

**“TOGETHER FOR BETTER HEALTH, FOR US, BY US”
October 2013-March 2014 Report**

Goal: to improve health and access to medical services for impoverished children, aged 3-5, from OvidiuRo’s *Every Child in Preschool* communities.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS DURING REPORTED PERIOD:

- 830 (88%) of the 940 FCG children had two basic medical tests (throat swab and stool sample) done in September and October. This is the second year when GSK makes these tests available to FCG children – they are required for all children before preschool starts but, as they are not free, poor parents rarely afford them. The results showed that 102 (12%) kids had intestinal parasites and 61 (6%) had streptococcal infections. All the children received treatment. Over 60 preschoolers who are not in FCG benefited from the discount offered by the laboratories and had their tests done. The results of the medical tests were slightly better than the ones from last year, the infections being with 2 or 3% below last year’s average, and the process went smoother, due to the experience gained in the first project year.
- 950 children from 16 poor communities received free vitamins for two months (starting January or February). The teachers organized meetings with the parents and family doctors before the children started taking the vitamins, and gave children the vitamins in kindergarten to make sure the doctors’ prescriptions are respected. The parents noticed that after taking vitamins their children’s appetite increased. Some local coordinators told us that less children got sick after starting to take vitamins than in a regular month.
- The immunization campaign continued in Araci and Hetea – the family doctor sees between 50 and 80 people a day during his visits in Hetea. Since September, around 60 children were vaccinated to catch up with the mandatory national immunization scheme and 350 prescriptions were bought for children through the grant, to make sure they get treated. Since November, the health mediator also started a contraception campaign for the women in Hetea.
- 375 children received healthy snack for four weeks, in four communities where the county authorities had delays in providing the government snack because of contractors problems.
- One more community, which joined FCG in October 2013, decided to implement the health component as well, following a hepatitis outbreak soon after the program brought in kindergarten the poorest children from the community. The situation was worsened by cases of children with lice. Tirnava (Sibiu county) is a very poor community, where over 60 children are born per year in the poor families, and there is a very high number of children who do not attend primary school. With FCG, about 50 new children were enrolled in preschool since October. The grant will help children do the mandatory tests for preschool and solve other problems that will appear.
- One health mediator was hired officially in this position this December, in Intorsura Buzaului. We believe the process was successful because this is a town, not a village, with better access to information as well as a closer relationship with the County Health Department.

IMPLEMENTATION:

Follow up on individual cases

Vasile

With the help of medical students involved in last summer’s medical caravan, Vasile’s heart surgery on February 12 was a success. Vasile, 35 and the father of three daughters, needed to have a valve replaced, as he was suffering from severe cardiac insufficiency – this was confirmed during the medical caravan, when the students warned him that he must get a surgery, otherwise he risked dying any time.

Vasile is not Roma but comes from a poor family from Valcele comuna, Covasna county. Given his bad health, he doesn’t have a job, so his family lives from social aid and children’s allowances (with less than 100 euros per month). Even though he was hospitalized many times, he couldn’t get the proper surgery. He has medical insurance, but the valve replacement is not covered and would have costed around 2000 euro. Many doctors,

including the ones from a private clinic in Brasov, the town close to Valcele, which offers free surgeries for impoverished people in emergency situations, said they could not help. Vasile's file was repeatedly rejected as "not urgent" (the conclusion was the same even in October, after Vasile was hospitalized after a pre-stroke).

In November, the students helped Vasile get an appointment with a doctor from the Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases, who considered the case urgent and agreed to do the surgery for free. T4BH helped Vasile solve other additional health problems prior to the surgery, to prevent infections, and covered his and his family's travel costs to Bucharest. Until the surgery in February, OvidiuRo's T4BH coordinator Iolanda Burtea kept regular contact with Vasile to comfort him and make sure he gets ready for the surgery, visited him in hospital to bring supplies and acted as a liaison between him and the doctors.

Vasile is now at home, but still follows a strict diet and goes to the hospital in Sf. Gheorghe, the nearest town, for regular medical check-ups. For the rest of his life, Vasile will have to take a pill every day to make sure that his blood doesn't thicken and the valve is doing its job.

Lavinia

Last fall, during a visit to Budila, a FCG community, our colleague Elena discovered Lavinia, a severely disabled 5 year old girl who couldn't walk and also could go to kindergarten. Elena found a private donor who gave Lavinia a wheelchair and since November she's been going to preschool regularly. Lavinia also suffers from strabismus, but with the help of T4BH and local authorities she received a pair of glasses that will help her solve her eye problems. The City Hall provided transportation to the ophthalmologist in the nearest city, the social worker accompanied Lavinia and her grandma to the doctor and GSK covered the costs.



Vladut

Vladut is only one year old and lives with his 19 year old parents and brother. Vladut was born with tibia agenesis – his right tibia didn't develop properly because of a hereditary problem. In September, his mother took him to a doctor in Brasov, who gave him a plastic prosthesis and recommended he go to Marie Curie Hospital in Bucharest for further treatment. But the mother didn't go to the doctor, fearing that something bad would happen to the child and lacking travel money. The lack of money was just a pretext because the traveling costs could have been covered through T4BH. It took a lot of persuasion from Gabriela to convince the mother to finally take Vladut to Bucharest towards the end of January to be seen by an orthopedic surgeon. She accompanied the mother and grandmother (who is only 37 years old) to Bucharest and Vladut was seen by a very good specialist who concluded that he needs surgery and programmed him for September. Although he will not fully recover after the surgery, Vladut will be able to walk and lead a normal life.

Filling in the gaps

Immunization campaign

T4BH helps the family doctor and a nurse visit the poor village of Hetea (Valcele) three times a month, and parents are incentivized to agree with vaccines by receiving free medicine when their children are ill. The medicine is prescribed by the family doctor during home visits; the health mediator buys them from the pharmacy in the closest town, and carries them weekly across the hill. Since the campaign started last April, parents are more open to vaccines and immunization rates in Hetea have more than tripled. Still, parents here, who live in dire poverty and have no education, often neglect bringing their children to the doctor or respecting vaccination terms, therefore the campaign has to be continued long term in order to be successful. We expect the number of children receiving immunizations to increase in the following months, as the weather warms up and less children will be ill.

Birth control

Valcele comuna has the highest birth rate in Covasna county, as well as the highest percentage of pregnant minors. In November, at the doctor's recommendation, four couples from Hetea, around 30 years old, started to use birth control (one of the men learned to use condoms in prison, and the other three women use pills). The younger women became more interested in contraceptives in January, after a 14 year old minor gave birth to a child with congenital malformations, who unfortunately died in the hospital. Since then, two more women take birth control pills, as well – these are provided for free through a national program (the problem is that only one type of pills is free and this doesn't fit to all women). Still, since January Gabriela identified 6 pregnant women, out of which only two wanted to go to the doctor for a checkup – the others didn't see the need despite Gabriela's insistence.

Healthy snacks instead of the daily government bagel

In September and October, T4BH helped 225 children in Covasna and 150 in Dolj receive their daily snack in kindergarten for four weeks. By law, these should be provided by the government, but the public procurement process in these counties faced an administrative delay, which has a negative impact on FCG children as families are so poor that they don't afford to give children a sandwich for kindergarten every day. OvidiuRo used a part of this grant to help the schools in Valcele, Intorsura Buzaului, Podari and Amarastii de Jos buy a health snack (cereals, biscuits, milk, yoghurt) during the blockage, to make sure that children are not hungry and can focus on learning.

Other activities

In Altina, 6-7 parents out of 13 started use regularly the washing machine to wash their clothes – it was a long process, as parents were ashamed to use the machine and there was also a belief amongst men that women should wash the clothes themselves, by hand, to prove they are hardworking. The arguments that convinced them in the end were that the hot water from the washing machine destroys germs more efficiently than cold water, and that while the clothes are being washed automatically, the mothers can use their time for other house chores. Even so, for months only 1-2 parents came repeatedly. This number seems to increase slowly.

Through the grant the coordinator also installed a shower, and the plan was that parents could take turns in the morning to shower their kids and dry them, before they start kindergarten activities. Unfortunately, until now nobody used the showers. Recently, a group of children were found with lice and the local coordinator thinks this is a good opportunity to convince the parents to bath their children. In order for the parents to get accustomed to bath their children, the coordinator thinks to make a new rule starting April: when a mother comes as a class assistant (at least 5 times per year, according to the program) she will be encouraged by the teachers to shower her child. The kindergarten is equipped with towels and hair dryer for the kids – the coordinator was also planning to buy toys for kids and other things that will make this activity more appealing.

Also in Altina, a group of 12 children continues to go twice a week to the speech therapist. The therapist sees an evolution, but very slow because the parents don't work with the children enough at home (although parents do attend the therapy sessions). In order to have results, she expects years of therapy and home support. The grant covers the salary of the speech therapist – again filling in the gaps of the system, as by law schools should benefit by such support services, but in reality the County agency that hires speech therapists has no funds and cannot hire new people anyway because positions in the public system are blocked – so only a few schools in bigger cities really benefit from this service. In the end of March, the speech therapist will organize a workshop with teachers.

Health mediators

In December, eight months after she obtained her diploma, Nicoleta Ardelean from Intorsura Buzaului was the first to be officially hired as health mediator by the City Hall. Nicoleta is 22 and the mother of a three year old, and she lives in Floroaia Mica, the poorest neighborhood in Intorsura Buzaului. She was recommended for the position because she was the only woman who had the qualifications needed for completing the training, and the desire to help improve the health condition of her community members. It is not an easy task, as it takes a lot of time, diplomacy and resilience to be accepted and trusted by the people in the community, especially for someone as young as Nicoleta, but after a



troublesome start, she is now determined to follow this path. In her new position, Nicoleta mobilized the parents for the medical tests, provides counseling to families with medical problems and, with the help of T4BH has started a similar system as in Valcele to bring parents the medicine they need and cannot afford.

We continue to work with the City Halls to hire Gabriela Gaspar, the Hetea health mediator – the process is again blocked because after a long series of requests sent by the City Hall to the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, until January there was still no answer. The secretary started the procedures again, but soon after he received a note from Prefectura saying that last year's law that regulated the hiring procedures in public institutions was declared unconstitutional. So, the City Hall has to wait for a new law (estimated to be published in April) in order to restart the procedures. Until then, they cannot employ any kind of new staff. Until Gabriela is officially hired, OvR signed an internship contract with her to make sure she remains motivated to do this hard work. Gabriela knows very well the poor community and is aware of all the difficulties they face in relation to the medical system and she is determined to help improve their health status. For example, her latest initiative is to improve the family planning campaign she started in the fall and conduct regular meetings with the young girls. Gabriela is constantly in touch with the poor people from Hetea, the family doctor and OvR team. She periodically submits reports informing us about her activities and the medical problems she identifies. OvR gave Gabriela a laptop and with a little help she learned how to use it to write and send the reports. She even has an email address. Even though there is still room for improving her skills, Gabriela is a quick learner.

Maria Haut from Vurpar is still paid by OvR for being class assistant, school & health mediator. The city hall hasn't started yet the procedures to hire her because some of the employees left (among them the social worker) and the mayor sees a priority in finding new people for these positions and ways to hire them. After that he said he will consider hiring Maria as well.

In Brateiu, two women were trained as health mediators by SASTIPEN so far, but none of them is doing the job because after the course they considered themselves not fit for the position. The local community identified a new person who would like to be trained, but SASTIPEN is not organizing any training in this period.

Networking

- On December 17, OvR participated at the closing Conference of the Health Mediation Program 2010-2013 implemented by SASTIPEN in partnership with the National Institute of Public Health. Even though everybody agrees that the health mediators have a very important role in poor communities, especially Roma – the improvement of the health status of the vulnerable groups – and several countries implemented the health mediation program as a good practice (Bulgaria, Spain, France), the hiring procedures are very slow and difficult in Romania. Both NGO and public authorities' representatives concluded that in order to unblock the health mediators' activity, Romania needs new laws that clarifies their status and facilitate their hiring. The frequent change of health ministers due to the politic turmoil, are delaying a step forward.
- A consortium of NGOs that won an EEA grant through Swiss Funds implements an integrated project in 12 communities from 3 counties (education, health, housing, culture). Among the 12, there is Ocolna, Amarastii de Jos from Dolj county, a FCG community. Through this project, the poor people from Ocolna will benefit from a medical cabinet right in the community, so that the people won't have to commute 10 km to Amarasti to be seen by a doctor. A doctor, a nurse and a health mediator will be hired to cover the emergencies and basic medical check-ups. The people with serious health problems will be referred to specialists working in the nearby hospitals. Initially, we wanted to organize the medical caravan planned for March in Ocolna, but after the February meeting with the NGOs, we decided to change the location because, starting April, the impoverished people from Ocolna will have access to medical care and wouldn't need the caravan as much as other communities. The meeting with the NGOs was very benefic because now we all understand better the interventions each has in the community, our common objective being not to overlap, but to complement each other's services brought to the community.

CONCLUSIONS

It is hard for local coordinators to follow up on cases until they are attended to. There is an initial enthusiasm when they identify children with health problems that could be solved with the help of the grant, but unless OvR team follows up with them weekly or sometimes daily, the process of solving them is very slow. This is probably because

despite trainings and the two year experience in the project, coordinators still find the medical system difficult to navigate and they are overloaded with their own work-related responsibilities, and also because they don't have health mediators that they can rely on for keeping track of these cases and helping parents deal with them.

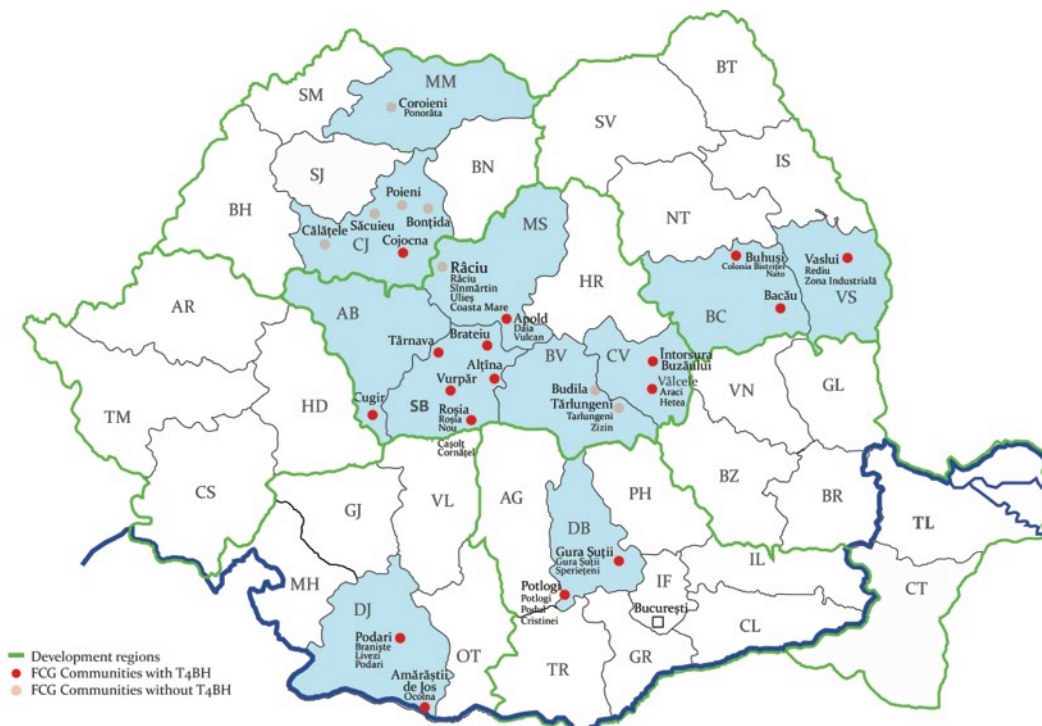
One of the main advantages of this grant is that it has brought health issues on the agenda of both OvidiuRo team, and of our partners from local communities. There is now a constant care to identify health problems in communities, and solutions are found although they do not always require the use of GSK funds alone – such as in the case of Lavinia and the wheelchair, or of the new medical caravan which we expect to use only 800 euros from the T4BH grant, while all other costs have been obtained either pro-bono (such as food from Carrefour, water from LaFantana, the bus from Atlassib) or by co-funding from other companies (e.g. Volksbank). In addition, the local community will contribute with lots of resources – for accommodation, lunch, consultation beds etc.

TIMELINE FOR NEXT THREE MONTHS

- New medical caravan in Nou village, Rosia comuna, Sibiu county – March 14-16 – a group of 22 medical students and 12 doctors (specialized in pediatrics, cardiology, neurology, infectious diseases etc.) will travel 600 km (round trip) to see 200 people in only two days. The children and adults from Nou are poor and they rarely make it to a doctor for routine checkups because the village is isolated, and some of them never get the chance to be seen by a specialist.
- Speech therapy training for teachers – March 21 – more than 20 preschool teachers will attend a workshop held by the speech therapist who works with the children from Altina – she is also the coordinator of speech therapists from Sibiu, and will teach teachers how to address the needs of children with poor vocabulary, undeveloped phonetic hearing and difficulties in pronunciation.
- Hopscotch Two with health focus – April – June. So far, app. 15 teachers want to organize this module for 2 year olds and their parents; in this period teachers are focusing on recruiting the children.
- Continue standard health activities in 17 communities – medicine and transportation to doctors, health education, fund for hygiene (toilet paper, soap) and fruit day for all kindergartens in the project.
- T4BH face to face meeting and round table with national authorities – May (TBD).

APPENDICES

1. Grant communities: 17 in the reported quarters.



2. Interim Financial Report – see attached Excel document.