is one of the central actors for Roma policy in Austria, its governance relations have been shaped historically and have been constantly adapted. The current structure can only be grasped by taking the history of the initiative as well as the Austrian and Viennese context into consideration.

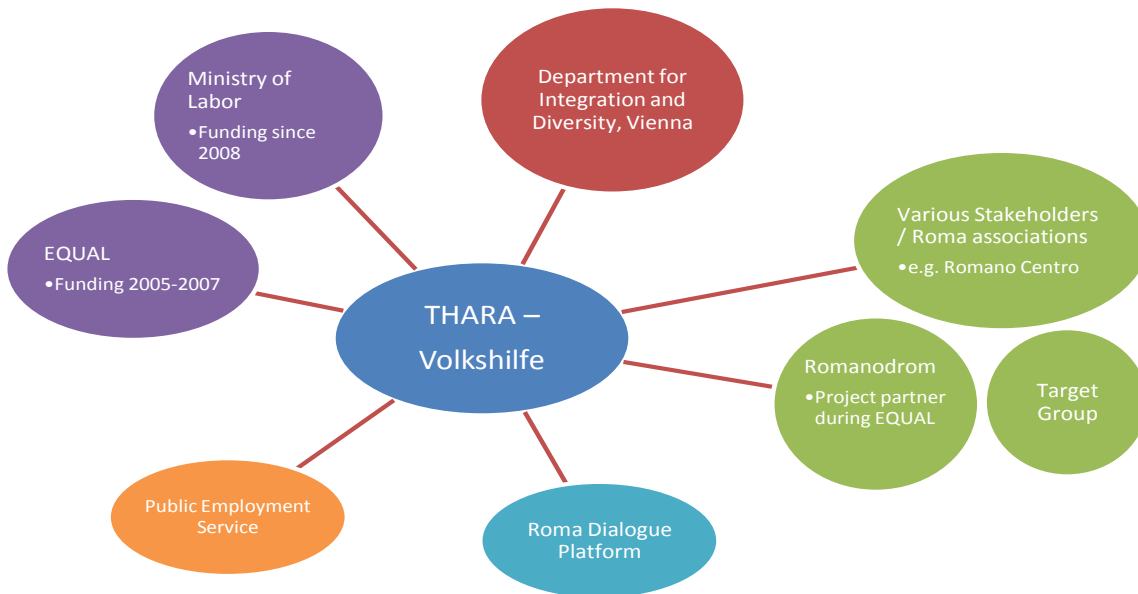
The field of Roma associations in Austria and Vienna is fragmented with only a few organizations such as Romano Centro connecting and representing different – autochthonous and allochthonous – groups at the same time. In contrast, some small associations are involved in rather specific issues of interests for small sub-groups. There is hardly any exchange between initiatives on individual approaches in specific problem areas such as promoting employment of women, school mediation or career counseling. This is also the case during project submission. To overcome fragmentation, proper “Roma dialogue platforms” were set up by the Austrian Federal Chancellery in the context of the Austrian Roma strategy. The fourth dialogue platform took place in December 2014 with the participation of key stakeholders from civil society. These dialogue platforms aim at consolidating the policy field and improving coordination. While there was some openness for life-world oriented discussions in the beginning, today’s format is rather oriented towards the Austrian middle class, which is better trained to express and defend its interests. Some community representatives consider the structure of the forum less and less favorable to the involvement of community associations and bottom-up initiatives.

The Ministry of Labor has been a key player in promoting and financing innovative measures for Roma. A window of opportunity was used to create a proper policy field for labor market integration of Roma in 2005. The principle of additionality of EU funding allowed to put pressure on Austrian decision makers who, for their part, had to be convinced that targeted measures for certain vulnerable groups are necessary complements of mainstream policies. The provision of additional funding for socioeconomic development of members of ethnic communities was seen as an alternative to conventional support structures, which were mainly directed towards autochthonous groups. Often, these funds were used for cultural events, like organizing Christmas parties. Thara opened the field of labor market policy to policies fostering social inclusion of Roma. It created a proper governance structure. However, some observers see the contribution of the Ministry of Labor as just a drop in the bucket or a fig leaf, given the challenge to overcome secular discrimination and multidimensional poverty.

Volkshilfe, a non-profit organization with strong links to the social democratic party, is specialized in care service delivery. It was founded in 1947 to provide basic support for the war-ridden Austrian population. Since the 1950s *Volkshilfe* has provided care services for children and the elderly, legal advice and aid to refugees and asylum seekers as well as development aid and catastrophe relief abroad. Today *Volkshilfe* employs about 9,200 employees in all Austrian provinces. Moreover, about 3,000 persons are contributing their share to *Volkshilfe*’s activities on a voluntary basis; its president is Margit Fischer, wife of the Austrian president (<http://www.volkshilfe.at/geschichte>). Together with Caritas, it is the main NPO for social service provisioning. The embedding of Thara in a large organization such as *Volkshilfe* is a big advantage in the corporate setting of the Austrian welfare regime. *Volkshilfe* is well established and recognized for its capacity to manage complex projects. That *Volkshilfe* finally took the responsibility must nonetheless be seen as a historical specificity, in part due to the personal commitment of the organization’s managing

director. In contrast to almost all other services of *Volkshilfe*, Thara is managed by the umbrella organization on the federal level and not by the provincial departments.

Illustration 1: Relations of Thara



The first project was based on a close collaboration between *Volkshilfe* and Romanodrom, a strong community player. This cooperation was difficult because there are about 20 to 25 individual associations with different targets besides Romanodrom. The formal inclusion of one important player in such a fragmented and heterogeneous field, which lacks a clear umbrella organization, increased tensions within the community. The fear arose, that this could contribute to further polarization. In the evaluation of the EQUAL project, a key conclusion was that the dependence on one strong community player – Romanodrom – created a situation in which one player held the interpretational sovereignty over all Roma affairs. This led to the decision to have one neutral player doing the organization in order to facilitate networking with all interested parties from the Roma community (Gneisz 2010). From today’s perspective, the involved Roma organizations were probably not the easiest to collaborate with. Before developing a joint project, it would have avoided later problems, if a certain level of trust had been built in advance. Although, *Volkshilfe* was the sole responsible from the second, nationally funded Thara project onwards, community members have continued being involved in decision making and being part of the project team. The decision was criticized, as non-Roma (‘Gadje’) would benefit from funding that was in principle reserved for members of the Roma community (Gneisz 2010).

The *Public Employment Service* (“AMS – *Arbeitsmarktservice*”) is the key institution in Austrian labor market policies. It was set up in 1994 as a service agency under public law, working in close cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Labor. It is the leading provider of labor-market related services in Austria. It matches candidates with job openings and assists jobseekers and companies who

need advice, information, qualification opportunities and financial assistance. It is structured into one federal, nine regional and 101 local organizations (<http://www.ams.at/en/public-employment-service-austria-ams/about-ams>).

The municipal administration of Vienna has only loose connections to civil society actors in the field. The latter complain especially about the municipal Department for Integration and diversity, which is in charge of Roma and anti-discrimination issues. Civil society actors have the impression that it is particularly difficult for “outsiders” with no connections to the right persons, institutions and parties⁹. Even well established Roma organizations such as Romano Centro find it easier to cooperate with other municipal departments, like the one for cultural affairs. The collaboration with the municipal Department for Integration and Diversity is further complicated due to fact that an employee at the municipal department is a former Thara employee – and Romni herself – but is now critical of the project. At the local level, neither formal nor informal channels exist for civil society organizations. Neither are informal contacts with politicians successful, as social democratic party fears right wing populist parties would explore targeted services to ethnic communities. Other stakeholders observe a political fear that if Roma receive special support from the Austrian welfare state, more and more communities might request special funding for their group-specific services. Nor do there exist functioning local forms of deliberative or cooperative governance or clear coordination and steering functions.

One has to take into consideration, though, that the budget and competences of the city of Vienna for these policies are relatively low. For the time being, thus, there seems to be little potential to create additional long-term structures apart from the subsidies for autochthonous ethnic communities. A more promising system innovation would be to embed Roma support persons in a multi-level governance regime with municipal and national organizations involved. In this regard, positive discrimination such as in the case of the handicapped could be an example. It is, however, doubtful whether such an idea would obtain sufficient political support.

In the coming years, the governance of labor market projects will change, as the European level becomes important again in the new ESF program period. With a funding opportunity of ten times the original budget, more Roma associations – also in other parts of Austria – might get involved in Thara in order to make the project more participatory. They have already been invited to present their ideas for improving the position of Roma on the Austrian labor market. But even with the extension there will not be a classical call for submission. Small associations will still depend on the participation of a big player when aiming at getting involved in an EU project as the problems of liquidity and administrative capacity remain.

To put it in a nutshell, innovations in Austria are often bottom-linked, a combination of bottom-up and top-down strategies. Although often initiated outside public bureaucracy, final implementation is often dependent on the initiative of key stakeholders in government or the administration. In the case of Thara, national actors were more conducive than local ones. However, bottom-linked strategies must not in advance privilege a certain administrative level. Since key persons as gatekeepers to public institutions are

⁹ This department succeeded a more independent independent public fund for integration affairs (Wiener Integrationsfonds), thereby re-integrating this policy field into the city administration.

crucial, it often depends on this type of innovative individual whether a certain administrative level or a specific institution takes up responsibility.

7 Governance challenges

7.1 *Mainstreaming social innovation*

Mainstreaming of the initiative was an issue in the first EQUAL project when the main national labor market actors – the Public Employment Service, the Austrian Chamber of Labor and Commerce – were still strategically involved due to ESF funding. There would have been the chance after the first project to mainstream Thara and turn it into a proper program or service provided by the Public Employment Service. Unfortunately, the institutions of the Austrian welfare state have remained skeptical when it comes to the provision of targeted services as this might stimulate demands from other (ethnic) groups. Therefore, the proposals of Thara were not taken up by the above cited labor market actors. Since 2007, Thara in Vienna has been financed on an annual project basis with changing priorities directly by the Ministry of Labor. Significant enlargement and extension to other provinces will be implemented in the near future with the provision of new funding opportunities in the ESF program framework 2014-2020.

7.2 *Governing welfare mix – avoiding fragmentation*

Fragmentation is an important issue in the field of Roma associations and policy makers. Roma are a heterogeneous group themselves, uniting different ethnicities, cultures, languages and well as social background. Moreover, there is the politically reinforced distinction between autochthonous and allochthonous groups. Due to the increasing number of civic associations, there seems to be increasing competition for political recognition and funding - and little coordination and cooperation. However, there are positive aspects in the current fragmentation as well, as it is a consequence of increased public awareness for Roma issues. Today, more community actors are active to see their special perspectives represented in politics.

Roma associations lack an umbrella organization that represents their interests nationally. The initiatives of the European Commission, the elaboration of the Austrian Roma Strategy and the establishment of the Austrian Roma dialogue platform were contributions to making the policy field more coherent and improving the coordination between different interest groups. The long-term success of these institutional developments is still open.

With regard to labor market services, the field seems to be more coherent. While the Austrian Ministry of Labor has always been the funding authority, the Public Employment Service and the Austrian Chamber of Labor as well as the Austrian Chamber of Commerce were strategic partners in the first EU-funded project. Until now, the Public Employment Service sends Roma clients to Thara when there is a need for special services or assistance. Nonetheless, there is not much exchange on labor market services that are partly also provided under different headings by different Roma associations. The improved public awareness of Roma issues has been crucially dependent on the collaboration of Roma associations with the Public Employment Service as well as different institutions in Vienna in the fields of migration and youth counseling.

7.3 *Governing welfare mix – developing a participatory governance style*

At the beginning, the target group was one of the key initiators of the project. Although the role of Roma associations has decreased after the EU-funded EQUAL project and *Volkshilfe* took the sole organizational

responsibility for Thara, employees from the target group have always been involved. Generally speaking, the project seems to be very open for participation. It has created creative communication channels and approaches in order to reach the target group and get a feeling for their desires and needs. With the extension of funding, civic Roma associations should again play a more central role in the provision of services.

The improved and more effective involvement of grassroots Roma associations and representatives is a crucial issue. The critique with regard to the Roma dialogue platform should be taken seriously. The more events are led by white middle-class academics without strong connections to the Roma community, the more these groups feel excluded from a forum that was originally established to improve their representation in Austrian politics. Due to this format, interest of associations in this discussion body is decreasing.

7.4 Equality and diversity

In principle, all stakeholders agree on the need of specific measures for Roma due to their long history of stigmatization and discrimination on the European continent – with a tragic peak in the holocaust. But it is not really operationalized in the Austrian Roma strategy. Its key argument is that Austria provides a well-functioning welfare state that secures all citizens against social risks and provides quality services. This expresses the contradiction between promoting equality and diversity at the same time. In Austria, this trade-off is usually decided in favor of so-called “universal” services to which all ethnic and social groups have access. This results in a strong middle-class structure of Austrian welfare services, which is defended by key policy makers of the main political parties. Targeted policies are related to an Anglo-Saxon understanding of welfare as relief for marginal groups. There is an inclination to misunderstand equality as homogenization, denying the fact that structurally unequal actors cannot be dealt with uniform policies. Policy areas as education, housing and health are open to the broad majority of the population and lack rigid social targeting. Apart from more ideological and partisan concerns, there is also the argument that universal service offers are cheaper than targeted ones, as this implies additional support for overcoming multidimensional deprivations and discrimination. Targeted services for special communities, especially support by social workers and other professionals remain rare. This is criticized by immigrant initiatives. They complain that the mainstream approach leads to assimilation, as its focus on citizenship and the acquisition of the German language discriminates other inhabitants and non-German speaking natives.

Roma are often affected by multiple problems of poverty, low education and discrimination that would justify targeted measures beyond those focused on issues of cultural or ethnic identity. Proponents of Thara argue for proper support structures to access public institutions, of which Roma are often scared of and thus try to avoid contact with as much as possible. Striking the balance between equality and diversity would require positive discrimination and a political commitment to increase the capabilities of the Austrian Roma population.

Some stakeholders argued that the reason why there are still relatively few targeted projects for Romnja and Roma in the Austrian welfare state is the fear (e.g. on behalf of the Department for Integration and Diversity matters of the city of Vienna) that a parallel society might be established. In contrast to the understanding of integration as a two-way process in the field of policies for the handicapped, the expectation of public authorities with regard to ethnic minorities is more on assimilation than on calling for change of attitudes among the majority population as well. To sum up, there still seems to be little understanding

that social cohesion is a *problématique* of striking the balance between equality and diversity (Novy et al. 2012), ethnic discrimination is not given due attention as a form of multiple deprivation.

7.5 Uneven access

Uneven access is definitely an issue in this relatively new and weakly institutionalized multi-level policy field. There have only been a few projects for improving the labor market access for Roma. Besides Thara in Vienna and the EU-funded project Mri Buti there is a cooperative initiative with the Public Employment Service in Burgenland. Currently the Roma association Ketani in Upper Austria shows interest in starting its own project (perhaps in cooperation with *Volkshilfe*) under the framework of the new ESF funding period. This shows that apart from some regional centers of either autochthonous Roma communities or Roma immigration, the chances that Roma job seekers are able to draw on specialized services are low. Uneven access results from uneven awareness of national, regional and local actors in civil society, but especially in public administration. This uneven access cannot be reduced to features of Austrian federalism. A federal ministry provides funds for Thara and the project is organized by the federal umbrella organization of *Volkshilfe* instead of the Vienna branch – but Thara is located in Vienna only. Grassroots initiatives are strongest in Vienna, but the city administration is not very keen in cooperating. Multi-level governance is complex, uneven access one consequence.

With regard to the definition of social right as universally accessible, two aspects need to be taken into consideration. First, anti-discrimination protection seems to be sufficient from a logistic perspective, but needs to be better implemented. Second, the Austrian Ministry for Labor has just presented the idea that all youth living in Austria should have the right and/or the duty to professional qualification in the form of apprenticeships or the like, which would significantly reduce the Austrian NEET rate.

7.6 Avoiding responsibility

Institutions of the Austrian welfare state entered in this new policy field due to requirements from the European Union on anti-discrimination. After decades of neglect, policy makers started to take up responsibility. To continue financing Thara after the completion of the EQUAL funding shows the commitment of key actors within the Ministry of Labor. Even before the first Thara project was implemented, civil servants within the ministry lobbied for a stronger orientation of ESF funds on marginalized and discriminated minorities. In the context of Thara, the Austrian welfare state shows its capacity to open itself to new needs and new target groups – “outsider”. However, its institutions and their respective cultures are not yet accustomed to this challenge. Although the problems of century-long discrimination requires substantial programs to sustainably improve their position in the Austrian society, Thara has mostly been financed on an annual project base. Moreover, available funds for the autochthonous community have been nominally fixed for many years and thus decreased in real terms. Responsibility for marginalized groups thus seems to be handled rather flexibly without too much long-term commitment or the creation of lasting structures.

Sustaining the project has been an issue right from the beginning. Although there was relatively little awareness in the advisory consortium for the special problems of the target group and little openness for further support, some key state officials shared the opinion that the special history of discrimination of European Roma and Romnja justifies a continuation of the project. Even the Austrian Chamber of Commerce, although it never contributed to project funding, has been quite supportive by providing small

contributions such as co-organizing events or courses or funding the translation of brochures into Roma; as was brought up by one stakeholder, for them Romnja and Roma seem to be simply members that are entitled to receive services. Moreover, as the head of the Chamber's diversity unit has immigrant background himself, he is supposed to be sensitized for the difficulties non-native Austrians confront when trying to open a business.

Although Thara did not become a proper program, it was nevertheless institutionalized. However, project funding on an annual basis caused different problems. Despite a relatively well developed spectrum of services, the logic of project funding requires that project plans and project management needs to be slightly changed from year to year - target groups and main strategies have to be adapted continuously. The ad-hoc financing on an annual basis by different sources and with specific criteria for eligible costs, report requirements and payment conditions, makes the project management a real challenge for small Roma associations. This is a major barrier for their more substantial participation in service delivery. Due to limited own resources, small associations lack liquidity to compensate for deferred payments. Even from within the Roma community it was argued that many associations would lack a sufficiently professional administration for organizing a large project such as Thara. With regard to EU policies, funding opportunities of small associations could be improved by providing liquidity support and loosening the administrative requirements.

7.7 Managing intra-organizational tensions

Lasting conflicts between Roma and non-Roma were a major issue of the first Thara project funded by EQUAL. These conflicts are mostly explained by a number of reasons: the innovative topic and approach, the lacking experience of the diverse spectrum of organizations in working together, little understanding and sensitivity for cultural differences, as well as lack of trust. These conflicts vanished after *Volkshilfe* took over the sole responsibility for the project. Nowadays it seems that there is an atmosphere of trust and respect between the Roma and non-Roma members of the project team.

Besides the internal practices of collaboration within the project, also the relationship between the Ministry of Labor, as the financing institution, and *Volkshilfe* seems to be based on trust and cooperation.

7.8 Enabling legal framework

None of the interviewed persons and stakeholders mentioned a lack of transparency with respect to the funding of Thara by the Ministry. This is surprising, as there was no regular tender procedure. For the project manager, the role of other key institutions such as the city of Vienna and the Public Employment Service was always sufficiently transparent and clear – even if they decided not to contribute to financing. Concerning the city of Vienna, however, other stakeholders were rather critical of the way targeted policies are organized. Ministry representatives defended the negotiation-based solutions of Thara and the lack of competition and tenders as well as calls for contributions. For them, the level of trust that is required in such sensible policy fields justifies this.

Most stakeholders see the limitation of ethnic community funding to autochthonous Roma groups as well as their decreasing real value as problems. Another problem mentioned by almost all stakeholders is the logic of project funding that originates in the idea of enabling innovation but often lacks long-term stability

even in cases where programs have to compensate for structural asymmetries. A clearer political commitment to support minorities would thus be necessary. For the time being, existing political strategies and action plans seem - at least - to create some more awareness for these issues.

Apart from Thara, the systematic implementation and enforcement of existing anti-discrimination legislation remains a burning issue. Access to mainstream institutions of the welfare state would be easier by making their staff more diverse and making the whole public administration more sensitive to cultural differences and the consequences of discrimination and stigmatization.

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Interviews

- Two project leaders, Volkshilfe/Thara
 - o 21.3.2014, 1050 Wien, Geigerg. 5-9, 10-11.45 Uhr
- Representative of department labor market policy at Sozialministerium (BMASK)
 - o 18.6.2014, 1010 Wien, Stubenring 1, 9-10 Uhr
- Managing director, Romano Centro
 - o 1.7.2014, 1030 Wien, Hofmannsthalgasse 2/Lokal 2, 10-12 Uhr

Focus group

- 1.10.2014, WU Wien, 1020 Wien, Welthandelsplatz 1, D4.2.213, 10.15-12.45 Uhr
- Participants
 - o Project leader, Volkshilfe
 - o Project coordinator, Volkshilfe
 - o Vocational & educational counsellor, Volkshilfe
 - o Representative of department labor market policy at Sozialministerium (BMASK)
 - o Representative of EU Strategy for the Danube Region, City of Vienna

- Carla Weinzierl, WU
- Florian Wukovitsch, ImPRovE

Feedback to draft version by focus group participants & interviewees

- June 2015

Concluding Interview

- Representative of Romano Centro
 - 1.7.2015, 10.30-12.00am, Romano Centro

ImPRovE: Poverty Reduction in Europe.

Social Policy and Innovation

Poverty Reduction in Europe: Social Policy and Innovation (ImPRovE) is an international research project that brings together ten outstanding research institutes and a broad network of researchers in a concerted effort to study poverty, social policy and social innovation in Europe. The ImPRovE project aims to improve the basis for evidence-based policy making in Europe, both in the short and in the long term. In the short term, this is done by carrying out research that is directly relevant for policymakers. At the same time however, ImPRovE invests in improving the long-term capacity for evidence-based policy making by upgrading the available research infrastructure, by combining both applied and fundamental research, and by optimising the information flow of research results to relevant policy makers and the civil society at large.

The two central questions driving the ImPRovE project are:

How can social cohesion be achieved in Europe?

How can social innovation complement, reinforce and modify macro-level policies and vice versa?

The project runs from March 2012 till February 2016 and receives EU research support to the amount of Euro 2.7 million under the 7th Framework Programme. The output of ImPRovE will include over 55 research papers, about 16 policy briefs and at least 3 scientific books. The ImPRovE Consortium will organise two international conferences (Spring 2014 and Winter 2015). In addition, ImPRovE will develop a new database of local projects of social innovation in Europe, cross-national comparable reference budgets for 6 countries (Belgium, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy and Spain) and will strongly expand the available policy scenarios in the European microsimulation model EUROMOD.

More detailed information is available on the website <http://improve-research.eu>.

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