

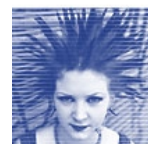


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**Field social work
programmes in
neighbourhoods
threatened by
social exclusion**

Comment Paper, Bulgaria



on behalf of

 European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





In order to assess to what extent Field Social Worker Program is applicable in Bulgaria, we will consider the policy and legislative system in Bulgaria as a peer country. In the second part we will comment on the potential transferability of the program. Finally we would like to pose a few questions to the host country which might of a help to the peer country.

Part 1

The main factors for social exclusion are connected with lack of recourses and opportunities for exercising of basic fundamental rights. Some of the factors are: lack of sufficient incomes to satisfy basic life needs, lack of access to productive resources, lack of opportunities to find decent jobs, lack of access to basic social services, healthcare, education and culture, lack of access to social protection, lack of housing or appropriate housing, illiteracy. There are some other factors which could be a reason for social exclusion as disability, different addictions, ethnic belonging, family dysfunctions and family break-downs, domestic violence and others. The second group of factors is connected mostly with the difficulties which could appear before the persons, but also it is connected with the public perception and attitude.

The activities for combating social exclusion in one more general aspect could be: creation of opportunities for employment and reintegration of the excluded risk groups into the labour market; increasing the incomes; facilitating the access of all to resources, rights, goods and services trough: optimizing the access to material resources and infrastructure, improvement of the access to healthcare, ensuring the equal access to education and training, ensuring of equal access to administrative, legal and informational services, development of housing policies, optimizing the access to justice; social support for the most vulnerable groups, families and persons through: improvement of the mechanism for social assistance, flexibility of the social protection schemes, provision of social services in community and deinstitutionalization, development and implementation of system for preferences of the risk families and children (for example – creation of conditions for ensuring access to housing for families with low incomes, improvement of the living conditions through establishment of homes for most vulnerable as ethnic minorities and etc.)

As of 1 March 2001, the date of the last population census, the ethnic composition of the population in Bulgaria is as follows: Bulgarians are the largest eth-



nic community, representing 83.9% of the entire population, the Turkish ethnic group is second - 9.4%, the Roma ethnic group is third - 4.8%, and the "Others" group includes the remaining ethnicities in the country – 0.9%. The number of people who have not stated their self-identification¹ is 1.0%. As regards the Roma ethnic group, it has to be taken into consideration that there are around 350,000 people (according to experts' estimates) who as a rule share the same social characteristics that are typical of the majority of the Roma population, but they themselves oppose that identification, and identify themselves as Turks, Bulgarians and a small percentage – as Romanians.

In the field of the social policy a number of reforms and legislative initiatives for modernization of the social assistance have been taken and the results which have been achieved are: better purposefulness of the social assistance; creation of circumstances for improving of the mechanism for the granting of the social services and possibilities for social integration of the vulnerable groups of the society.

A leading principle is the aiming of the benefits towards the most vulnerable groups – representatives with ethnical background (particularly the Roma community), old people, single people, people with disabilities, children at risk. One of the main goals is the prior development of the social services for overcoming of the social isolation trough directing of the social services and care to the people in disadvantaged position.

Social services are a part of the social assistance system and are designed to overcome the social exclusion of most vulnerable groups. Social assistance policy is gradually being re-directed from the provision of cash benefits entirely financed by the central State Budget to employment promotion and social service provision considered much more effective for the purposes of reintegration of vulnerable groups (family support, training, etc.). However, social services still have a relatively limited coverage.

1 The ethnic-demographic indicators of the population of Bulgaria are traditionally included in the censuses. The 1992 census included 'ethnic group', 'mother tongue' and 'religion' as indicators. They were also included in the most recent census of March 1, 2001, whereby data comparability was ensured. A new element, worth emphasising, is that people were free to answer these optional questions, unlike all previous censuses, which required compulsory answers. The NSI issued "Instructions on the filling of census cards", which indicated that those polled in a census should identify individually their ethnic group, mother tongue and religion. The NSI stressed that no limitations existed for the **self-determination** of those entering the answers under 'other'.



The granting of social assistance and services in Bulgaria is an activity for assistance for those citizens who can't supply their basic living needs on their own or with the help of a persons obliged by the law to maintain them. An unabolished part of the social security is the specific social work in every individual case, which leads to the right assessment of the needs of every persons, as well as to show the most suitable forms of social support incl. including the granting of services. Some of the main goals of the Law on Social Assistance are:

- supporting the citizens, who can't supply their basic needs without the help of someone else;
- strengthening and developing the solidarity within the society during hard living situations;
- supporting the social reintegration of people, receiving social assistance.

Under the legislation in force /Article 16 of the Social Assistance Act/ the social services are based on social work and aimed at supporting the assisted persons to carry out their everyday activities and social inclusion. The practice in this sphere shows that usually the beneficiaries are people with disabilities; elderly lone people; pensioners; children at risk; disadvantaged people; ethnic minorities, etc. An important instrument is activity of the social workers. One of their legal duties is identification of persons and families at risk. They keep registers which are very useful not only from the informational point of view but also for observance of the results of undertaken measures.

In a process of social inclusion of the people from Roma community very important role has the social work. Social work is professional activity for improving the mutual adaptation of the assisted persons, the families, the groups and the environment in which they live. It is a complex of assisting activities, aimed at achieving a better quality of life, dignity and responsibility in people on the grounds of their individual abilities, the interpersonal relations and the resources of the community. In order to promote the knowledge and acquisition of practical abilities for working in a multi-ethnic environment and increasing the effectiveness of the system a social assistance trainings are organized for social workers from the directorates "Social Assistance" for working in multi-ethnic environment.

Non-government organisations are developing as sustainable providers of social services mainly in the field of community-based social services. Unfortu-



nately, these hold a relatively small share of the socially-oriented non-government organisations in Bulgaria. Most social services programmes are funded by the state budget. The involvement of private resources and cooperation with NGOs is also considered a social inclusion policy priority. The existing legal provisions (e.g. the Law on Social Assistance) are related to registration procedure, but not to measures for supporting cooperation with NGOs. Presently, there are 439 social service providers registered under the Law on Social Assistance. The financial legislation does not envisage direct or indirect tax deductions or subsidies to the third sector, even if the NGO's activity targets disadvantaged groups. Some extra-budgetary funds, such as the Social-Investment Fund and the Social Assistance Fund under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, cover part of the expenditures for social initiatives of NGOs, but this practice is still limited.

Part 2

We should consider to what extent we need such a program in Bulgaria. According to the respective Bulgarian legislation social workers should provide social assistance and services to the people eligible for that. If it is decided that this program is to be launched, two basic problems are likely to appear in the course of the implementation of the Field Social Workers Program:

1) *segregated social services*

To the extent that field social workers offer personalized support to Roma that is complementary to the state and chosen by the individuals concerned, they fill an important role in facilitating Roma access to various forms of social assistance. However, to the extent that these field workers in fact may replace the state and create a parallel system of social assistance for Roma, they will contribute to their social segregation. It is not difficult to imagine that such process may develop given the intense anti-Romani prejudice at various levels of the public administration and social services. An intermediary between the Roma communities and the social services would readily be perceived as a substitute for the regular social services rather than a mechanism to help the social services improve their performance to accommodate the needs of excluded Roma communities. For example, there are reports in relation to the Roma health mediators that health service providers tend to transfer their own responsibilities to the mediators.



2) *intrusive action by the social workers*

In a number of countries (Czech Republic including) the interaction between social worker, parent, child, state institution has become problematic revealing systemic problems of assimilation and segregation. Such are for example, the cases of forcible removal of children in Italy, Sweden, the Czech Republic, and Romania following reports of social workers on the alleged inappropriate family care that the children receive. There is reportedly dramatic overrepresentation of Roma in state institutions in a number of countries. In the Czech Republic, social workers are called by some Romani activists “social police” indicating the transformation of the social workers’ function from supporting communities to exerting control over private/family matters.

A better solution in view of the isolated Roma communities’ problems would be if social workers themselves are trained to work in multi-cultural and multi-ethnic environment during their course of higher education. This would enormously contribute to improving the social services performance. In stead of spending funds on quasi education – training for local Roma in providing social services to disadvantaged Roma, attention should be shifted towards providing sound higher education in social workers/sociology to Roma. Moreover, considering the comprehensive work of the field social workers described by the host country reporter, it is suspicious that the program would succeed.

Questions and Comments

1. What are the safeguards against possible misuse of the function of the field social workers?
2. How would it be guaranteed that field social workers would actually work to make the social services inclusive of Roma?
3. It is not clear to what extend goals 5, 6 (set out in the host country paper) have been achieved through all this period of program implementation.
4. There is a lack of sound evaluation of the program, including self-evaluation, testimonies with Roma who have been helped, Roma who have not been helped, a number of field social workers, representatives of the local and state social service institutions.
5. There is a lack of regular monitoring of the program, which makes it difficult for a peer country to understand the achievements and results.