Peer Review
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Promoting the Social Inclusion of Children in a Disadvantaged Rural Environment — the Micro-Region of Szécsény

Budapest , 27–28.5.2010

Synthesis Report

On behalf of the
European Commission
Employment, Social Affairs
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José Manuel Fresnoe

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Summary

With 19 million children living under the poverty threshold in the EU-27, reducing child poverty and promoting social inclusion have been placed at the heart of the European Union's policy agenda. EU policy documents have increasingly recognised the importance of measures specifically targeting groups in the most disadvantaged regions and those at particular risk of poverty, such as one-parent families, minorities or people with a disability.

The Roma population is one of the largest and most socially disadvantaged ethnic minorities in the EU. Ten to twelve million citizens are spread throughout the European continent, mainly concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe. It is a relatively young population, with around 50% of Roma citizens thought to be under the age of 18 in some countries. But the environment of the majority of Roma children is one of marginalisation, poverty and exclusion, and in many countries, their situation has worsened significantly over the past two decades.

At EU level, the recent enlargements towards Central and Eastern Europe have prompted public and private initiatives designed to facilitate the integration of the Roma community and to reduce social inequalities experienced by Roma persons.

Eliminating the segregation and social exclusion of its large Roma minority, whose children are particularly at risk of poverty, is also an important priority for the Hungarian government. Adopted by Parliament in 2007, Hungary's '*Making Things Better for our Children*' National Strategy aims, over a period of 25 years (2007–2032):

- to significantly reduce the poverty rate of children and their families and improve children's chances of continuing studies and bettering their life prospects;
- to eliminate extreme forms of child poverty, exclusion and segregation, and;

- to fundamentally reform the methods and approaches pursued by existing institutions, which contribute to the reproduction of poverty and social exclusion.

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

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

The project has demonstrated its effectiveness and displays important elements of potential transferability, not only to other micro-regions in Hungary, but also to other countries in the European Union. The strengths of the project are related to its bottom-up approach and to its adaptation not only to the circumstances of the micro-region but also to the particular realities of each settlement, thanks to the delivery of policies at the local level, the active involvement of stakeholders, the building of partnerships and the active engagement of all partners concerned.

It was this project that was presented to participants of the Peer Review on "Promoting the social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment", hosted by the Hungarian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour on 27–28 May 2010. The Peer Review was held just before the entry into office of the new Hungarian government and the incoming head of social integration issues assured participants that the new government intended to pay special attention to tackling child poverty and including society's most disadvantaged groups and to pursue the implementation and further develop successful programmes and good practices in this field.

In addition to the host country, six peer countries were represented, namely: Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Portugal, Serbia and the United Kingdom. Also present were representatives of the NGO Eurochild and of the European Commission's DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. After visiting the Szécsény 'Give Kids a Chance' pilot programme, participants gathered in Budapest, where discussions focused, among others, on policy priorities, the relation between national policies and local projects, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, the promotion of cultural change, monitoring and evaluation, long-term sustainability, desegregation and active participation of local communities.

The broad political consensus surrounding the 'Give Kids a Chance' programme at its launch was highlighted as a key element in the experience's success. Participants considered the existence of a national framework strategy as a useful element in ensuring policy coherence and good cooperation between national and local levels. They also underscored the importance of local level participation and of the adaptation of measures to local circumstances, which is facilitated by the programme's micro-regional approach.

In terms of achieving positive results, the main lessons learned from the Szécsény programme were the following:

- Projects must be sustainable. This implies:
    - a long-term approach and continuing action, and, in this respect, the long-term generational approach over 25 years and the

progressive, scaled-up implementation of the 'Give Kids a Chance' programme were viewed as particularly laudable.

- building people's capacity and enabling them to participate in decision-making relating to their future;
- aiming for normalisation and real inclusion of the Roma.

- Projects should build on previous experiences with demonstrated effectiveness and on proven principles, such as the need for an overarching institutional framework, broad-based participation and socio-political consensus, leadership, commitment, client-based services, proper monitoring, active participation of local authorities and, to some extent, civil society, and an intercultural approach.

- Political commitment is essential. It is important to underscore that promoting the welfare of Roma children is beneficial to society as a whole. Indeed, as well as being unethical, the exclusion of the Roma is economically unsustainable, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where the Roma population is the youngest and fastest-growing demographic segment in a region characterised by declining birth rates.

- The territorial approach has proven highly effective but also activities must be adapted to the different circumstances and needs of each settlement, with a bottom-up approach.

- Effective data collection, though sometimes controversial in the Roma context, is vital. Common indicators used to measure child poverty have to be complemented with other specific indicators that are adapted to the specificities of the area and people involved.

- The involvement of Universities and Research Centres can play a positive role in all the phases of the project, including diagnosis, planning, monitoring and evaluation.

- Access to EU Structural Funds should be simplified to gain in efficiency and help the most vulnerable to make use of available funding.

- Mainstreaming Roma issues into the general policies is very important given that most problems can only be resolved through structural policies.

Part A: Policy Context at the European Level

Child Poverty Reduction

Reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion were placed at the heart of the European Union's policy agenda at the Lisbon European Council of March 2000, where heads of state and government pledged to achieve a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty and social exclusion by 2010. Since then, child poverty and the social exclusion of children have emerged as increasingly important issues.

Indeed, according to Eurostat,[1] children are at a greater risk of poverty than the average population across the EU-27 (20%, compared with 17% for the total population) and in the majority of Member States. According to data from 2007, children most at risk of poverty tend to come from two types of household, namely: single parent households with dependent children and households with two parents and three or more children. Living in a household where none of the adults work is also likely to have a significant impact on children's current and future living conditions and on their poverty risk. In 2007, approximately one in every ten children (9.4%) in the EU-27 lived in a jobless household.[2]

In spring 2006, the European Council's conclusions invited Member States "to take necessary measures to rapidly and significantly reduce child poverty, giving all children equal opportunities, regardless of their social background".[3] The statement underscored the damaging effect of child poverty and social exclusion on the future life opportunities of children and on their future capacity to contribute to tomorrow's society.

In line with these conclusions, Member States responded, in their strategic reports for 2006–2008, with a series of commitments towards breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty and exclusion. Almost all identified

1 Eurostat. 2010.
2 Jobless households are defined as those in which no one has worked during four weeks preceding the Labour Force Survey.
3 Council of the European Union. 2006.

the need to develop an integrated and long-term approach to preventing and addressing poverty and social exclusion among children as a priority.

In July 2006, the European Commission stressed that "respecting and promoting the rights of all children should go hand in hand with the necessary action to address their basic needs".[4] This Communication was a new step in the process of linking children's rights to the EU's Social Inclusion Process and to the reduction of child poverty.

The Commission report '*Eradicating child poverty: from analysis to targeted policies and implementation*',[5] further highlights the importance of taking a holistic approach to the material security and wellbeing of children. Such an approach should include legal measures, such as those highlighted in the *EU Guidelines for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of the Child*,[6] which stresses the importance of key international and European human rights legal instruments, norms and standards, as well as political commitments relevant to the promotion and protection of the rights of the child.[7] However, policies and specific actions targeting families in need are also required in order to break the vicious circle of poverty, vulnerability, discrimination and social exclusion.

As a result of the increasing political attention paid to child poverty, there is today more know-how and consensus among stakeholders on the types of action required to promote children's well-being and to prevent their exclusion as adults in the future. Countries achieving the best results are those that combine access-to-employment strategies with enabling services (childcare, etc.) and income support. However, this is a long-term investment that requires:

- a sound analysis of the issue at stake, based on solid information that allows for the setting of quantitative objectives;

4 European Commission. 2006.
5 European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. 2008.
6 European Union. 2007.
7 In particular the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two Optional Protocols, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as well as other instruments and standards relevant to the rights of the child.

- a broad approach tackling all policy domains that affect children's lives;
- the participation of all relevant actors, including children;
- effective and universal policies for all children, with universal access to essential services (e.g. health, housing, education, childcare, effective social services), complemented when needed by targeted policies to address specific problems;
- policy delivery at the local level, backed up with sufficient resources and support. This last point was namely highlighted during the UK Peer Review on 'The City Strategy for Tackling Unemployment and Child Poverty'[8], which stressed the importance of decentralisation in the delivery of social and employment services, with the development of partnerships and synergies at local level, the activation of local stakeholders, the empowerment of local institutions and the development of integrated local employment strategies. However, transferring responsibilities from central to local level implies significant financial means.

Today in Europe, much work still remains to be done. As pointed out by the 'Europe 2020 Strategy'[9], 80 million people in the EU, among which, 19 million children, are still at risk of poverty — and these figures date from before the economic crisis. Among the Strategy's five principal objectives for 2020, two are related to the reduction of child poverty, namely, that: "the share of early school leavers should be under 10%" and that "at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree". According to the Strategy, this could lead to 20 million fewer people at risk of poverty by 2020.

Inclusion of the Roma

The European Platform against Poverty asserts that "Member States will need to define and implement measures addressing the specific circumstances of groups at particular risk (such as one-parent families, elderly women,

8 European Commission. 2009a.
9 European Commission. 2010a.

minorities, the Roma, people with a disability and the homeless)" in order to overcome poverty and social exclusion.

The Roma population is one of the largest ethnic minorities in the EU, with between 10 and 12 million citizens spread throughout the European continent, although mainly concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe. It is a relatively young population and, in some countries, around 50% of Roma citizens are thought to be under the age of 18.

A large share of the Roma population suffers from extreme poverty, social exclusion and general rejection by the majority of the population.[10] In many countries, their situation has worsened significantly over the past two decades.

The environment of Roma children is one of marginalisation, poverty and exclusion. Poor housing and poor infrastructure are exacerbated by residential segregation. Residents of slums cannot register their home at a permanent address and are faced with legal insecurity and a lack of property rights. Due to this situation, many are unable to access basic services and, in fact, become 'invisible', living on the margins of societies that do not care about them.

Educational levels, affected, among others, by housing segregation, are profoundly deficient and limit the Roma's access to the labour market, thereby conditioning the widespread poverty and exclusion experienced by most Roma today. Many Roma do not complete primary education, while only a small group completes secondary studies and an insignificant minority has a university degree.[11] Despite governments' substantial investments in integrated schooling, segregated education and the lack of special-needs schools continue to be a problem in some countries, particularly in Central and South Eastern Europe.[12]

Although no accurate information is available as yet, it is likely that the economic downturn is further exacerbating the already deteriorating living

10 World Bank. 2005.
11 2.5% in Bulgaria, 4.7% in Romania, 12% in the Czech Republic, 16% in Hungary and 19% in Slovakia. UNDP. 2004.
12 Fundación Secretariado Gitano. 2009.

conditions of many Roma. What's more, the scarcity of resources nourishes tensions among the Roma and EU nationals, and tends to heighten the Roma's feeling of rejection. This is confirmed by the latest European Barometer on discrimination in the EU, which shows a substantial increase in the feeling of rejection perceived in general and by the Roma in particular.[13]

At EU level, the recent enlargements towards Central and Eastern Europe, which have been accompanied by migratory processes, have prompted public and private initiatives designed to facilitate the integration of the Roma community and to reduce social inequalities experienced by Roma persons. The issue has been included on the European Council's agenda and been the subject of various resolutions by the European Parliament. The Commission has not only taken a number of measures, it has also developed new political instruments and institutional mechanisms, including the '*Integrated Platform for Roma Inclusion*' approved by the Council in 2008, with its '*Ten Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion*' aimed at guiding public policies and projects for the Roma.[14]

The positive developments taking place at the European level, as well as the progress made in the Member States, are confirmed in the Commission Staff Working Document '*Roma in Europe: The Implementation of European Union Instruments and Policies for Roma Inclusion — Progress Report 2008–2010*'.[15] Nevertheless, the Commission's Communication on '*The Social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe*',[16] identifies numerous challenges ahead. Among others, it highlights the importance of improving cooperation between European, national and international players and representatives of the Roma community; of translating commitments and cooperation into positive changes at the local level; of more effectively communicating on the benefits of Roma inclusion in terms of local and national economic and social development; of developing explicit desegregation policies; of focusing on the most disadvantaged micro-regions; of promoting the integrated use of EU funds; and of mainstreaming Roma inclusion issues into broad policy areas.

13 European Commission. 2009b.
14 Council of the European Union. 2009.
15 European Commission. 2010b.
16 European Commission. 2010c.

The June 2010 Council Conclusions on *Advancing Roma Inclusion*,[17] confirmed the need to mainstream Roma issues into the relevant European and national policies and to ensure that EU financial instruments, such as the Structural Funds, are accessible to the Roma and have a real impact on their needs. It further requested that the work of the Integrated Platform for Roma Inclusion be pursued via the identification of clear targets and a working plan that engages all relevant actors.

17 Council of the European Union. 2010.

Part B: The "Give Kids a Chance" Programme in Szécsény

The Fight against Child Poverty in Hungary

In Hungary, one child in five lives on less than 60% of the median income. Key social factors identified as leading to poverty are low activity rates and educational attainment, the lack of vocational qualifications, poor living conditions, living in a depressed region, poor health and belonging to the Roma population.[18] At the same time, family and education are crucial in the reproduction of social exclusion. This is particularly visible in the outskirts of certain cities, and even more so in small villages, where poverty has increased since the middle of the 1990s. According to a 1996 survey, the number of unemployed people and social benefit recipients living in villages with a population of less than 1,000 was three times the national average. By 2007, that ratio had risen to nine times the national average, leading to a situation where 60% of poor children in Hungary live in villages or small settlements. The lack of a comprehensive anti-segregation policy in the past has aggravated this situation so that, in some areas such as Szécsény, prejudices, stereotypes and Roma segregation in schools and housing are an everyday reality in the majority of settlements.

In light of this reality, an unprecedented political consensus emerged in Hungary on the need for a long-term, nationwide, comprehensive strategy to combat child poverty. A '*National Programme for Combating Child Poverty*' was commissioned by the Government in March 2006, with the support of the Child Programme Office ('GYEP') of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The programme is built around three axes: the reduction of child poverty and the prevention of its reproduction; the elaboration of a long-term programme covering at least a generation (25 years, from 2007 to 2032); and a detailed description of actions to be undertaken in the first three years. The National

18 Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Centre for Social Research. 2010.

Strategy for 2007–2032, entitled '*Let's Make Things Better for our Children*', was adopted by Parliament in May 2007.[19]

The three key objectives of this Strategy are:

- to significantly reduce the poverty rate of children and their families and improve children's chances of continuing studies and bettering their life prospects;
- to eliminate extreme forms of child poverty, exclusion and segregation, and;
- to fundamentally reform the methods and approaches pursued by existing institutions, which contribute to the reproduction of poverty and social exclusion.

The Strategy further includes horizontal priorities having a direct impact on deep poverty, in particular among priority groups such as the Roma minority and those living in disadvantaged settlements and regions. These priorities namely relate to the legal enforcement of rights, increased democratic participation and stakeholder cooperation, the development of employment opportunities, and an improvement of public service systems, in particular in terms of access to childcare, healthcare and education services.

A National Strategy Evaluation Committee was set up by the government in 2008 to monitor the programme and to help ensure transparency and citizen control. Its members include representatives of the Academy of Sciences, NGOs, churches and the Hungarian member organisation of the European Anti-Poverty Network. The Committee is also supported by government experts and other invited researchers. It produces an annual report on the situation of children in Hungary, including poverty data, an assessment of the impact of government measures, an evaluation of the impact of kindergartens, and case studies of children and families living in poverty. The Committee's first studies have set a baseline against which the longer-term evolution of children's opportunities will be assessed.

19 Resolution no. 41/2007 (V. 31.), 31st May 2007.

The rural micro-region of Szécsény, with its 13 small settlements, totalling 20,000 people, was chosen to pilot the roll-out of Hungary's "Give Kids a Chance" programme, which began in 2008. The idea is to spread the programme to all of the country's 33 very disadvantaged micro-regions, which are home to around a million people, or 10% of Hungary's population.

The National Strategy was recently reinforced by the Social Renewal Operational Programme 2007–2013, sponsored by the European Structural Funds.[20] Thanks to these funds, ten more micro-regions have or are initiating the pilot project in 2009 and 2010. The objectives of this programme are aligned with the National Strategy and include targets such as decreasing the segregation of severely disadvantaged and Roma pupils by promoting equal opportunities in public education, supporting the education and integration of groups with special educational needs, or developing human capacities in the most disadvantaged territories.

The Pilot Programme in the Micro-region of Szécsény

The Szécsény micro-region is located in the deprived North-Eastern part of the country and is characterised by high unemployment, significant social disadvantages and a high percentage of Roma settlements. The micro-region consists of thirteen settlements — one town and twelve small villages — all of them independent local governments. At the end of 2005, a total of 20,446 people lived in these settlements, including 4,288 children under the age of 18. The ratio of Roma population within these settlements is currently increasing. At present, about 13% of all elementary school students in the micro-region are Roma, representing approximately 700 children. But in ten of the settlements, the proportion of Roma students in schools exceeds 50%. School segregation is present in different depths in the individual settlements, ranging from full segregation to integrated schools applying the open-approach method.

The '*Give Kids a Chance*' project seeks to tackle child poverty and social exclusion thanks to a comprehensive approach that covers the different dimensions of a child's life and by developing activities not only with children,

20 Government of Hungary. 2007.

but also with their families. The project is financed by the Child Programme Office, as well as by other small government grants and the Norwegian Fund. It experiments with new working methods and approaches, seeking to change traditional perceptions and to strengthen the role of public administrations and private organisations based in the region. It is an experimental model, the aim of which is to draw lessons that will enable the experience to be extended to other regions in the country. The Academy of Sciences' active involvement in the project facilitates this mixed action/ research approach.

The project includes actions in the various priority development areas established by the National Strategy, such as the early development of skills (through the establishment of 'Sure Start' children houses), the development of public education, the improvement of nutrition and healthcare for children, the development of an information society, the improvement and modernisation of social and children's services, the improvement of housing conditions and the development of employment opportunities for parents. Horizontal priorities include reducing settlement disadvantages, cooperation among sectors and institutions, participation of citizens and access to information.

Flexibility and micro-regional action, with a view to ensuring that solutions are adapted not only to the circumstances of micro-region but also to the particular realities of the different settlements and their inhabitants, have also been among the keys to the success of the project.

In this respect, the active involvement of the leaders, experts and, increasingly, citizens of the micro-region is one of the most important aspects of the project. Based on the common principles and action axes established in the National Strategy, each community had to set its own local priorities and joint targets had to be decided in cooperation with members of the community.

The project's bottom-up approach, with the development of partnerships and synergies at local level, the activation and empowerment of local stakeholders and institutions, the development of integrated local strategies and the decentralisation of social service delivery, has demonstrated its importance. Indeed, social change cannot merely be a top-down

process. The need for change must also stem from the community. Yet, to achieve positive results, there must be effective coordination between the local and central levels of administration. The institutional framework must foster collaboration between different concerned bodies, broad-based participation, socio-political consensus, and the involvement and commitment of the beneficiaries themselves. This process has not been free from tensions and difficulties, and the leading role of the Child Programme Office of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences has been crucial in providing sound analysis and a proper monitoring system, as well as ensuring the linkage between local action and the National Strategy.

Having different sources of funding has also been very positive for the project and has allowed the formation of a team of trained and motivated experts that are truly committed to the project. There are now almost 50 people working on the Szécsény project. Nevertheless, it is difficult to build a complex programme on the basis of fragmented funding and often the criteria that must be fulfilled to apply for funding sources are not aligned with local needs. Despite this, in the past year, there has been a real boom in the service offering around Szécsény, particularly in the areas of extra-curricular activities and second-chance youth programmes, as well more finely-tuned children's programme and local services. The principal risk that could now affect the project's long-term sustainability is that of the credit crunch, which will undoubtedly have a negative impact on budgets and financing sources.

Part C: Policies and Experiences in Peer Countries

European and International Comparative Aspects

Nineteen million children are currently living under the poverty threshold in the EU-27.[21] In one third of EU countries (Malta, Ireland, Bulgaria, Italy, Spain, Estonia, Latvia, Poland), the poverty intensity is three to six percentage points higher for children than for the overall population, with the poverty gap ranging from 20% to more than 30%. Half of all poor children in the EU live either in a single-parent household or in a large family (with three or more children). In the EU, 21% of children live in large families and face an average poverty risk of 25%. The number of children living in large families is lowest in Southern Europe (15% or less in Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal), as well as in the Czech Republic, the Baltic States and Slovenia (14 to 18%), where, on the other hand, they face the highest risk of poverty (30% or more except in the Czech Republic, Estonia and Slovenia). By contrast, the number of children living in large families is highest in the Nordic countries (26% to 33%), in Ireland and in the Benelux countries (31% to 33%), where they face the lowest risk of poverty (9 to 15% in the Nordic Countries).

The countries with the lowest child poverty rates are those that spend most on social benefits (pensions excluded), with the notable exception of Cyprus and — to a lesser extent — Slovenia. Statistics on the EU-25 show that social transfers alleviate the risk of poverty to varying degrees. On average, social transfers other than pensions reduce the risk of child poverty by 44%, against 38% for the overall population. In Denmark, Finland and Sweden, the child poverty risk rate is reduced by as much as 60% thanks to social transfers, while in Bulgaria, Greece and Spain the impact is below 20% both for children and for the overall population. Only in Poland, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic is the impact of social transfers on poverty slightly smaller for children than for the overall population.

21 Eurostat. 2010.

Family benefits and benefits specifically targeting children have the largest impact on child poverty, but the countries achieving the best outcomes are those that perform well on all fronts, namely by combining strategies that facilitate access to employment with enabling services (childcare, etc.) and income support.

Universal benefits emerge as a prerequisite but appear insufficient and should be complemented with targeted benefits for the most vulnerable families (low-income, lone parents, large families, families with disabled children, etc.). In addition, the supply and quality of childcare should be enhanced with a greater variety of solutions. The importance of early intervention to support children's development and, in particular, of pre-schooling is highly apparent in the Member States. In addition, special attention is being paid to children from disadvantaged families and in deprived areas. A number of Member States are increasing the national budget devoted to pre-school education (Ireland, the UK and Italy) in order to increase the supply of educational services in deprived areas.

The assessment of Member States' policies would indicate that more efforts are needed to address the risk of social exclusion faced by children suffering from multiple disadvantages, who tend to be particularly marginalised, such as Roma children, children with disabilities, children without parental care or at risk of losing it, and children of migrant background.

The Peer Countries[22]

Croatia

Most of the 30,000 Roma people in Croatia are considerably marginalised in almost all public and social activities and their living conditions are far more unsatisfactory than those of the average population and of other ethnic minorities. In 2003, the Government launched a ´National Programme for the Roma´, aimed at improving the status, living conditions and social inclusion of the Roma, while preserving their traditional culture, by tackling

22 For more information on the single countries see the respective comment papers at http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2010/promoting-social-inclusion-of-children-in-a-disadvantaged-rural-environment-the-micro-region-of-szecseny

problems in areas such as housing, education, employment and healthcare. In the field of education, one of the main goals is the inclusion of Roma children in preschool or preparatory school education programmes, as well as in regular education, with incentives to complete their education to the best of their abilities.

Early development and premature departures from primary education level are major problems in Croatia and a series of measures have been adopted by the government to address them, including free kindergarten programmes, free day-care in primary schools, financial support and free accommodation for Roma pupils during their high-school education, and financial support for higher education (university and college programmes). This has resulted in a lower school drop-out rate, down to 70% in 2007 against almost 85% in 2006.[23] Other experiences are currently being developed, such as the programme 'Modification of Behaviour Through Play' (or MMPI) in the Peš□enica Office of the Centre for Social Care in Zagreb.

Another important concern is the segregation of Roma students in special schools and a complaint was filed (Medjimurje County local government, as well as four primary schools in Orehovica, Macinec, Kuršanec and Podturen) regarding the segregation of Romani children into separate and educationally inferior classes, based solely on their racial/ethnic identity. The complaint alleged that such practices amounted to the denial of equal educational opportunities for Romani children. The case went to the European Court of Human Rights in 2004, where the Grand Chamber declared that the segregation of Romani children into separate classes, based on language, represents unlawful discrimination violating the European Convention on Human Rights.[24]

The Czech Republic

A number of general changes to the Czech Republic's educational system were initiated with the entry into force of the new school law in 2005. The

23 Decade for Roma Inclusion. 2009.

24 The Grand Chamber decision builds on the Court's groundbreaking judgments in 'D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic' and 'Sampanis v Greece', which rejected the segregation of Roma students into special schools for children with mental disabilities or within mainstream schools on the basis of ethnicity.

text sought to abolish the existence of so-called 'special schools' for the mentally disabled (or '*zvláštní školy, resp. pomocné školy*'), in which Roma children were regularly placed, thereby significantly lowering their chances of obtaining a well-paid job in the future. However, the change was largely superficial; the schools were re-labelled (to '*základní školy praktické, resp. školy speciální*'), but continued in the same buildings, with the same teachers and students, and the same substandard curricula. In 2007, as a result of the 'D.H. and Others v. Czech Republic' litigation, which found that, "in the Czech city of Ostrava, Roma children were 27 times more likely to be placed in 'special schools' for the mentally disabled than non-Roma children", the European Court of Human Rights ruled that "this pattern of segregation violated non-discrimination protections in the European Convention on Human Rights". Despite this landmark decision, there has been little change.[25] The Ministry of Education has initiated a process of desegregation in the educational system, establishing practical schools for mentally disabled children, who can be moved in with the signed agreement of their parents. However, a crucial question remains to what extent failures in decisive psychological tests can be caused by the fact that the child has been living in a different socio-cultural environment.

Italy

According to the latest estimates provided by the Opera Nomadi (2008), around 160,000 Roma Sinti and Caminanti are living in Italy. Of these, about 70,000 are Italian citizens, while the rest are largely citizens of Romania (about 60.000) or of other Balkan states.

The Law 285 of 1997 provides a dedicated budget for the promotion of children's rights and opportunities. This funding is devoted to pilot projects of four main types, including the development of childcare services, especially innovative and flexible ones that complement those already existing, and the fight against social exclusion, which also covers social and cultural mediation, as well as services to mothers and children who become involved with the juvenile justice system. The budget is transferred to the regions, but 30% is transferred to 15 major cities selected on the basis of child crime

25 Open Society Institute. Litigation D.H. and Others VS. Czech Republic.

rates, the number of children in institutions, the level of population aged under 18, and the lack of childcare services. The best results are achieved in these 15 cities. Another basic principle is the involvement of all stakeholders, including civil society, families and family associations. Co-planning, co-management and co-evaluation are important tools built into the Law and this has enabled establishment of strong networks around the projects, whether in terms of implementation, management or evaluation. Project evaluation is strengthened further thanks to the central administrative monitoring not only of costs, but also of quality. Information on all projects is compiled in a publicly accessible database (www.minori.it) and selected best practices are shared within a permanent round table, bringing together the government and the cities.

Portugal

According to the results of a recent survey, the Roma population has been living in deplorable housing conditions for more than 20 years in about 30% of Portuguese municipalities, without any outlined intervention strategy. Today, 53% of Roma families live in sub-standard or poor housing conditions. This worsens their situation of social exclusion, exacerbating difficulties in access to social and health services. Over half of the Roma population (52.3%) have no education.

Several Portuguese social inclusion programmes target the Roma among other beneficiaries: the territorial intervention programme promoting the inclusion of marginalised areas; the Social Development Local Contracts ("Contratos Locais de Desenvolvimento Social" or CLDS) organised through Local Councils of Social Action or Social Networks, partnerships and participative local management forums, which aim to render community resources more effective; the Choices Programme ("Programa Escolhas"),[26] which seeks to promote the social inclusion of children and young people from more vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, with a view to achieving equal opportunities and the reinforcement of social cohesion.

26 The Choices Programme is funded by the Institute for Social Security, by the Institute for Employment and Professional Training and by the European Social Fund, through the Operational Programme for Human Potential.

In order to close the gap between initiatives undertaken at national and local level towards Roma communities, the High Commission for Immigration and Intercultural Dialogue (ACIDI) — a governmental body decision attached to the Council of Ministers — established, in September 2009, a Pilot Project for Municipal Mediators. The Project's main goal is to train fifteen Roma municipal mediators in the fields of Mediation, Public Institutions Functioning and Communication, and to insert them in local municipalities so they can establish a close relationship with local services and organisations and local Roma communities. The Project has also enabled the development of a local and national network between municipalities, national authorities and Roma mediators, which serves to reinforce intercultural dialogue and proximity in this thematic field between all stakeholders.[27]

Serbia

Serbia has a comprehensive national strategic framework aimed at improving the living conditions of the poor, the children and the Roma. This framework is composed of three strategy documents, namely:

- The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS), adopted in 2003, which served as the basis for taking measures targeting the reduction of absolute poverty. The main goal of the PRS was to reduce absolute poverty in Serbia by half by 2010.

- The National Plan of Action for Children (NPA), first developed in 2004 and currently under revision, defines measures for child poverty reduction for the period 2004–2015. The NPA is implemented through Local Action Plans for Children developed in 21 municipalities.

- The Roma Decade action plans, drawn up as part of the national strategy for improvement in the position of the Roma. The first Decade action plans in the fields of education, housing, health and employment were adopted in 2005. Special action plans on the other eleven Roma Decade fields were developed in 2009.

27 At the end of its first year of implementation, there will be an evaluation report made by Centro de Estudos Territoriais to assess obtained results that should indicate this Project added value to the improvement of Roma communities situation in Portugal and to the need to implement this Project in other municipalities.

Despite these efforts, the results of the Living Standards Measurement Survey (2007) show that nearly half of the Roma population remains poor (49.2%) and a further 6.4% are extremely poor. Although child poverty was reduced from 2002 to 2008, it is now increasing again.

The United Kingdom

In recent years, the UK has witnessed a significant influx of Roma migrants from Eastern and Central Europe and the number of Roma in the country is today estimated to exceed 400,000. The nation is also home to significant numbers of 'Travellers of Irish heritage', many of which are semi-nomadic. Nevertheless, the vast majority of Roma, Gypsies and Travellers live in normalised housing. It is estimated that nearly 100,000 Gypsies and Travellers live in caravans and may be nomadic at certain times of the year, while up to 350,000 Gypsies and Travellers live in houses.

Gypsies and Travellers have a lower health status than the general population. What's more, Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children do not always start school as early as the rest of the population, and do not have any pre-school educational experience.

A key strand of government policy to combat child poverty and disadvantages in England has been the development of Sure Start Children's Centres. With over 3,600 centres established over the country, almost every community in England now has a local children's centre. Sure Start Children's Centres have become part of the local system of universal children's services, providing easy access to a range of community health services, parenting and family support, integrated early education and childcare, and links to training and employment opportunities for families with children under the age of five. The Centres have increasingly recognised the need to ensure that their services also reach out to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. Indeed, there is evidence that families from these communities often remain excluded from many mainstream services and opportunities. An 'open door' policy in itself is not enough. Therefore, outreach services form a key part of the children's centre services, meaning that services are delivered directly to families who appear to have no other means of accessing them, or are tailored to the particular needs of those families. Outreach can also imply

creating a route to bring families into existing locally provided services. In most cases, outreach combines these two approaches.

Most local authorities have a Gypsy, Roma and Travellers (GRT) Education Support Service with specialist teachers and other professional workers, including GRT learning support assistants. These teams support families, pupils, and schools in a wide range of ways, including the provision of training and family/community outreach and advocacy. In 2008, the Department for Children, Schools and Families introduced a national Gypsy, Roma and Traveller "History Month", which has proven very successful in raising the profile of these communities in a positive way, in making school curricula more inclusive of the history, culture and language of GRT communities, and in boosting ethnic pride and confidence in self-ascription.

Eurochild

According to the Eurochild representative, four overall principles must be respected when working to promote the social inclusion of children:

- A rights-based approach;
- Respect for parents and children and their potential;
- Recognition of the diversity of parenting and parental situations;
- Address stakeholders (childcare, school, health ...etc).

It was also emphasised that:

- Children must be considered in their own right.
- Services for families must absolutely be seen as a universal entitlement.
- A strength-based approach should be employed by professionals. This requires the provision of specialised training and vocational education for all professionals, based on a standardised value system and baseline.

- Early intervention is required when it comes to families at risk of poverty and exclusion, and parents must be empowered to look after their children, in order to help reduce cases of neglect or abuse, ending the culture of crisis management and mitigating the need for young people to be taken into care.

- Families should be supported in their parental role in order to create a good environment for children.

- There is a need for a long-term vision that informs how money is spent on children and families over a generation.

- The seriousness and the depth of the problems require sustainable long-term, multidimensional strategies, closer monitoring and more complex indicators.

- Family, school and community conflicts and disputes should be resolved in a non-violent manner by strengthening mediation techniques.

Part D: Discussions at the Peer Review Meeting

The first day of the Peer Review took place in the micro region of Szécsény where the ´National Strategy to Combat Child Poverty´ and the 'Give Kids a Chance' programme were presented and participants had the opportunity to visit the children's houses and other services for children, teenagers and parents, as well as to interact with local leaders, the project staff and beneficiaries.

These presentations and on-site visits, as well as the various working papers produced for the Peer Review, provided a good basis for an interactive discussion and allowed participants to share experiences and opinions. Discussions focused on issues such as the policy priorities, the relation between national policies and local projects, how to break the intergenerational cycle of the poverty, cultural changes, indicators, long term sustainability, desegregation and the active participation of the communities including Roma.

Broad Consensus

The existence of a broad political consensus surrounding the 'Give Kids a Chance' programme at its launch was highlighted as one key element in the experience's success. It was considered that the consensus on the way to approach the situation was facilitated by the existence of the National Strategy as a framework and by the scientific support to the programme.

Participants stressed that, although many countries achieve such 'formal' political consensus on the issue of setting child poverty as a priority on the social agenda, this does not necessarily lead to the adoption of practical measures. In fact, it was recalled that, especially since 2007, many countries have included the reduction of child poverty as a priority in their NAPs on Social Inclusion, but they have not taken specific action or allocated corresponding resources. And, while some countries have a formal framework for child poverty reduction, several participants pointed out that these are often devoid of any real content or of the necessary implementing mechanisms.

National vs. Local

The issue of ensuring coherence between national policies and actions at local level was the subject of animated discussions. Local action has to be tailored to local needs and local actors must be given the opportunity to determine their priorities. However, this flexibility must be framed within certain ground rules. In this sense, participants considered that the existence of a national framework programme or strategy can be very useful in guiding the actions of regions and municipalities. However, they stressed that such an approach must be based on participation at the local level and adaptation of planned actions to local circumstances. Indeed, local dynamics, logics, working cultures and speeds frequently differ from those at national level.

It was felt that the micro-regions participatory approach may be valuable in achieving a good balance between the national and local levels and ensuring programmes are adapted to local needs. In Szécsény, numerous forums were held in which local mayors and decision-makers, as well as the beneficiaries themselves, were able to share their experiences with the programme planners. Local communities are involved not just in the initial decisions, but also in the ongoing decision-making process, to create a common understanding of the contribution that children's houses can make to community development and acceptation for the idea that young children should attend a centre or receive services. This was particularly important as, when the first needs assessment was undertaken in Szécsény, the needs of 0–3-year-olds were one of the last items on the list. Decision-makers, families and educators were often unaware of the fact a child's future development begins at age 0 and even earlier. This goes to show the importance of having an overarching structure within which to develop local actions.

The question of whether 'sticks and carrots' should be used to ensure that local implementation is consistent with national policy gave rise to a series of different viewpoints. It was recommended that, if strategy is set at national level, with funding allocated to local authorities in the form of grants, some form of conditionality should be attached. Conditions could include criteria such as the ability to demonstrate the real involvement of local community in decision-making on the establishment of children's centres and on the

nature of services provided. Another option could be to oblige other key providers (health, social and employment services) to provide their services via children's centres, as in the UK. In other cases, as in Hungary, local access to European funding is linked to the existence of a desegregation plan at the local level.

It was stressed that certain forms of conditionality could lead to the exclusion of the poorest communities from tendering for grants. For instance, co-financing is almost always a compulsory condition and poor communities do not have the necessary financial resources. Also, submitting applications in the correct form requires skills that many small localities do not have, so that "those who can buy in that skill will win the bid. Those who can't will lose". The gap between formalities and reality is another frequent problem. In many cases, localities receiving grant aid are required to account precisely for how every cent is spent, but they are not required to demonstrate that the aid has achieved any results.

Monitoring Progress

The issue of how to measure progress was actively discussed. Some participants insisted that it is a mistake to put too much energy into measuring who exactly the poorest people are and how many of them there are, saying it is more important to have information on relative inequalities and how they develop. Existing Laeken indicators of relative poverty are nevertheless surely not sufficient to capture the reality in Hungary and other countries of Eastern Europe, and absolute figures are also needed.

However, indicators are dependant on the availability of data and most countries face numerous difficulties in obtaining official information in the case of some Roma groups. For a start, there is no system of ethnic data collection in schools. Participants pointed out that these difficulties are heightened due to the lack of legal protection. They referred to various problematic cases, such as the lack of citizenship of many Roma in Croatia, which forces schools to take in some pupils without any trace of their attendance in the paperwork. Other countries have supported a policy of providing Identity Cards to undocumented Roma, but this can prove costly.

In some countries, Roma children face the additional risk of forcible and sometimes unaccompanied deportation to Kosovo, a post-conflict society that does not yet have an adequate absorption capacity.

Asides from these issues relating to quantitative measurements, discussions also centred on the need to have a view on the beneficiaries' perspective and to monitor their feelings and their perception of their inclusion in society and in the local community. This requires qualitative measurement and focus groups.

Promoting Cultural Change

The promotion of cultural change has to be at the centre of any Roma inclusion strategy. However, it is a common mistake to think that the changes have to come from the families or the Roma side. Emphasis has to be not only on the Roma changing but on society changing. The challenge is to move towards a more diverse, interculturally-educated and fully inclusive society. It is not about changing people, but about changing structures. Schools must provide equal opportunities, implement anti-racist policies, promote intercultural curricula, develop books and resources, develop bilingual support for children with different languages, and multi-faith inclusion.

Such structural changes are also essential in breaking the intergenerational transmission of exclusion among Roma. Indeed, the very low level of education of the parents and the poor living conditions of the families are important factors in the intergenerational transmission of exclusion. The integration of all Roma children into mainstream schools at the earliest age is therefore essential.

It was commented that the existence of separate schools for Roma is in fact a symptom of a wider problem — that of the existence of "Roma ghettoes". Desegregation is thus not only an issue for schools, but also for wider society. In many cases, the only way to deal with the situation in a school is to deal first with the situation in the locality. Yet desegregation is about more than just placing Roma and non-Roma children in the same classroom. Breaking the vicious circle of exclusion requires an integrated, long-term approach aimed

at economically empowering people in deprived areas, by strengthening the services provided to them. Unfortunately many governments are not taking the necessary measures. The establishment of Sure Start centres may represent the start of many changes to come. Coexistence must be introduced at the earliest stage of education. Otherwise, later on in school, barriers spring up.

The need to provide specific services for Roma minorities under certain circumstances was addressed, but participants stressed the importance of connecting such projects to normalised services in order to avoid "ghettoisation". Programmes should emphasise the fact that Roma and non-Roma experts can work together. Whether in providing specific or normalised services, the role of Roma educators and mediators is very important, and proper pedagogical training should be provided to ensure they are able to undertake their role in the required manner. Projects should include at least some staff members who clearly and proudly identify themselves as Roma and who know what it is to be a Roma in the current societal context. This being said, it is also important to distance the idea that Roma can only be employed in Roma contexts.

Acting on the Long-term

The sustainability of child poverty projects was a concern for many participants. Sustainability is related not only to the availability of resources in the long term, but also to the mainstreaming of projects into existing structures once they have demonstrated that they function well and contribute to Roma empowerment. For most countries nowadays, the economic argument is a key driver conditioning social policies. It is therefore important to show that, by taking into account the long-term costs and benefits of investing in universal early child care, balanced parental leave and targeted interventions, governments can reap huge social and economic benefits. According to UK estimates, the UK government could save GBP 486 billion over the next 20 years thanks to the implementation of child poverty reduction projects, but more reliable central government funding is needed.

Part E: Conclusions and Key Lessons

All in all, the Szécsény programme was seen as a sign of hope that polarisation can be overcome and that cooperation can be built between communities, thereby creating a positive environment and achieving practical results. Many ideas were expressed and discussed during the Peer Review and, in this section, we present the key conclusions and lessons learned with regard, first of all, to policymaking, and secondly, to project implementation and to practical approaches and measures.

National and Local Policymaking

Reducing child poverty requires a multidimensional approach, defined over the long term in order to achieve continuity and stability, and consisting of actions at three levels:

- *Improving income levels and ensuring inclusive social protection systems*: Income levels must suffice to enable children and their families to live in human dignity. This prerequisite is even more important today, because of the economic crisis and the rise in levels of deprivation. Inclusive protection systems imply that services must be available to everyone according to specific needs and circumstances. Inclusive schools are schools with an adequate infrastructure and quality teaching, which provide equal opportunities for every child and compensate disadvantages.

- *Creating better living conditions*: Although they are prerequisites for reducing child poverty, sufficient income levels and inclusive protection systems are not sufficient conditions. It is also necessary to promote opportunities through the development of concrete plans and projects, and to create better living conditions, especially in relation to housing and employment.

- *Empowering people*: It is also important to provide people with the necessary capabilities to become active participants in society, and

with the skills and means to make responsible decisions on their future.

The challenge for inclusion policies is not merely to combat exclusion, but, crucially, to prioritise those who are most in need, such as Roma children. In this respect, it is important to underscore that promoting the welfare of Roma children is beneficial to society as a whole. Indeed, as well as being unethical, the exclusion of the Roma is economically unsustainable, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where the Roma population is the youngest and fastest-growing demographic segment in a region characterised by declining birth rates. Failing to reduce Roma child poverty would create a wasted opportunity for society as a whole in the coming decades, and resources allocated to the reduction of Roma poverty thus represents an effective long-term investment.

When it comes to Roma children in situations of extreme exclusion, the biggest issue, in most cases, is that of breaking the vicious circle of the inter-generational transmission of poverty. This namely entails:

- Ending the concentration of Roma children and students in special needs schools or 'ghetto schools'. This also means avoiding new concentrations of Roma children in mainstream schools.

- Promoting educational opportunities for pre-school children at the earliest possible age to reduce initial disadvantages.

- Promoting cultural change, not only on the part of the Roma, but also in society's approach to Roma issues and within the practices of institutions such as schools, so that truly equal opportunities are provided.

Inclusion issues should not be confused with law and order issues. While the promotion of security does have a role to play in social inclusion, it is important to maintain a distinction between the two, particularly at a time of budget cutbacks and administrative streamlining. Indeed, social inclusion is a human right and social policies cannot be transferred to security policies.

A key difficulty met in most member states relates to the gap that often exists between local activities and national policies. In most EU countries, although National Action Plans on Social Inclusion set child poverty reduction among their priorities, they often lack a practical local-level approach. A number of lessons can be learned from the Peer Review:

- Strong horizontal coordination among all relevant Ministries, departments and municipalities is essential when tackling child poverty. In particular, it is a prerequisite for Roma mainstreaming.

- Vertical coordination among the local, regional, national and European levels must also be improved. The EU Platform for Roma Inclusion, which is expected to develop a Roadmap in the near future, could play a role here.

- The involvement of local community in the decision-making process is vital. This requires adequate resources and capacity-building. It also means criteria and approaches must be adapted to local circumstances.

- The empowerment of existing local organisations, building on their existing experience, is another key requirement. Again, this requires the allocation of sufficient resources and capacity-building.

- Flexibility and permanent adaptation to the specific circumstances of each local community are also important.

- Barriers, in the form of administrative procedures, complex reporting systems, formal requirements, co-funding, etc., must be removed if less skilled, vulnerable, marginalised groups are to be actively involved.

The new EU policy framework for the promotion of social inclusion, including, firstly, the Europe 2020 Strategy, with its objective of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty by 20 million and its flagship 'European Platform Against Exclusion' initiative, and, secondly, the various Parliament Resolutions, Commission Communications and Council Conclusions on

Roma policies, should provide Member States with a new impetus in the fight against child poverty, particularly among the Roma.

Achieving Project Impact

As is the case of Szécsény, projects need to demonstrate that they are effective in achieving results and provide good solutions with regard to promoting the social inclusion of children in disadvantaged rural environments. The Peer Review debates provided some lessons on how project impact can be best achieved:

- Projects must be sustainable. This implies:
  - a long-term approach and continuing action (in this respect, the long-term generational approach over 25 years and the progressive, scaled-up implementation (with a first pilot project in the Szécsény micro-region, later adapted and extended to ten other regions) are particularly laudable).
  - building people's capacity and enabling them to participate in decision-making relating to their future;
  - aiming for normalisation and real inclusion of the Roma.
- Projects should build on previous experiences that have demonstrated effectiveness in various circumstances and on proven principles, such as the need for an overarching institutional framework, broad-based participation and socio-political consensus, leadership, commitment, client-based services, proper monitoring, active participation and positive expectations.
- Political commitment is essential. Desegregation is a basic human right but it is not easy to achieve given the geographical concentration of the Roma and the fact that the Roma are not necessarily driving change themselves. Indeed, the Roma, like other people, do not necessarily appreciate what they do not know. Only once they have lived in a house, will they assign greater importance to housing. Similarly, Roma parents who have never experienced integrated

education may want their children to go to a separate Roma school. However, once one member of a Roma family has benefited from integrated schooling, the latter will become the preferred option.

- Effective data collection, though sometimes controversial in the Roma context, is vital. In order to demonstrate real progress, it is necessary to have accurate and reliable data that facilitates permanent measurement.

- Common indicators used to measure child poverty have to be complemented with other specific indicators that are adapted to the specificities of the area and the people involved.

- The territorial approach has proven highly effective. Nevertheless, it is important not only to identify various micro-regions with similar characteristics, but also to adapt activities to the different circumstances and needs of each settlement, with a bottom-up approach.

- As witnessed by the participation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in the Szécsény project, the involvement of Universities and Research Centres can play a positive role, not only in the diagnosis and planning process, but in all the phases of the project, including monitoring and evaluation.

- Although EU Structural Funds — acting both as a financial tool and a policy tool — emerge as the best tool to achieve impact in terms of social inclusion of the Roma community, existing barriers contained in regulations and calls for proposals, such as eligibility expenditures, financial procedures, timing, etc. should be simplified to gain in efficiency and increase accessibility. Application procedures for EU funding need to become more flexible, as the organisations and micro-regions most in need of support are those that have the greatest difficulty in obtaining it.

- Some of the principles developed by the European Platform for Roma Inclusion may provide useful input to the development of child

inclusion projects with Roma or other minorities. Among others, it is worth drawing attention to the practical work carried out on:

- Explicit, but not exclusive, targeting (principle two), which means that not only Roma, but other people in similar circumstances, should be involved in the project.
- An intercultural approach (principle three) throughout the project cycle — involving promoters, staff and workers.
- Active involvement of local authorities and, to some extent, civil society (principles eight and nine), acknowledging that in Central European countries, civil society is still very weak.

- Mainstreaming Roma issues into the general policies is very important given that most problems can only be resolved through structural policies and that the central criterion has to be normalisation.

- Last but not least, participants underscored that the active participation of the Roma not only gives added-value to a project, but also represents the best way to empower them and to create reference models that the child can aspire to and follow.

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Promoting the Social Inclusion of Children in a Disadvantaged Rural Environment — the Micro-Region of Szécsény

Host country: **Hungary**

Peer countries: **Croatia, Czech Republic, Italy, Portugal, Serbia, United Kingdom**

The Szécsény micro-region consists of 13 independent settlements, totalling 20,000 people, among which 4,000 children and a significant Roma population. The area is characterised by high unemployment and an accumulation of social disadvantages.

A pilot programme was launched in 2006 with a view to breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion faced by children in the region. The programme is based on a comprehensive approach that combines the improvement of nutrition and healthcare for children, the modernisation of social and childcare services, the improvement of housing conditions, the development of public education and of the information society, and the development of employment opportunities for parents.

It was elaborated in partnership with the settlements, based on the premise that each local community is unique and must set its own local priorities, albeit within a framework of joint national targets.

Thanks to its democratic, participative, collaborative and comprehensive approach, the programme has proven successful and its nationwide dissemination has begun. Hungary hopes to share its experience with other Member States and to contribute to the development of guidelines for future local/micro-regional programmes for combating poverty and social exclusion, particularly of Roma children.