

Promoting social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment

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The possible relevance of the good practice for Serbia

Serbia, like Hungary, is facing the problems of poverty and social exclusion.

Following a reduction in the number of impoverished population during 2006/2008, the number of the poor once again indicated an increase in 2009. The data from the Household Budget Survey 2009 indicates that 6.9% of the citizens of Serbia lived below the absolute poverty line in 2009. Households with less than 8,022 dinars per consumer unit were considered poor (slightly less than 80 EUR). The number of the poor declined in urban areas – from 10.9% in 2008 to 9.1% in 2009, while the category of other settlements shows an increase in the number of the poor – 16.1% in 2008 to 19.5% in 2009.

Data indicate that the most vulnerable are children under 13 years of age – 9.8%, as well as children between 14 and 18 years of age – 8.4%. The greatest number of poor and the largest increase in the number of poor in 2009 is recorded in the category of persons without primary education (from 9% in 2008 to 14.8% in 2009).

Table 1. Percentage of poor children and adults

	2006.	2007.	2008.	2009.
Children	11.6	10.5	7.1	9.3
Adults	8.2	7.8	5.8	6.4
Total	8.8	8.3	6.1	6.9

The percentage of the poor below the absolute poverty line is lower in urban areas and notes a slight decrease in 2009 from 5% to 4.9%, while the category of other areas notes a significant increase in 2009 (9.6%) following a decline in the number of the poor in 2008. Serbia is a scarcely urbanised country in European terms, both according to the low share of urban population, as well as the low qualitative urbanisation, making rural areas unattractive for economic investments and living (contrary to trends in highly urbanised countries). Therefore the level of cultural and human capital of these areas is low, as indicated by the unfavourable demographic structure in rural areas. The share of illiterate persons in non-urban settlements is 5.9% (1.6% in urban ones), while persons without elementary education account for 35.6% (11.2% in urban areas), indicating the significance of regional variation in the courses of urbanisation in general and the urbanisation of the villages in particular, the development of road infrastructure, etc. No efficient state policy exists currently for the development of human potential in rural areas and the revitalisation of the devastated rural areas.

According to the results of the Living Standards Measurement Survey in 2007, nearly half of the Roma population (49.2%) was poor, with 6.4% extremely poor. Compared with the total population of Serbia, the Roma are 7.5 times more exposed to the risk of poverty. There is a significantly higher number of poor Roma (62.1%) in rural areas than in urban areas (35.5%).

Child poverty was reduced during the 2002-2008 period by one third (Living Standards Measurement Survey), and started to increase again during the last year. Poverty reduction was influenced by the growth of parental income, as well as social contributions (child allowance and social benefits), while the increase in child poverty over the last year is the effect of the economic crisis.

The example of Hungary is relevant for the context in Serbia since it addresses multiple deprivation of the poor, particularly the Roma, in a rural area without built-up infrastructure, marked with high unemployment rates, low level of education of the population and no available human resources that could contribute to the economic recovery of the micro-region.

The experience of Serbia in relation to combating child poverty and promoting Roma inclusion

Strategic and Institutional Framework

As is the case in Hungary, Serbia has a comprehensive national strategic framework at the national level directed at improving the position of the poor, children and Roma. The strategic framework includes the following documents:

- Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS);
- National Plan of Action for Children (NPA);
- Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of the Roma and pertaining Action Plans.

Unlike Hungary, none of these policies is long-term (NPA concludes in 2014).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) was the first strategic document of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, adopted in 2003, which served as a foundation for creating measures targeting reduction of absolute poverty. The main goal of the implementation of the PRS was to reduce absolute poverty by half in Serbia by 2010. The development of the PRS was preceded by the Living Standards Measurement Survey that defined vulnerable population groups (including children and the Roma) as well as the inequalities existing at the national level (poorer regions in comparison to “rich ones”).

Funds for the implementation of the PRS were budgeted within the regular activities of line ministries¹, and the coordination was entrusted to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Implementation Focal Point formed by the Government of Serbia in 2004, and tasked with supporting,

¹ The persons considered to live under the absolute poverty line are persons of age whose monthly expenditures are below the minimum required for food (minimum nutritional prescribed by FAO) and other expenses that do not include food (with the exception of durable goods and imputed rent).

coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the PRS. The team was part of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Serbia and its mandate was expanded in 2009 with social inclusion issues (the current name is Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit – hereinafter: SIPRU). Support for the implementation of the PRS was focused at the central level and directed at supporting line ministries to implement effective policies targeting the poor; to imitate new measures to improve the position of the poor and to mainstream these measures in daily activities of the ministries; support to formulate new policies through *ex-ante* and *ex-post* analyses (laws, by-laws, strategic solutions); initiate and coordinate donor assistance and EU funds, as well as their efficient use in improving the position of the vulnerable population. PRS was dated until 2010 and work is currently under way on redefining national social inclusion and poverty reduction policies. Monitoring poverty and social inclusion is achieved through national indicators defined based on the Laeken indicators of the EU.

The PRS was a national framework for measures implemented at the local level as part of various documents and operational plans, e.g.: local social welfare development plans, local action plans for children, local PRS documents. Funds were directed at the most vulnerable regions of the country and activities were coordinated through a "leading" sector, i.e. a competent line ministry.

In its work the SIPRU has faced similar challenges as the team of the Academy of Sciences from Hungary (with whom cooperation was established in 2007), primarily related to harmonisation and synergy of all stakeholders whose work tackles poverty reduction among the most vulnerable populations: national institutions, parliament, international organizations, civil society, academic community, business and media.

The measures for child poverty reduction were defined in the **National Plan of Action for Children (NPA) 2004 - 2015**. The document was designed by the Council for the Rights of the Child – an advisory body of the Government of the Republic of Serbia for directing and monitoring national policies for children, which included representatives of international organisations and NGOs in addition to the representatives of national institutions. The Council is presided over by the Minister in charge of social issues. The work of the Council is financed from UNICEF funds. An impact evaluation of the implementation of the NPA was performed in 2009, when specific objectives were defined and measures within existing priorities were revised: 1. Child poverty reduction; 2. Quality education for children; 3. Better health for all children; 4. Improving the position and rights of children with developmental disabilities; 5. Protection of the rights of children without parental care; 6. Protection of the rights of children against abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence; 7. Improving the capacities of the country for resolving child problems. The activities of the National Plan of Action for Children within the priority of *Child poverty reduction* were integral of the comprehensive *Poverty Reduction Strategy*.

The NPA defines poverty reduction among Roma children as one of its horizontal priorities (there is a comprehensive policy for the improvement of the position of the Roma population), while measures for the improvement of the position of Roma children are monitored through indicators in the education, social and healthcare sectors.

The NPA is implemented through **Local Action Plans for Children** developed in 21 municipalities. Action plans prescribe activities targeting children and youth in terms of poverty reduction, improvement of health and education, improving the quality of life for children without parental care, reduction of the number of cases of abuse and violence against children, increasing information sharing. As part of certain priorities, such as poverty reduction and

education improvement, special attention was given to Roma children, in the sense of an increased presence of Roma children in education institutions, at all levels, from pre-school education to secondary schools. The creation and implementation of the LPA in municipalities was led by municipal inter-sector teams gathering representatives of local authorities and institutions (in the field of education, healthcare, culture, social protection, etc), local organisations and the beneficiaries. The position of coordinator in some municipalities was integrated in the regular structures of state administration, thus integrating activities related to the LPA into the regular working tasks of those employed in self-governance. This significantly increased the sustainability of the LPA. The main sources of financing for the implementation of the LPA are municipal budgets, which allocate specific funds for the implementation of the LPA. However, expenses do not exceed 0.1 to 0.3% of municipal expenditures.

The drafting and implementation of the LPA was characterised by extremely poor involvement by the private sector (primarily the business sector). Even though the LPA documents presume an active and purposeful involvement of children in their implementation, children were insufficiently engaged in implementing the LPA. LPA implementation is monitored based on a number of indicators contained in the *DevInfo* database of the Republic Statistical Office. However, neither municipalities nor state institutions make sufficient use of this database, primarily since it is not updated timely. Key problems and obstacles in the context of monitoring are insufficient data collection systems and the design of basic databases, poor availability of the data and a lack of adequate technical equipment and trained personnel working on data monitoring.

A comprehensive state policy for the improvement of the position of the Roma was defined in the **Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of the Roma** adopted in 2009, while action plans in the fields of healthcare, education, housing and employment of Roma are being implemented since 2005. See Annex 1, Implementation of the Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Roma in Serbia.

The coordination of the implementation of the Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of Roma is conducted on three levels:

- The strategic coordination of the implementation of the Strategy is conducted by the Council for the Improvement of the Position of Roma presided by the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration (strategic decisions, budgeting of specific measures, etc.).
- The coordination of the implementation at the national level is conducted by the Secretariat for Roma Strategy, a part of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights. Coordination is undertaken through the work of 10 working groups at the line ministry level (within the ministries), comprised of line representatives, experts, representatives of the Roma community and NGOs.
- The coordination of the implementation at the local level is comprised of Local Roma Coordinators (Roma) who are part of the local self-government unit in 58 municipalities. Their work is coordinated by the Secretariat for Roma Strategy of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights.

Systemic measures for combating child poverty and Roma inclusion

Table 2: Measures for combating child poverty and Roma inclusion

Social protection	Education	Healthcare	Housing	Employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Child allowance ▪ Material family support (Social benefits) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Free textbooks for all children ▪ Scholarships for secondary school and faculty students ▪ Free and subsidised student dorms ▪ Free transportation ▪ Roma teaching assistants ▪ No categorisation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Roma healthcare mediators ▪ Projects implemented by healthcare institutions in cooperation with Roma NGO in Roma settlements ▪ Immunisation activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social housing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Active employment measures

Two basic transfers delivered by the state aiming to protect children against poverty – **child allowance and material family support - MOP (social benefits)** – are not well-targeted. Impact evaluations have shown that 86% of households receiving child allowance do not fall within the category of poor population, while social benefits (MOP) mitigate poverty, but do not eliminate it (covering 46% of the spending deficit of the poverty line).² Although there are no official statistical data, studies have shown that there is a certain number of Roma families whose sole regular income comes from social benefits, i.e. that social protection in the Republic of Serbia does prevent the poverty among Roma from increasing further (according to estimates, poverty among Roma would increase to 73% without this type of social protection). There are also significant limits in access to social benefits for Roma families, mostly reflected in lack of knowledge and complex procedures.³ A certain number of households receive both MOP and child allowances, thus additionally supporting families with children receiving MOP.

Weaknesses have been noted in the implementation of the child allowance programme and MOP, primarily related to lack of knowledge among the beneficiaries, high costs of applying (of informational, administrative and social-psychological nature), lack of networking between state institution databases (employment service, tax service, central register, Ministry of Internal Affairs) that could improve the activities and accelerate the procedures if fully networked, etc. Municipal services do not have sufficient material and human resources to select those with a right to transfer and for fieldwork. The relation between MOP and child allowances as to the purpose and the problem has initiated current consideration of linking these two programmes in a single programme, therefore new legal provisions are expected in the new Law on Social Protection.

² Matković G, (2009), Analysis of the Impact of National Financial Assistance to the Poor (Analiza uticaja državne finansijske pomoći siromašnima), Government of the Republic of Serbia, PRS Implementation Focal Point, p. 41.

³ Source: Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of the Roma in Serbia, Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2009.

The problem of early drop-outs from school is particularly characteristic for the Roma population. Even though elementary education in the Republic of Serbia has been mandatory and free-of-charge since 1958, we are facing the issues of insufficient inclusion of children/students in pre-school education, primary/mandatory and secondary education, as well as early drop-outs among children and youths from vulnerable groups. The trend of exclusion for marginalised groups, particularly poor and Roma children from all educational levels increased during the nineteen-nineties and during the economic transition, and data gathering and various projects for increasing accessibility and inclusion only began in 2004. Considering quality (PISA Survey), the poorest students receive the lowest quality of education, resulting in the fact that there are 60-75% of functionally illiterate persons after nine years of education.⁴ Poor and Roma children have insufficient access to pre-school education, there is a lack of sufficient measures to attract and retain children from marginalised groups, including increased support in learning. Cooperation with parents regarding the issue of drop out is nearly completely absent.

Serbia has very few systemic measures for the support of education of poor children, including the Roma. The following measures of educational policy can be pointed out: measures of student standards (subsidised housing and food for students in institutions, scholarships and loans)⁵ and distribution of free textbooks in primary education. Even though the Ministry of Education awards scholarships and credits to Roma students, as well as subsidised housing in student standard institutions, there is no system for monitoring recipients of scholarships and therefore the effect of these measures is unclear. During 2009, the Law on the Foundations of the Education System eliminated the categorisation of children before enrolling in school (the categorisation of children in special schools was a large issue), Roma teaching assistants were introduced and positive discrimination was applied to Roma children and children from vulnerable groups in enrolling in pre-school institutions. The implementation of this Law, the Strategy for the Improvement of the Position of the Roma and the Action Plan in the sector of education will be supported also by realisation of two major projects: IPA-funded Education for All and Delivery of Improved Local Services (DILS) funded by the World Bank loan. Currently, a very limited number of Roma assistants, 54 in total, are engaged in Serbia.

⁴ Baucal A, Pavlović D, Quality and Equity of Education in Serbia: Education Opportunities for the Poor, Analysis of PISA data 2003, 2006 (*Kvalitet i pravednost obrazovanja u Srbiji: obrazovne šanse siromašnih*, Analiza podataka PISA 2003, 2006). Ministry of Education, Government of the Republic of Serbia/PRS Implementation Focal Point, Institute for Psychology 2009. Conclusions.

⁵ During 2007/08, there were 11,241 scholarships and 339 credits to the amount of 3,000 dinars awarded. The criteria for awarding scholarships and credits is based on student achievements, while material status is representing with 30% of the ranking points. A number of scholarships are awarded to Roma students at reduced criteria.

On-going large scale projects (started in 2010)

- The project *Education for All* of the Ministry of Education, totalling EUR 3 million, aims at contributing to social inclusion and poverty reduction through enhanced access of children from marginalised groups (poor, Roma, deprived). The project directly supports the implementation of the Action Plan for the Education of the Roma, and covers pre-school and primary education. 128 pedagogical assistants for the same number of schools (80 primary schools and 48 kindergartens) will be engaged by school year 2010/2011 (currently totalling 54).
- Project *Social Inclusion* of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, total value EUR 5,8 million aims at improving social inclusion and poverty reduction of vulnerable groups (children with disability, women in rural areas and Roma), through rationalisation and decentralisation of social welfare services and development of community services.

Sixty Roma healthcare mediators still work at the project level and are not institutionalised in the system.

Serbia drafted a methodology for designing plans for Roma housing, wherefore the line ministry is awarding grants to municipalities for creating plans for Roma settlements.

Support for Roma employment is provided through active employment measures. 390 persons were included in additional education during 2009. Subsidies were provided for 231 Roma. Priority in 2010 will be given to activating material assistance beneficiaries (mostly Roma) through public works, Roma, and persons with disabilities. The issue of grey-market workers and the status of Roma secondary raw material gatherers (recycling) were opened.

In order to overcome the systemic preconditions for social inclusion (e.g. poor housing conditions and parent unemployment), it is vital to provide harmonisation of projects in certain regions. Therefore the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights is implementing a project for social Roma housing in municipalities already implementing projects for improving education (Roma assistants and accessibility increase to preschool services) and Roma healthcare (Roma healthcare mediators), as well as those with local Roma coordinators.

The potential transferability of the good practice

The example of Hungary is an excellent example of implementation of an integrated programme targeting poverty reduction and social inclusion on the local level, in rural environment. The example is in line with activities set in the NPA "Initiate, define and implement multi-sector projects to rehabilitate impoverished regions unfavourable for the life of children".

We are currently preparing a social experimentation project which shall focus on the South of Serbia in which a high number of the Roma are residing. The Hungarian example is beneficial in terms of experience with establishing a team of experts who work with the local community and the contribution of the team to the enhancement of human capital in the local community. Furthermore, we would also find useful the experiences of the education component of the project and linking of the programme for early child development with the employment of mothers (an additional issue in Serbia is the lack of pre-school institutions in rural regions, wherefore alternative solutions are being considered, such as travelling pre-school teachers, pre-school teaching in the home of the teacher, travelling kindergarten, etc.). We would also find useful the

components relating to employment, as well as the experiences relating to the linking of services on the regional level.

Questions and issues relating to the project implemented in Hungary

- Are any ex-ante analyses conducted and how are such long-term strategic commitments monitored?
- The approach, in spite of treating the multidimensional aspects of the issue and implies a coordinated approach, still leaves an impression of a “project approach”. This is most perceivable in terms of outcomes relating to employment and failure to tackle systemic issues (e.g. housing, living conditions). What are the factors of achieving the significant outcomes and the sustainability of the project? To what extent is the legislation a pre-condition for the sustainability of the project? How many years would it take to empower the local community to take over the coordination of the project? What is the relationship between the national and local structures in terms of the coordination of the project implementation?
- To what extent did children and/or Roma take part in the design and implementation of the programme?
- How shall the project exert impact on the economic growth of the micro-region? Has a joint regional project been launched to increase employability (e.g. productivity, competitiveness)? Has the organisation of Roma in, for example, “cooperatives” been encouraged and what aspects of social economy have been supported?
- How is the project evaluated? How do the project outcomes reflect back to the national strategic framework and policies? How is the impact of the project outcomes monitored in terms of change in the attitudes of the local community, local institutions, local businesses in relation to the Roma?
- How is the issue of “mobile” regional services resolved, for example, who is in charge of maintaining the mobile ICT bus?

An example of good practice in Serbia

An example of Serbia which could be useful in the context of Hungary is the model of Functional Education of Adult Roma – the Second Chance, the project of the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia and the National Roma Council, which trained adult Roma in basic life competencies and parallel training for acquiring first qualifications. The project was piloted by REF funds, and the model is used to reform the formal system of elementary adult education with IPA funds.

The project aimed to develop programs of elementary general education and professional trainings. Both lead to gaining accredited diplomas and/or certificates, and the main principle was to develop the curriculum relying on the characteristics of the target group and the labour market requirements. Other project objectives were to develop a system of functional elementary adult education which would offer a better access to elementary education and represent a “second chance” for the Roma, facilitate the involvement of the Roma in the education system and

encourage social inclusion and integration. The project strived to increase motivation for gaining elementary and vocational education, as well as employability of the Roma, which would significantly contribute to poverty reduction and achievement of EFA goals in Serbia. Based on the project results, a new model of functional elementary education was proposed targeting new groups of adults, in particular marginal groups, with a new legal framework and new financing mechanisms.

The main project activities included the development of a new curriculum – for general education and vocational trainings, for VII and VII grade (followed by the program for V and VI grade). The programme, which included general education and “life competencies” courses (health, family life, active citizenship, communication skills, IT skills, entrepreneurship), was piloted in 11 schools in Serbia, including 275 trainees (youth and adults) without finished elementary education. Furthermore, schools were equipped, teachers were trained and assistant teachers were introduced – Roma assistants who helped teachers, monitored the trainees and assisted them with all issues which may hamper successful training attendance.

The project results may help reform the overall system of (functional) elementary education, by developing new mechanisms of legal and financial regulation, cooperation of social partners on the local and national level, mechanisms for the development of curricula (for elementary education and vocational training) for various marginalised groups.

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

Monitoring indicators must have been defined at the beginning of the project in terms of defined objectives. In addition to statistical indicators (the percentage of children living below the poverty line, poverty risk rate, poverty risk rate per gender and age for the population aged 0-15, and the type of household; percentage of household food consumption; the percentage of children living in adverse housing conditions; the share of children with low nourishment quality; the level of cultural participation among children aged above 14, life aspirations of children in relation to their current living situation, general satisfaction with life, the number of children in families that receive social transfers, etc), participative evaluation should also be conducted to help analyse the attitudes, causes and quality changes in specific phenomena related to the project goal.

Promotion of the cultural change within public authorities aimed to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and social exclusion and to be able to better address the needs of ethnic (particularly Roma) and other excluded groups

It seems that media play a significant role in creating the stereotypes of the Roma, wherefore it is important to work on promoting examples of successful educated Roma. The promotion of cultural heritage of the Roma is but one way – the first Roma Museum has been opened in Serbia, and Roma culture is gradually introduced into the professional development of teachers.

The empowerment of civil servants to recognise issues of vulnerable groups (in particular the Roma) is a method to achieve changes in attitudes. It is important to acquaint civil servants with private and social benefits of social inclusion of the Roma.

The World Bank has published the study on the costs of Roma social inclusion and implications for the gross domestic products in different countries, which may be a way to motivate decision makers to identify and articulate projects which aim to improve the position of the Roma.

Active participation of target groups (e.g. Roma population)

The Roma should be continuously empowered to take part in the relating policy development and involved into different processes occurring on the local and central level. Roma NGOs should be empowered and involved in the design and implementation of projects, as well as the decision-making mechanisms as representatives of their community.

Sustainability of funding of projects addressing child poverty and promoting Roma inclusion

The sustainability of projects depends on the available funds and the establishment of institutional mechanisms on the national and local level.

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