

Introduction

This set of policy papers is a direct result of the project “To Solve Our Problems Together”, undertaken in partnership by the ECHOSOC Foundation—Romania and the Open University Subotica—Serbia. The papers aim at portraying the situation of the Roma minority in the two countries, in various areas of social life. Moreover, they bring forth a series of recommendations meant to contribute to the identification of feasible intervention means for solving many of the different problems presented.

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Other organisations involved in the project:

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- ◆ Agency for Community Development “Împreună” [Together], Bucharest;
- ◆ Aven Amentza Foundation, Bucharest;
- ◆ Ramses—Foundation for Social Development of the Roma, Dej;
- ◆ Cultural Democratic Union of Roma from Valea Jiului, Petroșani;
- ◆ Intercultural Institute, Timișoara;
- ◆ Rrominterpress, Belgrade;
- ◆ European Voivodina, Novi Sad;
- ◆ International Scientific Forum "Danube—River of Cooperation" (ISF “DRC”), Belgrade;
- ◆ The Modern Society Movement (MSM), Zemun.

We hope these materials contribute to a better knowledge regarding the situation of the Roma population in Romania and Serbia, as well as adequate support for needed interventions.

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1. To whom is this *policy paper* addressed?

The target group of the current analysis consists of the active Roma population in Romania.

There are several categories of potential beneficiaries of this paper:

- Decision-makers, especially representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, Ministry of Education and Research, representatives of the local and central administration;
- Romanian civil society in general and Roma NGOs in particular;
- Researchers working in the field of social policies and inter-ethnic relations;
- Think-tanks from Romania, Serbia, and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe;
- Funders and/or donors for programs in Roma communities;
- General public.

2. Objectives

The current paper aims at achieving the following objectives:

- Evaluation of the degree of integration and access of the Roma on the labour market;
- Identification of mechanisms which limit and/or exclude Roma from access to the labour market;
- Evaluation of employment policies and recommendation of certain action strategies.
- Providing information services and solutions for action.

3. Methodological framework

The current paper is methodologically supported by documentary analysis of reference works in the field and by secondary data analysis. The main data sources were papers elaborated by the Institute for the Research of the Quality of Life (ICCV) on the basis of a series of research undertaken on representative samples for the Roma population between 1992-1998.

We also considered qualitative-type research based on the methods of focus groups and individual interviews, carried out by ICCV in Buzău county, as well as

by UNICEF and Save the Children in 10 Roma communities geographically distributed in all the historical regions of Romania.

Another data source consisted in social investigations carried out by a team of ICCV in sector 5, Bucharest, within a larger research regarding *Roma children in the labour market*, to the benefit of the International Labour Organisation.

Other data sources were the National Strategy for the Improvement of the Situation of Roma, formulated by the Government of Romania earlier this year, as well as the evaluation of the program for Roma of the Open Society Foundation.

The documentary and analysis data were enhanced with direct observations of the author, who has participated during recent years in a series of field researches regarding Roma communities in Romania.

4. Identification of the problem

The situation regarding employment in the labour force, in the case of the active Roma population, indicates poor integration of this population into the labour market. The very low access of the Roma to the official labour market has two main consequences:

- Reorientation of the Roma towards the grey/black labour market and
- Creation of a significant segment of Roma beneficiaries, or potential beneficiaries, for the social protection system.

The process of excluding Roma from the labour market has reached worrisome dimensions during the transition period, under circumstances of economic decline and structural adjustments undertaken by the Romanian economy at large. Thus, the dissolution of the agricultural cooperatives for production (CAPs) and the closure of certain productive units have deprived a significant part of the Roma population from a source of employment, for Roma individuals are generally the first to be dismissed in the case of closure of productive units.

The mechanisms that lead to the exclusion of Roma from the official labour market are, in general, the following:

- Formal education below the levels required on the labour market;
- Lack of qualification in general, especially in modern professions;
- Decline of traditional crafts;
- Existence of stereotyping and prejudice against Roma, effecting discriminatory practices by employers;

- Economic recession which accompanies the post-communist transition and the creation of a competitive economy.

The consequences of the exclusion of Roma from the official labour market are the following:

- Lack of income for an important segment of the Roma population, which leads to extreme poverty of an ethnic nature and deepens the social isolation of the ethnic group of the Roma, compared to the majority population;
- Reduction of “life chances” and social opportunities for the future generations of Roma “trapped” in the vicious cycle of poverty, due to the impossibility of the adult population to financially support the education of their children;
- Encouragement of illegal activities or activities at the limit of legality, in order to ensure family survival;
- Marginalisation and exclusion of the Roma population from the social life, through the association of the lack of jobs with an inferior status;
- Placement of an important social group in the situation of social dependency and creation of an increased pressure and cost on the social security system.

The measures taken for the improvement of the Roma access to the labour market are rather fragmented and come in particular from the civil society. The state intervention has been limited, until now, to passive/reactive, universal measures, not focused on the Roma population, but reaching this segment only in a tangential manner. Such measures include the provision of unemployment benefits, support allowance and social support. In fact, these measures are targeted only in a small percentage to the Roma population, for a big part of the Roma work without a written contract and are not hence eligible for welfare measures; thus, social support becomes a discretionary measure, being granted on a conjectural basis.

The initiatives of NGOs in this respect envisage especially the creation of jobs for Roma, income generating activities and support for private initiatives of the Roma. In this context, the main direction for action is the initiation of active employment measures for the Roma, through positive discrimination or affirmative action practices in the favour of Roma, institutionalised through the law and common practice. Supporting such positive discrimination practices is, in our opinion, a necessary repairing measure that can contribute to the reduction of social polarisation between the ethnic group of the Roma and the majority population, and to the improvement of the economic situation of Roma families.

5. Situation of labour force employment

Relatively recent research data (ICCV, 1998) show that the integration of Roma on the labour market is very poor. Thus, analyses¹ reveal that the degree of employment of the Roma population in Romania is much lower than that of the population at large (47% comparing to 61.7%). Of the total employed population, almost 2/3 is represented by men (65%), while only 27.5% are receiving salaries from employers.

Most of the Roma in Romania are self-employed (71.7%). The large percentage of day-labourers, 41.7% of the total population, indicate that the Roma are in a difficult situation with respect to employing their labour force and, implicitly, to ensuring the necessary income for day-to-day living.

The percentage of retired persons from the Roma population in Romania is significantly lower than at the national level (17.9% comparing to 49.2%).

The percentage of housewives is over 4 times bigger in the case of Roma compared to the population at large, indicating a poor participation of women in the labour market.

Direct observations in several Roma communities in Romania, as well as individual or group discussions with Roma, make us believe that an important part of the activities that they undertake for ensuring their income take place within the so-called grey or black economy. Although there are no quantitative data regarding Roma participation in the informal economy, it is supposed that at least half of the Roma individuals undertake such activities. In addition, almost 60% of the interviewed Roma (ICCV, 1998) declare that the activities undertaken were based on simple verbal agreements, without any registered labour contracts. Besides the fact that the majority of the Roma present an increased degree of vulnerability with regard to incomes, in the majority of cases they are placed in marginal activities, associated with an inferior social status.

The most frequent activity of the Roma within the informal economy is represented by day-work in agriculture or construction. Thus, almost half of the occupied Roma population receive their incomes as day-labourers in the mentioned fields. This type of activity has a rather seasonal nature, in the sense that it cannot be undertaken during winter, thus making the ensurance of income for the winter period very difficult for the Roma families. Employment usually takes place for

¹ Sorin Cace "Ocupa iile populației de rromi" [Occupations of the Roma Population]. Bucharest: in print, 2001.

short periods, without written contracts, and payment is usually made on a daily basis.

Out of the approximately one third of the employed Roma who receive regular salaries, half of them undertake unskilled activities. The percentage of agricultural labourers is relatively small (12% of the occupied Roma population), due to the fact that only a small number of Roma have property rights on land. In frequency, this activity is followed by traders (10%) and workers in traditional crafts (6.4%).

Besides these declared activities, there are a series of marginal activities that contribute to the family incomes, and can be included in the category of labour. We refer here to the picking and selling of medicinal plants and mushrooms, begging, car-windows washing, housekeeping for other households (activity specific for women), small occasional services (such as loading or unloading of merchandise), and the like.

6. Causes which limit Roma access to the labour market

The most important cause, in our opinion, of the limited access of the Roma on the labour market is the lack or low level of education and, in close connection, the lack of professional qualification. The incidence of lack of school education among the Roma population is very high.

A comparison between generations of Roma population shows that the incidence of the lack of school education is the smallest in the case of the mature population and the highest in the case of the elderly. The biggest differences appear between the old and newer generations. The communist school system seems to have reduced significantly the incidence of lack of school education amongst this social segment. This tendency is maintained also today.

Lack of school education, by generations

The transition generation (7-16 years)	The young generation (17-25 years)	The mature generation (26-45 years)	The old generation (over 46 years)
18.3%	17.0%	15.2%	26.7%

Source: *Social Investigation of the Roma*, ICCV, 1998.

In fact, better school performance of the Roma during the communist period was also accompanied by higher access to the labour market. Thus, the period between 1980-1990 is one of a maximal degree of integration into the labour

market, the percentage of Roma who worked as employees being at 45% (ICCV, 1998). Later on, during the transition period, along with the degradation of their overall school performance, the percentage of Roma employees out of the total occupied population decreased to 34%.

For all the generations,² the level of schooling reached by most Roma individuals at elementary and secondary schools are under the level required for achieving a minimal position on the labour market. Thus, in the case of the young, as well as of the mature generations, graduation of only 8 grades (or less) cannot guarantee access to qualified jobs. The same thing happens in the case of the mature population, where graduation from elementary school only can, at best, guarantee access to an unqualified work.

The tendency to increase the level of school education for young and mature generations correlates with a tendency to increase the requirements for school education levels needed to achieve a qualified position in the labour market. Thus, in the case of all generations, school performance of the majority of individuals is much lower than the requirements of the labour market.

Orientation towards graduating from a vocational school is more accentuated in the case of the mature generation. Almost 10% managed to graduate from a vocational school which allowed them to obtain certain qualifications. Also, the highest percentage of high-school graduates is to be found in the case of the mature generation, when compared to other generations. Graduation from higher education institutions is present only in isolated cases.

At the level of the entire Roma population over 16 years of age, there are very important differences in school education by gender. Thus, while the percentage of those who lack school education reaches 14.5% in the case of men, it raises to 23.5% in the case of women. The most important gender difference regarding the lack of education is present in the case of the old generation, where the percentage of women who never attended school is over two times bigger than that of men. In the case of the mature generation, this difference tends to decrease a little, although the percentage of women who never attended school is still almost twice larger than for men. Regarding the young generation, the differences between women and men who never attended school are very small. On the one hand, there is a slight tendency towards emancipation of women (the percentage of uneducated women decreases from 19.5% to 16.4%); on the other hand, the

² For a more detailed analysis of the school education of Roma, see Mihai Surdu, "*Educația școlară a populației de rromi*" [School Education of the Roma Population]. Bucharest: in print, 2001.

percentage of men who lack school education raises in comparison with the mature generation (from 10.9% to 17.5%). A possible explanation for such behavioural patterns displayed by the young generation could be the tendency towards modernisation of the Roma family—abandonment of the traditional distribution of roles whereby women are usually housewives and men provide incomes for supporting the entire household.

Significant gender differences also appear in the case of vocational schools graduates of all generations, although these are quite slim in the case of the old and mature generations compared to the young generation. If in the case of the old generation, the ratio between men and women graduating from vocational schools was of 5:1, at the mature generation this ratio decreases to 3:1, only to reach less than 2:1 with the young generation. The higher number of men graduating from vocational schools, compared to women, can reflect the persistency of a traditional family model in which the man is oriented towards a profession, while the woman discontinues school education before obtaining a qualification, in order to deal with household duties. This inequality between men and women with respect to the achievement of a profession (by means of graduation from a vocational school) tends to decrease with the young generation.

Associated with the low level or absence of school education, illiteracy represents a major impediment in the integration of Roma into the labour market, especially in obtaining qualified jobs. One of the most important indicators in the comparative analysis of generations is represented by the incidence of illiteracy, for we believe that the assimilation of minimal abilities (such as reading and writing) represents the foremost acquisition for a population with low levels of school education. The lowest incidence of illiteracy is to be found at the level of the mature generation, where approximately 30% of the subjects can be considered illiterate (read with difficulty or not at all), while the highest incidence of illiteracy rests with the older generation. Thus, in the case of the old generation, 45% of the subjects declare that they read with difficulty or not at all, and the increased number of persons who refuse to answer probably represents non-declared cases of illiterates, due to the negative social connotation associated therewith. If we were to also consider the non-respondents, it would mean that over 60% of the older generation are illiterate. In regards to the young and transition generation, it is noted that the illiteracy tendency is increasing, when compared to the mature generation.

In the case of the old generation, women are illiterate in a higher percentage than men, the number of women who cannot read being almost double that of men.

Also, a higher percentage of illiteracy among women remains with the mature generation, although there is a slight decreasing tendency in the percentage of illiterate women, comparing to men. Starting with the young generation, we notice an almost equal distribution of the number of illiterates by gender; moreover, the number of illiterate men slightly over-passes that of illiterate women. In the transition generation, these differences are being maintained, with the number of illiterate men being larger than that of illiterate women.

As a result of the low level of school education, a sizeable part of the Roma population has no professional qualification. There is a tendency to revive traditional crafts, on the one hand, due to the economic recession that led to the dismissal of Roma from productive units and their return to traditional crafts, and on the other hand, due to initiatives of Roma NGOs targeted at stimulating traditional crafts.

Professions of the Roma population in Romania 1992-1998 (percentages)

Profession	Roma at national level 1992	Roma at national level 1998
No profession	79.4	52.4
Traditional crafts	3.9	10.3
Modern professions	16.1	37.3

Sources: *Social Investigation of the Roma*, ICCV, 1998 and Elena Zamfir, Cătălin Zamfir, "Țiganiile între îngrijorare și ignorare" [Gypsies Between Ignorance and Concern]. Bucharest: Alternative, 1993.

Amongst the modern professions, the most encountered qualifications are constructions (mason, house painter, ironworker), mechanic locksmith, auto mechanic, welder, driver, tailor.

The traditional crafts are related to the specific of the Roma groups and are transmitted between generations, without involving the formal educational system, with the exception of programs undertaken by NGOs in partnership with schools, for the revival of traditional crafts. Most often, Roma who exercise traditional crafts are fiddlers, coppersmiths, blacksmiths, brick makers, tinmen, and silversmiths. The percentage of traditional crafts is higher in rural areas, due to higher degrees of preservation with respect to specific cultural traditions in compact Roma rural communities than in Roma communities of the big cities. As the city Roma adapted faster to modernity, almost 3/5 of the Roma exercising traditional crafts are in the rural area.

Aside from factors related to education and the associated qualifications, which limit the access of the Roma to the labour market, we must not ignore the discriminatory practices of employers who, in many cases, refuse to employ Roma. Advertisements for employment include, in some cases, the specification “no Roma”, and the discussions with Roma individuals from various rural or urban communities confirm the fact that some employers refuse to hire them.

Equally, we encounter a form of discrimination also in the case of banks. Some of the Roma complain about the fact that banks refuse to give them credits for the development of small businesses, sometimes despite the fact that they can offer material guarantees for the loans.

In rural areas, although the Roma were eligible for being given ownership of lands, the local authorities, claiming the insufficiency of the agricultural land, did not give land to the Roma, except in some isolated cases. The lack of agricultural land excludes the Roma from the most frequent occupation in the rural area, that of farmer. Moreover, the closure of the agricultural cooperatives for production (also known as ‘kolhozes’), the main employer of the Roma before 1989, makes the economic situation of Roma families even more difficult.

7. Measures taken with respect to occupation of labour force

As we already stated, the government remained, to date, confined to passive policies with respect to employment. Even these policies (unemployment benefits, support allowance) have targeted or benefited in a small measure the Roma population, since only one third of them have worked as employees.

Social support, as a last form of social protection for families in difficulty, does not represent a source of income for the Roma, this support being offered in a temporary manner, most often during electoral campaigns.

Active measures for the integration of Roma into the labour market have been initiated by NGOs. The most active NGO in this sense has been the Open Society Foundation (OSF), through its special program dedicated to the Roma ethnic group, which also has an economic component. In the objectives of the projects funded by OSF are to be found: vocational training for young people who did not succeed to reach a satisfactory level of school education, orientation towards relevant professions for the Roma, intensive qualification of young Roma in

professions that allow their access to the labour market, entrepreneurial education and basic legal training.

One initiative, funded by the OSF, has been launched through the project “Stimulation of employment of Roma civil servants in public administration and public services”. Through this project, a partnership network has been established between local authorities and Roma communities, in 7 counties of the country. The project aimed at providing training for a number of 140 Roma in the practice of public administration, and their employment in the local public administration, through open competition. In our opinion, this project represents the first attempt to institutionalise positive discrimination, in the favour of Roma, on the labour market.

Projects initiated by Roma NGOs³ in the category of economic programs have as objectives income generation, creation of work places and professional formation. Usually, these are projects focused on special issues, meant to improve the situation of employment in some of the Roma communities. In a typology of projects, we can identify the following categories:

- Creation of jobs through the initiation of small businesses;
- Qualification of the Roma for jobs required on the labour market;
- Support for the Roma in the establishment of small businesses;
- Brokerage for the labour force.

The above-mentioned categories are not exclusive, as many projects represent a combination of two, three or all these categories. As an example of best practice for the creation of jobs, we would mention the project “Construction of a Bakery”, implemented by the Agency for Community Development “Together” in partnership with a private commercial company, for the benefit of the Roma community in Traianu village. One of the immediate effects of the project has been the employment of 6 Roma individuals in the new bread factory. Similar projects have been developed by other Roma NGOs, through opening brick-making manufactures, wood processing or textile confections units, producing objects for home improvement, handicraft, etc.

An example of a project whose objectives combined the professional formation with actions taken regarding employment of labour force and support for the Roma in the initiation of small businesses is the project “New Qualifications for Young Roma”, implemented by the Amare Phrala (Our Brothers) Association in Cluj-Napoca. The beneficiaries of the project, 20 young Roma with no qualifications,

³ For a more detailed analysis, see Mariea Ionescu and Sorin Cace, *Best practices in Rroma Communities*, Bucharest, 2000

attended courses in shoe repairing, some of them also being supported for employment in specialised units and the others for obtaining the necessary authorisations in order to open their own shoe-repairing shops.

Another example of a successful project is the project “Qualification of Roma by economic agents in jobs required on the market”, implemented by the General Roma Union of Deva. The project was developed in the localities of Petrosani, Hunedoara, Brad and Calan, with the purpose of supporting young unemployed who were looking for work and were registered with the Offices for Labour Force and Unemployment. Over three years, 120 persons have concluded pre-employment contracts at the beginning of the project, followed by their employment for vacant position at the end of the courses, or have expressed their wish to initiate businesses on their own. The qualification courses have been organised with the approval and cooperation of the Office for Labour Forces and Unemployment and the General Department for Labour and Social Protection of the Hunedoara county.

Beyond these specific projects, the merits of Roma NGOs lay in their collaboration with the Government on drafting a strategy for the improvement of the situation of Roma. This strategy also contains an economic component and, despite the fact that it does not establish specific costs and responsibilities, it stipulates for the first time, officially, the main measures that could improve the situation of the Roma, such as the introduction of positive discrimination on the labour market or the granting of property rights to Roma in the rural area.

In the economic field, the governmental strategy⁴ stipulates:

- Initiation and implementation of projects for professional formation or re-conversion of the Roma;
- Provision of facilities for the exercise and revival of traditional crafts that meet specific needs of the market;
- Formulation and implementation of specific projects for funding income generating activities and small businesses for Roma families and communities, including Roma women;
- Reduction of the unemployment rate amongst Romanian citizens of Roma origin, through the creation of facilities for employers who hire Roma and through provisions against all forms of discrimination regarding the employment of Roma;

⁴ Strategy of the Romanian Government for the Improvement of the Situation of Roma, Bucharest, 2001.

- The formulation of programs meant to provide property rights and to stimulate agricultural activities for Roma communities;
- Support, according to the legislation in force, for small and/or medium size enterprises owned by persons belonging to the Roma ethnic group, through a system of advantageous credits;
- Inclusion of the disadvantaged Roma communities in the provisions of the law on disadvantaged areas, followed by the formulation and implementation of programs to redress such communities;
- Encouragement for the implementation of job creation projects targeted at Roma women.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

Beyond certain measures from the Government Strategy (positive discrimination, affirmative action and granting of property rights on land), which are undoubtedly aimed at eliminating some of the causes of the exclusion of Roma from the labour market, an efficient and sustainable action for the improvement of the situation of Roma, with respect to employment, must consider a correlation of the educational policies with the employment policies.

As we pointed above, the lack of education or insufficient education, associated with the absence of qualifications, turns the majority of the Roma into a marginal community, and makes them vulnerable in the labour market. Thus, educational policies which envisage desegregation of schools, improving the quality of human resources, promoting positive discrimination, or providing material support for families with low incomes, could have positive effects on the improvement of the school situation of the Roma and, implicitly, on their employment situation.

As we have already seen, the communist period, when the Roma population reached a maximal school performance, was also a climax period for the employment of their labour force. The mistakes of that period, which led to the assimilation of a big part of the Roma population, including by means of the school education system, can now be avoided through the promotion of an inter-cultural education.

In the long term, the solution of investing into human capital represents, in the case of the Roma, the only solution for keeping them up to the requirements of modernity and of a competitive economy. Such methods also reduce the social polarisation between the Roma ethnic group and the majority population.

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