

INTEGRATED COMMUNITY HOUSING PROJECT

BRNO, THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The project takes place in Brno, in the Czech Republic. Brno is the second largest city in the Czech Republic and has approximately 400,000 inhabitants of which approximately 12,000 are Roma, which is 3% of the population. The majority of the Roma live in two districts of the city. The houses in these districts, tenement-buildings of different sizes with small flats situated around an inner-yard, are more than a 100 years old and have not been maintained for many years. The majority of the Roma live in these kinds of houses. The project is directed at two of these houses, one on Bratislavská Street and one on Cejl Street. On the 1st, 2nd and 3rd floors live approximately 60 families, the majority of them are Roma.

The Roma community centre "Drom" is located on Bratislavská Street in one of above-mentioned apartment buildings. The ground floor of the building, including the spaces around the inner yard, had been empty for years and every now and then some of these spaces were inhabited by families who had nowhere else to live. At the end of 1998 the local authorities decided to reconstruct the ground floor of the building to be used for activities of the centre. In spring 1999 the front-part was finished and could be used by the centre. The remaining part of the reconstruction took place during 1999.

That was the moment, Spolu Czech Republic started to be involved. The Spolu community-workers agreed with the director of the Drom-centre to organise a meeting with the tenants of the house. The meeting was planned with the following aims:

- To inform the tenants about the plans of the Drom-centre, regarding the extension of the centre's activities and the planned reconstruction of the house,
- To look for ways in which the tenants could be involved in the activities of the centre.

The local organisation: Roma centre *Drom*

The community centre started in 1990 with activities for Roma children and youths. After a few years the centre extended its activities towards adults. Today, the centre offers leisure-time activities, education, advice and support to Roma children, youngsters and adults. Besides this, the centre co-operates intensively with the local authorities, police, institutions of social work etc. to work on improving the situation of Roma people in Brno. Co-operation had already existed for years between the people who established the Czech branch of SPOLU and the Drom-centre. In spring 1999, Drom became one of the organisations which planned to co-operate in a Network for Local Community Development, initiated by Spolu-CZ.

Many people were present at this meeting. An interesting fact was that the majority were women. Their reactions to the plans were positive. The people who were present had many ideas of what kind of activities could be started at the centre, and in which way the tenants could play a role in them. However, one important problem appeared. Most of the families who lived in the house did not have valid rent-contracts. Most of them were in arrears for rent, electricity or gas. They were afraid that, once the local authorities decide to reconstruct the house, they would be evicted from their flats, and that there would be a Roma centre without Roma.

The idea to work for debts

In discussions with the director of the Drom-centre, one Spolu-worker came up with the idea of investigating the possibility of having the tenants working in the centre instead of paying back their debts. The main reasons for thinking about such a possibility were: on the one hand the scale of debts and the impossibility of paying them back from the low income most of the families had, and on the other hand it could be a way of involving the tenants in improving their living standard.



Once this idea was presented, it necessarily meant the involvement of the local authorities. The building in which both the Drom-centre and the flats are situated was owned by the local authorities, so they were the first ones from whom approval was needed.

For a long time, good working-contacts had existed between the director of the Drom-centre and the vice-mayor of district one in which area the building is situated. This was one reason why the local authorities showed a willingness to start negotiating on the work-for-debts plan. Another reason was that the vice-mayor realised that it would be also in his interest to get a proper overview of who is living in the flats, to have the debt problem solved and to be able to carry out a decent administration of the house. This resulted to the following agreement:

- The tenants would get the possibility to do work for the local authorities. This work would consist mainly of cleaning the unused spaces (empty, derelict flats, cellars, etc.) in the building where they live and, if that was not enough, to do similar work in other buildings owned by the local authorities.
- The tenants would receive a nominal amount of money per hour, which would be deducted from their debts.
- People who worked their debts away could sign a new and valid contract for their flat for one year.
- If they paid rent regularly from the start of the project, their contract would be extended.

The comprehensive project *Community Housing*

When working on the reconstruction of the ground floor of the house, it appeared that in fact the whole building should be rebuilt, since it was in such a bad state. This resulted in elaborating a more comprehensive plan, which was given the name "Project for Community Housing". The main aspects of this project were:

- Making it possible for Roma people to stay in the city-centre. This is quite a unique aspect of the project, since many municipalities do not want to keep Roma people in the expensive city-centres. At the same time, in the future this can cause problems when the scarcity of building-ground in or close to the city-centre will increase. This might very well increase strongly the market value of the ground on which the buildings are situated. This might make it difficult in the future to keep these areas reserved for housing for low-income families.
- The work-for-debts plan, as described above.
- The reconstruction of the apartment building without moving out the families. The main reason for this approach was, to make it possible for people to be involved in the cleaning and reconstruction work, and to increase the attachment of people to the place where they live.
- To support the families in such a way that they could continue living in the house. Practically, this meant motivating people to pay their rent regularly, and to ask for help in case financial problems appear. Both aspects are important: Many families have lived in the house without a contract, without paying rent, *and* without being evicted from their flats and are not used any more to a strict approach from the side of the local authorities. At first sight this might look strange ("it should be normal to pay your rent regularly"), but considering the fact that there are many families who live for years illegally in flats without paying rent, it is understandable that people have to get used to the new situation. Connected to this new situation is solving financial problems as soon as they appear (for example, delay in payment of social

benefits), and not to wait until it "maybe will be solved". The average incomes are so low, that once new debts occur, it will be difficult to pay them back.

- Looking for ways how, in co-operation between Drom, Spolu, the local authorities, the Labour Office and others, the situation for the tenants could be improved, looking at different aspects of life (housing, employment, community-relations, etc.). That is the essence of the so-called *comprehensive approach*.

The local authorities were cautious in the beginning in their approach towards the house at Bratislavská Street. However, after a short while they decided to involve a second house in the project, situated in nearby Cejl-street. This is a similar kind of house as the one in Bratislavská Street, only a bit smaller.

Money for this comprehensive project was to be found from different sources: The City of Brno, the Czech Government, and through a loan from the Development Bank, connected with the Council of Europe. This made the project more comprehensive, but at the same time also more complex, from the point of view of organisation and co-operation.

The role of SPOLU

The part mentioned above is very much directed at the co-operation between the different organisations and institutions which play a role in the project. Spolu plays two roles in the project. One is the role of giving expert-organisation in the realisation of the project. The second role concerns community-work. These two roles often overlap, and they can be reinforcing, but also conflicting.

Role 1: Spolu-CZ as expert-organisation. In this role Spolu-CZ is participating in the project as a partner of organisations or institutions like Drom, the local authorities, the estate-agency, etc. In this co-operation, the tasks of Spolu-CZ are the following:

- To involve the opinion of tenants in meetings where they, for whatever kind of reasons, could not take part in (advocacy).
- Using our experience from direct work with people to influence decisions.
- Using our experience in community-work projects.
- Systematic documentation of (parts of) the project.
- Stimulate a systematic approach.

Role 2: Spolu-CZ as an organisation, responsible for carrying out and developing of community-work. In this function, Spolu-CZ has two tasks. These tasks often overlap, it is important to mention the differences.

The first task is directly related to the housing project. An important aspect of the responsibility of Spolu-CZ is to actively work on ensuring the involvement of tenants during the whole project and to avoid the situation of them becoming only clients of the different institutions. Spolu tried to do this by securing the practical involvement of the people in activities concerning the project and to find ways in which tenants could discuss directly with, for example, representatives of the local authorities. One way of trying to achieve these aims, is by organising tenants meetings and by supporting people in their efforts to establish a tenants committee (more about this later). To make a proper documentation of the project, in which the process of development in the community itself (Opinions, reactions, changes, ideas, etc.) will be stressed, is another important task of Spolu-CZ.

The second part of the activities of Spolu-CZ is the work with the communities who live in the two houses in which the project takes place. In this work, Spolu workers involve tenants where it is possible. Since the project started, and since a start has been made in solving certain legal problems concerning housing, other problems have appeared:

- There are still many problems concerning citizenship (since the former Czechoslovakia split up into two independent republics many Roma who live in today's Czech Republic do not have Czech citizenship, or are involved in complicated procedures to apply for Czech citizenship).
- Many families have, apart from debts on rent, more debts to all kind of institutions or companies (electricity, gas, loans for buying expensive consumer-goods, etc.).
- Drugs (especially inhaling solvents).
- Most families have very low incomes: How to make ends meet with such a little money and continuously rising expenses?
- Taking responsibility for order in the house.

Meetings with the tenants of the houses

The meetings with tenants, which took place on an irregular basis, are seen by them as something special. The problem is, that it appeared to be difficult to achieve concrete results during these meetings. The tenants proposed many interesting ideas (like, for example, establishing a laundrette in the building, both for the house and for the general public). These ideas have been recorded, but at the moment there are no possibilities to carry them out in close co-operation with the tenants themselves. Partly because there are practical barriers: For example, there is no space any more for a laundrette in the Bratislavská-house, while in the Cejl-house the reconstruction has not been started yet.

One reason for not reaching concrete results could be, that people are not at all used to

these kind of meetings. Another reason is, that certain people who are for all kind of reasons against the project, use these meetings to speak in general terms against the project and against the people and organisations involved, without giving concrete suggestions or remarks. This often negatively influences the meetings and limits the space for other people to participate in them. The problem of opposition will be elaborated more later in this chapter.



Other meetings are those with the tenant-committees. There are big differences between the committees of the houses at Bratislavská and Cejl Street. Each house has its committee which has been "elected" during one of the tenants-meetings. In the housing committee at Bratislavská 41 are people participating who are willing to do something. The main task now is to find ways how to work systematically and to support them in working as a collective which is really representing the community. An important and positive thing is, that apart from one or two members, there is a willingness to solve things. Until now, however, this did not really result in concrete steps, partly because the people are not used to tak-

ing initiatives themselves independently.

The tenant-committee from the house at Cejl Street was from the beginning dominated by one man who continuously has been trying to influence the project in a negative way; meaning: no systematic work, preferences for his family, for those who do what he wants and for those who pay him enough. After a certain number of meetings, it appears that only he came to the meeting, apologising for the others (even those who shortly before the meeting said to Spolu-workers that they would come). This was a reason to cancel this committee and to look for ways how to elect a committee which would better represent the tenants at the house at Cejl Street. It was also obvious, when speaking with tenants from Cejl Street individually, they did not have any confidence in "their" tenant-committee.

Spolu-CZ is planning to start training for those housing-committees as soon as they are more established. This will be important, since there is a chance that these committees will be gradually given more formal responsibilities in running the houses.

Role of local experts: strengthening dependency, patronage, and corruption

Among the tenants, there are certain people who are more active than others. This in itself is logical, and there is nothing wrong with that. An example of this is the housekeeper at the Bratislavská house. This lady, Roma, is a great help in many practical things concerning the house. She knows the people and has great respect and authority. She is helping many people in arranging complicated things, and does a lot for people. The problem is that she is often working independently, without consulting things with other participants in the project, and solving things in a different way than agreed in meetings between the different participating organisations. Another problem, is, that it is obvious that people are dependent on her and often do not take any initiative, "because the housekeeper will do it," or "we'll ask the housekeeper for this." This keeps the majority of the people in a dependent position, which in the longer term could be a disadvantage for them.

This process of "re-enforcing dependency"¹ is something which is important to keep an eye on when doing community-work. It is a process which can be seen as one end of a spectrum which ranges from "patronage"² towards "corruption"³.

Problems which appeared during the project

Development in the community; co-operation with the local authorities. One continuous point of complication was how to synchronise the process of development within the community with the work of the local authorities. This has to do with two things:

- Developments in a disadvantaged community, living in the old inner city go slowly. Being neglected for a long time, there is a whole range of prob-

Reaction of tenants on the project

In general, people are positive about the planned improvement of the houses. There is a "silent majority" of tenants who do not put themselves that much to the foreground, but if you speak to them individually it is obvious that they realise that they have been given a great chance. There are others who more openly express their appreciation, and there are still people who do not take it seriously. The latter still do not pay their rents regularly (or do not pay at all) and think that they will never be evicted from their flats. Unfortunately for them, the reality will not be as they expect.

Most of the families gladly took the opportunity to work for their debts, realising that this would be the only way to get rid of the high debts and to legalise their tenancy status. In the second house, the "payment" for working will be less than at the 1st house. One reason is the strong influence from public opinion that saw the "wage" as at a level, difficult to reach for any other citizen of Brno in a common low-qualified job. Although it was expected that there would be a lot of criticism from the inhabitants of the second house, this was not the case. Of course there were negative reactions, but the general tendency was still to appreciate the chance of settling the debts and the legal matters.

blems which need to be addressed. This presents the following dilemma: It is not possible to solve one problem without addressing the others. At the same time it will be very complicated to address all aspects at once. It will be a process of years to find ways to solve everything in a sustainable way.

- The second important fact is, that the mainly Roma tenants in this project are seen as active participants instead of clients. This is a question of changing perception, both from the side of tenants and from the side of the different institutions which co-operate in the project. Also to change the feeling - based on concrete experience - of being neglected for a long time into an attitude of co-operation is something which does not occur quickly.

The two roles of Spolu-CZ. The role as an expert-organisation, in co-operation with other partners (the municipality, Drom, etc.) requires a commitment to achieving concrete results. In the role as community worker the process is as important as the results to be achieved: As a community worker you know it is sometimes important to allow people to make mistakes and to learn from these experiences. This, however, can be in conflict with a commitment, together with other participating organisations, to meet certain deadlines and not to delay the project as a whole. This is especially true when certain agreements have been made, contracts have been signed – for example with building-firms – a dilemma often appears between taking over responsibility from people and trying as Spolu-CZ to make the best out of it, or leaving the responsibility up to people, which can mean missing deadlines and/or risking that their involvement will be completely neglected

A more systematic approach

Since autumn 1999 the work on the project started to be more systematic. Slowly but surely, people from different sides have started to realise that only a co-ordinated approach will work in managing a complex project like this. More often people are officially invited to meetings and reports of meetings are made and sent to the participants. An important point of attention is to keep the decision-making processes as transparent and straight-forward as possible, and to make important decisions during meetings where all participating organisations take part, and not by two people on the phone, without any report. This will increase the status of decisions and decrease the possibilities for people to ignore decisions which have been made. The more unclear the decision-making process, the more it benefits corrupt people. Fortunately, the pragmatists among the people who co-operate in the project see the benefit of systematic work.

A problem that Spolu-CZ came across is a lack of professionals. This appeared in both parts of the Spolu work: The work directly related to the project and in the work in the community which is not directly related to the project. For example, when working with people in the

community it is obvious that certain problems need expert-help, for example drug-addiction. The regular institutions are not ready for actively approaching Roma people in disadvantaged situations, and alternative kinds of social help are still marginal.

The general approach of Spolu-CZ in situations like this is to try to get expertise and people from existing institutions together (to form a kind of network) to address problems which need specialists or experts.

Conclusion

In general, the project "Comprehensive Community Housing" is an interesting and promising project. An important aspect of the project is the fact that different sides are co-operating on a concrete project. The approach is quite pragmatic. Common discussions and accusations of, for example, racism, hardly play a role.

A problem with this concrete project is the fact that it is very complex. This makes it more difficult for the tenants to be involved in all parts of the project which are important for them. It is also a problem when, like in Brno, different sides are not used to systematic co-operation in such a complex project. The fact that the project

is part of a complex structure also means, that attention to the process will be much less than the attention on results. "Learning from experiences" is often difficult to combine with having to meet deadlines.

Last, but not least, the problem of corruption is something that can ruin a project like this. The more complex a project, the more non-transparent the process of decision making and the more a project touches the personal interests of participating people or organi-

Opposition against the project

On different levels there was, and still is, opposition against the project. Within the local authorities there are still people who do not agree with any non-standard approach towards solving this problem. Also the general public is very sceptical. Partly because of the selective approach of the media in presenting the information, there is the image of Roma getting preferential treatment. This, in turn, influences the local authorities, especially those people whose position is dependent on elections or on the public opinion in general.

But opposition does not come only from the side of the majority. Roma political organisations, many of them which already for some time lost their credit among Roma in Brno, have tried their best to "take over" the project with the aim to improve their position among the Roma in Brno. This is especially problematic, since their approach of trying to create opposition among the Roma against Drom, Spolu and the local authorities that the project concerns will never result in the city-council choosing new partners to co-operate with. On the contrary, it strengthens the position of those people within the local authorities who are against the whole project: "Look, we are doing so much for these Gypsies and still they are not satisfied - let's cancel the whole thing and they can sort it out themselves." Which might mean in the end: no reconstruction, no settling of debts and legal matters, no non-standard solutions any more, and Roma evicted from their flats.

sations, the higher the chance that corruption sooner or later will appear.

However, in spite of these problems, the project also shows something very important: community-based work is a good way to achieve concrete results, which helps in persuading others of the value of the work. The co-operation at the community-level between different people and institutions brings people in contact with each other who normally are not, or who would hardly be, in touch with each other. It is also a good way to involve all the features of the local situation in the project, which prevents the application of standard solutions. Several people who were rather sceptical when the project started have by now become enthusiastic supporters of it.

Brno, May 2000, Marta Misíková, Peter Mulder, (Spolu-CZ)

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¹ With *re-enforcing dependency* is meant the tendency of people to stop being dependent on officials or experts, and become dependent on somebody from inside the community who acts as spokes-person and problem-solver for the community. Often the intentions of these "problem-solvers" are not bad; "I know how to do it, so don't bother, I'll arrange this for you." Often, with good results, since the "problem-solver" is experienced in arranging things. But at the same time it prevents other people from learning, from gaining these experiences themselves and from becoming independent.

² Patronage is a system, well known and accepted among many communities and cultures, especially in those where personal authorities, often connected to family-ties, play an important role. The main feature of patronage is "I have contacts, so I can arrange things for you, if you support me when I need it" (for example, in elections, or when other public support is needed). Being accepted as normal and without any moral objections in many cultures, in the European view on public and political dealing it gets the label "corruption." It needs discussion in daily practice, what is acceptable and what not. The role of personal and cultural values is important in this: Often the "patron" is seen as a respected person who does a lot for the community and who deserves to be rewarded for this, for example, at elections.

³ You can describe corruption when people ignore compromises made in co-operation with others, to work mainly for their own benefit, or act in a way which disadvantages both the people who are dependent on them as, for example, the partners in a certain project. That things like defrauding money, stealing documents for one's own benefit, et cetera, is corruption is obvious. The activities which are on the borderline of patronage and corruption are the most complicated, since different values play an important role. Also because activities of the once benevolent patron can easily move towards corruption, without the community knowing or realising this.