



Hungary 2010

**Peer Review:  
Promoting social inclusion of  
children in a disadvantaged rural  
environment –  
the micro-region of Szécsény**

Minutes



On behalf of the  
**European Commission**  
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



**Peer Review:**

**Promoting social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment - the micro-region of Szécsény Szécsény and Budapest, 27-28 May 2010**

*The Peer Review was hosted by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Hungary.*

## **Day 1**

*The day began with a visit to the "Biztos Kezdet" Children's Cottage in Endrefalva, a Sure Start house providing family support, healthcare, childcare and education for children aged 0-4 years and their families.*

### **Welcome addresses**

**Erzsébet Fábrián Serfőzőné** (Mayor of Szécsény, Hungary) described the recent EU-supported renovation of her borough. Some 6,000 people now live in Szécsény, which is the centre of a micro-region with 12 villages. Its 2,400 households are all now connected to the public utilities. There are 1,300 students attending school, including a municipally run kindergarten and a vocational college funded by Nógrád County. The micro-region has particularly high unemployment rates, and it is hoped that a new bridge linking it to neighbouring Slovakia will bring new opportunities. She warmly welcomed everybody to Szécsény.

**Erzsébet Kovárik** (Deputy Secretary of State, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Hungary) welcomed all the participants. One reason why Hungary's national strategy to combat child poverty is so important is that it has mainstreamed this issue. 13% of Hungary's adult population lives in poverty. 20% of children are poor. That is an awfully high figure, especially in the light of demographic trends. Children have an almost two times greater risk of living in poverty than adults do. The other important reason for having this programme is the strong regional discrepancies within Hungary. Poverty is concentrated in two major regions. According to a 1996 survey of unemployed people and those on social assistance, the number of people in these groups who were living in small villages with a population of less than 1,000 was three times the national average. By 2007, that had risen to nine times the national average. In 2007, there was an unprecedented political consensus that a long-term, nationwide, comprehensive strategy had to be put in place to combat child poverty. Research by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences served as the basis of this programme, the philosophy being that we have to join forces in a nationwide combat, including NGOs, the churches and every individual citizen. But the strategy also emphasises that the fight against poverty will not succeed without the active participation of the State. This is why, right after the adoption of the strategy, the three-year action plan to implement it was also adopted. In recent years, the credit crunch has undoubtedly had a negative impact on budgets. But she hoped that, over the two days of the Peer Review, the participants would hear positive news about the government's implementation of the national strategy. "Think global, act local" is the motto. Implementation has to be at the local level, at the point of service provision. Szécsény was where this model was first applied. During 2010, it will be rolled out to another 11 micro-regions. She thought that the Szécsény experience was an example of good practice, and she looked forward to hearing about experiences in other countries.

**Walter Wolf** (European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) thanked the hosts for their warm welcome. He emphasised the strong and shared European commitment to fighting poverty and the social exclusion of children as well as the confirmed EU commitment to Roma inclusion. At the 2010 Spring Council, the Member States agreed on promoting social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty, (operationalised at the June European Council as 'by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion').

### **The national strategy to combat child poverty**

**Ágnes Vranesics** (Head of Unit, Children's Chance Office, Prime Minister's Office, Hungary) quoted a 1989 comment by the UN Secretary-General that the way a society looks after its children also reflects its understanding of justice and its commitment to future generations. This was the underlying philosophy of the Hungarian national strategy. That strategy was drawn up and adopted within a short timeframe, between 2005 and 2007. It is designed to run for 25 years. Three-year action plans were subsequently developed, and the first of these will have been completed by the end of 2010.

The main aims of the National Strategy are to reduce the poverty rate of children and their families, while improving children's educational chances, giving children access to better services and promoting a more harmonised approach. Key priorities are:

- **improving employment opportunities for parents and reducing poverty in households with children**, especially through improved day care and poverty reduction measures.
- **breaking the regeneration cycles of poverty**, with the emphasis on public education reform, equal access to early care and education services, and measures to promote inclusion as well as children's and youth welfare, recreation and sports opportunities.

Over the past few years, numerous steps have been taken to achieve those goals. Short-term, Hungarian-funded action has included kindergarten support, scholarships for both primary and secondary school pupils living in poverty, local authority provision of free meals for children during the school holidays, and multiple roles for kindergartens. Longer-term measures have been EU-funded and include the Sure Start early development programmes, more complex programmes such as the one in Szécsény, public infrastructure development, quality improvements in public education, development of diagnostic tools, promotion of equality in education, many employment programmes for disadvantaged people, the expansion of day care and crèche provision, and integration programmes for children and youth. The programme sets clear goals and provides for accountability. Rather than passive protection, it aims at preparation for market competitiveness through social integration.

To monitor the programme, the government set up the National Strategy Evaluation Committee in 2008. This body helps to ensure transparency and civil control. It has been developing a monitoring system, which previously did not exist. It also issues recommendations on children's policy. Its members include the Academy of Sciences, NGOs, the churches and the Hungarian

member organisation of the European Anti-Poverty Network. The work is also supported by government experts and other invited researchers. The committee produces an annual report on the situation of children, including poverty data, the impact of government measures, the impact of kindergartens, and case studies of children and families living in poverty. The committee's first studies have set a baseline against which the longer-term evolution of children's chances will be assessed.

### Questions and discussion

**Bernard Rorke** (Open Society Institute) recalled the broad political consensus surrounding this programme at its launch. Does that consensus still exist today? **Erzsébet Kovárik** replied that the National Strategy is a detailed, scientifically based programme. Some priorities might be set differently, and resources might be adjusted, but there is really no alternative to this programme. Within the Prime Minister's Office, a State Secretariat is to be created whose specific task will be to combat poverty. It will also, at the State Secretary level, deal with the inclusion of the Roma. So it is clear that the programme will continue under the new administration. Nobody questions the fact that an effective fight against poverty has to start at the youngest possible age. And nobody questions the need to fight poverty, although views may differ about the best ways of doing so. So this is encouraging for the future. **Balázs Kelemen** (European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities) asked how far the NGO and civil society control exercised over the programme via the assessment committee is effective. Do NGOs have the knowledge needed to monitor policy in this sphere? **Ágnes Vranesics** believed that the NGOs on the committee are generally very knowledgeable and make an important contribution. This can be seen from the third part of the annual report, which is based on their work. By and large, civil control is well enforced. **Jana Hainsworth** (Eurochild) asked if local authorities are invited into the assessment committee. And are the beneficiaries, notably the children and Roma parents, involved in any evaluation activities? **Ágnes Vranesics** replied that local government is not represented on the committee, as it is there to monitor national government measures. Representation of children and parents on the committee is via the relevant NGOs. These regularly meet the people directly concerned and feed their views into the committee. **Ágnes Darvas** (Child Programme Office, Hungarian Academy of Sciences) added that the micro-regions must also feel ownership of these programmes. Many forums have been held where local mayors and other local decision-makers shared their experiences with the programme planners. Local action has to be tailored to local needs. So efforts are made to get the children and their families together with the designers and planners of action at the micro-region level. **Adriana Ciampa** (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Italy) asked if the total cost of the project, over 25 years and for each year, is known. **Erzsébet Kovárik** said a budget was drawn up at the outset. However, the economic crisis intervened and a lot of cuts were subsequently made. The ideal initial budget would have been HUF 80bn per year. In 2008, significant Hungarian funding was available, but in 2009 and 2010, the programme relied mainly on EU sources. This EU funding has saved the programme so far. She hoped that the budget would enable more to be spent on these goals in future. Social expenditure levels in Hungary have not been index-linked over the past two years.

## Regional background of the programme

**Erzsébet Fábíán Serfőzőné** said it was no accident that Szécsény was chosen for the pilot. In 2006, it was ranked as Hungary's most depressed micro-region. In the meantime, it has climbed one step up the scale and is now classified as disadvantaged. In the autumn of 2006, the Szécsény municipal association and the government agency in charge joined forces and developed a Norwegian-backed project to help fund the implementation. In April 2007, a cooperation agreement signed between the municipal association and the programme office defined specific development steps. This was the start of the "Give Kids A Chance" project in Szécsény. In the Szécsény micro-region, poverty is twice the national average and the unemployment rate is currently 26.5%. Nearly 50% of the pupils in the schools of the micro-region are of Roma origin. That proportion is much lower in the kindergartens, but this is due to a lack of capacity, which means that Roma children and other children from poor families often do not start at kindergarten until they are almost of school age.

Programme funded Sure Start "children's houses" have been set up in eight villages. Their objectives include skills development, learning opportunities and health promotion. They also give lifestyle advice to families and communities. Children up to the age of 5, and their parents, are involved and supported. The children's houses promote physical, mental and social development at this early stage. The fact that anyone in need can rely on these services, and not Roma alone, has led to their acceptance. A shortage of resources and tools is a recurring problem. Municipal budgets are shrinking, and central grants are also being reduced. If the project succeeds in Szécsény, then it should become the publicly funded norm nationwide. It is very important for children to be looked after in the early stages of life, so the project involves health visitors, paediatricians, dentists, ophthalmologists, educators and other counsellors. There have also been "train the trainers" sessions, particularly in order to change the mentalities of the mayors, town clerks and municipal staff. New pedagogical methods are being tried and tested, and workshops are held in the primary schools. There are methodological presentations on early childhood language and skills development. School-based coordinators work locally. Extra-curricular support services help children to develop their skills through drama, handicrafts and other cultural activities. Very importantly, the micro-region's educators also receive methodological support under the programme. Education days and health screening days are among the activities in the villages. A number of summer camps and excursions have also been held. 75% of those aged 19 and under in the micro-region do not have jobs and many of them do not go to school. So they just loaf about. But over the past few years, there have been efforts to involve teenagers in activities, mainly through "telehouses" which provide computers and Internet access. The village mayors are keen for quick, spectacular results, but even a project like the Szécsény one cannot wipe out decades of backwardness. That takes leadership, commitment and money. Also very important is the active involvement of young Roma. In Szécsény, some of them have invested a lot of energy in promoting drama, music and dance. Efforts are also being made to maximise Roma employment, and skills development is an important part of this. A social cooperative is being promoted. Waste recycling skills are being developed, and she looked forward to the building of a waste recycling plant in the near future. She emphasised that social change cannot be just a top-down process. There must be an internally felt need for change.

### “Give Kids A Chance” programme in Szécsény

**Ágnes Darvas** highlighted two components, both heavily reliant on EU funds. One is the Children’s Office roll-out, under the guidance of the Academy of Sciences, which is very much based on the experiences in Szécsény. This began in 2008 and in the meantime, five micro-regions, which are among the most depressed in Hungary, are starting to implement the complex “Give Kids A Chance” project. Six more are in preparation. 33 Hungarian micro-regions are very disadvantaged and require multiple forms of support. About a million people, or 10% of Hungary’s population, live in those 33 micro-regions. A third of them are now covered by the Give Kids a Chance programme and, using EU funds, by the Sure Start children’s houses. There are now more than 40 such houses up and running, and it is hoped to have up to 150 of them in operation by the end of the present programming period in 2013. While there had been a broad consensus on the need to combat child poverty, the long-term availability of funds for the Szécsény project had not been at all certain. Nor had the regulatory framework been clear-cut. So was too much of a risk taken by launching it? There is no clear-cut answer to this, but her team believes that the effort was justified. Microregional action had been particularly important here. Many services cannot be adequately provided at the village level. Several hundred experts, NGOs and services were drawn into the planning of the project. A great strength of the team had been that it contained people who had both practical experience and a good theoretical background. Some core data already existed, from an earlier survey of families in Szécsény. Over the past three and a half years, the survey work has continued in Szécsény and other disadvantaged areas, conducted by university students taking part in “socio-camps”. Problems in the operation of various local services (employment, education, healthcare) have also been mapped and analysed. One interview-based deep analysis concerned kindergarten children, their parents and their teachers.

In the strategy, the central and local levels are interdependent. So the experts had to contend with a dual mandate of implementing national procedures but also supporting action on the ground in the micro-region. For example, the strategy strongly emphasises that a multi-faceted programme is required for long-term success, and this national priority entailed introducing complexities, not always successfully, into the microregional project. Also, support from non-local budgets had been sparse. An example of the nation-wide action had been the expansion of meal provision to children in need. The project’s inability to produce rapid, perceptible change in local conditions generated some local criticism. Nonetheless, over the past three years, some significant changes have taken place, and tremendous efforts are being made to improve the situation of families with children. But if this does not go hand in hand with structural changes, to what extent can these programmes be successful in the long term?

Another dilemma is that, although Hungary has a wide range of family support services, they are very unevenly distributed. Often, access to them is most lacking in the places where they are most needed. The financing of the system takes no account of this inequality of need. For instance, settlements with a population of more than 40,000 are required to provide debt management services. In Szécsény, with its population of 20,000, there is no such requirement. But the municipality recognised the need and a debt management service has now been launched. Many services have to be present if people are to get out of deep and lasting deprivation. A further dilemma is that the criteria for applications to various funding sources do not necessarily fit local needs. Also, it is difficult to build a complex programme on the basis of fragmented funding. The successful bid for the Norwegian funding was followed by a three-year

wait for real support. So there is a fine-tuning dilemma. But the Szécsény Children's Office has managed to build a team of trained, motivated experts who meet the criteria. There are almost 50 people working in the Szécsény programme, so it will soon be one of the biggest local employers. This obviously affects sustainability. But over the past year, there has been a real boom in the services around Szécsény, particularly extra-curricular activities and second-chance youth programmes, as well as the fine-tuning of the children's programme and the local services. Sustainability is the greatest dilemma. In the long term, the programme's goal is not to provide parallel services but to strengthen local services. One path towards sustainability is that those services that prove to be effective and needed are built into the more traditional service structures. Voluntary work is another possible future avenue, but this is still in the early stages in Hungary and there are too few volunteers. A social cooperative has been functioning for 18 months now. It may offer possibilities for maintaining services that local government is unable to finance.

## Discussion

**Michael Hiscox** (Together for Children, United Kingdom) said there are now over 3,500 children's centres specifically in England. Other countries within the UK have taken slightly different paths. He shared with the Hungarian hosts the uncertainties surrounding the start-up of such centres, and also the uncertainties that come from a change of government. But the English Sure Start programme does have assurances about continued funding. He asked how the local community is involved not just in the initial decisions about the Hungarian children's houses but also in the ongoing decision-making. Replying, **Ágnes Darvas** noted a public perception in Hungary that the best place for children up to the age of 3 is at home. There is no sympathy at all for the idea that young children should attend a centre or receive services. When the first needs assessment was undertaken in Szécsény, the needs of 0-3-year-olds were one of the last items on the list. The concept of children's houses was not yet known. So the decision on that was top-down. In the meantime, the idea has caught on and almost all the villages in the micro-region either have a children's house or will soon have one. And educators have understood that early learning is actually contributing to community development. **Éva Szomor** (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) added that efforts had been made to get decision-makers and educators to understand that babies are born at age 0, and the child's future development begins even earlier. Part of the problem was that the adults in poor households had missed out on their own childhoods, and were not quite sure how to become the adults that they wanted to be. What really works for the community is that, in the children's houses, life feels good. It is an experience that they want to be part of. Later on, they see that the children who attended the children's houses do better at kindergarten than those who did not. **Erzsébet Fábrián Serfőzőné** said that the support from pediatricians and health visitors had been important, as they are respected figures in the country areas. Szécsény set up a mini-creche group, for children aged 18 months and up. For the children's houses, vacant properties were made available and the programme helped to refurbish them. In Szécsény itself, HUF 500m were spent on building a new school and kindergarten. One room within that building will serve as a children's house. In other villages, the municipality simply handed the vacant properties over, but no funds are available for maintenance and utility bills. So the decision-makers at the top need to be made aware that central grants to the municipalities should include a separate item for children's houses. **Michael Hiscox** agreed fully that the work with parents should begin before the child's birth and continue right through. Of course, this must

be done in a tactful and skilful way.

**Jana Hainsworth** asked how the project had managed to get the various specialists to communicate with each other. **Éva Szomor** replied that the first attempt was to use the parents' get-togethers in connection with the children's houses as a pretext for bringing the experts from different disciplines together to discuss various issues. However, this did not really work. It was when interdisciplinary meetings for the experts were set up that things got rolling. **Ágnes Darvas** recalled that the interdisciplinary meetings began roughly at the same time as other discussion forums kicked off at three levels. For a year now, the micro-region has had a Children's Committee, on which every village and every sector (schools, healthcare, NGOs, parents, experts and decision-makers) are represented. This is the local counterpart of the national assessment committee. There are subcommittees on schools, employment and social issues. There are also interdisciplinary cooperation processes in the villages themselves. A big concern in Hungary is that different experts focussing on the same area do not keep in touch with each other. This leads to lost opportunities and duplication of effort. Bringing them together unleashes new potential and enables the sharing of good practice. Quite often, the mayor or the town clerk also attends these meetings. **Éva Kecskés** added that the law requires annual "early warning system" meetings. The aim is that everyone working with children should attend these meetings, so that they liaise. But this is not working well at the national level. As regards funding, **Erzsébet Kovárik** emphasised that, from Day One, the Prime Minister's Office has also contributed to the Szécsény project, even before the application agreement was signed, in addition to the Norwegian grant. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour tapped into the Labour Market Fund in order to provide some of the means required. Although the stage of earmarked support for the children's houses has not been reached, there is at least a government resolution on this point and a concept has been developed. It is hoped that the new government will pick this up and carry it forward. All the preparatory work for that has been done.

**Alexandra Castro** (Centro de Estudos Territoriais, Portugal) referred to a case study conducted in Hungary by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), which has funds for housing and social integration programmes. Has that funding been accessed for the Szécsény micro-region? **Ágnes Darvas** replied that no programme of that type has been conducted. **Walter Wolf** clarified that the FRA carried out a study of Roma housing conditions. **Györgyi Vajda** (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Hungary) added that, since 2005, some 40 Roma settlements in Hungary have received money from that source, in the context of slum clearance. However, the Szécsény micro-region was not involved in this. In 2010 and 2011, some 20 further settlements can apply for slum clearance funding from Hungarian domestic sources. They can also apply to the European Social Fund regarding the employment, healthcare and education elements to be implemented. **Barbara Tonte** (Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Roma Integration Dept, Hungary) said invitations have been issued for this programme, but the experts are still formulating their opinions and some elements of the programme, as well as the deadlines, may be modified as a result. The application process needs to be changed so that more settlements can enter as bidders.

**Nóra Rítok** (Real Pearl Foundation, Hungary) said that she is from Berettyóújfalu, one of the 33 most disadvantaged micro-regions in Hungary. Her NGO, without funding and through voluntary work, is striving to make an impact on deep poverty. She felt that many things are still missing from the current Hungarian system. Education services are not accessible, and there is a belief that, simply by reforming vocational training, the employment problem will be solved.

Organisations are not aware of one another. Churches are not active on child poverty issues. Yet solutions to these problems do exist. She recently visited Finland and was amazed by the voluntary work she saw there. The example of her foundation showed that Hungary's rigid, bureaucratised system can be changed. The foundation has to tell all kinds of officials that they are breaking the law. But as it does so with a smile, they often end up cooperating. So there are reserves within the Hungarian system.

*The participants then visited Magyargéc and Nógradszakál, two villages in the Szécsény micro-region that include many inhabitants of Roma origin. In each case, the peer reviewers visited children's houses and other provisions for children, teenagers and parents ("tanoda" second chance school, community centre, IT point).*

### Feedback from the site visits

**Tomás Habart** (People in Need, Czech Republic) asked if the organisers know what proportion of the target population actually uses the houses. **Éva Szomor** said this varies from one service to another. The managers of the houses try to reach out to the parents and children, but this is a long-term effort. **Zsuzsa Ferge** estimated that no more than 20-30% of children are reached by the children's house projects. This is also a matter of resources and political will. **Erzsébet Kovárik** emphasised the "fermentation" effect of the Szécsény example. It is now being spread to other micro-regions and this in itself will produce a steady growth in the number of families reached. However, there are still uncertainties about future funding. **Ágnes Kende** (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) added that, if provisions such as after-school activities are taken into account, the proportion of children reached is much higher. **Arthur Ivatts** (United Kingdom) had been particularly impressed by the quality of the professional commitment in the centres and of the relationships with the young people. **Bernard Rorke** said many such projects in Hungary, such as the "tanoda" second chance schools for drop-outs, are hampered both by very short-term funding and by the late disbursement of the funds. Has the complex Szécsény approach avoided these pitfalls and, if so, should it be adopted nationwide as a way of institutionalising longer-term, reliable funding? **Judit Berki** (Hungarian Academy of Sciences) replied that the Szécsény scheme does not depend on the same funding sources as the tanoda, and has not so far experienced these problems. But it is indeed very important that, once a project is under way, it should not be interrupted. A scholarship scheme now being developed could provide mentoring support for pupils up to Grade 10, and this might gradually replace the tanoda system in the course of 8-10 years. **Michael Hiscox** had been struck by the evidence of the involvement of whole families in the houses, as well as by the challenge of attracting in the parents of children aged 0-3. **Jana Hainsworth** noticed that local ownership has been taken of a scheme that originated at the national level. The pride taken in the programme by the local mayors was very clear. The challenge, in future, will also be to generate funding locally. The Hungarian hosts pointed out that the local authorities are heavily indebted, but it is certainly hoped that they will act as advocates for further funding. Greater differentiation of central government funding is needed. **Nóra Rítok** evoked a dilemma that arises whenever one is showing people from abroad around projects of this kind. One does not want to them to take away memories of a Hungary in trouble. But on the other hand, one does not want to be hypocritical either. Dire living conditions, segregation, daily police raids, and minimal health, social and educational services are still the lot of many Roma in Hungary. All too many of them have no prospects and no future. While agreeing

that there are many problems, notably a lack of local resources, **Judit Berki** felt that gradual progress is possible. The changes in Szécsény over the past three years are a proof of that. They are the fruit of significant teamwork. **Tomás Habart** praised the enormous amount of work done in Szécsény. He asked if children from disadvantaged local non-Roma families also attend the houses. The hosts confirmed that they do, and that this is an important integration factor. **Walter Wolf** asked if there is an upper age limit for the programme's target group. The hosts replied that this depends on the services. Certainly, a 25-year-old needing educational help will not be turned away. **Walter Wolf** then asked if beneficiaries are in any way being prepared for migration away from their villages, in search of better opportunities. If so, what is the reaction of the parents and the local mayors to that prospect? The organisers of the programme replied that it is not for them to decide if the first priority is to build up the micro-region or to pave the way for migration. They are giving the children the freedom to decide for themselves in future whether they want to go or to stay in their villages. In general, Hungary is not a very mobile society.

## Day 2

### Stakeholders' statements

**Jana Hainsworth** explained that **Eurochild** is a European umbrella organisation promoting the rights and welfare of children in Europe. It is core-funded through the EU's PROGRESS programme. As such, it has a key role in monitoring and influencing the social Open Method of Coordination (OMC). Since 2004, Eurochild has been regularly evaluating each of the Member States' National Action Plans on social inclusion (NAP/incl) from a children's rights perspective. Two agendas should be married: the children's rights agenda, based on the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, and the work to combat child poverty and social exclusion. Eurochild currently has 87 full member organisations across 32 European countries, including all those in the EU. 2010 is the European Year Against Poverty and Social Exclusion. It is also the year in which the European Commission and Council will adopt the Europe 2020 strategy, and there is currently a proposal that combating poverty will be one of its key quantified targets. A quantified target for combating child poverty may not be achieved, but even a general, overarching poverty target will give Eurochild the visibility it needs to continue this work. The Belgian presidency of the EU in the second half of 2010 will be followed by the Hungarian presidency in the first half of 2011. So Eurochild wants to follow through very closely with the Hungarians on the work that it has already done with the Belgians. Belgium has put child poverty at the top of its political agenda, and it has an ambition that by the end of 2010, there will be a clear roadmap towards an EC recommendation on child poverty and well-being. 20 of the Member States have tackling child poverty as one of their main NAP/incl strategic objectives, so there is a consensus. But Eurochild evaluation of NAPs has shown that most Member States are not taking account of what they had agreed in the 2008 task force report on child poverty. So the recommendation that could emerge from the Belgian presidency could be very important in making Member States more accountable to their commitments. She asked the Hungarian Government to then take that commitment forward during its EU presidency.

In the Szécsény example, she particularly appreciated the commitments to empowering the children, to early intervention, to non-stigmatisation, and to strengthening families. The emphasis on multidimensionality is an important criterion for success, as is the long-term nature of the

agenda. All this is very close to the messages developed by Eurochild for 2010: empowering children, universal access to services, equal opportunities for all, strengthening families and supporting the most vulnerable. One of the challenges in the EU is to show that tackling child poverty is not just about income. It is about opportunities and empowerment. It is about debt management and avoiding loan sharks. We need to take a holistic view of child well-being. A recent Eurochild survey showed that Roma children are heavily over-represented in care institutions. The report of the European Roma Rights Centre included the same finding. Also, many Roma children are being wrongly diagnosed as having intellectual disabilities. We need to show that, through work such as in Szécsény, these things are being prevented, that children are staying with their parents and are not being taken into care. We also need to show that it is preventing early school drop-outs. These outcomes need to be evaluated on an ongoing basis. Sustainability is another key challenge. Given the change of government, can this work be sustained in the long term? The work also needs to be coupled to the generation of opportunities for young people within the region itself. She hoped the new government would appreciate that this approach produces savings and benefits in the long term. One more challenge: how do we ensure that the children's houses actually reach out to the most vulnerable?

**Bernard Rorke**, for the **Open Society Institute**, recalled that we are midway through the Decade of Roma Inclusion, with two EU Roma summits behind us, and a Platform for Roma Inclusion has been set up. Commission President Barroso has stated that there can be no more "business as usual" or *laissez-faire* approach to Roma inclusion. However, it has been business as usual when it comes to racial segregation, it has been business as usual when it comes to routing Romani children into special needs schools and wrongly diagnosing them, it has been business as usual in IDP and refugee camps in the western Balkans, it has been business as usual for people who lack basic ID documentation and are deprived of the very right to have rights. Visiting the Szécsény project had instilled a new sense of optimism in him, as it embraces all the principles that the Open Society Institute (OSI) holds dear. It incorporates action research, it deals with the particularities of the specific localities, and it is driven by a strong sense of commitment by all of the people who are part of the project. It is guided by dignity and respect for all and a sense that every single child counts. But he was concerned about the uncertainty surrounding the project's future. The OSI would like EU funding mechanisms to be more flexible. The most depressed micro-regions are the least able to access EU funding. The EU can do extraordinary things in extraordinary times. The bail-out of Greece illustrates that. Where there is political will to make a change, it can be done. But the primary responsibility remains with democratically elected national and local government. Brussels is not a panacea. The commitment to combating child poverty should transcend party politics and should be maintained. In some other parts of Hungary, deprivation is so acute that there is a sense of despair and hopelessness. The Szécsényi project does bring a sense of hope for the future. This is not something that can be quantified. The complex approach used in Szécsényi shows that the current climate of acute polarisation can be overcome. We can build trust and cooperation. The OSI and the World Bank have produced studies showing that, as well as being unethical, exclusion is economically unsustainable. This is the youngest and fastest-growing demographic segment of the population in a region characterised by falling birth rates. These children are an asset and should be seen for their potential. We cannot afford another lost generation. But the ethical imperative is even stronger – no child should be left behind.

### Input by Zsuzsa Ferge

**Zsuzsa Ferge** (Head of Unit, Programme to Combat Child Poverty, Hungarian Academy of Science) said this was the first time the Szécsény programme had received such systematic outside evaluation, and she thanked all the participants for this. She had heard that work has now begun on separate indicators of extreme poverty. This extreme poverty was perhaps not immediately apparent during the site visits, but this may be partly due to the work of the past three years. The reviewers had seen teenagers who were wearing white shirts and who were happy to be receiving their study certificates. Three years ago, they would not have been wearing clean shirts to school and they would not have been happy about anything. Two things have happened here: they have gained some things needed for integration, but they have also been given back some hope. What the visitors had not seen were the conditions back in these youngsters' homes: in 80% of cases, 5-8 people sleep in one bed in a one-roomed house. The majority of the houses do not have a bathroom, a toilet or other utilities. There may be a water connection, but they cannot always afford to pay for it. Many of the children are malnourished and are more prone to illnesses, depending on where they live. Life expectancy for the Roma is 10-14 years less than for the non-Roma. With love, and with some resources and funds, it may be possible to move children out of such a situation. There is currently a debate among Hungarian sociologists about whether the Roma and other deeply poor people are the lowest class in society, or whether they are completely outside society. Some say that they are a low caste with no way back. This is a real debate, because if there is no way back, why are we working on it? If there *is* a way back, then there is hope. Though originally a statistician herself, she had doubts about putting too much energy into measuring who exactly the poorest people are and how many of them there are. If local and general politics function well, then the borderlines between poverty and deep poverty may fade away. So we must not become the hostages of notions that we have developed ourselves. That said, the present Laeken indicators of relative poverty are surely not enough to capture the reality in Hungary and other countries of Eastern Europe. Certainly, we should be sensitive to inequalities and how they develop, but we also need absolute figures. The nature of inequality in Eastern Europe has changed very much. First, there used to be an upper limit for inequality. That is no longer the case today. Second, one may increasingly observe "split inequalities". An example may be life expectancy. On average it has risen by some years. But for the better off, improvement was very significant. For the worst off, it has actually declined. The third problem is that there is no longer a floor to inequality. The EU has been urging a social minimum. In Hungary, the very thought of a social minimum is anathema. The country does not have enough money to provide a minimum to everyone. In 1995, the Constitutional Court ruled that there is no such thing as minimum housing. The State's only duty is to pull somebody out of the cold if they are about to freeze to death. There is no family minimum either. Certainly, there will be no progress unless we can take local action to improve the lot of children and the environment. But this will not be achieved unless certain minimum, core rights are also respected. Hungary needs assistance with this as well.

### Presentation of the discussion paper

**José Manuel Fresno** (Thematic Expert) had been very positively impressed by the projects visited in Szécsény. The cleanliness, the interaction and the working atmosphere were excellent, and that is important to making progress. From his own work with Roma in Spain since 1983, he

knew that, even under initially bad conditions, we can achieve good results if we persevere.

Child poverty has become increasingly prominent on the **EU social inclusion agenda** since it was launched in 2001. In an important conclusion adopted in the spring of 2006, the European Council said the Member States should “take necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background”. So there is a commitment and there is a mandate, but often these are not translated into practical action and resources. As regards the EU’s 2020 Strategy, the European Platform against Poverty has stated that “Member States will need to define and implement measures addressing the specific circumstances of groups at particular risk”. Roma are one of the groups cited. Some of the main objectives of the EU 2020 Strategy have a bearing on child poverty. One is that “the share of early school leavers should be under 10%”. Another is that the number of people at risk of poverty in the EU should be reduced by 20 million. That would be a 25% reduction. The problems facing the Roma are extreme poverty, exclusion, rejection and discrimination. To tackle these issues, we need to focus on some aspects of European policy. There has been some progress here. The EU has launched the Integrated Platform for Roma Inclusion and has established 10 Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion – notably an explicit but exclusive approach, and the principle of mainstreaming. New European Council conclusions on Roma issues are expected in June 2010. They will include:

- mainstreaming Roma issues into the more relevant policies (social services, rights, education, regional development, housing etc.);
- making better use of the financial instruments, especially the structural funds; progress has recently been made on this in the form of an amendment to Article 7(2) of the European Regional Development Fund regulations, allowing Member States to use structural funds for investment in housing, under an integrated approach based on improving living conditions by tackling education, employment and other Roma needs.

To pursue a broad-based integrated approach to child poverty, we need to engage the relevant actors, we need universal policies, we need good information and analysis, and we need action at the local level. Universal social benefits are a prerequisite, but they must be complemented by targeted measures addressed to the most excluded groups. A current problem in Europe is that social benefits are being reduced as a result of the financial crisis.

There have been **previous EU-level Peer Reviews on child poverty and Roma exclusion**.

The 2009 review of Greece’s integrated programme for the social inclusion of Roma concluded that:

- education is crucial for social inclusion;
- early intervention is needed to prevent the intergenerational transmission of Roma poverty;
- preventing school dropouts is important; there is evidence that a comprehensive support system, comprising teachers, mediators, Roma school assistants and social auxiliaries, could improve Roma school attendance;
- schools should be integrated.

The 2009 UK review on tackling unemployment and child poverty emphasised the importance of:

- decentralising the delivery of social and employment services;
- building partnerships and synergies at local level;
- ensuring good financial means and permanent financial tools;
- involving the stakeholders;
- making more effective use of existing resources.

The 2006 Spanish review about housing and the Roma stressed the need for:

- a proper institutional framework for tackling Roma issues;
- a broad socio-political consensus;
- clear leadership;
- solutions that lead to normalisation (so that targeting does not produce segregation);
- integrated services;
- a long-term approach;
- active participation by the beneficiaries;
- positive expectations.

**Good practices that can be drawn from the Hungarian experience** currently under review include:

- the comprehensive approach taken by the Szécsény pilot project;
- its bottom-up approach, but combined with top-down support from the national level;
- its ability to adapt not only to the circumstances of the micro-region but also to the particular realities of each settlement;
- active involvement of local stakeholders;
- early intervention on education;
- empowerment of local institutions;
- good diagnosis and monitoring;
- the linkage between local action and national strategy.

Together, these experiences suggest a number of **elements that could possibly be transferred** to other countries:

- a capacity to adapt the national strategy at the local level;
- a territorial approach to micro-regions with particular circumstances;
- tackling special, specific needs;
- a system of governance that involves all stakeholders in decision-making and establishes synergies;
- a focus on the needs of the most excluded and vulnerable groups within the Roma

community.

He proposed **four topics for debate**:

- The relation between national plans, strategies or policies designed to combat child poverty and the grassroots projects developed at the local level;
- Getting impact from the projects;
- Translating some of the EU Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion into practice;
- Ensuring the active participation of the Roma themselves in the projects.

## Discussion

*The discussion was structured around key questions drawn from the four topics.*

### ***To what extent is child poverty a policy priority in your country?***

**Tanja Ranković** (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit, Serbia) outlined Serbia's comprehensive national strategic framework, which includes The Poverty reduction strategy adopted in 2003; The National plan of action for children, developed for the first time in 2004 and currently under revision; and its Strategy for improvement in the position of the Roma. Roma Decade action plans were adopted in 2005 on education, housing, health and employment. Special action plans on the other eleven Roma Decade fields were developed in 2009 and adopted together with the strategy. Established in 2004 under the direct supervision of the Deputy Prime Minister, her unit now also coordinates the social inclusion action of the various ministries. Serbia's seven most vulnerable groups are children, women, youth, people in rural areas, elderly people etc. The groups were defined in line with the Living Standards Measurement Survey, the World Bank methodology for the measurement of absolute poverty. Funds for the implementation are budgeted within the regular activities of line ministries. Now, poverty is being measured through the household budget survey, a different methodology. From 2010, Serbia hopes to be able to measure poverty and social exclusion on the basis of the EU's Laeken indicators, as well as a number of national indicators designed to capture local factors. The poverty reduction strategy goal of halving poverty by 2010 was achieved, but due to the economic crisis poverty is now once again on the increase in Serbia. Unfortunately, local action plans for children are being implemented by only 21 municipalities. However, all Serbian municipalities have carried out social sector reforms which include measures targeting child poverty. A comprehensive evaluation of the local action plans for children was carried out in 2009. They are financed mainly from municipal budgets, but the evaluation showed that spending on them does not exceed 0.3% of municipal expenditures. **Ivan Radenković** (Association of Roma Students, Serbia) recorded his impression, as an NGO activist, that while Serbia has a formal framework for child poverty reduction, it has neither the necessary mechanisms nor any real content. Child poverty can only be tackled through a holistic approach, but this creates a paradox. The work takes place with the Roma community, on the ground, but getting the finance entails both dealing with the bureaucracy and adopting a market-based, competitive mentality that can ultimately alienate the Roma community.

***How can cooperation and coherence between the national and local levels be ensured?***

**Michael Hiscox** said the English Sure Start programme had, initially, been very much nationally led both in policy terms and through major financial investment. Up to GBP 1.5bn of capital was put into building the Sure Start centres, and the annual budgets available for their running also approached that figure. National government set the strategy and the funding was allocated to the local authorities in the form of grants with some policy conditions attached. But underlying the approach was participation at the local level. One of the conditions for drawing grants to establish a children's centre was to be able to demonstrate real involvement of the local community in decision-making about the nature of the centre and its services. Normally, the centres have some form of advisory board which includes local parents and other providers, and also consultative groups of parents. In 2010, legislation was passed which places an obligation on local authorities to provide children's centres. There is also now a duty on other key providers (health, social and employment services) to look, in the first instance, to provide their services via children's centres.

**Walter Wolf** asked what sticks, carrots and conditionalities can be used to ensure that local implementation is consistent with national policy. For example, he understood that in Hungary, local access to European funding is linked to the existence of a desegregation plan at the local level. **Michael Hiscox** felt that, in the English case, a good balance has been achieved between national steering of the overall strategy and the opportunity for those at the local level to determine their priorities, within a certain framework. This involves looking at local priorities and seeing how the children's centre can be tailored to meet them. Another aspect that has worked very well has been the involvement of existing local organisations. Early on, there was a concern that well-established local voluntary organisations, nursery schools and other establishments would be pushed out by a new children's centre. So the approach has been very much not to duplicate resources, but rather to build on what is already there. There is flexibility, but within certain ground rules and an overarching structure. **Zsuzsa Ferge** commented that conditionality is very fashionable in social policy these days. The World Bank has managed to put across the idea that conditional benefits are the only ones that can help anyone. But what conditionalities should be placed on payments to local authorities? In England, a well-developed NGO sector is prepared to receive the Sure Start scheme, which they see as a good thing. In Hungary, the experience has often been that local conditionalities exclude the poorest communities from even tendering for grants. Co-financing is almost always a compulsory condition, and poor communities do not have the money for that. Also, submitting applications in the correct form is a middle class skill. Those who can buy in that skill will win the bid. Those who can't will lose. A third, closely linked, difficulty is the gap between what is formal and what is real. When you receive grant aid, you are required to account precisely for how every cent is spent. You are not required to demonstrate that it has done any good. In Hungary, the funds disbursed for school integration can, formally, be accounted for. But how much integration have they produced?

***What are the key issues for breaking the intergenerational transmission of exclusion?***

**Tomás Habart** said one problem in the Czech Republic is that local authorities can and often do take action that is diametrically opposed to national strategies. Czech NGOs cannot stop this, but they do monitor such inconsistencies and bring them to the attention of the media. The Czech National Action Plan for Social Inclusion is more of a report than a strategy, he suggested. There are no measurable indicators and nobody is named as being responsible for ensuring

implementation. A similar situation exists in the education system. While everyone pays lip service to pre-school intervention, there are very few concrete examples, either nationally or locally. A general decline in the birth rate led to the closure of many kindergartens. Now that it is rising again, they are not re-opening, as no funds are available. Good news is, that part of Ministry of Education is very strongly supportive to desegregation and to inclusive education, although there are doubts, what happens after national elections. National Action Plan for Inclusive Education was approved by the National Government recently. Therefore, its implementation is just at the beginning. There are very few projects aimed either at getting Roma children into kindergarten or at creating parallel pre-school projects. In eight towns where People in Need operates, it is now trying to set up something similar to the Sure Start houses in Hungary. It also tutors children who have difficulties in primary school and shows their parents how to support them. Often, the parents themselves have a very low level of education, and this is an important factor in the intergenerational transmission of exclusion. He strongly supported pre-school preparation for these children – including the development of language skills, as many Roma in the Czech Republic are not fluent either in Czech or in Romani. They speak kind of Roma etnolect of Czech language, and this causes problems for the children at school. Completing the reform of the “practical” (schools for mentally disabled children) schools would imply integrating many Roma children into the mainstream schools. Many Czech parents are opposed to this, and the future of the reform is in considerable doubt. One way ahead may be to integrate schooling at the earliest age. **Viktor Piorecký** (Agency for Social Inclusion in Roma Localities, Czech Republic) added that Czech schools’ budget would have to be more or less doubled if they were to deal with the diversity of the children. At present, there are nice plans but no budgetary measures. So he did not think that things are about to change fundamentally. **Tanja Ranković** commented that economic empowerment of local people is essential to any such project. Education and training of the local people must be combined with the economic empowerment of the local community. Also, it is important to link and to integrate services at the local level. Sure Start provision of extra-curricular activities can also support the mainstream schools in order to build capacity of the mainstream schools for inclusive education.

### ***What action can be taken to promote the necessary cultural changes?***

**Arthur Ivatts** recalled that, when Black and Asian people came to work in the UK in the 1950s, they were initially seen as grains of sand that would be put in a bucket of English cultural water, which would then be stirred up and they would become lovely little Britons. But in the end, it was realised that the cultural change had to take place in white British society. He felt there is a huge message there for the whole of Europe. On the site visits, he had sensed that the emphasis was more on the Roma changing than on white Hungarian society changing, although that might be an unfair observation. Over the past sixty years, there has been enormous progress in the UK in moving towards a more diverse society with good-quality intercultural education that is fully inclusive. It is not about changing people but about changing structures. This has been a useful development model, but the journey was a long and painful one. The reversal of understanding was helped by a series of major riots by angry Black and Asian youngsters who felt that, as regards British racism, enough was enough. There are also messages there for the UK and the rest of Europe. In a way, the British have been dragged screaming and kicking from a very racist position in 1945 to that of today, where most schools are excellent in their equal opportunities, their anti-racist policies, the intercultural curriculum, the development of books and resources, the

development of bilingual support for children with different languages, and multi-faith inclusion. But the story is different when it comes to gypsies, Roma and travellers. Here, we see government and schools dragging their feet. It is very difficult to change race hatred when it permeates a society so subtly. The progress on integrating gypsies, Roma and travellers into the school system has been good but slow. One idea had been to change the status of Roma culture. In June 2008, a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month was held. Launching it in the House of Lords, he had taken pleasure in pointing to the irony of this event in the Houses of Parliament, where so much anti-gypsy legislation had been enacted over the previous 500 years. The Month had a big impact in schools, but also and more importantly in communities, who saw this as English society finally recognising their culture. This celebration of Romani history, language and culture is now held every June. It is having a very positive effect on changing public attitudes.

***What kind of indicators can show that the vicious circle of exclusion has been broken?***

**Dora Dodig** (University of Zagreb, Croatia) pointed out that the indicators used in this context tend to be quantitative – drop-out rates, incomes, employment rates and so on. But it is very important to get the beneficiaries’ perspective. This means qualitative measurement and focus groups. Social inclusion cannot be measured in quantitative terms alone. It also depends people’s own feelings and perception of their inclusion in society and the local community. Croatia has a problem of Roma who do not have citizenship. This is a particular problem for the schools, which have to take in some pupils on a sort of “black market” basis, without any trace of their attendance in the paperwork. Social care centres, ministries, the police and others encounter the same problem with people who, officially, do not exist. **Viktor Piorecký** confirmed that Serbia faces exactly the same situation. **Walter Wolf** noted a commitment by Romania to make progress on providing Roma with ID cards. In Turkey, there is a recent commitment from the Prime Minister to give ID cards to Turkish Roma in need for free. Often, this has also been a question of having the money to pay for the paperwork. **Joseph Moyersoan** (Italian Association of Juvenile and Family Judges and Magistrates) reported a complex situation in Italy: some Roma are Italians of long standing, with Italian ID cards, some have come from the ex-Yugoslav countries and some are from Romania. Each of these communities is different and has made different lifestyle choices. Some live in illegal camps. Some live in legal camps. Some live in apartments. While there are no reliable figures, a current underestimate is that there are around 170,000 Roma in Italy (data of the Roma ong Opera Nomadi, 150.000 from the Italian Ministry of Interior), of whom more than 70,000 are aged under 18. **Arthur Ivatts** suggested that the issue of ethnic self-ascription and data needs to be flagged up in the outcomes of this Peer Review. The accuracy of data is crucial. Apart from the cost of ID cards, they raise issues of civil liberties.

**Tanja Ranković** mentioned that Serbia has recently developed a Child Info Database within the State Statistical Office which measures child well-being at the local level via a number of selected indicators. But of course, this depends on having people at local level who are collecting and trained to input the data, and there is still a deficit here. Furthermore, these indicators are not segregated and do not count Roma children separately. **Ágnes Kende** said that, since 1993, Hungarian schools are not allowed to keep a separate count of their Roma pupils. Very few scholarship programmes exist. Usually, they are called “scholarships for the least advantaged”. Identification as Roma in the population registers is purely on the basis of self-declaration. **Bernard Rorke** insisted that every child has the right to a nationality. It is not the responsibility of

NGOs, as they have been doing, to get mothers registered so that they can register their children. It is the responsibility of government. This issue has, he said, been complicated by Germany's forcible deportation of children to Kosovo, a post-conflict society that does not yet have that absorption capacity. Some coordination is needed here among EU Member States, as regards the recognition of the sovereignty of Kosovo but also about a practical solution that return should be voluntary and should be organised in such a way that the absorption capacity of a small, impoverished post-conflict society can cope. It should be a condition for joining the EU that the Copenhagen criteria are strictly observed and the rights and well-being of children take priority. **Adriana Ciampa** (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Italy) said that Italy has no official data on how many Roma children are at school, and depends on the cooperation of the NGOs for this. The same goes for figures on health service access. In 2008-9, the Ministry of the Interior, together with its local structures and UNICEF, undertook to register the Roma in camps, whether legal or illegal, in three major cities – Rome, Milan and Naples. This is where the main camps are. There are few Roma issues in the rural areas. **Joseph Moyerso** recalled that the EU adopted a directive in 2008 on the repatriation of people coming from third countries (Directive 2008/115/CE of the European Parliament and the Council of the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2008). It says that unaccompanied children can be repatriated not only to their country of origin but also to other third countries even if there aren't parents or guardians present, though in these countries there aren't facilities to accommodate them. This is very negative, because the directive it is directly applicable by Member State governments. He suggested that it has a bearing on some of the issues discussed in this Peer Review.

**Carolina Castro** (ACIDI/Programa Escolhas, Portugal) reported that Portugal's national Choices Programme, which exists since 2001, is aimed at integrating children and young people and fighting poverty. It supports and evaluates local projects all over the country, although measuring their impact has always been difficult. The local projects approved within the present phase began in January 2010. Before they started, their organisers were asked to work on the indicators, in order to achieve more efficiency in the assessment process. The aim has been to have both effect indicators and impact indicators. Via a special online tool, the local projects input all the information that they have built up for the assessment process. In this way, greater objectivity has been achieved in assessment. Indicators include the number of students. 66 of these projects involved Roma children and youngsters. Only ten of them work exclusively with Roma children. The others include Roma in projects for the wider community. Effect indicators that are being worked on include the number of children that go back to school and the number of young people who go into vocational training. Little can be said about the national effects of these projects, but locally, this is the first generation for which some objective results will be obtained.

***To what extent and under which conditions can the political and financial long-term sustainability of the programmes be ensured?***

**Adriana Ciampa** said Italy's Law 285 of 1997 provides a dedicated budget for the promotion of children's rights and opportunities. This funding is devoted to pilot projects on four main types of intervention. The first is the fight against social exclusion, which also covers social and cultural mediation within camps as well as services to mothers and to children who become involved with the juvenile justice system. The second is childcare services, especially innovative and flexible ones that complement those already existing. There is also provision for the improvement of

leisure services, particularly for adolescents, and for promoting knowledge of, and participation in, the promotion of children's rights. The budget is transferred to the regions, but 30% is transferred to 15 major cities selected on the basis of child crime rates, the number of children in institutions, the level of population aged under 18, and the lack of childcare services. The best results are achieved in these 15 cities. Another basic principle is the involvement of all the stakeholders: civil society, families and family associations. With local participation, this law has led to strong networking around the projects themselves, but also on their management and evaluation. Co-planning, co-management and co-evaluation are important tools built into the law. A second evaluation step is central administrative monitoring of costs, but also of quality. The projects are all in a publicly accessible database ([www.minori.it](http://www.minori.it)). Selected best practices are shared within a permanent round table bringing together government and the cities. In this regard, efforts are under way within the cities to adopt the Open Method of Coordination as a means of sharing best practice, defining common indicators and setting common priorities for the projects financed in local areas. **Joseph Moyerso** suggested that, if all objectives, expected results, activities and indicators are taken into account right from the start of a project, this is a useful way of promoting sustainability. **Jana Hainsworth** emphasised the importance of a political will to support early years services. By bringing people together around young children, a much more accepting community can be built up. There are also cogent economic arguments. Action for Children in the UK, with the New Economics Foundation, analysed the cost benefits of investing in universal early years services for children, good parental leave and targeted interventions. They estimated this package would save the UK government GBP 486bn over the next 20 years. By taking a long-term view, governments can reap huge social and economic benefits. **Léna Szilvássy** (Sure Start house project manager, Hungary) said EU funding makes it very difficult for early intervention projects to achieve long-term sustainability. That will require more reliable central government funding in future. **Arthur Ivatts** argued that the key ingredient for sustainability is Roma empowerment.

***How could some of the Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion be put into practice – for example, the desegregation of education?***

**Viktor Piorecký** said the existence of separate schools for Roma is a symptom of something else: the existence of Roma ghettos. Desegregation is not up to the schools. It is up to local society. The only way to deal with the situation in a school is first to deal with the situation in the locality. **Barbara Tonte** suggested that desegregation is about more than just giving Roma children classmates from the majority population. It is also about improving the services provided for the Roma children. That way, the schools will become more attractive for everyone. **Judit Berki** said Hungary has made significant progress on school segregation since 2003. This does not mean that there are no segregated classes today, but several hundred schools are striving to integrate children. As a Roma herself, she felt that coexistence must be introduced at the very earliest stage of education. Otherwise, later on in school, barriers spring up. The strengthening of services in deprived areas will yield results in the long term. Parents' great fear is that being in the same classroom as Roma will bring their own children's school performance down. But in fact, studies have shown that in integrated classes, the performance of the most advantaged pupils decreases only very slightly, whereas the performance of the least advantaged ones greatly improves. **Tómas Habart** said this is about money and political will. The Czech education system is underfinanced in the long term. Where there are already 30 children in one class, one can

understand teachers who do not want to bring in children with special educational needs. The political parties know from surveys that the Czech public give higher priority to road-building than to education of excluded children. So a long-term vision based on consensus among main political parties needs to be created first, so that the strategies are not changed after each elections. **Joseph Moyerso**en thought that good practices also need to be shared with the media, in order to counter negative approach and reporting of Roma issues. **Tanja Ranković** said a major conference on desegregation in education was held in Belgrade in 2009, bringing together all the Roma Decade countries. She would make its conclusions available to the peer reviewers. Serbia is now designing a new scheme for grants to local government to help 40 municipalities to develop local Roma plans aimed to inclusion into education. The criteria for the design of these projects are the 10 Common Principles, and the evaluation indicators will also be based on them.

***To what extent are specific services suitable for the Roma minority and under what circumstances?***

**Alexandra Castro** reported that benefits recipients in Portugal often come under attack from public opinion and some political parties. When projects are targeted at Roma or other disadvantaged groups, this creates a lot of tension. In this context, it is often better to earmark separate resources for the poorest Roma groups, while explaining clearly that these funds are not being deducted from the general social budget. One locally initiated project, in Lisbon, is in response to the great Roma reluctance to allow girls aged over 12 to attend school, due to a fear that their honour will be compromised by contact with non-Roma boys. The parents proposed a separate school for Roma girls. Despite considerable official resistance, this school now exists, but the results are not yet known. A government-initiated pilot project for municipal mediators has also been launched, but there is strong resistance to the idea of implementing this for Roma alone. Within the Commission for Intercultural Dialogue, there are only two people who work with the Roma communities. So it is difficult for them to put across the case for such projects at the political level. The pilot, which began in October 2009, involves 15 Roma mediators. It aims at the recruitment and training of further mediators at the local level, and efforts are now under way to create a national association of Roma mediators. **Tanja Ranković** emphasised that the criteria for the selection of target groups should not be set in such a way that the participation of the poorest Roma is excluded. The processes have to be kept simple. The criteria for tendering of projects/grants targeting Roma need to be simple to prevent exclusion of the poorest communities from even tendering for grants. **Ágnes Darvas** pointed out that broad projects can be targeted fairly well - for example, at single-parent families, large families or families raising handicapped children, as the risk of poverty is higher. The problem arises when it comes to special projects. These are geographically concentrated in identifiable areas. 66% of poor children in Hungary live in a rural setting. There are currently two key criteria for identifying multiple disadvantage: low income and parents' low educational qualifications. About 60-70% of multiply disadvantaged people are Roma. So when we take a service into a region with a high proportion of multiply disadvantaged children, do we need to analyse any further who actually uses that service? It will in any case serve to promote integration.

### ***What is the added value of Roma staff in the projects and programmes?***

**Barbara Tonte** recalled that Hungary established a Council for Roma Integration in 2007. It brings together all the relevant ministries and authorities, seven Roma NGOs and the national Roma self-government structure. It has the right to participate in, and amend, the programmes and measures, and it had a very important role in designing the national action plan for the Roma Decade. This is all still in the learning phase. The Roma have to learn how to put their views across in bodies of this kind, but officialdom also has to learn more about how Roma express an opinion. If Roma can help to design the interventions, this will be an important contribution to their empowerment. **Judit Berki** said programmes should emphasise that Roma and non-Roma experts can work together. We also have to get away from the idea that Roma can be employed only in Roma contexts. They should have employment opportunities in all walks of life. Society needs them as economically productive, tax-paying citizens. That said, it is important to have within such projects at least some staff members who clearly and proudly identify themselves as Roma and who know what it is to be Roma in present-day Hungary. **Tanja Ranković** said Serbia sees the employment of Roma mediators and staff as an opportunity to give these Roma, including many women, an opportunity to finish their university education. **Ágnes Kende** added that the employment of Roma within programmes and administrations gives society an opportunity to see them in roles that are not traditionally associated with them. **Jana Hainsworth** said there is no reason to suppose that Roma children do not have equal potential. This is a question of society's expectations. **Viktor Piorecký** pointed out that, when the Czech Republic introduced the post of Roma Assistant into its schools, this position was defined ethnically. This has resulted in an army of assistants who do not have pedagogical training and therefore cannot really help the teachers. Head teachers often face the dilemma of choosing either a Roma assistant who can mediate or a non-Roma assistant who can teach. **Éva Szomor** said that only projects that address all aspects of disadvantage simultaneously can achieve lasting social change. **Ivan Radenković** thought that the quality of the Roma assistants in Serbian schools is influenced by the fact that their wages are often paid late. These people work very hard at a very difficult task. They deserve proper recognition.

### **The incoming Hungarian Government's plans**

**Erzsébet Kovárik** introduced **Zoltán Lakner**, who would be succeeding her in this function, although at the time of the Peer Review he had not yet been formally appointed as the State Secretary responsible for this field.

Welcoming the participants, **Zoltán Lakner** said that under the Government that would take office the day after the Peer Review, the Ministry of Public Administration and Justice will have a State Secretariat for Social Integration, headed by Mr. Zoltán Balog. It will be responsible for all kinds of integration issues, including Roma integration. The incoming government has reviewed the work carried out to date and appreciates the efforts made. In future, special attention will be paid to the continued implementation of this programme, which should be extended and continued. The intention is to use it as a flagship or reference project and to strengthen its implementation. So the new government is counting on the peer countries to maintain their interest, so that these efforts can be continued jointly.

**Walter Wolf** said the European Commission greatly appreciated the fact that, the day before the new Government took office, the Secretary of State had found the time to join the Peer Review. This showed his dedication and his awareness that what Hungary is doing in this field is also appreciated by Europe and is relevant to the other EU Member States, as well as the candidate and pre-candidate countries. He hoped that Europe can continue to benefit from Hungary's experience, and he thanked the incoming Secretary of State for his support in advance.

### Key lessons learned/conclusions

**José Manuel Fresno** summed up the Peer Review discussions:

- **Tackling child poverty is basically about three issues:**
  - improving income levels and social protection and having inclusive social protection systems, available to everyone according to their needs and circumstances;
  - promoting opportunities, through the development of plans and projects, and creating better living conditions in terms of housing and employment;
  - empowering people to break the circle of the inter-generational transmission of poverty.
- **Closing the gap between local activities and national policies** is not always easy, as local action obviously has to fit local circumstances and needs. In most EU countries, the framework for this exists, in the form of the NAPs/incl. However, many NAPs/incl lack a practical approach to the local level.
- **Better horizontal coordination** is needed among the various ministries, departments and municipalities when tackling child poverty. In particular, this is a prerequisite for the **mainstreaming of policy towards Roma**. Also required is **better vertical coordination** among the local, regional, national and European levels. The EU Platform for Roma Inclusion, which is expected to develop a roadmap very soon, should play a role in this coordination.
- **Involvement of the local community in the decision-making process** is another key issue. This requires adequate resources and capacity-building. It also calls for flexibility in adapting criteria and approaches to local circumstances.
- **Empowerment of the assisting local organisations** is another requirement. Again, this means allocating resources and building capacity.
- **The most excluded groups** must be brought within the scope of the action. This may entail some flexibility in the application of conditionalities, matched funding requirements, co-funding etc.
- **Inclusion issues must not be confused with law and order issues.** The promotion of security has a role to play in social inclusion, but it is important to maintain the distinction between the two, particularly in the case of the Roma, and particularly at a time of budget cutbacks and administrative streamlining. Social inclusion is a human right.

- **Breaking the vicious circle of the intergenerational transmission of poverty** entails, notably:
  - ending the practice of concentrating Roma children and other students with special needs in “ghetto schools”;
  - promoting educational opportunities at the earliest possible age for pre-school children;
  - promoting cultural change, not only on the part of the Roma but also in society’s approach to Roma issues and in the working of the institutions, so that schools provide truly equal opportunities.
- **Effective data collection**, although sometimes controversial in the Roma context, is vital if reliable **progress indicators** are to be developed.
- **Indicators** must be **adapted to Roma realities**.
- **Sustainability** of inclusion strategies requires:
  - a long-term approach;
  - building people’s capacity and enabling them to decide their own futures;
  - continuity of action, leading to normalisation and true inclusion of the Roma.

At the EU level, this implies continuity both of policy and of funding. The structural funds are the best tool for achieving an impact on the Roma community. On the policy side, the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth must take account of the needs of the Roma community.

- **Desegregation** will not be easy to achieve, given the geographical concentration of the Roma. But there must be a political commitment to it, as it is a basic human right. In his experience Roma, like other people, do not appreciate what they do not know. Once they have lived in a house, they assign greater importance to housing. Similarly, Roma parents who have never experienced integrated education may want their children to go to a separate Roma school. But once somebody in the family has benefited from integrated schooling, they usually prefer it. In Spain, a decision was taken some years ago to integrate Roma students into mainstream schools, with additional teaching support. However, some schools now have a high concentration both of Roma and of children from immigrant backgrounds. So Catalonia, for example, has decided that no school will have more than 40% of its pupils drawn from Roma and immigrant backgrounds, and has made extra transport provisions to achieve this where necessary.
- As regards the **mainstreaming** of policy approaches to the Roma, he reflected on the Spanish experience. The first prerequisite had been political democracy. Before the advent of democracy in Spain, the police used to persecute the Roma. But subsequently, the police protected Roma children and parents during the process of integrating schools. An inclusive welfare system had also been needed. The Roma had indeed received proportionately greater

access to social housing, healthcare and so on. But importantly, this had been purely on the basis of social disadvantage. Targeting of special needs had been a further element – but on a temporary basis, leading to normalisation. Indeed, good prospects of achieving normalisation had been one of the criteria for adopting any such targeted approach. Also essential had been the active engagement of civil society in favour of the Roma community. The fifth element had been capacity-building for Roma leaders and the promotion of Roma self-organisation. This is particularly important because, if there is a perception that Roma are unable to run their own projects correctly, public opinion could once again shift against them.

### Concluding remarks

**Zsuzsa Ferge** felt that one of the great lessons to be drawn from the peer reviewers' comments was the need for additional resources. However, these should be targeted appropriately. They should be available not only to the Roma but also to other people in similar situations of poverty. When and when not to apply positive discrimination is a difficult issue. Would it be a good thing to say "We need 20% Roma in the public administration" or would it be catastrophic? Positive discrimination always carries the risk of stigmatising people as less capable. The involvement of civil society is crucial to achieving inclusion. But whereas in some countries, such as England, that involvement dates back three hundred years, Hungary is just at the stage of trying and testing it. Civil society organisations are an important channel for top-down and bottom-up communication and a force for sustainable projects. She suggested that the European Commission does not take dignity sufficiently into account when processing applications from such organisations.

### Closing remarks

**Walter Wolf** replied that access to European money has to be 'difficult'. Any fraud or misuse could be possibly used to discredited social inclusion policies as a whole and would risk harming those who are most deserving. Hungary and other EU countries have organisations that could act as go-betweens for project applications to the EU. Such technical assistance for the application process could be financed 100%, but Brussels cannot create the appropriate structures for this. They have to be established at the national level.

On the broader discussions within this Peer Review, he noted some cogent arguments that promoting the welfare of Roma children is beneficial to society as a whole. He quoted Hungarian MEP Livia Járóka's view that, for economic reasons, Hungary cannot afford not to promote the Roma and disadvantaged youth in general. While the central justification for social inclusion is rights-based, it may at certain times be more advantageous to put more emphasis at the economic case. On a personal note, he expressed some concerns about mainstreaming without respecting the uniqueness of the Roma and the potential risk of a loss of Roma cultural identity. But we should be positive and support those who are acting to bring about change. He had just heard some encouraging, though not yet official, news about the sustainability of the Hungarian strategy against child poverty. There are therefore some grounds for optimism. However, it is clear that the financial crisis will not make the work for social inclusion any easier. There will be budget cuts. There will be many people who will question the usefulness of action to support the

poor. So he invited all concerned to monitor and assess carefully what works well and what could be improved. Ultimately, we are all responsible to the taxpayers and we have to give them the proof that what is being done with their money is useful both to the beneficiaries and to society as a whole. Empowerment of the Roma themselves is certainly essential in this respect, as it is key to the sustainability of the programmes. He thanked the hosts, participants and organisers for the extremely interesting, frank and useful Peer Review.

**Erzsébet Kovárik** thanked everyone for their contributions and their openness. The Peer Review had been a wonderful way of rounding off this part of her life. One of the greatest impediments to the take-off of the Szécsény programme was the lack of funding availability at the start, and she had learnt from this Peer Review that Hungary is by no means alone in facing this problem. The possibility of funding the programme from Hungarian central sources will need to be examined in relation to the next three years. Hungary keeps a close eye on European developments in the social field, and she was very glad that the incoming Belgian EU presidency has made combating child poverty one of its top priorities. So the trio of the Spanish, Belgian and Hungarian presidencies will all have focussed on combating social exclusion. She thanked all those who had pointed out the importance of employment and of reinforced social protection in this regard. At the outset of the Szécsény programme, some saw it as a top-down approach imported from outside and did not welcome it with open arms. But in the meantime, the local mayors are more positive about the ideas involved, even though they still sometimes express criticisms. The inequality of opportunities that has developed over the past twenty years has split Hungarian society in two. It is not an inclusive society, and efforts to improve it must continue. In future, she will be doing so from the ranks of civil society. Roma are not the only poor people in Hungary, but they are heavily over-represented among the poor. There is still a long way to go in combating anti-Roma bias. In visits to another pilot project over the years, she was always saddened to see a very dilapidated house on the edge of a settlement. But on her most recent visit, she saw that the house had been done up and the garden was now well-kept. A social worker told her that both the man and the woman living there now have jobs. Even though it is at the minimum wage, at least they now have hope for the future and something to believe in.