

Phare Programme SR9813.04

# Improvement of the Situation of the Roma in the Spiš Region



**The Deputy Prime Minister of the SR Pál Csáky,  
Section of Human Rights and Minorities of the SR Government Office**



Dialogue Development

*non - profit consulting*

## **Improving the position of the Roma - towards self-reliance.**

The depths of the problems resulting in the low standard of living and quality of life among Roma in the Spiš Region, an area covering some 3.500 square kilometres in north-eastern Slovakia, are many-sided. A combination of high unemployment and social exclusion has engendered a complicated vicious circle of poverty, from which it is virtually impossible for the Roma to break. Long-term unemployment and slum-like living conditions - at times 23 kilometres from the village proper - combined with poor health, low levels of education, dependence on social benefits, and high birth rates perpetuate the Roma citizens' reliance on a society, which so openly rejects them for these and other reasons. Problems of drug abuse and of usurers (informal moneylenders) have become a serious concern in Romany communities. Debts are responsible for splitting up communities into various castes and for disproportionate distribution of power based on the monetary dependency and labour enforcement.

This bleak picture of the social and economic situation of the majority of the Roma population in Spišská Nová Ves, has become a generic issue for Europe's policy on improving the situation of the Roma people. In its endeavour to promote social integration while at the same time upholding the respect of the Roma culture by enactment of relevant European acts for Minorities' rights, the European Union through the Phare programme has initiated a series of interventions to come to terms with this situation. The situation of the Roma has become an important issue in the accession criteria to the EU for several countries. In view of the gap in the delivery of services from government organisations to the disadvantaged communities and in view of widespread social scepticism of whether intervention will work, the Slovak Government has adopted a Strategy for the solution of the problems of the Roma National Minority and the Set of Measures for its Implementation.

This Phare programme SR9813.04 on Improvement of Romas position in the Spiš region and better mutual understanding with the majority of society of their situation, is an integral part of the realisation of this strategy. It has been a pilot project in the sense that it has employed different approaches towards improving the Roma position in Spišská Nová Ves according to the type of community and socio-economic factors. It will be followed by larger and more far-reaching programmes. It has collaborated closely with the Spišská Nová Ves district office.

But only through the active participation of Roma communities in the conception, implementation and supervision of measures to assure educational integration, to uphold the protection of minority rights and, in particular, to increase the self-reliance and living conditions of the Roma can any project success be measured. An elaborate set of criteria was therefore developed for the selection of the 10 pilot localities for kindergartens and the 5 localities for community centres in Armutovce, Betlanovce, Bystrany, Chrast nad Hornadom, Kropachy, Letanovce, Markušovce, Smižany, Žehra and Spišská Nová Ves. In the 9 first villages the Roma population constitute appr. 26 percent of the population.

The locations are illustrated on this Map:

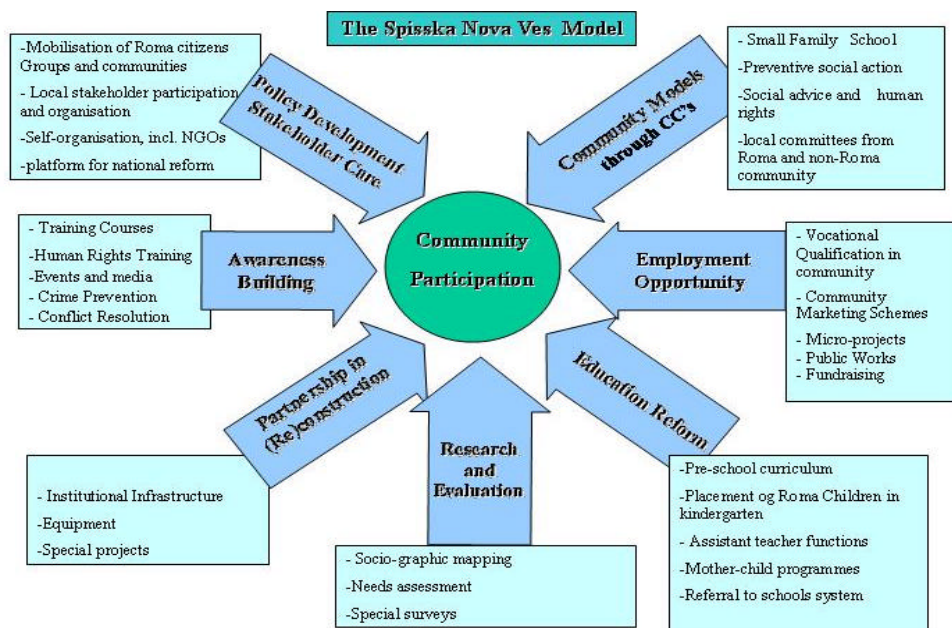
## Okres Spišská Nová Ves



### Models and People -Methodologies of the Project

*Working with the Roma, mainly in settlements, requires patience and a continuous dialogue not only about the needs of people but also about their hidden potential. In our project we have been trying to overcome the obstacles between the Roma and the non-Roma in order to reach common ground upon which the future dialogue can be based. The principles of partnership have been applied also to the community centres as their position depends on mutual trust and responsibility. (Mgr. Emil Samko, a university teacher, gives lectures on the Roma language, the leader of NGO Za lepší život, Markušovce)*

To deal with the complex reality facing the Roma people in Spiš and basing it on the aspirations of the selected Roma communities themselves, the pilot project developed its concept of community participation and own responsibility for activities by defining a set of multiple interventions. This was done according to a circular model.



The programme focus defined in the outset was made in a way so that the different project elements would be able to interact from beneath building up the structures through activities. An example of such classical linkages of interaction is made in the project when improved family skills acquired in the community work benefit the ability of the child to attend kindergarten and thereby enter in to basic school.

### **Key achievements of Project:**

1. Community models through Community centers:
  - Development of small family school curriculum in health and hygiene, household skills by training more than 200 young Roma women
  - Preventive social action through specific programmes involving 960 young people
  - Specific social action programmes on themes selected by local community reaching 570 people
2. Employment opportunity: 50 young Roma trained in wood skills through community education and several micro-projects developed by own means of fundraising.
3. Education reform: Introduction of assistant teacher function in kindergarten with Roma children and elaboration of proposal for curriculum even when different on-going programmes. Ongoing workshops on pedagogical and psychological issues.
4. Reconstruction: Parallel intervention by Government reconstruction monitored
5. Awareness building: Trained staff and community workers, two visits to Denmark and Spain. Media coverage and training courses.
6. Stakeholder care and Policy development. Local committees and working groups established in community even when buildings were not yet finished.

This project has thus aimed not only at improving the position of the Roma through catching-up with the majority position but rather at finding ways of socially integrating Roma in the local community. Dialogue has been existing as the oldest and most basic means of communication. The level of understanding of participants does not depend only on the strength of arguments but also on the willingness and ability to listen to the views of others. The expectations might or might not be fulfilled, the views on solutions might be contradictory and therefore, it depends on previous experience and readiness what kind of result the partners want to achieve. The result of a long-lasting dialogue between Roma and Non-Roma communities in Slovakia is a still low level acceptance of different views. This pilot project marked the beginning of such dialogue on understanding and responsibility.



## Community education and Community center work

The community development concept of this project has rested on the self-mobilisation of skills in the community rather than necessarily linking to a given societal qualification framework. By providing introduction to machine saw techniques and by providing handsaws to train and develop community skills for the improvement of the community infrastructure or even marketing, processes were put into motion that sooner or later will make particularly young Roma without completed education want to get the formal qualifications. But this was not the only aim, the main initial issue was to create the incentive and motivation for community participation.

The main idea of the project was to support the establishment and functioning of community centers as tools for development of communities and also as tools of public relations. After strengthening the role of these centers they could be associating professionals and volunteers interested in solving these issues and be as partners for other institutions.

The main objective of activities of community centers has been to increase the active participation of representatives of Roma in the conception, implementation and supervision of activities that would lead to the improvement of living standards and removal of disproportions. The concrete activities reflected the needs of a particular community with focus on improvement of educational and cultural life, employment opportunities generation, and improvement of housing conditions and health conditions.

The community centers were located in five selected towns and villages of Spišská Nová Ves district (Markušovce, Žehra, Krompachy, Arnutovce and Letanovce).

The project team consisted of 27 members consisting of both Roma and non-Roma staff and was extended by many volunteers from community, partner NGO's and local experts. Five were employed as Community center leaders, 10 as social workers and 10 as assistant teachers in kindergarten, but all worked interactively. Thus Assistant teachers all spent part of their work time with community center work.

### The work was built up in three stages:

In the **initial** – analytical project phase of three months where the local working groups were formed that specified the needs of each community and proposed adequate measures and activities. The common feature of all the communities was besides the high level of unemployment also low educational level, living standard and health conditions.

The **second** project phase of four months focused on organization of individual activities of community centers and on communication with the Roma community with the goal of increasing the motivation and participation on community center activities.

Common activities organized in all community centers included for example:

- *Small Family School* – with focus on theoretical knowledge and practical skills on household works, home economics, education towards parenthood
- *Cultural and Social Events* – International Day of Romas, Concert of Tolerance, “The Great Summer Holiday Day”

The **final** project phase of eight months focused on realization of internal projects based on the analysis of community needs and mobilizing the active participation of Roma population in settlements.

Specific activities in this phase related to the multiple set of interventions included: Health Care Program in Letanovce (vaccination of 123 Roma children against hepatitis and flu) and regular cleaning work of Letanovský mlyn settlement in cooperation with Roma Youth Club

- *Household works* for Roma women and girls in Arnutovce
- *Drug use prevention* program in CC Krompachy
- *Training in wood processing work* for 54 young Roma's organized by CC Žehra in cooperation with the Foundation Dobrá rómska vília Kesaj and Secondary Vocational School in Bijacovce (8 participants obtained work right after graduation from training)
- *Improvement of Housing Conditions* through reconstructing of 30 houses and building rest rooms in Jarecek settlement by Markušovce local group ( with World Bank grant)



### **Proposal for Preschool Education Reform**

The post of an assistant teacher is required mainly in the regional territories where children are entering the school system institutions from environments with low social incentives and language barriers, where the family does not provide or is not able to provide them with a sufficient amount of stimuli to promote their psycho-motoric and cognitive skills to successfully engage in the educational process.

The lesson learned from the project is that it is extremely important to support positive bonds between mother and a child and to assist mothers with learning more about how to effectively run the household and develop individual creative skills. At the same time, it is necessary for future success of the child at school to attend a kindergarten and learn the official language in a bi-lingual context while developing psycho-motoric and cognitive skills so that the child would succeed in doing well in multi-cultural environment in basic school. In the context of the curriculum plans for assistant teachers and for training Roma mothers in child-care this bond needs to be formalised and strengthened.

In relation to the new school law it is proposed that the position of assistant teacher is introduced. The Qualification framework shall be based on completion of secondary school combined with excellent minority language skills and supplemented by graduation from a 1-year specialised course from secondary pedagogical school accredited by Ministry of Education.



The method for co-option of experience with use of assistant teachers in national curriculum for kindergartens should be developed with comprehensive additional research based on the lessons learned from this pilot project and similar programmes. There is in this sense a need to add a more detailed description of the methodological work on bi-lingual and multi-cultural education related to the introduction of Assistant Teacher in kindergartens.



## Krompachy Community Center

Roma population in Krompachy makes 13 per cent of a total population Unemployment rate among Roma population is almost 99 %.

### Main Problems Identified

- The work of a local project team focused on solving the problems of drug addiction (Toluene) among Roma population which makes a negative impact on school performance and entering the job market.
- The project has also developed a study on the *Communication of the Krompachy municipal government with the Roma community*

### The Main Activities:

- ATAL – Anti-Toluene Alternative Project realized by the community center in cooperation with the municipal government, primary and special school, city police and volunteers (co-financed by British Know How Fund and IROMAR Banská Bystrica)

*The goals of the project were:*

- to decrease the number of drug addicted among Roma children and youth
- to propose and recommend preventive measures
- to motivate Roma children and youth to participate in community center's activities

*Work performed in Community:*

- survey on the use of toluene among Roma parents and children
- International Roma Day - Concert of tolerance, exhibition of Roma children drawings  
foundation of a Roma children folklore group Grajoro  
organization of sport events
- Small Family School
  - debate in drug addiction prevention with parents
  - debates with children on the harmfulness of drugs
    - field work in the most effected target group
    - First Aid courses and meetings with a family skills courses
- participation of Roma's in the wood processing course
- foundation of a Roma Civic Guard system
- proposal on limiting the sale of toluene in retail network
- Roma Youth Club Project (within the framework Open Society Foundation Grant - Scheme)

*I have spent almost my whole life in Krompachy and I know the problems of its citizens very well. Seeing Roma children inhaling toluene in the streets of our town worries me a lot. That's the reason why, we and some Roma volunteers, have prepared the ATAL project aimed at spending a leisure time in the community center actively. I hope that the parents of endangered children will support us as the success of the project is also subject to their involvement.*

**(Jakub Záhradník, Krompachy Deputy Mayor, a member of the ATAL team.)**



## Letanovce Community Center

Letanovce and Letanovský mlyn Roma settlement are inhabited by about 1.300 Romas. The settlement, located 3 km from the village, has no drinking water, electricity and gas. The only source of drinking water is the local well. The unemployment rate among Roma population is almost 100 %.

### Main Problems Identified

- The work of a local project team focused on solving the problems with community hygiene and health conditions of local population
- The main goal was to improve the level hygiene in Roma families, environment in settlements, increase the interest of Roma children and youth in activities of a community center

### The main activities:

The main activities within the framework of Small Family School included:

- lectures and seminars in family planning for Roma women, personal visits of a doctor and social workers to Roma families, education of parents and health prevention, First Aid contest, vaccination of children against hepatitis and flu, trash collection and community cleaning activities, bathing of children in the community center, organization of sport events: "The Great Holiday Day", trips to Spiš Castle and the High Tatras, participation of Roma men in wood processing course in Secondary Vocational School in Bijacovce, 6 employed Romas on woods cleaning work in cooperation with NGO Zachránme Letanovský mlyn (Save Letanovce mill), preparation work for building a community center, foundation of the NGO Spolu do Európy (Together to Europe), Roma Youth Club Project (within the framework Open Society Foundation Grant Scheme)



*We are the team of the "right" men in Letanovce: a doctor, a social worker, a teacher and I. We all do our best in order to help people living here. Children and youth are provided with vaccination and they can take part in trips, sports tournaments and different workshop activities. We have decided to make use of the woodwork skills that young men have already obtained and to involve them in the reconstruction of houses and completion of our community center, which will also give them a chance to earn some money. If we join our forces, we will succeed in accomplishing our plans.*

*(Viktor Horváth, Roma volunteer of the NGO Spolu do Európy )*

## Markušovce Community Center

Markušovce and its settlement Jarecek are inhabited by about 1.300 Romas. The settlement, located 1 km from the village has, a limited infrastructure. The unemployment rate among Roma population reaches 96 %.

### Main Problems Identified

- The work of a local project team focused on improvement housing conditions, hygiene and improvement of school performance of Roma children

### The main goals were:

- to improve the housing conditions of 30 Roma families
- **to improve the school attendance and performance of Roma children**
- **to increase the level of interest of Roma children and youth in NGO work and activities**

### The Main Activities:

- regular meetings with children and helping them with homework and preparing for classes
- visits of families in the settlement
- organization of the International Roma Day in the primary school
- work on the cleaning of the community's environment
- Small Family School
- lectures and seminars on family care
- organization of sport activities for Roma kids
- participation of Roma's in the wood processing course
- improvement of housing conditions in the Roma settlement Jarecek supported by the World Bank
- Project for children: "In Markušovce we are not bored" supported by NPOA



*The name of our NGO is Za lepší život (For a Better Life). We have been trying to improve the quality of our life for four years. It is a demanding task as a vision of a better life differs from man to man. Another problem is that our people are not equally eager to lend a hand. Although we miss the community center a lot, we have reached a few encouraging achievements in Markušovce. We have succeeded in getting several grants for children and we are rebuilding and reconstructing parts of our houses and cottages because we do want a better life.*

*(Rudo Horváth, a local authority Roma deputy and a NGO member)*

## Community Center Arnutovce

Arnutovce is inhabited by 222 Romas. The relationship between Roma and non-Roma population was the least problematic one from all the communities within the project. The kindergarten was involved in the project „Mother and Child“. The unemployment rate reaches the level of 95 %

### Main Problems Identified

- The work of a local project team focused on social advisory in Community and motivation of the children's attendance of the kindergarten
- The aim was: to develop social advisory among the Roma Community to motivate children graduating from primary schools in further study in secondary school to motivate the participation of Roma's in the activities of the Community Center

### The main activities:

- participation of the citizens on the reconstruction of the kindergarten
- personal visits of Roma families
- debates with children in the primary school about their future plans
- providing advisory on how to work with public administration
- preparation of the exhibition of the art works of Roma children
- International Roma Day
- Small Family School - family care education
- establishment of NGO Community Center Arnutovce



### Community Representative Statement

*I am familiar with social work as I have been devoted to it for a long time. Every day I meet people who have never crossed the borders of their villages or settlements, and they do not know how to approach the authorities. In my opinion, social work should teach people how to become responsible for their lives and to seek chances of further education. As young people can hardly find work, they often underestimate an urgent need of training and education. I think that patient social work can change the current situation and the results, in the long term, will be successful.*

*(Viera Kokyová, a Roma social worker of the Arnutovce Community Center)*

## Community Center Žehra

Žehra is inhabited by 1.100 Roma's, which represents about 70 % its citizens. The unemployment rate reaches the level of 95 - 97 %. The community work was supported by NGO Spolu through the reconstruction of the Community Center building.

### Main Problems Identified

- The work of a local project team focused on solving the problem of unemployment in the Roma community.
- The aim was: - to motivate the Roma's men in the activities of working group
  - to train 50 young Roma's in wood processing work in cooperation with other Community Centers
  - to motivate the largest possible number of Roma's to participate in the activities of the Community Center

### The main activities:

- involvement of the working group members in the building and reconstruction works on the Community Center building
- training activities in wood processing work in cooperation with the Secondary Vocational School Bijacovce and the Foundation Dobrá rómska víla Kesaj
- Small Family School - family care course
- Organization of the Roma and non-Roma senior citizens meetings
- International Roma Day - opening of the Community Center
- Organization of the Mother's Day event
- Sport events for Roma children
- Establishment of the NGO Community Center Spolu Žehra
- Roma Youth Club Project (within the framework Open Society Foundation Grant Scheme)



*The society with a high rate unemployment does not offer a joyful life to anyone. Most families in our village face this problem and must deal with it. If we hope to improve the current state, we need money. If we want to get money, we must have work and people who know how to work. That's why we carried out a training in wood processing for young men. We would like to set up a computer club for Roma children, who will obtain essential computer skills and practise foreign languages there. Hopefully, they will be able to find work later and secure a better life for themselves.*

*(Marián Dunka, Roma Coordinator of the Žehra Community Center)*

## **FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY**

The experience and findings of a multiple intervention scheme as carried out during 2000-2001 in this pilot project will evidently have to be followed up in a more systematic framework to allow for the necessary time for verification of its findings. The long-term objectives of continuing the pilot project are to support the Roma self-organisation in community to become effective in communicating and negotiating with local authorities and other social stakeholders. The policy dilemma is how to balance social integration policies of Roma with national implementation of their minority rights that upholds their cultural and lifestyle for the long term preservation of Roma identity. This should be reinforced by the implementation of the decentralisation strategies of the Slovak government within educational, social and labour services to improve the position of the Roma in Slovakia.

### **The specific objectives in this follow-up will be:**

Reinforce the ownership taken by primarily Roma stakeholders and the networks that support and work with a given policy aspect. Capacities and competencies must be developed so that the project can sustain beyond the duration of the project time. Based on the nucleus of people trained and involved in the project models continuity is being developed based on agreements with ministries, regional and local authorities and the involvement of other structures such as NGOs occupied with Roma issues. The community centre part has been promised support by Danish funds, whereas the further support specifically to pilot project kindergartens is not yet foreseen in the context of the otherwise substantially increased Phare programme. Future arrangements for systematic support to the concepts of the Small Family School, social prevention and action, should be developed in a social context where the local community already had demonstrated their strong incentive to find ways for the future.

A prerequisite for sustainable impact is the improvement of community relations and mutual respect between the Roma and the majority population. Lack of community structure is exacerbated by the Roma's bleak employment prospects, most often predetermined by a generally low level of education and skills. In a climate of state budget restrictions, the Government's top priority is therefore to identify ways to support the Roma towards self-reliance. In particular the commitments to improve the infrastructure and buildings will be crucial for anchoring the activities in places where people can meet freely and without fear.

Models of collaboration with authorities must be based on comprehensive and well-designed government programme is in place. Apart from the specific recommendation coming out of the project regarding pre-school reform on curriculum and assistant teachers, there are several recommendations to apply more flexible approaches to how to integrate into the greater policy plans. Although the Slovak government faces tight budgetary restrictions over the next few years, it has expressed its willingness and intention to pursue a pro-active minority policy, particularly with regard to the Romany population. The state has made necessary budgetary provisions for the support of various initiatives to improve the situation of Roma this includes the commitment for the educational reform. However, given the severity of problems faced by the Roma, and the housing situation in particular, the Slovak government will cooperate with international assistance not least through EU in the provision of adequate infrastructure improvement and living conditions for the Romany population.

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