



Hungary 2010

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

Short Report



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



Held in Szécsény and Budapest (Hungary) on 27-28 May 2010, the Peer Review was hosted by the Hungarian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. In addition to the host country, six peer countries were represented: Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Portugal, Serbia and the United Kingdom. Represented as stakeholders were Eurochild and the Open Society Institute (OSI). Taking part for the European Commission were representatives of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

1. The policy under review

In Hungary, as in most EU countries, the poverty rates for children and for households with children are above the national average. Moreover, 60% of impoverished Hungarian children live in villages or small settlements. Adopted by parliament in 2007, Hungary's "Making Things Better for our Children" National Strategy aims, over a period of 25 years (2007-2032) to:

- Significantly reduce the poverty rate of children and their families, while improving children's educational chances and life prospects;
- Eliminate the extreme forms of child exclusion, segregation and deep poverty;
- Fundamentally reform the operational method and approach of institutions and services that currently contribute to the inter-generational transmission of poverty and social exclusion.

Specific priorities include eliminating the segregation and social exclusion of Hungary's large Roma minority, whose children are at particular risk of poverty.

To promote local action in line with the national objectives, a pilot project was launched in Szécsény, which by 2006 had become one of Hungary's most disadvantaged micro-regions, particularly as regards employment prospects. The micro-region's population has a large and growing Roma component. Incorporating action research elements, the Szécsény "Give Kids a Chance" Programme has enjoyed considerable success, and has recently been transferred to ten other micro-regions. Its main elements are:

- Early skills development, notably through the setting up of Sure Start Children's Houses;
- Integration and development of public education;
- Youth development assistance to early school-leavers based on individual plans, youth clubs and youth programmes;
- Strengthening of individual and community social work in settlements;
- Improving parents' employment prospects, particularly through cooperatives and better day-care provision for their children;
- Improving housing conditions.

The Peer Review was held just before a new Hungarian government took office. The incoming head of social integration issues assured the meeting that special attention will be paid to tackling child poverty and inclusion of the most disadvantaged groups. The intention is to continue and strengthen the implementation of

successful programmes and good practices in this field. The new government is, he said, counting on the peer countries to maintain their interest, so that these efforts can be continued jointly.

2. Lessons learned

Among the main points to emerge from the Peer Review:

- The Szécsény programme was seen as a **sign of hope** that polarisation can be overcome and cooperation built between communities. There is a need to implement and bring substance to the 'Ten Common Basic Principles'¹ endorsed by the European Council in 2009, particularly with regard to mainstreaming of Roma issues into general policies and the application of the 'explicit but not exclusive targeting' principle.
- **Breaking the vicious circle of the inter-generational transmission of poverty** entails, notably:
 - ending the concentration of Roma children and students with special needs in "ghetto schools";
 - promoting educational and early development 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.
- **As well as being unethical, exclusion of Roma is economically unsustainable.** They are the youngest and fastest-growing demographic segment in a region characterised by falling birth rates.
- **Closing the gap between local activities and national policies** is not always easy, as local action has to fit local circumstances and needs. In most EU countries, the framework for this exists, in the form of the National Action Plans on social inclusion, but these may sometimes lack a practical local-level approach.
- **Better horizontal coordination** is needed among the various ministries, departments and municipalities **when tackling child poverty**. In particular, this is a prerequisite for **Roma mainstreaming**. However, it was emphasised that mainstreaming should not lead to a loss of Roma cultural identity.
- 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 vital. This requires adequate resources and capacity-building. It also means adapting criteria and approaches to local circumstances.
- **Empowerment of the assisting local organisations** is another requirement. Again, this means allocating resources and building capacity.
- **Inclusion issues should 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,

¹ For more information on the 'Common Basic Principles' please see Annex II of the discussion paper for this Peer Review: <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2010/promoting-social-inclusion-of-children-in-a-disadvantaged-rural-environment-the-micro-region-of-szecsény>

particularly at a time of budget cutbacks and administrative streamlining. Social inclusion is a human right.

- **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.
- **Effective data collection, fully respecting all relevant aspects of data protection**, is vital if reliable **progress indicators** are to be developed. Indicators must be adapted to Roma realities.
- The **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 a key tool for supporting the Member States in achieving a sustainable 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.