Summary of SDC Learning Trajectory: Women's Empowerment

The goal of this learning trajectory was to deepen participants' understanding of how theories and strategies for Roma women's empowerment are put into practice. In the first meeting, we agreed some learning objectives:
- To deepen our understanding of processes through which Roma women can empower themselves (and how SDC can support and facilitate these processes)
- To understand the role of intermediaries (NGOs) in this process (through interviews with NGO staff in implementing agencies, both Roma and non-Roma)
- To make proposals to improve SDC programming in this area.

Note: the members of this group are from Bulgaria, Romania and SDC HQ. The views expressed reflect their perspectives.

1. Process (what did we do?)

We met 7 times between October 2015 and May 2016, although Cristi was only able to join the first four. We identified some sub-themes to discuss, and participants agreed to interview one or two Roma and non-Roma people to learn about their understanding and approach to women's empowerment. Lili, Cristi and Laurent were all able to reflect on field visits, and Lili carried out several interviews. We shared articles and documents, which we discussed.

2. Substantive (what did we learn?)

Terminology: Roma women and non-Roma women working with Roma women, often do not use the term 'empowerment', they prefer to call it 'self-reliance' or other 'less frightening' terms.

The stories shared in this group reveal that there are high levels of intra-familiar as well as community and societal discrimination towards Roma women. It is also clear that Bulgaria and Romania face significant gender discrimination more generally, and women generally are not familiar with the language of empowerment. However in the case of Roma women, they face a number of **intersecting inequalities**, which are intensified according to where they live: Roma families in rural villages are more conservative than in the cities. This is compounded by institutional barriers, for example the requirement of a high school diploma to apply to be a health mediator. **Power** operates at every level to create barriers to empowerment; SDC cannot directly address power inequalities in the private realm, but it is important to understand these relations and to develop strategies. Organising safe spaces for women to meet is an example.

Empowerment models:
- Women's empowerment models emphasise the importance of building the confidence of individual women and girls; this prerequisite for transformative change happens through longer-term individual and group processes, which signify a trade-off in terms of reach/coverage.

- o Empowerment approaches need to create 'safe spaces' for women to come together to talk, to understand their situations and to support each other.
- o Women's basic and strategic needs must be considered[1].
- o Empowerment work also needs to take place at the institutional level to support women to become leaders beyond the community. The models we found helpful are: 'Gender Equality & Institutional Change', and the 'Capacity Development Butterfly'.
- o It is important to understand how power operates: it is much more complicated to be Roma **and** a woman. Women face discrimination at home, in the community and in institutions. For understanding how power operates, the Power Cube is also useful.

Gendered roles: There is a lack of gender focus in much NGO work with Roma, and a tendency to engage with Roma women as 'mothers'. However, women are often leaders in Roma community organisations, and are active in advocacy. Roma women activists are pushing for change, and can be catalysts for other improvements in Roma inclusion.

Men: There is a need to work with men – gender equality assumes an approach which focuses on working with women towards their empowerment, but does not bring in men. Transformation of unequal gendered relations will require working with men and women (we did not begin a discussion about sexual identity, but it needs to be considered in further work on gender).

Education: gender norms in educational content and teacher attitudes (as well as parents) perpetuate inequality between women and men. Education mediators can play an important role, but they are not funded by the state (in Bulgaria) which means the municipality may not be able to support them.

Roma women's empowerment is a complex topic, and discussion does not provide any consensus or simple answers. Its complexity and our learning about the different levels of action required for empowerment (to be sustainable and transformative) suggests that we need to look at it transversally rather than only at project level. Our group identified the need to develop tools to measure qualitative change at programme level – which specific issues are taken up and addressed, and how. There is also a need for more analysis and understanding of the obstacles that Roma women encounter and the power relations that constrain them.

SDC programming and gender: It became clear that in the case of **new EU member states**, gender equality & women's empowerment are not mainstreamed. SDC has a policy framework agreement with the government (where gender equality is mentioned, as one thing among others) but this does not require gender mainstreaming. There is also a gap in understanding between national and local government levels; many municipal governments are not clear about what 'empowerment' is.

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[1] For an explanation of basic vs strategic needs, see
http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/sites/bridge.ids.ac.uk/files/reports/re55.pdf

3. Methodological (how did we learn, how did we find the process?)

The Learning Trajectory method was felt to be a good way to express our perceptions and explore these and their meanings and to get feedback from others, in a safe space. The opportunity for reflexivity was valued, to explore the assumptions we are each making about Roma women.

It was helpful to have a recording of each meeting, which we could refer back to and see what was discussed. It was considered very useful to do 'fieldwork', to interview people on a topic. However, this needs planning as field visits can be very intensive, and you need to have a quiet space to conduct an interview.

Relying on skype was difficult, because not everyone could use skype in the office and had to work from home or from a coffee shop. The internet connection was not always good enough. After the first three sessions, we met via Lync, with Laurent calling to our phones. Using Lync is probably the best option at the moment.

When we evaluated the process, participants expressed:
- The combination of field visits and structured discussion worked well
- It is very valuable to have a reflection session aloud **with peers** after a field visit, in fact it should be 'a must' – the experience holder is deepening her/his learning through communicating the experience, and sharing insights with the others, which are useful to them
- The time was not always sufficient to go deeply into the content
- It was useful to hear the views of others who are not so close to our own everyday work
- It is 'useful to be in the field with the questions about women's empowerment that we discussed in the group, in your head'.
- They became aware of issues regarding SDC's programme of work on Roma Women's Empowerment.
- We were able to discuss issues on which we had different views and identified in different ways

4. Next steps

i. To continue to reflect on Roma women's inclusion as a thematic area, and develop internal guiding documents, theoretical background, and identify overall specific issues to address.
ii. To provide/receive direct support to country programmes which are working with Roma women as a target group.
iii. To monitor our programmes using a framework which enables us to analyse our theory of change around Roma women's empowerment
iv. To discuss how to better promote women's empowerment within SDC programmes within the framework of new member states.
v. To use participatory methods to engage with Roma women in identifying indicators of change
vi. To organise a Roma Inclusion seminar with a specific focus on gender

vii.   To organise ourselves better for learning, so that we can have time for reflection, and not just for action. This is needed to ensure the quality of our work, and is important!

viii.   Future LTs need to ensure that the meetings happen regularly, perhaps shorter but monthly

ix.   We would like to promote more collaborations between NPOs, using a field-based and reflexive model. One idea is to link a field visit to a Learning Trajectory. Participants could begin with their own fieldwork and meet by lync to discuss/reflect. They would then spend 2 days together in the field, followed up with reflection via lync.