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on Social Inclusion

Investing in children:

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

A Study of National Policies

Slovak Republic

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Investing in children:

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

A Study of National Policies

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COUNTRY REPORT – SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Table of Contents

1. Assessment of overall approach and governance	8
1.1. Integrated multidimensional strategies and synergies between relevant policy areas and players	8
1.2. Children's rights and mainstreaming of children's policies and rights	9
1.3 Balance between universal and targeted policies and focus on children at increased risk.....	10
1.4 Involvement of relevant stakeholders and children	10
1.5. Evidence based approaches and evaluation of impact of policies in response to crisis.....	11
1.6. Sustained investment in children and families to protect from impact of crisis	13
2. Access to adequate resources	13
2.1. Support of parents' participation in labour market.....	14
2.1.1. Does it pay for parents to work?.....	15
2.1.2. Employability of single parents	16
2.1.3. Access to affordable, quality early childhood education	17
2.2. Policies to provide adequate living standards	18
2.2.1. Family policies	18
2.2.2. Balance of universal and targeted benefits.....	22
2.2.3. Adequate living standard for jobless families with children	23
2.2.4. In-kind benefits.....	25
2.2.5. Issue of stigmatisation and low take-up	27
3. Access to affordable quality services	27
3.1. Early childhood education and care	28
3.2. Education system capacity to break cycle of disadvantage	29
3.3. Health care	31
3.4. Housing and living environment.....	32
3.5. Family support	33
4. Addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester	34
5. Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments.....	36
6. References.....	38

Executive Summary¹

As all EU Member States, the Slovak Republic has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the implementation of its commitments is subject to regular reporting. The National Action Plan for Children and Youth is the main tool for the coordinated implementation of the children's rights commitments. Poverty and the reproduction of disadvantages related to poverty, including school segregation, violated language and housing rights, remain, however, marginal topics in this document. The use of indicators has not been standard practice up till now. Common indicators are published without having an impact on policy decisions.

The Commission Recommendation on investing in children of 20 February 2013 has not been referred to in any policy document with the exception of the revised OP Human Resources. Policy assessment reports and recommendations of experts, NGOs, and international agencies in the area of education or social protection have little effect on the revision of policy-making. The well-being of children, and particularly of the Roma children, and serious violations of children's rights such as the demolition of slum dwellings of their families without compensations, tend not to be perceived as a public issue.

Though ex-ante social impact assessment is currently a regular part of policy-making, it has not made policy-making more sensitive to the negative consequences of poverty. There is no rule that would require a revision of the bill that could cause deterioration of living conditions. This is because of general and long-term disregard for the right to adequate standard of living and to the continuous improvement of living conditions of everyone as set by the Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights in policy-making.

An evidence based approach is a weaker point of policy-making. In some cases, there is a lack of information (data are not collected about the mother tongue of children starting school attendance), but mostly data are collected, published but not used to monitor and assess the effects of implemented policies. An overburdened public administration and a lack of capacity for assessing implemented policies at the local level contribute to this situation.

The EU-SILC documents that in Slovakia the child's well-being and access to adequate resources is strongly dependent on size and socio-economic status of the family. Households with three and more children are at increasing risk of poverty. The access to adequate resources of jobless households is not the policy objective.

The family policy is comprehensive and universalism and the regular indexation of child allowances and parental allowances is its strong point. The support of parental care is long (up to three years, six years in case of child's health problems). The maternity benefit based on insurance principle has been increasing since 2010. Austerity measures have not affected the family policy so far. Child allowances are, however, low and not sensitive to age of child or socio-economic situation of a family.

The high birth rate in the poorest areas, especially in the Roma community, influences the family policy. Proposals targeting family policy at low income families have been alternating with attempts to increase the merit principle in the family policy (making parental allowance conditioned by the work record) and to limit the number of children in a family who will receive support. The attention is also given to the removal of work disincentives. In the last decade, various in-work benefits were introduced such as

¹ Readers should note that the drafting of this report was completed in September 2013 thus it does not include an analysis of data or policy developments that became available after this date.

child tax bonus and tax premium for low wage earners. Jobs of those with a permanent contract are well protected but re-entering the labour market is difficult for other parents, particularly for those with more children and without work experience. Parents with three and more children have recently lost the status of disadvantaged jobseekers and, thus, the one of target groups of employment services. The lack of vacancies and the limited access to the ECEC are crucial barriers to employment, however.

The minimum income scheme (MIS) is designed as a last resort “survival” scheme that does not aspire to provide adequate living standards. The MIS is insensitive to the number of children in the household. The basic benefit is very low and allowances to the basic MI benefit (housing allowances, activation allowance) are variously preconditioned and not available for a significant share of beneficiaries. Despite the documented high levels of severe material deprivation of families dependent on MI benefit or parental allowance as the only income, there is no political will to improve adequacy of MI benefits. On the contrary, the recent reform of the MIS cancels some of allowances to benefits, introduces workfare to basic benefit and it also introduces the possibility to subtract fines imposed for public order offences from the benefits (sequestering of benefits has not been allowed so far).

Social inclusion programmes in schools provide elementary support only. Children from MI beneficiary/low income households are entitled to free meals and free school aids. The ECEC has been free for children from MI beneficiary households since 2008. Schools with pupils from households on MI benefits and pupils with special educational needs (so called individually integrated pupils) receive higher financing to adapt school environment or set up a teacher assistant. However, a very low share of poor children attends the ECEC and the number of teacher assistants is still too small to become an efficient support of integration. Children with Roma mother tongue do not have the opportunity to be educated in their language and teacher assistants are not required to speak Roma. Though bad school results, repeating a year and early school leaving are very frequent among poor children, school absenteeism is dealt with mostly formally and repressively. Poorly paid and overburdened teachers can hardly substitute for missing spectrum of social inclusion programmes in schools.

Services for children threatened by poverty are also problematic. There is low quality and unsafe housing of many children living in marginalised Roma communities (MRC). There is a low number of low-threshold centres for children and youth and their existence is threatened by the lack of resources. The Health Care Assistant Programme was stopped in 2012 due to the lack of resources. Envisaged support of community centres and preschool education has not been followed by investments in this area. The Community Centres project has been delayed considerably.

European funds are of essential importance in designing new initiatives in the area of child’s rights protection. All new initiatives count upon their support. The preparation of the new financial framework is semi-public. The OP Human Resources was subject to the public consultation with experts and with representatives of the civic society. There are ambitions to implement an integrated approach to child poverty in marginalised Roma communities and to use experience accumulated by NGOs working with marginalised communities. Financial allocation for specific objectives has not been set yet. There is fear as the Commission envisaged strict sanctions for those who will not manage to reach their targets. This fear could reduce ambitions in the fight against child poverty.

The most urgent suggestions for the implementation of the Recommendation in Slovakia might be: Slovakia should revise its neglect to adequacy of the MI benefits; it should support more versatile social inclusion programmes in the ECEC and schools and in after-school activities and more sophisticated forms of fighting school

absenteeism of poor children. Support of affordable and dignified housing and the protection of essential housing rights – ban on demolition of shelters without compensation – are also very urgent.

1. Assessment of overall approach and governance²

The Slovak Republic declares its adherence to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in strategic documents and reports to the UN. National action plans for children and youth (further “the NAP for children”) are the basic tool for “targeted and coordinated procedure of implementation of Convention”. This document is, however, not referred to in explanatory memoranda of proposed amendments to legislation. For that reason, it hardly holds a position of the framing political concept in the area of social protection of children.

1.1. Integrated multidimensional strategies and synergies between relevant policy areas and players

The Committee for Children and Youth of the Council of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Human Rights, National Minorities and Gender Equality is the expert body responsible for creation, updating, and assessment of the implementation of the National Action Plan for children.

The latest NAP for children for 2014 – 2017 (2013) was approved by the Government on June 5, 2013. It presents itself as the synthesis of existing strategies and measures implemented by several ministries and self-governing regions. It claims to be the instrument of coordination of several policy areas (education, social affairs and family policies, health care, justice) and levels (central, regional, local). In fact, it seems to be a typical container document that stockpiles existing policies or policy plans of individual ministries and other players in this area within the requested structure.

Competences of the Committee for Children and Youth are not so wide-ranging, however. They suffice for the administrative coordination of preparation of the NAP for children. At the level of central policy there is not an institutional player with clear dedication to the objective of children’s right protection and a sufficient authority for the horizontal or vertical coordination of the policies and decision-making on resources allocation. Regional and local governments have significant competencies in this area, particularly in the domain of housing, and the early childhood education and care (further the ECEC). The central Government has limited instruments to motivate regional and local governments to implement more children friendly policies. Schools, municipalities and the social departments of the offices of labour, social affairs and family (further OLSAF) share responsibility for surveillance of regular school attendance and taking remedial action. Coordination and comprehensive approach at the local level faces yet many obstacles because of understaffed and overburdened bodies that are responsible for protection of children’s rights: child protection and social-legal custody at social departments of the OLSAF in particular. These bodies have been subjected to several waves of personal and budgetary cuts in the last decade.³ The OLSAF’s resources for cooperation with the NGOs providing services for families in crisis are also limited. The inability of public bodies to notice child maltreatment and intervene in time has become publicly known. “Dysfunction of comprehensive approach and low level of policy coordination” in the area is also admitted by OP Human Resources (OP Ľudské zdroje 2013: 11). The level of

² Readers should note that the drafting of this report was completed in September 2013 thus it does not include an analysis of data or policy developments that became available after this date.

³ In 2012, social custody for children was provided by 113 employees of the LSAF offices to 25,930 children in total; it is 229 children per one social custodian in average. (MLSAF 2013)

cooperation of public bodies with paediatricians is also low and insufficiently binding rules of reporting the place of residence also complicate child-centred cooperation.

- **Recommendation:** it is of urgent importance to strengthen the governance of child protection at the local level, especially by increasing the staff of child protection and social-legal custody.

1.2. Children's rights and mainstreaming of children's policies and rights

The NAP for children that is the umbrella document for child protection in Slovakia has been approved in June 2013. The NAP for children deals with the issues such as increasing public authorities' awareness of children's rights and support of rights education and children's participation in policy-making. Poverty is not recognised as the violation of children's rights in the document. Access to adequate resources, decent housing or right to education in case of children from disadvantaged social environment is not explicit topic in this document as well. Phenomena related to poverty such as absenteeism and early school leaving are approached from the administrative perspective.⁴ There is no reference to the Commission Recommendation on investing in children and breaking the cycle of disadvantage (February 20, 2013) in this document.

Children's rights are formally monitored through regular implementation reports to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. (MLSAF 2013c) Poverty is not a substantial topic in these documents. Implementation reports to the Convention deal with extreme forms of violation of children's rights such as sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The rights-based approach to poverty is also absent in the Alternative report on the implementation of the Optional Protocol to the Convention.⁵

The Slovak National Centre for Human Rights (SNCHR) has prepared annual reports on children's rights since 2009. In the SNCHR reports,⁶ poverty is approached as a violation of human rights and failures in observing rights of children are documented in several areas, especially in education and housing (more in part 3.2 and 3.4). SNCHR reports have no impact on the policies implemented and the Centre representatives are not addressed as stakeholders. Recently published special reports of the Public Defender of rights (2013a, 2013b) also apply right-based approach to poverty.

- **Recommendation:** it is of urgent importance to promote awareness of the policy-makers of poverty as violation of children's rights at all levels of governance, particularly by informing on negative consequences of early childhood poverty on future prospects of the child.

⁴ Proposed activity of fighting against absenteeism is only "to improve effective communication of headmasters of schools and public administration bodies during reporting pupils who miss more than 15 lessons without an excuse, including securing feedback to headmasters". (NAP 2013: 28)

⁵ Government supported preparation of the Alternative report on implementation of the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

⁶ <http://www.snslp.sk/#menu=1426>

1.3 Balance between universal and targeted policies and focus on children at increased risk

As it has been suggested in the section 1.1, there are several levels of governance responsible for protection of children. The central level of governance, the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (MLSAF), and the Ministry of Education in particular, are responsible for the devising a proper balance between universal and targeted policies and the allocation of resources for their implementation. Universal policies have mainly the financial form and prevail in the family protection and support: in 2010, universal family benefits amounted to 9.5% of the total social protection expenditures while support of social inclusion (MIS + school inclusion programmes) amounted to 2.5% of the total social protection. (SO SR 2012)

Targeted policies have more often the form of social services; they involve public and NGO providers and are subjected to regional variation. Their financial support is less regular and safe as it depends on the invitations to tenders ("calls") by the central government bodies and/or willingness of municipalities to support given type of services. The overview of targeted policies at municipal level is missing as information of this sort is not centrally collected.

1.4 Involvement of relevant stakeholders and children

Preparation of the latest NAP for children for the period 2014 – 2017 was based on interdepartmental cooperation and cooperation with other significant actors including representatives of children.⁷ Participation of children has been recognised as the substantial part of the preparatory process of the children and youth policies and has been inbuilt in the Statutes of the Committee. According to the NAP for children, independent human rights institutions such as the Coalition for Children perform the role of its public control.⁸

Recently, all the ministries of the central government have adopted the declarations on cooperation with the aim to improve participation of the civil society stakeholders in the policy designing, implementation and assessment.⁹ MLSAF seems to cooperate traditionally with NGO social services providers on drafting the proposals of the social services act amendment. The representatives of parents caring for disabled children have been invited to participate first time this year. However, the involvement in policy-designing does not warrant that their proposals and requests will be listened to.

- *Recommendation:* it is important to adopt the rules for the participation of the NGO and children representatives in the policy-making process, and particularly the rules for dealing with their proposals and requests. Here, the exchange of good practices and learning from other MSs is recommended.

⁷ The Council for Children and Youth cooperated with Slovak UNICEF in securing participation of children in assessment of children's rights observation. (Národný 2013: 5)

⁸ The Coalition covers NGOs dealing with children and youth in the Slovak Republic, including marginalised groups, refugees, mass media, etc. Its origin was initiated by the Children of Slovakia Foundation with the objective to elaborate Alternative Report on the OPSC Implementation http://www.nds.sk/images/attach-dokumenty/Alternative_report_on_the_OPSC_Implementation_in_Slovakia_May_2012.pdf

⁹ <http://www.rokovania.sk/Rokovanie.aspx/BodRokovaniaDetail?idMaterial=22271>

1.5. Evidence based approaches and evaluation of impact of policies in response to crisis

Evidence based approaches

Though the evidence-based approach to policy-making is formally recognised by the Government, it is yet weaker point of policy-making. The tradition of the assessment and evaluation of the impact of implemented policies and utilising them in the policy-making in Slovakia is not strong, however. Government bodies and policy-makers use mostly macro-economic indicators and indicators related to adult population to assess the quality of the governance. Indicators concerning children and youth are presented in regular domestic and international reporting but they are seldom assessed as a basis for policy-making¹⁰. Annual reports on gender equality that deal with the access to the ECEC are the exception, for instance. Some positive development is observable. The latest NAP for children pays much more attention to indicators as its predecessors.

Since June 2010, all legislative proposals have had to undergo the ex-ante assessment procedure. This part of the legislative process is not public and information of its conclusions is available only in the beginning of the commenting procedure when it is published at the Portal of legislation¹¹. Outcomes of the assessment are not politically binding.

The ex-ante assessment is complicated by the lack of data in some cases (e.g. the data are not collected about the mother tongue of children starting school attendance) and by insufficient analytical capacities. Amendments to existing policies are often introduced on the basis of more or less marginal “experience from practice” and without designing a system of regular monitoring of their effect¹². The necessity to increase analytical capacities within the ministries to secure evidence-based policy-making was acknowledged by the NRP 2013.

Statistics provided by the Statistical Office of the SR (SO SR) and the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family (COLSAF) are collected, published and prepared to be used in monitoring and the assessment of the effects of implemented policies.¹³ MLSAF annually publishes regular reports assessing social situation in the country. The Government only takes note of these reports. MLSAF also orders special surveys and policy assessments from its departmental research centre, the Institute for Labour and Family Research (ILFR) when there is the plan to revise or launch new policies. Since 2008, there have been several surveys of ILFR contracted by MLSAF monitoring the availability of social services (Monitoring of social services 2008, 2009 and 2010), the institute of a substitute recipient of social assistance (Bodnárová 2012), capabilities of

¹⁰ Reporting statistical data without their use for policy assessment is a common practice. Typical example is 51 pages of statistical data in the attachment to the consolidated third, fourth and fifth periodical reports of the Slovak Republic to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

¹¹ <https://lt.justice.gov.sk/Public/AllMaterialsList.aspx?instEID=-1&Categories=1048574&langEID=1>

¹² For instance, the effects of the implemented sanctions such as the cut of parental allowance in half for a period of three months in case of the school absenteeism of the older child (introduced in 2011) have not been assessed yet, though it could have exerted serious impact on the living conditions of children.

¹³ Some common indicators such as the indicator on early school leavers or the risk of monetary poverty indicator seem to suggest that the situation in Slovakia is more favourable than the EU average. Such signals can easily provoke a false satisfaction with assumingly unproblematic situation in Slovakia.

the youth from children's homes for independent life (Fico 2012) or experience of the children with emotional and physical violence in their families (Repková 2013). ILFR has also accomplished a multifaceted assessment of the subsistence minimum institute (Gerbery – Bednárík 2011) and of the income inequality (Gerbery 2010). There is, however, missing a stable order of the Ministry for the continual systematic research in this particular domain.

Evaluation of the impact of policies in response to the crisis

Monitoring and evaluation of the anti-crisis measures that were implemented for a limited period ended without a special assessment of their impact except their negative effect on the state budget. (Kusá – Gerbery 2010). Efforts in the field (monitoring of new social services provided by municipalities and regional governments) ended in 2011. There was no attempt to trace the effects of the crisis on the situation of children in general or children from most disadvantaged groups such as jobless families, disabled children or the marginalised Roma communities (MRC).

The most noteworthy assessment has been conducted by the World Bank experts on the basis of the contract with MLSAF. An extensive study on the social protection employing the EU-SILC and administrative data was produced to assess the adequacy and coverage of the social protection and to outline a proposal of its reform.¹⁴ It was not used afterwards.

Monitoring of the employment rate of the school graduates of individual secondary vocational and grammar schools is the next new initiative. It is more linked with the austerity measures than with the monitoring effects of the crisis, however. This publicly available system should serve as a guide for parents and students' informed choice of the school. It will be also used in the assessment of schools' entitlement for funding.¹⁵

There are several independent expert studies addressing rights of children to education. They provide the assessment of effects of the Slovak legislative arrangement on the right to quality education of the most disadvantaged (SGI 2004, Salner 2012) and mediate the good practice example from the EU MSs (SGI 2010). UNDP surveys of Roma households (2006, 2012) also provide important information about the effect of the social protection policy in Slovakia on living conditions of the most marginalised groups. There are, however, no indications that these information resources are used in designing or assessment of educational or social protection policies. On the other hand, the recently published Atlas of MRC¹⁶, which is based on the 2011 Census, and the UNDP and OLSAF administrative data, will serve as the essential data basis for targeting at the OP Human Resources' Horizontal Priority MRC within the 2014 – 2020 Financial Framework.

There has been strong stream of research on children's right to education published in recent years. Several studies published in 2013 (Amnesty International 2013; CVEK 2013) pay attention to barriers to education of Roma children. The fact that the governmental NAP for children does not pay adequate attention to specific situation of Roma children has been critically noted by the independent assessment report (Lajčáková 2013).

¹⁴ The assessment provides argument for targeting the social protection at most vulnerable groups http://www.employment.gov.sk/filemanager/Slovakia%205_13_sent.pdf

¹⁵ School statistics are available at www.uips.sk

¹⁶ http://www.minv.sk/?atlas_2013

1.6. Sustained investment in children and families to protect from impact of crisis

The family policy has not been negatively influenced by the crisis. All types of the family allowances were kept on. Child allowances and parental allowances have been regularly indexed. The indexation partly compensated the increase of living costs due to cancelling the lower VAT for foodstuffs and re-launching the flat VAT in 2011 and its increase to 20%. Replacement rate for the maternity benefit (based on insurance principle) has also been increased and a relatively generous contribution to the birth allowance has been extended to the second and third child in the family. Similar effort to protect children and families against the crisis and austerity measures has not been manifested in relation to households with children dependent on the MIS. Minimum income benefits and allowances to the basic benefit have not been indexed since 2009.

- *Recommendation:* it is very urgent to introduce regular indexation of the MIS and reassess the neglect of the living standards of children living in households dependent on the MIS.

2. Access to adequate resources

Slovakia belongs to the EU countries with lower shares of households living under the poverty threshold: 13 % SILC 2011 (EU-27: 16.9 %) and 13.1 % SILC 2012. Similarly to the EU-27 average, children under 18 years of age are the group most at risk of poverty out of all age groups: 18.8 % in 2011 and 21.9 % in 2012.¹⁷

Households with three and more children are also in the increasing risk of poverty: 32.6 % in 2011 and 35.1 % in 2012. The risk of poverty of households of lone parents has also been growing: 26.4 % in 2011 and 27.5 % in 2012.¹⁸ Households with dependent children (16.5 %) were two times more likely in the risk of poverty than households without dependent children (9 %).

Relative data say little about the adequacy of resources households have at their disposal. If national median and poverty thresholds are expressed in PPS, median and poverty threshold in Slovakia turn to belong to those lowest in the EU-27. Purchasing power of the Slovak households with the median income (8 857) is lower than purchasing power of the households with income at the poverty threshold in Germany, Austria or UK (see the following table comparing the poverty thresholds expressed in PPS of Slovakia and the countries that are the target work migration countries for Slovakia).

EU SILC 2011	EU-27	CZ	DE	UK	AT	SK
Poverty threshold in PPS		5915	10 945	10 082	12 150	5314

Source: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_li01&lang=en

Low purchasing power of the SK median income suggests that considerable part of the Slovak population might have had difficulties with providing their livelihood. Difficulties with livelihood are also suggested by the share of the population suffering by material deprivation (3 from 9 items). It is twice as high as level of monetary poverty.

¹⁷ <http://portal.statistics.sk/files/Onas/aktuality/EU%20SILC%202012.pdf>

¹⁸ In 2008, under the poverty threshold there were 20.9 % of single parent households. Continuing increase of the risk of poverty is a consequence of „cumulating several disadvantages caused by parenthood, discriminations of mothers on labour market and next structural barriers that expose families to the risk of poverty“ (Súhrnná správa 2013: 43).

EU-SILC provides the evidence that in Slovakia, the child's access to adequate resources and well-being is strongly dependent on the size and socio-economic status of the family and on education of parents. Poverty threatens strikingly children from families with the low level of attained education. Slovakia has one of the highest gaps in risk of poverty between children from families with the highest and the lowest level of education attained by parents living in the same household. There are extremely great differences in risk of material deprivation of children of parents with low (ISCED 1 - 2) and university level (ISCED 5 - 6) education: 73.7 % and 4.1 % respectively (EU SILC 2011). These differences replicate high differences in the access to labour market (employment rate of persons with ISCED 1-2 is very low, 28.7 % in 2011, and is one of lowest in the EU-27) and inadequacy of minimum income scheme.

In Slovakia, similarly to the EU-27 level, the highest share of severely materially-deprived persons lived in single person households with dependent children; SK: 25.6 % and EU-27:18.4 %. (EUROSTAT 2013: 189) However, unlike the EU-27, the highest share of population living in the households with very low work intensity is not among single person households with dependent children (16.3 %), but among single person households: 29.9 % (ibid: 199).

Despite more favourable work intensity, single parent households have high share of those who make ends meet with difficulties and single parents and households with three and more children perceive a high level of stress due to housing costs: 53.5 % and 44 % respectively (SK 32.7 %) according to SILC 2011. The share of households perceiving a heavy financial burden due to the housing costs increases with increasing number of children.

<i>Financial burden due to the housing costs (EU SILC 2011)</i>	Couple under 65 years of age without children	Single parent and one or more children	Two adults with child	Two adults with two children	Two adults with three and more children
Heavy financial burden	27.7	53.5	32.4	27.2	44.0
Financial burden	64.8	42.8	55.8	64.2	48.2
Without financial burden	7.5	3.7	11.8	8.5	7.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

2.1. Support of parents' participation in labour market

Harmonisation of work and family life is the declared long-term objective of the family policy in Slovakia. Strategic documents recognise the necessity to reduce barriers in employing persons who care for children, first of all and mainly women.

This objective is partly implemented by protection of jobs of the parents who are on maternity/parental leave. The Labour Code sets fairly good protection of caring parents. Slovak legal protection is higher than the European standard in this regard. (Report on the state of gender equality 2013: 4) An employer cannot give notice to an employee during the period of protection, it is the period of pregnancy and the period of taking parental leave or when a lone employee cares for a child that is younger than three years of age. (Report 2013: 4). Such protection concerns only workers with a permanent contract. Jobs of those with the fixed-term contract are not protected during parental leave.

In case of a seriously disabled child requiring special care, employers are obliged to provide parents with parental leave until the child reaches six years of age. Recent amendment to the Labour Code gives the employee an opportunity to draw the parental leave, if agreed with the employer, in much flexible way than hitherto. It can be taken in parts till the child reaches five years of age (eight years of age if the child is seriously disabled). The total length of parental leave is not extended. In current practice flexible drawing of parental leave is rather exceptional. (SNCHR 2012a: 26/27)

2.1.1. Does it pay for parents to work?

Long parental leave and a relatively fair job security for those with permanent contracts explain why Slovakia has one of the lowest employment rates for women with children under the age of six.

Various measures have been launched in recent years to make work more attractive and improve the position of parents with small children on the labour market. Substantial increase of the minimum wage has not had support of employers as social partners. There were therefore attempts to increase attractiveness of the work income indirectly, by cutting the social protection and widening gaps between the income from a job and MIS, by not calculation of the part (25 %) of work income when assessing entitlement to the MI benefit and by introducing some in-work benefits. Increase of attractiveness of the pay by more significant increase of the minimum wage (like from the present EUR 337.7 to EUR 352 since January 2014) is a rare political measure and it faces strong criticism from employer organisations¹⁹.

There are four main in-work benefits: (1) the child tax bonus; (2) the activation allowance; (3) the employee tax-premium and (4) the childcare allowance.

The child tax bonus

Families of working parents are supported by the child tax bonus. The benefit was introduced in 2004 simultaneously with cuts in the minimum income benefits and child allowances. The tax bonus is flat and not sensitive to the age of the child. It is regularly indexed in relation to indexation of the subsistence minimum. Since July 1, 2013, the tax bonus for 1 child is EUR 21.41 monthly. It is possible to receive the tax bonus to the end of compulsory school attendance, for a longer time only in the case of continuing study or in the case of the child's illness or accident and until his or her age of 25 at longest.²⁰ Parents who did not work because of age or disability and take an old age or a disability pension are not entitled to the child tax bonus. Since 2007, they are partly compensated by the contribution to the child allowance. Its amount is, however, substantially lower than the tax bonus: EUR 10.83 monthly.

The activation allowance

The activation allowance of EUR 63.07 per month is given to those who move from long-term unemployment to employment. At present it can be taken for six months as

¹⁹ It is worthy to note that the comparison of the level of the minimum wage and the level of the national poverty threshold (60 % of the median income as measured by the EU SILC) has become the basis for the argument that it is necessary to increase the minimum wage as it is a shame to have the minimum wage under the poverty threshold. Fact is that the net minimum wage still remains under the poverty threshold based on the EU SILC 2012 data.

²⁰ http://www.drsrc.sk/drsrc/slovak/danovy_subjekt/brozury_a_letaky/data/2013_07_03_bonus.pdf

maximum. A proposed reform of the assistance in material need (2013, on debate in the Slovak Parliament) introduces a permanent supplement of the same amount for all employees with low wages, not only for former long-term unemployed. The allowance of EUR 63 monthly could be taken for an unlimited period in case the household income is below the material need threshold for the given type of household and the person is engaged in work.

The employee tax-premium

The employee tax-premium of a maximum of EUR 50.34 annually can be applied to those employees – tax payers whose yearly income are equal to or lower than the minimum wage.

The childcare allowance

The childcare allowance was introduced in 2008 to stimulate employment of parents/mothers of children under three years of age with the help of the ESF resources. Till that period, parents could have worked during taking the parental allowance and used it to cover the childcare, however, with the exception of the care in formal public child care facilities. The childcare allowance is targeted solely at working parents; it is higher than the parental allowance and is provided on reimbursement basis (to cover real childcare costs). It is perceived by parents as more demanding from administrative point of view.

2.1.2. Employability of single parents

In 2011 at the EU-27 level, very low work intensity was most common in single person households with dependent children (25.6 %), while households with two adults and one dependent child reported the lowest rates (6 %). In Slovakia, the share of households with low work intensity among single person households with dependent children is also significantly higher than that in households with two adults and one dependent child: 16.3 % and 5.1 %. It is, however, significantly lower than the EU-27 average.²¹

Deviation of single parent households from the common trend might be the consequence of longer parental leave in the country (more in part 2.2.1) and insufficient coverage of areas of concentrated unemployment and poverty (marginalised Roma communities) by the LFS and EU SILC surveys.

Difficulties with labour market access of lone person households with a dependent child are reflected in the labour legislation. The Act on Employment services (5/2004) recognised the single parent caring for the child younger than 10 years of age as the disadvantaged jobseeker. Next amendments to the Act prolong their status of disadvantaged job seekers till the end of compulsory school attendance of the child a lone parent cares for.²² Preferential entitlement to all kinds of active employment measures provided by labour offices, including child care services during education and training, could have helped to increase employability of lone parents. The 2013 Amendment to the Act on Employment services that has been in force since May 2013

²¹ The highest share of households with very low work intensity (29.9 %) is among single person households (EU-27: 21.7 %)
<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

²² The 2005 amendment to the Act on Employment services (Act no. 273/2005) puts parents and carers for three and more children on the list of the disadvantaged jobseekers and thus increased their access to ALM measures.

has turned several obligatory employment services measures, education and training including, into facultative ones. This change might worsen the access of lone parents to ALM measures and, thus, worsen their employability.

2.1.3. Access to affordable, quality early childhood education

Access to affordable, quality early childhood education is a rather poorly recognised right in Slovakia. Since the 1980s, there has still been dominating a policy opinion that personal parental care for children up to three years of age is much favourable for their healthy development. This opinion is reflected in the extensive and relatively generous support of personal parental care (more in part 2.2.1) and in disappearance of the public facilities for early childhood care in the beginning of the 1990s. The institute of nurseries was let out from the Act on Healthcare, which regulated its functioning and financing, in the 1990's. Legal definition of nurseries as public/municipal services yet does not exist in Slovakia.

On the other hand, the network of pre-primary education and care (the ECEC) has had continual existence. In the 1980s, the ECEC attendance was high especially in the group of 5 – 6 years old where it was close to 100% as the one year of preschool education was made compulsory in that time. There was an intensive effort to secure ECEC to Roma children as the ECEC was recognised to be the condition of their good school performance.

In the 1990s, regulation of pre-school education attendance became more relaxed. The ECEC was given in charge to municipalities as their original competence. The interest in the ECEC had decreased with the increased unemployment and the declining birth rate. Children of employed parents were preferentially accepted and there were no programmes (payment reliefs, etc.) to support kindergarten participation of children from low income or disadvantaged families. In that period the institute of so-called zero classes was introduced to compensate absenting pre-school education and to develop language, fine motor and social skills of a part of pupils (more in part 3.2.). Number of kindergartens and classes in kindergartens decreased in response to the decline of birth rate and the unemployment increase in the turn of the centuries and in first half of the 2000s decade. A part of the ECEC facilities that were insufficiently used were sold by the municipalities or used for various social services.

At present, participation of 3 – 6 years old children in the ECEC is 87 %. This participation is under the EU average. According to the Institute for Information and Prognoses in Education (further UIPS), since 2006, the number of unsatisfied requests for child's placement in the ECEC facilities has multiplied 7.6 times. It is due to the increased birth rates in the recent 8 years. In 2012, the offer of places in the ECEC facilities increased, but the situation is far from being favourable, especially in rural areas. Participation of Roma children on pre-school education is substantially lower than that of children from majority population living in geographically close areas. According to the UNDP Survey held in 2010²³, at least partial or temporary experience with attending kindergarten before starting compulsory school attendance was held by 53.1 % of persons (of all age categories in total). Children have less experience with kindergartens than their parents or grandparents had in their age: only 18 % of them

²³ United Nations Development Programme (2012), Report on the Living Conditions of Roma Households in Slovakia 2010. Bratislava

were enrolled in kindergartens.²⁴ The World Bank (2011) found that 28 % of children from Roma communities attended kindergartens.²⁵

The importance of access to the quality ECEC for disadvantaged children is recognised in some strategic documents, such as the National Roma Integration Strategy, but not in others.²⁶ In recent years it has been done little for improving the availability of the ECEC by the central government. Majority of the new classes and places in the kindergartens established in the school year 2012/2013 were created in Bratislava region and only minor number in regions of Eastern Slovakia with higher share of marginalised Roma communities. Setting up new classes has been then rather “market response to customer demand” than the implementation of the Government’s public policy commitments. The only step to make the ECEC more inclusive for Roma children is the implementation of the National project Inclusive model of Education at Preschool Level of Education System. Project covers 200 kindergartens with more than 2000 children and their parents from marginalised Roma communities.

- *Recommendation:* Slovakia should support more generously the active labour market measures and single parents and parents with three or more children should receive more assistance and support to help them participate in these programmes. Also, in connection to the ALMP participation, more ambitious programme for improving access to the ECEC, especially for children from disadvantaged environment, should be prepared.

2.2. Policies to provide adequate living standards

2.2.1. Family policies

The family policy in Slovakia has been closely interlinked with the demographic policy and in the past, its objective was stimulation of the birth rate growth and securing the demographic balance of the nation. High level of universalism and generosity in the family policy has been gradually reduced to a certain extent. There is not an explicit objective to provide adequate living standards for families in the Slovak Constitution and in the social protection legislation. The Article 34 section 1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU is not referred to in strategic documents or explanatory memoranda to the bills. Care for adequacy of living standard has gradually turned into private issue or something that can be hardly influenced by national public policy.²⁷ Several family benefits are designed in the way they would not support teenage motherhood or motivate permanent living on family benefits.

Cash maternity benefits

Maternity benefits are provided during the maternity leave, based on the insurance principle and regulated by the Act on Social Insurance. Entitlement to maternity benefits is conditioned by at least 270 days of health insurance (nemocenské) within two years before the expected date of childbirth. The benefit can also be paid to the

²⁴ This datum – 18 % became the benchmark in the Slovak National Roma Integration Strategy http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_slovakia_strategy_en.pdf

²⁵ http://www.governance.sk/assets/files/publikacie/Policy%20Brief_Predskolska%20Vychova_SGI.pdf

²⁶ National Action Plans for children propose the introduction of allowance for support of education and versatile development of the disadvantaged child for preschool and school facilities (NAP 2013: 20) but do not deal with the barrier of the access to preschool education.

²⁷ Expectations of the state responsibility for living standards of citizens have been declining in the last decade and conviction that securing living standard is an individual responsibility has been growing. (EVS 1991 – 2008)

child's father and other persons subject to conditions. Maternity benefits are paid for 34 weeks if one child is born, for 43 weeks if two and more children are born and for 37 weeks in case of the single mother.

For a very long period, the replacement rate (RR) for maternity benefits was stable: 55 %. The first increase of the RR to 60 % came paradoxically in 2011 when the austerity measures became the top political issue. In 2012, the RR was increased to 65 % of the daily assessment basis, but not of a higher sum than EUR 38.76, which is EUR 25 as the daily maximum. There was a commitment of the Government of Iveta Radičová to increase the maternity benefit RR to 75 % till 2014. The length of the entitlement has remained the same.

Amounts of family benefits (in EUR)

Year	Parental allowance	Child allowance	Birth allowance	Contribution to birth allowance
2009	156.7	21.25	151.37	678.41
2010	256/ 164.22	21.99	151.37	678.41
2011	256.3/ 194.4	22.01	151.37	678.41
2012	194.70	22.54	151.37	678.41
2013	199.60	23.10	151.37	678.41
2014	203.20	23.52	151.37	678.41

Parental allowance

Parental allowance is the state support that is paid for the care for at least one child up to the age of three years (or to the age of six years if the child has long-term health problems) after period of receipt of the maternity benefit finishes. It is a universal and not means-tested benefit that is regularly indexed. There have been repeated efforts to link parental allowance to previous social insurance (work record). In 2010, two levels of parental allowance were introduced, the higher one for mothers with at least 270 days of insurance/work record, the lower one for those who did not work or worked for shorter period. In 2013, the proposal of the amendment to the Act on the Parental Allowance has attempted to reintroduce the differentiation of parental allowance on the basis of previous insurance/work record, but this intend was banned due to lack of support of other revisions of the Act that were to obtain necessary resources for more generous support of "deserving" parents.²⁸

Since January 2011, the amount of parental allowance has become sensitive to number of children that were born at the same time. The parental allowance is increased by 25 % for each next child. This applies only when children were born at the same time – not in the case when there are two or three children under the three

²⁸ Originally, the amendment proposed that parents employed before birth of the child, should receive EUR 260 during the first two years of the parental leave and EUR 160 during the third year. Parents who were not employed should receive EUR 160 all three years long. The latter amount is below the subsistence minimum. This proposal was justified as helping secure former living standard of those who worked before parenthood and as no harm to those who had no income from work so far. After the comment procedure, MLSAF resigned on planned changes because it failed to get support for proposal of the ban on occasional work of caring parents that would lead to the transfer of part of the parental allowance beneficiaries to the category of beneficiaries of the childcare allowance funded from ESF. <http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/289239-rodicovsky-prispevok-zostane-rovnaky-pre-vsetkych/>

years of age born at different times. This condition does not support families with frequent child births.

The next important change introduced in January 2011 makes it possible to subject parental allowance to 50 % reduction for the period of three months if the older child in family does not attend school regularly (has 15 hours of unexcused absences). This measure could have negative impact on well-being of children in families with truants. There is no assessment of the effectiveness of this measure in fighting against absenteeism²⁹. According to the 2012 Report on social situation, number of children is in the care of social custody because, in comparison to the previous year, the neglect of school attendance increased by 493 children and reached number of 8,479 children. (MLSAF 2013b: 72).

The proposal of the amendment to the Act on the Parental Allowance (at present submitted to the Parliament debate) allows to subject parental allowance to the institute of the special receiver (municipality or other subject) that will make decision about the family spending. The proposal also introduces the ban on entitlement to parental allowance to the parent who already has a small child and entrusted him or her to the other person who takes parental allowance for that child. (NR SR Tlač 0650 2013)

Parental allowance is fully counted as an income when determining eligibility for the material need benefit (minimum income benefit). Such measure is aimed at favouring work before parenthood as a source of income. Logically, it leads to less favourable treatment of poor families with small children that have worsened their access to the minimum income benefit and allowances to the benefit.³⁰ This and next regulations of the MIS that complicate simultaneous access to the MIS and parental allowance explain why there is the small proportion of families with children among recipients of the MIS in Slovakia. (World Bank 2012: 8)

Child allowance

The child allowance provision has undergone substantial changes in the last two decades. In the 1990s child allowances lost their universality and progressiveness with a number of children in the family and became targeted at low income households and sensitive to the age of the child. In the beginning of the 2000s, the universality was returned to the system and combined with targeting (supplements for children living in low income families) and sensitivity to the age of children. The present system of child allowances is the result of the profound reform. Act No.600/2003 Coll. on Child Allowance cancelled both the progressiveness of the allowance in respect to the child's age and the supplements for the child continuing in education that were set by Act No. 281/2002 Coll. The Act cancelled the child allowance supplements to low income households and introduced the same amount for each child.³¹

²⁹ School absenteeism is "dealt with" mainly repressively: by fines, cutting or blocking benefits or placing children in correctional educational facilities. A comprehensive social inclusion programme for children tending to truancy absents.

³⁰ The World Bank speaks about "unintended consequence" of the policy design, but the explanatory memoranda to the bills on the MI benefit and public criticism of policy makers of those "for whom the uterus is the means of production" suggest that the eligibility to MIS is set this way on purpose. (<http://www.mecem.sk/rpa/?id=human&show=22357>)

³¹ A part of the saved resources was used for child tax bonus for working parents. Another part was used to fund so-called incentive scholarships, which was the allowance to the MI benefit conditioned by the documented effort of children to improve their school results.

Since January 2004, the child allowance is the universal, not means-tested, and the most extensive state social support. The child allowance is flat for a child up to the age of 16 (age of 18 for a child with long-term health problems, age of 25 if the child is a full-time student or disabled). It means children (teenagers under 18 years of age) that ended their education and are jobless are not entitled to child allowances.³² Since 2007, old-age and disability pensioners raising children are entitled to a contribution to the child allowance in amount of EUR 10 to compensate them for their non-qualification for the child tax bonus.

Traditionally, child allowances are subjects of sanction in case of the neglect of regular school attendance. In such a case, the payment of the child allowance can be suspended and sent to the account of a 'special receiver' (more in part 2.2.4.)

In the recent years, the child allowance is regularly indexed though their indexation is not legally binding. The monthly amount is modest to be valued as an efficient support by households with the above the average income, but it is significant aid for the MI beneficiaries' households. In 2012, almost 1.156 million of children were covered by child allowances scheme and in total EUR 316.5 million was spent for its funding. There is the World Bank's recommendation to consider means-testing of child allowances, make the system more targeted at children growing up in poorer families and "reallocate spending from family allowances to the MIS so as to increase the coverage and generosity of the BMN transfers without increasing total expenditure on social assistance". (World Bank 2012: 5) This recommendation was not accepted for several reasons that vary from considerations of higher administrative costs required by means-testing to political unwillingness to increase MIB for purportedly "undeserving" benefit takers.

Birth allowance

Birth allowance is paid for the birth of a child to parents residing permanently in the Slovak Republic.³³ In order not to support teenage pregnancies motivated economically, there is the age limit of the mother for eligibility to the allowance: mothers younger than 16 years of age are not eligible at all; eligibility of 16 – 18 mothers depends on the Court decision to grant them parental rights. Mothers who have not visited preventive gynaecologist examinations are also not eligible. The same applies to mothers who have relinquished their child in past. A lump sum of EUR 151.37 is paid for each child; for multiple births of three or more children (or the birth of two sets of twins in a two-year period) the lump sum is increased by 50% for each child.

Supplement to birth allowance

Solidarity with families with children has been enhanced since January 2007 by setting up the universal supplement to the birth allowance for the first child born. In 2009, despite the economic crisis the supplement was also extended to the second and the third child in the family. It was partly devised as the anti-crisis measure that should

³² If they live in their parents' households, they were not eligible to individual MI benefit until they are in age of 25 years.

³³ In the recent years, growing number of children is being born outside the Slovak Republic to mothers with permanent residence in Slovakia. In 2011 and in 2012, 5,691 (9.35 %) and 5,374 (8.8 %) of all children born to mothers with permanent residence in Slovakia were born abroad. These mothers can apply for the birth allowance and the supplement to birth allowance in case they do not apply for similar allowance in the host country.

have helped preserve living standard and purchasing power of families with children. Similarly to the birth allowance conditions, the eligibility for the supplement is preconditioned by the age of mother. The supplement is not given to mothers who gave birth to their child outside the European Union and were not insured for 12 months.

A lump sum of the supplement (EUR 678.49) for each child has not been indexed since its introduction. The present amendment of the Act on Child Birth Allowance and Supplement to Birth Allowance (debated in the Parliament at present) proposes merging birth allowance and supplement into one benefit. It should ease application processing and decrease administration costs for both sides of the process.

2.2.2. Balance of universal and targeted benefits

Family policy benefits in Slovakia have universal character. However, there is the tendency to make the system bound to the merit (insurance) principle and provide more support to mothers/parents with sufficient work record. This tendency seems to be stronger than the political will to increase its targeting at low-income and disadvantaged families. Lower amounts of benefits (parental allowance, child allowances), the amount of which does not suffice to lift children out of poverty, are the toll for universalism of the state family policy.

Fundamentally, there is no legal ban on combining universal and targeted benefits. There is, however, the restriction created by the very low eligibility threshold and the rules set by the Act on Assistance in Material Need for calculation of household income. According to these rules, the child allowance is the only universal family policy benefit that can be fully and easily combined with targeted benefits of the MIS (material need benefits) and top the household income as the child allowance is not calculated as income in determining the eligibility for the MI benefit. On the other hand, the whole amount of the birth allowance and the supplement to the birth allowances and 75 % of the parental allowance are calculated as the income when testing the entitlement to benefit. As the outcome, poor households with babies are mostly not qualified for the MI benefits and cannot get the status of the MI beneficiary that gives entitlement to free of charge the ECEC and free meals and school aids in the ECEC and schools. There are often only a few euros above the (very low!) eligibility threshold gained by universal birth allowances etc., which takes targeted benefits away from poor families with children. According to the expert assessment, this situation contributes to the low share of Roma children in the ECEC (Salner 2013).

The next difficulty in access to targeted benefits is the shifting amount of the entitlements for households with different socio-economic status of their members that is related to the conditionality of allowances to basic benefits.³⁴ Allowances for (regular) school attendance have been counted in the total amount of MI benefit (eligibility threshold) only since January 2013. This is the next reason why large families taking parental allowance have often remained outside the MIS though their income was lower than the total amount of benefit and allowances.

As it has been observed elsewhere, a targeted approach with a very low eligibility threshold necessarily provokes divisions and tensions not only among tax-payers and people on benefits, but also among entitled and not entitled poor people. Targeted programmes in schools (provision of food, school utilities and scholarships) seem to

³⁴ The housing benefit is typically not counted in the amount defining eligibility threshold for testing the income of households living in undocumented shelters, those with renting debts, etc.

strengthen divisions in schools and lead to stigmatisation and segregation of children covered by the programme.³⁵

2.2.3. Adequate living standard for jobless families with children

Adequacy of the minimum income scheme belongs to neglected parts of the social protection in Slovakia. High levels of severe material deprivation of families dependent on the MI benefit or the parental allowance as the only income are well documented (UNDP 2005, 2012, WB 2011), but the political will to improve the adequacy of MI benefits is missing. Minimum income benefits are significantly lower than the subsistence minimum and the EU SILC poverty line.³⁶ Consequences of inadequate benefits, first of all, incapability to live a standard way of life, to observe hygienic and cleanness standards, preference of odd work instead regular school attendance, transgression of law, stealing food, wood and other things influence negatively the life of local communities and promote mistrust, stereotypes, and moral exclusion of families dependent on MI benefits.

The social protection is approached mainly as a source of possible work disincentives and a subject of misuse. This perspective dominated in the reforms of the minimum income scheme that started in 1998 and culminated in passing the Act No. 599/2003 Coll. on Assistance in Material Need. This Act has undergone several amendments, but its original design and philosophy has been preserved.

The Act on Assistance in Material Need sets the fixed amounts of basic benefits for six categories of households. It distinguishes three groups of households according to the number of children: a household with no children; a household with one to four children and a household with five and more children. Each category is given a fixed benefit irrespective to the number of children.

Development of basic MI benefit for the defined households categories (in euro)						
	Single adult			Couple		
	Without children	From 1 to 4 children	5 children and more	Without children	From 1 to 4 children	5 children and more
2008	58.43	109.54	159.34	101.58	150.04	201.16
2009	60.5	115.1	168.2	105.2	157.6	212.3
2013	60.5	115.1	168.2	105.2	157.6	212.3
2014 (proposal)	61.6	117.1	171.20	107.20	160.40	216.10

Source: www.upsvar.sk; www.nrsr.sk Tlač 0648/2013

There are several allowances to basic MI benefit, the eligibility to which is variously preconditioned. The most extensive entitlement is to the *health care allowance* in amount of EUR 2 monthly. This amount is multiplied by the number of household members has topped MI benefits in majority of beneficiaries' households. Proposed amendment to the Act (at present debated in the Parliament) cancels this allowance.

Next important allowance to the basic benefit is *the housing allowance*: EUR 55.8 for a single person household and EUR 89.20 for households of a couple or more persons. Conditions for the housing allowance are strict and met hardly by 50 % of household in the MIS. The amount of allowance has not been indexed for 5 years and it has no relation to housing costs.

³⁵ There are several case studies that support this.

³⁶ According to the EU-SILC 2012, in 2011 the poverty threshold was EUR 346 for one person household. The amount of the subsistence minimum for the single person was EUR 189.93

Activation allowance and *protection allowance* (both of EUR 63.07) are contributions to the basic benefit that were originally intended to be available to all who are willing to be active (or have a serious health problem that prevents one to do it). Due to various legal limitations (there is the legal ban on repeated or too long participation in an activation programme) and financial constraints, the amount of activation opportunities is limited. The number of activation allowance receivers is substantially lower than in the first years of implementation of the Act. Availability of the protection allowance has been also decreased. Since January 2013, the allowance has had two levels. It is halved for those who are sick for more than 30 days. Activation and protection allowances have not been indexed for several years and there is no intent to index them.

The allowance for (regular) school attendance (EUR 17.20) is intended for children till the end of the compulsory school attendance. This allowance could be withdrawn if the child has 15 hours or more of unexcused absences. The proposed amendment to the Act sets the possibility to withdraw the benefit also in the case of “violating school rules”. The ambiguity of this provision aroused critical discussions.

The MIS also comprises allowances such as *the contribution to pregnant woman or the contribution to parents of the child up to one year of age* (both of EUR 13.50). These contributions were intended to protect against malnutrition and hunger.³⁷ Proposed amendment to the Act cancels both the contributions. Thanks to the NGOs’ participation in the comment procedure there is a chance that this support of pregnant women and young children will be preserved.

The proposed indexation of the basic MI benefit in the amendment submitted to the Parliament session is also the outcome of the comment procedure and mobilisation of the NGOs in the process. The proposed indexation does not compensate the 8.7 % depreciation of benefits due to the inflation since 2009. Moreover, due to the cancellation of health care allowance, the total amount of the basic benefit will be lower than it is at present.

Proposed amendment of the MI scheme is strongly inspired by so called Roma reform elaborated by the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma communities.³⁸ According to the NRP 2013 and SSR 2013, the new act is to improve targeting, merit principle and rewarding of those who try to get „low paid job” or those who “activate themselves”. It is true that the proposed amendment widens an opportunity to take activation allowances for low-income households and thus it will mitigate the severity of income poverty in working poor households. However, with the extending range of housing benefit beneficiaries, these are the only improvements of the protection of poor households.

The amendment has been widely criticised for introducing the workfare condition for entitlement to basic MI benefit. Sanctions of EUR 60 for any adult in the household who refuses a work proposal (“participation in the small community work”) will have a negative impact on the livelihood of all household members including children. The amendment introduces next possibilities to cut (already low and inadequate) MI benefits. It proposes subtracting the fines from the MI benefits that are imposed for

³⁷ Devastating effects of hunger and malnutrition on the development of cognitive capacities of the child are recognised (UNICEF, WHO, World Bank: *Levels & Trends in Child Malnutrition* 2012) <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2013:0141:FIN:SK:PDF>

³⁸ “The Roma reform” has been elaborated separately and without drawing on National Strategy of Roma Integration. It has prevailingly repressive disciplining character. It requires full workfare conditionality of MI benefits.

public order offences in the municipality. Sequestering of benefits has not been allowed so far.

Cutting benefits because of an inappropriate behaviour of parents (or improper behaviour of children at school and their school absenteeism) without assessing the consequences of this step for the child's well-being goes against the spirit of the Commission Recommendation that asks for using discretion "when making family benefits conditional on parenting behaviour or children's school attendance and assess the potential negative impact of such measures". (Commission 2013: 6) Several NGOs are convinced that the amendment will violate children's rights and the amended Act on Material Need Benefits should be submitted to the Constitutional Court or the European Court for Human Rights.³⁹

Adequate living standard for single parent families

An important protective institute for children from single parent families is substitutive (compensatory) alimony. Substitutive Alimony Act No. 452/2004 Coll. has been in force since January 2005. It regulates provision of substitutive alimony by the State through the OLSAF for securing subsistence of entitled persons in case those who have alimentary duty did not pay for it. Act No. 201/2008 Coll. has extended entitlement to substitutive alimony also to children, whose orphan's annuity does not reach 30 % of subsistence minimum.⁴⁰ This revision has extended the number of children taking subsistence alimony: According to MLSAF (2013b) in 2012, 12 518 children took maintenance payments. It is almost three times more than in 2005.

2.2.4. In-kind benefits

There are three most widespread in-kind benefits for children in material need

First, it is replacement of cash benefits by in-kind benefits via *the institute of the special receiver*. The special receiver takes cash child allowances and MI benefits designated for the household; decides on the household spending and supplies the family with food and other necessities. The Institute of the special receiver intervenes in the household spending in case of established child neglect. Setting up the Institute depends significantly on the local administrative capacities and the will to work with families who are, as a rule, rent debtors and prevent child taking away from the family and the family housing eviction. In the first half of 2013, a number of persons covered by the special receiver institute was 11 – 12 thousand on average according to COLSAF data. The number of children is not specified. In comparison, in 2003, child allowance for 1,858 children on average went to the special receiver and in 2005 it was child allowance for 6,840 children.⁴¹ It is not clear if the increasing number of children/persons served by the special receiver institute is the evidence of the improving municipal protection of vulnerable families with children, the evidence of sharpening vulnerability of households living from the MI benefit or both. The assessment study (Bodnárová 2012) suggests that the institute is effective social protection tool especially in combination with the field social work.

³⁹ The Slovak National Centre for Human Rights also expresses the opinion that the financial sanctions – cutting the MI benefits will result in „worsening well-being of the child and worsening his or her living standard, will have a negative impact on his or her mental and physical development and this will be the apparent violation of the Act on Family and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and their main objectives.” (SNCHR 2013: 76/77)

⁴⁰ Orphan annuity is fully based on insurance principle since the reform of Act on Social Insurance in 2003.

⁴¹ MLSAF 2006: Report on social situation of population of Slovakia.

There are two in-kind benefits provided to children from low-income families at the ECEC and elementary schools (providing ISCED 1 and 2): free school meals and school aids. Both were introduced with the objective to increase the motivation of poor children to regular school attendance. Eligibility for both programmes is based on the household income test and – since January 2006 – it also depends on the share of pupils from MI beneficiary households in the given school. Children are individually eligible if they come from households of MI beneficiaries or households with income less than the subsistence minimum.⁴² Since 2006 all children in school are entitled to the programme if at least 50 % of pupils come from low-income households. This condition partly mitigates stigmatised effects of these programmes. According to the eligibility criteria, children from families of pensioners and the working poor are also supported if the household income is less than the subsistence minimum. However, the eligibility threshold is still very low and children are excluded from the programme as soon as the family's economic situation slightly improves.

Free meals

This programme has official name “subsidy to support eating habits development”. In 2012, 79 406 children from kindergartens and elementary schools, on monthly average, received free of charge meals at school. It was by 891 children less than in 2011 and the number given amounts to 14.5 % of the children enrolled in kindergartens and elementary schools. The programme of free meals is most widespread in the regions with high unemployment and high share of households on MI benefits.

School aids

The programme of free school aids (exercise books, utensils) covers higher number of pupils than the free meals programme: 89,516 pupils on average. School aids are provided to pupils two times a year. Both programmes are funded from the state budget.

Free access to sport and hobby youth centres

Free access to sport and hobby youth centres can be considered a sort of in-kind benefits. There has been long tradition of public funding of free time and youth centres on the basis of number of participants in Slovakia. Participation of children in material need has only been regulated since 2008. The School Act No. 245/2008 Coll. sets in its articles 114 – 116 that the founder of a free times centre, a school club or other child and youth facility can free children from households on MI benefits from paying participation fees. Municipalities as founders of the children free time facilities have to set regulation of payment, reduction or freeing from fees by generally binding regulation. A central evidence of number of children from households on MI benefits having free access to children and youth free time facilities is missing. It can be expected that there could be high diversity of rules in this relation and many municipalities might have not approved generally binding regulation for this issue.

⁴² As the MI benefit is not sensitive to the number of dependent children in household, the gap between the subsistence minimum and MI benefit grows with increasing number of children in family. The subsistence minimum is significantly lower than the EU-SILC based poverty threshold (see for instance: Kusá et al. 2012)

Recent change in the financing of free time activities of children and youth can have a contradictory effect on poor children's access: instead of supporting children and youth centres directly (on the basis of number of participants enrolled), subsidies go to the municipalities that will decide on the distribution of the subsidy. Existing centres suspect they are put in danger of underfunding and staff dismissal.⁴³

Subsidised holidays for disadvantaged children are provided by leisure-time and hobby centres as well as by NGOs, charity organisations and the child protection and custody departments of the LSAF offices. Subsidies can be obtained from public resources (the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour's grant schemes, grant scheme of the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma communities, or various charitable endowments and private sponsors. The statistics about the number of disadvantaged children having participated in subsidised vacations are not available.

2.2.5. Issue of stigmatisation and low take-up

The social assistance reforms of 1998, 2002, and 2003 have changed the Slovak MIS to the residual type 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. The MIS only provides support to households with no or very low amount of income. Provided support is also very low, often significantly below the subsistence minimum and makes it impossible for beneficiaries to maintain decent living standard. MI benefits hardly suffice to meet essential needs. Longer living on benefits deepens precarious conditions of families and sooner or later leads to social exclusion. High unemployment of Roma goes hand in hand with domination of the Roma population among MI beneficiaries in some regions. It is the reason why in public opinion the MIS and related programmes of school aids and free meals are strongly associated with Roma and sometimes understood as exclusively provided for them. In the society with high level of ethnic stereotypes and anti-Roma prejudices this can lead to stigmatisation of the MIS and lower take up by non-Roma population. However, according to the field experiences, the main cause of possible lower take-up seems to be insufficient informing, missing individual approach to clients and discouraging behaviour of the labour offices staff.⁴⁴

■ Recommendation: One of the most urgent needs is to re-establish the system of social assistance benefits on the basis of the careful assessment of the minimum living standards for all household members so that the benefits could secure modest, but decent life for all of them and their basic integration in society.

3. Access to affordable quality services

Slovakia has enormous deficiencies in all types of essential services. There is availability and affordability problem in the ECEC and housing, there is a huge problem with the overload of teachers, social workers and child protection custodians and there are serious problems due to the lack of financing within all the sectors. Governance problems penetrate majority of the areas: central government's ambitions might encounter reluctance and lack of professional capacities at the municipal level that has the authority to decide on fundamental issues such as housing, the ECEC and other services for children, including desegregation programmes.

⁴³ <http://www.sme.sk/c/6816575/centra-volneho-casu-zanikaju-ministerstvo-mozno-zakon-upravi.html>; <http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/293037-k-zaciatku-skolskeho-roka-zaniklo-16-centier-volneho-casu/>

⁴⁴ These are common findings from interviews with MI beneficiaries as well from the debates from the Slovak Anti-Poverty Network conferences where MI beneficiaries are frequent participants.

3.1. Early childhood education and care

Proportion of older children enrolled in formal provisions is below the EU average. Administrative data on kindergartens confirm this picture. Two-year-old children attend kindergartens very rarely.⁴⁵ It has been suggested in part 2.1.3 that since 1980's, the dominating policy opinion has been that personal parental care for children younger than three years is the most favourable for their development. This policy opinion has led to the promotion of relatively generous family benefits and policy measures supporting access to the ECEC remained limited in scope.

According to EU SILC 2010, more than one quarter of children from 3 to 6 years wasn't involved in any form of the ECEC. Children aged less than 3 are almost completely cared for in informal ways, only 3 % of them attended formal childcare in the given year (all of them full-time). The public ECEC for children less than three years old almost does not exist and the legal framework of this social service does not exist as well.

Recently, in response to increased birth rate and age cohorts of children in pre-school age, the ECEC has come to the forefront again. The next impetus for increasing the political importance of child education and care are aggravating difficulties and bad school results of children from poor households, particularly Roma, who did not attend kindergarten and pre-school education. Share of disadvantaged pupils with pre-school kindergarten attendance was continuously decreasing between 2007 and 2009. (Kriglerová et al 2010)

The support of the access to kindergartens for children from low-income households has only become more systematic in the last decade. Since 2004 and 2006 meals in kindergartens have been made free of charge for children of all ages coming from families with income less than the subsistence minimum. The School Act (245/2008 Coll.) has made pre-school education free to all children from families in material need for the duration of schooling. However, the families with small children are very often not the MI beneficiaries⁴⁶ and even if their income is close or less than the subsistence minimum, they are required to pay charge for kindergarten. The required monthly fee of EUR 15 is too high for these families. The last year before the school enrolment is the only that is free of charge for all children.

There are several reasons why Roma children, particularly those from marginalised communities, rarely take part in the ECEC. Some of them have already been discussed in the section 2. 2.2. Two strongest factors are (a) difficult access and low availability of kindergartens particularly in rural areas and (b) non-affordability for low income families. (Salner 2013)⁴⁷ Material conditions of families in material need often hamper sending a child into the ECEC (lack of clothing, shoes and other items to ensure that the child feels dignified). Here, a mere removing charge for attendance does not suffice. It does not remove the consequences of financial hardship.

⁴⁵ Extension of kindergartens' coverage in 1990s toward involvement of 2-year-old children was done as a reaction to cancellation of nurseries.

⁴⁶ The World Bank's explanation of low share of large families in the MIS has been already provided.

⁴⁷ Even EUR 15 is too big amount for the households with their income close to the subsistence minimum. Parents should pay this amount monthly for the ECEC if they are not on MI benefit and free from the fee. Reduction in regional transportation services (buses and trains) and missing special school transport also hamper the access to the early childhood education services in rural areas with the high concentration of marginalised communities.

Financial demands of securing availability of the ECEC already seemed to be the main barrier to the initiatives in this field before the financial crisis⁴⁸. They compelled digression from the commitment to improve the access of the most disadvantaged children to pre-school education and led to the promotion of the programme of so called zero classes for children who do not have cognitive, motor, language and other skills necessary for successful education process (more about the programme of zero class in the part 3.2.).

The National Roma Integration Strategy (2012) and the Revised National Action Plan of the Decade of Roma Inclusion it is based on (2011) has caused the turnover in the strategic policy thinking about the importance of the ECEC for the school success of Roma children. Especially for success of those from the disadvantaged environment and those whose mother tongue is Roma. These children do not have an opportunity to be educated in their mother tongue as the Slovak Republic does not secure Roma children the right to be educated in their mother tongue. The objective to promote access to the ECEC has reappeared in the policy documents (including NRP 2013). Implementation strategies and allocation of resources to this objective are postponed to the new multiannual financial framework. Daring plans in this area might be tamed also by the fact that the pre-school education is legally defined as the original competence of local governments. It means that municipalities have a final word in the decision about the development in the ECEC.

There is general recognition that the widening access to the ECEC will be financially extremely demanding and cannot be implemented without use of the structural funds. There are considerations of possibility of making the pre-school education compulsory in order to secure participation of Roma children. The Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities pushes through a proposal of obligatory pre-school education from 3 years of age targeted solely at children from the "riskiest" environment. It is likely that this plan is associated with the envisaged Act on Socially Excluded Communities that should be prepared in 2014. This act will also regulate the access to early childhood care and education and it is assumed that it might set a specific regime for pre-school participation of children from the most deprived communities. In general, setting up new classes in kindergarten will be further left on „possibilities of the founders“, which are basically municipalities according to the Competence Act.

3.2. Education system capacity to break cycle of disadvantage

International comparative surveys of students' competences PISA suggest that the Slovak education system is not successful in equalising educational prospects of children with diverse social-economic background. On the contrary, it rather contributes to reproduction of parents' level of education. Several factors contributing to the determining impact of the family of origin on the pupil's school results are identified. High stratification of the Slovak education and extensive early tracking of pupils into special educational streams (special schools, eight-year grammar schools, selective elementary schools and classes) is of significant influence. (OECD 2010a, 2010b)

Recent policy documents (NRP 2012, 2013, Partnership Agreement 2013) recognise negative consequences of deep differences in the economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) of Slovak students and of the ESCS compositions of schools: there are significant differences in knowledge of students from different schools even on the level of compulsory education. (Partnerská 2013) This condition has a negative impact

⁴⁸ In Slovakia, austerity measures in the public sector have already been implemented before the financial and economic crisis as the part of implementing Maastricht criteria of transition to euro (2009).

on school results and education prospects of students with the low ESCS. School results of students with the low ESCS are significantly worse in schools and classes where students with the low ESCS prevail and vice versa.

Documented favourable consequences of anti-tracking and anti-segregation policies in other countries do not have significant impact on the education policy in Slovakia so far. Monitoring of the integration and segregation practices in the Slovak education show that despite the explicit ban on discrimination and segregation by the School Act separation and segregation practices targeted at children with the low ESCS and particularly Roma children persist. (Amnesty 2013, Hapalová – Kriglerová 2013, Public Defender 2013). Covert segregation is a serious and chronic problem of the Slovak elementary education.⁴⁹

Besides the well-known problem of special schools that tend to become “a refuge” of considerable amount of pupils with the language barrier, there are various forms of Roma pupils' segregation within the standard schools, too. In schools with several parallel classes, there is a tendency to concentrate Roma pupils in one class and non-Roma pupils to the other – very often as a consequence of the pressure of non-Roma pupils' parents. The programme of zero classes should promote basic learning and social skills that are the basis for success in education. The zero class programme, which is very popular among school managements due to the 200 % higher normative for pupils, shows segregation effects, too. As a rule, after finishing the zero class, pupils are not mixed with pupils from standard classes, but continue their education separately. (Hapalová – Kriglerová 2013) Placing in zero classes could contribute to a low self-esteem and low ambitions of children from socially disadvantaged environment and Roma pupils.⁵⁰

Next weak point that is structurally inbuilt in the programme is that the zero class is included in ten years of compulsory education and this might complicate further education of students who repeat a year.⁵¹ It cannot be considered to be full-fledged substitution of the early childhood education as from the developmental psychology perspective it comes too late to perform an effective cognitive stimulation and stimulation of personal development.

Controls of the State School Inspection also reveal⁵² deficiencies in the internal control and assessment system of individual schools. Schools do not have defined their strategies and priorities in the area of social inclusion and tools for assessment of their implementation. Teachers pay attention mainly to the development of cognitive skills and working habits and education to tolerance, cooperation etc. is a marginal and coincidental issue. There is a very low resolution to desegregate. (Amnesty 2013)

The special report of Public Defender of Rights (2013b) also warns against the violation of the Roma children's right to proper education and education in their mother tongue. The report is based on the field observation in 21 schools and documents that mastering Roma language is still not the condition of a teacher assistant position. It also deals with the above the average share of Roma children in special schools and special classes (and individually integrated pupils) that seriously limit the chances of further education of pupils graduated from these schools. The

⁴⁹ <http://www.mecem.sk/rpa/?id=sita&lang=slovak&show=23431>

⁵⁰ <http://aktualne.atlas.sk/nulte-rocniky-mozu-romske-deti-aj-brzdit/slovensko/skolstvo/>

⁵¹ Slovak School Act expects that pupils who reach 16 years of age cannot stay at elementary school irrespective of the fact in which grade they are. This requirement (which was likely set to prevent bullying) expels older pupils.

⁵² Správa o stave a úrovni výchovy a vzdelávania v školách a školských zariadeniach v SR v školskom roku 2011/2012

Public Defender states that the rights of a big amount of small children often from very poor families are violated. (Public Defender 2013b)⁵³

Observations in schools suggest that it is hardly possible to expect social inclusion initiatives from the “bottom” and on the volunteer basis. The Slovak education system suffers from insufficient funding, overloaded and poorly paid teachers. In areas with numerous Roma communities, schools are overpopulated and pupils attend schools in shifts – there is no space and capacities for after school activities or tutorage.⁵⁴ Initiatives from “the above” are partly hampered by high levels of prejudices and lack of solidarity with Roma population on one hand and by satisfaction with “too good performance” in the early school leavers’ indicator on the other.⁵⁵

3.3. Health care

The health care system has a very good coverage in Slovakia. In principle, everybody has access to health care. Health care is funded by health insurance and contributions are paid by both employers and employees. Those without a job are insured by the state: children, pensioners, persons on parental leave, family carers and jobseekers registered by labour offices.

Though majority of medical care is free of charge, this only applies in a limited scope to dentist care and medicaments. Patient’s supplement payments are often too high for low income groups. UNDP (2012) The Roma household survey documents that there is a part of households, which cannot afford to take medications from the pharmacy and follow doctors’ instructions. Doctors’ visits and taking medications from the pharmacy is more complicated in rural areas due to travel costs and bad transport connection.

In segregated Roma communities with very bad housing conditions and lacking or dysfunctional water supply and sewerage, there is above the average occurrence of infection diseases such as hepatitis, tuberculosis and other diseases particularly dangerous to children. In an emergency situation inhabitants of settlements with infection are vaccinated free of charge.

In the area of health care, the only systematic programme targeted at most disadvantaged communities was the programme of health care mediators working in the most deprived regions. The programme has a clearly positive impact on the access to health care of those living in segregated communities. (MHSR 2011) The programme was underfinanced and only 30 health mediators were involved. In 2012, the Ministry of Health case did not secure funds for the programme. In 2013, the health mediator programme has been re-launched under the auspices of the

⁵³ The Public Defender of Rights submitted this report to the National Council. When members of Parliament were approving the programme of the Session, they voted against placing Defender’s report on the programme. <http://romovia.sme.sk/c/6922670/ombudsmanka-poslanci-rezignovali-na-prava-deti.html>

⁵⁴ The ratio of pupils per one teacher at the first stage of elementary school is higher in SK than in many other EU-27 countries. In 2011 it was 17 pupils per teacher (12 pupils per teacher in Austria, Denmark or Belgium). A high number of pupils in classes make it very difficult to approach pupils individually. Such situation is discouraging for both excellent and weak pupils and leads to high demand for tracking students according school results. Present Ministry of Education considers the present teacher-pupils ratio as favourable and even increasable.

⁵⁵ It is necessary to use available administrative data on socially disadvantaged students. School statistics show that shares of drop-outs among children from socially disadvantaged environment are very high; about 30 %. This is several multiple of the Slovak average. (Správa 2013)

Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities. The plan is to increase the number of health assistances at least three times till the end of 2013.⁵⁶

3.4. Housing and living environment

EU-SILC data suggest a very low level of housing deprivation in Slovakia and do not indicate problems with quality of housing. 90.3 % of Slovak households did not indicate any type of housing deprivation (78.5 % in EU-27) according EU SILC 2011. However, there are several indicators such as the share of overpopulated households or the share of young adults living in their parents' households (the highest share in the EU-27) that suggest a problem with the housing availability and affordability for middle and low wage earners and for those living on MI benefits. Though the housing policy has substantially improved in the last decade, public housing construction has not been capable to fill the gap in housing supply. The housing stock availability is below the EU average (329 apartments per 1 thousand inhabitants according to the SK 2011 Census)

The 2011 Census informs about the deterioration of housing availability in the country (the share of apartments inhabited by two and more census households exceeds 20 %) and the increase of the share of low quality housing (fourth category dwellings).⁵⁷ The lowest quality housing occurs often in areas inhabited by Roma communities. Public rental housing represents a very low share of the housing stock. Only 1.8 % of the housing stock in the country was identified as municipal rental housing.⁵⁸

As a result of the economic crisis and austerity measures, budgetary resources for support of housing declined. Municipalities also show less interest in public housing construction.⁵⁹ As a consequence, the public housing construction, including rental housing of lower standard for marginalised groups, has been decreasing since 2008.

An insufficient access to decent housing in marginalised Roma communities is a persisting challenge that is, however, not perceived as a rights' issue, but as an issue of violation of the public order and the public hygiene in Slovakia. The appalling housing situation of marginalised Roma communities, though it is not well grasped by EU-SILC, is sufficiently ill-famed. The present complex situation is mainly the outcome of the Slovak governments' resignation on the state housing policy and on support of the public housing construction in the 1990s. Since the early 1990s, local governments have been made free to design and implement their housing policies without receiving any central support or being obliged to follow common standards. Cancellation of the programme of Roma shanties liquidation and cancellation of the system of social work targeted at Roma communities, no support of public housing construction, non-existence of standards such as "social mix" have led to pushing low-income families out of the central parts of towns and villages to their margins, to concentrating rent-debtors and "trouble-making tenants" in the same neighbourhoods. These gradually changed into infamous places such as Luník IX in Košice. This neighbourhood consists of apartments designed for 2,400 persons in total. However, due to the housing shortage, in 2011 these apartments had 6, 094 registered

⁵⁶ http://www.minv.sk/?spravy_rk&sprava=terenni-zdravotni-asistenti-pre-romske-komunitysu-uz-vyskoleni

⁵⁷ The share of the population living in apartments and houses of the fourth category increased from 7.5 % to 11.6 % between the Censuses.

⁵⁸ It is possible that the share is higher than 0.7 %. There are 4 % of dwellings the ownership status of which was not identified by the 2011 Census.

⁵⁹ The Ministry of Transport, Construction and Regional Development: 2012: Report on reaching the goals of the Concept of State Housing Policy until 2015.

inhabitants; out of them 2,486 children under 14 years of age. Almost 41 % of inhabitants of Luník IX are children. Almost 90 % of inhabitants live there cut off electricity, heating and water because of rent debts.

Occasional tragedies such as deaths of children because of fire, frosts or a rats' attack in poor dwellings did not become the impetus for a substantial change in the housing policy. The housing rights protection of low-income dwellers seems to be poor. Housing is not considered a right in the public policy practice. Numerous cases of forced evictions of families with children and demolitions of undocumented dwellings have been done without compensation. Even dwellings of the families with children do not enjoy protection. For instance one hundred children lived in the Košice slum community "Za teplárňou" that was demolished in the end of October 2012.⁶⁰ No child was taken from parents after the demolition of dwellings as parents stated they would move to their relatives.⁶¹ According to the Slovak National Centre for Human rights, „Slovak legislation tolerates forced eviction to a large extent and provides only poor protection for victims of forced eviction“. (SNCHR 2013: 142) In her recent assessment of the case of demolition of Roma dwellings, the Public Defender of Rights pronounces that the Slovak public bodies violated Roma families' rights to housing. (Public Defender 2013a)

Facilities for emergency accommodation (emergency housing, the halfway houses, supported housing facilities, crisis centres) have limited capacities and there are only few types of facilities that provide accommodation for families with children. Amendment to the Social Services Act (submitted to the Government's session in September 2013) has limited the opportunity to use the services of emergency housing facilities solely to persons experiencing domestic violence and abuse. According to the emergency housing services providers, this change will threaten lone parents with children who use to live in such facilities.⁶²

3.5. Family support

Various types of family support have been outlined and assessed in the part 2. 1. In this part, the situation in the system providing remediation and rehabilitation for family members or families as the whole in a crisis situation and the situation in the system of the community field work is briefly mentioned.

- Social protection and custody for children

Social protection and custody for children is an organisational part of the OLSAF. In 2012, it was provided by 113 specialists of the offices of LSAF, it was less than in 2011 and 2010 (116 and 118 employees). Social custody was provided to 25,930 children in total.⁶³ The overload of child protection custodians is extremely high: there

⁶⁰ <http://kosice.korzar.sme.sk/c/5906818/romovia-z-demetera-neodisli-usadili-sa-v-stanoch.html>; <http://kosice.korzar.sme.sk/c/6587108/kosice-zlikvidovali-nelegalnu-osadu-pri-teplarni.html>

⁶¹ <http://udalosti.noviny.sk/z-domova/31-10-2012/tazke-mechanizmy-za-kosickou-teplarnou-zburali-nelegalnu-osadu.html>;

⁶² Discussion of services providers at the Conference of Socioforum, the Slovak Antipoverty Network and the MLSAF "Active Inclusion – we will manage it together" Bratislava October 1, 2013.

⁶³ The Report on Social Situation of the Population of Slovakia in 2012 informs that out of them one third, 8,479 children, was supervised by custodians because of neglect of school attendance. It is clear that in this situation the supervision is more or less formal and positive effects are not large.

were 229 children per one child protection specialist/custodian. This ratio provides a clear message about overburdened services of child protection and impossibility of an individual approach. The work of specialists from the offices of LSAF is supplemented by the work of expert NGOs that focus on rehabilitation of families. In 2012, they provided support to 545 children and it was the increase by 123 in comparison with 2013. The work of the NGOs is irregularly supported in this field as well and tutorial, mentoring and assistance services they could provide are not used⁶⁴.

- Programme of community field work

The programme of community field work is the programme funded by the national project targeted at marginalised Roma communities. In practice, community field workers serve as mediators between municipalities, offices of LSAF, schools and families belonging to marginalised Roma communities. In 2012, community field work was running in 201 municipalities with marginalised Roma communities. There is an effort to engage community field workers in fight against school absenteeism to a larger extent.

- *Recommendation:* A whole domain of the essential services (but primarily the ECEC, housing, child protection, and custody and services for families in crisis) urgently requires the increasing investment in availability of services, in staff and in physical facilities development. It is necessary to deal with the governance problems and consider taking the competences away from local governments that have not been accomplished properly, especially in the area of the ECEC and housing.

4. Addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester

Though the National Reforms Programme 2013 was drafted after the publication of the Commission Recommendation on Investing in children, it is not informed by this document. Similarly to the previous NRPs, education is highlighted as the key mechanism of breaking intergenerational transmission of poverty. Determination to implement an integrated approach to multifaceted barriers of the access to education that children from marginalised Roma communities face is not documented by a concrete plan and measures in this document. The pilot programme of inclusion programme in kindergartens is the exception.⁶⁵

Contrary to the NRP 2011 and 2012, the NRP 2013 stresses the importance of pre-primary education and puts forth the national target to increase the share of children older than four years attending kindergartens to 95 % until 2020. An outline of the way to reach this important target is not developed. There are several partial tasks associated with this goal described in the Action Plan to the NRP 2013. Some of them

⁶⁴ The same source as referred to in the Note 59

⁶⁵ The programme covers such small, but important details as slippers or pyjamas for afternoon sleep for children from marginalised communities. Provision of such items from the project resources often matters in the social inclusion processes. However, this option is still exceptional. (Interview with Zuzana Kumanová, the former expert of the Roma Plenipotentiary Office)

are targeted at legislation amendment, other deal with education and training of pedagogues and improvement of methodology.⁶⁶

The problem of school segregation is only sketched and prevention of early school leaving among children from the disadvantaged environment and the second chance education are not dealt with.

Integrated approaches to child poverty are not envisaged in the NRP 2013 and their need is not explicitly recognised. In the area of social protection, the NRP and SSR continue in neglecting the issue of adequacy of MI benefits. The attention is paid solely to the issues of better targeting, conditionality and prevention of benefits misuse. Neither NRP 2013, nor the Country specific recommendations for Slovakia (June 2013) show signs of the lesson learned from the Commission Communication on SIP and its Recommendation on Investing in Children.

The plans related to the social protection reform that were mentioned in the NRP 2013 were rather vague and the recent development (more in part 2.2.) deviates from them. An intended limitation of universality of some benefits (child allowances, the contribution to the birth allowance) was not implemented.

In the area of services for disadvantaged families, the NRP 2013 lists existing earlier, running or designed programmes such as field social work, a project of creating standards for work of community centres (in fact the project was halted in 2012 and the only step accomplished in 2013 is the legal framing of community centres as the social service in the amendment to the Social Services Act), a project of deinstitutionalisation (transformation of children's homes into more personalised care) and pilot programmes All-day-education and Inclusive Model of Education at Preschool Level of Education System.

Though SSR 2013 is more responsive to the issue of the access to housing and it outlines planned improvements of the support of social housing construction, both policy documents ignore problematic housing conditions of families with children in marginalised Roma communities such as lack of access to electricity and running drinking water.

▪ Recommendations: It is necessary to withdraw the preparation of the guidelines for the NRPs from the exclusive competence of ECOFIN and open it to social ministers, too. The Country specific recommendations should be prepared in cooperation with social protection experts, too. It seems to be the only way to integrate better the Commission Recommendation on investing in children into the European Semester.

⁶⁶ Education-related projects are much more elaborated and precisely planned than social protection projects. They concern improvement of pedagogic methods of work with children and pupils from disadvantaged communities, education and training of pedagogues (for instance how to deal with aggressiveness of the child, etc.), School Act amendment to launch the all-day education (it is not clear if it concerns all pupils). Issuing of school books in Roma language is also mentioned (without resource allocation).

5. Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments

EU financial instruments are of substantial importance for any innovative efforts in the social protection policy, including the access to public and social services. However, the assessments of Slovakia's implementation of the horizontal priority Marginalised Roma Communities of 2007 – 2013 programming period (Salner 2013, UNDP 2013) suggest that an inadequate design, indicators and monitoring and control mechanism might lead to an insufficient targeting of resources and a lack of positive effects for the target groups. There is a growing recognition among the experts and policy makers that the resources for the horizontal priority were mostly not used for improving living conditions and education and employment prospects of marginalised Roma communities and the new financial framework is possibly the last chance for Slovakia to make a significant breakthrough in the area of Roma integration.

There is increased awareness that good preparation of the new financial framework is of essential importance as there is pressure on the part of the Commission for setting clear targets and controllable indicators as well as the threat of financial sanctions in case of not reaching them.

Social protection and social inclusion objectives are mainly covered by the OP Human Resources operated by the MLSAF and the Ministry of Education. The continuing horizontal priority Marginal Roma Communities (MRC) that will make possible combine resources of several operational programmes and the integrated approach to marginalised Roma communities is coordinated by the Office of Government's Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities.

At present, the second revised version of the OP Human Resources (September 5, 2013) has already been available and the commenting session of the preparatory group that includes wide range of stakeholders and ex-ante assessment experts has been held.⁶⁷ Though basically, all specific objectives and investing priorities included in the OP Human Resources are important and address essential social and economic problems, individual objectives and targets are not put into the "hierarchy of importance". A consensus about resources allocation has not been reached so far and it is more or less clear that the decision on resources allocation will be made at the top political level (level of ministries) and other factors than the expert arguments will be considered.

In situation of lacking information on resource allocation it is almost impossible to assess appropriateness of the OP Human Resources and find out if some important objectives are not underestimated. It is clear for all stakeholders involved that the significant work has still to be done in the area of indicators for the OP targets (it concerns to majority of OP) and specification of available data/bases that can be used for measuring the progress in specific areas. It might be stated that the targets and the indicators for the horizontal priority MRC are more elaborated and specific than targets and indicators for other areas⁶⁸. This is the outcome of the close follow-up of the Revised National Action Plan and the National Roma Strategy by this programming document.

The precisely quantified targets in the horizontal priority MRC do not seem to be welcomed and appreciated by all. There are indications that the fear of the sanctions,

⁶⁷ Zuzana Kusá, the author of this report, represents the Slovak Academy of Sciences in this group.

⁶⁸ The targets for the HP MRC are also territorially bound to the segregated and the most deprived Roma communities identified by the extensive mapping in the Atlas of Roma Communities. First results are available at: http://www.minv.sk/?atlas_2013

which could be imposed by the Commission in case of failure to reach specific objectives, might paralyse efforts to set clear and ambitious targets in the area of social inclusion, especially in the area of inclusion of marginalised Roma communities. It is possible that there will be a pressure to formulate indicators in vaguer and therefore safer way (to protect against possible sanctions by the Commission).

There is (partly surprising) information from the sources close to the core preparatory team of the OP Human Resources that the Commission is not in favour of putting children and the effort to break the cycle of disadvantage on more significant place within the OP. Incentives for more measures that would be targeted at disadvantaged children will certainly not come from the Commission and negotiation of such measures has been rather difficult. An indication of the Commission's position might be reducing the general target to increase the availability of quality, sustainable and affordable solutions in the ECEC (which was present in May 2013 version of the OP) to the mere horizontal priority MRC (in September 2013 version). This reduction might lead to better resources targeted at those most disadvantaged. However, on the other hand, such narrow targeting might, in fact, lead to further segregation of Roma children and only "improving living conditions in ghetto". There are several other suggestions (such as planned use of the structural funds solely to administrative and legal consolidation of the ownership of land on which houses are built in segregated and separated Roma communities) that reduction or elimination of the greatest risks related to extreme poverty and social exclusion is predominantly on the programme of the next programming period.

- *Recommendations:* Using structural funds for fighting with the deficiency of the living conditions of the most deprived communities in Slovakia is of essential importance. However, at the same time, it is of urgent importance to invest in opportunities of social inclusion: to support building the spaces for common growing up, learning playing and making friendships among Roma and non-Roma children. The ECEC facilities, schools and children and youth free-time facilities, including sport clubs with clear commitment to the ethnical balance should receive extra support for their activities and their staff development (to secure the individual approach to various needs of participating children and youth). Free (public) transport for children attending the ethnically mixed ECEC, schools and free time facilities could also be supported.

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