

Mimiu – a possible urban action area in the integrated urban development of Ploiești

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ABSTRACT: The integrated urban development currently represents the „tip of the spear” of urban planning, promoted by all the structures of the European Union. The principles of this new movement have been established in the table of contents of the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities (2007), adopted at the Informal Reunion of the European Ministers responsible for Urban Development in the EU Member States. Apart from the crucially important acting strategies, in it we also encounter one that refers to stigmatized communities: *Granting special attention to underprivileged areas within the city as a whole*. Decisive on this line, it is specified that the “*politics of social integration which contributes to the reduction of inequalities and prevention of social exclusion will be the best warranty for maintaining the safety of our cities*”. Thus, rough neighbourhoods are mentioned in all of the European Union’s programmatic documents.

In our study we have focused our attention on one such underprivileged area, the Mimiu neighbourhood (ghetto) in Ploiesti, where time seems to have stood still for decades, during which time the people here have struggled to make a living.

KEY WORDS: area of urban action, ghetto, integrated urban development, social inclusion, marginalised community.

1. Introduction

"The Urban Action Area" is a recent concept that we encounter in the methodology of integrated urban development, being defined as an area/territory clearly outlined within a town/city (according to POR 2007-2013, the programme which finances the integrated urban development in Romania). Due to the fact that all the programmatic documents of the EU mention problem areas and the integrated urban development is seen as a solution to the problems that these urban areas are faced with, through concentrated investments in these areas, it is only natural that the people involved should be interested in the ways in which these areas will be identified. We also find the recommendation to grant special attention to those underdeveloped urban areas in the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities in the context of the city as a whole. It starts from the idea that an area that has started to fall into decay needs great costs to be fixed, this being more difficult than trying to prevent this situation from happening. However, at the same time we must not neglect the areas which have a high potential for development and thus concentrate the investments in these areas, taking into consideration the benefits that would result from this fact.

Regarding the criteria of identifying the urban action area, the discussion remains open, as there is no clear methodology on a central level regarding this fact. In the definition from the Solicitor’s Guide (2008) it is clearly stated what the urban action area is, i.e. **a clearly delimited area/territory within a city where are concentrated certain problems that need an integrated approach in order to be solved**, without stating the way in which outlining these areas is done. In this sense, we do encounter some statements that can constitute methodological directions:

- the urban action area usually represents a contiguous area, without any enclaves;
- this area is identified based on well established criteria;
- determining the area will be done after analyzing the current status of the territory in order to clearly outline the existing malfunctions in the organisation of the urban area;
- it is not mandatory that this area overlap one or more neighbourhoods in the city;
- in well justified cases, it can coincide with the administrative territory of the town/city.

To the above mentioned criteria for defining an urban action area we may add the following:

- The urban action area must present a critical mass in terms of human, financial and economic resources, in order to be able to back a viable local development strategy. We will mention as an example the human resources because this criterion is the easiest to establish as there are many recommendations and practice on a European level. Thus, the cities that took part in the URBAN programme were required to identify urban action areas with at least 100.000 inhabitants. As the features of cities from every country must be taken into account, in Romania POR has set a limit of at least 10.000 inhabitants, taking into account the numerous problems that our country is facing, as well as the different context.
- The urban action area does not have to overlap areas determined through UGP/UZP (Urban General Plan/Urban Zone Plan).
- The existence of a common local identity of the inhabitants of these areas that would generate a certain sense of belonging.

In light of the characteristics of these urban action areas and of the experience gathered in Europe as well as on other continents up to the present day, we can list the following examples of urban action areas: historical centres, **neighbourhoods on the outskirts with insalubrious living conditions, former industrial areas (brownfields)**, socialist residential areas that overlap large neighbourhoods, areas on the outskirts etc.

2. Methods

In our study we have used methods that are specific to geography and methods specific to sociology. From the first category – methods that are specific to geography – in our presentation we have used **positive methods** (the scientific geographic description), **methods of exploiting the reality and its substitutes** (observation, shaping), and **methods based on experience** (the case study). From the second category – methods that are specific to sociology, for obtaining primary data we have used the **method of sociologic inquiry (the questionnaire)**, and for the processing and interpreting the data we have used the **method of statistical analysis**, in which the most used procedure was that of **statistical modelling**, through which we have created diagrams and statistical points (e.g. for shaping the urban image: the attractiveness index).

3. Research Results

The case study on Mimi neighbourhood is part of a more complex research regarding the city of Ploiești, in which the inhabitants' perception regarding the city's living conditions in all its thirty-seven neighbourhoods was analysed.

Thus, the responders have been asked to grant marks to elements regarding the quality of life, declaring their situation as “very good”, “reasonably good”, “very bad” or “seemingly bad”. We have followed twenty-five elements that determine the quality of life and the satisfaction of the inhabitants in the urban area. These are:

1. Access to the public transport system (a);
2. The existence of parks/green areas (b);
3. Street cleaning (c);
4. Playgrounds for children (d);
5. Stray dogs (e);
6. The state of the roads (f);
7. Street lighting (g);
8. Air pollution (h);
9. Traffic (i);
10. The safety of the people and household goods (j);
11. The existing schools (proximity and capacity) (k);
12. The existing kindergartens and nursery schools (l);
13. Cleaning (Garbage collecting) (m);
14. The central heating system (n);
15. Public law and order (o);
16. The water supply (p);
17. Parking spaces (q);
18. Opportunities for spending free time (r);
19. The number of existing jobs (s);
20. The type of existing jobs (t);
21. The possibilities for shopping (u);

22. Relations with the neighbours (v);
23. Relations with the Town Hall (x);
24. Relations with the emergency services (y);
25. Relaxation areas for the elderly (z).

Following the data analysis, for each neighbourhood an **attractiveness index (I_a)** was determined according to the following methodology:

- I have granted a numerical value to the answer options as such: "very good"=2, "reasonably good"=1, "seemingly bad"=-1 and "very bad"=-2.
- I have summed up the values for all the **twenty-five questions ($a_1...z_1$)** for each neighbourhood;
- I have calculated the average between the total value that I have obtained and the number of responders (n) for every neighbourhood.

$$I_a = \frac{(a_1 + b_1 + \dots + z_1) + \dots + (a_n + b_n + \dots + z_n)}{n}$$

$$-50 \leq I_a \leq +50$$

$$-2 \leq a_{1...n} \dots z_{1...n} \leq +2$$

According to the classification, the most attractive neighbourhoods are Republicii Vest II, Centre, Democrației-Alexandru Lăpușneanul, and the most repulsive are Râfov, Bereasca and Mimiș. Based on the results of this analysis, I have also delineated the *urban image* or the mental map of Ploiești (fig. no. 1).

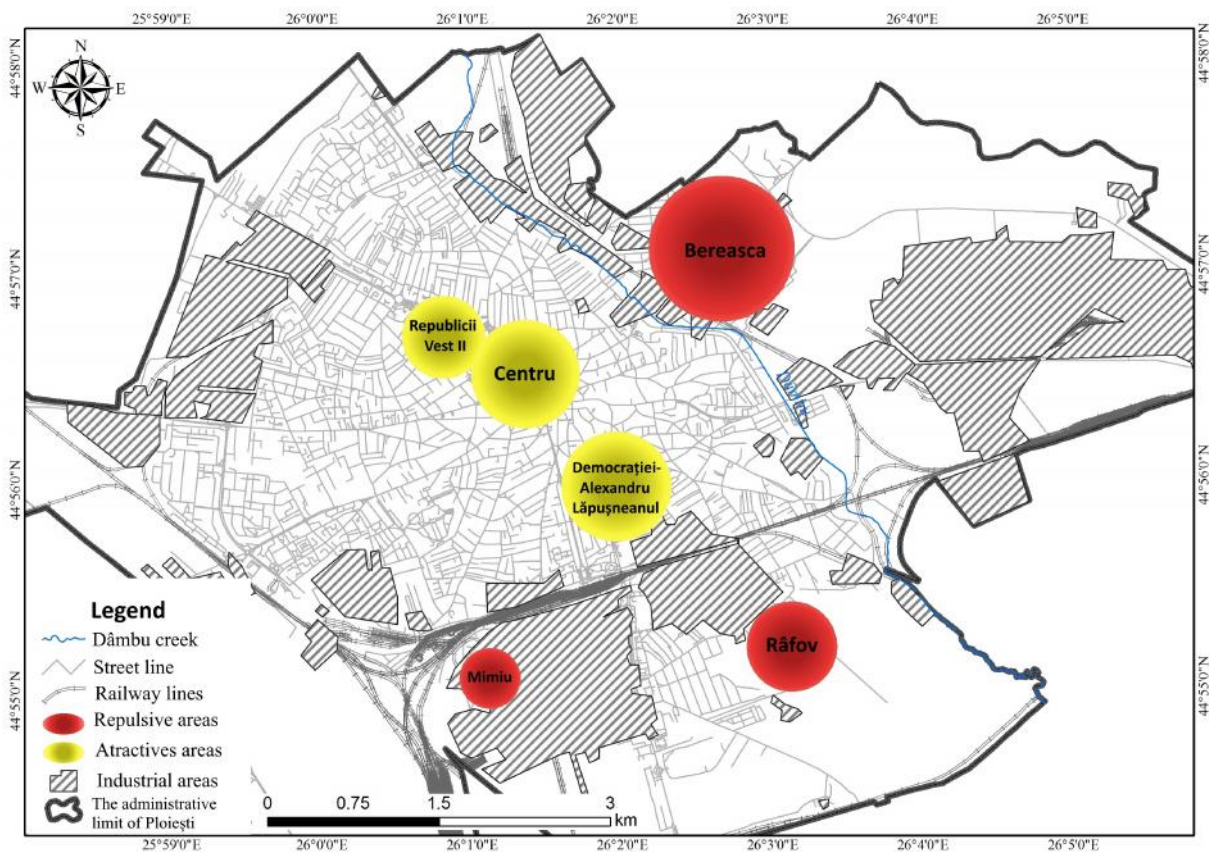


Fig.no.1. Urban Image of Ploiești

For Mimiș neighbourhood, just as we would have expected most negative elements that have been analyzed received negative marks (Fig.no.2). The biggest discontents of an inhabitant from Mimiș neighbourhood relate to air pollution, the number of available jobs and the relations with the emergency services. There were only four elements that have received positive index: street cleaning, street sanitation, central heating and the relations with the neighbours. Regarding street cleaning and street sanitation the positive perception of the responders on a section where this neighbourhood encounters serious problems can

only be explained through a different mentality of a citizen who has been marginalized and who was used to worse living conditions in the recent past. The garbage piles stored randomly in the streets, a thing which would be unacceptable to inhabitants of other neighbourhoods, can become something ordinary or easily overlooked, as barely making a living brings about more important concerns.

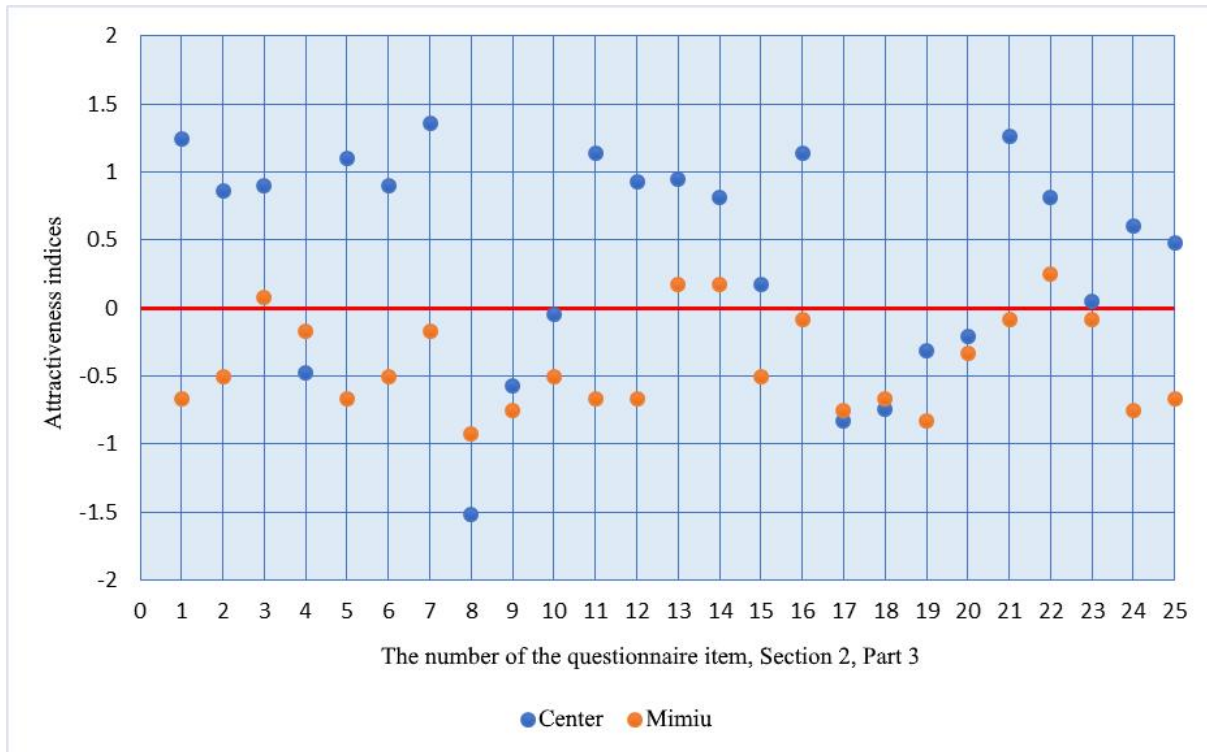


Fig.no.2. The attractiveness index in the Centre and Mimiú neighbourhoods, broken down by the twenty-five analysis elements

Following the results of this analysis, we recommend that the municipality of Ploiești take seriously the implementation of urban development integrated projects for Mimiú neighbourhood in the next period, in order to achieve the social inclusion of this stigmatized community that will be described next.

4. What are rough neighbourhoods? What do they have in common?

Etymologically, the Romanian phrase “cartiere rău famate” that translates as “rough neighbourhoods” is drawn from the Latin “fama”, which means “fame”, “celebrity”, “rumour”, “reputation”. Therefore, it is connected to the perception of those who come in contact with this environment.

However, next to the subjective element represented by the perception of reality, there are measurable elements such as:

- the level of crime (number of crimes, robberies, acts of violence per year);
- school attendance;
- the number and types of illnesses;
- the price of households/sq m and the frequency at which real estate items are sold;
- the number of active economic entities (shops, pharmacies, dispensaries);
- the household surface related to the number of inhabitants;
- the households' comfort level;
- the structure according to age groups;
- the number of people who live on social income related to the whole population;
- the number of people without identity papers;
- the number of construction authorisations related to the number of existing buildings.

The things that all rough neighbourhoods have in common are:

- their placement (mostly on the outskirts of cities);

- the absence of street cleaning and sanitation, manifested through the mess in the streets and around households;
- the high degree of poverty;
- the high crime rate (drug traffic and consumption, human trafficking, prostitution, violence);
- personal insecurity;
- the lack of public services and low quality infrastructure (caused by the indifference of the local authorities and their incapacity to find solutions);
- the precariousness of households;
- truancy and school dropout rate;
- school exclusion;
- high rate of unemployment;
- high consumption of alcohol;
- the appearance of the “to be avoided” category in the guide books etc.

Something rarely mentioned is the fact that, due to the lack of understanding of this phenomenon by the authorities *the problems of rough neighbourhoods tend to multiply and become worse*. A concrete case showing the lack of understanding of this problem dates back from 2011 when the mayor of Baia Mare, Cătălin Chercheș, decided to relocate about five hundred families in the former offices of the Cuprom factory and, following that, he ordered a wall to be built around the neighbourhood, causing fierce reactions and accusations of racism and Nazi practices.

The solutions most often imply spending large sums of money which the local authorities are not willing to spend on areas considered unproductive and hopeless. The poverty level is so high that the inhabitants of the neighbourhood will never be able to produce income for the local public administration and they will never be convinced to pay taxes (for examples taxes on illegally constructed buildings, fines, not to mention the fact that in some cases people do not even have identity papers).

Sometimes, part of the blame for the emergence and development of problem neighbourhoods belongs to the authorities. In Detroit, for example, relocating the factories on the outskirts, in the metropolitan area, due to the passiveness of the local administration, caused the decrease of population from around 1.850.000 inhabitants in 1950 to only 673.000 inhabitants in 2017. The economic situation quickly worsened for its inhabitants and before long the problems in the suburbs became serious.

The top worst neighbourhoods in our country are Ferentari (Bucharest), Ițcani (Suceava), Fața Luncii (Craiova). We might state that, on a lower scale, Mimiș represents the equivalent of “Ferentari” or “Fața Luncii” in Ploiești.

Below, we will present in detail this “rough” neighbourhood in order to create a clear image of what precarious living conditions mean in the city of Ploiești.

5. Ploiești, from slums to ethnic ghettos

Nicolae Iorga wrote about Ploiești in 1909 in his travel diary¹ stating that “it is divided between clean and flowering slums in some areas, and places full of gypsies and robbers in others”.

The “slums” withstood the passing of time, so did the bad habits that still cause problems. In nowadays Ploiești there are problems in every neighbourhood, but the biggest challenges are in Bereasca, Râfov and Mimiș. From these, the case of Mimiș draws attention through the fact that the crime rate is the highest of all the neighbourhoods in Ploiești, and its general appearance is distressing: unsafe and scraped up buildings with no construction authorisation, streets full of holes and mud and tons of rubbish thrown by the inhabitants, lying in the streets not being picked up by anybody. Poverty, improvisation, indifference, filth, isolation are just a few of the key words that describe the essence of this neighbourhood (fig.no.3) surrounded by the disused industrial areas in the south of the city.

Mimiș neighbourhood can be placed the category of *informal urban settlement ethnically and spatially segregated*. Mostly inhabited by Roma citizens, it has every chance of becoming an “ethnic ghetto” just like Stolipinovo (Plovdiv, Bulgaria), Lunik IX (Kosice, Slovakia) or Hrebendova (Bratislava, Slovakia).

¹ Published in a two-volume paper entitled “România cum era până la 1918”, Editura Minerva, Bucharest, 1972, volume one, p. 244.



Source: Adevărul.ro



Source: Adevărul.ro



Source: Adevărul.ro



Source: Adevărul.ro



Source: Google Maps



Source: Adevărul.ro

Fig. no. 3. Images from Mimi neighbourhood: a) – neighbourhood street, b) – routine activity, c), d) – individual households, e – block of flats from Marin Mehedințeanu street (next to the bus stop), f – the Astra Refinery reservoirs area

Situated like an island in the south part of the city (fig. no. 4), almost completely separated by the railway lines (completely on the west side and partially in the south and north) the only connection with the city is made through two main roads: Petrolului Boulevard (which carries on towards the east to Bucharest Boulevard, up to the roundabout close to the Petroleum-Gas University) and Marin Mehedințeanu Street (which connects it to the South railway station). The only bus route is one that stops at the South train station eight times a day.

Lacking sewer systems, running water and asphalt, Mimi seems to be stranded in time. The most widely used means of transport is the carriage and the lifestyle is archaic, typical of underprivileged communities; people barely make a living, usually doing so through illicit means. Visited more often by the Special Forces and the police than by the social workers from the town hall or by the priest, the members of this community have grown used to this way of life and cannot imagine that things could unfold in a different way and their lives could be better than they are.

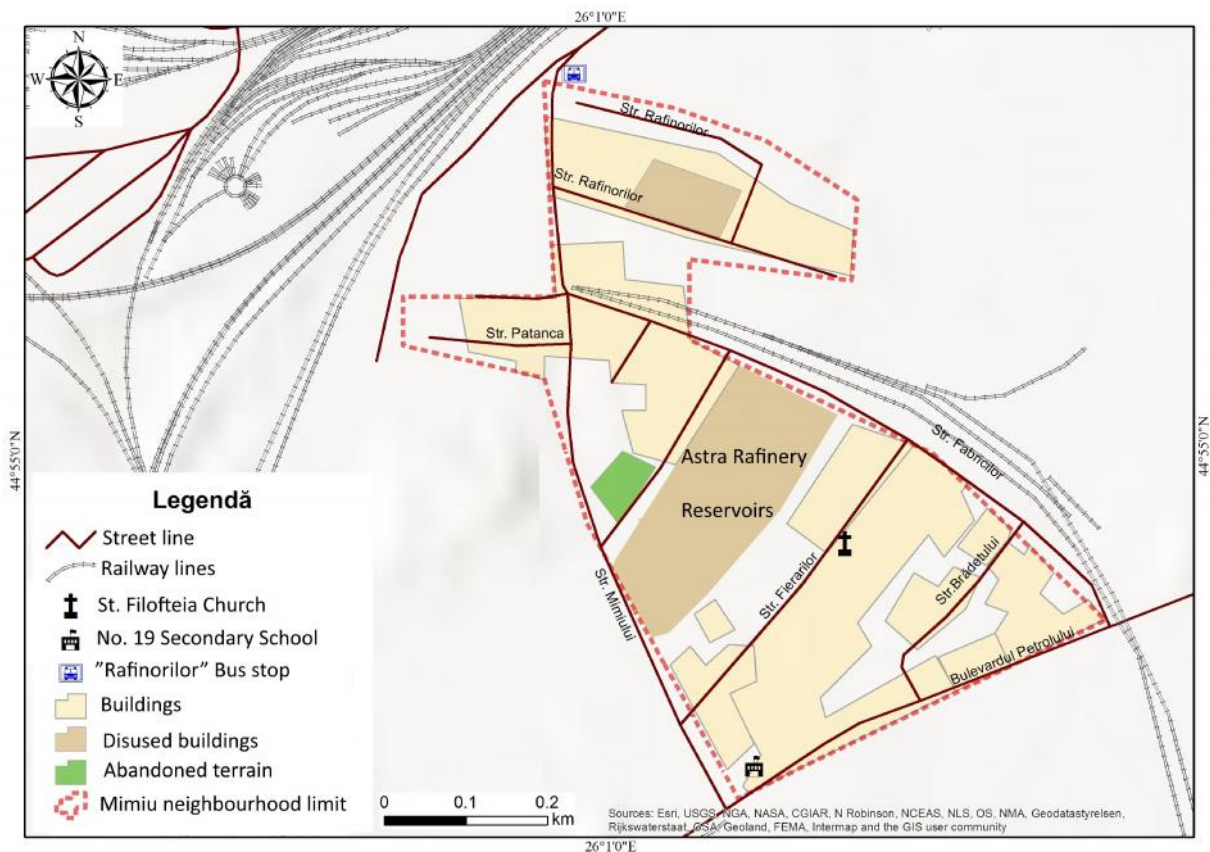


Fig. no. 4. Mimiu Neighbourhood

However, we cannot state that good things do not happen in this community. The fifteen employees at the neighbourhood secondary school are doing their best to bring children to school, ninety-eight percent of them having Roma origins, to make sure that they receive free materials for school at every start of the school year, to get them involved in projects and school contests, to convince their parents to allow their children to go to school, education being their only chance to develop. School is the only institution in Romania that is present in this neighbourhood. There should have been at least a department of social services or a police station here, but there aren't.

Private initiatives, such as projects done by NGOs also bring a significant contribution to the evolution of the neighbourhood. We should mention the "Casa Cristina Day Centre" project of the Concordia Humanitarian Organization financed by the Vodafone Foundation in 2016 (220.152 lei). The project meant involving thirty-six children from twenty very poor families in an after-school type programme. In addition to the educational support, the children and parents received psychological counselling to boost their self esteem, healthcare information, speech therapy, material aid (school materials, clothes, food and hygiene products).

Regarding the City Hall's projects of building the essential infrastructure (sewage, running water, resurfacing the streets), we await their being put into practice, hoping that the deadlines will not be delayed again since the amount of money has been included in the city's budget, as mayor Adrian Dobre announced during the public debate of the 2018 budget.

The mayor's office encourages the members of this community to uphold the law by facilitating the changing of (or obtaining) identity papers in case the people do not possess them. The legal framework has been created through *Decision no. 186/27th July 2006 regarding urban renewal of the Mimiu neighbourhood, as well as facilitating other forms of social protection for poor people*, taken by the Local Council of Ploiești. In addition to identity papers, the decision also regulates the situation of the constructions built "in good will" before 2004, by granting the terrains to the household owners. At the same time, they have ordered the parcelling of the free spaces into 200 sq m lots, which the Local Council would grant to people under the age of thirty-five who are willing to build homes for themselves. The status of putting this decision into practice is unknown, but we acknowledge its utility and the intention of supporting the neighbourhood's inhabitants.

6. Conclusions

Is there any hope for marginalized communities?

Marginalized communities often become excluded communities. They transform from groups of poor and needy people into unwanted groups which people prefer to avoid, with dreams and aspirations that nobody cares about. When nobody helps, listens or offers them a place to work, their members often end up in extreme situations because they do not matter to the rest of the community.

This total gap between social groups is perfectly illustrated by a story related to the evacuation of the Roma families that had built illegal shelters on Coastei Street in Cluj-Napoca, which happened in December 2010. The evacuated people were moved even closer to the outskirts, close to the city's garbage dump to an area known as "Pata Rât". Following the evacuation of the Roma people, even though it was winter and close to Christmas, the neighbours showed no sign of compassion; they even celebrated with music and fireworks.

Pata Rât in Cluj-Napoca is, perhaps, the best known and, at the same time, the only example in Romania for the way in which one can solve the problem of rough neighbourhoods, at least partially.

"Pata Cluj", a project that was financed through the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009-2014 within the "Fight Poverty" Programme, involved a number of social interventions for the social desegregation of vulnerable groups, especially of Roma communities.

The project's motto says everything about the organizers' mentality: "Walls and bridges are built from the same materials"!

The outcome of the project worth 4.095.864 Euros was relocating thirty-five families (out of nearly three hundred) from Pata Rât to the Cluj metropolitan area and the significant improvement of the living conditions for those who remained behind.

At the same time, the project represents a chance for the future for the communities that are marginalized or discriminated ethnically, because it suggests a new method of intervention as an alternative to the slow and punctual procedures that are applied by the local councils, compelled by the countless laws.

What impressed us in a special way regarding this project (apart from the organization and clear definition of the project's aims) was the introduction of the "community facilitation" concept, meaning supporting the community (to find its own way to organize itself), and making decisions that impact the whole community. The role of "community facilitator" has been fulfilled by volunteers endorsed by respected members of the Roma community.

Even though not even those who have received social homes claim that things have gone on smoothly and that all their problems have disappeared, the conclusion is that methods exist and also capable people that, through their efforts, have managed to change the lives of vulnerable and marginalized people for the better, *as long as there was involvement from certain representatives of the respective community*, that would act representing the will of the majority of its members.

Do we have a consensus within the Mimi community? Do the inhabitants of Mimi form a community with common needs and aspirations? Do the inhabitants of this corner of Ploiești desire a different lifestyle? Are they willing to act to make things happen? We hope that the answer to these questions is "yes"!

7. Recommendations – measures to be taken concerning Mimi neighbourhood

- projects of minimal infrastructure (sewage, running water, asphalt) and institutions (medical office, police station, social service department);
- individual security projects (surveillance cameras in the whole neighbourhood, police and gendarme patrols);
- educational projects supported by NGOs;
- social projects (placing a shower container for the homes without running water, mobile teams that can offer basic medical assistance to the community, collecting clothes and school materials for the children who attend school);
- cultural projects (the rediscovery of the true Roma culture, following the European motto "unity in diversity").

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