

Tools for Improving Employability of ROMA

No 4

Slovakia

Project Report

Partnership Meetings in Slovakia

12-13th February, 2008

The first meeting of project partners was organised in Bratislava. Partners participated at the international conference "Roma Employment – Challenges and Barriers" organised by Milan Šimečka Foundation. Also partners discussed the activities of the Grundtvig project.

27-28 th October, 2008

The fourth partnership meeting took place in the Eastern Slovakia. During two days the partners had the possibility to visit 2 social enterprises, where long term unemployed, mainly from local Roma population are employed. The partners were also welcome by the mayor of Kecerovce, where large Roma population forms more than 70% of whole village population and where diverse development activities are being held.

Common activities of the partnership were discussed during steering committee meeting.



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ROMA in Slovakia

Roma population represents, after Hungarian population, a second largest minority in the Slovak republic. This fact is generally accepted, even though there are no exact data on number of Roma population. The last census (2001) showed 89 920 citizens of Roma nationality living in Slovakia, but the estimations are much higher – from 200 000 to 500 000. The Roma live spread around the whole republic, but the highest amount of population is concentrated in 3 regions – Prešov, Košice (east of the state) and Banská Bystrica (south-central). A research conducted few years ago concluded with around 500 localities inhabited by Roma in these 3 regions – and an important part of them was described as a socially excluded settlement – usually a geographically separated part

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of a village, inhabited only by Roma, living in inadequate housing conditions with houses often build without permit, low access to water and sanitation, in few cases even without electricity.

The Roma population was hardly hit by structural changes in Slovak society after 1989. Generally lower education level, employment experiences in industries that did not survive on the open market, geographical isolation of large part of Roma population from developing regions and, last but not least, everyday racism

of Slovak population lead to a large increase of unemployment level in the beginning of 1990's and started new strategies of survival on social welfare. Many of sacked of that period remained unemployed until present and meanwhile grew up a new generation of adults who have never see their parents working and do not perceive employment as a major strategy of gaining success in the society. Unemployment rates in many segregated Roma localities rise to 90 – 95%, and it is hard to find an employed person between women part of Roma society.

Decrease is visible also in housing conditions of large part of Roma population. Before 1989 the state policy controlled the rental prices and also conditions for building of a private house were more accessible even for low-income groups. Opening of the housing market together with small amount of free flats brought increase of prices and many of new owners did as much as they could to move Roma inhabitants out of their houses. This process, in connection to increase of unemployment lead to creation of Roma ghettos in many of Slovak towns and also to move of town inhabitants to village localities and thus to spread of excluded settlements in the countryside, often described as places of Third world in the middle of EU.



The end of “we control everything” governmental policy after 1989 had its impacts also in education. Large part of Roma pupils is put into “special” schools, based on psychological testing done in Slovak, which is not adequate to their language skills (most of the Roma speak Romani as mother tongue and many of them meet with Slovak language only when they enter the basic school) and sometimes also on efforts of local school authorities to have an ethnically “clear” school. Ending up in this kind of institution generally means getting much less from education, meeting mostly only with other Roma kids and having only few chances to follow in secondary education. In connection to low importance to formal education, enrooted in Roma society, when parents do not force their kids to be at the top of the school class, most of the Roma youth ends their education process in the age of 15 and follows their parents to local Labor Offices.

“The change must be done in most of the aspects of life – housing conditions, education, employment, but also in acceptance of this minority in everyday life of local population.”

Since second half of 1990's there was a number of attempts trying to improve the situation of Roma population in Slovakia. Many of them, mostly those, realized on local level were successful, others were not. Unfortunately, there is still a lack of meaningful central conception of work with people living in social exclusion, which would sensitively coordinate and connect activities of diverse governmental offices, possibilities brought by EU funds and enthusiasm of people working in the field. The Office of Plenipotentiary of Slovak Government for Roma Communities, which should be the highest representative of not precisely defined Roma population declared in 2008 a new and complex conception of integration, but after a year it is very hard to find at least some outcomes.

After entering the EU in 2004, which brought also opening of job markets in most of the EU countries, many of Roma took the future in their own hands and try their chances in some other country. Migration to Great Britain and Ireland is still popular and in many villages one would find at least one family who left and started good life abroad.

The future of Roma in Slovakia does not look very terrific as well. The change must be done in most of the aspects of life – housing conditions, education, employment, but also in acceptance of this minority in everyday life of local population.

In this report we are trying to show at least some examples of activities done to improve the conditions of Roma population in several east Slovakian localities. We believe to give also an inspiration to the reader and probably help to the change in his/her own country.

Social enterprise in Rudlov



Non Governmental Organization „Svatobor pod Oblíkom“ is from 2006 in the village Rudlov, in Prešov region working on creation of a socially oriented farm, concentrated at support of long term unemployed, often young and low educated Roma or disabled people from nearby localities

The NGO attempts to build an ecological farm, which will produce mainly medical herbs and herbs used in cosmetic industry. The goal is to have a certified *bio* production, which will be able to compete at open market. On social level, the NGO attempts to employ and thus support local people – teach them

new skills, utilizable not only at work but also at home, and employ on regular contract those of trainees, who prove good during training period. As the head of NGO, Štefan Straka, says: *“We have chosen probably not the easiest way for building a farm – we want to do the most we can by ourselves, not with a help of professionals. It is truth, that we could have it all already done, if we’d hire some professionals to clean the forest, repair the houses etc. But I want to train my future employees, make them feel that it is their success and also show them some new methods, which they could later use in their own gardens.”*

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Roma girls working in the social farm

The NGO started its activities with buying a house close to a village Rudlov with a large agricultural land around. During first years of its work the house was repaired to allow at least basic service background for workers and the land around of size 2,5 ha re-cultivated so it could be used for farming purposes. As workers was hired together 106 people, mainly young Roma from localities Rudlov and Sol' (51 men and 55 women) and also 25 Non-Roma. These people were employed mainly with the use of

support from governmental program of "Activation works" (financial support for long term unemployed working on part time contract), some disabled people were employed with other forms of support. The NGO also conducted trainings of development of ecological farming skills, where 28 young Roma men and women and other 7 Non-Roma took part.

From the beginning of 2009 the NGO wants to make an important step forward – employ several first workers on

regular contract and thus take responsibility for their full income.

The plans for future are – self sustainability on economical level (success on open market with products), support of employment on local level and support of educational and training activities for local people in reconstructed facilities.



Social farm in Rudlov

Roma in Kecerovce

The village Kecerovce is situated in Košice region in Eastern Slovakia. Kecerovce belong to one of the villages populated by a large number of Roma and with a large number of people living in undignified housing conditions. The number of Roma inhabitants in the village exceeds 2100 people out of total 2600, which represent around 80% of local population. In the area (on the outskirts) of the village there are 3 concentrated Roma settlements where housing conditions differ from bricks-constructed villas to wooden shacks. Other Roma live side to side to Slovak population of the village. The unemployment of the Roma population is estimated around 80%. The Roma in Kecerovce represent relatively young and growing community –

mean age in the village is 24,5 year; in 2008 there was born 90 kids, out of them only 2 Slovaks.

The village is situated in relatively remote part of the region. Košice, as a local public and economic centre, is about 25 km far. This, together with growing number of Roma represents a push-factor for increasing move of Slovak inhabitants away from the village. Also due to reputation of the village as “almost Roma”, the prices of real estates are decreasing, which allows Roma families from Košice or other localities to increase their housing conditions by buying houses in the village. This, together with some other factors allow to local people to estimate that in few years the village will be populated almost



only by Roma.

Local municipality is for several years active in local development programs related to Roma, concentrated mainly on housing situation, living conditions, infrastructure, education and social field work /community activities.

The main outputs of development activities of the municipality are: sewage system for the whole village; construction of 30 social houses for young families (and planned construction of other 30 houses); implementation of social field work and other social services in the village; support of local community centre; supporting activities for local unemployed in terms of the governmental activation policy.



Social housing in Slovakia

The poverty of number of Roma families in Slovakia is on the first sight visible mainly at the level of the housing. According to a research, run few years ago by the Office of Plenipotentiary for Romani Communities (main governmental body for Roma tasks), there is more than 600 segregated or excluded localities inhabited by Roma (means by poor people, regarded by surrounding society as Roma) in Slovakia. Out of this number, around 500 of such places are in the three regions – Banská Bystrica, Košice and Prešov (central – south and eastern part of the country). Most of these localities are located in villages, where they form a specific part of the municipality – mostly a specific part of a village, remoted from the majority and separated from it by some natural obstacle. Also in urban areas the socially excluded Roma live often in specific parts of towns, either in some “traditional” localities (inhabited by the Roma from the times of communism) or in new formed social ghettos, where they

were (and still are...) replaced during the post-communist period.

The housing situation in rural Roma settlements differ from one to another, but in the most of the places people inhabit quite simple houses, equipped only with electricity. The infrastructure is generally quite poor, many of settlements have no sewage system and the water is available only in one or few wells or springs, also only a small number of houses are equipped with gas. A lot of houses are also built illegally and since many of the settlements are placed on a land without a known owner, it is very uneasy to legalize the houses. The uncertain legal situation in the settlements also allows to its inhabitants to build new and new houses without permit, which causes permanent grow of these places of poverty.

The situation in towns is different, since the most of poor population there lives in rental flats, owned mainly by local municipi-

palities. High percentage of unemployment, dependence on social wages, high costs of services (electricity, water, etc.), but also a lack of concern of flat owners, connected with economical habits of inhabitants lead in many towns during past 20 years to grow of indebted localities, from where the rent payers have moved away and to where were moved non-paying families from other part of towns – mostly of Roma origins. In many of such places the inhabitants are (due to their debts) cut from the services and due to the same case the flat owners do not invest into reconstruction works. Since most of the towns do not have financial possibilities to build new low cost housing from their own sources, the number of people in these social ghettos generally rises, while the number of square meters remains the same. Many of young families therefore choose rather to move to some village locality and build an illegal 4x5m house without running water and flushing toilette than to live together with their parents, brothers and cousins in one flat.



Since the entering process to the European Union, the housing situation of Roma in Slovakia became an issue, monitored not only by local activists, but also by international institutions and organizations. In past 10 years was invested quite a large amount of money to solve this problem, but still the situation is not satisfactory. From the pre-entering PHARE funds times, the municipalities have a possibility to apply for infrastructure building projects, later for preparation of project documentation and after 2004 also for a large percentage of a price of a new social house / flat through governmental and EU funding.

The social house / flat (officially labeled as “lower standard housing”) was few years ago finally defined in the Slovak legislation as a place not larger than 60 m² with defined minimal equipment and for such a house the municipality can obtain up to 80% of costs from the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development. The municipalities have the possibility to obtain the remaining part of the investment costs through labor of future inhabitants. This program has also an integration policy background – the new flat / house should be, according to the donor’s policy, placed closer to the majority than the previous houses were. As for the municipalities the investments into houses for Roma minority is not a popular political issue, there is also the possibility to obtain support for preparation of technical plans and investments into technical infrastructure, in some cases, the municipalities were successful also with gaining money for buying the land, which belonged to some private owners, for new houses. Technically, there is only a very small need of investing municipalities’ own money into new houses for Roma minority. Presently the biggest need is the will of municipality representatives for improving the situation of Roma in housing issue. In the past years this governmental tool has been used by number of municipalities and yearly was build several hundreds of lower standard houses. The whole program is presented as one of main programs helping to integration of underprivileged Roma into major society.

The reality is not always that bright as the official places would like it to be.

The whole program fights with several important troubles:

- The future inhabitants are not used to live in rental flats – most of them were never paying rents and other contributions connected with renting a flat, only for electricity. Also the income of many families depends only on social wages, often not high enough for proper rent and services paying. Without proper and intensive social work there is a high risk of falling into debt spiral. The governmental social policy offers a tool against rise of debts for families in the bad social situation – those without debts can apply for special subsidy for paying rent. Presently this tool is being used quite often and helps to many families to keep their housing.
- The financial support from the government is limited and the municipalities have not enough will to support the construction works with their own money. Also, there is often only a low interest of municipality representatives to control the quality of construction works. The houses are often built from cheap materials and not in proper quality. This fact often objectively leads to fast destruction of new houses, perceived by majority as another general fail of Roma population – “they received again something for free and do not take care of it”.

- Some of municipalities do not follow the “integration” instruction and do not build the new houses closer to the majority. Oppositely, in many cases the new houses are built even further from the majority. The municipalities argue with impossibility to obtain the land from private owners closer to the villages. According to the conditions of call for projects, these municipalities should not be receiving the financial support, but the ministry argues that they are not able to control everything...

- Often the space of “low standard houses” is not much larger than original houses, so the families have sometimes even smaller living space (together with limited space outside of the flat).

- Only few of building projects have some oversize to the future – the contemporary projects mostly do not solve even the present generation (not enough houses build for all the families in old settlements) and do not care at all for the next generation – should the new families stay living with their parents?

Generally the people are often not enough prepared to move to completely new type of house with all its interconnections and on the other hand, the municipalities do only what’s the most needed and do not take care of the background – do not allow the people to build stags for wood (the main source of heat), do not build pavements, social services, street lighting, etc.

On the other hand, the newly build houses have improved housing situation of many of Roma families; they received access to running water, sewage, better isolated houses. Generally this tool has a good intention in its grounds, but it is often misused by municipalities, who, under the label of integration put the Roma families to even deeper isolation.



Some examples of lower standard housing

Žehra, Spišská Nová Ves region

The municipality is divided in 2 separate neighborhoods – a village part, inhabited mostly by Slovaks with a small number of Roma, living spread around the village and a Roma settlement, about 1 km from the village alongside the main road. The Roma represent majority of the whole village population (about 2000 people), for 3rd elections term there is also a Roma major. The houses in original settlement are mostly old, build from low quality materials. The municipality attempts to solve the housing issue for about 20 years. In the first phase, at the beginning of 1990's, there was built 4 blockhouses with 12 flats each, close to the old settlement. The original idea was to move the whole population of the old settlement to these flats, but before the construction was finished, the population grew and the number of flats was not satisfactory. Another part of social flats was finished around 2004, again with the same intention and with the same conclusion. Presently, the municipality finishes another 16 flats, but the old part of the settlement is still growing. Without enough large financial support the municipality will never be able to move all the people into new houses and will never succeed in destroying the old shacks.

Spišské Podhradie, Levoča region

The municipality has build 12 “low standard houses” in a locality about 1,5 km from the town border, where were moved Roma families, living originally in the historical centre of the town. The town hall argued there was no other land available.

Sabinov, Prešov district

The municipality has build more than 30 “low standard houses” in a locality about 1,5 km from the city border where were moved Roma families from municipal flats in the historical centre of the town. The town hall intention was probably to “clear” these apartments, since they were later sold to private owners. Many of Roma families' owed money to the town for rents, but together with them were moved even those Roma families who were paying properly. To non-Roma families were offered flats in other parts of town. A Slovak NGO Občan a demokracia recently won a first instance case against the City of Sabinov and the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development, accusing them in the name of several families of discrimination in access to housing and for segregation of Roma families from the majority.

Spišské Podhradie, Levoča region

The Slovak NGOs, People in Need and Kolping Slovakia, together with the local municipality have tested the possibility of building a “low standard house” from alternative materials. They succeeded and finished a mud-straw-wooden construction, build almost all by its future inhabitants, from local and easy-to-use materials, equipped with all the facilities. They have proved that the investments can be even lower than the governmental support, while the house has maybe even better quality than usual flats do. Also, due to use of easier construction methods, the inhabitants’ amount of work was higher than 20% of the price of the house.

Sveržov, Bardejov region

The municipality succeeded to build enough flats for the whole Roma settlement at once. During the construction process most of the Roma men were employed by a municipal building company who was building the houses and many of them later received regular work contracts from other companies who contributed at the construction. The municipality continues with social work with inhabitants, including against-debt program, money saving program and plans to help to employ the rest of Roma population (even the women) in a nearby planned soft industry facility.

Zborov, Bardejov region

The municipality has built new flats directly in the old settlement, situated on the edge of the town. The construction process was cheated by the building company – the houses, built in the hill were not equipped with entering stairs, the drainage was not done properly and so the water and mud flows into some of houses, the roof windows in the first floor rooms were not equipped with isolation so the rooms were wet during the rains and started to rotten fast. The people were moved to the flats before the water and sewage was finished and had to go for water to the old part of the settlement for several months after moving there.

Social enterprise in Krompachy

The non-governmental organization *Ludia a perspektiva* (People and Perspective) from the town Krompachy in Spišská Nová Ves region runs, apart from other Roma-oriented activities a social enterprise, concentrated on employment of long term unemployed women from underprivileged groups.

Krompachy is a middle size town with population 8650 inh., out of them approx. 1800 Roma, living in 5 concentrated settlements. Local unemployment level is around 15%, in between the Roma population the unemployment level is around 85%. Krompachy is a local industrial centre with history of heavy industry, broken during transformation after 1989 and renewed in past 8 years. Nowadays there are 3 major factories – Panasonic and SEZ, producing electronic and electric components and metallurgical factory Kovohuty.

The NGO *Ludia a perspektiva* based its social enterprise on cooperation with the SEZ factory. The idea was to give job to people who are long term unemployed and therefore need some specific help in getting back to labor market. These people are often hardly employable not because a lack of will or skills, but due to psychological barriers, connected with the state of long term unemployment. The NGO therefore attempts to secure a safe work environment, without common

stress and with services, fitting to the needs of women as mothers.

After negotiations with the SEZ Company, the NGO received a part of company's work – assembling components of power switchers and plugs. The NGO started with employment of 7 women in a workshop, after several months opened also a protected workshop with other 4 physically disabled employees.

In 2008 the municipality of Krompachy together with NGO succeeded in a grant proposal at Ministry of Labor for establishment of a new social enterprise. This will employ around 30 people, mainly men, most of them from the Roma community of the town. This emerging enterprise will consist of 3 workshops – 1

again in cooperation with the SEZ Company, second concentrated on production of wooden products and third will serve as municipal service company. Together with employment there will be implemented also some social services for employed. The employers will be chosen from inhabitants of municipal social flats, which should have impact on debt prevention. The social enterprise should start its operation in spring 2009.

The NGO *Ludia a perspektiva* works apart from social enterprise also in social field work, implements educational activities for Roma women and runs a maternal school for women working in social enterprise and participating at educational courses.



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Grundtvig Learning Partnership

The Grundtvig Learning Partnership is a framework for small-scale co-operation activities between organisations working in the field of adult education in the broadest sense. The partnerships focus more on process, and aim to broaden the participation of smaller organisations that want to include European cooperation in their educa-

tion activities.

In a Grundtvig Learning Partnership trainers and learners from at least three participating countries work together on one or more topics of common interest to the co-operating organisations. This exchange of experiences, practices and methods contributes to an increased

awareness of the varied European cultural, social and economic scene, and to a better understanding of areas of common interest.



Lifelong Learning Programme

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