

Promoting social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment

Eurochild*

1. Assessment of the policy debate at European level

2010 has been declared the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. Ten years have passed since the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 declared as a policy priority reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion within the EU across Europe, with the aim to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion by 2010. The EU Social Inclusion Process has made an important progress in the framework of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on poverty and social exclusion; common objectives and detailed implementation arrangements for the process were subsequently elaborated at the Nice European Council in December 2000 and focused on five main elements: a set of common EU objectives, two-year National Action Plans on poverty and social exclusion, an agreed set of common indicators, a process of regular monitoring and reporting on progress and a Community Action Programme to underpin and reinforce the process.

The Roma population is the largest minority in Europe with a population up to 10 million dispersed across the continent. They are a very vulnerable group that faces widespread discrimination and extreme poverty. Growing up in poverty considerably restricts the children's ability to fulfil their potential. The earlier a child begins to live, and the longer the child grows up in poverty the more severe the effect on his/her current well-being and his/her future chances in life. Therefore the fight against child poverty in Europe has to become a top political priority. A strong focus has been placed on promoting the quality of life and the well-being of children, which is strongly determined by their family situation and the quality and accessibility of services.

Nowadays Roma children continue to grow up in situations of severe deprivation and face discrimination in their access to health, education and social services. Therefore we need to promote Early Childhood Development as an entry point for fostering the social inclusion of Roma children and as a substantial tool to fight against discrimination in Europe. The EU enlargement process (2004, 2007) has brought attention to the situation of Roma and, at the same time, to the recognition that a socially inclusive Europe is impossible without the inclusion of Roma and other vulnerable groups in the society.

* Eurochild is a network of organisations and individuals working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children and young people. Our work focuses particularly on the fight against child poverty and social exclusion in Europe and is underpinned by the principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC).

Eurochild is co-funded by the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields.

Child poverty and social exclusion has been emphasised as an emerging issue in the EU Social Inclusion Process since 2001. In 2006 the Spring European Council requested the Member States “to take all the necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background”.¹ The European Council in its December 2007 Conclusion specifically mentioned Roma for the first time, stating that the Council, “conscious of the very specific situation faced by the Roma across the Union, invites Member States and the Union to use all means to improve their inclusion”²

The First European Roma Summit in 2008 showed clearly that national policies alone are not bringing change for Roma, and that action at the European level is crucial. In 2009 the Council made an important step by calling upon the EU and the Member States to take account of situation of the Roma and the set of Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion when designing and implementing policies. The second Roma Summit in Cordoba in 2010 has also emphasized the need for positive changes. *“Too many Roma people are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, inadequate education, unemployment, bad housing and poor health.... Europe 2020 Strategy has a strong dimension of social inclusion. It focuses largely on fighting poverty and developing skills for new jobs. These aims are valid for everybody, and they are especially relevant for Roma. The Summit has showed that Roma inclusion cannot be a stand-alone policy. It must be firmly anchored in a framework of fundamental rights and practical policy – employment labour market, infrastructure development, education, regional policy and in all other dimension.”*³

There is now sufficient understanding and experience to allow for a strategically managed approach based on a planning cycle of legislation covering policy choice, planning, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

In 2008 the European Economic and Social Committee underlined that the mainstreaming of Roma issues into all relevant European and national policies is the most promising way to achieve inclusion.⁴

Roma children

The situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has deteriorated over the past twenty years, as they were most adversely affected by the loss of livelihood opportunities and the breakdown of the social infrastructure during the early years of transition.

The Roma population is much younger than the respective majority population, as 45-50% of their population are children. Roma children are at a great risk of experiencing regular violation of their rights, which is reflected in extreme poverty, marginalisation, discrimination and the denial of equal access to services and of equal opportunities in society. Home care and learning

¹ Council of the European Union, Brussels European Council 23/24 March 2006, Presidency Conclusions.

² http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/108377.pdf

³ <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPEECH/10/148&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

⁴ Exploratory Opinion, The Integration of Ethnic Minorities/Roma, SOC(263), EESC 1207/2008, paragraph 5.3.

environments are generally poor and little if any support is available to assist families in the care and rearing of young children in their first years. This, together with persistent disadvantage and discrimination in pre-school facilities and education, including lack of access or access only to lower quality institutions, low enrolment, low attendance, high rates of early drop-out and segregation make it highly probable that without strong policy interventions and investments, poverty and social exclusion will be perpetuated generation after generation.⁵

Young Roma children consequently form one of Europe's most vulnerable groups. They continue to be excluded from quality early childhood services. In many places Roma communities have no buildings to house early childhood programmes. Even if availability, cost and distance are not prohibitive, some Roma parents choose not to send their children to pre-school, given the general ill-treatment and discrimination they might be subject to. The low enrolment of Roma children in pre-school education is alarming. Without quality pre-school education, Roma children entering the first grade are less prepared than their peers, and consistently fall behind in their school careers. Early childhood services for Roma children are often reduced to a focus on "school readiness", neither looking at the circumstances and needs of Roma communities nor promoting their voice in society.⁶

UNCRC Article 7 calls on state parties to ensure that *"all young children (and those with primary responsibility for their well-being) are guaranteed access to appropriate and effective services, including programmes of care, health and education specifically designed in order to promote their well-being"*.

Early childhood development is crucial in the case of Roma children. It can serve them as a unique entry point to enable disadvantaged, poor children to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. *"Children benefiting from childcare and opportunities for early education tend to belong better off groups of the population and live in urban areas. Roma children are still missing out. In EU Member States with significant Roma minorities, ECD is still not a major strategy for tackling educational and social disadvantage"*.⁷

UNCRC Article 12 emphasises the right of all children to express his or her own view freely, concerning all matters affecting them, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child, and for those views to be taken into account. Many children are denied this right, but in particular Roma children.

UNCRC Article 18 refers to the right of parents to receive state support in their child rearing responsibilities. Parental support is still poorly developed across the EU. Families living in poverty, and in particular Roma families, have little access to child care services and social services intervention are limited to crisis intervention.

⁵ A Good Start in Life a Future without Barriers. Early Childhood Development as an Entry Point to the Social Inclusion of Roma Children. A proposal to the European Union, UNICEF, Geneva, Mrch 2010.

⁶ http://www.bernardvanleer.org/Realising_the_rights_of_young_children_progress_and_challenges

⁷ A Good Start in Life a Future without Barriers. Early Childhood Development as an Entry Point to the Social Inclusion of Roma Children. A proposal to the European Union, UNICEF, Geneva, Mrch 2010.

ERRC research proves the over-representation of Roma children in the public care system. The main reason for children to be deprived of family care, despite the existence of legislation to prevent it, is poverty. Placement of Roma children into foster care is not easy due to the prejudice and discrimination against them just like in the cases of refused adoption. Children in public care face multiple difficulties and may be regarded as disabled or retarded due to developmental delay, neglect and lack of proper care.

2. Relevance of the Hungarian policy

Eurochild welcomes the Hungarian Parliament's long term commitment to protect children and develop a strategy for prevention and early intervention.

As indicated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly on 20 November 1959, "the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth". This was recalled in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) preamble.

Families with young children, and in particular those facing poverty and social exclusion, must receive the necessary support and encouragement. Intervention before problems occur is less costly and produces long-term benefits to society⁸. However, more attention should also be paid to emotional poverty in which children and young people grow up. Secure attachment, safe community environments, good peer relations, etc., all impact on the future well-being of young people.

We live in a society where the socio-economic status into which a child is born is still probably the most important determinant of his/her future health, education and employment outcomes. To break the cycle of "inherited poverty" assistance must be provided as early as possible. High quality and accessible early prevention and intervention measures are therefore crucial. *"In the case of Roma children, not being developmentally ready for primary schooling often means that they are tracked into special schools which offer inferior education and curtail all-round development, reinforcing social exclusion and discrimination."*⁹ Therefore early years services could play an important role, but in Hungary people are facing a lack of these services all around the country. After the political, economical transition, a huge number of nurseries – crèches - were closed down, and nowadays the number of places in nurseries only covers 6, 5% of children at the age of 0-2 (in reality 8% of children are registered - still a very low figure) that doesn't allow parents to find employment. . We find immense differences by regions; nurseries usually are concentrated in the capital, and in bigger cities. In smaller villages no appropriate childcare is available.

In Hungary, belonging to the Roma population is a key social factor leading to poverty which is combined with a low activity rate and education attainment, the lack of vocational qualification,

⁸ Action for Children (2009), *Backing the Future*, <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/7857.pdf>.

⁹ A Good Start in Life a Future without Barriers. Early Childhood Development as an Entry Point to the Social Inclusion of Roma Children. A proposal to the European Union, UNICEF, Geneva, March 2010.

poor living conditions, poor health, and living in a depressed region. Within the 25 Member States, Hungary is among the 5-6 countries with the widest gap between poverty levels among the population as a whole and among children. In the country, twice as many children live in villages than in the 25 Member States of the EU, and while in Europe 29% of the poor children live in villages, this rate is two-third in Hungary.

The ratio of the 3-5 year olds attending kindergarten was 88% on average in Hungary in 2000, while the corresponding figure was only 42% among Roma children. This difference is not only attributable to poverty. Although kindergarten attendance of children below the poverty line is also below the average (in 2006 it was around 75%), the figure is much less dramatic than in the case of the Roma. Some of the disadvantage of the Roma as well as the non-Roma poor children is likely to be due to their high prevalence in small settlements where no pre-school childcare is offered.¹⁰ Other forms of care, such as family based-care, are either non-existent or very limited and expensive. These very disadvantaged areas are also suffer from sub-standard local service provisions such as family help centres, child welfare services. Although Hungary has a system of universal health visitors, the actual availability of this service is roughly 20% below demand throughout the country. The rural areas and Roma communities suffer most from this shortage. Other specialised services such as psychologists, psychiatrists are also missing in these areas of Hungary.

Regional inequalities are strongly interrelated with the level of the Roma population. Poverty-risk factors are seriously concentrated in the Roma population. These include severe underemployment, low education, large families and also place of residence. The Roma were severely hit by the economic transition when massive lay-offs of the unskilled workforce took place. Since then their employment rate has stabilised at an extremely low level. The employment rate of men (aged 15-59) has been around 29%, while the corresponding ratio of women was as low as 13% in 2003. Roma employment is not only low, but is also is often characterised by short-term and infrequent jobs. Ratio of employment fell from 95% in 1984 to 39% by 1993 among Roma men aged 15-49 and from 61% to 23% among the Roma women.¹¹

Disadvantages of the Roma continue to be transferred from generation to generation. While by the 1990's the proportion of the Roma who completed primary education was close to the national average, their disadvantages at the higher levels of education remained significant. Their rates of entry into the secondary level increased but they remained concentrated in vocational education (providing much more limited employment opportunities). At the same time, their drop-out rates at the secondary level continue to be above the average. The proportion of Roma students in higher education is still negligible.

Impoverishment due to the collapse of Roma employment is one of the key factors behind the widening education gap between the Roma and the rest of society. Further factors include educational segregation that affects Roma children particularly badly and which was found to strengthen after the political transformation – both for administrative reasons and as a result of spontaneous processes; and low coverage of the Roma children in pre-school institutions.¹²

¹⁰ http://www.tarki.hu/en/research/childpoverty/case_studies/childpoverty_hungary.pdf

¹¹ http://www.tarki.hu/en/research/childpoverty/case_studies/childpoverty_hungary.pdf

¹² http://www.tarki.hu/en/research/childpoverty/case_studies/childpoverty_hungary.pdf

There is little research evidence specifically on Roma children's access to health care in Hungary. Like all children, the Roma are also entitled to free health care services including primary care as well hospital treatment. Access to healthcare however is limited by geographical inequalities that typically disadvantage the poor, including the Roma. For example only 72% of the 0-14 year olds are looked after by a paediatrician – the rest receives general health care from a general practitioner. The lowest child/paediatrician ratio is measured in the most disadvantaged counties where concentration of the Roma is high. Still, access to some form of health care is not a problem even for the poor. Difficulties however arise when medicines are needed: 42% of poor families cannot afford the necessary medications either for the children or for the parents themselves.¹³

The inheritance of social (dis)advantages has grown since the political transformation in 1990, particularly for men. Social mobility is seriously hindered by educational segregation and the general failure of the educational system to compensate for disadvantages in the family background. Analyses carried out on the PISA scores suggest that social background of pupils has a much stronger impact on the various competencies in Hungary than in most OECD countries.

3. Assessment of the specific policies reviewed

Eurochild fully agrees with some important issues that have been raised in the discussion and host country papers:

- Long term planned, multidimensional policies are the only effective way of combating poverty and social exclusion of Roma children and to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.
- A focus on early intervention and early childhood development is crucial. Services that support pre-school children and their families tend to have greatest impact on community empowerment and involvement, language learning, intercultural awareness, school readiness and ultimately educational outcomes. Services should be designed to be inclusive of Roma but should not be exclusive or segregating.
- Preventing segregation and desegregating “ghetto” schools is a precondition to guarantee real equal opportunities to Roma pupils. To achieve this all schools must achieve high quality standards, especially in relation to teaching and leadership. Special attention should be paid to children with special needs and multiple disadvantages.
- Integrated policies and complementary initiatives at macro, meso and micro levels are crucial. It is the interplay of policies that either creates poverty traps or brings families out of poverty.

¹³ http://www.tarki.hu/en/research/childpoverty/case_studies/childpoverty_hungary.pdf

- Access to appropriate material, psychological, social and cultural resources should be ensured even in the most disadvantaged areas where the only way of breaking the inheritance of poverty is by developing specialised services in assistance of families with children
- Multisectorial, multi-professional, complex intervention is a key factor of success for effective early prevention and intervention measures by the establishment of networks, including health care facilities, pregnancy counselling services, interventional centres, childcare options, and children and youth services.
- Working together and utilising the very limited resources also by empowering clients and working in partnership, by including them and volunteers as well.

Eurochild would also emphasise the following key points:

- The importance of considering children in their own right. We challenge the notion that children's interests can be addressed only under the umbrella of family or women's policy. The needs of parents can sometimes obscure the interests of children; nor should the needs of children always be perceived as the same as those of women. Children should be empowered to become agents of change in their own life rather than passive recipients of adults. Empowerment of children is entirely coherent with the vision of strengthening families and deprived neighbourhoods and keeping children safe from harm.
- Family services to be recognised as a universal entitlement. Universal services are the foundation on which targeted services are built. Even where services are universal, strategies to promote effective access, methods and ways are required, to ensure they reach the most vulnerable.
- Families must be supported in their parental role. Actions could include parenting education, information and guidance on caring for and nurturing their young children, and support for social networks. Support should be empowering and 'strengths-based', focusing on existing resources within the family. Awareness raising about "good enough" parenting is needed for the professional community and the public at large.
- There is a massive need for training of social workers and professionals working with pre-school children and their families. The specialised training must build on existing international standards and common baseline of knowledge and experience. The UN CRC is an optimal guideline and the comprehensive Implementation Handbook is now available in Hungarian. The Council of Europe is another valuable source of information and guidance.
- Early intervention with families at risk will help reduce cases of neglect or abuse, ending the culture of crisis management and mitigating the need for young people to be taken into care. We emphasise the need to engage with families at an early stage and tackle

problems at their root, which will also enable us to combat the major social ills such as disadvantage, poverty and poor health.

- There must be a long-term vision that informs how money is spent on children and families over a generation – in terms of the type of intervention and in terms of how public services are funded and monitored at national and local level. Reactive, punitive approaches to parents whose children do not attend school or who are engaged in anti-social behaviour can be counter-productive and expensive. In Hungary the way the social welfare system is organised can have negative effects on the rights and welfare of children. For example local authorities' responsibility lies solely for local services. Whilst they are obliged to provide certain services, there is no real monitoring of their performance or sanctions when the services are not adequately provided. When a child is placed in public care, the duty of care and associated cost is borne by the state through the central budget. Evidently it can be seen as against a local authorities interest to provide primary, preventive services, especially if they bear no financial or legal consequence as a result of not fulfilling their obligations.
- The seriousness and the depth of the problems would require real sustainable long term, multidimensional strategies, closer monitoring and more complex indicators.
- Family, school, community conflicts and disputes should be resolved in a non-violent manner by strengthening mediation techniques to help communities living in a more supportive environment and easing the number and seriousness of conflicts and their escalation.

Overall principles:

- a rights-based approach;
- respect of parents and children and their potential;
- recognition of the diverse types of parenting and parental situations;
- address stakeholders (childcare, school, health ...etc.).

Implementation: how can the state support Roma children's social inclusion in disadvantaged areas?

- Adequate family policy measures (reconciliation of family and professional life, promotion of higher participation of fathers in all situations of family life, ...).
- Mainstreaming children's rights in policymaking.
- Awareness raising (ensuring comprehensive awareness).
- Services to support parents including:
 - local centres and services dispensing information, counselling and training on parenting;

- spaces where parents can go to exchange experiences and learn from one another, and play with their children (Sure Start Houses);
- educational programmes for parents, during pregnancy and other stages of the child's development;
- programmes to support children's education, prevent school drop outs and promote cooperation between schools and parents;
- Services targeting populations at risk such as Roma families, parents and children with disabilities, teenage parents or parents in difficult social and economic circumstances.

4. Key issues for debate

4.1 How to reach the most vulnerable

Eurochild supports the long-term holistic approach as envisaged within the Hungarian end child poverty strategy and the services developed in the Szécsény region.

A question arises, however, regarding the extent to which the most vulnerable people are using the available services. Is the Szécsény pilot project reaching out the most vulnerable people? Are the beneficiaries reflective of the number of people who are most in need: single parent households, young mothers, families in-debt, families in conflict with the law etc? What out-reach services are available?

It would be important to monitor which children are regularly attending day care including information on the age group of the children, whether the children are known to be at risk or are registered as protected, what other services are being accessed by the children etc.

4.2 Long-term routes out of poverty

Having a job remains the most effective, long-term route out of poverty. In the Szécsény micro-region it is extremely difficult to raise employment rates, and in the current crisis it has become almost impossible to find a job. More emphasis could be given to the social economy, to the role of voluntary work and social cooperatives (as a means into work), as well as actions to support rural economies.

4.3 Quality early years care

The services developed in the Scécsény micro-region place a strong emphasis on the quality of the early childhood services. A child rights approach is evident in the attention to the child's overall emotional, mental, physical and social development. There is evidence of strong involvement of the community and parents in the running of the children's houses. Open access,

non-discrimination and respect appear to underpin the services. There is good cooperation parents, professionals and community leaders.

4.4 Providing a holistic approach

Inter-agency working is crucial for all families and children to receive the best possible support. The Szécsény micro-region appears to have been successful in bringing professionals together from education, policy, social services and health sectors. Such working together in the child's best interest is crucial to respond to the individual needs of each child and should avoid that children 'fall through the system' and are vulnerable to neglect or abuse.

4.5 Vertical coordination and coherence in policy delivery

Whilst a key strength of the experience in the Szécsény region should be that it falls within a 30-year overarching national strategy to reduce child poverty, the status and commitment to the over-arching strategy is far from clear. Even in the later years of the Socialist government, the Strategy fell from its priorities and resources to implement it were not forthcoming. The recent election of Fidesz – the conservative party – throws more uncertainty on the continuity of the strategy.

The pilot project in Szécsény appears to have had some success at gaining ownership at local and regional level. However, it is questionable to what extent this commitment and engagement would extend to supporting the services on an on-going basis if no national financial support is forthcoming.

4.6 Sustainability of the services

Connected to the previous issue for debate, the sustainability of the services provided under the Szécsény micro-region pilot project must be called into question. Whilst considerable progress has been achieved in a short space of time, too little attention has been given to their long-term continuity.

To ensure continuity more emphasis should have been awarded to thorough monitoring and evaluation of outcomes for the children and parents involved and integration and coordination of the programme with other national and regional initiatives including economic regeneration, Sure Start programmes etc.

4.7 Evaluation and monitoring

Eurochild recognises the challenges in monitoring and measuring outcomes from such a project where many of the benefits are long-term and are difficult to measure. Nonetheless, development of proper indicators at the outset of the programme would have been extremely

valuable to ensure objective evaluation of the programme and to support its continuity and expansion. A crucial outcome for Eurochild would be, for example, how the programme is improving educational performance, reducing school drop outs and reducing the numbers of children that are placed in care. More attention could also be given to the views of the children, parents and community leaders involved in the programme.

Eurochild questions whether the monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that have been put in place are sufficient to identify major short-comings or structural barriers to the long-term success of the programme. It is not possible to assess to what extent recommendations or weaknesses identified through the past evaluations have been taken into account in the development of the programme. New policies and programmes need to be continually challenged and adapted to ensure their long-term success and sustainability.