

## Roma People in Garla Mare

*An insight in every day life of a poor Roma community in a WECF project village in Romania.*

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## Foreword

This document is the result of many years of experience in Garla Mare and intensive informal contact with the Roma population. About Garla Mare many documents have been published; the first ecological Dry Urine Diverting school toilet in Europe has been build there. But so far we little interest was shown to the Roma people that make up about 25% of the population. This group deserves attention and eventually needs to be empowered, just as the Romanian part of the population in the frame of WECF projects.

As a volunteer and fieldworker for WECF, the author Anna Samwel, spend many holidays in Garla Mare. She lived at Roma families of different religions and socio-economic status, from middle class to an extremely poor extended family. She earned the trust of the community and established good connections with the local medical assistant, who has thorough knowledge of the Roma community and a deep compassion with its members. WECF cooperates with the medical assistant in small humanitarian projects.

This document wants to give insight for the sake of information and awareness raising about the situation of Roma people in Romania throughout the WECF network and beyond. It is a case study, but can represent the situation in many villages throughout Romania. It might be helpful with fund raising, though that is not the prime scope.



# Roma people in Garla Mare

## **Introduction**

Garla Mare, Romania, is the WECF project village ‘where everything started’. The first WECF project on safe drinking water and school sanitation started in Garla Mare in 2003, in cooperation with the Romanian NGO Medium et Sanitas. Since then, many things happened and other similar projects were developed in many other countries. However, WECF is still working with the people from Garla Mare.

Roma people make up 25-30% of the population. Although WECF provided some small scale humanitarian aid, they remain a neglected but very much in need group. This paper wants to give an insight in the lives of the Roma people that live in Garla Mare, to create a higher awareness in the WECF network and to provide a base for new projects and initiatives.

Garla Mare lies on the shores of the Danube, on the place where the borders of Serbia and Bulgaria meet and has about 3500 inhabitants. There is no centralized drinking water supply and no connection to sewage. People use wells for drinking water, and pit latrines for sanitation. Bottled gas is used for cooking and wood for heating. The poorer families use also wood or corn stalks for cooking. The population lives mainly on agriculture. The main problems are poverty, a lack of perspective, unemployment, a lack of organisational capacity and a lack of services.

## **Roma Culture**

In Romania, several Roma tribes with their own traditions, folklore and dialects of the Romani language can be found. The background of the Roma from Garla Mare is unclear, but research is being undertaken by community members. They are not specialized in any craft. During communist times they made clay bricks and worked on the collective farms. A few families have a small garden plot or some chicken, but most don’t have land to practice agriculture. They speak a Romani dialect, and are dressed according to traditional prescriptions. Also many other old Romani traditions are conserved. Dancing is an important element of every day life. Marriages are often arranged by the family on a very young age. Mixed Roma – Romanian marriages are very seldom and are not well seen by both communities.

Spatially, Roma and Romanian people live mostly separately. In Garla Mare two Roma districts or ‘Tsiganie’, as they are called by the villagers, can be found. As the Roma population is increasing and the Romanian decreasing, more and more Roma families start living in ‘Romanian’ areas.

Conventionally, the Roma from Garla Mare are Orthodox, just like the Romanians. After the revolution however, the community was over-flown by religious people who wanted to help and tried to convert the people to their religions. At the moment, 4-5 different religions can be found among the Roma in Garla Mare, among which Jehovah Witnesses, Pentecostal Church and a new Evangelic Church. Old Roma beliefs are also practiced but not very openly.



**Roma family has slaughtered their pig**

### **Short history of travel, segmentation, economic development and poverty**

The Roma community is very diverse in economic respect. Very poor families with many, partly neglected kids can be found in overcrowded one room mud houses, next to wealthy families in new houses with a Mercedes in front of it. To explain this, we will go back in time.

In Soviet times, the Roma community was said to be a very coherent community. Most members worked for the state mostly in teams consisting of Roma. Some of its members had high positions in governance and economy as part of an effective integration strategy from the former dictator Ceaucescu. Despite the relatively well integration in the economy and politics, the district was said to be 'no go area' for Romanians. There must have been social ethnic tensions already.

After the revolution those tensions manifested. All Roma lost their jobs and were discriminated against very much. In other parts of the country, violent programs took place against Roma communities. Many fled to Germany or France, where they applied for asylum. Roma from Garla Mare also left their village to what they expected, a better future. That was the starting point of the loss of coherence in Garla Mare. Even present day, probably more than half of the Roma population is commuting between Garla Mare and Western Europe and some are making good money. Some of those people are able to make a decent living and are supporting their family members from Garla Mare. Unfortunately, some are making money in the criminal sector, and got even rich. Especially for those who are trying to earn money on an honest way, the trips mean a lot of hardship. They are being sent back to Romania by the foreign police of their destination countries. Women are often not able to find a regular job, and are begging for money. Children are also begging, as they are able to make more money than adults. They are mostly not able to gather substantial savings to make investments.

The poorest people in Garla Mare stayed behind because they could not afford the trip and miss the right family connections. Others were in Western Europe, were send back to Romania and lost their money. They live in great poverty in Garla Mare. Single mothers and old people are the most effected by poverty.

Social allowance is 20 Euro per month, and for every school going child an additional 4 Euros is paid. For those without revenues from abroad, life is hard to sustain. In summer and autumn seasonal work for Romanian farmers brings 4-5 Euro per day. Days without the basic food stuffs and sufficient heating are no exception during the low labour seasons. Children are walking on flip-flops even in winter. Houses are in general made of stone or mud with straw. However, the houses are often overcrowded, especially children are numerous. At least nine families that live at the border of the village are not connected to electricity. A connection costs 500 Euro, which is unaffordable for those poor families.

#### ***Poor and poor***

*Even between the poor, there are differences. Most poor can sometimes do seasonal work and get social allowance and somehow manage life. A few cases of extreme poverty can be found. Those households are not able at all to care for themselves. One of those cases is a family consisting of a mother with her children and the grandmother. The mother and grandmother are mentally ill. They live at the border of the village in a dirty one room house. The children are healthy, but neglected. Another difficult case is a woman with three children who is divorced from her husband. They have no house of their own and live in a small shanty at her uncles' land. The ex husband broke her arm, so that she is not able to work anymore. Her three children go to school. Her biggest wish is to build a house. She already gathered some second hand building material and bought a piece of land at the border of the city from her savings. Now she is in need for money to pay the labour. But she can not even gather enough money to sustain her daily life.*

*Even worse off is the woman that lived in a small container with her family. Neither she nor her kids were registered. She wanted to divorce from her drinking husband. She remained completely stripped off all belongings. WECF in cooperation with the medical assistant helped her to obtain identity papers. Because she still couldn't sustain living in Garla Mare, she moved to the city with her relatives where she is begging for money on the street.*



*A poor single woman with two of her children in front of her house*

### **Roma and education**

First of all I want to mention here, that in Garla Mare live educated and literate Roma, and a part of the school children has promising school results. There are Roma children attending kindergarten and speaking Romanian. But a substantial part of the population is illiterate, among them a high percentage of women and even a considerable amount of school age children.

A part of the illiteracy among young people and children can be ascribed to the commuting between Garla Mare and Western Europe. The children join their families and have to help begging in Western Europe, where they stay illegally sometimes for years. The children don't go to school. Other Roma families leave the country in the summer, so the children miss a part of the school year. Other families leave their children behind at older relatives, who are sometimes not fully able to look after the many children and don't stimulate them sufficiently to learn at school.

Another negative effect is, that children who are born in foreign countries, are not registered. They officially don't exist. Back in Romania, they have no insurance, no social allowances and probably worst, they are not allowed to go to school.

Many children did go to school, but often the education system failed to transfer even basic skills as reading and writing. One of the reasons is that the Roma children don't speak Romanian when they enter primary school, so they can not catch up from the beginning. Unlike the Romanian children, who mostly attended kindergarten, they are not used to sit still in a classroom environment. Another problem is that they leave school before the lessons finish because they didn't have breakfast and the parents can not afford a lunch package to be brought to school. Illiterate parents can not help with doing homework, and often don't motivate the pupils sufficiently to learn well at school. They often lag behind from the start. A part of the teachers believe that Roma children don't have the intellectual capacities to follow classes and put them at the back of the class instead of giving them extra attention. Parents don't prioritize education high enough or are simply not in the country. As completing primary education is compulsory, the school let the children pass under any conditions so that they can leave as soon as they have 'completed' their primary education. It is very sad to see smart, school going children not able to read a simple word. The only reason that they are send every day to school by their families is to earn the 5 euro child allowance that is only paid to school going children.

Fortunately, not all teachers neglect the Roma population. On contrary; summer preparatory school is organized by a very active teacher and WECF partner to prepare Roma children for school. She also organizes classes for children that are lagging behind so that they can catch up. But she has not the capacity and authority to reach all in need kids. The authorities are getting more active to stimulate Roma children to attend kindergarten.

### ***How illiteracy constrains normal life***

*With one of the young, very poor mothers I have a closer contact for several years. Last year autumn, she was complaining that she didn't have winter clothes for her three children. A neighbour and I proposed her to go to the Red Cross second hand shop in the city. She said she didn't have money for the bus and the cloth. I offered her to give her the money, it would cost all together ten Euro. But even then, she wouldn't go. It turned out that she is afraid to go alone to the city and find her way. She can not read the names on the bus. A taxi wouldn't drive her because she is a Gypsy. She is afraid to ask for the way because no body will answer her. In the end I went with her and we bought for 8 Euro enough closes for the whole winter. I asked a policeman to provide us with some information about a registration matter. He refused to answer because the question was on behalf of a Gypsy, and for the first time I experienced how it feels to be an outcast in Romania.*

*The same woman often asks me for help to read the medicine packages she had to buy for her family. When one of her children gets ill, she is so worried because she is totally dependent on the doctor and doesn't understand the treatments. I must mention that she is finds the courage to go to hospital when one of her children is ill, but it means a lot of stress.*

*Her niece goes to the third class and lives in the same house. When I was living with them, we were trying to do maths homework together. She was very good in maths, but she couldn't read the exercises. She was not able to catch up from the first class, because she couldn't speak Romanian, like many of her Roma classmates. Her teacher didn't believe her capable of learning. Her brother never went to school because he was not registered. He is now 15 years old. Both will never be able to find a normal job.*

*These stories show how illiteracy combined with a low self esteem brings about inertia and dependency. The experienced discrimination is catalyzing all this.*



**Romanian and Roma children cleaning their village with one of the active teachers**

### **Vicious circle**

The poorest families in Garla Mare are trapped in the so called vicious circle of poverty. The people have many daily problems, and have to worry about the daily food and other needs. There are no possibilities to improve lives visible. This causes stress and sorrow. Self esteem is often low due to discrimination and poverty. Because the situation doesn't improve, that feeling is perpetuated. If a person is stressed and has a pessimistic view on her situation, initiative to improve the situation is less likely to be taken, so that the situation doesn't improve, which in turn re-assures the person that there is no perspective, which causes more stress. People are completely absorbed in their daily struggles, that there is no energy left to get out of this chain.

In practice this means that women are so busy and worried with their families daily surviving, that they have lost all perspective for the future. They have to search for food, money, struggle with their children's illnesses, and in many cases have to deal with domestic violence and alcoholism of their

husbands. They lack the energy and confidence to maintain a strong network with each other. This prevents them to think about or believe in the future.



To bring about social change, only an incentive from outside can and must mean the first move out of the vicious circle. An interruption of the circle and a change in the lives of the people has to take place. The consequences must be a higher self esteem and better perspective for the future. Ways to this are the strengthening of the village network and stronger cohesion amongst the poor. Very practically, ways for improving the living conditions and income must be found.

### Discrimination

That Roma people are discriminated against in Garla Mare is very obvious. Very few jobs are occupied by Roma. Prejudices can be heard all around. A deep mistrust can be found in the Romanian community, especially among the older generation. The general perception of Romanians about Roma is that they steal, they stink and don't want to work. In general, Roma distrust Romanians also. A part of this mistrust is indeed based on bad experiences with individuals from the other community. However much more it is based on old social images and categorisation. It is maintained by a lack of knowledge and interest in the other community.



Fortunately, the younger generations start to have more contact to each other, so that the images of two groups towards each other become more nuanced and realistic. In the village council, Roma have their representatives. The state has launched several programs for integration of Roma into Romanian society. An increase in constructive attention to Roma issues can be noticed even on village level in recent years.

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### Host families

*Every time I visit Garla Mare, I stay at a different host family, to get a good impression of the community and to spread the benefit more equally. I pay around 5 Euros a day, which is in the village a very good compensation. I change between Romanian and Roma families.*

*The first time I stayed at a Roma family I was 21 years old. Many of my Romanian acquaintances were reluctant to let me stay at the Roma's because they were worried about my safety. If I would live with the Roma, my stuff would be stolen and I would get beaten or killed. I insisted and eventually my Romanian family helped to find a guest family. Of course, this people and the neighbours were very nice and took good care of me, as well as all the other Roma and Romanian families I stayed with.*

*Fortunately, the attitude of my Romanian guest families to my habits and new friends changed. They visited my host families, heard my stories and got used to my stubbornness. Especially young people meet in the evenings in the centre, and both groups visit each others parties and meet in the disco which is organized in the school holidays.*

After the fall of communism, the religious organisations were the first outsiders to come in Garla Mare with the intention to help the people. They have indeed improved the lives of some villagers by giving material incentives and providing education not only about religious, but also practical day to day issues like hygiene. But, by far not all people are reached.

Other humanitarian organisations seemed not to have found Garla Mare. This has the relatively good effect that the community is not 'addicted to aid', as can be observed amongst many other poor communities around the world and in Romania. The people in Garla Mare are not used to receiving aid from foreigners, thus keep on searching for means of living themselves.

Some Roma families became very wealthy in Western Europe, and shared the wealth among family members. Another source of cash money for older people is *Boys from the neighbourhood* the revalidation fund in Geneva, which compensates for the

suffering of deportations to Transdnistria by the Nazi's. Several older people are now benefiting from these funds. WECF has assisted with writing applications for compensation. At least two elderly got several thousand Euro's to sustain their old days with the help of WECF.

The president of WECF partner NGO FVC, established in the frame of the sanitation projects, is actively working with the Roma children in the school. She participates as a teacher and NGO in the governmental school programs addressing discrimination and the educational arrears of the Roma population. For example, she conducts a summer school for children with difficulties to keep up. She is also organising symposia for traditional Romanian and Roma dances, in order to increase self esteem and respect from both sides. She applied for the government adult alphabetisation project, but the interest that was expressed by potential participants was legally under the limit for the course to take place.

One of the most promising initiatives is taken by the medical assistant engaged for Roma issues. She herself is Roma, but from another, more 'Romanianized' tribe, which has lost most of its traditions and the Romani language. In her position she functions as a 'bridge' between the two communities. The young motivated woman visiting households for medical issues, and thereby knows the home situation of all members of the community very well. She has the trust of most community members.

She is also mediating in social and officials problems. She helps families with the bureaucracy and all official matters. This is necessary, many Roma are not able to read and write, thus can not accomplish the bureaucratic procedures of e.g. registering a child or applying for social allowances or insurances.



**Michaela discussing with two poor women**

WECF supports Michaela in her work. WECF has supported nine poor families to obtain birth certificates so that they can go to school. WECF provided a grant for one family to obtain connection to electricity. Small scale emergency aid is provided on an irregular base by private WECF funds.

### **Cooking for social change**

It is very difficult to reach the poorest people with projects that have a substantial impact. Extremely poor people are mostly too busy with surviving to have energy left for real change. In the beginning, WECF would not address Roma issues in Garla Mare, because they were considered too delicate. An in depth knowledge and understanding of the community, and sufficient local capacity is needed. WECF started on a very small scale working through Michaela, providing birth certificates and humanitarian aid. Now we feel that we are ready for a more consistent strategy together with the beneficiaries to address the problems.

WECF has developed the strategy to bring the poor women together by integrated cooking sessions. During the sessions, the women discuss different issues of importance like hygiene, child care, domestic violence, while they prepare some food for their families. In Garla Mare women are gathering and preparing healthy vegetarian foods under the supervision of Michaela. They are very positive about learning new practical things, and having a change in their daily life. Children are brought with them.

The outcomes will depend on the participants. It may not only include increased knowledge and awareness, but new cooperation forms between the women might emerge. Out of that might derive initiatives for improvement. The course has a direct connection to the daily lives, which is necessary to reach the women literally and to touch their minds. The meetings in a different environment are a distraction from their daily problems and can facilitate a change. Most important is that the participants give direction to the topics that will be discussed. They will be learning in a group in the



form of informal workshops. It will probably induce a process of change, which is badly needed. This change must be facilitated over a long period of time. During the project, Michaela will learn more about methodologies and will eventually be able to facilitate the process on her own. This strategy is being applied successfully in another WECF project village for a year. In Garla Mare, the process has been started and first reactions were very positive.



Michaela and some of the girls during a cooking session