

## Alba Iulia, Romania

### Gaining consent for change

A turning point involving concrete participation, commitment and community strategic development involving a Roma neighbourhood, Alba Iulia municipality and other key local actors and specialists was made possible through an EU-funded project, NODUS, in the period 2008-2010. It put the Roma issue on the agenda of urban regeneration projects in Romania. The challenge of this activity was not simply to bring consolidated standards into the Romanian context but rather to experiment with a new, successful approach, complementing the top-down and the bottom-up approaches.

### Gaining consent for change

NODUS Alba Iulia was part of a larger project of that name in URBACT II subtitled Linking Urban Renewal and Regional Spatial Planning,<sup>1</sup> which involved seven European partners. NODUS developed a perspective and a method to link spatial and strategic planning with interventions in marginalised, deprived areas so as to influence regional development and fight spatial segregation. The project's main goal was to develop a series of recommendations for the better coordination of area-based urban regeneration policies with regional or metropolitan planning. It took into account the relationships between urban regeneration and those sectorial policies with a spatial impact designed at regional or metropolitan level, such as housing or transport, and the fact that these different policy elements are defined by different agencies often belonging to different administrative levels.

'Local empowerment and public participation' was not only the theme of this project, but its working method in overcoming the challenges posed by attempts to shift from the area-based and integrated approach to more infrastructure-related schemes. It also enabled the project effectively address Roma groups' needs, at the same time influencing strategic, spatial planning and local urban regeneration policies.

Through the NODUS project, Alba Iulia municipality identified both from the statistical and the sociological points of view the detailed characteristics of the deprived area and the community that lives there. It was the first time in Romania that such a detailed, complex survey was applied at a specific neighbourhood scale, and not at the entire city level. Moreover, while problematic communities with a significant Roma population can be identified in Romania, it is the first time an action plan based on clear rules and procedures, publicly debated and agreed by the beneficiaries, has been implemented. All the actions were based on the target community's participation and organisation, and they took responsibility for both successes and failures, hoping that the project would be continued and followed up. Needless to say, while implementing the NODUS project, participants broadened their horizons, and discovered new perspectives as well as new challenges for the city and the community. Above everything, NODUS is about people and their lives, and about empowerment and building political will.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://urbact.eu/en/projects/metropolitan-governance/nodus/homepage/>

## Gaining consent for change

Alba Iulia, in central Romania, is rich in history. It is where the national assembly met to declare the Great Union of 1st December 1918, which is now celebrated as Romania's national day.



Alba Iulia Map and NODUS intervention Area



The images above show Alba Iulia plan and the Google map, marking the intervention area location, as well as the aerial view of the city and the citadel

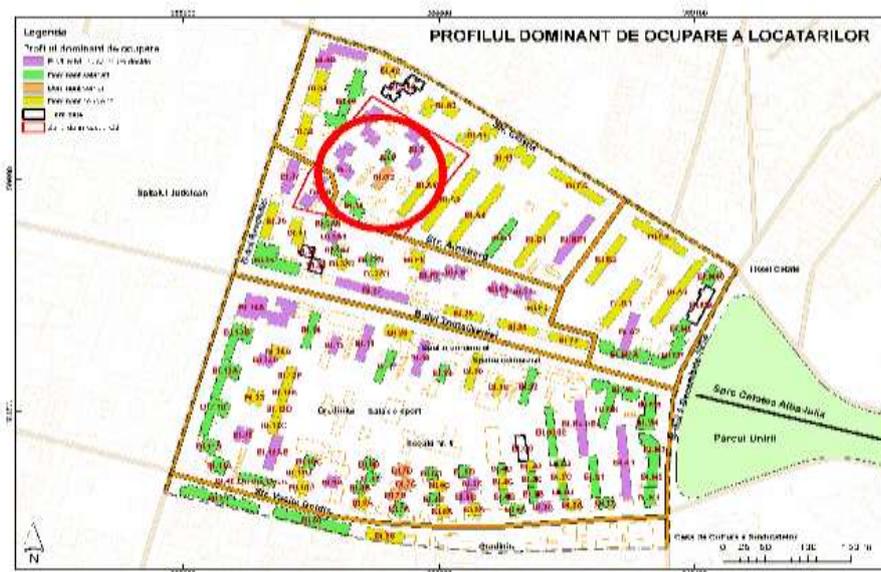
In a municipality of about 66 000 inhabitants, the Roma population of Alba Iulia numbers about 1 500, of whom about 1 200 live in a rural-type neighbourhood called the New World and 324 in Cetate ('Citadel') which was selected as the project area. As shown on the above map with a blue circle, Cetate is in the western part of the city, close to the historical citadel of Alba Carolina, a Vauban-type fortification.<sup>2</sup> The citadel is the pride of the city's heritage and a famous tourist attraction. The Cetate neighbourhood has a population of 9,700 and covers 94 hectares. It was considered a pilot zone having a significant impact on the development of the city and on the other micro-areas in the neighbourhood.



The area includes a community of citizens living in 22 blocks of flats, one of which – G2 'Turtledove' – contains municipal social housing and is perceived as a Roma minority 'ghetto'. (The turtle dove is migratory and the nickname implies that the residents are not considered to be permanently settled.) The area is home to 1 500 children under 18 years old. The Roma minority live in the block numbered 'G2', which houses about 324 people, among whom 100 children

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.beautifulromania.ro/projects/alba-iulia/the-fourth-gate-of-the-vauban-type-citadel.html>

under 18 years old, living in 105 one-room apartments). The intervention area and the G2 impact zone are shown in the small map below.



**NODUS Intervention Area and G2 „Turtledove” block of flats impact area**  
 Source: Sociological Study “Legături între regenerarea urbană și planificarea spațială - NODUS WGE”, 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2010

#### ***A 4-stage approach, a sociological study and a local action plan***

NODUS Alba Iulia was financed by the Regional Operational Programme (ROP) for Romania, Priority Axis 1: Support to sustainable development of urban growth poles and Priority Axis 3: Improvement of social infrastructure. Its budget was €30 000, of which the ERDF provided 85%, the national budget 13% and the municipality 2%.

In the project’s first five months (April–August 2008), a first general inception phase meant the elaboration of a state of the art analysis by all seven partners. It included the establishment of a working group (WG), followed by the development and application of a framework and a methodology for the whole project philosophy, taking account of the diversity among the seven European partners. The Alba Iulia partner participated as a working group member by collecting the relevant experience and literature as required. It agreed to the project outline and completed questionnaires on delimiting supra-local areas, defining the concept of ‘deprived area’ and elaborating a four-stage methodology to link strategic supra-local spatial planning with local area-based intervention activities by the public sector, as the framework for the implementation phase. These four stages are:

- **Stage 1:** exploring a multi-actor governance model for larger urban areas to organise the policies and strategic responses for the different types of deprived areas;
- **Stage 2:** identifying and selecting deprived areas, according to the aims and strategic approach towards urban renewal, based on territorial analysis across the larger urban area, building bridges between the deprived areas and the dynamic ones;
- **Stage 3:** identifying renewal interventions supporting effective social inclusion in the perspective of urban integrated regeneration;
- **Stage 4:** monitoring the external effects of the interventions and determining how their effects could be handled on the regional level, promoting territorial balance.

During the second phase (September 2008–June 2010) work was more locally oriented. NODUS Alba Iulia set up the 23-strong Alba Iulia URBACT Local Support Group (ULSG), which brought together elected officials, including the Alba Iulia’s mayor, eight volunteers from the deprived area, the nearby neighbourhood owners’ associations, the local police, representatives of the schools frequented by the ‘ghetto’ children, the specialised education centre, the local

electricity company ENEL, independent sociologists and UNICEF volunteers. It also identified and selected the deprived area in Alba Iulia where the project would intervene, based on the opinions of specialists, local stakeholders and the Alba Iulia ULSG. It then carried out a sociological study, based on a community process)

The study revealed the different problems and conflicts at the project area level (parking areas, green areas, safety, noise and difficulties finding a job), at the block of flats level (weak community, apartments abandoned by people migrating abroad, street dogs, noisy neighbours and children, inappropriate garbage collection) and at the G2 and household level (atomised and poor community, unclear legal status of some apartments, lack of interest in maintenance of public space, precarious and hazardous living conditions, cleanliness). A 'Citizens' Agenda' for the Cetate neighbourhood was developed on this basis, with the aim of building cohesion and participation in the community and jointly fighting the problems identified, targeting two main aspects:

- what should be changed from the population's perspective, and
- the citizens' potential to participate and expectations regarding the municipality

This agenda was followed by 11 recommendations, related to focused and balanced actions at the whole area level, diversification of the action instruments, clear rules and procedures, monitoring and evaluation, non-discrimination, community participation and partnership, good practices and visibility.

The ULSG adopted the study recommendations and a Local Action Plan was developed, focusing on block G2. It had six quantified and verifiable objectives, with the responsible actors identified, concerning:

- electricity supply and payment
- information and monitoring
- cleanliness and changing the environment
- maintenance and toolkit
- clarification of the legal status of all apartments
- activities to improve the children's lives

The realism and concreteness of these objectives meant that the Action Local Plan was achieved almost 100%.

Finally it organised periodic debates and information meetings with key stakeholders in situ. Media representatives were invited to attend a number of meetings.

### *Generating participation in the local community*

NODUS Alba Iulia identified a common objective for all the area's inhabitants – the improvement of the quality of life – and used most appropriate instruments to achieve it through participation and empowerment, to which was added another factor which enabled change. This was the dedicated work of a team of sociologists, who were able to talk to all the local actors on their own language and provide a basis for real participation. No unrealistic promises were made to bring people together; there were and still are lots of suspicions and obstacles, but NODUS was a real achievement in building bridges among the local actors. In this perspective a great change was the tasks the local actors assumed, the roles they played and the way participation was organised during the project's implementation.

The sociologists coordinated and monitored the working groups, ensuring they had clear and achievable tasks and responsibilities which matched with needs. They discussed their findings in public or smaller groups, and proposed and implemented a short local action plan. They were able to bring other external resources (people and money) which enlarged the project's impact. Roma representatives actively participated in all groups. Although the neighbourhood's public image has so far only improved slightly, the change is real and well-known in Alba Iulia, owing to the links and networks among local people and a series of local agencies, schools, economic agents, volunteers, local authorities and independent experts.



**NODUS Alba Iulia – discussions in the neighbourhood of the local working groups**

Discussion and negotiation became common practice, and brought the concrete benefits of participation, such as the cleaning of the basement of block G2, which the local people asked for and the Town Hall provided as a starting point. But the neighbourhood still faces police-related problems, especially in block G2, and a low level of collaboration and trust between the Roma and Romanian groups. Local people and in particular most of the Roma minority know that a threshold was overcome and their participation, their monitoring and their responses were visible.

There is not a unanimous chorus of local voices praising the achievements, even among those who have actively participated to NODUS, as each individual, when they talk about their participation, sees it through his or her own lens, and asks 'What's in it for me?'

The Roma people see it in very diverse ways. Children, especially, are very positive and want to revive the trip to a summer camp on the Black Sea, which 20 of them won as result of participation and good marks in class. The mothers involved are enthusiastic too, as they are enabled to take part in a 'second chance' programme and other initiatives, but they are also very proud of their children's achievements. The eight volunteer members of the Alba Iulia URBACT Local Support Group (ULSG) have become more aware of their strengths and try to keep people together, but it is difficult, as the project has ended and, despite promises, no other project has (yet) been signed to continue NODUS. The other residents enjoy the cleaner and more pleasant environment, but remain reluctant as long as their income does not increase and they are still perceived as thieves.



**G2 'Turtledove' residents – volunteers and members of the Alba Iulia URBACT Local Support Group (ULSG)**

There are also a number of problematic families, which according to City Hall and equally according to the G2 tenants will be evicted in September 2012 because of their anti-social behaviour. This is an issue that should be solved otherwise than by eviction, possibly through social support and ad hoc projects.

Generally, G2's neighbours and people from Alba Iulia lump this experience with the two decades of efforts by City Hall to recuperate the Citadel and tidy up the area for tourists and especially for Alba Iulia's citizens.



### **Revival of the historic Citadel, pride of Alba Iulia**

For some, allocating time and resources was considered simply ‘another useless project dedicated to Roma people’ and a waste of money, as there is still considerable racism against Roma.

The local administration publicly informed the city and other local and external actors about NODUS in relation to the urban renewal plan. It mentions the need for accurate information gathering, a sound dialogue with a problematic and different community as well as getting increased local support as each task and responsibility undertaken, each resource promised and the participation of key decision-makers was respected. The Mayor, Mircea Hava, even advertised the Alba Iulia NODUS approach in Bulgaria, and praised its benefits as best practice, highlighting its transferability. AIDA Alba Iulia Intercommunity Association strengthened its working collaboration in the intercommunity territory.

The other local actors involved, such as schools, local agencies and companies, police, are positive and include this approach among the instruments to work with in the long run.

The external experts (especially the team of sociologists), volunteers and other independent actors acted as process facilitators and activators, mediators and negotiators. They were perceived as non-aggressive from the very beginning and during the project implementation they built a good working relation and dialogue, being seen as objective, and helping to build bridges at critical moments.

Despite a sound project organisation, the community factor – especially regarding the Roma minority and its involvement – might have produced huge challenges if it not been appropriately understood and managed, for various reasons. Of paramount importance are the traditional stereotypes and perceptions deriving from the different concepts of living, working, social status and relationships between Roma and the majority Romanian population, all of which are reflected in the way public space is occupied and segregated. Most of people and families living in Cetate did not exactly choose the area. Until 1990, most of the Romanian families were blue collar workers who rented their apartments through their workplace, a common system in those days. After 1990 most of these tenants became owners<sup>3</sup> and saw their properties’ values reduced by having the G2 Roma block of flats inside their area. Nor did the poor Roma people exercise an independent choice of where to live, as their rented one-room apartments were also assigned by the local housing office during the 1980s. Most of them remain tenants today. The two communities – Roma and non-Roma – fundamentally distrust each other and rarely communicate. The communist experiment of mixing did not automatically create new diverse and inclusive communities, but on the contrary built invisible walls, if not real, concrete barriers. The initial mistrust grew year by year, sporadically inflamed by incidents involving civil servants or the police.

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<sup>3</sup> Pascariu S., Stanculescu M, ‘Management Improvement and Quality Standards Challenges: Local Government and Housing in Romania’ (pp. 243-91), in *Housing Policy: An end or a new beginning?* LGI Books, 2003, ISBN 963 9419 46 X

### *What was different?*

There were undoubtedly good experiences before NODUS, involving Roma and other problematic, deprived communities and mixed communities. However this project was strong enough to provide a platform which could evolve organically and freely, based on input and participation from the local actors, and especially the Roma inhabitants of block G2.

The intention was to elaborate the Local Action Plan and implement it with and for the selected poor community. And it started out as such, but it evolved into a continuous negotiation game, regenerating itself. The local authority and the local community were equal partners and negotiators throughout the project's implementation, building together, through participation and commitment, a common frame and 'enlarging the pie' to produce 'win-win' solutions. The role of other local inhabitants, institutions and organisations was also key, as they understand the potential of this approach in solving other problems of public space and urban segregation.

This was new and, unless the project is continued, will be lost. Moreover, non-continuation will lead to demotivation, especially among the Roma minority, who will again feel that they have been the subjects of another experiment.

A further novelty was the sociologist team taking the leadership role for a short period of time during the participatory process (with AIDA's and City Hall's agreement), as they best understood the potential of the project, actors and approach.

### *Lessons learned*

The NODUS project has a number of lessons. The most vital is that real changes may happen even in the most deprived and vulnerable communities following the proposed approach of the NODUS project – on condition that there is a basic mix of elements, including the existence of local potential. In this perspective, 'difficult communities' must identify not only 'problems', but also 'potentials' in order to be successful and overcome challenges. An area without any potential to change – develop – faces structural problems that are even more difficult to address, as no basic capital for change has been identified.

Secondly, the right tools should be at hand. The community implementation phase of the NODUS Alba Iulia project developed a series of innovative instruments that are beneficial for the community itself, as well as for scientific research, such as the 'block association fiche', a synthesis of the monthly apartment evaluation forms, agreed by all G2 households, which is elaborated, verified and kept by the community actors. Also, a system of rewards and penalties in the implementation and monitoring of Local Action Plan activities was proposed and implemented by the community itself, according to which people were rewarded with public thanks at meetings or penalised by the withdrawal of a coordination task.

Thirdly, obvious and genuine commitment is its own reward. The local authorities, despite their leading role, were project partners and acted as such, transparently. In the NODUS Alba Iulia project, the representatives of the AIDA intercommunity association and the municipality were present on the spot, participating and answering questions throughout the process. The community reacted positively when they the mayor and other officials working 'shoulder to shoulder' with them.

Fourthly, such a project requires good governance. The structures established under NODUS to support, implement and monitor the project activities (the URBACT LSG, the Coordination Committee, the Monitoring Committee and the Working Groups) should be strengthened and publicly promoted. As in the case of NODUS, facilitators should be part of the process and continue their work in the long run, seeking to understand the actors and their needs, but without proposing solutions. Many community participation activities do not include enough resources for the external and objective facilitation of the internal process. The central / regional level (when applicable) should identify, support, cofinance and 'market' the local successes.



**G2 'Turtledove' before and after NODUS: the back yard is now a children's playground**



**G2 'Turtledove' children, June 2011**

### ***The challenges for the future***

It is not realistic to hope that all good lessons are immediately translated into common practice, especially if there are breaks in the rhythm of involvement and activities. So, what should be done to capitalise this project? How can this momentum and impetus be made part of a day-to-day life?

For one thing, the project's approach is already included in the design and planning of community participation in Alba Iulia as regards gathering information and acting as local 'change agents'. A more difficult step is to provide resources to keep the community interested, and in this respect both AIDA and the Alba Iulia municipality started new initiatives and are both participating in submitting proposals to other URBACT and Structural Funds projects, for the Cetate neighbourhood as well as for other potential intervention areas. It is even more difficult to provide external help for community facilitation without projects specifically including this in their budgets. Most difficult of all is to keep the community working groups alive when they have no concrete, clear prospects.

So far, NODUS Alba Iulia has been a very good experiment and example: a real turning point, through which all the actors were able to see that change is possible. Real and sustainable success remains to be defined and achieved from now on.



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