



Czech Republic 2005

Field Social Work Programmes in Neighbourhoods Threatened by Social Exclusion

Summary



on behalf of



European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs
and Equal Opportunities





Another meeting in the ongoing series of Peer Reviews in the field of social inclusion policies took place in Prague on 19-20 May – the first review of an example of good practice in one of the new Member States of the European Union. The subject for analysis was NGO People in Need's *Field Social Work Programmes in Neighbourhoods threatened by Social Exclusion*, in operation since 1999 and aimed primarily at assisting Roma families, many of whom suffer the highest levels of social exclusion in the country.

The participants applauded the courage of the Czech Republic in hosting a peer review on such a complex issue. Six peer countries took part: Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, and the UK. Participating on behalf of the stakeholders were representatives from the European Anti-Poverty Network and the European Roma Information Office. Mr Hugues Feltesse attended on behalf of the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. On the first day of the peer review, the participants divided into groups to visit three locations where the programme is working, in Prague, Kladno, and Ústi nad Labem on the Elbe River.

The Field Social Work Programme

The programme sets out to tackle the wide range of problems confronting the most disadvantaged Roma families. It targets clients who may have been both socially and spatially isolated for a long period, and are often unaware of the services and benefits they are entitled to. It adopts an individual approach, offering a range of services, negotiating with the client on the basis of his or her wishes and needs, and agreeing in partnership on a plan of actions which is constantly reassessed and revised.

The main goal is to increase people's social competences, help them orient themselves in the system, and work out practical and long-term solutions that will lead towards social inclusion.

The programme currently employs 25 social workers, eight of them Roma, in 16 localities, and this will rise soon to 30 with the addition of two new areas. The meeting heard that whereas at the beginning of the programme, many of the workers were activists from local communities, the service is now more 'professional', with tougher recruitment procedures and a compulsory training module lasting 200 hours over one year.



However, given the gravity of the problems and the limited resources available, the programme's organisers recognised that often it can perform no more than "harm reduction", ensuring that clients' situations do not deteriorate further, rather than achieving full social inclusion. People in Need also carries out research and lobbying activities on behalf of the Roma. The People in Need programme is incorporated into the 2004-2006 Czech National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAP/Incl) as one of the three examples of good practice relating to the social integration of Roma. The Czech government has just adopted a new Roma Integration Policy Concept. The earlier 2004 concept focused on human rights, minority rights and national identity, and social and cultural perspectives.

Evaluation is complex since the programme responds to clients' needs rather than setting its own targets. In 2003, workers carried out a total of 11,893 consultations involving 2,871 families, with housing as the main problem, followed by lack of income. All the workers are routinely supervised both internally and externally. Nonetheless, the review participants felt that impact assessment would help to demonstrate the programme's effectiveness.

People in Need's programme has been instrumental in the Czech government's decision to set up its own Programme of support for field social workers in socially-excluded Roma communities, whereby money is made available to municipal authorities to run their own local inclusion schemes. However, the meeting heard that the government has no power to force local authorities to take action in this area. Support for Roma communities is often unpopular among the wider Czech population, and is therefore regarded as politically disadvantageous. There was strong criticism during the peer review of many Czech municipalities' failure to confront to problem.

There was much debate about whether the social exclusion of Roma people should be approached primarily from a social or an ethnic standpoint. Whereas the programme's Executive Director pointed out that not all Roma in the Czech Republic are poor, and that therefore the clients should be assessed primarily on their social status, the EAPN representative highlighted the experience of Ireland, where policies in support of Travellers were much more successful once they identified the issue as an ethnic one, with discrimination as a major factor. Many felt a combination of anti-discrimination and social inclusion approaches is required.



Transferability

Overall, the peer group found many positive elements in the Czech programme. They praised its design and objectives, and agreed that it was carrying out invaluable work in helping some of the most vulnerable people in Czech society. However, most felt that since it could be said to provide a minimum level of harm reduction it could only be usefully transferred as a whole into contexts where no provision already exists.

Some individual aspects highlighted as transferable were:

- Organisation by an NGO, which allows for independent lobbying on Roma issues.
- Public/private partnership model.
- Commitment and enthusiasm of social workers.
- Proactive approach to identifying and reaching out to vulnerable people.
- The training module and standard documents and codes of conduct for workers.
- The partnership with clients in addressing the different needs of individuals, families and communities.