

Recognising homelessness in the Republic of Serbia

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Introduction

Being a country in transition, Serbia is still facing the systemic improvement of existing and developing legal, strategic and financial systems for the improvement of the status of general population, but especially of the most vulnerable groups. As regards to it, the issue of homelessness in Serbia comes into the focus of the state and the public in general as a part of overall aim in improving the status of certain vulnerable groups mostly refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and Roma population. The Republic of Serbia is a country with the largest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in Europe. Furthermore, Roma people are one of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in Serbia with acute social problems, ranging from lack of decent housing, high unemployment and inactivity rates, low qualifications, lack of health care, social counselling and employment support.

Moreover, the Republic of Serbia does not have homelessness strategy, but national strategies and programmes that tend to address the multidimensional needs of each abovementioned vulnerable group with emphasize on housing, employment and social inclusion. The issue of homelessness itself is still neither defined nor explored. Strategic Government documents recognize homelessness as a problem requiring further research in order to determine the appropriate state policy aimed at achieving social inclusion of this group. As a starting point for the overall approach to the homelessness is 2011 Census that will for the first time included the data on homeless people living in Serbia.

Background – Legal and Strategic Framework

The Government of Serbia adopted the *Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS)* in 2003 aiming to reduce poverty by half in Serbia by 2010. Although the number of the poor population in the Republic of Serbia was reduced by half in the period 2002 – 2007, there are still more than 500,000 citizens living below the absolute poverty line. In light of the newly-emerging global economic crisis, there is a threat that the number of the poor in Serbia will increase again and/or that the vulnerable population close to the poverty line may fall below it.

Following the formal finalization of the PRS implementation process, the Government has been developing plans to promote and manage the transition process towards the social inclusion policies implemented at the level of EU. In addition to the development and implementation of measures mitigating the effects of the financial crisis, the Government is planning to enhance

measures of poverty reduction and social inclusion, paying particular attention to vulnerable and marginalized groups of population.

The shift from the concept of poverty reduction to the concept of social inclusion is driven by the Government's commitment to the European Integration process (EIP) and by the need to align Serbia's efforts with EU policies aimed at achieving a higher level of social cohesion. This shift will emphasize that improving the quality of life for all social categories is an integral part of the European integration process.

Since Serbia is gradually entering into a contractual relationship with the EU (SAA and the status of a candidate country), the Government of Serbia is committed to meeting the requirements set by the EU at the Lisbon and Copenhagen summits regarding social inclusion, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as of the objectives set in the Poverty Reduction Strategy for Serbia. To achieve this, Serbia needs to update existing policies that only partially deal with social exclusion issues and develop a strategic framework that shall take into account the full scope of exclusion which is based on numerous social factors.

Domestic national legal and strategic framework in relation to the topic could be shortly defined as following: The current Law on Social Protection defines social protection as an organised social activity aimed at offering assistance to citizens and their families when a citizen or a family needs social support to overcome social and existential difficulties and create conditions to meet the basic living needs if these cannot be met otherwise. One of the prescribed rights is temporary accommodation in a shelter or reception facility. Provision of such accommodation (organising services and funding) falls under the responsibility of the local governments (municipality and city).

The draft new Law on Social Welfare by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, currently in public consultation, is based on the experience and lessons drawn from the results of reforms carried out so far. It will create the conditions for further improvements and greater scope for the exercise of human rights and social inclusion;

The Law on Social Housing was adopted in Serbia in 2009 enabling the creation social housing stock by means of which local governments could provide housing for the most vulnerable population and thus realise a part of the conditions for successful social integration. Development of a *Social Housing Strategy* is ongoing.

The Social Welfare Development Strategy has been guiding reforms in the sector since 2005. The Strategy sets out two main objectives for the reform process: 1) Improvement of social welfare for the poorest citizens, by securing an "existential minimum" a more efficient system of financial support; 2) Development of a network of integrated community-based services reflecting the needs of local beneficiaries and complying with minimum quality standards.

The Strategy for Improvement of the Status of Roma in the Republic of Serbia sets the foundation for identifying and implementing affirmative actions in favour of Roma in the areas of education, health, employment and housing.

The National Strategy for Resolving the Problems of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons provides the framework for resolving refugee and IDP issues - the return and integration of refugees/IDPs, livelihood enhancement, housing and employment.

Strategy for the Reintegration of Returnees on the basis of the Readmission Agreements provides a framework from primary admittance of returnees and their full reintegration into local communities.

Housing framework

Surely the most important factor in meeting the housing needs, in addition to the available housing stock, is financial assets. According to Republic Statistical Office, 13.6% of population was below the median poverty line amounting to RSD 9,580 in 2009. Events of the past 20 years in Serbia (political and economic situation in the region) particularly affected the increase of the number of the poor and those who either have no housing or have inadequate housing.

Impoverishment of the population and a large number of refugees and internally displaced persons, along with the disappearance of the housing stock for members of vulnerable groups - the poor in the first place – all resulted in a severe problem of homelessness.

The necessary requirement towards the improvement of the living standards of the most vulnerable citizens is identification and implementation of an adequate housing policy.

The past experiences emphasise the need for imposing legal obligations on the local governments to identify, from among the housing stock in its possession, the housing stock to be leased under favourable conditions to financially disadvantaged individuals and families, as well as the obligation to monitor the use of these flats and their investment maintenance.

In order to achieve social inclusion of homeless people, ensuring inclusive support (in the field of employment, education, health care and social protection) is important. Research on the aspects of homelessness in Serbia, its causes and occurrences is also required in order for this support to be adequate and effective. It is vital to provide adequate capacities and services of the shelter, as well as to strengthen the capacities of those services that carry out the required activities at all levels, especially of the centre for social work.

Housing is also one of the dimensions of social inclusion, as a process that allows those who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion to gain ability and resources needed for full participation in economic, social and cultural life and achieving living standards and prosperity considered normal in the society that they live in (*Council of the EU, 2004*)

Housing is reasonably considered one of the basic needs, since the realisation of all other needs is conditioned by appropriate housing conditions.

The risk of social exclusion in housing is the highest among households with low or no income at all, among those who do not have a dwelling and no ability to rent an adequate one and thus live in housing with low or no infrastructure, of insufficient size and high rent relative to the quality of the dwelling and their income or they have occupied the dwelling with no legal tenancy.

Among the poor there are also those who own a flat albeit of inadequate size and furnishing and who do not have sufficient funds to maintain it. Additional risk of exclusion is posed by widespread illegal construction in urban areas when the owners do not have means or conditions to legalize these structures. These persons may actually be considered homeless (Petrovic 2004).

According to the last Census from 2002, an estimated 177,555 households (6.8%) are in a state of acute need for apartments (of which 119,676 live in towns and others in villages).

Assessment of data from the Living Standards Measurements Survey (LSMS, 2007) indicates that there is inadequate infrastructural housing and the lack of housing in population affected by poverty to a great extent, which is actually hidden homelessness (three-generation families in small apartments), especially in Roma population. It is estimated that illegal construction in Serbia is approaching one million housing units, of which one part, predominantly inhabited by the Roma, do not have conditions for legalization because it was constructed from inadequate material and/or on the public land that is either impossible or inappropriate to bring to the housing purpose.

A major problem is providing adequate housing for refugees and internally displaced persons who fall into one of the most poverty-affected groups.

Housing status of Refugees, IDPs and Roma population

The Republic of Serbia is a country with the largest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in Europe and one of the five countries in the world with a protracted refugee situation. In 2010¹, 82,603 persons with refugee status live in Serbia. In the period 1996 - 2009 the number of refugees, decreased by 80%. The decrease in the number of refugees is largely the result of their integration in Serbia (more than 200,000 persons acquired the citizenship of the Republic of Serbia) which also represents the largest integration process in Europe. According to the data of the Commissioner for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia and UNHCR, for the year 2010, 204,753 internally displaced persons from the territory of Kosovo and Metohija resided in Serbia in addition to some 20,000 internally displaced persons within the territory of Kosovo and Metohija.

On April 1, 2010, there were 60 collective centres with 4,791 persons lived in inadequate conditions. Out of the total number of collective centres on the territory of Serbia, 43 with 4,134 persons are outside Kosovo and Metohija, and 17 collective centres housing 657 persons are located in Kosovo and Metohija.

Although the number of persons with formally recognized refugee status dropped significantly, it is clear that there are still about 300,000 persons (4% of the total population in Serbia) who are essentially in a refugee-like situation i.e. without housing, even though they have formally lost their refugee status.

¹ UNHCR, 2010.

Data from the Census of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, as well as various research and reports by national and international and domestic organisations (UNHCR, OSCE, UNDP, Group 484, Humanitarian Centre for Integration and Tolerance/HCIT) reveal the biggest problems these groups face to be high unemployment rate - significantly higher than in general population - as well as the inability to favourably resolve the housing issue. An estimated two thirds of refugees who have acquired citizenship lack housing.

The Government of Serbia has been making great efforts to take different options into consideration to address the needs of refugees and IDPs such as support to employment and housing. The Commissariat for Refugees and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy in association with international agencies and organisations, EU, the governments of individual countries and local governments, have been supporting programmes for the establishment of sustainable solutions for refugees and IDPs in line with the National Strategy for resolving the problems of refugees and internally displaced persons. The programmes for providing durable housing solutions for refugees and IDPs are:

- building of housing units, partial construction and self-initiated construction;
- acquisition of rural households;
- donation of prefabricated houses;
- assistance in the form of packages of building materials intended to assist in the completion of housing units already in the process of construction;
- construction of housing units intended to be used for social housing in protected conditions;
- adaptation and transformation of collective centres for the purpose of accommodating the elderly;
- fostering of community- based social services.

A total of 3,442 housing units intended for the purpose of accommodating refugees, internally displaced persons as well as socially vulnerable families from the local population have been constructed according to recorded statistics dating from December of 2009.

The Roma population is the third largest ethnic group in Serbia with officially 108 193 residents (Census 2002), of which about 38,000 registered as IDPs. However, various researches estimate their number to range from 250,000 to 500,000. The majority of Roma live in ethnic enclaves, and are often unwilling to or incapable of participating in nation-wide research, which explains the relative scarcity and inaccuracy of data about them. Data from 2002. stated that about 70% of Roma settlements do not regulate their status-planning and about 44% are informal, squatter settlements with very poor infrastructure, poor housing stock. It is particularly difficult housing situation of Roma IDPs and returnees on the basis of Readmission agreements. The programmes and funds aimed at solving the housing problems of Roma are insufficient.

Institutional System of Social Assistance

In Serbia, social inclusion policies are dealt within the mandate of several line ministries and their networks. Key bodies and institutions are: the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, The Ministry of Health, The Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economy and Regional Development, the Ministry of Youth, the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights, Commissariat for Refugees, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit., Republic and Province Institute for Social Protection. The backbone of the social welfare system is the country-wide network of 138 Centres for Social Work (CSWs), in almost every local self-government (LSG). Although CSWs are established by LSGs, the majority of their functions are delegated from and funded by the central government, with additional support from LSGs' budgets. Local self-government is an important player in the implementation of social policies at the local level. According to the law, LSGs are responsible for providing social welfare (social benefits and social services) to their citizens, in line with identified local needs. The social benefits provided by the LSGs from their own resources, which are in cash or in kind, supplement the financial assistance provided by the State at the national level. According to the existing regulations, LSGs also finance and manage community-based social services and if needed, they can provide additional services beyond those prescribed by law and issue subsidies for communal services to materially deprived households.

Existing support structures for the children, youth and adults facing homelessness

In addition, accommodation for the homeless in Serbia is provided by the Reception Centre for Adults and Elderly in Belgrade and the Reception Centre for Children and Youth, attached to the Institute for Education of Children and Youth Belgrade.

Shelter services for adults and elderly were organised in a few cities only (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Nis), with an almost negligible capacity relative to the needs (up to 200 beds in total). Reception facility services are provided in Belgrade and Novi Sad solely.

Although not formally recognized as a category of persons in social needs, if in possession of personal documents these children and youth may exercise different rights from the different systems and per differing bases. The children and youth who have no documents and to whom the institutions are completely inaccessible are in the most difficult situation. Establishing competencies in such situations is very difficult and done on individual basis solely with enormous efforts of NGO activists who manage to find solutions. Primarily, this is the issue of the Law on Identity Cards stipulating that in addition to the birth and citizenship certificates one also needs a residence certificate in order to obtain an identity card. The persons without any property find this a practically impossible mission, so the system itself generates new homeless. This law must be changed. The Law on Birth Registration and simplification of the procedure of entry for those who were not registered at birth, is next in line for changes.

The capacities of reception spots and day care centres needs to be increased as they would provide psycho-social and legal support to homeless persons in addition to the possibilities of satisfying their basic living and hygiene needs.

The eligibility criteria for social housing and supportive housing need to be developed providing for the possibility of homeless applying too.

With a view to ensuring adequate health care for them, the Republic Institute for Health Insurance has endorsed an Instruction on Health Protection for Children and Youth – drifters from reception spots and shelters. According to this Instruction, the children from the Shelter will be issued health booklets through the social welfare centers which will obtain these from the branch offices of the Republic Institute, and forward them to the Shelter. Since these are homeless children, they require no residence for issuance of a health booklet, nor do they require birth certificates i.e. the unique citizens registration number (JMBG). The only data required are name and surname, year of birth and, in absence of residence, the address of the social welfare center. In cases when homeless children need urgent medical care, health care institutions are obliged to provide it even without a health booklet. The instruction enabling children identified as drifters/homeless the right to health care.

Children shelter capacities exist only in Belgrade and Novi Sad and reception facilities are mostly in homes for children (in 14 municipalities and cities). Only a few NGOs provide these services for victims of family violence. According to the data of the Republic Institute for Social Protection, the shelters and reception facilities in Serbia temporarily accommodated 728 children and 512 adults and the elderly in 2008. The services offered to the children living in the street are provided only in one institution in Belgrade and that only in the course of the day.

Reception Centre for Adults

The capacity of the Reception Centre for Adults is 104 persons. At the moment, it is overcrowded with 122. Highlighting this persistent problem, ever more present in winter, the representatives expect 200% increase of capacities next year, thus responding to the needs in the next 20 years period. According to the representatives of this Institution, the Reception Centre in Belgrade, occupying the space of 940 sq.m. was issued an approval from the City Secretariat for Town Planning and Construction to extend to 3,300 sq.m. in the following years. The Centre has sufficient food and consumables and that the city is paying all the taxes and salaries for 50 employees regularly. Most often people come to the Centre only to get a fresh meal or take a bath, so they are not in it 24 hours a day.

Reception Centre for Children

The Reception Centre and the Home for Children and Youth in Belgrade is a social welfare institution under the mandate of the city of Belgrade. It has been in existence for 52 years. More than 60,000 beneficiaries passed through this institution from its establishment.

Although under the mandate of the city of Belgrade, the Reception Centre accommodates children and youth from all over Serbia. The categories of children accommodated are: children without parental care or adequate parental care, victims of violence, neglect and abuse, victims of human trafficking, illegal migrants, children with disturbances in social behaviour and children parties in judicial proceedings.

The 24h/7 assistance is provided to girls and boys aged 7 - 18. In cooperation with the social welfare centres, the Centre takes part in identifying durable solutions for care and accommodation of the children.

One of the leading social providers, NGO Centre for Integration of Youth manages the Shelter for Children of the Street, called Drop in centre giving support to the children and youth who live and /or work in the street. This programme came as a result of research based on two years long work on the field and examining the needs of these children. Initiated as a programme of harm reduction, the main objective of Drop-in Centre was to meet the basic needs of children and youth under 26. In 2008, Secretariat for children's and social protection as a part of City Belgrade Government, started co-financing this social service. First users came on in 2008 and by now 450 users visited it. On daily bases Drop-in Centre has approximately 40 users and during winter these figures raise up to 70 users.

Definition of homelessness and data collection

To date, the terminology on homeless persons in official use in positive legislation referred to: taking to - begging, drifting, alcohol, etc. Placing them only under the mandate of Ministry of Interior and disturbance of public law and order i.e. qualifying it as a crime or a violation of public law and order, indicates the status of persons identified as homeless. There are neither official nor reliable data on homeless people who are "without a roof over their heads", who are without any shelter and sleep in the streets. Data collection on these persons is further complicated as they remain outside the established methodology of collecting data on households and other statistical records. Thus, the only data that remain are those of Centres for Social work, private centres and shelters offering some form of protection. Within this group of the homeless, there is lack of data on the needs of the citizens requiring special support, such as children without parental care, elderly persons without family support and sufficient funds to rent apartments, victims of violence and poor families with children.

What will Census in 2011 bring?

The Republic Statistical Office, will for the first time in the next Census to be conducted in April 2011, collect data on the so called primary homeless i.e. on persons having neither permanent nor temporary address, persons living in the streets, parks, below bridges, etc. In addition to defining the primary homeless, secondary homeless – persons living in make-shift facilities such as sheds, cellars, wagons and other improvised housing / will be defined. The information on the numbers of primary and secondary homeless will be disaggregated as per age and gender structure, potential health problem, education/literacy, etc.

Registration of primary homeless persons will be organised and conducted in cooperation with the Republic and Province Institute for Social Protection on the basis of addresses of shelters, centres and other facilities for short-term care of children and adults. This cooperation will also produce a detailed plan of census conduct.

The aim is to register each person accommodated in a shelter or center for the homeless. Furthermore, a clear distinction shall be made between the homeless and the persons coming to shelters only for short stays, for nutrition, and clothing where after they return to their households.

No specific action relative to registration of secondary homeless has been planned. The interviewers (some 50,000 persons engaged and trained for census in the field) shall register also the persons living in make-shift facilities provided these exist in their census area or at an accurately defined territory they are in charge of.

Conclusion

Although meeting the needs of citizens in the area of housing services is still under the authority of municipalities, more than 90% of state-owned apartments (at the local level) were privatized by the year of 2000. Municipalities and cities lost their housing stock, mainly intended for vulnerable groups and to a smaller extent for the deficit personnel relevant to the development of local communities, and following the general trend the resources for housing construction have been centralized at the republic level.

Impoverishment of population and a large number of refugees and displaced persons, along with the disappearance of the housing stock intended for persons belonging to vulnerable groups, especially the poor, resulted in a severe problem of homelessness.

Identification and implementation of the adequate housing policy and monitoring the indicators to exercise the right to housing, as a significant segment of social inclusion of the most vulnerable, is especially one of the most important tasks of Serbia in the EU accession process, but also a prerequisite for improving the living standards of its citizens.

Support of implementation of the Law on Social Housing enabling the creation social housing stock by means of which local governments could provide housing for the most vulnerable population and thus realize a part of the conditions for successful social integration. The social housing policy should be established. Development of a Social Housing Strategy is ongoing. It should allow the access to adequate, healthy and hygienic housing to all the citizens and provide support for the poor to achieve minimum standards of decent housing, improve the existing housing stock and encourage housing construction. The problem of housing and homelessness should be defined in order to set down the legal criteria for entitlement to social housing (the basic criteria are poverty and housing vulnerability) and to expand the focus from the urban to the rural social housing, taking into account both the regional and sustainable development.

The past experiences, both good and bad, indicate also the need for legal obligations of local governments to create social housing stock in its possession and to rent it under favourable conditions to financially disadvantaged individuals and families, as well as the obligation to monitor the usage of flats and their investment maintenance.

However, in order to achieve social inclusion of homeless people it is also necessary to ensure support measures according to their individual needs and conditions, especially in the field of employment, education, health and social care. Research into the forms of homelessness in Serbia is also required, as well as on its causes and the means by which it occurs in order for the support to be appropriate and effective. It is necessary to provide adequate capacities and shelter services, as well as to strengthen the capacities of services implementing the required activities at all levels, especially of the centres for social work.

Serbia, enjoys the potentials of Centres for social work being unique institutions. In performing their duties, the centres assess the needs of beneficiaries, plan services, refer beneficiaries to other services and institutions providing services and collaborate with them (in social welfare, health, employment, education, judicial system, etc.), provide consultations, initiate and develop prevention programmes that contribute to meeting both individual and collective needs of citizens, that is to say that contribute to preventing and combating social problems in local communities.

As the basic, pivotal social protection institution, multifunctional, multi-sector, with public authorizations and having information on the needs of the beneficiaries, resources in the local community and the ability to influence the creation of those lacking, the center for social work, along with the appropriate capacity building, is an essential participant in the creation of effective conditions for prevention and reduction of homelessness.

Serbia, as other countries undergoing the EU accession process, will be expected to develop the Joint Memorandum on Social Inclusion (JIM). In regard to it, Government of Serbia prepared the document *Monitoring Social Inclusion in Serbia: Overview and Current Status of Social Inclusion in Serbia Based on Monitoring European and National Indicators, 2010*². The Report contributes to the establishment of the system for monitoring social inclusion and poverty reduction indicators in the Republic of Serbia. The Report provides a framework for analyzing the current status of social inclusion and poverty in our country, and indicates the current potentials for monitoring social inclusion indicators harmonized on the level of EU member states and maps the gaps in data sources for measuring social inclusion and poverty indicators in Serbia.

Using abovementioned as a baseline, Serbia has already started the process of creation of the First National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction that should cover period from 2008 to 2010. Republic Statistical Office with the support from IPA funds will start piloting Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) as a future social inclusion monitoring methodology that should provide comparability of basic social inclusion indicators monitored in EU member states and the countries undergoing the EU accession process. It should also provide insight into the specific issues of social inclusion on the transition road of Serbia.

At the end, also to be mentioned is ongoing process of drafting national document *SERBIA 2020* that predict the establishment of the Social Inclusion Fund which is in line with EU2020 flagship initiative European platform against poverty.

² <http://www.inkluzija.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Monitoring-Social-Inclusion-in-Serbia-July2010ENG.pdf>

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