



Sabina Drmaku (left) is from the Roma community and serves as a UN Community Volunteer with UNDP. Here she is seen at the Community Health Centre in the municipality of Beočini, Serbia.

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## From engagement to employment: improving the social inclusion of young Roma in Serbia

Across the European Union, leaders have pledged to fight poverty and social inclusion as part of the Europe 2020 strategy. Improving the economic and social integration of Europe's most deprived and vulnerable minority groups, such as Roma, is high on their agenda. The United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme is partnering with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to provide Roma youth with a venue for engagement as UN Community Volunteers.

In the Republic of Serbia, Roma are the largest ethnic minority and remain one of the most disenfranchised communities, often facing discrimination, social exclusion and unequal access to employment, education, housing and health services.

UNDP's 2017 regional survey on the socio-economic position of Roma in the Western Balkans highlighted that although education among Roma has improved, one of the biggest challenges for the social inclusion of Roma in Serbia was the high level of unemployment.

As a result, UNV partnered with the UNDP and UNHCR in Serbia to launch a new initiative with the goal of engaging young Roma women and men as UN Community Volunteers in local governments and other governmental or non-governmental institutions at the local level.

Through the pilot UN Community Volunteers modality, 30 young Roma were given the opportunity to develop their skills and given an initial six-month assignment across 24 municipalities, including the Ministry of Culture and Information, health and social welfare centres. They were assigned as accountants, legal advisers and social workers.

Following this period, 19 out of the 30 assignments were extended by two more months, until the end of 2018, and at the beginning of this year, 15 out of these 19 assignments were extended further to the end of April 2019.



### Selected UN Community Volunteers during training organized by UNDP and UNHCR in Belgrade, Serbia. (UNV, 2018)

In addition to gaining professional experience, the initiative enabled young Roma to increase their knowledge of human rights, discrimination, legally-invisible, stateless and internally displaced persons and returnees, and the rights of vulnerable groups (such as access to social welfare, employment and education).

Following the completion of this project, Kilino Stojkov, who served as a UN Community Volunteer at the Office for Inclusion in Novi Sad, Serbia, was encouraged and became the first from his Roma community to enrol in college, inspiring other youth from the community to continue their education.

“ UNV in Serbia has done something that has never been done before. For the first time, young Roma men and women were taken seriously. It changed our lives and gave us courage. I became the first person from my community who enrolled in college. I am proud that through this initiative I was able to open the door that was closed for many generations of Roma people in my community. -- Kilino Stojkov, UN Community Volunteer with UNDP in Novi Sad, Serbia

Sabina Drmaku, a university student and another UN Community Volunteer in this project, worked at the Community Health centre in the municipality of Beočini, Serbia. With cervical cancer being the second most common malignancy challenge for women in Serbia, Sabina visited Roma settlements to educate women on the importance of gynaecological check-ups for prevention of cervical cancer and other diseases and organized reproductive health education workshops for both women and men.

“ This project was my favourite because I feel that we’ve made an important change not only in the lives of these young people, but also in the general opinion of young and educated Roma in Serbia and on the contribution they can offer to the Serbian society. -- Jelena Milonjic, Protection Associate, UNHCR Representation in Serbia

The UN Community Volunteer category proved a success for young Roma in Serbia, and a possible flagship for expanding economic opportunities in the sub-region. Through the initiative, UNV and UNDP negotiated with local stakeholders to maintain the employment of the young Roma beyond the completion of their assignments as UN Volunteers. So far, out of the 30 people initially selected, continued employment has been secured for 8 people within different state institutions and non-governmental organizations at the local level. Due to the success of the project, UNDP and UNHCR have announced a call for applications for the new group of 15 UN Volunteers, with the aim of offering them six-months assignments from May 2019.

“ We are proud that we are contributing to employment opportunities and projects for young Roma women and men through UN Community Volunteers Modality. UNDP stands ready to provide further assistance to participating municipalities in the implementation of the strategic and action framework for the social inclusion of Roma and continue the implementation of this initiative in cooperation with UNHCR and UNV. --Bogdanka Tasev Perinovic, Project Coordinator with UNDP, Serbia



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