



Slovak Republic

Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children

A Study of National Policies

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Summary

The aim of this report is to describe the social and economic situation of children and to analyse the policy for fighting against child poverty and social exclusion in Slovakia. To reach this aim we used statistics, surveys and relevant policy documents, related laws, directives and regulations that were available before the end of April 2007.

The report is divided in two parts. The first part describes the extent and nature of child poverty and exclusion in Slovakia. The second part deals with the social inclusion programmes and policy-making related to child wellbeing and it pays special attention to policy-monitoring and evaluation.

A short sum-up of the main points of the report follows. Slovak children are the social category that has the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate (19 %). In general, child poverty in Slovakia stems from two main (often joint) social conditions: living in a jobless household and living in a family with many children. Higher education does not seem to play a reliable role in lifting people out of poverty. Despite the low level of early school leavers, Slovakia ranks as having one of the highest unemployment rates among young people, compared to the EU-27. Besides structural factors (limited job options, lack of cheap public transport...) youth unemployment tends to be linked (imputed) to a not flexible enough response of the education system to the requirements of the labour market and to the slow adaptation of the curricula content to the special needs of different social groups of children, especially children from socially disadvantaged environments.

Long-lasting critique of the over-representation of Roma minority children in special schools produced some progress. The educational policy is more focused on integration of Roma pupils into the mainstream school system. Several programmes like the 'institutions of zeroth classes' and teacher's assistants were introduced into the School act in 2002 to facilitate the integration of Roma pupils into the mainstream educational system.

Child poverty is explicitly linked with bad housing. In Slovakia, the institution of social housing is considerably underdeveloped and public or private rental housing represents a very small part of housing stock (about 3 %). As a result, such limited supply profoundly hinders access to affordable housing for poor families.

A targeted approach is dominant in Slovak social policy. Some of its practical consequences go against the aims of social inclusion, as it provokes division and tension among tax-payers and people on benefits as well as among those poor people who are entitled and those who are not. In many respects, social assistance programmes are perceived to be unfair.

The review of general politics and (overall) policy-making in Slovakia indicates that the fight against social exclusion is not a Governmental priority in Slovakia. Likewise elsewhere, the Governmental priorities are, on the one hand, economic growth and economic competitiveness and, on the other, reducing the budget deficit. Cuts in public expenditures are extolled to the degree that resource-demanding policy recommendations are depreciated in advance. We are conscious of the omnipresent saving considerations and the impossibility of defying them.

Long-lasting restriction on public expenditures has an impact on the assessment and evaluation of social policies. The shortage of resources has led to many negative effects, such as cuts in personnel, in data collection and decreasing analytical capacity. Certain data, especially on children's subjective experiences and perceptions of their wellbeing, but also on housing conditions, is completely missing. There is poor cooperation between policy-makers and

academic scholars on producing and interpreting relevant social data. Several official reports and documents tend to be formally developed but with no practical relevance. Though we do not wish to engage in making utopian proposals, we can hardly avoid stressing that more public discussion is needed and more bottom-up initiatives commemorating human rights commitments of the Slovak Republic. There is still much to do for raising public awareness, both on the importance of social rights as human rights and the importance of fighting against social exclusion in a sustainable democratic society.

Section 1. Description and analysis of the extent and nature of child poverty and wellbeing in Slovakia

Even in the era of calling in question value of justice and equality there are many good reasons to embrace children universally. Child wellbeing is attributed essential importance and child poverty is unacceptable for both human rights and human capital investment paradigms. That is why 'the vast majority (of EU Member States) have set as a key priority the need to develop a strategic, integrated and long-term approach to preventing and addressing poverty and social exclusion among children' (Joint Report 2007: 44).

Description and analysis of child poverty and wellbeing in Slovakia has various limitations. Some of them are similar to many EU Member States: research and especially systematic data collection in this domain has been deficient and its importance is not fully appreciated. Certain data is not available for Slovakia. The launch of surveys is often preconditioned by external stimuli and resources. As a rule, Slovakia does not take part in comparative projects which require funding from domestic resources. The 'HBSK 2000/2001' project was a case like this, and Slovakia, as possibly the only European country who did not take part in it. As data on child subjective wellbeing or health behaviour was not collected, the Slovak Republic was not included in the recent Unicef-IRC report on child wellbeing (UNICEF Child Poverty in Perspective 2007, February 2007).

On the other hand, it is believed that the EU-SILC launched in 2005 may have started the new era of social research and monitoring in Slovakia. Though at this time, there is only data available from the EU-SILC 2005, departmental experts as well as academic researchers believe that the EU-SILC data creates at long last a solid data base on the social situation and living conditions of inhabitants, including children.

Though the EU-SILC has been frequently talked up among domestic experts, there have still only been a few studies that used the EU-SILC findings. Many comparative studies have still been using the microcensus 2003 data for the Slovak Republic. According to microcensus 2003 data, children poverty rate was 30 % in Slovakia and the relative poverty gap placed the country in the worst position among the first 25 EU Member States on various monetary poverty scales. For example it is the case of Bradshaw's study, where Slovakia took the last place in material situation cluster among the first 25 EU Member States (Bradshaw, 2007).

Although the country data from the EU-SILC for the year 2004 has only been available since April 2006, we would like to plead for its use in the following studies. There are two reasons for this. First, the *National Report on the Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion* (the SP/SI report) emphasises the EU-SILC data for the year 2004 as the basic line that is even called the

absolute poverty limit and is considered to be the country indexical basis for future comparisons¹. We think that we should respect this endeavour for a new start. On the other hand, the SP/SI report states that older microcensus data is not compatible with the EU-SILC. In its view, there is no possibility to create a solid and reliable picture of the development of poverty and social exclusion in Slovakia that would be based on the comparative analysis of these data collections. Such opinion does relegate in advance any attempts to study recent history using these data collections.

1.1. Monetary poverty and material deprivation

In 2004, children under 15 represented 17.1 % of the Slovak population². In the first half of 2006, 26 057 living babies were born, 1 069 less than in the first half of 2005³.

The decrease in birth rate (reduced to one half in comparison to 1970) is noteworthy and often taken by politicians as more dramatic than the at-risk-of-poverty rate of children. According to the EU-SILC data for the year 2004, children aged 0-17 are the demographic category having the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate (19 %). Child danger of poverty is statistically on the same level as the average of the first 25 EU Member States and as the EU average implies 'standard' or even 'norm', this piece of information seems rather to blunt interests in poverty problems on the side of mass media and politicians.

Households with children are generally in the higher at-risk-of-poverty category (16.5 %) than households without children (8.3 %). In 2004, households with children even constituted 73 % of poor households (58 % in the first 25 EU Member States). The at-risk-of-poverty rate differs according to the type of household the children grow up in. The highest at-risk-of-poverty rate is in the category of lone parent households (31.7 %) and among large families with three or more dependant children (24 %). The at-risk-of-poverty rate in the families with four children is even 41 %⁴. Low working intensity of household significantly increases children's risk of poverty. Risk of poverty of households with children where only one parent is working is 38 % and it is even 75 % in households with children where no one is working⁵.

¹ 'Material deprivation indexes shall be used by us as another indicator when assessing the poverty and social exclusion. They should be the first time available from the EU-SILC survey in 2007. The absolute poverty limit can be defined on the basis of the at-risk-of-poverty rate in relation to fixed time — i.e., 2004. In the basic year that was followed within the framework of the EU-SILC 2005 survey, specific values that were calculated within the framework of both measures (i.e. the at-risk-of-poverty rate and the chosen absolute poverty limit measure) are obviously the same. Therefore, the values for the absolute poverty limit (i.e. the at-risk-of-poverty risk rate in relation to fixed time — 2004) are not indicated. It belongs to the group of indicators that are followed within the framework of the EU-SILC survey according to Eurostat methodology. In future, the monitoring of the absolute poverty limit shall enable correct assessment of the development of the number of the poor, and consequently the impact assessment of the policies, mainly of those aimed at reducing and removing poverty' (the National report..., 2006, p. 6, fn 8).

² According to the UNDP survey, children represent up to 39.4 % of the Roma population in Slovakia (UNDP, 2006, p. 10).

³ *Report on the social situation of inhabitants in the first half of 2006.*

⁴ EU-SILC, Tab. 44, 2005.

⁵ *Správa o sociálnej situácii obyvateľstva*, 2006, p. 103.

Table No 1
Share of children living in jobless households

| | | | | | | | |
|---|------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Year | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
| EU25 | – | 9.5 ^(e) | 9.8 ^(e) | 9.8 ^(e) | 9.8 ⁽ⁱ⁾ | 9.7 ^(e) | 9.5 ^(e) |
| SK | 12.5 | 9.3 (u) | 12.1 | 11.8 | 12.8 | 13.8 | 11.8 |
| Year | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 |
| SK unemployment rate | 18.6 | 19.2 | 18.5 | 17.4 | 18.1 | 16.2 | 13.3 |
| SK Long term unemployment (% of unemployed) | 53.9 | 55.6 | 59.8 | 61.2 | 60.6 | 68.1 | 73.1* |

Source: Eurostat website, * Statistical office of the Slovak Republic http://www.gpn.org/data/slovakrepublic/slovak_republic-en.pdf

Slovakia has an above EU average share of children aged 0-17 living in jobless households (11.8 %). Table No 1 shows that this share does not correlate with the overall level of unemployment. However, it is firmly linked to the stable share of long-term unemployment (11-12 %) that is reflected in the increasing share of long-term unemployed in unemployment overall ⁶. Active labour market policy (ALMP) and other factors such as foreign investment, job creations, and opening of the EU labour market have brought about small openings for the long term-unemployed up until now. Enduring high levels of unemployment in some southern and eastern districts indicate the high risk of persistent joblessness of their residents and the high probability of permanency for children living in a jobless household, if they have been born to parents out of work. Living in households in which no one has a job is daily, and highly probable, and is the chronic experience of more than every tenth child in Slovakia: it is the fifth highest level in the EU (9.5 % in the first 25 EU Member States). The number of children living in households with one parent unemployed is not known. In other words, 88.2 % of children are living in families where at least one parent has a job.

What does it mean to grow up in a jobless household or large family in present-day Slovakia? How much protection and opportunities are granted to these children? According to the Eurostat data, the percentage drop in the at-risk-of-poverty rate for children aged 0-17 years allowed by social transfers (excluding pensions) is a slightly lower in Slovakia than in the first 25 EU Member States average. However, the suggestion that social protection schemes are slightly less protective than the first 25 EU Member States average, does not say very much about the scope and quality of protection supplied by social transfers.

In the first half of 2006, more than 63 000 households with children took up social assistance benefits for material needs. Among these, there were 41 283 two-parent households (64.8 %) and 22 438 lone parent households (35.2 %) on a monthly average. There were 135 269 children in households receiving social assistance and this number was 2.8 % less than over the same period in 2005 (Správa o sociálnej ..., 2006).

According to EU-SILC 2005 data, in 2004, 12.4 % of households had great difficulties and 19.2 % of households had difficulties in making ends meet in Slovakia. In the case of lone parent households, 21.5 % had great difficulties and 24.8 % had difficulties. In large family households, the economic stress seems a little weaker in comparison to lone parent households: 15.6 % households had great difficulties and 16.2 % difficulties.

⁶ In the EU, the share of long-term unemployed in overall unemployment was 45.6 % in 2006 with no change over previous year. In Slovakia those who were unemployed for over a year represented 76.3 % of all unemployed (males 76.8 % and females 75.9 %) with a 4.4 inter-year increase. This is the worst position in the EU. (Eurostat/employ/indic_y/ltu_une_rt through www.bmwa.gv.at/NR/rdonlyres/08DBC637-7DCE-4B83-99FF-B8DEACED1D17/0/aminterlanginteren.pdf).

Table No 2**Experienced economic stress from rent/housing payments in %**

| To pay all housing costs is | Total households of the Slovak Republic | Lone parent households | Households with 3 or more children |
|-----------------------------|---|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Great burden | 38.0 | 58.4 | 44.9 |
| Some burden | 55.4 | 38.0 | 48.4 |
| Not at all | 6.6 | 3.6 | 6.7 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

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Table No 3**Experienced economic stress from loans, leasing, and instalment payments in %**

| To pay all loans, leasing and instalment payments | Households SR | Lone parent households | Households with 3 or more children |
|---|---------------|------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Great burden | 42.8 | 51.0 | 44.1 |
| Some burden | 51.2 | 42.1 | 48.0 |
| Not at all | 6.0 | 6.8 | 7.1 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

© EU-SILC, 2005

Three major factors increasing childrens' risk of poverty are generally recognised: living in a lone-parent family, living in a jobless household and living in a family with many children ⁷. Lone parent families account for 6.8 % of Slovak households. The next factors which escalate their risk of poverty are low education, engagement in low-skilled work or being without a job.

Children growing in jobless households face high material deprivation. The recent representative survey of jobless households (Bodnárová, 2006) documents various aspects of material deprivation of households with dependent children. According to its findings (Table No 4), hardly one quarter of children can attend after-school activities and sport clubs without restrictions — in the case of visiting cultural events there are only 12 %. Within jobless households, more than 40 % of parents reported that they had totally cut back the spending on children's after school activities and sport activities. Even visits to cultural events were totally halted in 61 % of families. Restrictions were smallest in the case of buying school supplies; however, they impact half the children from jobless families to a various degree. These findings clearly suggest that the social assistance ⁸ available to jobless households in Slovakia can only partially secure children against material and cultural deprivation. Certainly, it does not prevent the reduction of opportunities for child development.

⁷ *Joint report, 2006*

⁸ According to the Molsaf analysis, in the first half of 2006 the overall maximum social assistance jobless families could have received was far less than the at-risk-of-poverty line in all types of households (varying according to number of children and parents). For instance, maximum social assistance a lone-parent household with two children could have received was 24.4 % lower than the monetary poverty line, and in the case of a lone parent household with four children it was even 35.5 % lower. In the case of a two-parent household with two children it was 19.4 % less and of a two-parent household with four and more children 29.6 % less than the monetary poverty line. (Správa o sociálnej..., Table No 32, 2006). What is more, a large share of households in material need are not entitled to maximum social assistance, for instance because of the strict conditions (six months of the proven rent payments or settled debt payment conditions and status of owner or lodger) only about one third of households in need are entitled to housing benefits.

Table No 4
Cutbacks in children's needs in jobless families (in %)

| | They are totally reduced (cannot afford at all) | Partially reduced (they meet them from time to time) | Not reduced (they rather save elsewhere) | Total |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|-------|
| After school activities | 42.6 | 32.5 | 24.9 | 100.0 |
| Sport activities | 42.9 | 32.9 | 24.2 | 100.0 |
| Cultural events | 61.1 | 26.1 | 12 | 100.0 |
| Buying school supplies | 10.9 | 39.3 | 49.7 | 100.0 |

© Bodnárová B., 2006, p. 149

The study of lone parents on social assistance has found out that only 38.1 % of families received alimony from another parent regularly and 27.3 % of them do not get alimony at all ⁹.

Self-reliant life of young adults is complicated in the areas without job opportunities. Joint assessment of all household members, including young adults under the age of 25, to calculate household benefit means that if they get a job, their earnings are assessed as part of household income and if it then goes beyond the subsistence line, their household (family) would lose entitlement to benefit. This rule decreases the pluses of daily commuting for lower paid jobs. Territorial mobility of young adults is further hindered by strict conditions to get housing benefit (available only for one address and one citizen in material need from jointly assessed persons) that require at least six months living at a separate address (proven by rent instalment payments for the six preceding months) to be eligible for it. Under such conditions young people from rural jobless families will hardly have resources to move to a town and start living there. As a result, young jobless adults are forced to stay with parents and younger siblings ¹⁰. Common assessment of household shows unintended trapping effects here.

1.2. Health

Children's health is commonly measured by three indicators: health at birth, immunisation and health behaviour (Bradshaw, 2007). Because of the lack of data on children's health behaviour, Slovakia's picture is incomplete. The first two indicators give rather contradictory information.

On the one hand, the health-at-birth indicator suggests that children in Slovakia are a particular risk group because infant mortality is the third highest in the first 25 EU Member States. Some comfort can be taken from the fact that infant mortality dropped down considerably over the years (28.6 ‰ in 1960, 11.0 ‰ in 1995, 7.9 ‰ in 2003 ¹¹ and 6.8 ‰ in 2004). This comfort is somewhat illusionary because infant mortality among the Slovak Roma minority is roughly twice the national average.

⁹ *Jednorodičovské rodiny ohrozené chudobou* [Lone parent families at risk of poverty], Bodnárová — Gerbery IVPR, p. 20, 2006.

¹⁰ As their parents complain they are not setting a good example to younger siblings. The statement is based on the findings of the focus groups' research held in 19 Roma communities in the Banská Bystrica self-governmental region (SGR) as the basis for the 'Regional action plan for Roma inclusion' (see Kusá, 2006).

¹¹ OECD.

On the other hand, the immunisation indicator throws evidently a more favourable light on Slovakia — here the country reaches the second best position in the first 25 EU Member States¹². It is assumed that strong 'State focus on immunisation during socialism may have been the factor of no link between immunisation and family social status' (Bradshaw, 2007). However, nowadays immunisation has become a problem in poorer Roma communities living in rural areas. In 2005, the monitoring of compulsory immunisation of children revealed that 6.2 % of paediatric districts did not reach the 90 % level of vaccination. The highest percentage of under-immunised districts was in the Prešov SGR¹³ and the Košice SGR that have the highest unemployment levels, especially in rural areas. In under-immunised districts, paediatricians have been doing vaccination directly in Roma settlements in cooperation with municipalities. In the paediatricians' view, the under-immunisation problem was caused by 'frequent Roma migration' (Monitoring 2005: 2). In this relation it is important to note that the number of paediatricians per 10 000 inhabitants is significantly lower in the regions with higher demand for paediatric field work than in other regions: for instance, in Bratislava SGR there are 10.83 paediatricians per 10 000 inhabitants, in Nitra SGR 9.13, in Košice SGR 8.06 and in Prešov SGR only 6.9. In some cases insufficient vaccination was the result of the under-financed local hospital and health centres (ibid)¹⁴ and most likely expensive public transport from distant rural areas to a district town may lead to parents' refraining from frequent visits to the paediatrician.

A report by the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (SNCHR) notes that the transfer of responsibility for securing immunisation from the healthcare institutions to parents¹⁵ 'has become a burden, mainly for families with lower living standards that are unable — socially and economically — to secure appropriate healthcare for their children' (Správa 2006: 77).

Unfavourable nutrition and health condition of children from jobless families and their irregular attendance for paediatric examinations provoked efforts to set up political measures that could improve the situation. We describe them in part 2.2.7.

As we already mentioned, common indicators for children's health condition are missing, as Slovakia did not take part in the HBSC survey 2001.

¹² Slovakia has a similarly favourable position in the low birth weight (under 2 500 g). The proportion of new born children with low birth weight has slightly increased (from 7.1 % in 2001 to 7.4 % in 2004 and 2005) but it is still at the level of developed countries (about 7%).

http://www.childinfo.org/areas/birthweight/LBW_WHO_UNICEF%202000.pdf

¹³ SGR = self-governmental region (NUTS 3).

¹⁴ Public opinion on proximity of health services differs widely in Slovakia. The comparison between the first 15 EU Member States and the 12 newer EU Member States reveals that the accessibility gap between the highest and lowest income quartile is larger than 30 % in Slovakia and Hungary and it is higher than in the first 15 EU Member States with the largest accessibility gaps between the highest and lowest income quartiles.

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_situation/docs/ss02005_healthc_report.pdf, p. 93.

¹⁵ Parents now have to go to a paediatrician to receive a prescription, then to a pharmacy to get a vaccine and then again to a paediatrician for the immunisation vaccine. A procedure like that is time-consuming for parents from rural areas with a sparse and expensive public transport.

Table No 5
Consumption of fresh fruits

| Kind | 1950 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 1992 | 1996 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | RFA |
|------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Fresh fruit in kg per capita | 27.7 | 35.2 | 47.5 | 51.3 | 44.5 | 51.7 | 40.4 | 39.5 | 40.1 | 39.0 | 37.1 | 96.7 |

© Spotreba potravín SR, 2007, p. 22, Statistical Yearbook, 1996.

Table No 5 shows a rather dramatic decrease in the consumption of fresh fruits during the reform years. The consumption of fresh fruit in 2005 has reached only 71.8 % of the consumption in 1996 (51.7 kg per capita). Moreover, it has reached only 38.4 % of the recommended consumption (96.7 kg). Apparently, the decrease of the fresh fruit consumption had not been even in all social groups. Similarly, though the consumption of milk and dairy products was 154.6 kg in 2005, i.e. 1.3 kg (0.8 %) more than in 2004, it has still lagged significantly in comparison with the first 15 EU Member States.

1.3. Education

Bradshaw's study measures the access of children to education with indicators of school achievement, participation and youth labour market outcomes. Slovakia reaches the 11th position in the first 25 EU Member States in this field. The better than average position is achieved mainly through the low rate of early school leavers that is one of the lowest in the first 25 EU Member States. However, contrary to expectations, this good result does not influence the rate of unemployment of young people which remains one of the highest in the first 25 EU Member States: 'Though the SR has the second lowest rate of early school leavers (5.7 % females and 6.0 % males) in the EU after the Poland, the unemployment rate of young people (15-24 age group) is now 30.1 % in Slovakia (EU-18.5 %) in spite of the decrease by 2.6 percentage points in comparison to 2004' (SP/SI report 2006: 6). It is now recognised that the high unemployment of young people is the result of the lack of low- or semi-skilled jobs¹⁶, but at the same time, the SP/SI report stresses 'the need for structural reform of curricula content to harmonise it with the requirements of the labour market' (ibid). The stress on curricula reform seems to comply with the resounding critique of industry leaders and investors who point out that there is a shortage of specialists and skilled workers who could start working immediately. However, this critique suggests certain indolence and insufficient willingness by firms to invest in education and training of their employees.

PISA (2003) findings show slightly poor school achievements of Slovak children and, more importantly in this context, the low equalising effect of educational institutions on school attainment of children from different family backgrounds. In other words, the findings suggest 'the highly significant impact of children's family background on their school achievements'. (SP/SI report 2006: 7). According to the comparative research on the reading literacy of 4th class pupils, the powerful indicator of cultural capital of families is the number of books (or children's books) in a household: in all countries pupils with higher number of children's books at home scored better in reading than pupils that had fewer books at home. In Slovakia only 7 % of pupils have more

¹⁶ According to the *Report on the social situation of inhabitants of the Slovak Republic in 2005* (March 2006), there were still 25 job-seekers per vacancy in 2005. The fact that young Slovaks get work in Ireland, the United Kingdom and other countries, supports the structural explanation of youth unemployment.

than 100 children's books at home. In Canada, the United Kingdom, Iceland, Norway and Sweden over 30 % of pupils have more than 100 children's books at home ¹⁷.

Preschool education and preparation for school education in kindergarten is believed to improve and equalise children educational chances, also in Slovakia. According to Act No. 279/1993 Coll. on school facilities, children that reach five years of age and those with postponed compulsory school attendance are preferentially admitted to kindergarten. Several factors (introduced voluntary principle, increasing prices for meals, and insufficient resources of poorer municipalities to run kindergarten) contribute to considerable differences in children's preschool education attendance ¹⁸. There is significant correlation between kindergarten attendance and economic situation in a region. According to statistics of the Ministry of Education, the average participation in preschool education of 5-year-old children was 91.11 % in 2005 ¹⁹. In the more prosperous regions of Bratislava, Trnava and Žilina SGRs it was more than 95 %; however, in the less prosperous Prešov and Košice SGR, it was only 85.78 % and 82.94 % respectively. In some of their districts (for instance in Košice-okolie, Michalovce) slightly above 60 % of 5-year-old children attended kindergarten.

Statistics about the relief programmes (subsidies from the Ministry of labour, social affairs and family) for school children from low-income families (Graph No 1) suggest important regional differences in the numbers of children included in the programmes. In the Bratislava SGR, the programmes cover a small number of children, in the less prosperous regions of Košice and Prešov SGR the numbers are many times higher. However, large absolute numbers of children benefiting from the programmes say nothing about the share of children from poor family backgrounds who are assisted. The relative numbers are far less favourable especially in social scholarship programmes for pupils of secondary schools. For instance, in Košice SGR, out of all the 15 to 19-year-old children living in households on social benefits, only 19.35 % are social scholarship holders ²⁰. As the school marks' requirements for social scholarships are not very strict, it would not be right to suppose that 80 % of this category of children are doing so badly at school that they are not eligible for a scholarship. It is more likely that a large share of children coming from poor family backgrounds do not continue with their study after their 15th birthday. The data further suggests that in the second half of the 2005/06 school year, the social scholarship holders only took a 1.58 % share of all grammar school students and a 5.98 % share of all students in secondary technical schools with maturita exams in the Košice SGR ²¹. These low numbers could indicate that the majority of social scholarship holders are concentrated in vocational schools without maturita exams and, worse, that children from jobless households and households registered as benefit takers (which embrace 12 % of Košice SGR inhabitants) already gave up on the type of school that is the precondition for tertiary education.

¹⁷ *Čitateľská gramotnosť žiakov* [Reading literacy of pupils], 2001.

¹⁸ According to the statistics of the Institute for Information and Prognosis of Education (ÚIPŠ), the number of kindergartens in Slovakia dropped by 2 849 from 1990 to 2006, that is, almost by 30 %. The number of children attending kindergarten even dropped by 37 %; from 216 336 in 1990 to 136 795 in 2006 (www.uips.sk). The decline reflects the simultaneous effects of declining birth rates and insufficient public policy measures in the 1990s.

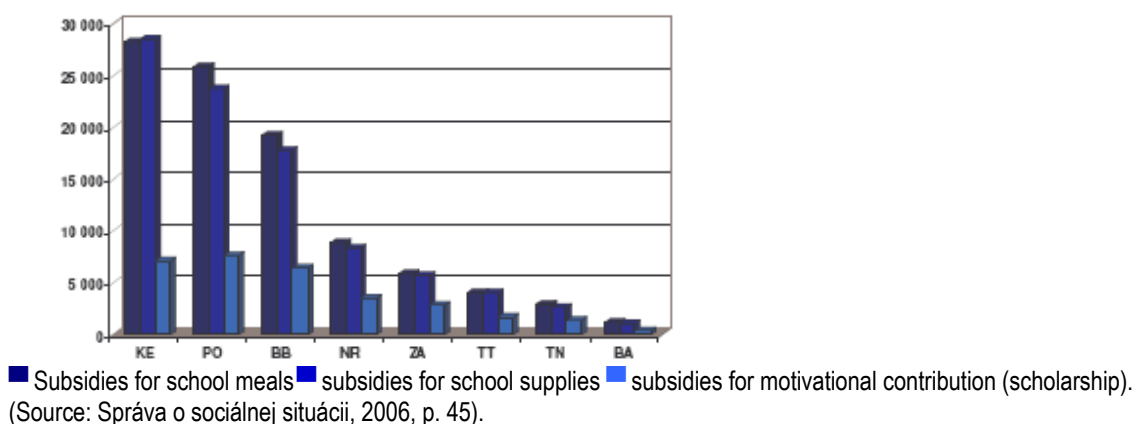
¹⁹ The data are somewhat inconsistent. The cited numbers are from the *Government Implementation Report of the Action Plan for Children* from 2005. Statistics of ÚIPŠ inform that the participation of 5-year-old children in preschool education in kindergartens was only 82.26 % in the same year.

²⁰ *Sociálna situácia v Košickom kraji* [Social Situation in Košice SGR], KSK, 2006.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Graph No 1

Regional division of children that were targeted by the relief programmes in the first half of 2006



Education of children with various physical, mental or combined health difficulties (special needs) is organised in three basic ways: in special educational establishments (special kindergartens, primary schools and vocational schools); in special classes that are part of mainstream primary schools (MPS); and by individual integration in MPS. The last form is the most recent and is facilitated by the introduction of the profession of teacher assistants since 2002. The new regulation and institutionalisation of personal assistance has considerably promoted the increase in the number of individually integrated pupils: from 6 055 pupils in 2001 to 10 607 in 2004 and 11 722 in 2005²². This was a 93.6 % increase between 2001 and 2005. The share of individually integrated pupils among all pupils with special needs has been developing favourably in recent years. Though the shares of individual integration are still low if compared to the first 15 EU Member States, Table No 6 shows a continuous increase of individual integration into mainstream education.

Table No 6

Pupils in special elementary schools, special classes and individually integrated pupils

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| A. Pupils in special elementary schools | 22 002 | 21 433 | 20 690 | 20 541 | 19 960 |
| B. Pupils in special classes in mainstream elementary school | 3 669 | 4 304 | 4 686 | 5 441 | 6 262 |
| C. Pupils with special needs individually integrated in mainstream elementary schools | 6 055 | 6 450 | 8 414 | 10 607 | 11 722 |
| <i>Pupils with special needs in total (A + B + C)</i> | 31 726 | 32 187 | 33 790 | 36 589 | 37 944 |
| Share of individually integrated pupils of all pupils with special needs (C/A+B+C) | 20.3 % | 20.0 % | 24.9 % | 28.9 % | 30.9 % |

Source: www-8.mensiny.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/1729.rtf

1.4. Housing and environment

To analyse deprivation/wellbeing of children in housing and environment conditions, Bradshaw uses the data from the European quality of life survey (EQLS) 2003 on apartment overcrowding, quality of local environment and next aspects of housing. Slovakia takes up the 19th place on this aggregate scale. It is followed by Poland, Hungary, Portugal and the Baltic states.

²² <http://www-8.mensiny.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/1729.rtf>

In spite of multifaceted difficulties related to housing (overpriced rents and unaffordable expensive cost of flats in urban areas with job openings, rent-indebtedness, heating, water or electricity supplies cut off to debtors' households as well as their neighbours in the apartments blocks) there is not much debate about housing in Slovakia. Housing is perceived traditionally as a matter of individual responsibility and individual house-building as the demonstration (and obligation) of proper 'manhood'. However, the main culprit in the difficulty of addressing housing issues is missing 'data fuel': lacking information about housing demands, availability, affordability and quality at national, regional or local levels. Actually, except for once every 10 years (as population and housing censuses are held every decade) there is no monitoring of the housing situation. Services providers related to housing do not have any duty to report to the public authorities in the cases where electricity, heating or water supply is cut off. No Governmental level or body is charged with collecting current information on housing which it does not own. The monitoring of cases where services (heating, water or electricity) have been cut off, or the possibility that children might be hit by cut-offs and deprived in this way, does not exist. Housing issues only draw mass media attention when there are casualties or bizarre situations occurring as was the case in February and March 2007, when supplies of hot water and heating for 22 blocks of flats, the municipal council, the health centre and two elementary schools in the town of Čierna nad Tisou were cut off for two weeks by a private supplier because of mounting debts on payments. The town municipality did not have the resources to repay the debts that some households had accumulated over a few years and they did not protect inhabitants (at least pupils or patients) against the penalty imposed by the heating supplier²³. The purpose of news like this is more likely to warn people against making debts on rent payments than to incite some programmes to prevent similar situations from recurring. The news also makes it clear that other Governmental levels (regional, national) are not accountable for dealing with similar situations.

1.5. Extra-school activities

The statistics about children's leisure time and extra-school activities do not fully correspond with each other. However, they match in the following: firstly, that the share of children engaged in organised activities is smaller than the share of children that are not involved; and secondly, that the share of children involved in extra-curricular developmental activities considerably increased in the last three years²⁴.

According to the survey carried out by the Institute for Information and Prognosis of Education (UÍPŠ) in 2003, 15.7 % of children were regularly involved in hobby activities, but most of them conducted their hobbies by themselves or with their friends and not in school clubs or hobby centres. If we take into account official statistics, we will get a little different picture. In 2003, more than 10 % of all children under the age of 15 regularly attended leisure-time or hobby centres.

The development in the last three years is interesting. In this period, the number of leisure-time and hobby centres, as well as the number of children involved, has been growing rapidly. If there were 60 554 children under 15 years of age active regularly in organised leisure-time and hobby activities in 2003, in 2006, the total number exceeded 103 000. The difference is even larger, if we consider that the number of pupils attending primary schools in 2006 was 70 000 lower than in 2003 (decrease from 580 791 to 510 510). It means that in 2006 twice as many children regularly

²³ <http://www.cassovia.sk/korzar/archiv/clanok.php3?sub=8.3.2007/3003Z>

²⁴ *Review of Youth Policy — Slovak National Report (RYP-SNR), 2005.*

attended these centres than three years ago and the share reached almost 20 % of all elementary school pupils. The proportion of children taking part in extra-school activities of course vary regionally ²⁵.

On the other hand, some other documents such as the *Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan in Youth Policy in 2006* claim that participation in occasional leisure-time and hobby activities increased by 100 % in 2006, compared to 2005. But this argumentation is derived from the online events database, administrated by the Slovak Youth Council (Rada mládeže Slovenska). The council works on a voluntary base, hence not every event has to be registered in the database. In fact, the database recorded over 15 000 events in 2006, which is about 4 000 events less than the number recorded by ÚIPŠ ²⁶.

1.6. Children's subjective wellbeing

We are in an unfortunate position here as we have no representative data on children's subjective wellbeing in our country. Slovakia did not participate in the cross-national surveys that were analysed in the Bradshaw study, in the Unicef comparative studies or in any similar survey. We cannot therefore describe how children perceive themselves and their peers, if they feel lonely or pressured by schoolwork, etc. Naturally, as in other domains, the data gap may indicate low public importance for a given issue. It seems clear to us that subjective wellbeing of (other people's) children can hardly lay claim to public status in a society preoccupied by transferring as many issues as possible to the realm of private care and responsibility.

1.7. Risk and safety

The risk and safety study covers child mortality, risky behaviour, and experiences of violence. Child deaths (accidental and non-accidental deaths under 19 per 100 000) are the most basic indicator for children's safety. Bradshaw's study puts Slovakia on a relatively good 6th place among the first 25 EU Member States. However, there is also disturbing information in the large number of accidents with fatal injuries or permanent damages. For instance, children in Slovakia die from injuries three times more often than in Sweden. In 2004, 211 children (aged 0-19) even died from injuries. On the other hand, there were no deaths from HIV/AIDS or polio in the 0-19 category from 2001-05 in Slovakia and but one death from infectious hepatitis in 2002 and 2003 ²⁷.

Bradshaw's study on risky behaviour is constructed as a cluster of declared experiences and engagement in seven sorts of activities (from smoking to not using condoms). The Slovak Republic is in 17th position here. We do not have enough data to deal with risky behaviour comprehensively. The data on early pregnancies (Table No 7) only illustrates one form of risky behaviour and cannot be the grounds for generalising its development.

²⁵ For instance, the online regional statistics on children's involvement in after-school activities (leisure-time centres, art schools) from Nitra SGR suggest that in this region one third (33.7 %) of basic school pupils (1st -9th class) go to art schools or leisure-time centres.
<http://www.ksunitra.sk> (own calculations).

²⁶ In sharp contrast to the 100 % increase in occasional leisure-time and hobbies events in last year, the ÚIPŠ documented a decrease in events from 20 507 in 2005 to 19 720 in 2006.

²⁷ *Implementation report of the Children Action Plan 2005*, statistical information attachment.

Early pregnancies and children born to mothers under 14 are minor occurrences (35 cases or 0.064 % of all births in 2005) but they are regionally uneven: in 2005 most of the children born to young mothers were born in two eastern Slovak regions: Košice SGR (18) and Prešov (8). Births to teenage mothers (15-19 years old) represent a much more significant share of all births (Table No 7).

Table No 7
Children born to mothers of 15-19 years of age

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Number of all births | 51 136 | 50 841 | 51 713 | 53 747 | 54 430 |
| Number of births to mothers of 15-19 years of age | 4 600 | 4 543 | 4 331 | 4 194 | 4 080 |
| Share of births to young mothers in all births | 8.9 % | 8.9 % | 8.4 % | 7.8 % | 7.5 % |

Source: Implementation Report of Children Action Plan.

Table No 7 suggests a slightly positive development between 2001 and 2005: there is a small continuous decline in early pregnancies. It is interesting that eastern Slovak regions contributed unevenly to this decline. Košice SGR is the only region (of eight) in which the early pregnancy share remained the same; the drop in Prešov SGR almost reached 10 % between 2001 and 2005. It is possible to think about migration abroad, community work as well as hardships caused by the social assistance reforms as contributing to this outcome.

Data about Slovak children's experiences of violence are not included in Bradshaw' study. However, this domain deserves to be illustrated at least partially. There are two categories of data under the label of children's violent behaviour. These are: children as violence victims and children as violence perpetrators²⁸. Children criminality is worth paying attention to for various reasons that cannot be detailed here. It is necessary to mention at least the recent lowering of criminal liability from 15 to 14 years of age (Act 300/2005 Penal Code) that followed the already adopted 'three strikes and you're out' principle (Amendment of Penal Code Act. No. 171/2003) that gives the green light to life imprisonment for the third criminal act committed by a relapsing person. These kind of legal measures suggest quite a low belief in the corrective effect of punishment and remedial programmes. Such legal measures might create a danger of systematic and total exclusion of people who relapse several times possibly at a very young age.

Table No 8
Crimes committed by children under 15

| | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Violent crimes | 937 | 772 | 554 | 518 | 660 |
| <i>Out of them violent robberies</i> | 152 | 153 | 151 | 175 | 177 |
| Rapes and assaults | 90 | 85 | 73 | 100 | 79 |
| Property crimes | 2 448 | 2 763 | 2 634 | 2 103 | 2 101 |
| Other crimes | 233 | 260 | 273 | 211 | 233 |

Source: Implementation Report of Children Action Plan.

The number of children that were victims of sexual exploitation of various kinds, including trafficking and kidnapping, was far higher: in 2003 it was 719, in 2004 728 and in 2005 623 (Implementation Report, 2005).

²⁸ We are aware of the necessity to use the label of perpetrator with maximum circumspection in case of children.

In a society guided by the 'three strikes and you're out' principle it is of essential importance to recognise the significance of social work and facilitate conditions for its development. As far as legislation is concerned, social work is recognised and valued as a fundamental method of prevention. Social work with²⁹ children and young people who are 'in risk of social pathological phenomena' is coordinated by the social affairs and family branches of district labour offices. These units cooperate with local education, healthcare and culture departments as well as with the police, NGOs, etc. According to the *Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan in Youth Policy in 2003* 'social prevention was provided for 17 235 children and youths on the grounds of neglected school attendance, drug addiction, criminal activity, suspicions of being bullied and maltreated or sexually misused as well as because of a child's return from institutional care'. The social field work targeted on a child's natural surroundings was carried out in 51 888 families (*Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan in Youth Policy in 2005*). In 2006, social custody (formerly 'prevention') was provided for 21 896 children with 'behaviour disorders' and out of them 8 715 children were under 15 years of age. The most frequent reason for custody was neglected school attendance (58.1 %) and crime committed by children (30.4 %) ³⁰.

A seamier side of children wellbeing in Slovakia is the situation of children who live in so-called institutional care: in children's homes and especially in social year-long care service facilities for children with severe disabilities. Several aspects of institutional care have been criticised for quite a long time: a relatively successful one dealt with the large size of facilities that hampered individual care, privacy and family atmosphere. Such facilities are now mostly history. The present children's homes have about 40 children in average and some are almost of large family size. However, statistics classify all these types under one category of 'children homes' and this may cause a misleading interpretation of the situation.

Another serious problem is the limited variety of residential services for children (as well as adults) with severe physical and mental disabilities (daycare, weekcare centres). Also here the statistical evidence merges all types of residential centres in one category 'Social services homes'. This category accounted for 68 facilities in 2001, 65 in 2002, 68 in 2003, 73 in 2004 and 65 in 2005. This up and down fluctuation is disturbing as it violates the stability of living conditions of the most vulnerable groups.

Changing numbers are typical for many types of important social services' facilities in the recent years. For instance, in 2001 there were 28 homes for single parents, in 2002 they were 11, in 2003, 20. Such fluctuation suggests that the facilities that are expected to provide protection in critical existential moments have themselves a rather fragile project-based constitution.

1.8. Civic participation

Bradshaw's study puts Slovakia in 9th position out of 18 EU countries. The scale is made from a combination of reported involvement in two or more civic activities and declared interest in politics. Here, it would be pertinent to base Bradshaw's findings in statistics on children's participation in civic organisations and first-time voters' turnout. However, such accomplishment is beyond our capacity. Available data is very scattered and fragmented. For instance, in compliance with EU regulations, the Ministry of Education has recently launched a grant scheme for programmes of pupil boards and youth boards in municipalities. Up until now, only a little

²⁹ The Slovak administration still uses the formulation 'social work aimed at'.

³⁰ Annual report on social and legal protection of children for the year 2006 (internal material of H-LSAF sent to author under the request).

information has appeared in the press. For instance, in Košice SGR pupils' boards and youth boards are reported to work in 53 schools and 2 student hostels, that is in 62 % of secondary education facilities. Information about their mission and how (if at all) the issue of social exclusion is set on their agenda is lacking.

Section 2. Description and assessment of the overall framework for coordinating and developing policies to prevent and alleviate child poverty and to promote children's wellbeing

The inventory of policy documents on children's wellbeing is quite extensive. The Slovak Republic questionnaire on monitoring child wellbeing (Molsaf, 2007) lists them exhaustively. There are various so-called framing documents that set off regular reporting on their objectives' fulfilments. However, though reporting rituals engage many institutions and experts and use up a lot of time, they seem to have formed a sort of autonomous sphere without substantial impact on the domain to which they refer.

Though strategic documents are now more time-sensitive and include concrete indicators and commitments, there are still plenty of objectives that are rather wishful thinking. There is often a lack of differentiation among items, for instance: those that are already implemented and those that are on a very remote political horizon; those with different coverage or scope (small pilot programmes or nation-wide rules?); and those with the secured budgetary backing and those that are hoped to get backing via structural funds.

2.1. Policy framework

Like elsewhere, the Governmental priorities are, on the one hand, economic growth and competitiveness, and on the other, reducing the budget deficit. It seems that the Government's political orientation does not make a difference: saving public expenditure continues to be the fundamental priority. No matter how eloquent the strategic policy documents on combating child poverty are, the imperative to save has led to pruning back. At present, the Prime Minister states that the Government's permanent priority is to reduce expenditure in every domain of the public sector by 20 %. This claim concerns all Governmental levels and institutions connected to the State budget, including old people's homes, social services facilities for children, pedagogical-psychological counselling centres and other institutions. No matter what the objectives are, which priorities and targets of the fight against child poverty and exclusion are elaborated, spending is the priority and must have the last word.

With necessary simplification, we can say that the rights that are the most influential and defended in policy-making are children's rights to a family, to be healthy and educated³¹. There are various programmes aiming to secure these rights and to equalise children's chances for educational development, health and their growing up in a family.

³¹ However, the Slovak Government frames the right to education, similarly to Mary Daly's observation of the Lisbon process, 'not in terms of protection of social rights but in terms of investment in productive capacities especially in the human capital endowments' (Daly, 2006: 470).

The 'National action plan on social inclusion 2006-08' (further, the action plan) is the most important recent policy document aimed at children's wellbeing. The action plan comprises the policy objectives, priorities and targets related to combating child poverty and social exclusion in the most condensed way. One of four priority objectives in the action plan is 'to reduce poverty of children and to resolve the inter-generation reproduction of poverty by preventive measures and by support of families with children.' Reduction of children poverty and prevention of its generational transmission is also presented as the key priority of the Slovak Government³². As the word poverty is associated with explicit material deprivation and exclusion, the commitment is understood as dedicated mainly to Roma communities.

The Slovak questionnaire on child wellbeing policies (Molsaf, 2007) offers a wide-ranging list of strategic documents approved during the last decade and describes their objectives and targets. The list is voluminous, but as the content of many documents replicate one another³³ their synergic effect is lower than might have been expected. The list starts in the year 2001, when the Government adopted a document on youth policy strategy that was inspired by the white paper on youth, adopted by the European Commission in the same year. This document was intended to set the Slovak youth policy into the European context. As in the more recent documents, learning and education (and all their kinds and forms) appeared to be the core and the main concern.

Education is considered to be the most efficient anti-poverty programme in the long run and crucial for labour market access. Generally it has now been accepted that poverty and social exclusion are multidimensional phenomena. The SP/SI report 2006 and especially the action plan 2006-08 emphasise the necessity of multidimensional and comprehensive policy and present the intent to combine various mutually reinforcing programmes. Their core and focus is the education of children from low income families (households in material need). On a practical level, the SP/SI report tackles poverty of children first of all by improving their access to education and this is considered to be the way to jointly pursue the aims of economic growth and social cohesion.

Educational policy is presented as the key tool to prevent intergenerational poverty. Its measures to ensure equal access to quality education start with preschool education. Subsidies for jobless parents caring for a child and taking part in education for the labour market, tax relief for working parents³⁴, child allowance preconditioned by a child's regular school attendance, the school subsidies system for children from poor families (food, school utilities, motivational contribution or scholarships³⁵) and the commitments to substantially improve access to preschool education are interconnected measures that are believed to improve the chances of children to get on well at school. The composition of this system seems to be precisely focused, however, such a system of assistance for low-income families almost overtly preconditions alleviation of children poverty by children's motivation and the motivation of parents to ensure their children's school attendance

³² 2006-10 Government manifesto of the Slovak Republic, p.12.

³³ For instance, the 'National action plan of the Slovak Republic for the decade of Roma inclusion 2005-15' replicates the strategy and tools of the NAP inclusion 2004-06, and it seems not to offer any additional measures to cope with social exclusion of Roma in Slovakia. (*Kusá-Kvapilová Monitoring Report, 2005*)

³⁴ Both the tax reform and the social assistance reform were justified by the 'make work pay' principle. The social assistance reform (2004) detached the benefit system from the subsistence minimum. The tax reform (2004) has instituted tax reliefs for employees such as reduction of tax base for the taxpayer and non-working wife and a flat rate tax bonus for each child. Before the tax reform, the tax base deduction for a taxpayer was EUR 960 and for EUR 300 a non-working wife, after the reform tax base deduction increased to EUR 2 021 for both spouses. Tax reform has replaced the former tax deduction for a child (EUR 420) by a monthly EUR 10 tax bonus for each child (EUR 120 per year). Only those who are in employment however, have been entitled to a tax bonus. Since 2007 pensioners raising children are given financial compensation of the same amount.

³⁵ Scholarship is also preconditioned by school attendance: it is cut for the weeks when pupils miss school.

and efforts in learning. At the same time, financial contributions of individual measures are very modest and even if all available benefits are combined, their overall amount oscillates around — or slightly above — the minimum subsistence that suffices to protect children from the severest material deprivation (for instance, without having meals in schools, many Roma children would actually starve). But it is not enough to secure them adequate conditions for education, leisure and personal development. The Government plans to reevaluate the composition of minimum subsistence in order to ‘better correspond to actual life requirements’ (the SP/SI report 2006).

The SP/SI report recognises generally insufficient access to social services and is pledging to increase availability, quality, higher variability of their provision (social-legal protection and social curatorship, social work on the spot, community work, and other integration activities) and to elaborate measures for social and legal protection of children and social custody (curatorship) as a key tool for addressing this priority. Measures that should even increase the accessibility of housing for low-earning and vulnerable groups are also mentioned. These commitments are backed by the promises of drawing on structural funds, which make them more likely.

Continuous effort to elaborate the legislative framework to harmonise domestic legislature concerning children with all international children’s rights documents and declarations is independent of the austerity measures that influence everyday life in many sectors of society. This effort should be appreciated: there are hardly any international documents concerning children’s rights that Slovakia would forget to incorporate it its legal order³⁶. Proper attention is also given to the institutional framework of protecting children’s rights. The crucial law here is Act No. 305/2005 b. c. Coll. on socio-legal protection of children and social custody (curatorship). The act sets the legal foundation for protection of children in Slovakia and helps ‘to transcend departmentally limited views on care for children’ (‘National action plan on inclusion’, NAP inclusion 2004–06). The important mission of the act is the promotion of wellbeing of children in institutional care, as it facilitates the transformation of institutional dormitory-type care into family-type care. The act also regulates social field work and ‘widens space for caring for endangered and disadvantaged children in their natural family setting’ (ibid). On the other hand, the practical execution of law is made more difficult because of the lack of resources and understaffed social work, and because the sanctions for not warranted entitlements are less elaborated, vague or even missing.

2.1.1. Balance between a universal and targeted approach

First of all, the question of balance between universal and targeted social policy has not been articulated enough in the last decade. Though child allowance was given back its universal nature by Act No 600/2003 Coll. on child allowance, the residual approach to social policy has prevailed. Targeting has continued to be a social policy catchword and put forth as an inherent principle of social policy. It can be said that the universal approach has hardly got any advocates, as since 1990 the hallmark of the new generation of social policy scholars has become to lecture about targeting and to disparage the universal approach as being dissipation of public resources and a state-socialist residuum.

³⁶ However, the Slovak Republic has not yet signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Act No. 600/2003 cancelled both the progressiveness of allowance in respect to a child's age and the supplements for a child continuing in education that were set by Act No. 281/2002 b. c. Coll., and it has set the same amount for each child. Since January 2004, child allowance is universal, non mean-tested, and the most extensive State social support. It amounts to one tenth of minimum subsistence, which is now SKK 540 (EUR 16.4) monthly. The sum is very modest to be valued as efficient support. In 2005, child allowance was paid to 756 000 persons for 1 313 000 children in average. In total SKK 8.7 billion were paid for children allowance³⁷. In spite of universality, the provisions have become stricter: if a child does not attend school regularly, payment of child allowance can be suspended and sent to the account of a 'special receiver' (usually the municipality) instead of parents, who then uses the money for the benefit of the child. In 2003, children allowance for 1 858 children in average went to municipality accounts. In 2005, the number of children whose allowances were sent to a special receiver increased to 6 840 children³⁸.

Solidarity with families with children has been enhanced by setting up the contribution on the birth of the first child (SKK 11 000), that supplements the universal child birth contribution and the children allowance system since January 2007.

The social assistance reforms of 1998, 2002, and 2003 elaborated the residual model of social welfare. Efforts to make targeting more efficient were associated with the aim to protect the social assistance system against purported parasitism and misuse.

However, as it has been often observed elsewhere, a targeted approach provokes divisions and tensions not only among tax-payers and people on benefits, but also among entitled and not entitled poor people. Our recent study of school experiences of Roma families suggests that targeted programmes in schools (provision of food, school utilities and scholarships) could strengthen divisions in schools and lead to stigmatisation and segregation of children covered by the programme (Kusá, 2007). Therefore it is crucial to acknowledge some universal elements that were built into the school meals/supplies programme and that were widened recently (see section 2.2. of this report).

2.1.2. Children's rights versus family rights focus

The focus on children rights and focus on the family overlap considerably everywhere. In Slovakia, 'natural' family and parenthood is considered the institution of supreme value and the right of children to grow up in an emotionally warm and stable family surrounding is put above the right of children to live in materially secured conditions. Since Act 36/2005 on family b. c. Coll. became effective, inadequate housing conditions and the bad economic situation of households cannot justify taking children away (§ 54 section 2 of Act 36/2005). In § 3, the act determines that

³⁷ Smaller universal subsidy is paid for the birth of a child or children. Since September 2005 it is SKK 4 460 for one child and the amount is increased (but not multiplied) if more children are born at once. Since 1 January 2007, the first child is given extra SKK 11 000 birth allowance. The eligibility for the 'first child' allowance is preconditioned by the age of mother: mothers younger than 18 years of age and not having parental rights acknowledged by a court are not eligible for this allowance. The court will not grant parental rights to a mother that has not reached 16 years of age. The allowance will also not be given to mothers who gave birth to their child outside Slovakia and were not insured for 12 months.

³⁸ *Správa o sociálnej situácii obyvateľstva SR v roku 2005*, MPSVR, March 2006.

society provides parenthood ‘... mainly by material assistance to parents’³⁹. Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on socio-legal protection of children and social custody widens the scope of the ways to assist families and children together and also individually. On the other hand, families are expected to bear more responsibility in caring for their disadvantaged members and reciprocal help of children and parents is expected.

Family focus has been strengthened by Act No. 599/2003 Coll. on assistance in material need, that defines the household as the target of social assistance more widely than before. For instance, young adults up to 25 years of age who continue to live in their parents’ household are no longer considered as independent ‘units’ but the benefit calculation counts them as household members. This means that their income is calculated as household income and if it increases, parents’ benefits are cut. Though the wording in Act § 5, section 2 (c) could indicate that common calculation only goes for jobless or low-income young adults, ‘young people less than 25 years of age are assessed together with their parents *only in case they live with their parents and they have no income or their income is less than a minimum wage*’ (italics ZK). The assessment practice is not so unambiguous. Labour offices tend to interpret this wording with reference to § 115 of the civil code (definition of household) and to § 64 of Act No. 36/2005 Coll. on family. They read it as the substantiation of assessing together all family members who have the same permanent residence for the sake of calculation of benefits⁴⁰. The superiority of the family focus is maximal here, as are the barriers to young people’s chances of becoming independent.

Moreover the act does not consider the individual existence of the child as for the sake of benefit calculation. It recognises only three sub-groups of children: no children; from one to four children; and more than four children (in § 10 section 2).

On the other hand, the programmes for school meals, scholarship and school utilities are individually oriented. Social scholarship is scaled by a pupil’s school marks. However, if the financial situation of the family improves slightly, children lose their entitlement. Since the entitlement threshold is set very low, children can lose the entitlement for scholarship not only in the case of one of their parents getting a job but also after a household member gets a disability pension or after the birth of a sibling and drawing parental benefit. In these situations, the loss of social scholarships by good pupils is experienced as ‘clear injustice’⁴¹.

³⁹ Material assistance is rendered specific in § 113 that refers to the acts regulating State support provisions such as child allowance, birth benefits and parental benefits. Since September 2006, parental benefit has increased from SKK 4 230 to SKK 4 440 monthly (above EUR 138).

⁴⁰ It follows from the reading of Act No. 599/2003 made by the headquarters of LSAF (H-LSAF) on that matter in FAQ (http://www.upsvarmi.sk/dok/otazky_odpovede.pdf), that in the assessment practice for cases of benefits in material need, labour offices tend to rely on alimentary duties of all adult children (whatever their income) if they share the household with their jobless parents. H-LSAF suggests that the crucial element is the explanation of ‘living together’ (§ 115 of the Civil Code allows for a broad definition of household member) and ‘mutual alimentary obligation of children and parents’ set by Act No. 36/2005 on family: according to § 43 section 2 of the act: ‘if children live in their parents’ household, they are required to take part on common needs of family and contribute to cover family needs according to their abilities and possibilities’. § 66 of the act sets that ‘children that are able to provide for themselves are obliged to provide appropriately for their parents if they need it’.

⁴¹ Focus groups surveys done in 18 municipalities of Banská Bystrica SGR collected various complains about injustice in scholarships and school meal programmes: ‘Well... why is that scholarship not intended to all children? Why does it not matter how well children are doing in school? My daughter reads well, counts well, she knows everything. She received a SKK 200 (scholarship) but now she gets nothing because I am on parental leave!’ (FG Rimavská Seč). It would not be fair to use this example to suggest that the regulation is totally insensitive. According to the Ministry of LSAF, ‘even in case a family is not longer eligible for the assistance in material need or its income is higher than the subsistence minimum level for the whole family, the child is eligible for receiving subsidies till the end of a school year’ (Molsaf comments, 2007).

2.1.3. Effectiveness of arrangements for mainstreaming the issue of child poverty and wellbeing in national policy

Mainstreaming and coordination of social inclusion programmes belong to the shortcomings of policy-making in Slovakia. Lacking coordination seems to be the penalty for long-term satisfaction with simplified criticism of central Government and State administration that was fuelled by mass-media as well as academy. Centralism and State governance (similarly to welfare universalism) were considered to be the hindrance to 'a better performing welfare system'. It was also believed that the transfer of competences from central to lower levels of governance would be more sensitive to people and their needs and, of course, would secure savings on social spending.

However, the experiences with decentralisation are often just opposite: coordination competences are frequently formal, individual levels are not coordinated, the obligations of mutual informing do not exist⁴². In situations of financial constrain, all levels of governance (central, regional, municipal) tend to economise on their budget and to shift responsibility to another level, eventually at the detriment of families. Privatisation of some services and non-existent duties of data collection contribute to the situation of complete oblivion about some issues. Lacking housing is an example of it.

2.2. Analysis of main policies

2.2.1. Access to (quality) employment

Strategic documents recognise the necessity to reduce barriers in employing persons who care for children, first of all parents with children and mainly women⁴³. They generally promise to increase support to young families and promote harmonisation in work and family life. As already mentioned, families of working parents are supported by tax bonuses that were introduced in 2004 simultaneously with flat income tax and flat VAT (19 %). Since 2007, pensioners raising children are entitled to the child tax bonus originally designed for working parents only, by the increase of child allowance.

Various measures were launched in recent years to improve the position of parents with small children on the labour market. The employment act was recently amended and 'parents after parental leave' were put on the list of disadvantaged groups. The amendment opens the possibility of covering travel, education and childcare expenses of jobseekers that cared for children before they enter educational programmes or get a job. The important measure that simplifies parents' return to work and harmonises childcare and work is parental contribution⁴⁴. This belongs to one parent of a child up to three years old, irrespective of their employment status, provided they care 'properly' for a child, or if they organise childcare in a child daycare facility or individual care. If children are cared for by a nanny or a grandparent, the authorities do not require any proof of qualification or licence of a carer, and do not even need to register these persons as carers. However, if parents place their child in a kindergarten subsidised from public

⁴² Fresh experience of Bratislava SGR deserves to be mentioned. As SGR are charged to coordinate the social protection of their territory, Bratislava SGR requested all of its 86 municipalities to send information about the social services provided. Only 26 municipalities delivered the requested information. The SGR has neither the tools to sanction and nor resources to motivate municipalities to fulfil their information duties. (Sources: Bratislava SGR meeting on social services development, 15 May 2007).

⁴³ The Slovak Republic has one of the lowest employment rates for women with children under the age of 6.

⁴⁴ The paternal benefit amount is SKK 4 440 a month since 1 September 2006. In 2005, 131 000 persons took the parental contribution. More than 3 000 fathers were among them. The total sum spent for paying parental contribution was SKK 6.5 billion.

resources, they lose parental contribution. This means that parental contribution rather favours an informal and less professional care for children.

2.2.2. *Social protection benefits and tax benefits*

The social assistance reform (Act No. 599/2003 b. c. Coll. on assistance in material need) launched a new calculation of cash benefits that sets up six fixed amounts of basic benefits for six categories of households. The categorisation distinguishes between single adults and couples as well as between three groups of households according to the number of children: a household with no children; a household with one to three children and a household with four and more children. Each category is given a uniform amount of benefit irrespective of the number of children. The category 'adult couple with four or more children' was entitled originally to SKK 10 050 of basic benefit. Social assistance benefits are significantly lower than the risk of poverty line⁴⁵ and do not overpass the subsistence minimum line that is the national indicator of poverty. The 2006-10 Government manifesto declares that the subsistence minimum will be reevaluated so that this 'essential institution would correspond to the actual fundamental needs of life, and at the same time could represent an efficient tool in resolving situations that require financial intervention' (Programové..., 2006).

An important protective institution for children from single parent families is substitutive (compensatory) alimony. This protective benefit was not provided under State socialism and single parents had been claiming it to no avail since the very beginning of the 1990s. Legal arrangement of the substitutive alimony provision is secured by the substitutive alimony Act No. 452/2004 that has been in force since January 2005. The act was de facto passed a second time, since the first act on substitutive alimony (2002) was abolished after only one month of having been in force as it was considered by the second Dzurinda Government 'not to be systemic enough and supporting irresponsible parents'⁴⁶. Substitutive alimony is provided by the State through local labour and family offices for securing subsistence of entitled persons in case those who have alimentary duty did not pay for it⁴⁷. Claimants have to submit the court (executor) evidence that they judicially demanded the alimony payments for at least three months. In the first half of 2006, there were 3 174 substitutive alimony takers and alimony was provided to 4 476 children on average.

The social insurance Act No. 461/2003 puts a major part of social protection and support on the principle basis of meritocracy. It secures 'consistent relation between the former income of which insurance was paid and the amount of benefit'. Orphan pension was also set up on the insurance principle. This means that if deceased parents did not pay insurance for a mandatory period, their orphans cannot claim orphan pension. The public defender of rights for the Slovak Republic repeatedly pointed to the severity of the social insurance Act in sustaining the claim for pension

⁴⁵ Maximum material need benefits for 'the adult couple with four or more children' category hardly reached 71 % of the at-risk-of-poverty line calculated on the basis of EU-SILC 2004 data (Sociálna situácia, 2006..., p.95, Table No. 32).

⁴⁶ Gonda – Dostál, 'Sociálna Politika', in *Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*, IVO, Bratislava, 2003.

⁴⁷ In September 2006 the protection of children from lone parent families with a dodger (runner) parent was improved by the amendment to the Act on execution. The Execution Act that was in force was very ambiguous on the issue of financial provision of substitutive alimony. The act states that the execution costs of alimony enforcing will be covered by the State but it was not determined who will represent the State in the alimony execution process. The amendment of September 2006 designated the Ministry of Justice with the financial provision of the execution process (National Council, September 2006).

(old-age, invalid, or orphan) ⁴⁸. However, his criticism has not succeeded to initiate amending of the act.

An important trend is increasing direct financial contributions within the system of State social benefits. The 2006-10 Government manifesto pledges a gradual increase of parental contribution to ensure in 'the long term' that the contribution would be able to compensate — at least at a minimum level — for the loss of the breadwinning parent's income. It is likely that pricing childcare at least on the minimum wage level can substantially contribute to decreasing child poverty. Though parental contribution is not gender-dependent and caring parents are paid pension insurance from the public budget since 2006, there are however critical voices that this support would keep women caring for children away from the labour market and contribute to poverty of women in senior age.

2.2.3. *Subsidised services (e.g. free school meals, holidays)*

The school meals and school utilities programme for children from households in material need, already mentioned several times, was introduced in 2004 with a slight delay after the cuts in social benefits. In 2005, targeted subsidies for the pupils of basic and special schools were provided in the following way:

- school utilities: in the second half of the 2005 school year, they were granted to 64 673 children (10.9 % of all pupils of elementary schools);
- subsidies for food for children in material need in kindergartens, elementary and special elementary schools were provided monthly to 80 900 children. They covered 11 % of all pupils of elementary schools, special elementary schools and kindergartens.

The subsidised school meals and school utilities seem to have become the continuous poverty alleviating programme. Subsidies provided to younger children from low-income families at kindergartens and primary schools (subsidies for school meals, subsidies for school utilities and social scholarship) are paid from the State budget. The entitlement to this targeted support is based on household income tests or on the percentage of pupils from households in material need situation in given school and — in the case of scholarships — on a pupil's performances. Since January 2006, the eligibility has been extended to all pupils in schools where 50 % of them come from families on material need benefits. Since this time all children from low-income families (judged by minimum subsistence line) are eligible for this subsidy. That means that now not only children from families in material need benefit are recipients but also children from families of pensioners and working poor are supported. However, as we have suggested in 2.1.1., the eligibility criteria are still very strict (minimum subsistence is set as eligibility line) and children are excluded from the programme as soon as the family's economic situation slightly improves (even though the exclusion is postponed to next school year). Therefore it would be apposite to recommend mitigating eligibility criteria further and making them less dependent on (temporarily fluctuating) household income. Making the programme more universal would not only diminish

⁴⁸ The ombudsman presents the case of the widow with three children whose claim for widow pension (and her children to orphan pension) was refused because her deceased disabled husband did not work enough and did not fulfill the condition of the entitlement for invalid pension till his death. According to the new rules, a policyholder should pay social insurance for at least five years during the ten years before the pension to meet the conditions for entitlement for invalid pension.

the risk of children's stigmatisation by associating them with relief programmes for poor, but would also halt the increasing feeling of injustice and malice observed among various groups of poor people.

Subsidised holidays are provided by leisure-time and hobby centres, children organisations and charity organisations. Subsidies can be obtained from public resources (the Ministry of Education grant schemes, support of municipalities) or various charitable endowments and private sponsors. The statistics about the number of children having participated in subsidised vacations are not available. The only information at hand pertains to the decline in numbers of summer camps organised by the leisure-time centres subsidised by the Ministry of Education: there were 862 summer camps organised in the 2000/01 school year, 835 in 2001/02, in 788 2003/04 and only 703 in 2004/05⁴⁹. Though it is necessary to take into account that the number of pupils in elementary schools declined during the given period, the number of pupils dropped by 15 % while the number of organised summer camps declined by 18 %.

2.2.4. Housing

In section 1.4. we have already suggested that problems with access to affordable housing are widespread but hidden. Slovakia might be introduced as an example of deficient housing policy or, more precisely, non-policy. The housing sector was strongly subsidised under State socialism and inhabitants in general lacked resources to afford housing after the transition. 'Further exacerbating this problem in this country is the fact that clear responsibilities for public services and public spaces are missing' (WHO, 2001)⁵⁰. Only about 3 % of houses and apartments are now available for rent⁵¹.

Costly housing services (especially heating, electricity, gas and water supplies), whose prices doubled after the deregulation in 2001-02, put economic pressure on a large part of households⁵². Outstanding rent (electricity, water supplies) arrears are of course known for individual households and by individual service suppliers. There is no institution charged with collecting such information. There are not even municipal statistics available on the number of residential households that do not pay rent or electricity supplies regularly and have their heating or electricity cut off, if they are not renting municipal housing. Numbers of apartments dwelled by their owners and with heating or electricity cut off are not surveyed (the number of children living under such conditions is then unknown). However, we can suppose that the number could be substantial as in the last decades many municipalities were engaged in cheap sales of municipal apartments to their tenants (for instance, in Rimavská Sobota, municipal apartments were sold to local Roma for SKK 1 per apartment). This seemingly generous policy relieved municipalities of future obligations linked to apartment maintenance, dealing with possible debts, as well as dealing with situations like heating being cut off.

Even municipal apartments built with the assistance of subsidised loans from the Housing Development Fund that are assigned to low-income households are not affordable for designated users: families on social assistance have to pay disproportional rents (compared to benefits) and

⁴⁹ *The Implementation Report of the Child Action Plan (2005).*

⁵⁰ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_situation/docs/sso2005_healthc_anx_policy_briefs.pdf

⁵¹ Some parts of privately owned apartments are rented out, however systematic statistics on the number of apartments, lodgers or the prices for renting do not exist.

⁵² EU-SILC data in Table 2 in this report show that 38 % of Slovak households experience housing cost as a great burden.

they often end up with rent arrears. However, high amounts of rents for new apartments are preconditioned by the municipality duty to settle the loan from the Housing Development Fund over a 20-year period. In practice, this means that municipalities divide the total amount of the loan into 240 parts and include one 240th instalment of the loan into the monthly rent for an apartment.

2.2.5. *Child care*

The importance of childcare is recognised by State social benefit programmes and also stressed by the educational policy. Educationists consider that preschool education is especially important for Roma children doing well in school, as the Roma language is still not the teaching language⁵³ in Slovakia. Before 1991, 85-90 % of Roma children in Slovakia attended kindergartens but at the end of the 1990s their number fell rapidly.

The objective of increasing the number of children educated in kindergartens and to balance the differences in level of participation of children is presented among the most important targets of NAP inclusion 2006-08. This target has already been set as priority 7 in the 'Competitiveness strategy of the Slovak Republic to the year 2010' (2005) and implemented by the call for submission of requests for subsidies provision for the establishment of a preschool facility in poor municipalities in case of positive demographic development as of 31 December 2005.

According to the implementation report of NAP inclusion (the SP/SI report), the call brought only limited response and its form should be reassessed.

The new concept in the area of preschool education following the preparation of children for their entry into primary school that followed the respective resolution of the European Commission, aimed at reaching 100 % attendance of kindergarten up to 2013. This resolution was passed by the Government as resolution No. 222 from 7 March 2007.

The concept is proposing new regulations in this area, such as shifting of kindergartens from the category 'school facilities' to the category 'schools' in the Act on training and education under preparation. It declares that the State shall financially provide for a free of charge, voluntary preschool training and education of children from the age of five years in kindergartens through reimbursement of municipalities for the monthly contribution per child. It is also announcing legislation amendment enabling the State to establish kindergartens under special conditions. Then deadline for the implementation of the concept is December 2010. As its budgetary support is far less definite, we can only value it reservedly.

⁵³ The Methodical regulation CD-2004-566/1305-1:091 concerning the increase of basic education of children and kindergartens, has been in effect since 1 March 2004.

Though teaching in the Roma language is not allowed, we can identify first steps in efforts to start teaching Roma language at secondary schools. In 2004, a first class with Roma language and history courses was opened at the Jura Hronca Gymnasium in Bratislava. However we support this project, it is not designated as a tool for removing the burdens in educational process of Roma pupils, but as a tool for increasing interest for Roma culture among future elites (this school is considered to be one of the most prominent secondary schools in Slovakia).

2.2.6. Education

Removing the barriers to the access to education is formally recognised as being of supreme priority by the Slovak strategic documents. Though investments in education are emphasised as strategic investments, the proportion of education expenditures as the percentage of GNP does not indicate this. Similarly, the impression of its policy significance is marred by underpaid teachers⁵⁴ and overcrowded classes⁵⁵.

We have already dealt here with scholarships for children in material need as the important motivating tool for securing the access to education. Scholarships for pupils who attend elementary schools and special elementary schools are funded from the State budget. Scholarships for secondary school students whose parents are dependent on material needs benefits were funded from the ESF in the framework of the 'Human Resources' operative programme over the June 2004 to June 2006 period. The amount of a social scholarship depends on a pupil's school results or their proven effort to improve. It varies from SKK 600 (about EUR 18) to SKK 1 200 (about EUR 36) monthly. Up to the 2006/07 school-year, secondary school scholarships were provided only to pupils from families registered as assistance in material need takers. Now all students from families with income under the minimum subsistence level are eligible for scholarships provided they have good school results. The sum is modest and often serves for covering travelling costs since all students have reduced transport rates. The student's fare remains a big expense for jobless families⁵⁶.

There are also other barriers to accessing to education. A lingering and serious problem is that Roma pupils (children from segregated settlements and unfavourable social and economic conditions) are markedly over-represented in special basic schools for pupils with learning or behavioural difficulties. There has been much evidence that placing of Roma children in special schools was made without reviewing and re-assessing child development and there are failures in the interpretation and application of legal norms that regulate educational integration (National report, 2005).

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) report suggests that in spite of many surveys, projects, experiments, and of the 'Slovak national action plan for Roma inclusion — a decade of Roma inclusion' which aims to 'cut down the number of Roma children attending special elementary schools and special training facilities', the action plan does not provide any mechanisms by which this goal should be achieved, unlike other areas covered by the action plan for which it provides neither tools nor instruments to achieve the goals (ERRC, 2007: 22).

⁵⁴ Mr Mikolaj, the Minister of Education, submitted a concept of career development of educators that includes the intention to increase the salaries of teachers to SKK 36 000 (EUR 1 090) on average till 2013 under the condition that 3 000 teachers leave the education system. (*Pravda*, 12 April 2007). In 2005, there were 34 914 teachers at basic schools (1st – 9th classes) with an average of 21.3 pupils per class and 7 568 teachers at secondary schools with an average of 29.2 students in class (*Social Trends in the Slovak Republic 2006*).

⁵⁵ A recently publicised case of an overcrowded school in the village of Jarovnice and failing alternatives of getting places for 400 'redundant pupils' — refusals by school headquarters as well as municipalities of the nearby town of Prešov to admit Jarovnice Roma pupils to their schools, missing resources for school buses, etc. (see http://www.presov.sk/article.php?i_id_article=6540) — aptly illustrate the general lack of resources on the one hand and disputably arranged responsibility among governance levels on the other. The case also reflects strong anti-Roma prejudices and unwillingness to take on someone else's problems.

⁵⁶ Support can be provided by the higher territorial units. There is the example of Košice SGR, that implemented the project to support the accessibility of secondary education for children from disadvantaged social environments from 1 April 2005 to 1 June 2006. The support is, however, irregular and temporary.

It is necessary to mention that the Act No.597/2003 on financing school facilities that came into force in January 2004 was also intended as the tool promoting Roma children's integration. According to this regulation, financial support is now dependent on the number of pupils attending school facilities, including leisure-time and hobby centres. This is called the normative subsidy and its main aim was to 'increase competitiveness and quality of school facilities and training centres'⁵⁷. Normative subsidy has also been intended as the tool for integration. Mainstream schools are entitled to receive 250 % of the standard normative subsidy for a child with special educational needs. The normative for a child in a special primary school is however also very high — it is 200 % of the standard and for special boarding schools it is 500 % of the standard. In ERRC's view, this fact diminishes the potential of the integration incentive and though Slovak educational authorities have acknowledged the fact that many Roma children are misplaced in special schools, legal regulations do not envisage higher normative funding for integrating children in standard schools without mental disability who have been misplaced in special schools (ERRC, 2007: 47).

Simultaneously the Research Institute of Child Psychology and Pathologic Psychology has been testing new diagnostic methods to achieve greater objectivity in the process of evaluating Roma children in the early levels of special primary-level education and their abilities during enrolling in school. In the framework of the 'Phare 2002' project, so-called transition classes were established with the aim of preparing the ill-diagnosed Roma children to transfer from special schools to mainstream school facilities⁵⁸. The recent monitoring of the pilot programme suggest that the sticking point of the Roma pupils' integration can be the lack of cooperation among special schools and mainstream schools as well as among teachers and parents.⁵⁹ Under the present model of school facilities financing, that forces every school to struggle for the largest number of pupils as possible, it seems highly problematic to find common interest that would go beyond particularistic interests.

Another tool to facilitate integration of Roma pupils into a mainstream educational system are the so-called 'zeroth classes' and 'teacher's assistant'⁶⁰. A zeroth class is an integral part of

⁵⁷ On the other hand, some critics argue that in practice, the main goal of the schools and centres would be to attract as many pupils as possible and quantity, not quality, might become the main aim of the school directors and other decision-makers. Even though, this is a serious objection, no surveys have been carried out to prove or disprove it.

⁵⁸ In the framework of sustainability of the 'Phare 2002' project, the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic issued Regulation No. 11/2006-R from 25 May 2006 which provides for the establishment of specialised classes as the result of the above mentioned project, under condition of a primary school. At the same time on 19 June 2006, the Ministry of Education approved the experimental testing of the project called 'Transitive classes in the primary schools' that is going to be in effect from 1 August 2006 to 31 August 2008.

⁵⁹ The project 'Integration of Roma children in to regular schools' run by the Pedagogical Research Centre has revealed that parents themselves sometime insist on placing children into special school. They have several reasons for that: they are themselves special school graduates; they already have their older children there and want them helping with the younger child going to school; they like the partnership approach of school to children; school is attended by many other Roma children and their children will have many friends there; children have good results in special school easily and are not forced to work hard. They also say that their children will not manage to get a job even if they attend regular school and that is why there is no reason to demand too much of the child. The greatest problem is seen, however, not in parents' opinions but in children's irregular school attendance and the selection of children for so-called transitive classes. (National Report..., 2005, p. 17.)

<http://www.rozhlady.pedagog.sk/cisla/pr3-2005.pdf>

⁶⁰ Act No. 408/2002 introduces 'the profession of teacher assistant being the profession of a pedagogical employee, whereby the position was intended for kindergarten, primary school and special primary school. The teacher assistant is a pedagogical employee, active in the training and education process in schools and preschool facilities. He/she also participates in the creation of conditions necessary for the overcoming of

elementary school aimed at six-year-old children from socially disadvantaged areas who are not ready to cope with the first class curriculum because of social and language barriers. At the beginning of the 2006/07 school year, there were 2 301 children placed in 187 zeroth classes, which is around 4 % of the total population of 6 year olds. The programme is optional, which explains the low number of children placed in zeroth classes.

The teacher assistants programme is intended to lessen language, spatial and other barriers to integration of disadvantaged children in mainstream elementary schools. Setting up the teacher assistants for pupils with a health disability does not depend on a specific number of pupils, but on the severity of pupil disability. In the case of socially disadvantaged children, the recommended number of pupils is 20 for one teacher assistant. This ratio is not very favourable if we take into account that 17 pupils is now the minimum number for setting up a class. At the present time, 711 teacher assistants are working in elementary schools. We can thus estimate that teacher assistants take care of approximately 14 000 pupils, which cover less than 3 % of the total elementary school population.

2.2.7. Health

Free health care is granted universally except for dental treatment that is mostly charged for (with the exception of preventive examinations). The recent comparative study on the social situation in the EU states that in Slovakia, there is general commitment to health equity across Government, yet no formal coordination mechanism⁶¹. The substance of this assessment is not clear enough. Coordination of healthcare in the framework of the Ministry of Health is traditionally a well-elaborated departmental domain. In Slovakia, all children have health insurance paid by the State. Special methodical guidance of the general care of children and youth is executed by the Ministry of Health's section of general care for children and by the Ministry's main expert in this field in cooperation with regional main specialists. Regional specialists cooperate closely with main surgeons of self-Government regions, the Slovak medical association and the Slovak association of physicians for children and youth. State health institutes operate as the monitoring framework and they guide children's collective meals at schools to fulfil a preventive role and 'to optimise the overall balance and the rational nourishment, drinking regime'⁶².

Prevention is particularly emphasised in children's healthcare. According to the Act on health order, children in the first year of life undergo nine preventive medical examinations in the paediatric surgery where they are registered. The content of healthcare for children and youth is drafted in such a way that paediatricians can provide high-quality care for 900 to 1 400 registered children⁶³.

especially language, health, and social barriers of the child in order to be able to provide for the training and education process.' (specification of the Ministry of Education given to this report).

⁶¹ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/social_situation/docs/ss02005_healthlc_report.pdf, p. 156.

⁶² <http://www.uvzsr.sk/index.html>; in the chapter 'Domain of children and youth health and hygiene', the website of the Institute has rather one-sided information about correct shoeing of children and measures of obesity.

⁶³ Preventive examinations of children three years old and above take place every two years. About 96 % of children attend these examinations. According to the Health Insurance House this is a very good level compared to Slovak adults. Nearly three quarters of the Slovak adult population do not attend preventive examinations at all though they are free of charge.

There have been emerging problems with children's healthcare from jobless families and segregated communities. Their attendance at preventive examinations is low. There are various factors for this: among them, there are minor payments at the doctor's and pharmacy and expensive public transport fares. The situation called for efforts to deal with the problem and improve availability of healthcare. As the result, since January 2006, parents of children under one year of age who are classified as being in material need receive a new monthly contribution of SKK 350 (EUR 11) preconditioned on regular paediatrician examinations. By 30 June 2006, this contribution was administered to 5 244 families. A contribution of the same amount has already been provided to pregnant women ⁶⁴.

In November 2004, 40 health assistants began their training as part of the pilot project approved in 2003 to improve Roma access to healthcare. This initiative seems to be project-based and not a regular profession.

In order to improve access to health services, the new Government has already made some practical solidarity acts in favour of low-income groups. It has abolished so-called marginal payments in healthcare introduced by the healthcare reform that hit mostly pensioners, jobless people and large families and were interpreted as a barrier to healthcare access (SKK 50 per day in hospital, SKK 20 per doctor visit and SKK 20 per receipt processing in pharmacy). The flat VAT on medicine has been decreased from 19 to 14 % since January 2007.

2.2.8. Transport

Fare prices are deregulated in Slovakia. The reduction of fare prices in the public interest is administered in several ways. In general, there is a reduction by half for pupils, students, pensioners and special professions. Further fare reductions for some categories of inhabitants can be granted by several authorities that then have to compensate the loss in revenue to carrier companies. The Ministry of Transport sets up conditions for free railway fares whereas municipalities set up conditions for free fares on local transport (where available). The reduction in prices of regional bus fares has been the responsibility of the self-Government regions, as the organisation of regional public transport became their original responsibility in 2005 ⁶⁵. Companies providing national-scale bus transport (on regional tracts) are partially subordinated to the regional regulation of the HT unit in which they have their seat. If in the last decades, children less than six years of age were admitted onto public transport free of charge throughout the country, now there are regional differences. As the central support of regional public transport cease to exist, generosity in freeing some categories of inhabitants of fare payment now depends on the economic power of the region as well on the proportion of inhabitants possibly entitled to reduced fares. As an outcome a Matthew effect ⁶⁶ is coming up: small children may travel for free on public transport only in richer regions and vice versa, children living in poor regions are charged from infancy. To take an actual case: in Bratislava, the richest part of the country,

⁶⁴ In the first half of 2006, 1 630 pregnant women on average were registered in the assistance in material need database. Their number increased by 17.9 % compared to the first half of 2005 (Správa o sociálnej situácii..., 2006).

⁶⁵ 'Original competence' means that it has to be funded from own resources and there are no subsidies or funding programmes available from the central Government for this purpose. Regional railways have been under the competence of HT Units since January 2008.

⁶⁶ The Merton (1957) concept of self-fulfilling prophecy based on Matthew 25:29: 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away'.

children under 6 years, prams with children and seniors over 70 years old can travel free of charge on public transport. On the other hand, in the poorest Prešov SGR with a 21.29 % at-risk-of-poverty rate — according to EU SILC 2005 — all children are charged. Children aged 0-6 are transported for half the fare, similarly to pupils and students up to 25 years of age. The free of charge fare is now limited to MPs, judges of the Constitutional Court, wheelchairs of disabled persons and prams of disabled children⁶⁷. Charging infants may actually create a burden for parents from distant settlements without health centres who are obliged to travel to a paediatrician for regular examinations and can be the cause of an insufficient level of immunisation in some districts.

2.2.9. *Protection of children at risk*

The Act on socio-legal protection of children and social custody already mentioned is an essential legal framework of children's rights protection. Social work aimed at children and young people who are at risk of social pathological phenomena is recognised by this Act as the crucial prevention method. It is coordinated by social affairs and family departments of district labour offices. These units cooperate with local departments of education, healthcare and culture as well as with police, municipalities, NGOs, etc. The SP/SI report promises further improvements in legislation and its implementation. It declares its intention to improve preventive measures by extending the amount of social work in natural families and open environments, by introducing additional activities in field work with biological families and by augmenting municipal participation. It also outlines widening the portfolio of public services for families that will include such areas as preschool and out-of-school facilities, parental centres, alleviation services, community centres, as well as other nice ideas. On the other hand, the SP/SI report contains but few concrete commitments with clear temporal anchoring. Moreover, most of the outlined plans concerning social work and early intervention seem to be noticeably dependent on EU structural funds.

As already mentioned, coordination and evidence of social work and custody is done by the Labour, families and social affairs offices in each district. Some overall data in this field have been presented in the first part of this report. The implementation report of the children action plan⁶⁸ admits that social work 'requires improvement of its material and technical and first of all personnel conditions'. However, the practical effect of such a statement is not clear. It has been known for a long time that social work units are understaffed and therefore their work is not so effective and efficient as it should be.

The community social work programme targets segregated Roma communities in particular. It provides first of all, counselling and advice on a large number of areas of life (employment, living conditions and housing, education, healthcare, etc.). According to NAP inclusion 2006-08, community social workers operate in 176 municipalities and to date, 600 social work-related posts have been created, with spin-offs as regards employment rate. Local authorities are obliged to provide office facilities for the administration of social work, and a certain amount of co-financing. The Ministry of LSAF has already elaborated monitoring criteria for community social work and the programme should already have been evaluated at the end of 2006.

⁶⁷ According to the SAD Humenné regulation, all children have to have a special identification card to be entitled to reduced fare. A disabled child in a pram also has to have a severely disabled person's identification card if they are to be transported free of charge.

⁶⁸ Implementation Report of the National Action Plan for Children submitted to the Government on 17 August 2005.

2.2.10. Supporting participation of children in social, cultural, recreational and sporting life

The non-formal and informal training is considered to be part of the educational-training school system. According to the Act on school facilities no. 279/1993, this training is provided by the institution of leisure-time and hobbies centres. During the 1990s, the conditions were not very favourable for developing non-formal and informal training in schools, and therefore, many facilities were cancelled. Youth policy was basically non-existent. One of the most significant reasons was a low human and financial capacity in those areas of the Ministry of Education, responsible for creating and implementing youth policy. The situation has changed in the last few years.

At the present time, the main concern of the Government in this field is the implementation of the European Youth Pact with its partial goal 'to develop frameworks to support transparency and recognition of qualifications and competences, and for validating non-formal and informal learning'.

The tasks in the domain of 'informal education of children and youth' are managed by the children and youth section of the Ministry of Education. The tasks are: preparation of conception and legislative materials; methodical governance of centres of leisure-time and school centres for hobby activities; international cooperation in the domain of children and youth; financial support for work with children and youth. The Ministry has been running several funding schemes for leisure-time centres and school centres of extracurricular activities (in compliance with Act No. 279/1993 on educational facilities, Regulation of the Ministry No. 291/1994 on leisure-time centres). Leisure-time centres and school centres for extracurricular activities create conditions for informal education and provide education. The emphasis is now also given on supporting new forms of cooperation of youth with municipalities, work with information and promoting cooperation of all stakeholders. Traditionally, support has been going to the programmes 'directed at preventing and protecting youth against socio-pathological phenomena and suppressing their negative influence'.

The important tool for fulfilling the goals of European youth policy has been Act no.597/2003 on financing school facilities that has shaped the development of leisure-time and hobbies activities by the 'voucher system' introduced. Financing of non-formal and informal training through the voucher system is based on the idea of pupils as clients who (together with their parents) are free to choose the provider of non-formal and informal training. Each pupil interested in attending any kind of training centre providing leisure-time and hobbies activities receives an educational voucher for each school year at a given price. The voucher increases the motivation of children and their parents to participate in organised leisure-time activities. Moreover, it also increases motivation for training centres. According to this act, school facilities' financial support is dependent on the number of pupils attending school facilities, including leisure-time and hobby centres. This is called normative subsidy. As mentioned above, the new act really helped increase the participation of children in non-formal and informal training⁶⁹. On the other hand, we have no reliable data, which would interpret the effects of increasing participation. More precisely, a systematic effort to collect reliable data is missing, even though it is declared in the National youth policy strategy. As a result, official documents reporting on youth policy use different data and define different outcomes.

⁶⁹ In 2003, the total number (5 507) of non-formal and informal training units was still little lower than in 1989. However, it increased to 8 915 from 2004 to 2006, presenting 62 % growth.

Because of missing reliable data, we are very limited in interpreting the policy outcomes. For example, if participation in organised training activities should be one of the means for combating child poverty and social exclusion, we would expect to have reliable data concerning the socio-economic situation of children participating in organised training activities. Unfortunately, official statistics are missing. We therefore have to rely on polls from the Institute for Information and Prognosis of Education (ÚIPŠ), which is the main institution providing educational data, with very limited human and financial resources. According to the ÚIPŠ, most children attending these centres come from well-educated and well-off families and have good grades at school. Basically polls show that participation in organised leisure-time activities is positively determined by the socio-economic position in the social structure. The higher your social position the higher your participation will be. In order to prove this outcome, systematic and longitudinal data collection based on standardised methodology should be carried out.

The Ministry of Education administers the five grant programmes that support leisure time and civic activities of children and youth, including the 'Participation of young people in municipal life' programme. In 2007, it supported the 'Each different, all the same' campaign which aimed to strengthen solidarity among young people and increasing tolerance to national, ethnic, religious, language and other minorities.

Besides developing non-formal education in leisure and hobby centres, children's playgrounds are traditionally important infrastructures for children's leisure time. Children's playgrounds are cared for and supplied by municipalities. In this field, the situation is very complicated. As a rule, low-standard housing estates and rural areas are lacking these facilities for children. However, most playgrounds are now also being abolished in relatively prosperous urban areas, because they do not conform to the strict safety rules imposed by the European Commission and the costs for building new ones are too high and out of reach of most municipalities.

Section 3. Arrangements for monitoring the implementation and impact of policies

The Slovak questionnaire on child wellbeing (Molsaf, 2007) includes outstandingly elaborated parts on the arrangements for monitoring the impact of policies and it has precisely identified ongoing weak points and proposed changes in this area. Here we could only quote some of its results.

As far as systematically collected and processed databases used in monitoring and organisations involved in monitoring are concerned, their list is rather short. Data for monitoring is provided by administrative statistical databases of the ministries and statistical surveys of the statistical office. Data from the Molsaf administrative statistical databases is collected by the offices of labour, social affairs and family (the organisation responsible for collecting data is LSAF headquarters) and the Social Development Fund. Monitoring of the children's education policy is supervised by the ÚIPŠ. The Ministry of Education characterises the ÚIPŠ as 'a purpose-bound institution of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic, the main function of which is to create information for the support of management and development of the areas, which are within the administrative competence of the Ministry of Education'⁷⁰.

⁷⁰ Formulation recommended by the Ministry of Education in comments to this report.

The Slovak National Centre for Human Rights is in charge of monitoring children's rights at a national level in Slovakia. It was established by Act Nr. 308/1993 Coll. on the establishment of the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights that entered into force in 1994. The centre is an independent legal entity that performs tasks in the area of human rights and basic freedoms, including the rights of children. In December 2005, the Government passed this alternative for securing higher efficiency in guaranteeing children rights (Government Resolution no 963/2005) instead of the favoured idea of instituting the defender of children's rights. The autonomous institution was not approved (most likely due to budgetary reasons) and postponed to 31 August 2006. It has not been placed on the Government session's programme yet.

As the Slovak questionnaire on monitoring informs, 'findings and results from monitoring are published in reports, databases or outputs that are often available to public on the websites.' The main Molsaf report from monitoring is the annual report on social situation of the population of the Slovak Republic (www.employment.gov.sk). Most of the data from administrative statistical databases of Molsaf are published on the website of the headquarters of employment, social affairs and family (www.upsvar.sk). The statistical office publishes some relevant monthly, quarterly and yearly data on the website www.statistics.sk. Data on children education are available in the annual *Statistical Yearbook of the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic* and on the website www.uips.sk administrated by the School Information and Forecast Institute. Some policy measures in this field are also monitored in the framework of reports of the European Social Fund (www.esf.gov.sk) and Social Development Fund (www.fsr.sk).

The Slovak National Centre for Human Rights prepares and publishes annual reports on the respect of human rights in the Slovak Republic. The annual reports are accessible on the www.snslp.sk⁷¹.

It is important to emphasise that the majority of institutions that are engaged in monitoring and assessing the effects of social policy programmes have been struggling with shortage of resources, cuts or stagnation in staff, not allowing them to extend the scope of research and deal with new tasks.

The Molsaf expert admits that missing relevant good quality data, especially in the area of social statistics as well as on monitoring and evaluating policies, has been a huge weakness of social policy-making until recently. The EU-SILC is valued for a significant improvement of this situation. The Molsaf expert acknowledges the unfavourable situation (understaffed research, feeble research base) and emphasises the necessity to invest in the area 'in order to carry out various analyses and monitoring policies and measures, measuring and analysing poverty, research and complex information processing, data collecting, disseminating and exchanging of best practice, predominantly in the sense of human resources development'. She informs about the plan of Molsaf to extensively support the research and monitoring areas within the new 2007-13 programming period of the European Social Fund.

Besides the obvious financial shortage and lack of staff there are other problems complicating monitoring. The Molsaf expert admits that there are difficulties identifying Roma population and Roma children in Slovakia making policy impact evaluation much more difficult. The present legal arrangement of national and ethnic rights⁷² has resulted in the withdrawal of objectivist

⁷¹ Questionnaire on monitoring child wellbeing in the Slovak republic, MOLSAF expert, Bratislava, 2007.

⁷² As is well known, the bulk of Roma do not declare their ethnicity in the census. Item 3 of article 12 of the Constitution states that 'every person has the right to freely decide which national group he or she is a member of' (exact quote from Constitution).. This can encourage the precautious interpretation of Act No. 428/2002 on the protection of personal data, which § 8 banishes the processing of special categories of personal data that

determination of ethnicity by research and statistics. Such general restraint has unexpected consequences for research and human rights observance institutions⁷³. These as well as the fact that a considerable part of the Roma live mixed among a majority population have resulted in the practice that programmes for Roma children and Roma neighbourhoods are not officially designated for Roma but they are designated for those who come from or live in a socially disadvantaged environment.

There are also further limitations on monitoring that are apparent in the context of children's rights. The National Centre for Human Rights has criticised again and again about the non-complexity of data, non-existing statistics and information duties. In spite of permanent criticism, it seems that the shift towards more extensive statistics can hardly be expected. The root of the trouble is that more extensive data collection and more elaborated indicators would also require more (administrative, research) capacities that would mean an additional burden on public expenditure, and anything requiring additional public financing is unwelcome.

The gap not only exists in the system of national indicators for complex monitoring and analysing of poverty, social exclusion and wellbeing of the children but also in the institutional base for organising social research. Academic research is fragmented, university lecturers are overloaded. Research has a rather ad hoc character, often incited by coincidental external offers (looking for partners) and therefore unknowingly overlapping. Some areas are not covered by any research.

Some fields that concern children wellbeing are traditionally well monitored and assessed. A typical example is healthcare statistics. Healthcare quality indicators comprise numbers of executed health examinations and percentages of immunized children in blanket immunisations in the Slovak Republic⁷⁴. Healthcare data are included in statistical yearbooks and other publications of the Statistical Office. However, healthcare institutions, including the Ministry of Health as the main coordinator in the field, do not have statistical sections on their websites.

On the other hand, lacking evidence and the monitoring of housing situations (apart from censuses) can only serve as a warning-off example.

There are no available regional statistics on physically disabled children and types of social services facilities, as statistical yearbooks only publish summary data which do not distinguish among year-long facilities and daycare centres. Missing data powerfully block public debate as efficient pressure cannot be exerted on public administrations without them⁷⁵.

Key ex ante assessments of public policy (law proposals, Governmental resolutions) deal with evaluating the impact of proposed policy on employment and public finances. Sustainability of a deficit at less than 3 % is the focal point of any policy. All intentions and new steps are assessed according to their impact on public finances. The 2006-10 Government manifesto pledged to launch an assessment of social and environmental impacts of every new regulation affecting the living conditions of inhabitants (p.33). However, according to our information, the work on a social impact assessment formula (household impact assessment methodology) has not yet been finalised and moreover; this task is rather marginalised not to say far from being a public issue.

reveal racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious belief, etc. This provision is not only valid in the case of informed consent of the person in question.

⁷³ *The 2005 Slovakia National Report* of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.

⁷⁴ <http://www.detskylekar.sk/zc/img/koncepcia.pdf>

⁷⁵ Our experiences with surveying the needs of vulnerable groups of the Bratislava SGR (where the field work was organised by NGOs and advocacy groups) and correspondence with Zuzana Palovičová.

3.1. Involvement of stakeholders

Here we can refer to previous parts of this report as well as to our previous reports and repeat conclusions already made: there is still a lot to do in the field of coordination and involvement of various stakeholders, of raising public awareness both about the importance of the issue as well as about themselves as stakeholders. Public service broadcasting, especially public service television has been rather passive in informing about social rights issues. Like a majority of institutions that are dependent on the public budget, public TV has very limited resources to start new programmes and widen activities. NGOs are almost in an identical situation. Organisations gathered in the Slovak anti-poverty network (SAPN) are struggling with their individual problems and do not have common resources and capacities for coordination. That is why they can hardly monitor, remind, prime or at least try to put child poverty and social exclusion on the public agenda.

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