

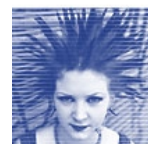


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**Field social work
programmes in
neighbourhoods
threatened by
social exclusion**

Comment Paper,
Slovakia



on behalf of

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DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities





The content of this contribution concerns the response to studies of the thematic expert and of the Czech Republic national expert on social fieldwork in the CR (submitted by Mr. Minev and Ms. Simíková, respectively). The two studies provide a comprehensive view of social fieldwork issues, from a pan-European viewpoint as well as from aspects of specific solutions implemented at a national level. The contents of both studies offer the essential theoretical points of origin applied to field social work on one hand, and concrete solutions already implemented in practice on the other hand, which may - and actually is - regarded as inspiration for other countries struggling with identical problems in this field.

The governments of new countries applying for EU membership commenced in the pre-accession period, intense involvement in issues relating to socially excluded population groups, and gradually adopted EU law in the social field. In his study, Mr. Minev described in detail the methods used to resolve similar problems in the *People in Need* project of a non-governmental organization. Since I am familiar with the implementation of this project in practice, and since Czech and Slovak field workers have been holding regular meetings, this is a response to the study from viewpoints of a man knowing about the practical side of realization of the project. However, the study of thematic expert D. Minev comprises several parts, therefore, in the introduction I am going to respond to the chapter discussing the European Union's orientation in the Roma issue. Undoubtedly, in the course of efforts of the new states toward full EU membership, positive shifts appeared in the social field, and the individual governments were obliged to implement all measures required by the European Union. This was directly reflected in practice, and the governments had - as opposed to declarative statements - to engage in the practical resolution of problems, including social issues, and mainly those involving the Roma as the most-numerous group of socially excluded citizens. This is a giant contribution, although its benefits would appear only in a medium-term horizon due to the protracted effects of methods and forms of social fieldwork.

Alleviation of poverty and of social exclusion is closely linked to the elimination of discrimination and adherence to the fundamental human rights and liberties. People finding themselves in social exclusion are frequently incomprehensively deprived of these fundamental rights, with their positions in society deteriorating even more in consequence. Therefore we need laws on positive discrimination, offering equality of opportunities to these afflicted people. Unfortunately, it appears that Slovakia is in a special position in this respect, by having en-



acted its anti-discrimination law but the Minister of Interior filing for a Constitutional Court decision on the provision relating to positive discrimination. It is also true that the authorities involved in law enforcement – courts, prosecuting offices, executive bodies of the state and of self-governments – are unprepared for elimination of discrimination in practice. This issue should be given much more attention.

The chapter discussing developments in the social work teems with ideas that are very much inspirational for all those involved in the issue. Recently, the position of people responsible for solutions in the field of socially excluded groups was that of people providing traditional social services; and the client's position was that of a passive recipient of these services. In his study, Mr. Minev presented the latest procedures in field social work, whereby the client is transformed into a productive participant of the process. These people should no more be regarded as problematic and unnecessary persons but, rather, as persons representing a human factor utilizing the work of experts, producing its own behaviour, own health and own education. This is a very inspirational as well as important concept. When adopted by all those responsible for resolving the Roma issue also in Slovakia, then they would finally start appreciating the depth of the problem and actually engage in its resolution.

Building up the civic and political participation of people afflicted with social exclusion is another important aspect. It is an indelible part of field social work, helping to build the civic society in its plurality and assisting in the creation of conditions for work of alternative services in the social field. *NGO People in Need* could realize its social fieldwork also thanks to this possibility.

This part of my response to the contributions of Mr. Minev and Ms. Simíková to the discussion represents the views of a man well-familiarized with a similar project in Slovakia. The introductory part precisely and clearly defines the target groups and objectives of the project. Although it is stated in this definition that other target groups are also members of the socially excluded, the priorities of the project are constructed on an ethnic basis; they were designed for the Roma ethnic group and deal with the reality of Roma communities. As pointed out correctly by Mr. Minev, the Czech Republic features the relatively unique phenomenon of adoption, implementation and funding, by the state, of a program that had initially been realized by an NGO. This is proof of accuracy of the statement that the nongovernmental sector is more inventive as well as flexible also in the field of social services. These organizations are capable of flex-



ibly responding to clients' requirements, and of resolving their instant as well as long-term problems. In this project we see a near-perfect symbiosis between state institutions and the nongovernmental sector. The bilinear functioning of this project - along the state line with field social workers employed by municipalities financed by the state, and the nongovernmental line with the NGO employing the workers and receiving contributions from the state for services rendered - is an ideal combination. This system eliminates, for example, the problem that when the magistrate, for any reason, lacks interest in the tackling the problems of its socially excluded citizens, then the NGO has possibilities to tackle them.

This implementation had, of course, been conditional upon enactment of the relevant base legislation in the Czech Republic. Certainly there were intense communications involved between the respective line ministry and the NGO. This, on the side of the state authorities, required a certain level of courage which is still absent in our country rather than experienced as the standard; unfortunately, what we see more often in the practice of dealing with responsible authorities is their reluctance to communicate with the nongovernmental sector.

From viewpoints of methods and objectives, the standard processes and procedures involved are usable in a given environment while working with a precisely defined target group. The methods and procedures reflect the needs for tackling the existing problems of the respective localities. The localities concentrating Czech field social work fully deserve being focused upon. However, practical implementation of the processes remains within the responsibilities of the field worker, who must be adequately experienced to know how he could help the client in each specific case. Adequate capabilities of the given worker are therefore important. Formal education often plays a subordinate role in comparison with willingness to work under the given conditions, as well as empathy toward the clients and their problems. Conditions in the Czech Republic differ from those in Slovakia. The socially excluded communities are concentrated in cities, and the structure of their problems is also different from Slovakia. This is clearly shown in the graph identically indicating unemployment as the most frequent problem (this is the same as in Slovakia), and the subsequent housing problems in consequence of rent defaulting. In Slovakia there is more emphasis on the fundamental civic rights, based on membership of an ethnic group. At this point I am approaching a comparison of the project in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, but first allow me a brief introduction.



Tackling the issue of socially excluded groups of the Roma commenced after acceptance of the *Strategy of the Government of the Slovak Republic for the Solution of the Problems of the Roma National Minority* in 1999, but mainly after 2002 upon acceptance of the *Comprehensive Development Programme for Roma Settlements*, parts of which included the pilot programme *Social Field-Workers Programme*. Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for Roma communities prepared this pilot programme in cooperation with the *People in Need* programme. The programme supervisor, Karel Novák, managed the activities of 18 social field workers in 17 East Slovakian villages. The whole project was based on knowledge and experience of the Czech colleagues, meriting our gratitude. Members of our team participated also in professional stays at the various locations. Naturally, the project had to be somewhat modified due to differences in the conditions, legislation and target group problems; but the principles and methods remained the same. After of a year of evaluation the SR Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family allocated 6.6 million SKK for employing social field workers and hired, through subsidies to the municipalities, 76 field workers in 50 villages. This, however, was a quantitative rather than qualitative growth. Selection of workers for the project had been left to the magistrate, and not all appointees entered the project according to their convictions that they wanted to take this difficult job. For 2005 the Ministry prepared the project *Community social work*, planning the hiring of approximately 200 community social workers and 400 their assistants.

This is the brief genesis of the social field work development in the Roma settlements of Slovakia. Comparing *People in Need* in the Czech Republic, and *Community social work* in Slovakia is difficult, since the inception of both projects is based on identical principles and experience. The Czech and the Slovak programmes have common roots also in the field of education. The workers in both projects regularly meet to exchange information about the orientation of the projects, legislative amendments, new ways toward tackling clients' problems, and about the overall direction of field social work in the individual countries.

From viewpoints of Slovakia the most-inspirational feature of the project is its plurality. This is probably the largest of the Czech project's advantages. There are others, e.g. the possibility to compare results in work with clients; new methods and forms of work can be implemented more flexibly within a nongovernmental organization; employees of municipal offices have a different status, the clients see them as people with more extensive competencies;



each of these forms as its pros and cons. The main advantage of the Slovak project lies in its stability; the project is designed for a three-year period, which is very important from the clients' viewpoints as they can rely upon longevity of the services offered to them. The absence of such reliance is the weak point of the majority of social projects funded from grants. The clients, accustomed to certain services, become frustrated and feel cheated when the services stop. The Czech and Slovak parties both experience problems regarding coverage and availability of the given service to all clients who would need them. Surely there are more locations in the Czech Republic than those now worked in by the field social workers; this, however, is a problem involving the options, primarily financial, that are available to the given state. When contemplating the issue from the standpoint of Mr. Minev, who defined clients as people producing their own health and education, then the funds invested in projects of social inclusion of socially excluded communities must be considered money spent very efficiently, with major effects resulting to society.

The study of Ms. Simíková lacks specifications of the financing method of the project at governmental level. It would be certainly interesting to learn, what funds – whether from the national budget, from European funds, or combinations of both - were allocated by the state for this project. The Slovak project will be fully financed from the national budget in the 2005 to 2007 period. The question remains, what will come next, whether there would be similar funds allocated by the state from the national budget. There is another question: when will the state be in the position to establish an open system in support of field social work for all persons in the need thereof, considering that Slovakia has some 600 Roma settlements where social field workers would be necessary.

There is also absence in the study of a description of standards of field social work, although they constitute the essential theoretical background, along with the code of ethics, job descriptions, personnel and technical standards. These materials were elaborated in Slovakia by a group of NGOs involved in the issue, and offered to the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family which adopted them and implemented into its project. In addition, the Association of Field Social Workers, founded in Slovakia, set it out as its main objective to spread field social work and to educate workers in this area. In 2004 the Association trained 33 assistant social field workers and 23 field workers, and planned to train 50 social field workers in this year. This is an effective experience-exchanging method while contributing to the resolution of problems in the field. The *Roma Inclusion Decade* accepted this year by both governments is visualized as another effective educating instrument.



Resolution of the Roma issue is finally becoming a priority both in the Czech Republic and in the Slovak Republic, with projects focused on the handling of concrete problems of socially excluded people. No short-term results of these projects are expectable, however. They could only be attained in combination with other projects, e.g. those involving housing problems, employment, health care, culture, education; such combinations are necessary to evolve the synergetic effects of all relevant measures.