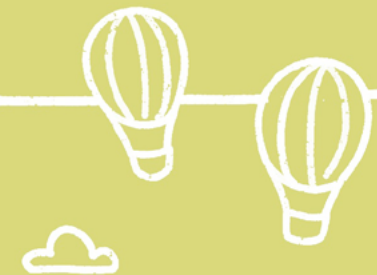




Solid Ground for Children
**Learning by Doing:
How Roma Innovation
Labs Are Rethinking
Family Separation**



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About The *Solid Ground for Children* Social Innovation Lab

The *Solid Ground for Children* Social Innovation Lab (“the Lab”)¹ is part of the ‘Solid Ground for Children’ programme, which seeks to double the number of people in Bulgaria who benefit from impactful solutions that support family stability².

Roma communities are among those most affected by family separation in Bulgaria. This challenge is shaped by systemic barriers and by limited opportunities for Roma communities to define their own needs and develop their own responses. The Lab was therefore established to support the Roma-led development of innovative solutions to address the question: “How can we develop new approaches to prevent the separation of children from their families within Roma communities?”

1 The Lab is the result of a partnership between [Spring Impact](#), leading the programme; [Reos Partners](#), providing expert guidance on social-lab methodology; and the [Open Space Collective](#), contributing to the Lab’s design and steering the process on the ground.

2 The programme was made possible thanks to the support of Tanya’s Dream Fund, sheltered by Swiss Philanthropy Foundation.

The Social Innovation Lab Approach

Social innovation labs allow for an adaptive and experimental way of collaboratively designing and testing responses to complex social challenges. They bring together a diverse group of participants, including representatives from civil society, business, public organisations and local authorities, in a shared process of deeply understanding a problem and developing and testing prototype solutions that seek to address root causes rather than isolated symptoms.

Social innovation labs are used across a wide range of issues and contexts globally. Within the *Solid Ground for Children* programme, the core principles of this methodology were used as a foundation and adapted to ensure the process was as responsive as possible to local conditions and needs.

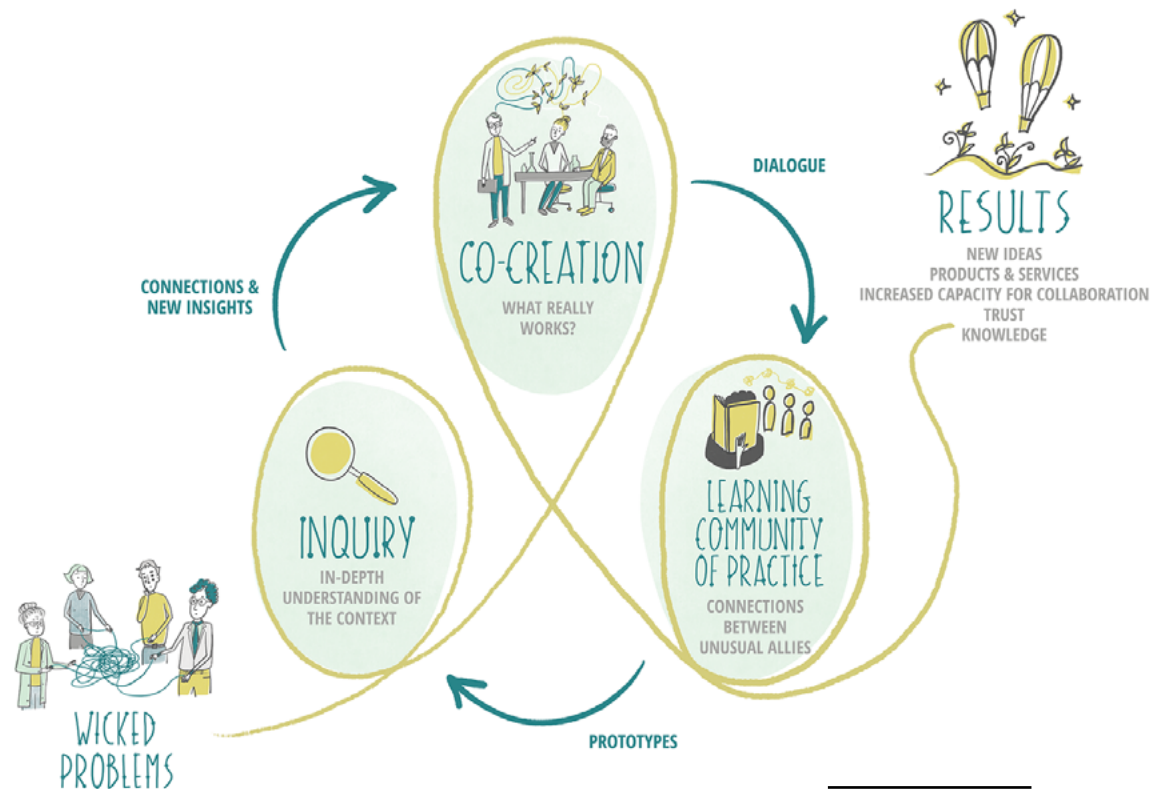


Illustration by Ål Nik

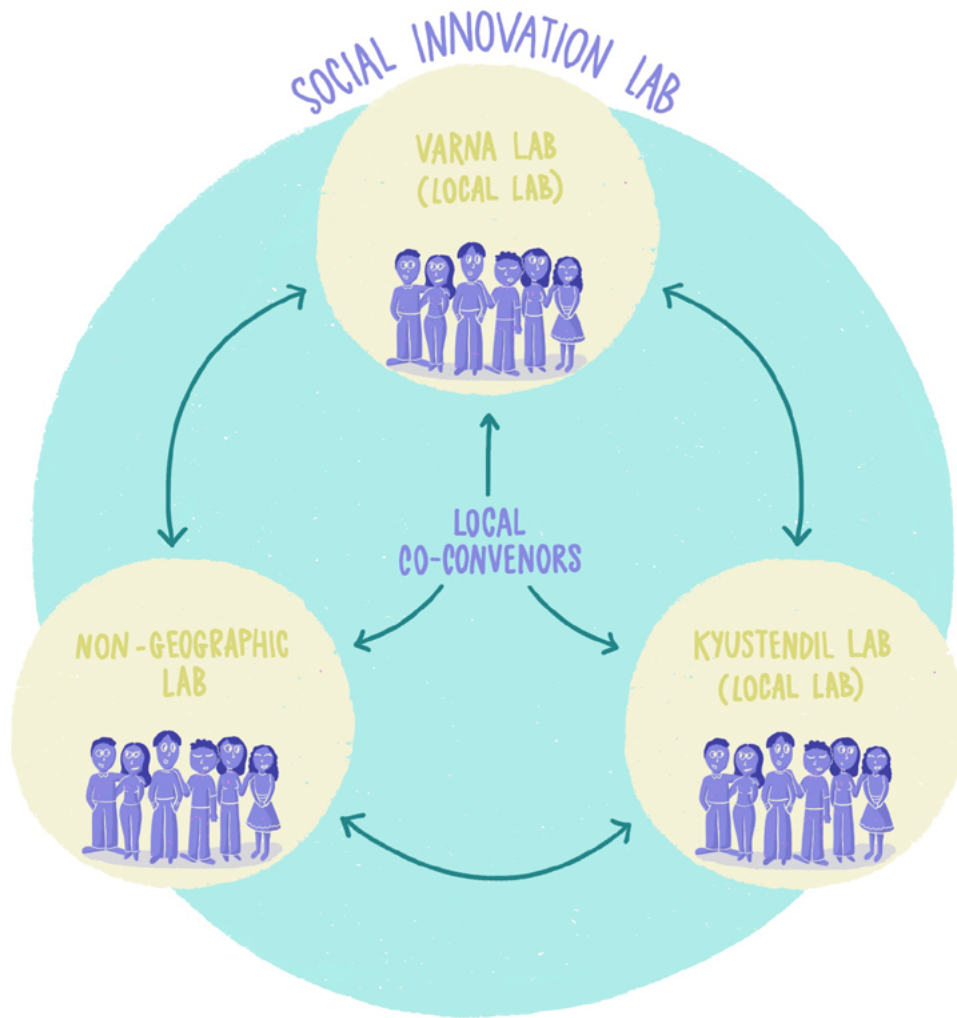
The Lab Structure

The *Solid Ground for Children* Social Innovation Lab was made up of three independent but connected Lab groups, designed to work at both national and local levels:

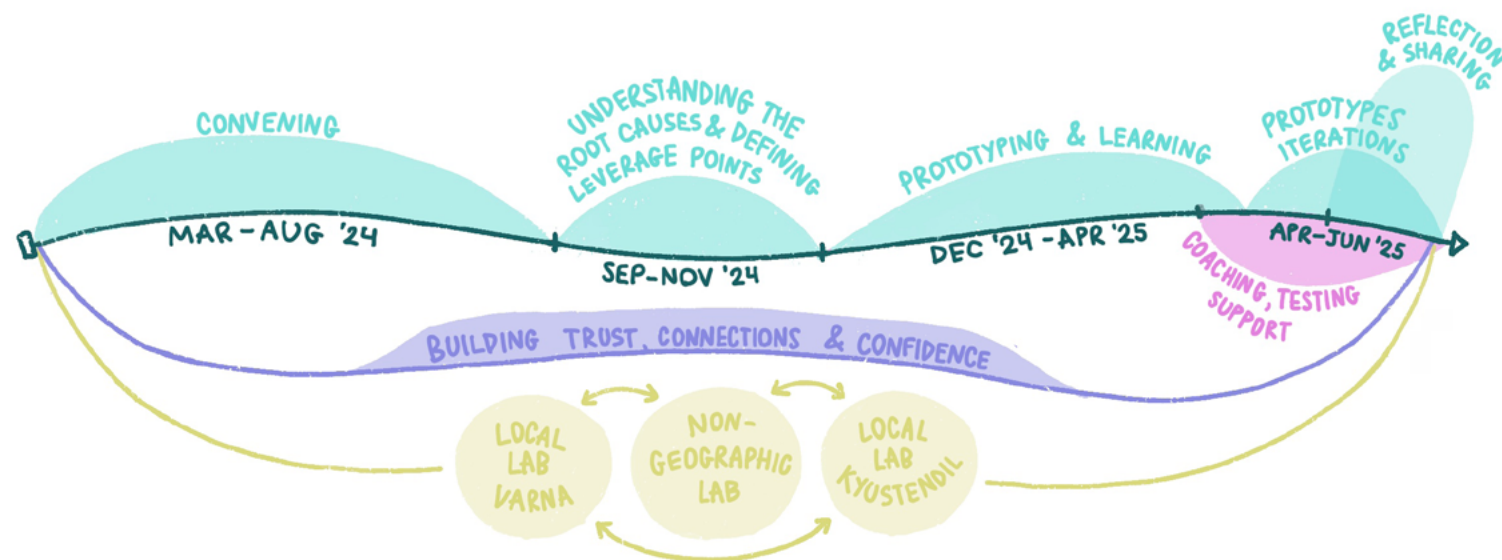
- **Non-Geographic Lab** - a majority Roma cohort from across Bulgaria, facilitated by Open Space Collective. This group brought together participants with lived experience and professional roles related to family separation from different parts of the country;
- **Varna Lab (Local Lab)** - a cohort of the local Roma community based in the city of Varna, facilitated by two local co-convenors who participated in the Non-Geographic Lab; and
- **Kyustendil Lab (Local Lab)** - a cohort of the local Roma community based in the town of Kyustendil, facilitated by a local co-convenor who participated in the Non-Geographic Lab.

This structure allowed the Lab to explore family separation in parallel at local and national levels. The Local Labs focused on place-based realities, relationships, and responses within their communities, while the Non-Geographic Lab provided a broader national perspective.

The co-convenors played a critical bridging role. By participating in both the Local Labs and the Non-Geographic Lab, they enabled learning, ideas, and emerging solutions to flow between the different groups. While each Lab group explored family separation independently, they aligned their work through a shared approach.



The Lab Process



The diagram above provides an overview of the Lab process followed by each of the three Lab groups. The first two stages of the process were essential for long term success and ensured the Lab groups were able to develop prototype solutions to test in the later part of the process:

👉 Stage 1: Convening a diverse group of relevant participants

A key success factor for social innovation labs is bringing together a diverse group of participants who can collaborate effectively. For this reason, significant time was invested before the Lab began in identifying active individuals from different sectors across the country. Numerous discussions were held and drawing on recommendations and personal networks meant reaching people beyond those already involved in existing initiatives and projects.

The Non-Geographic Lab was established with a majority of Roma participants, representing a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. The group comprised 18 individuals from more than 10 locations across Bulgaria, of whom approximately 70% were Roma and

around 50% were women. Participants included local activists, social workers, health and education mediators, leaders of Roma organisations, researchers, and representatives of community support centres.

In parallel, trusted local partners were identified in two communities to convene the Local Labs. Following an open call and an analysis of possible locations for the Local Labs, Layla Hussein and Eleonora Chorbadzhieva from Our Home Foundation, who are active in the Maksuda neighbourhood of Varna, and Arso Ganev, a local activist and education mediator from Kyustendil were selected as co-convenors.

Stage 2: Developing a shared and in-depth understanding of the problem and its underlying causes:

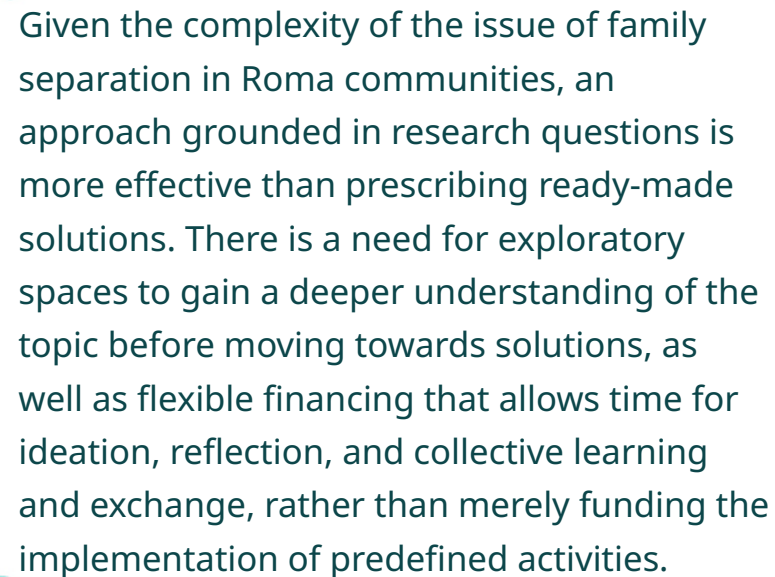
Before exploring practical solutions, the Lab undertook a systematic exploration of the problem of family separation and its underlying causes. This is a complex issue and, as became evident during the process, one that remains relatively unfamiliar within Roma communities, including among professionals and activists working on related topics.

To build a deeper understanding, the initial focus was placed on participants' personal experiences and narratives rather than on predefined concepts or frameworks. Particular attention was given to uncovering underlying causes through a collaborative analysis of attitudes, stereotypes, and patterns of thinking that shape how the issue is perceived and addressed. These activities were carried out across both the Local Labs and the Non-Geographic Lab.

The problem was examined at two complementary levels in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding:



- Participants engaged individually in questioning their assumptions and building awareness of the issue through multiple perspectives, lived experiences, and the stories shared by other participants. A range of storytelling and systems-thinking methods were used.
- Participants also conducted fieldwork with diverse groups to test their hypotheses, enabling them to deepen and validate their understanding of the issue.



Given the complexity of the issue of family separation in Roma communities, an approach grounded in research questions is more effective than prescribing ready-made solutions. There is a need for exploratory spaces to gain a deeper understanding of the topic before moving towards solutions, as well as flexible financing that allows time for ideation, reflection, and collective learning and exchange, rather than merely funding the implementation of predefined activities.





**Cross-sector
collaboration among
unlikely partners:
What we learned about
the Social Innovation
Lab approach**



2.1 The freedom to co-create with others without competition

Within their Lab groups, participants were actively involved in co-creating each stage of the process and defining their own areas of focus within a shared overarching framework. This approach allowed the participants to collaborate while retaining autonomy in how they contributed and proved crucial in allowing for the development of original and context-specific approaches.

The Lab structure created conditions for new partnerships and connections to emerge. Participants independently determined how to organise their collaboration and this resulted in the formation of various cross-sector teams, such as one sub-team within the Non-Geographic Lab that brought together a researcher, a social worker, and an education mediator from different parts of Bulgaria who had not previously met or worked together.

By bringing diverse participants together and empowering them to act together as decision-makers, especially in relation to designing and applying for budgets to test prototypes, the Lab approach helped the participants to move beyond the usual competitive dynamics that often characterise civil society work under call-for-proposal procedures.

Throughout the process, the Lab placed a strong emphasis on research, experimentation, and learning from experience, including from elements that did not work as intended. Participants noted that in more traditional networks the focus is often on sharing achievements, final results, and examples of good practice. In contrast, the Lab allowed them to shift from passive sharing and listening to co-creation, action and learning.



2.2 Financing: from frames to blank canvases

The budget and funding processes for each Lab group to develop and test prototype solutions to address the issue of separation were grounded in open-dialogue and trust. They followed a lean and flexible approach, intentionally designed to reduce the barriers often created by the terminology and administrative requirements of standard funding applications.

This trust proved well placed as participants reported that the autonomy they were given encouraged them to be more creative and flexible, enabling them to respond more effectively to the needs of the communities they were working with. Teams were able to align budgets with actual needs and reallocate funds in real time, without lengthy approval procedures, directing resources where they could have the greatest impact.

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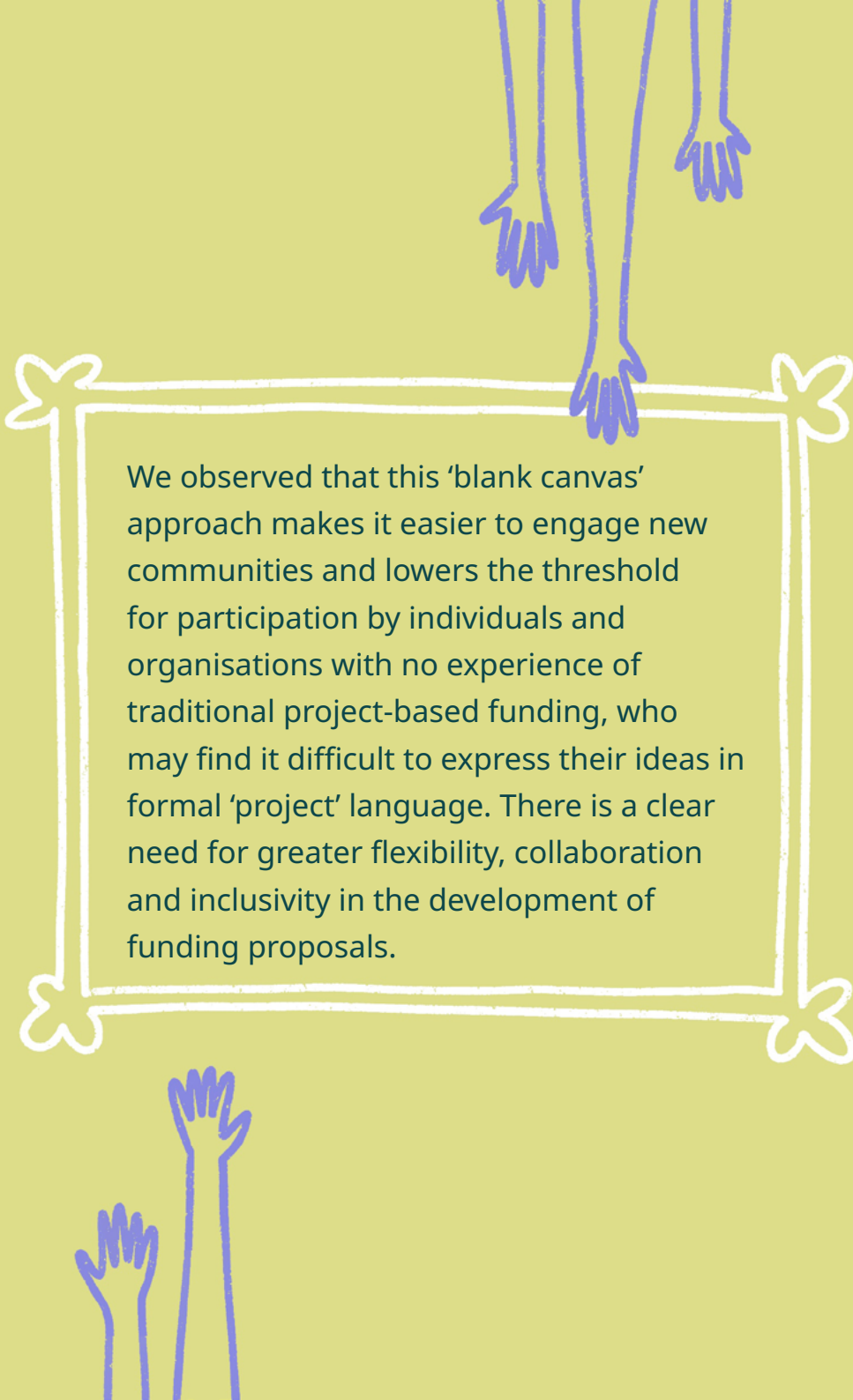
For the first time, I was able to do creative work rather than just chase KPIs and meet financial reporting requirements.

”

This freedom, combined with the absence of rigid reporting frameworks and a focus instead on shared working principles, also created space for unplanned initiatives to emerge organically alongside prototype development, without additional funding. These included a community football tournament in Varna and a meeting between institutions and health mediators in the Stara Zagora region focused on the implementation of Ordinance 26³.

³ Ordinance No 26 of 14.06.2007 on the provision of obstetric care for uninsured women and on medical examinations and tests for children and pregnant women outside the scope of compulsory health insurance.



A central white rectangular frame with decorative floral corners is set against a light green background. Four blue line-art hands are positioned around the frame: two at the top, one at the bottom center, and two at the bottom left. The text is contained within the frame.

We observed that this 'blank canvas' approach makes it easier to engage new communities and lowers the threshold for participation by individuals and organisations with no experience of traditional project-based funding, who may find it difficult to express their ideas in formal 'project' language. There is a clear need for greater flexibility, collaboration and inclusivity in the development of funding proposals.

2.3 Getting out of the bubble

The Lab was designed to be inclusive at every stage of the process, from the initial formulation of the problem that the Lab was addressing to the open sharing of mistakes and unsuccessful activities. Accessible language was used and the process placed value on lived experience, helping to reduce structural barriers for small, field-based organisations with deep local knowledge, as well as individuals with relevant expertise but limited prior experience of project-based work. This approach enabled all participants to play an active role in shaping potential solutions and developing prototypes to test these.

Lab participants were directly involved in decision-making throughout the process. This level of participation is an empowering practice in itself, offering an alternative to the more formalistic consultative approaches that often characterise child-related policies and strategies, including national projects in Bulgaria.



2.4 Doing is more valuable than knowing

We got our hands dirty!

One of the core principles of the Lab was that any hypothesis or assumption for a potential solution to the problem of family separation had to be tested through some sort of action. Rather than using ready made solutions or predefined activity plans, the development of every prototype started with a hypothesis that was explored through small-scale experiments designed to confirm or challenge it. For each experiment, participants identified the most appropriate target groups to engage, as well as the most effective outreach channels.

This approach enables a developing and continuous deeper understanding of the problem the Lab was exploring. It stands in contrast to approaches that begin with a limited or fixed understanding of the problem and carry it unchanged throughout an intervention, due to a lack of openness and adaptability.



What we learnt about family separation among Roma families

Learning in the Lab took place at three levels:

- 1 Peer exchange in the Non-Geographic Lab;
- 2 Within the Local Labs in Varna and Kyustendil; and
- 3 Within individual prototype teams across all three Lab groups.

The process was intense, non-linear, and thought-provoking and generated many new ideas and further questions about family separation among Roma families.



3.1 Family separation in Roma communities has many faces and manifests in different ways

“*Abandonment is not the only form of separation.*”

The issue of family separation proved to be relatively poorly understood, even among specialists in the sector. Separation can occur at different stages of a child's life and little was known amongst the Lab participants about the different forms of separation between children and their parents and how this affects children's development and behaviour.

During initial discussions between Lab participants, separation was understood almost exclusively as a mother abandoning her baby in a maternity ward, a scenario perceived as final and irreversible. Some participants felt that as babies in Roma communities are not being abandoned as frequently as in the past, separation is currently not a significant issue. It was seldom recognised that prolonged parental absence is a form of separation and many participants also did not consider residential care (short-term or long-term) as particularly problematic, as these practices were historically and culturally common and there was a limited understanding of child development and of the importance of children growing up with their parents.

Through these conversations, participants began to recognise the multiple dimensions of family separation and its harmful effects, and the rationale for supporting families



to remain together wherever possible. They explored the root causes of family separation through a novel process grounded in personal narratives and the sharing of lived experience. This approach enabled the identification of the many nuances and dimensions of separation. This deepened understanding of the problem of separation and helped the participants approach the topic in different ways.

“

The more people that know about an issue, the higher the likelihood it will be resolved.

”

A shared conclusion among Lab participants was the need to discuss family separation more within local communities. Rather than addressing the issue sporadically or through campaign-based efforts, participants emphasised the need for effective, hands on community engagement, grounded in sharing relatable personal experiences and stories. However, family separation is a sensitive and often difficult topic to raise within Roma communities. Traditionally, children have been regarded as the community's greatest wealth, creating what some described as an 'inviolable zone', never to be infringed, around the issue. A trust-based approach is therefore essential to enable people to share their experiences openly.

More broadly, participants noted a general distrust of institutions within Roma communities that can lead to fear, particularly in relation to child-related interventions. As a result, interventions are more likely to be accepted when they are led by trusted local leaders and organisations embedded in neighbourhoods, present on a daily basis, and fulfil multiple roles (as seen with the co-convenor partners leading the Local Lab groups Varna



and Kyustendil). This insight shaped the prototype phase, where participants introduced the topic of separation indirectly, through related issues and locally tailored approaches.

The separation of children from their families needs to be discussed within Roma communities, with appropriate sensitivity and in culturally relevant ways. Efforts should focus on strengthening understanding of what young children need—above all, their parents and a responsive, stimulating family environment—especially among young people who have yet to embark on relationships, family life, or parenthood.

“

It is both advisable and feasible to use diverse and unconventional ‘channels’ to communicate the topic. TikTok’s potential in this regard (as the ‘Roma internet’) is immense and to date, remains entirely unrecognised.

”

3.2 Parents left to cope alone: from isolation to opportunities

One of the underlying causes of family separation in Roma communities identified by Lab participants relates to the perceived role of Roma women within the community. Participants observed the presence of a tacit social norm suggesting that women should not raise their children alone or within a new household if the family into which the children were born breaks down for any reason. Enforcement of this norm frequently leads to the separation of children from their parents.

Participants also noted that if a woman chooses to raise her children independently, she often loses access to the strong informal support traditionally provided by the community and would experience significant social and economic isolation. When implementing prototypes to test possible solutions to the problem of separation, some Lab participants further recognised that this issue affects single parents more broadly, including fathers. While caregiving responsibilities are more commonly associated with mothers, fathers raising children alone were also found to face considerable challenges and were often less likely to seek advice or support. In response to this insight:

- Teams in Varna and Kyustendil developed prototypes which tested whether strengthening Roma women's economic independence could reduce the risk of separation by developing the skills and mindsets needed to generate income autonomously.



- Another prototype team in the Non-Geographic Lab explored how different forms of support could strengthen the capacity and confidence of single parents at risk of separation from their children. They tested different types of content and delivery formats to understand what best built trust with parents and clarified their support needs. Mental health support and peer support networks emerged as key priorities.



3.3 Bridging the world of policies and the world of people

In the Non-Geographic Lab group, some participants focused on how locally implemented healthcare could support women without public health insurance, specifically by examining how statutory entitlements could be put into practice. Two prototype teams tested specific ways of improving the implementation of Ordinance No. 26, which regulates the access to prenatal care during the pregnancy of uninsured women and birth delivery at maternity wards, in the regions of Shumen and Stara Zagora. This work took place on two levels: first, by identifying what was required in practice for pregnant women to access the support available to them; and second, by engaging in system-level consultations with institutions and healthcare professionals to identify barriers to the effective implementation of the Ordinance.

Key factors for effective implementation of the Ordinance were to ‘translate’ the provisions of the Ordinance into plain and accessible language and to accompany pregnant women to their obstetric and gynaecological check-ups. This form of accompaniment and support serves as a bridge between the regulatory framework and the needs of the communities and healthcare professionals. Accompanying pregnant women to their medical appointments not only made the visit to the doctor possible and increased confidence for these women (for some, this was their first ever medical examination), but also created opportunities for informal conversations with the expectant mother about parenting attitudes, family dynamics, the women’s role, family planning and newborn care, as well as for identifying early signs that additional support might be needed.



Testing this solution by running prototypes across two different administrative regions in Bulgaria showed that implementing national legislation at the local level requires contextualisation. Translating national policies into practice demands different resources, approaches, and forms of engagement dependent on understanding local contexts. To be effective, those who understand the language, dynamics, and realities of local communities must be enabled to play an active role, with recognition that meaningful implementation requires tailored solutions. This highlights the importance of flexibility as a prerequisite for ensuring that policy intentions reach those they are intended to support.



3.4 Engaging people where they are

“

Previously, we would travel by train on fixed tracks; now we have a bus and can go wherever we choose.

”

During the prototype phase, some participants tested potential solutions with stakeholder groups in locations they had not previously engaged with. A key success factor for the prototypes was creating safe, low-risk conditions for testing unconventional (and at times uncomfortable) ideas. From the outset of the prototyping phase, it was made explicit to the Lab participants that “failure” of a prototype was not only acceptable but an important source of learning.

A key learning was that when working in new contexts or with unfamiliar stakeholders, it is essential to allow time for exploration and understanding before designing or implementing more comprehensive interventions. Examples of how different prototype teams did this include:

- One team chose to work in two remote and highly marginalised communities⁴, a decision taken after a first round of prototype iteration and informed by feedback from the field. In these communities, some residents were living in complete isolation, and certain areas were considered ‘no-go’ zones that challenged even experienced social workers accustomed to working with severely marginalised groups. In such contexts, children may be born without access to any form of support. The prototype highlighted

⁴ In the villages of Kosovo and Markovo, in Kaspichan Municipality, Shumen Region.



the importance of activating the resources of individuals and organisations able to reach these areas and engage communities. This required flexibility, openness, and a willingness to confront difficult and sensitive issues.

- One team explored the potential of using TikTok as a means of reaching diverse Roma communities online. The team began by studying the platform and consulting with relevant experts before creating a dedicated account to facilitate discussion on the topic of separation. To extend reach and engagement, they collaborated with a content creator with an existing audience.
- One team recruited and trained informal women leaders from within the community. These women used their peer networks to engage a significant number of women who would otherwise be unlikely to participate in activities or formal programmes.
- Several teams addressed the issue of family separation indirectly. For example one team engaging parents through discussions on child nutrition supported by creative activities for women, whilst another introduced table football in child and youth centres as a way of attracting young people considered to be at higher risk.

These prototypes emerged organically through the Lab process and following iterations through fieldwork and real-time feedback. The Lab's structure enabled rapid uptake with minimal bureaucracy.



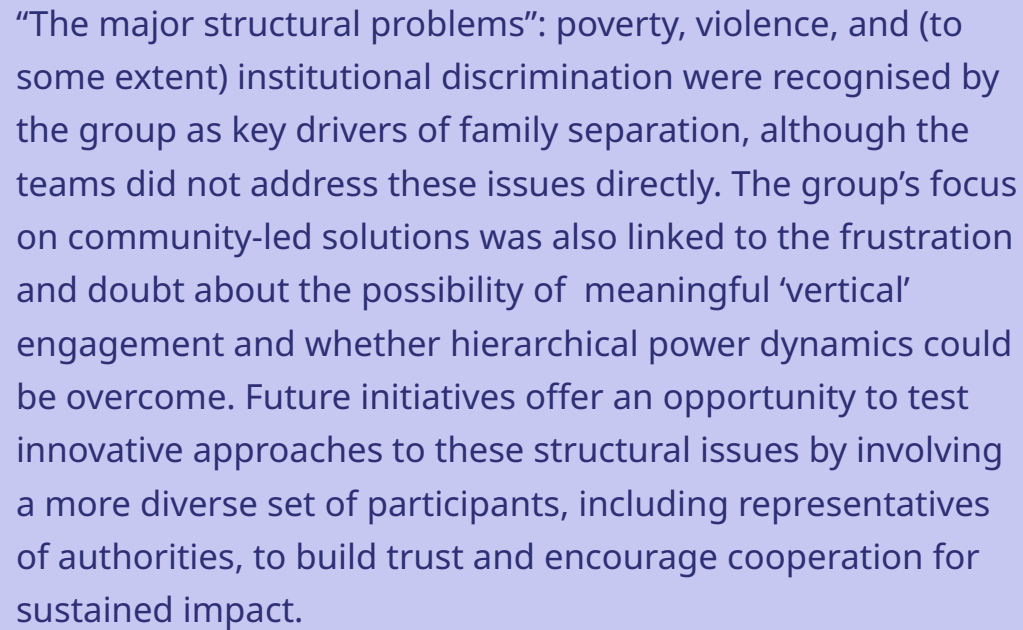
3.5 By the community, for the community

Appreciation for the value of convening diverse stakeholders to co-create solutions was a key learning. Influenced in part by the Lab's format, several participants went on to apply this approach in their own fieldwork, where they identified new connections and opportunities for collaboration. For example, in Stara Zagora and the surrounding region, one participant brought together a multidisciplinary group of active Roma actors with diverse professional backgrounds to develop local strategies for preventing the separation of children from their families.

This learning reinforced an insight that had emerged during the initial problem analysis phase of the Lab: Roma communities themselves play a critical role in addressing family separation, but require structured spaces for dialogue and collective action to do so effectively. Across many of the prototypes, teams pooled local resources, facilitated dialogue, and connected actors who would not typically engage with one another. In Varna, for instance, religious and political leaders temporarily set aside their differences to explore whether and how they could collaborate to prevent the separation of children from their families.

Some prototype outcomes were not tied to specific interventions or measurable outputs, but instead reflected investments in local social capital and early steps towards strengthening communities' capacity to collaborate and participate actively in similar processes. This was particularly evident in the Local Lab in Varna, where a strong group of women leaders emerged, committed to continuing work on the issue beyond the duration of the formal Lab process.





“The major structural problems”: poverty, violence, and (to some extent) institutional discrimination were recognised by the group as key drivers of family separation, although the teams did not address these issues directly. The group’s focus on community-led solutions was also linked to the frustration and doubt about the possibility of meaningful ‘vertical’ engagement and whether hierarchical power dynamics could be overcome. Future initiatives offer an opportunity to test innovative approaches to these structural issues by involving a more diverse set of participants, including representatives of authorities, to build trust and encourage cooperation for sustained impact.



Summary

The Solid Ground for Children Social Innovation Lab seeks to address the complex challenge of preventing the separation of children from their families in Roma communities through a novel approach which is flexible, experimental, and Roma-led. This is in contrast to more traditional project-based interventions in Bulgaria. Rather than applying predefined solutions, the Lab focused on the co-creation and testing of innovative, systemic approaches that address root causes of family separation, supported by iterative experimentation and learning.

The Lab successfully convened a diverse group of 'unusual suspects', many of whom had not previously worked together. A key achievement was empowering participants to engage meaningfully in decision-making throughout the process, including in relation to budget allocation and reporting for the prototypes in particular. This helped to move beyond the competitive funding dynamics that civil society organisations often face. The flexible, trust-based, and participatory approach fostered creativity, adaptability, and responsiveness to community needs, while also enabling smaller organisations and active community members with relevant expertise and lived experience to participate and access resources that are often difficult to reach through conventional funding channels.



The process and insights demonstrated that the separation of Roma children from their families is more complex and less well understood than initially assumed, even among experienced practitioners. Lab participants moved beyond a narrow understanding of separation as infant abandonment and began to recognise the harms associated with multiple forms of separation, including prolonged parental absence and placement in kinship or residential care, practices that are often viewed as culturally acceptable.

The Lab also highlighted that meaningful engagement on this sensitive topic requires trust-based, indirect, and culturally responsive approaches, often led by local actors and, in some cases, through non-traditional channels such as TikTok, which for Roma communities functions as a primary source of information and communication. Beyond generating innovative ideas and prototype solutions, the Lab contributed to building trust and strengthening willingness to collaborate among diverse stakeholders.

Overall, the Lab demonstrated that while important progress has been made in understanding and addressing the drivers of child–family separation, substantial potential remains to build on this solid ground. Continued exploration of innovative approaches to structural challenges such as poverty, violence, and institutional discrimination is also essential. The process also points to the need for greater investment in approaches that empower communities, enable genuine collaboration, and support sustainable, locally led solutions where they are most urgently needed, laying the groundwork for lasting systemic change for children and families in Bulgaria.





Annex: The Prototypes

This annex provides an overview of the prototypes developed and tested by the Lab. The first five are prototypes developed and tested by the Non-Geographic Lab. Each prototype was designed as a hypothesis-driven experiment to explore potential approaches to preventing the separation of children from their families in Roma communities.



Practically Implementing Ordinance 26

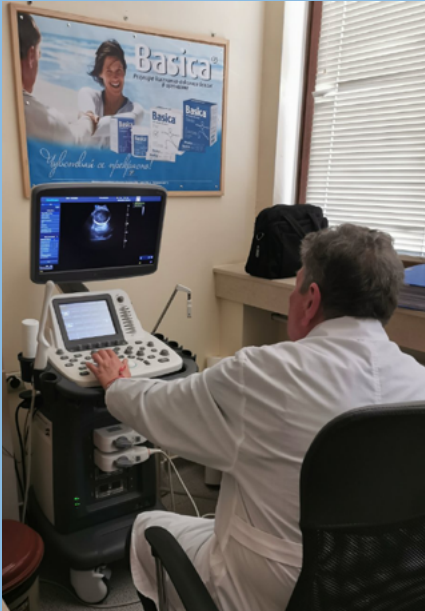
Research Question and Approach:

How can Ordinance No. 26 of the Ministry of Health on obstetric care for uninsured women be implemented in practice, and how can women in marginalised communities benefit from it?

The underlying hypothesis was that a structured approach to accompanying pregnant women would improve access to free prenatal check-ups, while also providing psychosocial support and reducing the risk of separation after birth. Two prototype teams explored the implementation of Ordinance No. 26 in Novi Pazar (Shumen Region) and Stara Zagora.

Key learnings:

- Accompaniment (including transport) to obstetric and gynaecological check-ups was critical for enabling access to care and functioned as an effective entry point for engaging women who would otherwise be difficult for social workers to reach.
- Time spent accompanying women created opportunities to build trust, provide informal counselling, and better understand individual circumstances and intentions.
- An initial assumption that a paid first examination was required to 'enter' the healthcare system was tested. Dialogue with healthcare professionals, which improved understanding and cooperation, negated the need for this approach.
- Additional laboratory tests and examinations not covered under Ordinance No. 26 were necessary in cases involving high-risk chronic conditions.
- Providing essential supply kits upon admission for delivery increased women's confidence and sense of dignity and equality within the healthcare setting.
- Multi-stakeholder working meetings with institutions in Stara Zagora supported more consistent and proactive implementation of the Ordinance.
- Group sessions on breastfeeding, vaccination, and newborn care addressed knowledge gaps and strengthened preparedness.
- Awareness materials for healthcare professionals and communities were valued for their clarity and accessibility.



Mission Parent

Research Question and Approach:

What approaches are effective at strengthening the parenting capacity of families at risk, including single parents, and for building trust-based relationships beyond formal compliance mechanisms?

The underlying hypothesis was that increasing the capacity and confidence of single parents at risk, including single fathers, would help prevent the separation of children from their families in Roma communities. The team started in Novi Pazar and after one round of iteration decided to focus on extremely marginalised and isolated communities in the villages of Markovo and Kosovo.

Key learnings:

→ Work with single parents:

- There were high levels of emotional fatigue and isolation among single parents, many of whom had nobody to confide in and to share concerns with. Establishing peer support spaces emerged as essential.
- Tailored, context-specific support proved more effective than standardised parenting guidance.
- Parents lacked access to basic information about available services and support programmes. Addressing this gap enabled more informed decision-making.
- There were clear strong links between poverty and risk of separation.
- Social norms and stereotypes were prevalent, particularly around early marriage.
- Despite the challenges, parents demonstrated strong motivation to learn and change.

→ Work with at risk parents in Markovo and Kosovo:

- Parents in isolated and remote communities need regular and accessible information as many parents don't have basic knowledge on how to take care of a child because these areas have little to no access to health and social services.
- Personalised home visits were critical for building trust and tailoring to individual contexts. This allows for identification of harmful traditional practices (such as applying salt to newborns) and work to stop them.
- The influence of mothers-in-law on young mothers emerged as a significant factor in caregiving decisions.



Engaging Religious and Community Leaders

Research Question and Approach:

How could engaging religious and community leaders help prevent separation of children from their families?

The underlying hypothesis was that religious and community leaders represent untapped potential for prevention at the local level. Following initial research and interviews, a multidisciplinary group was established in Stara Zagora. It included informal leaders (religious leaders, students, professionals from the community with university degrees, including teachers, healthcare professionals, and social workers and an attorney), alongside representatives from the Child Protection Department, the Regional Health Inspectorate, the Regional Department of Education, the Labour Office, and school and kindergarten leadership.

Key learnings:

- Local communities represent a significant asset with untapped potential and a new generation of leaders is emerging within Roma communities.
- Whilst strengthening the understanding of relevant regulatory frameworks was an important outcome, opportunities also exist to complement them with informal and relational tools.
- This work built participants' confidence in their ability to contribute positively to their communities.
- Church-based discussions revealed interest in continued dialogue on broader community issues



TikTok for Social Good

“It is difficult to reach this audience - they're mostly on TikTok...”

Research Question and Approach:

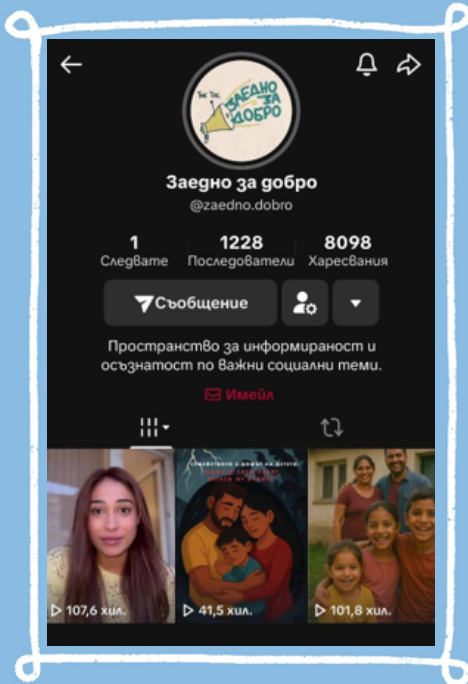
How can TikTok be leveraged as a platform for social good in Roma communities?

The underlying hypothesis was that Tik Tok can be used to mobilise social support within Roma communities for issues related to family separation. This prototype explored the platform's reach, community engagement, and potential to influence attitudes and behaviour and was delivered in two stages:

- 1 **Stage 1** - research, consultations with experts, and study of the TikTok platform
- 2 **Stage 2** - new Tik Tok channel launch and release of four videos (two on the new channel and two by a partner influencer, on her own channel):
 - [Post 1](#): 100,800 views // 1,198 likes
 - [Post 2](#): 40,400 views // 930 likes
 - [Influencer Post 1](#): 286,500 views // 17,400 likes // 253 comments
 - [Influencer Post 2](#): 10,500 likes // 151 comments

Key learnings:

- “TikTok is the entire internet in Roma communities” - it functions as the primary platform within many Roma communities.
- The platform provides valuable insight into the Roma community.
- Influential voices within the community can be mobilised to align their content and messages around socially significant issues.
- The issue of family separation is highly stigmatised and associated with negative connotations, resulting in fewer people actively seeking out information about the topic. Therefore, indirect and sensitive framing of the topic is more appropriate than explicit messaging.
- TikTok demonstrated strong potential for disseminating messages of societal significance in Roma communities and mobilising energy and action around complex social issues.



Entrepreneurial Skills for Women

Research Question and Approach:

How can young parents, and particularly women, develop entrepreneurial skills that support financial independence?

The underlying hypothesis was that equipping women with practical skills would increase their confidence to start their own businesses, enabling income generation and financial independence. 12 unemployed women were selected to take part in this prototype. After initial surveys and psychological profiles were undertaken, the women participated in over 20 sessions to assess and develop their working skills in sewing, candle making, soap making, pottery and wool felting.

Key learnings:

- Women needed to balance paid work with childcare responsibilities.
- Many participants had both an older child and a baby, creating logistical barriers to participation without transport and child-friendly spaces being available in the locations where the sessions took place.
- Flexibility in budget allocation for the prototype was necessary, as participants' needs and capacities evolved over time requiring flexibility in the activities that were being delivered.
- When participants themselves led group activities, motivation and engagement were high.
- Engagement was strengthened through practical support such as transport, refreshments, in-kind assistance (e.g. hygiene supplies) and engaging the children in the group sessions as well.
- Consistent scheduling, a clear group structure, and facilitation by someone from the community supported trust and continuity.



Prototypes from the Kyustendil Lab

Research on Early Marriage

Research Question:

Which dialogue and engagement tools are appropriate for different target groups in the neighbourhood and could contribute to shifts in attitudes towards early marriage?

The underlying hypothesis was that early marriage is the main cause of child-family separation in the neighbourhood, and there is a need for non-judgmental discussion in the community that enables dialogue and empowers the local community to seek answers to the issue in their own right.

Approach and Activities: Community survey, student essay competition and collaboration with the local church.



Roma in the Labour Force

Research Question:

What effect would a locally accessible job notice board, combined with targeted job-search support, have on employment opportunities for Roma residents?

The underlying hypothesis was that economic self-sufficiency is a key factor for the stability of families in Roma communities.

Approach and Activities: Mentoring for economically inactive people and installation of notice boards with job vacancies at the neighbourhood centre, targeting both job seekers and employers.

Successful Women, Successful Families

Research Question:

What effect would a mentoring programme pairing successful Roma women with young women from the neighbourhood have on aspirations?

The underlying hypothesis was that positive role models can significantly influence the way young girls and women view education, family and professional fulfilment.

Approach and Activities: Identifying successful Roma women and hosting mentoring sessions and group discussions.



Prototypes from the Varna Lab

Engagement with Children to Develop a Family Model

Research Question:

What types of training programmes and tools support children aged 7–12 to develop healthy family relationship models?

The underlying hypothesis was that behavioural patterns acquired within the family that contribute to child–family separation can be reshaped through structured group activities that promote emotional awareness and positive role modelling.

Approach and Activities: Group activities with children including games, role-playing and interactive exercises delivered in Turkish (the local language) to develop emotional intelligence and showcase new relationship models.



Women Leaders in the Community

Research Question:

How can women be informed and supported more effectively to keep their family together? Which messages, channels and approaches work best?

The underlying assumption was that a lack of information and support for women is a primary driver for their decisions to part with their child and place them with another caregiver or in institutional care.

Approach and Activities: Training and support for women leaders in the community to establish informal peer groups.



Engagement with Young People and Families at Risk

Research Question:

How can intensive support be provided to families at risk, with a particular focus on boys at risk, in the Maksuda neighbourhood of Varna?

The underlying assumption was that comprehensive family support, combined with engagement of boys through positive male role models from the community, can reduce risks of separation for families already involved with child protection services.

Approach and Activities: Families taking part in the prototype were referred by the Child Protection Department as they were at-risk and needed social services support. Activities included monthly social support and in-kind assistance (food, medicines, hygiene supplies), counselling and family support, engagement of children and young people in structured activities and the formation of three groups with varying frequency and activity mixes to test effectiveness, including drama, film discussions, educational games, football, boxing, dance, and visits to local institutions.

Key Learnings from the Local Labs:

- Sustained engagement with local communities requires trusted local partners and cannot rely on one-off consultations.
- Roma communities are not homogeneous; different communities have distinct characteristics, even within the same neighbourhood. Effective interventions must therefore be tailored to specific local contexts.
- Whilst there is significant untapped potential and willingness to act within local communities, local leaders lack confidence with respect to decision-making.
- In areas most in need of support, there are often not enough active people and this constrains local capacity to drive processes that support families staying together.
- The prototypes tested demonstrate potential for adaption and replication in other communities.





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