Drug use among the Roma minority in Romania – a missing topic on the national health agenda

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Issue/problem
Drug use among the Roma minority in Romania, as well in other countries in the region, is a very sensitive subject. Although a well-known fact, its existence is nevertheless hard to be admitted by Roma leaders, as drug use represents an additional cause for stigma for the entire Roma community.

Description of the problem
Roma drug users face double stigma and discrimination due to their ethnicity and their addiction, being most of the time less accepted by their community (Roma and non Roma), which makes them even more vulnerable to social exclusion and marginalization. Starting with December 2012, NGO Carusel has developed an advocacy project in order to sensitize the
governmental National Agency for Roma (NAR) and other two major Roma NGOs in Romania with regard to drug use among Roma. The main objective of this initiative was to prioritize the topic on the policy agenda and ensure proper funding for harm reduction activities.

Results (effects/changes)
Up to now, NAR and the two Roma NGOs have become open to the issue of drug use among Roma. Moreover, the Roma NGOs took the lead in changing the National Roma Strategy and, besides other topics, militated for the inclusion of drug use and harm reduction in the priorities of the Strategy.

Lessons:
1. Drug use among Roma is considered to be a taboo issue, so it is absolutely important to articulate key human rights and public health messages when approaching Roma leaders.
2. Reliable activists, evidence-based data and involvement of drug users in this initiative were key elements and excellent factors for change.
3. Working with the media and targeted journalists can make a difference when the public opinion is adverse to sensitive issues such as drug use.

Key messages
- Roma drug users’ rights are human rights that need to be addressed first by the Roma community in order to become a priority for the government.
- Constant updates, provision of trainings, field visits, exposure to stories and shared evidence-based data made possible the attitude change of Roma leaders towards drug use and Roma drug users.