

COMMUNITY-WORK IN A ROMA COMMUNITY IN EAST-SLOVAKIA ŽEHRA, SLOVAKIA

A few years ago, Spolu International was invited by the Regional Development Agency (*Krajská rozvojová agentúra*) of Spišská Nová Ves (East Slovakia) to assist this agency in addressing the complex problems in the region concerning the Roma minority. This invitation was based on similar experiences that SPOLU had gained in similar community-development projects in Slovakia and Romania. In co-operation between Spolu International, the Regional Development Agency, and the municipalities of several different villages, a working-plan was drawn up. This plan was directed at several villages in the region which have large Roma communities, addressing problems in the sphere of housing, education, employment and the relationships between Roma and non-Roma.

Also in Žehra, one of the villages in this region, preliminary planning was concentrated on a housing-plan and community-development. For the housing-plan, the technical documentation has already been made. The plan consists of a number of roof-flats on top of the existing blocks of flats. In this way, a part of the housing-problem is being solved in a relatively cheap way. It will also solve problems with the drainage of the water from the roofs of the flats.

This text, however, will highlight the community-work in Žehra, which was an important aspect of the whole project. To carry out a pilot-project, SPOLU International contracted us, two community-workers from the Czech branch of Spolu, to work in the Roma community in Žehra, a village in the region Spišská Nová Ves. From November 1998 until February 2000 we visited the village 10 times. This text will review our work and experiences in such a way, that it will give a comprehensive picture of our activities and of the results of the work. Of course, we will also address the difficulties and problems we came across.

Co-operation with local partners

There is very little contact between the representatives of the majority and Roma communities. Both groups regard each other with distrust. Since November 1998 when a Roma man was elected mayor of the village, relations have become even worse. During 1999, the non-Roma inhabitants of the village started an administrative procedure to separate "their" part of the village from the "Roma" part. This "white" part contains some historical

Characteristics of the locality

Žehra is a village of 1,500 inhabitants in the East-Slovak region of Spišská Nová Ves. Geographically, the village is divided into three parts. One part is the "centre," with the church, a shop, a pub and the municipal-office. In this area live approximately 500 people, mainly non-Roma people. At a certain distance from the centre is situated the second part of the village, in which also mainly non-Roma people live. The third part of the village is situated 2-3 km from the "centre." This part consists of a traditional Roma settlement ("the old settlement") and 12 small blocks of flats. In these flats and in the old settlement live approximately 1,000 Roma. In both parts there is a scarcity of decent places to live, but especially in the old settlement many Roma live in extremely bad conditions. There are a few brick houses, but most are made out of wood. Some of these wooden houses are in relatively good condition and have, officially or non-officially, electricity. The majority, however, are more like wooden huts. In some of these small wooden huts live 20-30 people. There is no access to running water or to gas.

Unemployment in the Roma community is close to 100%. Only when seasonal labour is needed are many Roma people contracted. Many people live in extreme poverty, partly because of the existence of *usury* within the community: Roma people from the community are lending people money against extreme high interest rates (100% a month is not a rarity).

monuments that are on the list of cultural heritage protected by UNESCO (like the old church and the Spiš Castle), which are sources of income for Žehra.

That is why cooperation at local level was crucial. During our work we co-operated with the following people or institutions:

Regional Development Agency (RDA, *Krajská rozvojová agentura*) in Spišská Nová Ves was one of our most important partners. This agency was the official partner for Spolu International when initiating the project. They also played a central role in the co-operation with the different municipalities. Last, but not least, they were strongly supportive of us in our community-work in Žehra. This support varied from practical things like arranging financial matters, to helping us solve practical problems we came across in the community. During the period of the pilot project, the Agency started to co-operate independently with representatives of the Roma community in Žehra.

The Social Manager. The social manager was employed at the municipality of Žehra, on initiative of the Regional Development Agency. This function was a "public useful job" for one year. The task of the social manager, a Roma man from one of the nearby

villages, was to solve practical problems for and with Roma families. Either this could be on his own initiative (when coming across problems when visiting the village or the settlement) or when asked by families, schools, municipalities or other institutions.

A working-group of local Roma people. In the village and in the settlement, our main partner for co-operation was a working-group of local Roma people. This group was established during our first visit to Žehra.

The mayor of Žehra. Especially when dealing with practical matters, we were often in contact with the mayor of Žehra. Or better: with the two mayors: During the period the project was running there were local elections in which, as mentioned before, a Roma man was elected as mayor.

The activities of SPOLU in Žehra between November 1998 and October 1999

Mapping the social situation of the Roma part of the village (the blocks of flats and the old settlement)

First of all we gathered information which was already available about the village and about the situation of the Roma in Žehra. This was already quite a lot, and was very useful to us. However, some more "first-hand" information was needed to get a real picture of life in the Roma community. By talking with Roma people from the village, with the mayor and with the people from the RDA, a description of the situation could be made. A large part of the information was gathered by meeting people from the settlement and visiting their houses and huts. Information was gathered about the number of people and their housing situation; their family-life; school; social structure in the community. Information on contacts between Roma and the authorities and contact with non-Roma was gathered as well.

On the basis of the information gathered the first ideas about the approach to the work in Žehra could be formulated.

Making an inventory, together with a large group of Roma people, of the main problems in their community

In co-operation with the Agency and the social manager, a meeting was organised in a space in the Roma-part of the village, which was used as a church and cultural centre. Approximately 50-60 people attended the meeting. The community-workers asked the people to tell them about their life, their problems, etc. Although there were at first a lot of complaints about everything and everybody, later on people came with very practical matters about things which are bad, which should be changed, and how. The community-workers succeeded in gathering information about what the local Roma saw as their problems and wrote this information down to discuss them afterwards with a smaller group of people.

Establishing a working-group of local people

The next step was, to put the information in order and to establish a smaller group of motivated people who would be willing to co-operate with us in solving problems. This working-group had to represent the Roma community. The social manager assisted the community-workers in making a first selection of the people. On one hand there were people who showed interest during the first meeting, on the other hand were people the social manager knew would be interested, but who did not attend the meeting.

This co-operation was an important instrument to keep, for example, the money-lenders out of the working-group. One of the money-lenders showed a lot of interest during the first meeting and looked at first sight quite reasonable. If the community-workers had not consulted with the social manager, they would have invited this man to the working-group before discovering that he was one of the money-lenders. This would have influenced the future work negatively.

In the end, a working-group was established of 7 people. This number increased during the year to approximately 16, of which 7 were women.

In the first meeting with the working group we started by making a list of the topics which had been mentioned during the first big meeting. Then we asked the working-group members to add topics which, according to them, were still missing. This resulted in the following list of problems identified:

Housing; the old settlement; water; heating; gas; school/education/travelling to school; future of the children, discrimination/fear/safety; no shop/butcher; nobody to go to in case of problems; bad contacts with majority population from Žehra and with Roma from other settlements in the region; no money from state; no opportunities to improve things; integration; rooms in the flats which are not furnished; Roma traditions and trades; culture-centre; place for mourning; equipment for church; usury; crime; unemployment/entrepreneurship.

After this inventory of the problems had been made, and written down on sheets of paper, the working-group chose "housing" and "the old settlement" as the main priorities. These topics were looked at more closely, and the following list came out:

Pull down the old settlement⁴; building family-houses and roof-flats; necessity of a common phone; improve as soon as possible the living of old and ill people; children's playground; heating/gas; no running water (in old settlement); no hot water (in most of the flats); safety of the children; sign along the busy road "watch out for children"

Together with the working group, the community-workers divided the problems into categories identified as "possible to solve easily and quickly," "in the mid-term" and those requiring "long-term solutions." This was an important moment: To agree on what is possible to solve quickly and what takes longer, without saying that one topic is more important than the other. From the easy and quickly the group chose:

- establishing a common phone
- asking a road-sign "watch out- children"
- little improvements for old and ill people who live in the old settlement.

We divided these things into tasks about what to do about it, who does what, and what could be the result at our next visit. We wrote this into a kind of contract, signed by all participants of the working group, including the two of us. The signing of a contract became an important aspect of the work and increased the commitment of the working-group members.

Concrete results of the co-operation

Road-sign "Watch out! Children!" The plan was, to put in a request to establish an official road-sign "Watch-out children!" on the road which leads along the Roma settlement and which is frequently used by the Roma from Žehra to walk to school, to the well, et cetera. For this, contacts had to be established with the municipality and with the department responsible for traffic and road-maintenance. This appeared to be rather complicated, partly because of all kinds of temporary maintenance-activities on the same road. Due to these complications, the sending of the final request for the sign was much delayed.

Public phone. A procedure has been started to establish a public phone in the settlement. Unfortunately, this has been delayed by the Slovak phone-company.

Improvement of a part of the houses of the old settlement. The improvement of a part of the houses of the old settlement was very important. The work was carried out by members of the working-group. They also decided the priorities. Material for the repairs was paid for by Spolu International. Although the problems were huge and there was not enough material and money to do everything, this was a success, for several reasons:

- The working-group had to decide what to repair and where. It was their responsibility to find criteria in a situation where in fact everything is necessary to be repaired. The fact that afterwards there were very little complaints from the community about it showed that they really had found a way of doing it.

- The working-group came across problems. For example, there were people who burned the wood they were given in their heaters, and then asked for more. They realised, that they had to find a way, to ensure that people who did things like this, would not get things again.
- The work was done voluntarily. Although there were continuously people who tried to get money, the fact that the work was voluntarily increased the status of the working-group. We as community-workers were often asked to explain that the people were really not paid for their work.

Round table meeting on issues of education

Another important example of the work in Žehra deserving special attention was the organisation of a working-seminar about education. Although the word "round table" often implies something formal and official and organised from above, this was different. During our work with the people from Žehra, they expressed the wish to improve contacts with schools. There also was the wish to discuss school-matters with different teachers or headmasters. This brought us to the idea of organising a seminar-like discussion meeting which should be attended by representatives from the Roma working-group from Žehra and representatives from the different schools.

The meeting took place in June 1999. At the seminar, representatives of the local working-group, local authorities, regional authorities and schools were present. They discussed the problem of school-attendance of Roma children. It was the first time, people from different schools were sitting together at one table to discuss real problems.

Before the meeting we had arranged the name labels in such a way that people would sit somehow "mixed" around the tables (and not Roma on one side of the room and majority representatives opposite of them!) After a few words of introduction, the discussion started. We explained the nature of the seminar and the kind of discussion we expected and everybody briefly introduced him/herself (name, and background, e.g. "teacher school Spišské Vlachy", "member working-group", etc.). We also asked people to mention very briefly what is, in their opinion, the most important problem regarding the education of Roma children. The topics were divided into several main groups:

Separate classes for Roma and other ethnicities children, leading to worse results

The topic of the separate classes has not been discussed extensively. The headmaster of one primary school briefly explained their approach to this problem. In all of the classes

of his school both Roma and other ethnicities children are mixed. There are no exclusively "white" classes. There are certain classes with only Roma children, especially those who are behind at the moment they enter school (not speaking Slovak very well, etc.). These classes have a lower number of children (± 15 ; whilst a normal class has 20-30), which allows the teacher to pay attention to all of them and to the specific problems they face. The headmaster's school has the highest rate of Roma children, much higher than the other primary school in the village. This high rate of children makes it practically impossible to divide children equally.

There were also arguments in favour of entirely "Roma classes". One was to have space to discuss typical Roma matters. Another was the idea that Roma children often feel more happy when they are not behind in a "normal" class but are among children who are on the same level. This motivates them to keep attending school.

It was obvious that, although there were many points of disagreement, the teacher was trying to find solutions to this complex problem.

Another problem that was mentioned is the fact that many Roma children who start school in the first class do not speak the Slovak language well. This leads to bad results and repeating classes. At present only a small number of Roma children visit the kindergarten, which has a capacity for 20 children.

School-attendance of Roma children

Regarding school attendance, we also discussed the practical problems of the bus-transport from Žehra to the village in which the schools are situated. One problem was that the bus often is late or goes at a time that children will have difficulties to be on time at school. Teachers mentioned that often only some of the children are late while others, who travel with the same bus, are on time. Children are hanging around in the village or spend a lot of time in the shop to buy food. Many children are late for the first lesson.

Relationship between Roma parents and schools

This discussion was sometimes quite difficult. Certain members of the working-group were quite demanding towards the schools, and it was obvious that there was a lot of mutual mistrust. Two members of the working-group mentioned fear of racist attacks as a reason for parents to keep the children home. They also mentioned the fact that children were not allowed to take schoolbooks etc. home, they cannot study at home, parents do not have money to buy school-materials, etc.

Some teachers felt offended by the confrontational approach of some Roma. They felt their efforts were not recognised and appreciated. They also felt that Roma parents use all kinds of arguments to hide their own non-interest in sending their children to school. Also the high demands and expectations from the side of parents without looking at their own part in the problem, was something which made some teachers and headmasters who were at the meeting angry. Hardly any Roma parents visit meetings of parent-assemblies or contact the school to get informed about how their children are doing at school.

It was obvious that many of these topics needed to be elaborated on more in a future meeting with the working-group. But it was also obvious that a majority of the teachers and the working-group members were interested in trying to co-operate.

Some of the concrete agreements of this seminar were:

- Establishing contacts between members of the working-group and schools;
- Planning to identify motivated parents who want to send their children to the kindergarten (co-operation between the kindergarten, the mayor and the working-group). A follow-up of this seminar is planned to take place, in which these parents take part and in which practical problems about school-attendance will be discussed.
- A member of the working-group will accompany the children while travelling to school, to assure that they will arrive at school safely and on time.

Just establishing contacts between parents and the school has been a success. Both sides overcame a barrier and started to communicate with each other. In the period after the seminar, several representatives of the working-group have visited schools to keep up the contacts between schools and the Roma community in Žehra. And during one of our next visits, one of the headmasters spontaneously decided to attend one of the working-

group meetings to discuss with the working-group their responsibility in supporting Roma parents in applying their children for secondary education.



The other agreements have not yet resulted in any concrete results. The plan to identify motivated parents was delayed by the fact that during the visits following the seminar, the majority of Roma were employed in seasonal labour. A few months later, our work in Žehra finished, so we could not develop this plan further

with the working-group. However, we learned that the working-group kept in contact with the kindergarten. Also the plan to elect one working-group member to travel with the children to and from school has not worked until now, because of the fact that the candidate for this job did not take it seriously.

Methodical aspects of the work

Although community-work means being flexible, being able to react quickly to a range of acute and unforeseen problems, etc., it also means working systematically. During the work, certain rules were established and, if possible, kept. This is sometimes not that easy but it is a necessary part of the work. Especially when there are so many topics to address, and when people are eager to switch from one topic to another at moments when things are not going that smoothly, it was of great importance not to give up our systematic approach: What has been planned, what has been successful, what did not work, do the people themselves see any causes, are there ideas to achieve better results the next time, et cetera, et cetera. Sometimes this might seem to hinder the progress of the work, but skipping these questions means skipping the opportunity to learn from experiences, to improve the work, and to learn to work independently of community-workers like us.

Making and keeping promises. We learned to make no promises about things we were not sure of. This is not easy, because it means saying "no" to 9 out of ten of the requests you get from people. This is even more difficult, since many of the requests are reasonable, considering the context of poverty. But we quickly learned, that although people always looked very disappointed after being refused something, which is also a part of the "game" which was often played, our approach increased our credibility and status: "When Peter and Marta promise something, they will keep it".

Being strict. This goes together with being strict towards ourselves and towards all partners we co-operated with. Not accepting excuses which are only given to cover up something, etc. Especially in the co-operation with the working-group this was important, since every now and then there were people who tried to see how far they could go in getting benefits for themselves or making us change agreements in a more easy-going direction. It appeared also to be a way to test us: How strong are we or how easy to be manipulated. This case is perfectly illustrated in the example described in the box.

Giving people responsibility. It is the responsibility of the working-group, whether things happen or not. When they did not keep agreements or deadlines, we discussed this. Not in an angry way, but as partners: What happened, what was the cause of the delay, was there a reason to decide differently than was agreed – and how to continue? The impor-

Being strict –difficult but always important

As described before, one member of the working-group was elected to accompany the children when travelling to school, to keep them from hanging around in the village before going to school. It was agreed, that when he showed the tickets he bought to travel with the children, he would get the money back. Spolu International had some money for this, the Regional Development Agency would hand it to the man. When arriving next time in Žehra, the man told us that he had lost his wallet, in which he kept the tickets. . . We told him again: "No tickets means no money," but if he kept at least the tickets from the week we were in Žehra, we could reimburse at least those costs. At the end of the week, at a meeting with the working-group, he showed us the tickets. However, they did not correspond with the times for travelling with the children. A discussion started, in which we stood our ground: The tickets do not correspond with the times, we have no proof that he has been travelling, so: No money. One interesting thing was, that of the people present, nobody openly said that the man had not travelled at all with the children - which to us was obvious from the very beginning. They also tried to persuade us not to be so strict and to give the man the money. We did not, and afterwards we discussed the situation with the social manager. He explained to us, that in this case it was more important to stand behind a member of your community when he is in conflict with an outsider than to openly tell the truth. Even while everybody knew that the man was only trying to get money for himself. But next time another person could be in trouble, and might need all the support of others. Then we asked: "And what is the opinion of the people about us being strict in this case?" The answer was clear: They all agreed, and our way of acting increased our credibility. If we had given in, the social manager told us, we would have been seen as naive people, who are easily manipulated.

tant thing was, even if we found that things went too slow, not to take over, but to find ways of proceeding within the working-group.

Teaching the group to work as a collective. It appeared to be difficult for the group as a whole, to keep working as a collective. This sometimes caused conflict within the group. It could happen that a few people got together on one task, and one of them found that the others did not work enough on it. He (or she) often solved it by doing the job him, or herself. The conflicts appeared when meeting with the whole group: Not everybody agreed with the way the person had acted individually. When discussing the task, it also often appeared that the solution, decided upon during the meeting, was better and more generally approved of than the solution somebody had carried out on his or her own.

If a local group keeps working as a collective it is also influenced by the approach of the community-workers. We always tried to involve all the members in the discussion and to avoid certain people falling behind. We also did not easily accept it when, for example, only men attended the meeting. Although there is always the temptation to work more with those people who are the most easy to co-operate with, it is important to treat a group like this working-group in Žehra as a collective.

Main problems which we came across during the work

Money-lending (*usury*). The problem of usury is an enormous problem in the community in Žehra, as well as in other Roma communities in East-Slovakia. We kept it as a strict policy to make no compromises with the money-lenders and to keep them out of the activities of the working-group. From the beginning it was obvious that this was appreciated – even while the members of the working-group themselves did not dare to act openly against the money-lenders. But it supported them as a group. Once there was a public meeting in which one of the money-lenders was questioning the use of the working-group. It was very interesting that in public, some members dared to defend their work as a working-group against these money-lenders.

The economic situation. Another major problem is the economic situation in Slovakia. Since the first contacts of Spolu International in the region the economic situation in Slovakia has become much worse. This has meant that a large part of the plans which were meant to be carried out in the region during the period in which the community-work took place (concerning housing, or employment) were delayed and had less and less of a chance to be carried out.

Finishing the project; follow-up. After a bit more than one year, we had to finish the work in Žehra due to a lack of money. However, the minimal time for a project like this would be at least 2-3 years. This time is needed to make the process sustainable and supported by the local people themselves.

Because there were no possibilities for us to continue the work in Žehra, it was agreed that Žehra would become one of the locations of the Spolu-Slovakia network.

Conclusions

We finished our work after approximately one year. As presented in the previous paragraphs, the results of this year of working are in general positive. Working intensively with the working-group has reinforced their self-esteem and self-confidence. Slowly but surely the working-group, representing the local community, is seen as a serious partner to co-operate with by the local authorities, schools, et cetera. Being regularly present in the community as community-workers, and taking local people serious has had a positive impact on the people, and also on those who were less actively involved in the Spolu-activities. Another important fact is, that it has been proved possible to motivate people to be involved with matters which concern the community as a whole, and to be active in the public sphere.

Also on an international level the community-work in Žehra has gained attention. The High Commissioner for Minorities of the OSCE, Mr Van der Stoel, has visited Žehra and was impressed with what has been achieved in co-operation with local people.

However, the stage has not been reached yet, in which it could be said that the working-group was able to work independently, or that the project was sustainable. With certain things only the very first steps have been made, other important things have not even been started yet:

- In Žehra the first steps have been taken to establish contacts and co-operation between the local working-group and the primary schools. While both sides are willing to co-operate in addressing the complex situation of education of the Roma children, this co-operation is still very fragile and vulnerable. Without coaching and support, it is far from sure if these promising contacts will lead to systematic, stable and fruitful co-operation.
- Systematic training of the local groups in running their own activities has not been started. According to us, training of the local working-groups in matters like organising their work, negotiating, independently gaining support, including financial support for their activities, is of utmost importance.
- Another aspect which plays an important role in Žehra is the relationship between the Roma and the non-Roma community. An important aspect of the Spolu-method is co-operation on local level between different ethnic groups. Until now, the activities of both community-workers have been mainly directed towards the Roma community. This is partly caused by the way the Roma community lives, both socially and geographically, isolated from the majority community. However, addressing the relationship between Roma and non-Roma should be an important point of attention when continuing with the project.

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⁴ This is something, however, which many people have different opinions about. There seems to be a consensus about eliminating the huts in which people live under very bad circumstances