

Promoting social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment

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Brief assessment of the possible relevance of the good practice for the Portuguese context

In Portugal most of the Roma communities are living more or less in the same conditions and in areas with similar characteristics to the intervention areas covered by the Hungarian programme. According to the results of a recent survey 53% of the Roma families live in poor housing conditions and sub-standard housing which worsen their social exclusion situation, namely by the difficulties in access to social and health services. According to the data collected, 60% of the Roma population is under 25 years of age against 27% in the majority. Additionally, 39.7% of youth are under 15 years of age. Over the half of the Roma population (52.3%) have no education. The low level of Roma education reflects directly on the employment opportunities. The majority of people do not belong to the labour force (84%). Additionally, 45% are unemployed carrying out informal tasks and 27% are either retired or living from some sort of social aid (REAPN, 2009).

In about 30% of Portuguese municipalities, Roma population is living in deplorable housing conditions for more than 20 years, without any outlined intervention strategy. The causes for this situation are diverse: hidden or underestimated housing needs; lack of identification of local resources and capabilities that can be used to solve problems; shortage of resources, at local level, to solve problems of different nature faced by the most disadvantaged populations and to implement actions that meet the needs and necessities of the Roma population; feeble political willpower due to the pressure/persuasion that is exerted by public opinion on local authorities; fear that any intervention may increase the size of the Roma population (Castro 2007, Castro et al. 2008). Despite these observations and approximately 29% of the social networks implemented under the Rede Social (Social Network) Programme¹ had identified, until 2006, the issues of education and housing as the most common, followed closely by social action, employment, and professional training², no changes have been registered regarding the design of national strategic documents, which, in turn, would make possible a systemic and integrated approach, able to

¹ This Programme was born as an instrument of local development and consolidation of social cohesion, through the adoption of processes of territorialised strategic planning as the basis for social intervention, with the aim of “stimulating the creation of integrated support networks at the local level”. Such methodology requires Cooperative Social Diagnostics, the implementation of Local Information Systems, and of Social Development Plans. In four years “social networks” have been created in almost every municipality in the country. These networks gather locally the most relevant intervenient: local government, non-governmental organisations and private institutions. These partners play a role in planning, monitoring and evaluating activities, integrating the Local Councils of Social Action. They take care of everything that relates to social policies in an optic of local development: unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, training, Health, Justice.

² The Centro de Estudos Territoriais devoted one of its research projects to the analysis of all information provided by planning documents made by Social Network teams, in the attempt to highlight a number of local problems/concerns, as well as to draw a more fundamented picture of the national panorama. Independently of the type and quality of data, 77 municipalities – 29% of their total – mention their Roma population (Castro, 2007a).

meet – at a local level – the multiple and complex peculiarities and needs faced by the Roma population.

In Portugal, efforts undertaken over the last 10 years regarding the integration of social policies seem yet to face some constraints, thus restraining the required attainment of efficacy concerning the struggle against poverty and social exclusion of Roma population:

- Concerning the Roma communities there are a complete lack of national strategies. Therefore the social intervention with Roma is punctual and not consequent with a more global and strategically approaches.
- In the fourth National Action Plans for Inclusion (NAP/Inclusion) generations, outlined measures were scarce and punctual, and in the case of the last NAP/Inclusion - to be concluded in 2010 - the conditions for the fulfilment of some expressed measures have still not been created, specifically the Advisory Group for the Inclusion of Roma Communities; the training for agents working with Roma communities, the diagnosis of the Experiences implemented in social housing.
- The non-inclusion of local problems and needs in the successive NAP/Inclusion, and the lack of housing policy measures to overcome some of the identified problems, is a serious lapse, which tends to perpetuate the social exclusion of many Roma families through the generations³.
- Despite the existence of public social policies relatively highly developed (Integration Social Income, housing programmes, measures for social protection and school social action...), yet it may be observed discriminatory attitudes and practices which hinder its efficacy.
- Roma were never a priority in terms of social intervention (for instance within the Structural Funds from the EU Portugal never had a targeting approach on Roma);
- Some of the implemented programmes and measures, and for they do not depart from a scientific reading of the problems and from a more systematic assessment of the development of the situation indicators, might not be responding efficiently to reduce child poverty.

Therefore the learning's from this Hungarian experience can constitute a very relevant example to understand why most of the attempts to draft and implement projects for the social inclusion of Roma are not delivering the expected and desired results.

³ A study by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and by Numena attempted to analyze the impact of the National Action Plans for Social Inclusion (NAPs) between 2001-2006 in the Czech Republic, France, and Portugal, measuring the access of Roma to social security, social housing, state pensions, and public health care. One of the problems highlighted "is the fact that little or no new policy specifically designed to address social exclusion issues experienced by marginalised groups such as Roma and Travellers are included in them" (ERRC/Numena, p14), as well as "the gap between the national policy and the local level" which translates into a difficulty in transforming the national objectives into actual local targets (idem, p17-18).

Similarities and differences of the good practice to the Portuguese context

Building on the experience developed in Hungary, it is possible to identify some similarities. On the one hand, the NAP/inclusion represents the main strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion, and child poverty is a political priority within the National Strategy since 2006. On the other hand, the Initiative for Childhood and Adolescence (Iniciativa para a Infância e Adolescência) was launched, encompassing priorities and strategic objectives which correspond to cross-sector-based measures. Finally, there are certain programmes and projects implemented in Portugal, at the local level, which have among their addressees the Roma population, and somehow relate to the national strategy:

- Regarding the programmes that seek a territorial intervention to promote the inclusion of marginalised areas, fighting desertification and isolation, and favouring the social integration of specific populations, one should stress:
 - The Social Development Local Contracts (Contratos Locais de Desenvolvimento Social-CLDS). This programme is based on a mobilising community logic – perceived as a whole – and, therefore, it is organised from Local Councils of Social Action of Social Networks, partnerships and participative local management forums, aiming to render lucrative the community resources, and to promote the subsidiary principle. The CLDS are organised in four axes of intervention: (i) employment, training and qualification; (ii) parental and family intervention; (iii) community and institutions training; (iv) information and accessibility and are based on a management model that envisages introducing funding for projects, in which the territories identified for the implementation of these projects are selected centrally. This enables solutions for needs diagnosed beforehand and favours territories in which target groups face situations of exclusion and poverty, in close articulation with the planning being implemented within the scope of Local Social Networks.
 - The Choices Programme⁴ (Programa Escolhas). This Programme seeks to promote the social inclusion of children and young people coming from more vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, aiming for equality of opportunities and the reinforcement of social cohesion. The Programme sets up on an application process promoting the participation of the community structures. From the needs arose from local diagnosis and with concrete action proposals, consubstantiated in the activity plans, the following projects are designed. In its third phase 16 projects (out of 120) one of the target audiences are children from Roma communities; the projects may be structured in four strategic areas of intervention: School Inclusion and Non-formal Education – Measure I; Professional Training and Employability – Measure II; Civic Participation and Community – Measure III and Digital Inclusion – Measure IV. Currently in its fourth phase, the Programme supports 140 projects (66 involving Roma population) throughout the country to support formal and non-formal education, orientation and referral to professional training and employment, developing civic and community participation, as well as promoting digital inclusion.

⁴ The Choices Programme is funded by the Institute for Social Security, by the Institute for Employment and Professional Training and by the European Social Fund, through the Operational Programme for Human Potential.

- In order to correct disadvantages in education, measures have been implemented to have an impact on the structurally low levels of qualifications amongst the population and to reduce early school leaving and school failure. With a view to ensuring equality in terms of access to educational opportunities the following measures have been implemented:
 - expanding the coverage of the pre-school;
 - generalised access to activities aimed at curricular enrichment in schools of primary education, creating conditions for full time schools;
 - improving the Programme for Priority Intervention in Educational Territories (Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária);
 - expanding the number of students in secondary school covered by school-based social actions and reinforcing support for the same;
 - generalised supply of meals for students in primary education;
 - reduce info-exclusion (providing schools with technological infrastructures, Training Projects from the technological education plan, Programmes of widespread access to computers with Internet connection and broadband, Digital Inclusion Centers, ICT activities for children and youngsters, Broadband Community Networks in disadvantaged regions).

- In order to close the gap between national and local administrations regarding Roma communities, the High Commission for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue (ACIDI - a governmental body decision from the Council of Ministers) has created, in September 2009 a Pilot Project for Municipal Mediators. The Project's main goal is to provide intercultural training (14 October 2009 to 15 February 2010) - in the fields of Mediation, Public Institutions Functioning and Communication - to create fifteen Roma municipal mediators and to insert them in local municipalities so that they can establish a close relation with local services and organisations and local Roma communities. Each of those municipalities should establish partnerships with local organisations and identify, in local Roma communities, potential municipal mediators. From this Pilot Project emerges a high potential synergy between national and local level concerning Roma issues that will benefit Roma communities both locally and nationally. From this Project results also a local and national network between municipalities and its partners, national authorities and Roma mediators that will reinforce intercultural dialogue and proximity in this thematic field between all its players⁵.

In addition to the implemented measures, programmes and projects disclosing some similarities with the experience developed in Hungary, two other aspects should be stressed, for in both countries they are presented as difficulties in what concerns to a more integrated and sustainable approach. In other words, in spite of the challenges' understanding of a multiplicity of

⁵ At the end of its first year of implementation, there will be an evaluation report made by Centro de Estudos Territoriais to assess obtained results that should indicate this Project added value to the improvement of Roma communities situation in Portugal and to the need to implement this Project in other municipalities.

opportunities in terms of long-term integration, the same type of obstacles is found in two crucial areas:

- The lack of funds hinders the approval of systematic plans to improve housing conditions.
- The access to the employment in the mainstream labor market keeps on dealing with the stereotypes' burden coming from the employers, as well as with the employment opportunities' scarcity for disqualified people, both at school and professional levels.

However, there are some aspects that make the difference regarding social intervention with the Roma communities in both countries:

- The social intervention in Portugal is not prepared for the difference of an ethnic group such as the Roma Communities. Most of the professionals are not prepared to work with this kind of groups and there are little experiences of specific trainings to do so.
- This lack of preparation is reflected, for example, in the way of organising work teaching in the classroom, as well as in a low degree of proximity and trust between parents and teachers, with little stimulation regarding a regular frequency of the school system (Casa-Nova, 2008).
- All measures that constitute alternative proposals to the standard curriculum are represented as "second chance educational proposals" and "second chances opportunities", where the success granted by the certificate does not always correspond to the learning success (Casa-Nova, 2008, p48).
- Despite the fact that several designed programmes and projects require its implementation the involvement of all relevant actors, an active engagement of the partners concerned and a development of synergies, the building of a partnership is not always attained.
- In most Portuguese municipalities where situations of great social vulnerability persist among the Roma population, one may observe a feeble political commitment regarding the implementation of existing programmes, often due to the difficulty on justifying and legitimising the issue at a scientific and technical level.
- The intervention's approach is hardly ever long-term and comprehensive: projects are sporadic, short-lived, and have a reduced impact in local and national reality in the medium and long term, due to the lack of infrastructure and financial support that allows the continuity and sustainability of the developed practices.
- In addition to the fact that the Roma population is not considered as a priority in the field of social intervention, interventions based on an action-research approach involving research centers are seldom promoted.

The potential transferability of the good practice to the Portuguese contexts

The analysis of the transferability of the Hungarian experience to the Portuguese context will imply the comparison of its potential regarding innovative measures and programmes that have been implemented in Portugal and which have had among its addressees the Roma population. A constraint that arises from this comparative dimension relates to the lack of systematic data either in terms of the undertaken actions, either in the achieved outcomes.

If this comparative analysis should not be possible to carry out, the Hungarian experience can constitute a set of important lessons for the Portuguese context. It is possible to underline different starting points that could help Portuguese policy makers, NGO's and other relevant actors to see and to make them understand what's not working in Portugal and why. In our opinion this Hungarian experience states important principles that any Portuguese strategy to fight poverty and social exclusion should take into account seriously in consideration when it comes to social inclusion:

- the political will and the socio-political consensus;
- a global and strategic view and the link between the local action and the national strategy;
- the necessary involvement of all the relevant actors and the development of synergies at local level;
- the action-research approach as the best way to achieve de real needs, to planning and monitoring social intervention;
- The renewal of pedagogical methodology at schools.

There are previous conditions for the possible transfer and success of this experience (or part of it) to a Portuguese context that should be taken in consideration, some of them have already been mentioned by Aires in a Peer Review meeting (Aires, 2006):

- To foresee a better knowledge of the Roma population needs and specific problems (a national sociological study);
- To cooperate with the NGOs, local authorities and other relevant actors, particularly those at the local level;
- Stronger involvement of the Roma Communities in the decision process making (promotion of Roma organisations, training for mediators, inter-cultural bodies);
- Establishment of a national strategy for the promotion of the development and inclusion of the Roma citizens (a strategy that should be participated by all the actors which are producing concrete intervention on the ground for the past 30 years);
- Design and implementation of specific actions and programmes targeted to Roma population (namely in the framework of the next Structural Funds).

In parallel and complementary with all the precedent actions promote a national campaign to fight discrimination as a necessary and indispensable condition for this kind of specific approach.

- To ensure that local needs are translated into regulatory and financing instruments (e.g.: the need for specific housing initiatives, regulation of the mediator status...).

Brief assessment of possible ways to measure the results or the impact of the good practice

Before addressing the possible ways of assessing the Hungarian experience, it might be important to recall some assumptions inherent to the evaluation processes in contexts such as the Szécsény micro-region:

- The assessment of social intervention – since it intervenes on complex phenomena with multi-causalities inherent to human action enjoys effects sometimes hardly measurable. The constant challenge is to find formal instruments of measurement of subjective effects, as well as the most relevant quantitative indicators (Guerra, 2002).
- The objectives can be translated easily into performance indicators whenever they suit theoretical principles (measurable specific, realistic and temporality).
- Achieved outcomes may have an explanation supported by the predicted quantitative indicators and by opportune qualitative assessments, so that the implementation of the objective should be justified and clear.
- The impact of an action, in what concerns to social exclusion, is extremely difficult to assess, since it implies being able to prove a causal link between action, impact and observed transformations, and it is very difficult to prove that one single action might modify one situation. Thus, to observe a positive or negative impact you need to consider:
 - the contribution of action in the transformation of a situation;
 - external factors to action;
 - the "lasting effects", i.e., that the new generated situation might have a higher duration as to the own action;
 - solutions to the eventual impossibility to assess intervention after a few years (e.g.: 1. adoption of a prospective character, formulating hypotheses from registered impact indexes observed by the time of the assessment; 2. comparison with a group, or a situation which one has not acted upon, analysing the differences).
- Selection of indicators or impact should take into account existing statistics and its territorial desegregation, if one seeks to have the required terms of comparison.

- The programmes' evaluation has particular characteristics whenever the target groups are composed by children and youngsters, in particular in its involvement in the evaluative processes and methodological and ethical procedures to be adopted. In other words, conventional evaluation criteria – efficacy, efficiency, relevance, suitability and sustainability – are not enough, since the results of the assessment should reflect the participation of children and youngsters all along the process, which would imply to take into consideration, among other things (Duarte et al., 2005), the following:
 - specific tools and skills to communicate with children and youngsters in the process of data collection information;
 - ensuring that participation has an informed consent;
 - the heterogeneity inherent to children and youngsters (age cannot be separated from other characteristics such as social class, gender, ethnicity, etc).

Before a scenario in which the conditions for large structural changes are not gathered, the measuring of some intermediate results may assume particular importance. As an example, and having always as reference the departure diagnosis, one should refer evaluation at the following levels:

- Empowerment of local institutions and governance model, through the identification of the involved institutions, their purposes, resources provided by their intervention, and a reflection on the articulation unleashed in terms of strengths and weaknesses.
- The direct addressees of intervention in terms of:
 - levels of trust they achieved either in themselves, either in both inter-personal, or institutions relationships;
 - levels of participation;
 - levels of school performance, absenteeism and dropouts;
 - the situation of the family regarding employment;
 - the composition of children's nutrition and dietary habits;
- Development of actions, identifying innovative features that occur and the understanding of this development.

On the other hand, given the importance of studying the inter-generational transmission of poverty one could think on the possibility of implementing a longitudinal survey from childhood to adult life to analyse children's life trajectories, which would require individual and regular data collection from the same people.

Some important questions about the policy that are being raised and debated in Portugal

Although some of these questions have already been identified, it is important to stress the following:

- Portugal has demonstrated political capacity to monitor the real needs of the country, this capability is translated in a set of plans, measures and programmes which tend to meet the identified needs;
- Some of the implemented programmes at the local level have been, over time, adjusted in terms of objectives, targets and methodologies of intervention;
- One begins to recognise the need of the importance of adopting additional measures, particularly directed to the Gypsy communities beyond the currently existing of general nature, and which are directed to all individuals and groups in a poverty and exclusion situation. In fact, for the first time, NAP/Inclusion 2008-2010 recognises the importance of the adoption of additional measures specially addressed to Roma and the need to overcome discriminations and reinforce integration of specific groups namely, Roma.

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