Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups
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The GIZ and FLMH teams spent several weeks in the five project countries of the Western Balkans to capture the stories of local people.
Storytelling as a concept offers a framework that allows transferring information, and at the same time, sparks intimacy and empathy. Personal accounts, supplemented by pictures and quotes make for an easier access to a topic – easier than the formal reports public institutions or governmental organisations are usually producing.

Therefore, the regional project “Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups” (SoRi) of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH together with FLMH, a Communications Agency from Berlin, has developed the 13 articles accompanied by documentary photographs that are assembled in this booklet.

The aim of this booklet is to present the regional project’s approaches and results to professionals in the development cooperation context, from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and other development partners, to experts and practitioners from governmental and non-governmental cooperation partners in the countries, to members of the target groups, as well as to the wider public in Germany.

In the period from February to April 2018 teams from GIZ and FLMH travelled to the five project countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Macedonia, and Serbia) and conducted interviews with the project partners and beneficiaries.

The selection of short articles set in the five countries of the Western Balkan, collected during these visits, tell stories of “change makers”: individuals who, through their personalities or their actions, embody the values and the potential of SoRi.

These articles tell stories of success according to the regional project’s four fields of action: 1. Social Services; 2. Information and Awareness-raising; 3. Financing of Local Social Services, and 4. Mutual Learning.

The first university student from the Roma community in Bijeljina, the “Mother of Šutka” who runs a day care centre for children on the streets in Šuto Orizari, one of the employees in the social enterprise for catering in Prishtina and many others are active and involved individuals who provide the fabric for the regional project “Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups” stories about working on social issues in five countries in the Western Balkans in order to foster the inclusion of vulnerable people and to improve their living conditions.

We are convinced that you will enjoy the stories on these change makers who are shaping a future worth living for everyone.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.
The doctor, Arif Pini, knows how discrimination feels. He was the only one to have been denied specialist medical training by the Macedonian state in his year group. Only when he received a grant from abroad was he finally able to become a specialist for internal medicine. Today he cares for disadvantaged Roma families in his home land.

‘We have to go to the people. To where they live. Where they need us.’
New approaches facilitate social work in Macedonia

In the Western Balkans, many towns and cities struggle to ensure everyone has equal access to social services. In Tetovo, a town in Macedonia, an advisory team is now taking the help directly to where it is needed.
A swollen knee, two patients with back pain, one with an upset stomach, two with heartburn, one person requiring a tetanus vaccination, plus a large group of people seeking treatment for high blood pressure – Doctor Arif Pini has his hands full. Today, he is visiting a Roma settlement on the outskirts of Tetovo, Macedonia, to provide medical care to neighbourhood residents.

Arif Pini is a member of an advisory team, a structure that also involves Sonce, a nongovernmental organisation. Sonce, which means ‘sun’ in English, is an organisation that mainly caters to Macedonian Roma, a segment within the population that suffers from discrimination and is pushed to the fringes of society in many Western Balkan countries. Arif Pini has himself suffered from discrimination. As the only graduate of his year, he was not admitted to medical school by the Macedonian state after completing his medical studies. “Because I’m Roma,” he says. “In the end, it was only through a scholarship from abroad that I could become an internist.” For the past three years, Arif Pini, Sonce staff and local social workers have been driving out to Roma families to provide them with advice and support, by helping with benefits applications, school registration or health problems for example.
The people they visit are poor. Hardly anybody here has a higher secondary school leaving certificate, a secure job or even enough money to get by. Most Roma also have no access to health care services. According to Arif Pini, ‘most only seek medical attention when it’s already too late’. Many Roma have no health insurance and can’t afford a doctor’s appointment. A further problem is that there are nowhere near enough doctors in Macedonia. Many have moved to countries where they can earn a higher salary.

The solution – a partnership between the city council and an NGO

For the city council of Tetovo, this problem is not new. However, a lack of money and personnel has meant efforts to improve the health care provision to socially disadvantaged groups have repeatedly stopped short of the mark. Things only changed with the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. The project promotes innovative approaches to social work aimed at improving the living conditions of people from socially marginalised groups in Western Balkan countries.

One such new approach was to create synergies between the city council and nongovernmental organisations. The NGO contributes to municipal social work and offers services the city itself cannot provide. In Tetovo, this idea brought about a partnership between the city administration and the Sonce NGO, which receives support from the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. They worked together to identify neighbourhoods with particularly needy populations and developed a plan to improve the services delivered to them which includes medical attention. Project partner efforts focused on developing the concept of mobile teams that visit the identified neighbourhoods and offer immediate counselling or medical attention to the people there. Doctor Arif Pini is a member of one of these teams.

In Tetovo, the Sonce NGO and the municipality have set up mobile teams so they can reach the people more easily.
‘We don’t wait for people to go and see a doctor; we take the doctor to them.’

For Ahmet Quazimi from the city council, the project has been a huge success: ‘Through working with Sonce, we were finally able to offer help where it was needed. If people don’t go to see a doctor, or if there is no doctor near where they live, then we take the doctor to them.’

However, this new approach cannot fully resolve every issue. ‘Many people still have reservations about, or are even afraid of, talking to municipal and NGO staff, even when we visit them at home,’ says Quazimi. For the Tetovo city council, having Arif Pini on board makes a considerable difference as he is Roma so many patients see him as one of their own.

As Arif Pini is Roma himself, the people consider him to be one of their own. That’s why Biljana Dijanisieva of the GIZ regional programme Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups calls him the ‘ice breaker’.

One of Arif Pini’s patients who benefits from the mobile teams’ work in the Roma settlements.
The programme helps assert the rights of socially disadvantaged groups

Arif Pini also helps to break down reservations about outreach teams through his work and the direct contact with the patients.

‘Arif Pini is our icebreaker,’ says Biljana Dijanisieva from the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, which facilitated the partnership between the city council and Sonic. ‘He builds trust and opens doors. With him on board, we are finally able to reach all of Tetovo’s families.’ This will help ensure the project achieves its target which is securing the social rights of marginalised groups – in this case, the local Roma population.
A routine day and primarily the affection which the former street children experience in the state-run accommodation, allows them to blossom.

Out to school and not to beg – child protection is a major concern in Elbasan.
A protected space for the children of Elbasan

In the Albanian town of Elbasan, the city council works closely with local nongovernmental organisations to protect children. Whether it’s at the counselling centre, during the trips carried out by advisory teams or at the jointly run child day care centre, the staff are always engaged with the town’s children and families. A supra-regional meeting to share experiences with colleagues in Kosovo has provided a further boost.
One of Nadire Kreka’s most recent cases was brought to her attention by none other than the deputy mayor of Elbasan, who noticed a boy begging at tables while he was out having dinner at a restaurant. Nadire Kreka is director of the department of child protection and equality in Elbasan, a city in central Albania. Her job is to help neglected or at-risk children who are begging on the streets and in shops, trawling through bins looking for things to sell or simply loitering outside because their parents are too poor to care for them at home. There are many such children in Elbasan; so many that the city council, and therefore the deputy mayor too, wants to help protect them.

‘Our door is also open to the people of Elbasan. Every day parents come to us and ask for advice or support for themselves and their children. However many also simply come by to say hello.’

New cases are discussed with those involved from the most diverse departments and disciplines. In this way knowledge and resources are bundled together.
The shared aim: permanently getting children off the streets

In collaboration with local nongovernmental organisations, the town has set up a free child day care centre to get these children permanently off the streets. Many children come here to eat, play and learn, and a number of them benefit enormously from the daily routine and the love they receive.

At the day care centre the children are well looked after, here they can eat, play and learn together.

Nadire Kreka has decided to present the case of the boy in the restaurant at the next ‘large meeting’. This is the name given to interdisciplinary meetings between colleagues from the city council and the participating nongovernmental organisations. Large not only because of the large number of people involved, but also because this is where people from different departments and disciplinary backgrounds meet. This ensures that all of the city council bodies which could potentially be involved can listen to the needs of these street children. ‘We are pooling our knowledge and energy,’ says Nadire Kreka, ‘and this has allowed us to become far more efficient.’

A major success of these joint efforts is when children continue to go to school. A good education helps to secure their future.
At the meeting, they discuss recent cases, determine which families and children to prioritise and decide who deals with what tasks. Moreover, they need to plan the trips undertaken by the advisory teams, who go to the places in the town where these children are most likely to be. ‘We go directly to the children,’ says Kreka. This is the only way to reach them. ‘Here, we can make contact, talk and take care of them.’ With a bit of luck, they will also meet the boy the deputy mayor pointed out. ‘Then we could look for his family and find out how to support them.’ Kreka would prefer the boy to go school again, instead of begging on the streets. ‘That would be a positive outcome,’ she says.

Making sure the door is always open

As important as these advisory teams are, nothing can replace an office with an open door, says Nadire Kreka. ‘Our door is always open for all families from Elbasan. Each day, parents visit us asking for advice or assistance for themselves and for their children. Sometimes they also just pass by to say hello and chat – that’s how well we know each other.’

Nadire Kreka and the members of her team have established a particularly good relationship with the parents of the children who come to the day care centre. One of these women is Tatjana Hida, a 38-year-old Romni woman whose son comes to the centre located directly opposite the department of child protection. Every now and then, when Tatjana Hida drops off her son in the morning, she stops at Nadire Kreka’s office on her way out. ‘I have learnt to ask for help when we have a problem in our family,’ she says. Before, it would have been unthinkable for her to ask for assistance. ‘I wouldn’t have known who to turn to either. But I trust the people here. They have never let us down.’
The support Kreka and her colleagues receive from Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups the GIZ regional project means that they can continue to do their work well and efficiently. The project aims to improve the living conditions of at-risk groups in the Western Balkans. The project has offered training opportunities and arranged a meeting for the staff of the city council and local nongovernmental organisations, so they can share experiences with similar organisations in neighbouring Kosovo. ‘Oh, yes, we definitely learnt a lot from that,’ Nadine Kreka says enthusiastically. ‘Hearing how our colleagues in Kosovo identify cases, categorise them and then follow them up helped us see things in a completely new light.’
The catering company ‘eShpis’ was born during workshop breaks, when the women cooked together and noticed that they enjoyed it and that they can do it really well.
Social enterprise is more than just business

Social enterprises have a dual-purpose mission: to generate profits and help society tackle specific challenges. For an NGO, founding such an enterprise is therefore an obvious step.
‘I never would have thought I’d be setting up a business someday.’ Belgiyzare Muharremi, the director of Open Doors, a Kosovan NGO, pauses briefly. But if you consider that part of our mission has always been to help women gain financial independence, it’s an obvious and logical thing to do.’ Established in 1999, Open Doors is a Kosovan aid organisation that cares for women traumatised by war. Over and above providing help in emergency settings, it offers psycho-social support and advocates for women’s rights. At its heart, its work has therefore always been about protecting women’s lives and improving their situation – a mission that Open Doors hopes its catering business eShpis can now contribute to. Setting up the business, Ms Muharremi says, was merely an obvious step forward. ‘If we can’t also help women become financially independent, we might just as well stop doing our work.’

Over the past few weeks, eShpis has set out to provide its catering services across Pristina with a staff of eight employees – all of whom are formerly unemployed women. In terms of work, prospects in Pristina are dire; women seeking employment will only rarely find a job. Only a marginal fraction of those belonging to Kosovo’s ‘vulnerable groups’ – the Roma minority, war refugees, returnees and women – are able to secure regular employment.

How a good idea evolved into an enterprise

‘The idea behind eShpis grew from the workshops for women that we offer on a regular basis,’ says Ms Muharremi. The participants – many of whom have left their Kosovan villages and settled in Pristina – would spend their breaks in the NGO’s kitchen cooking meals together, and at one point realised they were quite good at it, and that they were enjoying themselves. ‘At that stage, it wasn’t an established project,’ Ms Muharremi adds. ‘That is, until the GIZ became aware of what we were doing.’

At the time, the GIZ was active in Pristina with its regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. Its aim is to improve the living conditions of people from socially disadvantaged groups across the countries of the Western Balkans. The project brought Open Doors together with FIQ, a foundation that specialises in building social enterprises – pioneering work that it is now introducing to Kosovo.

‘We wanted to create a successful model that is easy to adapt – a useful model that people can learn from,’ says Kushtrim Puka, who works with FIQ. His team sat down together and
fleshed out ideas. But, more importantly, FIQ took the time to explore these ideas in depth and think them through from various entrepreneurial perspectives. It then went on to substantiate them with market analyses and feasibility studies, and finally added a marketing strategy and a business plan.

This is Mr Puka’s area of expertise; he used to work in the private sector. ‘I’ve founded businesses in that sector, too.’ But the fact that he can now use his business skills to deliver social change with FIQ is something that he himself considers to be ‘perfect’. ‘I found this aspect very important,’ Belgiyzare Muharremi says in agreement. ‘I’m an economist. I wanted FIQ to support us in moving forward, and I wanted a sound business plan to avoid any mistakes. At the end of the day, I’m responsible to the women, our organisation and our supporters.’ In this way, the cooperation between Open Doors, the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups and FIQ fostered the emergence of the social enterprise eShpis.

For Kushtrim Puka, an employee at FIQ, it was particularly important to work out a model from which you can learn. For eShpis he went through the standards process for setting up a company – from market analyses to developing a business plan.
Social enterprises can create change

The idea at the heart of a social enterprise is to plough some of the profits back into the venture and encourage further investment. The remaining funds are used by Open Doors to extend the NGO’s reach and empower more women. Other social enterprises follow similar models, but essentially, it’s about much more. ‘Take a look at the women we’re employing,’ says Mr Puka, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. ‘We’ve not only built a promising enterprise. These women here, they used to be shy, all of them. None of them wanted to be in the spotlight. And today?’

Today, eShpis has a staff of eight self-confident women. ‘I can pay for my children’s schoolbooks,’ one worker reports happily. ‘I earn enough to buy all our clothes and can even afford our medicine when we need it. And, to be honest, since I’ve been bringing home my own income, my husband has become much more respectful. Since then, he’s started asking me for my opinion whenever there are decisions that need to be taken.’

Promoting local economic development, alternative funding models for civil society institutions and empowering disadvantaged people – these activities highlight how valuable the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups is, not just in Kosovo, but in the other Balkan countries where it also supports social enterprises. In the Albanian city of Kukës, for instance, there are plans to establish a potato processing plant to produce chips and crisps. And some 200 kilometres south, in Elbasan, an initiative intends to recycle used vegetable oil from restaurants and produce biodiesel. Each of these projects immediately generates a profit for the organisations carrying them out, but pri-
The exchange of experience with other social enterprises helps eShpis women to further develop their own company.

Primarily it is the people who find work there that benefit the most: a job in a social enterprise can be a first step towards regular employment.

In Serbia’s capital Belgrade, for instance, an NGO opened a Bagel shop in 2015 in order to fund its fight against human trafficking and its support programmes for female victims of domestic violence. Since then, 25 women have found work there – all of them were previously victims of domestic violence, and almost all of the women who were trained there moved on to find regular employment.

In order to allow the project in Pristina to benefit from the insights gathered in Belgrade, the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups not only supports the social enterprises themselves, but also organises events that provide the projects and their participants with opportunities to meet and share experiences. ‘We’ve really learned a lot from our colleagues in Belgrade,’ Ms Muharremi says. Without support from the GIZ and its regional project, Open Doors would not have been able to fund the exchange, let alone build its catering business.
Lawyer Eda Noçka knows the Albanian legal system inside and out – and the government’s attempts to fight against corruption. With her colleagues from the ALTRI NGO, she campaigns for reforms.
Social rights are human rights

While it is important to support marginalised groups, this will not deliver long-term solutions to social ills. Moreover, it is necessary to ensure that social marginalisation is no longer seen as an individual problem and that social rights are recognised as human rights.
For many years, Eda Noçka worked as a civil servant in Albania. She knows the Albanian legal system, and its problems, inside and out. For years, she has been closely monitoring the attempts to reform and the struggle against inefficiency and corruption that so severely hamper the state’s capacity to take action. Together with a group of fellow lawyers, Eda Noçka set up the nongovernmental organisation called ALTRI (Albanian Legal and Territorial Research Institute) in 2011 and became its director. Since then, she and her colleagues have sought to reform the Albanian legal system.

ALTRI is currently investigating the legal position of marginalised groups in Albania. In collaboration with the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, ALTRI has developed proposals to make sure that marginalised people know about their rights and how to use them – through ombudswomen and ombudsmen, who are called Avokati I popullit in Albania, for example. ‘Our joint project focuses on the role played by state ombudsmen,’ Eda Noçka explains. In Tirana and seven other Albanian cities, citizens can approach the Avokati with their complaints about discrimination and violation of rights.

For this to happen, however, people need to first be aware of their rights. They have to know what they are legally entitled to, how their cases will be treated, as well as the criteria on which public bodies will base their decisions. ALTRI and the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups also aim to ensure that the relevant bodies grant people’s social rights in full – and this is where things get difficult in Albania. Roma people, for example, or returnees to Albania are practically ignored by public bodies: it might be because they are Roma people, because they do not have the proper documents or because they cannot provide past school reports for their children. They fall through the administrative gaps, and it is precisely these gaps that ALTRI and the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups want to close.
Needless to say, this approach has not gone down particularly well with the municipal authorities; the project partners have therefore sought to establish a dialogue with all those involved and to develop collaborative solutions. But it is not always easy. Regional offices, in particular, are woefully understaffed, says Noçka. ‘We can’t do much more than forward complaints to the main office in Tirana.’ But they, too, are already overstretched.

If the ombud’s offices are to work efficiently, a great deal will still need to change. In principle, the Avokati should be capable of proactively investigating cases when complaints are submitted. Although the constitution underpins their mandate and they are permitted to intervene in political debate, this has so far only been successfully carried out in a very limited number of cases. Recently, after the police cleared an informal Roma settlement in Tirana, ombudswomen and ombudsmen presented a report on the case in parliament. Subsequently, in March 2018, when protests against plans to introduce a road toll in Kukës turned violent, observers from the ombud’s office were present and reported on the events. ALTRI aims to strengthen such civil society control mechanisms and support the Avokati in comprehensively fulfilling their political mandate.

This will also require them to recruit more staff. ‘It’s not enough to simply have three paid posts in the respective department in Tirana,’ says Eda Noçka. ‘Evidently, the state has to show greater commitment. But we also need the appropriate tools’. And it is these very tools that ALTRI strives to develop with the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups.

The idea is to streamline procedures nationally through a set of procedural guidelines and by defining a method on which local offices can base their work. Ideally, these standards will provide Avokati with the tools to continuously observe the human rights situation at the local level and provide regular reports. The GIZ regional project known as Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups and ALTRI have already carried out the necessary preliminary work. The legal framework and the conditions in individual towns have been evaluated and provide the basis for a procedural proposal, which has already been discussed with the national ombudsman. A final draft is now on the table and has been released for discussion. But what is already clear is that regular and independent reports can significantly strengthen social rights.
He didn’t take the normal route for a young Roma man – out of a one-time unemployed man a would-be law student has emerged. Asmir Husić has to thank himself most of all for this but it was also a happy coincidence.

“Do something!” has become Asmir’s motto for life. It saved him from desperation.
‘Nobody can take what you have learned away’

Asmir Husić is no stranger to discrimination and hostility and knows only too well the resignation felt by many young Roma people who don’t ever expect much from life. His maxim ‘Get up and be active’ and his lucky encounter with the Vermont nongovernmental organisation not only gave the young man a more positive outlook but have also turned him into a role model for many other young Roma men.
Asmir Husić still lives with his parents and his younger brother in a house in the small town of Gornji Rahić, not far from Brčko, in the young state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Asmir could afford to move out, maybe even into a house of his own. For now, however, he prefers to continue living with his parents. After all, he still has work to do.

Asmir wants to give something back to the Vermont NGO, which gave him so much support and this is what ties him to Brčko. This assistance turned him, a jobless and hopeless young Roma man, into an aspiring law student. This summer, Asmir will turn 24. When he attended primary school at the end of the 1990s, he was the only child from a Roma family. ‘Discrimination was rife,’ Asmir recalls. However, his goal was clear. When he not only took the decision to finish secondary school, and then go to university, his parents immediately backed his decision. They did this despite the fact that they would certainly have benefited from the extra money if Asmir had started working. His father had spent half his life working as a car bodywork specialist before diabetes forced him into early retirement. Now the family struggles to get by on his pension.
The typical life of a young Roma - socially marginalised and out of work

There was no money to allow him to study. The family could barely afford to pay the bus fare to Brčko, which is 16 kilometres away. Paying for Asmir to study was out of the question. Asmir’s dream fell apart. He did not want the typical life that awaits young Roma people in Bosnia and Herzegovina - bad jobs, terrible working conditions or unemployment. Asmir found a job and tried to earn a living, but when his employer decided not to pay him one day, this nearly broke him. He lost all hope and became depressed.

‘Something had to change,’ he recalls. ‘I was constantly telling myself to do something. And that’s what I did.’ In 2015, in the Brčko youth centre, Asmir stumbled across Vermont, an organisation that has been working with internally displaced persons, returnees and, in particular, Roma people since the end of the Bosnian war. ‘I immediately knew they were the people I needed to meet.’ They offered Asmir guidance and it didn’t take long before he himself was offering advice. He now mans the organisation’s mobile info help desk, making sure Roma know their rights.

The idea to set up mobile info desks came from Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, the GIZ regional project, which works to empower socially marginalised groups in the Western Balkans and improve their living conditions. The project also provides support to the Vermont NGO, by offering advice, organising workshops and training sessions and, through coming up with ideas such as the mobile info desk, helping to develop new initiatives.

Asmir’s message

Asmir now sits at one of these desks and encourages people from the neighbourhood to become active and work as mediators for their community. Many of them are young Roma people and, in particular, returnees. Asmir also goes where the authorities, except for the police, effectively do not go, for example to Prutače, a settlement in his hometown, where most residents are Roma. He tries to convince the parents there to send their children to school. The project is gradually bearing fruit. In Asmir’s old primary school, where he had once been the only Roma child, there are now twelve children from Roma families.

‘We Roma, each and every one of us, can achieve a lot,’ Asmir says. ‘But to do that, we first need to try.’ He explains that many Roma do not believe in themselves or their opportunities. ‘From my own experience, I know how hard it is to stand up against external and internal discrimination. But I also know that we can succeed if we really set our minds to it.’ Asmir’s goals are now more ambitious. He wants to complete a master’s degree in law. Even if this means enrolling in a distance-learning course, he is confident that he will receive a scholarship to study as a regular student at the University of Tuzla. At the moment, he is still working for Vermont, manning the info desk for the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, but his path is laid out before him. ‘Nobody can take what you have learned away,’ Asmir says. ‘That’s my message to all young Roma people!’

‘We can do it! We can stand up to discrimination. We have to believe in ourselves.’
Only just a few years ago, Ibrahim Musliu would have most preferred to give up his job as a social worker. But then social work was radically reformed in the town of Ferizaj – and Musliu is once again confident that he can really achieve something.
Why social work in Ferizaj is always carried out in teams today

Ferizaj, a town in southern Kosovo, has completely changed the way in which it provides social services. Under the guidance of a nongovernmental organisation which promotes good governance and political education, municipal staff from different departments have begun working together rather than in silos.
Until only a few years ago, Ibrahim Musliu was ready to quit his job. He was frustrated and disillusioned by the work he was doing in the welfare office of Ferizaj, a town in southern Kosovo. Every day he worked to improve the lives of the people who came to see him and he was worn out. He wanted things to change, especially for the children, and to offer them an alternative to the stark choice they faced between a shabby home or sleeping rough. Yet, he felt he could not do very much on his own working for a public body that lacked proper organisation and in which everybody worked as if they were on a treadmill.

Today, Ibrahim Musliu radiates optimism when he walks into his office in the morning. Finally, he has the feeling that his work can actually make a difference. As before, he takes care of neglected children, tries to find foster families for orphans or to convince parents that their children ought to go to school, rather than begging on the streets. And his efforts are increasingly bearing fruit.

**New approaches to municipal welfare**

Musliu and the children he takes care of owe this important change to the GIZ Regional Project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups that promotes the social rights of minorities in Western Balkan countries. In Ferizaj, the project initiated a partnership between the welfare office and the nongovernmental organisation INPO, which brought about a stringent reform of municipal social services. INPO stands for Iniciativa për Progres. This ‘Initiative for Progress’ promotes good governance and political education in the Kosovan towns of Gjilan and...
Ferizaj. Together, the new partners have broken up old structures, abolished inefficient and complicated procedures and essentially reinvented social services in Ferizaj.

The introduction of interdisciplinary teams has probably been the biggest change. Instead of strictly sticking to the boundaries of traditional fields of municipal social services, staff from multiple public bodies and different disciplinary backgrounds now work closely together. Ibrahim Musliu, for example, is now in constant dialogue with a colleague from the family care department, the department for returnee families, welfare assistance, a youth psychologist and a school supervisor. Interdisciplinary teams visit and assist families in need in their homes.

‘I used to have to try to get things done all by myself and was often powerless because a social worker can’t really help a family when they’re on their own. For many issues, I simply wasn’t the right person to ask,’ says Ibrahim Musliu. ‘Today, I can turn to my colleagues, and we obviously also have the support of INPO, so we can do a lot for local people. We are finally able to offer a comprehensive service.’
Interdisciplinary teams – key to success

The success of the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups builds on the pillars of interdisciplinary workgroups and co-operation between the city council and local NGOs, a model that has since been exported to other Western Balkan towns. In Ferizaj, these teams now jointly discuss all cases. All the team members contribute from their vantage point; they carefully analyse each individual case and develop the best solutions together. Of course, keeping all team members updated, even if individual staff members are no longer working on a specific case, is and remains key. This approach creates a shared responsibility and commitment, creates awareness of the work of others among people who used to operate alone and offers opportunities to develop new solutions that may not have previously been apparent.

Ibrahim Musliu is currently working on one such case where the parents of a boy decided to take their son out of school because it was too far away. The family lives just outside of town, and to reach the closest school, the boy had to walk for several hours a day. Previously, there was little Ibrahim Musliu could have done working alone, but working with the school supervisor and the INPO team, he managed to convince the parents that an education was essential for their son and organised a lift so he could get to school.

Instead of working on a case alone, Musliu discusses all the possibilities with the team and finds the best solution.
Social work in Ferizaj has completely changed. All those involved have the feeling that they are much more successful than before. They can help more people. That is what counts.

Now Musliu the social worker is also hearing about cases which would previously have evaded him.

For Ibrahim Musliu, the partnership between the welfare office and nongovernmental organisations has therefore vastly improved the situation. ‘Sometimes the INPO staff are much closer to the families and have a far better understanding of their problems. We would not have noticed as many cases if it hadn’t been for the people from INPO,’ he says. He now has more cases on his desk, but definitely not more stress. ‘Even if there is a lot to do, the new team structure means we achieve a lot more than we used to.’ And, in the end, that’s what counts for Ibrahim Musliu.
If people tell me that they’re doing better today - this motivates me to carry on.

The child care worker, Marina Mechmedow, works in the Roma Community Centre in the Macedonian town of Kumanovo.
What returnees need most urgently

For their countries of origin, people who emigrate appear to have vanished. This creates a huge problem for the thousands of people returning to the countries of the Western Balkans. Not only do they generally have to start again from scratch; often, they also do not have the documents that could secure them and their children a fresh start. Thankfully, there is one organisation in Macedonia that is helping returnees resolve their issues – both big and small.
The situation is particularly dramatic for the children of returnees. Marina Mechmedow supports them and their parents through words and deeds. But things are set to change in Kumanovo. The nongovernmental organisation DROM, which means 'street' in Romani, has been struggling to improve the living conditions of Roma here for over twenty years. Since 2015, its staff has increasingly focused on the challenges faced by returnees. They receive support from the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups which aims to strengthen the social and human rights of disadvantaged groups in the countries of the Western Balkans. With the help of the project, DROM was able to open a child day care centre for disadvantaged children in one of the city's community centres. Currently, around 30 three- to five-year-old children come to the day care centre. Professional kindergarten teachers take care of them and they have books and toys at their disposal which are things that most of these children do not have at home.
Workshops for returnees help raise awareness of opportunities and rights

‘We thought about what returnees needed most urgently,’ says Miki Ristovski, a project coordinator at DROM. ‘This is how we set up the day care centre.’ In particular, the centre extends its services to families whose children are not accepted into state day care centres because they do not have the proper documents. ‘We believe,’ says Miki Ristovski, ‘that if we foster their talents at an early age, children will also do better later at school.’

‘The children who come here are from the local Roma communities, which tend to be socially isolated,’ says Marina Mechmedow. ‘At school, they will first have to learn Macedonian, which immediately puts them at a disadvantage to the other children. That’s why I only speak Macedonian with them. But as I am Romni and speak Romani, it’s easier for me to talk to their parents and gain their trust.’ Organising parent workshops is an important aspect of the work with returnee families. The GIZ regional project ‘Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups’ and DROM have jointly developed a concept for this. Once a month, at least fifteen people – men and women – meet for two days to discuss their problems and receive information and advice.

Marina Mechmedow is involved here too. ‘The workshops are designed to be as open as possible and take place in a friendly atmosphere,’ she says. ‘We talk about everything, from how to fill out particular forms to the importance of identity documents; we even discuss human rights. Ultimately, we want people to become more independent so that they are aware of their social rights and stand up for them.’
Ahmet Jasharovski is proud of having been able to do something. In the long term, however, he wants to ensure that no one will be forced to emigrate any more. In order to achieve this, Macedonia will have to recognise social rights as human rights.

Macedonia could solve its problems by itself ... if people no longer had to emigrate

DROM has been providing assistance to around 200 returnee families – around eight hundred people since 2015. They often maintain contact, even after workshops have ended. Marina Mechmedow often bumps into former participants on the streets of the local neighbourhood. When she does, she is eager to hear how things are going. 'If I see them, and they tell me how their situation has improved,' says Mechmedow, 'then that makes me feel really great. It motivates me to continue working.' Meanwhile, back in the DROM office, emails come in from Roma in Germany, telling the organisation that they will soon be returning to Macedonia (voluntarily or involuntarily) and asking for resettlement assistance.

Ahmet Jasharovski, the director of DROM, is optimistic: ‘Things are changing in Kumanovo thanks to our work.’ But he has his sights set even higher. ‘We don’t want people to emigrate in the first place; they should be able to stay here in this country,’ he says. DROM, which is a small organisation, has six open posts – and Macedonia is a country with high unemployment rates. ‘So many people leave,’ complains Jasharovski, ‘because they see no opportunities.’ Nonetheless, he is convinced that Macedonia could solve its problems on its own. ‘If social rights are recognised and implemented as human rights, nobody will feel forced to emigrate.’
For people returning, making a new start is difficult. Many returnees are completely ignored by the government. For many years they have relied upon false promises - their dreams of a better life abroad have come to nothing and after they return they are faced with nothing.

The work of DROM aims to make people more independent so that they themselves can stand up for their social rights.

Reintegration is seldom easy, particularly for older returnees.

The older returnees have quite different problems to those of the younger Macedonians. Finding a job is getting harder and harder. Health problems occur more frequently with increasing age.
The project deals with a reform of social work in north Serbia. An internet-based computer program will help process cases faster, more efficiently and with more oversight in the future.
New methods to enhance the efficiency of social services

Weak state structures impact the efficiency of social services. The effects are palpable at the local level, where people are expected to work with insufficient funds, too few staff and apply outdated methods. In northern Serbia, the introduction of a computer program aims to overhaul the provision of municipal social services.
If you want to learn something about the future of social services in Serbia, you need to go to the Novi Sad football stadium. The nongovernmental organisation Support to Sustainable Communities (SSC) still has its offices here and its team has recently embarked on a mission to reform social work in Serbia in co-operation with an institute in the autonomous northern Serbian province Vojvodina and the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups.

‘Quite a lot has gone wrong with social protection in this country,’ says Radomir Šovljanski. He advises the participating government institute, the Provincial Institute for Social Protection, which coordinates and provides expert monitoring of the co-operation between state social institutions and NGOs. ‘Small local welfare agencies are staffed by maybe two or three people,’ Šovljanski explains. This is what he means when he says: ‘Quite a lot has gone wrong.’ ‘Not only are they often expected to care for hundreds of families, they are also required to write detailed reports on all of their cases twice a month.’ These reports are sent in from 44 municipalities and over 100 institutions to Šovljanski’s institute – most of them on paper. They are checked for errors, retyped and formatted. ‘It sometimes takes months to prepare such a report and forward it to the ministry,’ says Šovljanski, who eventually began to look for ways to simplify data collection, speed up the process and make it more efficient.

‘No one has more work than before. The work with the programme’s completely uncomplicated.’
Digitisation increases efficiency

Solving structural issues and introducing new administration methods in Vojvodina is, as is the case everywhere else in the world, a government responsibility, yet one which so far it has been unable to fulfil. But support for the task is now being offered by the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups which promotes innovative approaches to social work in the Western Balkans to improve the living conditions of socially disadvantaged groups. In a joint project, the NGO Support to Sustainable Communities (SSC) was able to develop computer software which is currently in the final stages of testing in just a matter of months – all from its base at the stadium. Soon, the NGO will move to a new office, where it will have access to training rooms. In the meantime, the many welfare agencies of Vojvodina are to record every detail of their many welfare cases over this internet-based program. ‘It is easy,’ says Marija Krsmanović from SSC. ‘Filling out the input form only requires ticking boxes or filling in numbers. Where necessary, notes can be added to explain the context.’ Nobody needs to do any more work than before, she says, ‘but we have a centralised database that we evaluate, link and prepare for the reports’. Radomir Šovljanski is confident: ‘This approach will make processing cases more efficient and improve the basis for political decision-making.’

In future, all cases in Vojvodina should be covered by the ‘Aurora’ programme. This will significantly improve the social work in the region.

Processing the cases of the families in their care more effectively and more swiftly - this was the aim of the project as far as Radomir Šovljanski is concerned.

It is of course the state’s responsibility to solve the problems under its administration. However, for the time being non-governmental organisations, supported by GIZ have taken on this work in Vojvodina – for the good of the people who live here.
The child psychologist Elsada Horozić looks after people who are socially and territorially disadvantaged near Tuzla. The social workers go directly to the settlements - a completely new yet highly successful approach.
'You have to at least make the effort to see for yourself what is going on'

Public services are often mapped out by civil servants sitting behind desks. But if their services are to be effective, they first have to understand the needs of the people they want to help. So what can be done in countries where many don’t even know what they are legally entitled to and public bodies are often viewed as hostile? Bosnia and Herzegovina now applies social mapping as the method of choice to bring those in need and social workers together.
Work for Adnan Drndić and Elsada Horozić begins with a trip to the countryside. They are a team working for the nongovernmental organisation called Zemlja Djece u BiH, which translates into English as 'The land of children in Bosnia and Herzegovina'. Together, the social worker and the child psychologist reach out to socially and territorially marginalised people who live outside the city. Like the other Zemlja Djece u BiH teams, Drndić and Horozić drive directly to the slums to offer residents advice and provide support.

They have a lot to do in Kiseljak, a settlement next to the Modrač reservoir. Around 1,000 people live here in ramshackle homes; half of them are Roma. There is only occasionally a bus to Tuzla which is 15 kilometres away, and a small kiosk where residents can buy food. ‘90% of the people here want to leave,’ says Drndić. ‘If they had the means, they would pack their bags immediately.’ But hardly anybody here does; only a handful have regular incomes, and people can barely survive on their benefit payments, which are often paid months late.

Outreach work means going to people who would otherwise not come to you

Adnan Drndić knows all of this only too well. In 2013, he began a project of social mapping in and around Tuzla. He went knocking on doors, talking to people, listening to their problems and gradually getting an idea of their social situation. To increase the level of detail, he developed questionnaires: how many families live here? How many children do you have and do they go to school? What legal status do people have? Do they have birth certificates and are they officially registered? How are their homes equipped and what are their immediate needs? There are a lot of things Adnan Drndić wants to know – and his questions provide the basis for an entirely new approach to social work.

Meanwhile, the GIZ regional project on Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, which promotes innovative approaches to social work in the Western Balkans, has applied the social mapping concept in other towns. They call this approach, which takes welfare offices directly to local people, outreach work. Previously, city councils had no direct contact with the communities they were dealing with; they did not even know how many people were living there. ‘The numerous action plans applied in Bosnia during the past years have had no effect,’ Drndić reports. ‘You have to at least make the effort to see for yourself what is going on. Today we have precise figures and know the people personally behind them.’ Planning the necessary material and staff resources, as well as the assistance required, can be done in a much more precise way.
People who know their rights will also use them

This outreach work also had another positive outcome: people in the settlements now have more information – they know who to talk to and which conditions they have to fulfil to receive assistance. ‘For people who generally experience state bureaucracy as either indifferent or hostile, simply knowing that a particular form exists is already a great help,’ says Adnan Drndić.

Some people in the neighbourhood who are convinced about the benefits of this method, are now getting involved as social mapping volunteers. They take care of their neighbourhood, visit other families at their homes and help them fill out social cards that include all the important data and can be presented during appointments at the welfare office. For adults who can often only barely read and write, if at all, this provides important assistance. Eventually, volunteers may go on to become mediators and advisers, settle conflicts and convince parents to send their children to school so that they do not end up on the streets.

‘Our outreach work has been a huge success,’ says child psychologist Elsada Horozić, who accompanies Adnan Drndić on his trips. By going to meet people, listening to them, and providing advice and support, they have gained a lot of trust. The result is a clear rise in the self-esteem of the people who live here. ‘Now 90% of the Roma children here attend school fairly regularly. This is also a result of social mapping and our work with volunteers.’
When working with disadvantaged children, contact with the parents is particularly important. Therefore, the social workers ask the mothers and fathers for support. If they can work well together, this also benefits the children.
Social work with children is also aimed at parents

To improve the living conditions of an entire social group, it makes sense to start by helping their children. Numerous organisations in the Balkan countries have therefore opened day care centres that take in children from socially disadvantaged groups. One desired side effect is the ability to establish close contact to parents.
Some call Irena Velkoska the ‘mother of Šutka’, and when you visit her at work, it becomes clear why. ‘I always try to do as much as I can. If there is no more food, then I bring some from home,’ says Velkoska. ‘You can’t just shut the doors and leave the kids to fend for themselves.’ Velkoska works in Šuto Orizari, a neighbourhood in the north of the Macedonian capital of Skopje. It is the largest Roma settlement in Europe and the only municipality where Romani is the official language. In 2006, the nongovernmental organisation Defense for Children’s Rights (DCR) opened a day care centre at the heart of the neighbourhood. Since then, Irena

Velkoska, social worker Vasilka Jovanoska and their colleagues have been working to develop opportunities for Roma families.

At 8 am, when the day care centre opens, the first children are already waiting impatiently at the door. Unshowered children are showered, then they all sit down for breakfast. After breakfast, classes aimed at preparing children for school and supporting those who are struggling start. The centre works closely alongside the school. Often this process begins with a discussion with the school administration about how to admit the large amount of children who do not have a birth certificate. Over the eight

‘We can’t just leave the children to themselves!’ For years, Irena Velkoska has been campaigning for neglected children in the largest Roma quarter in Europe – and is working on creating future prospects for these children.
There are alternatives to poor traditions – that’s what the children learn in the day centre and their parents too.

hours during which the centre is open, it is not unusual for one hundred or more children to come through its doors. Once inside, they are taken care of by a small team of social workers, psychologists and teachers.

Social work that is also aimed at parents

Many of the children who come are socially neglected and sent to beg by their parents. ‘These children were brought up on the streets,’ says Vasilka, who has been working at the day care centre since 2009. In order for this to change, social work here also focuses on the parents. The staff tries to convince them that they are responsible for the development of their children and their potential. ‘Children used to be married off at the age of thirteen or fourteen and, back then, that was called tradition,’ says Irena Velkoska. At the day care centre, children and parents alike learn that they have options.

Over the years, persistent information campaigns have slowly improved the situation in Šuto Orizari. More and more parents are gradually starting to understand that children are not fit to marry at thirteen. Children too are becoming more assertive and increasingly unwilling to meet such demands. ‘It remains hard work,’ says Irena Velkoska. There have been cases where they have had to report obstinate parents to the police. Nonetheless, the figures reflect the day care centre’s positive impact: in 2017, 80 children received a place at school and 76 successfully finished the first year. Only four dropped out due to marriage. Just a few years ago, less than half of these children would have finished their first year. Back then, around one quarter of pupils were married off or simply disappeared from school.
Fundraising workshops to raise money for social work

This success is also due to the collaborative work with, and the support received from, the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. Irina Velkoska and the day care centre staff have learnt a great deal about fundraising and accounting in the training sessions organised by the project and thereby bolstered the material basis of their work. The supra-regional exchange programmes and the insights they offer into social work in other towns within the Western Balkans also brought new ideas and fresh enthusiasm. They can therefore now set themselves higher goals and help ‘their’ children to gain an opportunity to earn money once they finish school, for example by selling the professionally published street newspaper ‘Face to Face’, a cooperation partner of the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. Irena Velkoska and her colleagues are particularly proud of Selma, the first Romni here in the north of Skopje to finish secondary school. ‘Many families do not see education as a way out of poverty,’ Irena Velkoska explains. ‘This forces us to work even harder.’
The social workers are also planning for the period after school for the children at their charge.

He will most likely finish school. Fewer and fewer children from the day care centre drop out of school.

Education is the way out of poverty. Their daily work aims to communicate this to the parents of the children in their care.

The variety of activities offered in the day care centre is diverse - playing, learning and doing handicrafts.
Social rights on the radio: the local Roma radio station ‘Radio Romano Avazo’ explains their listeners’ rights to them in Albanian and Romani. The programmes are also offered online as podcasts.
‘Providing information is key to effecting change’

In southern Kosovo, the town of Prizren is running an information campaign to raise awareness among Roma of their rights. As part of this initiative, a new municipal working group is willing to test uncharted waters.
Osman Osmani is annoyed. Parents have just told him that a teacher chided their son for asking too many questions during class. ‘Teachers need patience,’ he says angrily. ‘Children learn by being curious. Yet here, teachers want classes to be quiet. What has that got to do with education?’

In spite of this, Osman Osmani actually has quite a lot to be happy about: it’s partly thanks to him that so many children in this town go to school. Osmani presides over the Roma organisation Nevo Koncepti, which aims to improve the living conditions of Roma families in Prizren, a town in the south of Kosovo. Education is the main focus of Osmani and his team’s work and they do everything in their power to ensure that as many children from Roma families as possible can go to school. He is therefore particularly annoyed when he hears about teachers that apparently lack commitment to their jobs.

Many people from the Roma community are unaware of their rights

Osman Osmani’s biggest problem, however, is not unmotivated teachers, but parents who decide not to send their children to school. Returnee families in particular, of which there are many in Prizren, often do not register their children at school.

The social workers of Nevo Koncepti explain about their rights to parents during visits to the settlements. And about the fact that their children are entitled to a place at the nearest school.
In many cases, missing documents are the problem. People lose their school reports from the time they spent in Germany or cannot afford to have the documents translated. There is, however, a law that entitles children to a place at the nearest school. Parents can hand in missing documents for registration later, or schools may assign children to a class based on statements by their parents and without proper documentation. Yet, only very few in Prizren know about this law.

A new working group helps spread the word

‘People from the Roma community, in particular, are totally unaware of their social rights,’ says Blerina Bytyqi, a social worker with Nevo Koncepti. ‘The state offers the assistance and support that people do not know they are entitled to.’ A simplified registration procedure at school is just one example.

Nevo Koncepti wants to change this. Prizren’s municipal council, in co-operation with the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, set up an awareness raising working group. In workshops, Prizren social workers now teach members of the Roma community about their social rights. At the same time, they work to improve the re-integration of returnees into society – for example by organising joint excursions of Roma and non-Roma children from Prizren.
Radio as a tool for education

Transmissions by Radio Romano Avazo, the local Roma radio station, are particularly popular. On air, Blerina Bytyqi and the other members of the working group talk about the rights people have, for example entitlements to benefits, healthcare or education, and tell people how they can access these services. The radio shows are broadcast in Albanian and Romani and are also available online as podcasts.

‘It’s exactly the kind of radio programme we need’

Nexhip Menekshe, the station’s director and a passionate activist, is very happy about the working group’s being involved. For many years, he has believed in culture as a tool to talk about the discrimination Roma people face, and has organised theatre evenings and short film festivals to deal with the issue. ‘Creating a radio programme that encourages people from the local community to stand up for their rights is exactly what we want to do.’
Theatre evenings or short film festivals help the authorities, Nevo Koncepti’s social workers and radio broadcasters to increase awareness among the people of Prizren about the discrimination faced by Roma people and to support those affected.

Osman Osmani is also a fan of these radio programmes, not least because education is a frequent topic of discussion. ‘The programme allows us to reach a large number of parents. We can persuade them to take their children’s school education seriously and dispel their fears of approaching the authorities.’ Providing this information, he believes, is worth much more than any financial support he could offer. ‘The most important things we can offer people are knowledge and education. They really are key to effecting change.’

Direct contact with the people there is key to the success of the work. In this way the social workers can get to the bottom of the needs and concerns of individuals and support them in a targeted way.
For Farzila Dzanić, everything changed with the greenhouse. She can finally earn money with her work and make her own living. Up to 15 Roma people are to work in the greenhouse – their social position will improve as a result of the work.
Chard, onions and hope – a greenhouse in Bijeljina offers opportunities for Roma

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups supports a nongovernmental organisation in building and running a greenhouse. The vegetables and lettuce grown here not only help the gardeners and their families, the project also has a positive effect on the work of the city’s welfare office.
Outside, fresh snow covers the muddy ground: it’s an unusually cold February and the people of Bijeljina in the northeastern tip of Bosnia and Herzegovina are struggling with the low temperatures. But on the southern fringes of the city, under a greenhouse’s new glass panes, fresh produce is sprouting. Onions and chard are growing here, and lettuce was also added more recently – Farzila Dzanić walks up and down, watering the individual seedlings. Soon, an irrigation system will do this job, but until then, Farzila will make sure every single plant gets exactly what it needs.

The greenhouse is managed by Otaharin, a non-governmental organisation founded in 2005, which mainly promotes education for Roma children. As in many Western Balkan nations, Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina are pushed to the fringes of society and are virtually cut off from vital social services. The circumstances in which the circa 1,000 Roma in Bijeljina live are precarious. Not only are they isolated from the non-Roma, getting a job on Bijeljina’s regular labour market is almost impossible for Roma, which is why the majority of them are unemployed.

Farzila, who is a Romni, has never found work, even though she is a qualified hairdresser. Unlike many other Romnija, she finished school and went on to receive proper professional training on her mother’s insistence. Nevertheless, Farzila could not find a job. That is until Otaharin began the greenhouse project, with support from the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. The project is directed at socially disadvantaged groups in the Western Balkans. In Bijeljina, the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups mainly collaborates with the state welfare office – and with Otaharin.

Before she was employed in the greenhouse project, Farzila Dzanić volunteered with Otaharin.
‘I want to work and earn my own money’

The greenhouse, which grew out of the collaboration between the NGO and the regional project, has become a catalyst. In the long-term, it will provide 15 jobs, all for Romnija who will then be able to earn a living and their place in society. After volunteering with Otaharin, Farzila became the first woman employed here. For 41-year-old Farzila, it is a huge relief that she can finally earn her own money through working. ‘My mother always used to say, “To survive you have to work. Or get married,”’ she says and grins. ‘I am now married – for the second time. But I still want to make a living and earn my own money for me and my children.’

Otaharin did a job which the state should actually have done. It’s just that Otaharin does a better job at a cheaper price. The organisation also works with the authorities and advises them about funding and taking on social services in the long term.
With her help, the Otaharin greenhouse has started to produce healthy food that improves the diets of chronically neglected and malnourished Roma families. The new gardeners attend courses and brief training sessions, where they learn about healthy eating and basic medical care. After their shift, they take this new-found knowledge home and share it with their families and neighbours. The project partners, the NGO Otaharin and the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups consider these women to be local role models. This is good for Roma communities, but it also aids the development of municipal social security offices.

This is because the effect the project is having can also be felt within the administrative structure – even the mayor of Bijeljina supports the project. ‘The municipal authorities have become aware of our project,’ says Dragan Joković, founder and director of Otaharin. ‘They recognise our work and even provided the land on which the greenhouse now stands.’ In this respect, the project is entrenched in the municipal structures, which is good for both long-term planning and for the continued improvement of living conditions for the Roma. ‘This is important,’ says Joković. ‘In reality, the state should be doing our job. This is not the way we should be doing things. But we are more efficient and cheaper than government organisations.’ However, a part of his work also consists of advising the government on how to implement, or at least finance, social services. ‘This will take time,’ Joković believes. ‘We have got ideas and solutions; we do our work, but we are also winning them over as partners.’ And the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups also supports him in this mission.

For Farzila Dzanić everything changed with the greenhouse. Despite a good education she was unemployed – because for Roma people in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is almost impossible to get a job on the regular labour market. Now she’s finally earning her own money for herself and her children.
Even the authorities in Bijeljina have now been supporting the greenhouse project for some time.
‘Fighting for my education was the best decision of my life.’
Bijeljina’s first Romni student

Wife, mother and housewife – this is the life girls from Roma families in Bosnia and Herzegovina can generally expect. For Sanita Smajić, however, simply accepting this as her fate was never an option. Today, she is the first Romni to register at the University of Bijeljina. Without a nongovernmental organisation backing her struggle, she might never have achieved her goal.
It takes just eight steps to reach the Faculty of Education in the Bosnian town of Bijeljina. It’s only a short distance, but to Sanita Smajić it still feels special. In Bosnia, this 22-year-old Romni is an exception. Not only has she finished school, she is now in her second year at the University of Bijeljina, a town in the northeast of the country. Before her, no woman from the Roma community has ever made it into this institute of higher education.

Even at other Bosnian universities, Roma students remain the exception. There are an estimated 70,000 Roma living in Bosnia and Herzegovina, most of them on the fringes of society with no access to the state education system. And for Romnija (women from the Roma community) life is doubly hard. While they suffer discrimination from mainstream society as members of the Roma community, the communities themselves are patriarchal and women are generally not allowed to decide for themselves about the life they wish to lead. Formal education is not valued and girls are expected to marry early or otherwise contribute to the family’s income.

‘What is she doing studying at university? Shouldn’t she be getting married at her age?’

Sanita became the first Romni student at Bijeljina University, primarily thanks to the support she received from the NGO Otaharin, an organisation that strives to increase the number of Roma children attending school. Further support came from the GIZ regional project Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups, implemented in the countries of the Western Balkans mainly to improve the lives of socially disadvantaged groups. Sanita, who grew up in a predominantly Roma neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bijeljina, had to fight doggedly with her family just to finish school. ‘At the most, there were just ten Roma children at my primary school,’ she recalls. Sanita was first given school textbooks at the Otaharin community centre, which receives funding from the GIZ regional project called Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. However, the social workers at the centre, who eventually convinced her parents to allow her to finish secondary school were just as important.
Sanita is certain that her parents would never have allowed her to study. They wanted her to earn a living after secondary school. Instead, she secretly enrolled at university, leaving her parents little choice. When they found out they were initially furious, but they eventually let Sanita have her way, in spite of a barrage of negative comments from friends and neighbours, who argued that university was no place for a woman, let alone a woman of marriageable age.

From student to teacher

Sanita now uses her newfound confidence to speak to other children about the support she received at the Otaharin community centre and through the GIZ regional project on Social Rights for Vulnerable Groups. She spends her free time at the community centre teaching homeless children and those at risk of ending up destitute. Today she is the one knocking on doors in her community to convince parents that their children are better off at school than on the streets. It’s also thanks to her perseverance that around 100 children from Roma families now attend the local primary school.

Over the years, her family has got used to Sanita doing things her way. Today, even her parents are extremely proud of their high-flying daughter, who has become a role model for many children in the community. Girls, in particular, admire the student. Many tell her: ‘I want to be just like you.’ This gives Sanita hope that things will eventually change and that, in future, more young Romnija will have the self-confidence to make their own choices. ‘This is why ensuring they have access to education is so important,’ she says. ‘It’s the only way girls can have the opportunity to do something other than get married and stay at home.’ After graduation, Sanita wants to work as an educator. ‘It’s the best way for me to help girls follow in my footsteps.’
In Šuto Orizari Benny Golm photographs people returning to their home country of Macedonia, taking a chance on a new start.
In Bijeljina Zorana Mušikić and the FLMH-Team encounter Sanita Smajić, the first Roma student in Bijeljina.

In Ferizaj Wolfgang Müller arranges two members of the local interdisciplinary team for a photograph.