

# Local engagement for Roma inclusion

## Locality study Sokolov (Czech Republic), 2016

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## 1. Executive summary

The LERI research in Sokolov focuses on education. Realised in cooperation with the local office of the Czech non-governmental organisation (NGO) People in Need, the LERI research combined leisure-time activities for families with children with education workshops. In Sokolov it sought to capture how Roma parents and their children perceive education. Local participants took part in various leisure-time activities, which provided a learning experience for their children. This was meant to contribute to a complex understanding of a parent's role in the education process, which should focus not only on the duties at school but also include leisure-time activities.

The LERI research in Sokolov offered at the same time space for informal conversations and group dialogue on education-related topics, which provided important feedback to the work of educational institutions and NGOs active in the field of youth and education. It also provided space for the invention of new ideas on education that could be applied either by the city and municipal schools or NGOs. The local NGO even tried to translate one such idea – learning opportunities for adults with an incomplete education – into practice. While most of the activities targeted inhabitants from one local Roma neighbourhood, the last phase of the research attempted to use the insights gathered for planning processes at the level of local municipality. While the LERI research in Sokolov had limited impact at policy level, it provided a useful experience for the participating families and helped the local partner organisation to gather feedback in order to improve its work.

### **Keywords/Tags:**

education, urban, children, leisure time, workshop, Roma, parenting, after-school activities, informal learning, local partnership, Agency for Social Inclusion, school desegregation

## 2. Description of the local context

The LERI research began in the Czech Republic with the selection of two municipalities that would offer a good environment to test the application of participatory action research (PAR) methods on the planning of Roma-targeted projects and policy interventions. Based on an analysis of the general situation and the network of stakeholders in four municipalities, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) selected two cities, Brno and Sokolov, for the realisation of research at local level. In the case of Sokolov, this decision was based on the expectation that the LERI research would build upon the work of the Agency for Social Inclusion, a government agency that had maintained a partnership with the city from 2011–2014. During this time, the city earned recognition for desegregating its school system and for the municipal police's innovative approach. Creating a partnership with the local branch of People in Need, the LERI in Sokolov involved families from the local Roma neighbourhood and focused on education.

First introducing the specific local context and relevant stakeholders, the following text provides an overview of the realisation of the local LERI research

and summarises both positive experiences and challenges encountered by the team members.

## Roma in the Czech Republic and the city of Sokolov

### **Roma Communities in the Czech Republic**

The proportion of Roma in the Czech population is usually estimated at about 2 % (200,000).<sup>1</sup> A large part of this Roma population represents a very visible example of the country's socially excluded population. According to a survey carried out by FRA in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, about 80 % of Roma live in households below the national poverty line. Low educational attainment is considered to be a key factor (in addition to other factors) in the labour-market-related disadvantages of the Roma – apparent in their low participation rates (less than one third of Roma have paid employment) and high unemployment rates.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, 74 % of the Roma have completed – at most – primary education, while only 20 % of the majority population failed to take their education beyond primary.<sup>3</sup> Although the share of the population with no education has dropped significantly over the past two generations, this increase in education only applies to primary education.<sup>4</sup>

The Roma population is more concentrated in cities within regions affected by higher unemployment and structural change (formerly centres of communist heavy industry). There are about 330 socially excluded Roma localities in the country (most in areas of high unemployment) where about 60–80,000 Roma live and where unemployment rates can reach 90–100 %. About a quarter of these localities are spatially segregated<sup>5</sup> and their numbers seem to be growing.

### **Roma integration strategies and policies**

In 2000, the government adopted the first programme document 'The Concept by Government of Measures Towards the Members of the Roma Community in Helping with their Integration into Society'; this document has been updated almost every year since 2001 (2001–2005). 'Principles of Long-term Roma Integration until 2025' was accepted in 2005, the 'Programme for the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015', and the 'Action Plan of Roma Integration for 2006–2009' followed. In December 2009, the government accepted the 'Concept of

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<sup>1</sup> Recently, Gabal and Víšek (2010) have estimated the number of Roma to be between 150 and 200 thousand, based on data collected by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in 2009 concerning the number of Roma pupils in school. Gabal, I. and Víšek, P. (2010) *Východiska strategie boje proti sociálnímu vyloučení. Východiska pro formulaci a implementaci politiky začleňování obyvatel vyloučených lokalit do české společnosti a její sociální a ekonomické struktury*. Prague, Gabal Analysis & Consulting, available at URL: [www.gac.cz/userfiles/File/nase\\_prace\\_vystupy/GAC\\_Strategie\\_soc\\_vyloucení.pdf](http://www.gac.cz/userfiles/File/nase_prace_vystupy/GAC_Strategie_soc_vyloucení.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2011) *Results from the 2011 Roma survey*, available at: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-results-2011-roma-survey>. All hyperlinks were accessed on 30 November 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Sirovátka, T. (2011) *Promoting social inclusion of Roma: A study of national policies*, Brussels, European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

<sup>4</sup> Czech Statistical Office (2001) National census, available at [www.czso.cz/csu/edicniplan.nsf/](http://www.czso.cz/csu/edicniplan.nsf/)

<sup>5</sup> Gabal, I., MPSV ČR (2006) *Analýza sociálně vyloučených romských lokalit a absorpční capacity subjektu působících v této oblasti (Analysis of socially excluded Roma localities and capacity of subjects active in this area)*, Prague, Global Analysis & Consulting (výzkumná zpráva pro), available at: [www.gac.cz/cz/naseprace/zakazky-2005-2009](http://www.gac.cz/cz/naseprace/zakazky-2005-2009)

Roma Integration for 2010–2013’ and ‘The Action Plan of Roma Integration’, which specifies the tasks and responsibilities of the ministries.<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, the most comprehensive document so far, ‘The Strategy to Combat Social Exclusion for 2011–2015,’ was adopted. Released in September 2011, this document was prepared by the Agency for the Social Inclusion of Roma Localities. This Agency was created in 2008 as a comprehensive programme for Roma integration and coordinates the implementation of Roma integration policies at local level under the auspices of the Office of the Czech Government and, specifically, the Department for Social Inclusion in Roma Localities.<sup>7</sup>

The Agency for Social Inclusion began its activities in the city of Sokolov in 2011, when it launched a three-year partnership for social inclusion. The creation of these partnerships, which are expected to bring together local stakeholders in order to work jointly on a strategy for social inclusion, is at the very core of the Agency’s scope of activities. After a break of about a year and a half, the Agency is once again active in the city (since the beginning of 2016). At the moment of writing this report, the local stakeholders are working on project proposals that will be forwarded to the national managing authority in charge of programmes co-financed by the European Social Fund (ESF) for support.

## **Sokolov**

When thinking about the reasons that led to the selection of Sokolov as one of the national Agency’s target municipalities, it is first of all important to look at how the economic situation has been changing since the beginning of the 1990s in this small city of 23,762 inhabitants. Surrounded by gigantic open coal mines, Sokolov is one of the Czech locations that used to be dominated by coal extraction and heavy industry that experienced serious economic and social difficulties after 1990. While coal extraction continues to be the basis of the local economy, mining and related industries today offer fewer work opportunities than they used to under socialism. The city has also not been very successful at attracting other industries. Similar to national trends, the situation in the job market is most difficult for people with low qualifications. There is a shortage of job offers, and the salaries of people with low qualifications often fail to rise above the minimum wage, which is already one of the lowest in the European Union (EU).

On the website of People in Need, a Czech NGO, the situation in the whole region is described in the following words:

*"Karlovy Vary region is the smallest region of the Czech Republic. Its inhabitants belong to those, who earn the least in the entire country and have the lowest level of education. Unemployment here is relatively high, because during the last twenty years a number of important factories were closed, which provided work over many generations. The social situation of the middle class*

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<sup>6</sup> For all these documents see [www.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?pgid=490](http://www.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?pgid=490)

<sup>7</sup> For more information see: Agentura pro sociální začleňování (Agency for Social Inclusion) at: [www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/](http://www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/)

*continues to worsen, and poor people find themselves often concentrated in newly emerging ghettos.*<sup>8</sup>

One interviewed employee of the Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD), a municipal institution using its state authority to protect the well-being of children, commented on the situation of the Roma community and the drastic impact of the economic crisis:

*"Concerning the attitude towards education and the capability of parents to support their children in school, there has always been a problem with Roma families. The reason for this is the low educational background of the parents, and also the situation on the job market. They do not see that finishing school would bring their children a real advantage, as there are no jobs anyway, and few examples of people in the community who would have benefited thanks to education. However, since the economic crisis, from our point of view there is a large other group outside of the Roma community that is even more vulnerable. Having faced the loss of work opportunities, large parts of what used to be the lower middle class were no longer able to manage. Many gave up altogether. There are all kind of indicators for this development ... our growing caseload, a rising number of divorces, drug and alcohol abuse and also more and more children that are given away for adoption, because their mothers feel that they cannot handle the situation any longer."*<sup>9</sup>

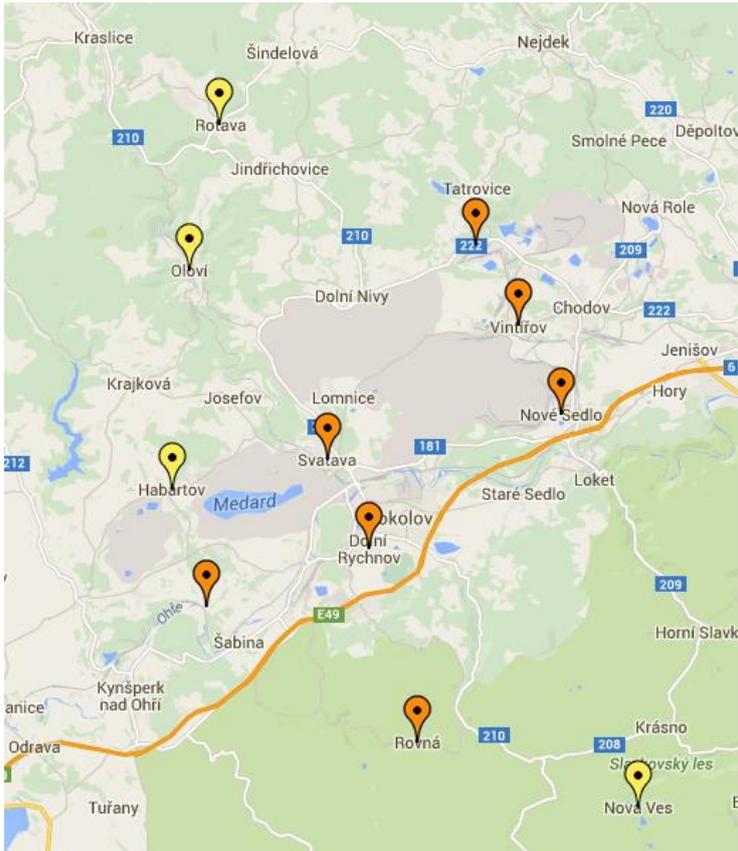
This statement reveals that the city's social problems are much deeper and are not restricted to the Roma community. However, it is the impression of the author, based on informal conversations during the implementation of the LERI research that this expert view seems to contrast with the perception in the city, where the question of social exclusion tends to be narrowed to the interaction between Roma and non-Roma. The situation of the Roma is of course complicated by the majority population's overwhelmingly negative perception of them. Another important issue is the tendency towards spatial concentration in stigmatised areas of the city. This process began in the 1990s, when the city began to privatise most of the housing stock. On the one hand, this led to the dislocation of Roma from Sokolov to smaller towns and rural municipalities in the surrounding areas. As a result, there is an unusually high concentration of socially excluded localities in smaller municipalities in the vicinity of Sokolov. This tendency is illustrated by the map below, based on data from the national mappings of socially excluded localities undertaken in 2005–06 and 2014–15 (Figure 1). Displaying only socially excluded localities in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, the map distinguishes between localities already identified in 2005–06 (yellow) and those that were identified only in the 2014–15 mapping (orange).

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<sup>8</sup> People in Need website, available at <https://www.clovekvtisni.cz/cs/socialni-prace/pobocka/karlovy-vary>

<sup>9</sup> Employee of the city of Sokolov's Bureau for the Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD), female, formal in-depth interview, May 2016.

**Figure 1: Socially excluded localities in the surroundings of Sokolov**



Source: LERI Field expert, 2016  
 Own map created with Google Maps, based on data from Ivan Gabal Analysis and Consulting (GAC) 2006 and 2015. The data were provided by the GAC research team and are not publicly accessible.

On the other hand, stigmatised areas inhabited predominantly by Roma are also emerging within the boundaries of the city. Written for the purposes of the local partnership, the *Situation Analysis Sokolov* (2011) identified two localities that are relatively close to the city centre (Figure 2). However, the situation has changed somewhat since then.<sup>10</sup> Many of the inhabitants of locality 'B' were forced to move out when the private owner sealed some of the buildings in preparation for reconstruction plans:

*"I was living in one of these empty houses together with my parents. After the houses were privatised, the new owner did everything he could to get rid of the Roma tenants. He shut down the water, electricity ... he made life in these houses a hell. After most people left and the houses were empty, people from the neighbourhood started to steal things there, windows for example. It did not take long and the houses were in ruins. I do not understand how is it possible that someone, who was just an*

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<sup>10</sup> Former consultant of the Agency for Social Inclusion, male, various formal and informal interviews, March 2014; Project assistant from the Sokolov office of People in Need, male, informal conversations, February and June 2016.

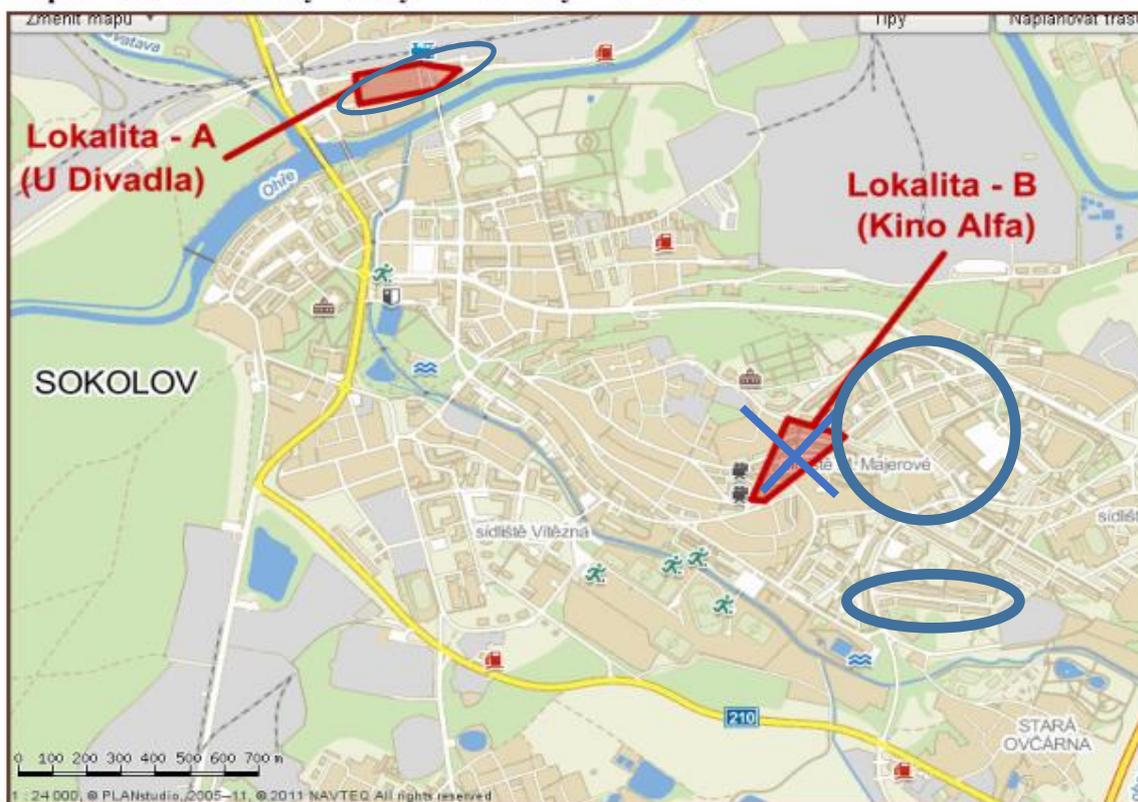
*ordinary man in 1990, today owns half of the city. And also that he is allowed to simply ruin the whole neighbourhood.”<sup>11</sup>*

While today, locality 'A' has the greatest concentration of Roma in Sokolov, there are also many Roma living in privately owned flats in the streets next to former locality B (on the map below, marked as a blue circle). At the same time, locality A grew and today also includes houses on Nadražní Street that used to belong to the railway administration; they were recently sold to one of the most prominent owners of housing for the socially excluded in Sokolov. In addition to this, a new locality in a housing settlement from the socialist period is emerging outside of the city centre that might soon turn into a locality of similar scale to the one around Divadelní Street (blue oval). Within this settlement there are various streets with a high number of Roma. Based on interviews with local experts and personal observations, the current situation is marked on the map, generated for the 2011 Situation Analysis, using additional markers in blue that were added by the author of this text.

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<sup>11</sup> Project assistant from the Sokolov office of People in Need, male, informal conversation during walk through the neighbourhood, June 2016.

**Figure 2: Location of socially excluded localities in Sokolov – 2011 (red) and 2016 (blue)**



Source: DIC (2011): *Situační analýza Sokolov*, p. 83. Blue symbols added by author in order to indicate new developments<sup>12</sup>.

## PAR needs assessment and the development of the local LERI intervention

The core idea of the LERI research was to support Roma in contributing their thoughts and reflections to the policy process. Depending on the conditions and opportunities found in a specific locality, this contribution could concern both large issues, such as the planning of strategies or new policies, or questions of a smaller scope, such as providing feedback to providers of social services.

In order to come up with suggestions for what kind of activities might be started in the selected municipalities, the field experts had to first carefully map the local situation. This analytic work had several phases. In late 2013 and early 2014, the LERI field experts visited four preselected municipalities (Brno, Sokolov, Ústí, Obrnice) and interviewed representatives of local authorities, NGOs, and other potentially relevant institutions in order to identify potential partners, and to learn about their view on the issue of Roma inclusion (stakeholder mapping and analysis). On the basis of this work, Brno and Sokolov were selected as LERI research localities. This phase was followed in autumn 2014 by a second phase

<sup>12</sup> Hůle, D. (ed.), Hirt, T., Šťastná, A., Svobodová, K., Vrána, K. and Kačerová, E., Demografické Informační Centrum (DIC) (2011) *Situační analýza Sokolov* (Situation Analysis Sokolov), Prague, Demografické Informační Centrum, available at: <http://www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/dokumenty/dokumenty-pro-lokalitu-sokolov/situačni-analyza-sokolov-dic-2011/download> All hyperlinks were accessed on 29 November 2016.

of research, which focused on the Roma community's perspective on their situation (needs assessment). Summarising the findings of the needs assessment and the consultations with local partners, the LERI field experts presented a feasibility study to the FRA in 2014. This study presented two possible scenarios for the realisation of a practical project in Sokolov. One year later, the LERI Local Project Implementation Plan (LPP) further developed one of the two scenarios. This was the final document that was to guide the realisation of LERI local activities that would directly involve members of the Sokolov Roma community. They were finally realised over nine months starting at the end of 2015 and completed in August 2016.

## **Mapping of stakeholders and institutions**

This work was guided by a methodological outline that was developed by the leaders of the international consortium implementing the LERI research in cooperation with the FRA. The results were summarised in an internal report, which was based on a unified structure and was prepared for all localities. While the following section draws on this report, it also reflects on the insights gained during the needs assessment and the actual research implementation. It is important to note that there was a relatively long period of almost two years between the stakeholder analysis and the actual start of the implementation of the local intervention. Not surprisingly, there were quite a few changes in this period: a new city government was elected, a new low-threshold centre was established in the locality, and the Agency for Social Inclusion terminated its partnership with the city in April 2014 to launch a new scheme of cooperation in January 2016. Due to these changes, much of the information gathered in the first phase of the project needed updating.

As mentioned earlier, the city was involved in a three-year partnership with the Agency for Social Inclusion that was about to end at the beginning of the research.<sup>13</sup> Having been in contact with many municipal institutions, the Agency's former local consultant proved to be an excellent source of information. Studying the achievements and failures of the city's cooperation with the Agency allowed a realistic idea about the potential for cooperation in Sokolov.

According to the former local consultant, cooperation was most fruitful in the areas of crime prevention and education. The head of Sokolov's municipal police promotes a broad understanding of security that includes dimensions beyond repression. The municipal police launched a number of interesting initiatives, such as meetings with the Roma community and a street festival in the Roma locality. It also employs a number of people from the Roma community as crime-prevention assistants and even used to employ other Roma for maintenance of public spaces (later, jurisdiction over this task was transferred from the police to the city's technical services). The head of the police also currently functions as a councillor in the city. Of all city officials contacted, he seemed most interested in LERI.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See [www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/sokolov](http://www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/sokolov).

<sup>14</sup> Former consultant of the Agency for Social Inclusion, male (several interviews, 2014); Head of the Municipal Police in Sokolov, male (interviews 2014 and 2015).

With regards to education, the city gained a reputation for being a model city when it closed a highly segregated elementary school and allocated the children from this school to the other elementary school. Initially prompted by budgetary needs, the city realised that this process is an integration method. The children were not transferred into separate classes within the other elementary school, rather, they were integrated within the existing classes. Methodologically supported by the Agency for Social Inclusion, the city helped the schools master this transformation by financing school psychologists and other supportive structures. While at first glance this seemed to offer excellent starting conditions for a local LERI research, a more careful, recent look revealed that the situation was less positive. The head of the city's education department, who was the person behind this plan, stopped working for the city after the process was concluded. The position was left vacant for more than a year. According to some observers, many of the achievements of the former partnership were lost. There was now less focus on the integration of the children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and some of the principals of the schools assessed the prior pro-integrative policy as a "mistake". According to the same sources of information, there is also competition between the schools, which fear losing the support of middle-class parents if the school is perceived as 'problematic' or 'Roma-dominated'. Sadly, this sometimes led to attempts to refuse Roma children based on the (unfounded) claims that the school lacked capacity. More generally, there seems to be limited interest on the part of the schools in participating in any new projects that would target children from Roma families.

This reserved attitude corresponds with the priorities of the new city government. A formal meeting with the new mayor, elected in November 2014, and the new councillor for social affairs showed that the city's priorities are instead directed towards other target groups, such as senior citizens.<sup>15</sup> The politicians did not refuse the potential involvement of the city in the LERI research, but requested that it also documents the reasons why so many people in Sokolov perceive Roma negatively:

*"Yes, the European Union should see how difficult the situation actually is, so that they do not spend money on activities that cannot work. We are ready to cooperate, but our request would be that this project leads to a balanced picture. You should not only ask the Roma, but also those who are in contact with the Roma, for example teachers. They should tell the European Union how the situation really is."<sup>16</sup>*

The politicians also stated that a lot had been done for Roma in the past and that there were other groups that also deserved attention now.<sup>17</sup> According to one interviewee, some decision-makers in the town hall would also be sceptical about grant-based projects, as these had consumed a lot of the municipal employees' energy in the past without adequate overtime pay.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mayor of the city, elected in 2015, male (formal meeting held in February 2015); City councillor for social affairs, elected in 2015, female (formal meeting held in February 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Mayor of the city, elected in 2015, male (formal meeting held in February 2015).

<sup>17</sup> City councillor for social affairs, elected in 2015, female (formal meeting held in February 2015).

<sup>18</sup> Head of People in Need for the Karlovy Vary Region, male (several informal meetings in 2015 and 2016)

The sceptical attitude of the new city government was also visible in its initial refusal of an offer from the Agency for Social Inclusion to enter into a new partnership within the so-called coordinated approach, which would have facilitated access to EU funds for projects related to social inclusion. At the end of 2015, however, the city decided to change its stance towards the Agency and accepted the offer. The new partnership was launched in 2016 and led to the creation of a number of working groups tasked with defining the priorities of the projects to be launched within the coordinated approach. Even though these activities started slowly because of staffing changes within the Agency, they clearly offered one of the most promising opportunities for the local LERI research to actually have some impact on policy planning.

Of course, the range of potential stakeholders not only included municipal institutions, but also NGOs that target Roma and other socially vulnerable people with social work and related activities. During the preparation phase, the field expert interviewed a project manager of a Sokolov-based NGO, Pomoc v Nouzi, which is also the manager of a social enterprise that provides employment to disadvantaged people (Srdce a Āin).<sup>19</sup> While this NGO has a strong reputation in Sokolov, the interviewed manager made it clear that although Roma are among their clients, they would not focus on Roma specifically. While interested in participating, he said that he does not support the idea of projects that single out Roma on the basis of their ethnicity.

The other NGO visited was the local office of People in Need, which eventually became the local project partner. People in Need is one of the largest and best-known NGOs in the Czech Republic. Within the area of social inclusion, the organisation was one of the earliest to conduct field social work. In Sokolov, the organisation runs a children's club, which seeks to prepare children and parents from the Divadelní locality for regular kindergarten. Cooperating closely with the municipal kindergartens, the children's club not only offers a half-day programme for children, but also organises visits for mothers to the kindergartens, which help reduce the mothers' fears or misconceptions about preschool education. In addition to this, People in Need Sokolov runs after-school training for children from socially disadvantaged families, and social activation services for families (SAZ).<sup>20</sup> Through this wide range of services, the organisation is in contact with a large number of families who live in the locality. The team of people cooperating on the LERI research in Sokolov included one project coordinator and one Roma assistant, who is also the organiser of the organisation's dancing club for Roma youth. The Roma assistant was paid mostly through the Labour Office's public work programme.

### **Needs assessment and determination of the LERI intervention's focus on education**

In autumn 2014, the LERI field experts carried out a total of eight interviews with Roma families from the neighbourhood around U Divadla Street. The families were selected randomly, without assistance from local intermediaries.

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<sup>19</sup> Representative of Pomoc v nouzi, Sokolov, male (meeting held in May 2014). Information about the organisation can be accessed on the following website: [www.pomocvnouziops.cz/www/script/main.php](http://www.pomocvnouziops.cz/www/script/main.php).

<sup>20</sup> SAZ is a registered social service in the Czech Republic that was introduced to stabilize families that could be at risk of their children being taken into care.

The aim of the interviews was to learn about the Roma community's view on the situation in Sokolov and to identify issues on which the local project might focus. Unfortunately, lack of clarity about key parameters (such as size of budget, type of supported activities, timeline) made it impossible to use this opportunity to start planning the actual activities. As the LERI field expert felt that there was a risk of causing frustration if the participatory planning later encountered formal or financial obstacles, he decided to undertake individual interviews in this phase of the research (in many cases with a group of people belonging to the same household) that dealt with the situation of Roma in the city more generally.

The interviews revealed first of all that most of the families were encountering various types of difficulties such as unemployment, children's difficulties in school, health problems and indebtedness. In many cases, these problems were interrelated. One major concern was the housing situation, as most of the respondents lived in flats in problematic conditions that were owned by businessmen exploiting the Roma tenants' lack of alternatives. While this issue is clearly very important (and has gained additional importance since then, as one of the dominant players of the city's housing market managed to purchase additional houses), it seemed less clear how the participatory project or action by the city could address the situation. Having sold most of its housing stock, the city of Sokolov today has a limited capacity to influence the housing situation of its citizens. Judging from the private landlords' reported lack of interest in suggestions or complaints by their tenants it seemed unlikely that the project would influence their attitudes or behaviours.

Having considered both the results of the needs assessment and the activities of the potential stakeholders, education and crime prevention emerged as potential topics for the participatory project to focus on. While crime prevention seemed to reflect the concerns of the majority population, who perceive the presence of Roma from socially excluded localities in Sokolov as a security risk,<sup>21</sup> the inhabitants of the Roma locality identified education as the key issue that strongly connected with other significant challenges, such as poverty and Roma labour-market participation. At the same time, education seemed to be an area where the city of Sokolov had already made considerable progress. This seemed to make it easier to gain support for a new initiative. Thus, the decision was made to focus on education and to ask People in Need to function as the local implementation partner.

The next section will describe how the planning of a concrete local research developed. In this section more background information about the educational challenges facing the Roma that were gathered in interviews with teachers, parents and social workers will be provided.

Both the interviewed experts and some of the parents agreed that the low educational background of parents and grandparents (who often have a very active role in the upbringing of their grandchildren) is a major hurdle that complicates their active involvement in the education of the new generation. While experts point more towards sociological factors that led to this deficit, such as the families' roots in rural Slovakia and illiteracy among women from the older

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<sup>21</sup> Head of the Municipal Police in Sokolov, male (formal meetings held in May 2014 and February 2015).

and middle-aged generations, the interviewed Roma parents also pointed to the impact of systematic discrimination in the school system:

*"We went to a school that was attended only by Roma. In our school they never taught us many things. Now, when my daughter is in the sixth grade, I am at the end of my abilities. I do not know how to support her when doing homework."*<sup>22</sup>

According to the teachers interviewed, another issue, which is certainly related to the parents' low educational background, is the lack of motivation. Teachers stated that some Roma parents regularly help their children to skip school by signing letters of apology, even when the children are not ill. Such problems were also confirmed by social workers. One interviewed English teacher described how difficult it is to find a strategy to motivate students who are still within the age of mandatory schooling yet seem to have completely stopped following lessons in the school room:

*"In this class there is a girl whose parents didn't buy the exercise sheet. So I copied for the girl, week by week, all the pages with the exercises. It is a bit of an awkward situation – one girl gets the stuff copied, the others not, but what should I do. But after half a year I checked and saw that she hadn't completed a single exercise. Nothing! Everything empty. That was the moment when I told myself, let's stop making those copies. It is useless. I asked her if she would mind if I stopped making these copies, as she isn't completing them anyway, but I got no answer."*<sup>23</sup>

According to the already quoted OSPOD officer, the lack of motivation also reflects the regional labour-market situation, which offers few opportunities for legal employment. This stands in contrast to other regions in the Czech Republic where employment opportunities for people with low qualifications are better due to a lower unemployment rate and stronger demand for manual labour. The problematic economic context should not be interpreted as a reason that children (or their parents) rationally decide to abandon education, i.e. because it is not expected to result in material benefits. While such considerations might play a role, it seems more important to mention that long-term unemployment is an almost universal experience among Roma from segregated localities. There are only few people whose life stories could serve as examples of different and more successful paths. In the eyes of some observers, the offer of public work programmes that are run by the city with resources from the Labour Office (public beneficial work) and the Ministry of the Interior (crime-prevention assistants) did positively influence the situation. However, due to the low

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<sup>22</sup> A Roma mother of two in her early thirties who participated in the local project (statement made during workshop, March 2016).

<sup>23</sup> English teacher in one of Sokolov's elementary schools, male, formal interview, May 2016.

minimal wage in the Czech Republic, the earnings from such work are often not sufficient to end the dependency on social welfare.<sup>24</sup>

Due to this context, efforts towards the social integration of children from the locality are very important. As mentioned earlier, the city has made significant progress in this field. It closed one infamous school that was attended mostly by Roma from the locality and allocated the children to the remaining schools. The city also changed the territorial borders of the school districts so that children from the locality would not be concentrated in just one school. Another positive indicator is the rising number of Roma children that are enrolled in kindergarten. Apparently, this positive change reflects the positive attitudes towards these families by many of the kindergarten directors and teachers. It is also the result of specific measures, such as kindergarten adaptation stays for Roma children and their mothers, which were carried out by People in Need in cooperation with the municipal kindergartens. This positive attitude is reflected in the words of one female project participant who was happy that she was able to place her older son in a municipal kindergarten:

*"I am very much satisfied with the kindergarten. The attitude of the teachers, and also of the boss of the kindergarten is just perfect. And my son loves it there. On Sunday he is always already eager to go. Unfortunately, so far they didn't take my younger one, who has turned three. But the head of the kindergarten said that he is top of the waiting list."*<sup>25</sup>

However, as explained earlier, according to some observers, not all of these changes are universally assessed as positive within the school system. The interaction with teachers and heads of schools revealed a large degree of scepticism about whether the efforts would bring any lasting effects. School representatives also complained that more and more responsibilities would be added to the burden of the schools, which would then lack the administrative capacity to manage their own projects. To some extent, pro-integration activities that target the Roma minority were also criticised as rewards or incentive for irresponsible parents, who were perceived as shifting their educational duties to the school.<sup>26</sup>

Another issue is the effect of Roma integration on the majority population's perception of kindergartens and schools. Several sources reported cases where the rising number of Roma children in a school or kindergarten had resulted in negative reactions from parents from the majority population, who had then tried to move their children to other institutions.<sup>27</sup> As there is a lot of competition between schools in the Czech Republic, it is clear that the heads of schools are therefore in a complex situation. Apparently, the situation was further complicated by the absence of coordination on the part of the city, which was

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<sup>24</sup> See also Trlifajova, L., Hurrele, J. and KISSOVÁ, B. (2014) Kdy se práce vyplatí? Analýza ekonomických motivací k zaměstnání. Prague: Multikulturální centrum Prague, available at: [www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/dokumenty/dokumenty-k-oblasti-zamestnanost/kdy-se-prace-vyplati-cela-studie-mkc-2014/download](http://www.socialni-zaclenovani.cz/dokumenty/dokumenty-k-oblasti-zamestnanost/kdy-se-prace-vyplati-cela-studie-mkc-2014/download)

<sup>25</sup> A Roma parent of two children in her late twenties who participated in the local project, female, informal conversation during project activity, August 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Statements by school representatives during LERI Workshop for members of the Working Group on Education, Local Partnership Sokolov.

<sup>27</sup> Project coordinator at the Sokolov office of People in Need, female, numerous informal conversations (August 2016).

unable to find a qualified person to lead the educational department. Sadly, this resulted in a situation where some schools tried to persuade Roma parents to register their children in an alternative school. In one case, it reportedly took a Roma family that had just moved to Sokolov more than two weeks to find a school that would accept its children. Consequently, the family left the city.

Interviews with parents and discussions with social workers also showed that, despite integration efforts, the school experience of children from the Roma locality differs substantially from the experience of children with working parents. The vast majority of Roma children attend school only in the morning and eat at home, while most other children eat at school and many younger students remain in school for the after-school programme (*družina*) until the late afternoon. They have hence about twice as much time to socialise with their fellow students, whereas social contact for children from Roma families is dominated much more by their families. The primary reason for this division is the different social situations of the families and the cost of food and the after-school programme. In Roma families, most women do not work. There are often younger children at home. The families hence see little reason to pay for the (subsidised) food at school when they cook at home. Some of the interviews with Roma parents confirmed this perspective. The Roma mothers also complained, however, that it is difficult to get a place in the school's afternoon programme where, due to limited capacity, priority is given to children from families in which both parents work. This fact is problematic not only for the integration of the children, but also represents a hurdle for integration into the labour market. Taken together, this situation represents a lost opportunity to narrow the gap between children from the Roma locality and children from families that are economically more successful.

One activity that is offered both by some schools and People in Need is homework support. While schools usually offer this as a group activity (often by the same teachers as the morning classes), the NGO offers individual assistance that is undertaken either at the student's home or the organisation's office. While teachers and parents assess this activity generally positively, the organisation does not have enough volunteers to meet the demand. Most of the interviewed families stated that their children were in desperate need of homework support but were unable to access this service:

*"My older daughter has more and more problems in school. I am getting really worried. I can't really help her, because I do not even understand the tasks. I contacted People in Need to see if they were able to give her homework support, but apparently they are booked up. Maybe next year, but I really need it now."* <sup>28</sup>

One interesting comment concerning the homework support was made by the interviewed OSPOD officer, which stresses very clearly the whole complexity of the education issue:

*"Homework support is a good thing. But not even so much because it would be able to change the situation of the child in*

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<sup>28</sup> A Roma parent of three children in her early thirties who participated in the local project, female, statement made during workshop, May 2016.

*school, but first of all because this means that a first contact is established, which could lead to the identification of additional needs and the involvement of additional social services. In many cases the situation of these families is very complicated. Inappropriate housing, debts and insecurity. These problems are so dominant that after-school training alone will in many cases not be enough to change something. But it can be the first step in a more complex approach.*"<sup>29</sup>

## **Development of the local research idea**

The LERI research was introduced by the FRA in reaction to the often lamented fact that Roma participate very little in the planning of projects and policies that are supposed to improve their situation. Focused on solving local-level situations in selected communities it was expected to test methods that could be used to involve Roma in local planning. While this goal is both important and laudable, it is also important to mention a number of difficulties.

Obviously, two very basic preconditions for the successful participation of people in policy or project-planning processes are: (1) that relevant policy or project-planning processes are actually taking place, and (2) that the input of those who participate will be reflected in the decisions made by those who are in control of the overall process. While the LERI research had ambitions to promote participation, this ambition in the research design was not linked in advance to planning processes that would be unfolding at the political (national or municipal) level. Apparently, the LERI research designers expected field experts to identify such planning processes locally and offer participatory research activities as an additional benefit.

However, at least in the Czech context, it cannot be assumed that most local decision-makers will be interested in giving Roma a more active role in the policy process. One reason for this is the absence of a strong tradition of participation in policymaking. This concerns both the attitudes of the political classes and the attitudes of the citizens. Czech political sociologists Rakušanová and Řeháková (2006) described the post-communist citizen in his relationship towards the civic society as "*organisationally passive and indifferent*":

*"In the middle and older generation we face the negative memories concerning forced organisation and participation during the communist regime. This does not apply for the youngest generation of voters, who have grown up in a different system. However, to a large extent the members of this group did not receive a value orientation, which would focus on participation in the civic and political life.*"<sup>30</sup>

Corresponding to this attitude is the position of the political elite, which Rakušanová and Řeháková (2006) described as "*not fully reacting to the needs of its voters and lacking sufficiently strong rooting in society*":

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<sup>29</sup> Employee of the city of Sokolov's Bureau for the Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD), female, formal interview, May 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Rakušanová, P. and Řeháková, B. (2006) *Participace, demokracie a občanství v evropském kontextu*. Sociologické studie/Sociological Studies 06:3. Prague, Sociologický ústav Akademie věd ČR, p. 35.

*"They have so far not fulfilled one of their main tasks. They did not generate stronger support among the citizen and did not support the participation of the citizen in the political and civic life."<sup>31</sup>*

A second significant limitation is the Roma minority's status as a highly unpopular group. As Roma function as a scapegoat for many problems, it could be considered a political risk for politicians to be perceived by the public as being 'pro Roma' or even 'too soft on Roma'.

The LERI field experts had thus to face the complicated task of identifying an area where the city administration would have a genuine interest in learning about the views of the Roma community.

Without a clear connection between the engagement of participants in the project and tangible improvements for the local community, it was at the same time unclear as to how members of the local Roma community could be motivated to join a project with such ambiguities. It was not clear if there would be a way to ensure that the ideas of the participants would result in any real improvements for the community. Moreover, the LERI field experts warned that a 'participatory research without results' could deepen frustrations within the community and hence complicate future activities.

When introducing the project idea to local officials for the first time, in spring 2014, the LERI field experts realised that the idea of the LERI research was not easily understood by local stakeholders. Local stakeholders were looking at the research proposal mostly from a pragmatic point of view, and wanted the details of their exact role and the expected benefits of their potential involvement. As hardly any practical details had been determined at that stage, in part due to the nature of the PAR methodology, the field experts were unable to answer these questions and might therefore have left the impression that the LERI proposal was vague or unprepared. One local interview partner with ties to the local political elite commented on this openly, stating that the chosen approach – to initially present the idea and invite city representatives then to jointly work on a concrete proposal – would confuse elected politicians, who might suspect that the research initiators were not yet clear on what they hoped to achieve.<sup>32</sup>

The difficulties outlined resulted in lengthy debates and negotiations between the various partners within the implementing research consortium and between the consortium leader in Brussels and the FRA. FRA set aside approximately €10,000 per locality that could be used for local activities that arose from participation, fulfilling the need to have concrete action and tangible results that could facilitate the overall LERI research. There was a common understanding that most of this money should be spent in ways that would bring direct benefits to the local participants and/or the local community.

After the local election in October 2014, a second round of informal talks was held with the newly elected representatives of the city and other local stakeholders (partly with participation of an FRA representative). In these talks, the LERI research was primarily explained as a research effort that should give

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Source asked to be quoted anonymously.

feedback to the EU on the efficiency of EU-supported integration measures. The interviewed politicians welcomed this explanation. However, they stressed that it would be important to gain a 'balanced and realistic' picture, which would also map the points of view of those who would work with the Roma. As the LERI field experts had already indicated in these talks that the local implementation might focus on education, the city promised that it could help organise a meeting with teachers who are in daily contact with Roma and their families.

In light of the limited time frame and the lukewarm reaction to the research idea from local government, the LERI field experts recommended that a smaller-scale activity be implemented with the Sokolov branch of People in Need. This would combine leisure-time activities for parents and their children with education-related workshops. The philosophy was to engage the parents in a low-stakes conversation about education-related topics. The organisation of the free-time events served two purposes: firstly, to motivate Roma parents to participate in the project and secondly, to stress the fact that time spent together has an important impact on child development.

### 3. PAR methodology employed

#### Goals and research questions

The idea of the research in Sokolov was to encourage parents from the Roma community to take a more active position in the education of their children. It also sought to initiate a dialogue between the Roma parents and the teachers of schools that the children from these families attended. The LERI local research was expected to teach Roma parents in particular how to actively monitor their children's performance in school and how to motivate their children. This was expected to strengthen parents' awareness of the importance of education and their ability to support their children's success in school.

In terms of research, the local LERI activities were expected to lead to interesting new perspectives. In response to both the widespread belief that Roma parents are not interested in the education of their children and the needs assessment's findings concerning the low motivation of parents and children, the project was expected to help develop new strategies in those areas. In contrast to many other initiatives, this project was primarily focused on how education is perceived by the Roma parents themselves. It was expected to provide answers to the following questions.

- What value does education have in the eyes of the participating Roma parents?
- What are the key obstacles they face when trying to ensure that their children are successful at school?
- To what extent do parents offer free-time activities that have educational value?
- How are existing offers in the area of education assessed by the parents?

From the beginning, there was also the hope that the implementation period would present the chance to link the local LERI research with formal planning processes within the municipality. However, when the local intervention activities were launched at the end of 2015, it was not clear how this goal could be achieved. In addition to this, attempts by the local LERI research coordinator to

contact local schools were not very promising, as some of the contacted teachers declared that they were not interested in cooperation at all.

The situation changed when the LERI field experts learned that the city had changed its mind about the offer from the Agency for Social Inclusion. Officially launched in January 2016, shortly after the start of our local project activities, the new local partnership for social inclusion led to the creation of working groups. These working groups are tasked with preparing projects to be financed by the ESF. One of these working groups deals with education. The local office of People in Need is also represented in this working group. This seems to have opened a space that will allow participants to give feedback directly about proposed projects or to suggest their own education activities.

**PAR methods employed**

The local LERI intervention can be divided into several phases. While all the activities undertaken in these phases were meant to contribute to the overarching goals of the local research – to learn how Roma parents from the segregated locality see education, and to promote activities that are beneficial for education – each phase had its own specific goals and particular PAR methods.

For each phase, the specific questions addressed are presented in a table, along with the initially planned application of research methods. This is followed by a comment, which summarises the experiences made by the local LERI team and the LERI field expert when trying to apply these methods during the implementation.

**Phase 1 – (January 2015–October 2015)**

ACTIVITIES	SPECIFIC GOAL	RESEARCH ACTIVITY	PAR METHODS
Introducing LERI research idea to new city government	Scenario for future phases should be defined in this phase	Exploratory interviews to identify key stakeholders	Interviews
Interviews within Roma community		Meeting with stakeholders	Informal meetings
Identification of potential leaders		Community involvement	
Informal discussion of LERI research with Roma		Needs assessment revision	

Due to time constraints, the preparation was done in a rather conventional way. Interviews with political and institutional stakeholders took place in their offices, and meetings with community members were undertaken in various settings. The realisation of this phase was complicated by the political situation prior to the October 2014 municipal elections. The LERI field experts were given the advice by persons close to the city government to contact elected politicians only after the election, as it would be entirely unrealistic to expect them to show

interest in the project in the pre-election phase. This advice turned out to be astute, as the city’s political leadership changed after the election.

The initial idea to form a formal preparation committee was abandoned, as it was considered important not to give preference to certain participants. Participants were, however, consulted informally in several meetings during the LERI implementation.

**Phase 2 – (December–August 2016 )**

ACTIVITIES	SPECIFIC GOAL	RESEARCH ACTIVITY	PAR METHODS
Core workshops of the LERI research	Brainstorming with parents and children on educational-related topics	Preparatory meetings co-organised by local Roma	Scenario workshop
		Stakeholder consultation	Survey/micro-narratives
		Thematic workshops	Debates
	Generation of project ideas that could be implemented by the city or local NGO People in Need	Cultural/social event	Workshop on project ideas

A mix of methods was used during this part of the local LERI research, which focused on the interaction with families from the local Roma community. The activities are described in greater detail below. In general, it was felt more appropriate to use mostly informal methods during the first events, which were similar to conversations the participants had in their usual social environment. Such conversations took place both on an individual level and at a group level. As all activities focused on parents and their children, separate children’s activities were offered in some cases in order to gain more peace for discussions with the parents.

As the participants became more used to the local LERI team and activities, the local LERI team started to test new PAR methods, such as scenario workshops, where the participants were introduced to a fictive education-related situation or story. The purpose of these scenarios was to stimulate the creativity and imagination of the participants when debating education-related issues. The reaction of the parents to these methods, which were applied prior to the workshop, was mostly positive:

*"I liked the trip, but also the discussion before. It was interesting."*<sup>33</sup>

In some cases, the local LERI team decided to change the PAR method finally applied. For example, the racist remarks of a restaurant owner, in whose establishment one workshop took place, led to dropping the initially planned role play as the method for the workshop. The reason was that it felt rather

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<sup>33</sup> A Roma parent of three in her early thirties who participated in the local project, female (evaluation talks in August 2016).

problematic to generate the kind of atmosphere necessary to test this new method in that environment.

### Phase 3 – (June–August 2016)

ACTIVITIES	SPECIFIC GOAL	RESEARCH ACTIVITY	PAR METHODS
Information meeting	Attempt to organise summer school for Roma adults interested in completing their education	Photo workshop	Photo-based narratives
Summer school (not realised due to low interest)		Meeting with education stakeholders	Simplified SWOT analyses
		Project planning	Joint definition of priorities
LERI workshop within framework of official working group for educational project planning	Attempt to link PAR project with ongoing planning processes within the new partnership for social inclusion		

Implemented in the period from June to August 2016, this final phase of the local LERI research had two main dimensions. The first dimension was the aim to realise one idea developed by the participants in the form of a pilot project. As a number of female adults had expressed regret for having dropped out of formal education at a young age, and their hope to complete their education, the idea was to offer a summer school for adults as a summer activity. The local LERI team tried to involve the participants in the planning of this activity by organising a community meeting (in the premises of People in Need). However, the actual interest in the activity was much lower than had been initially expected. Several project participants who had explicitly expressed an interest did not attend, claiming they had misunderstood the time of the meeting. Nobody showed up for the rescheduled meeting. Members of the local LERI team explained this disappointing outcome partly as a result of the time of year – summer – when it is generally more difficult to stay in contact with the families. They also said that several interested women had genuine reasons that had prevented them from participating (e.g. emigration to the United Kingdom, pregnancy). In addition to this, they suggested that it might have been successful if this opportunity to learn had followed the workshop more quickly, where the idea was initially generated.

The second goal of the local LERI research’s final phase was to link the local LERI research with planning processes that were unfolding in the city. As outlined earlier, the new partnership for social inclusion seemed to be a good opportunity for this. The LERI field expert initially negotiated with several representatives of the Agency for Social Inclusion in order to agree on a joint workshop. His initial understanding was that this would be a joint activity, which would be attended both by the members of the working group (heads of schools and kindergartens, city representatives, education expert from the Agency for Social Inclusion) and some of the LERI research participants from the local Roma community. Seeking to embed the workshop into the regular programme of the working group, the

LERI field expert and members of the local LERI team attended several of the working group's meetings. They revealed that the working group was preoccupied with technical issues related to anticipated grant schemes. There was also a certain frustration surrounding cooperation with the Agency, which had repeatedly replaced their local consultant, and did not always seem able to answer the participants' questions. The working group members reacted politely to our suggestion to hold a workshop. However, they also made it clear that their time was quite limited and that they had already spent a considerable amount of time on strategic planning in the working group. The head of the local partner organisation People in Need said that it would not be realistic to expect any Roma to join this workshop. She explained this by the location of the working group meetings (in the town hall).

Even though this was clearly a departure from the initial idea, these considerations resulted in a combined workshop. On the morning of 20 June 2016, a planning workshop was held with the members of the working group. Insights from the LERI research in Sokolov were presented during the workshop and used as a starting point for discussions on potential projects that might be realised within the framework of the Local Partnership. This event was followed by an afternoon meeting with the Roma participants, who were expected to comment on the results of the morning event. The idea was to integrate interactive elements (photo narratives) into this programme, to help to make the discussion more comprehensible. However, participation in this workshop was very low and included no one from those who had already participated in earlier LERI activities. Therefore this part of the programme could not be realised and the developed pictures were given to the participants in private.

Low participation was not limited to this event, but also complicated the accomplishment of some of the other activities in the last phase of the implementation. According to the local LERI field expert, it is often more difficult to maintain contact with the community in the summer. Possibly, also frequent changeover of the contact in the local NGO could have contributed to these problems. One local Roma with extensive ties to the local community, who had worked for the LERI research in the first six months as part of the public work programme (financed by the Labour Office), participated in the last phase only as a participant because his public work contract could not be extended.

#### 4. The local intervention description - Goals, partners, process and results

The **first step** in the implementation of the local LERI research's LPP was the negotiation with the selected local project partner on the exact local project plan. When the LERI field experts were discussing the project with People in Need on the one hand, and the FRA officers responsible for the LERI research on the other, a number of important questions had to be addressed:

- Who would be the participants? How should they be contacted?
- Would the local LERI research focus only on Roma, or in general on disadvantaged people?
- How should the participants be convinced to take part in the local project?

The decision was made to focus on Roma families with school-age children who had previously attended People in Need's kindergarten project, or were otherwise involved with the organisation's social programmes. While People in Need promotes an ethnicity-blind approach to the question of social inclusion, in the reality of Sokolov all of these clients are members of the Roma community. Contacting the families and the maintenance of ties between the LERI research activities were the tasks of two local LERI research workers, who had been in contact with the Roma community before. While one of the workers (employed within the framework of the public work programme of the Labour Office) was himself a member of the Roma community who had previously worked for People in Need as the organiser of a dancing club, the other worker had gained experience with the target group when working for one of People in Need's low-threshold centres in the Sokolov area. She also knew some of the families because of her involvement in the homework training programme.

One initial idea suggested by the LERI field expert was the establishment of an education resource fund, from which the participating parents could use resources in order to support the education of their children. The idea was that debate about the usage of the fund could be a powerful tool to increase awareness for the importance of education-related spending and also about the need for efficiency in education-related expenditure. What is more important: a nice school bag, a language course or participating in a school trip to the theatre? While this idea seemed very interesting, the representatives of People in Need saw a big risk in its potential impact on relationships within the community. As the organisation maintains ties with a large number of Roma families that are threatened by social exclusion, it seemed difficult to explain why certain parents would be entitled to this programme and others would not. More than that, the local LERI coordinator said that, in general, rumours about supposedly unequal treatment could damage the standing of the organisation within the community. Therefore it was suggested that the benefits linked to participation should be of a non-material nature. Another consideration was linked to the same issue: People in Need felt that it could not limit participation in the project to a small group of beneficiaries. As the number of participating families per activity was quite constrained due to the large number of children per family and the restricted transportation and accommodation capacities, the organisation suggested inviting different families to different activities. Preference would be given to those parents who showed interest in the education of their children. While this did not allow for the creation of one stable group, it widened the group of people who would be involved. For the local LERI team members, there was nevertheless a significant need to communicate on a permanent basis with the whole community:

*"We use all kinds of channels, but what is working is personal communication. Calling the people, meeting them, talking to them. You cannot rely only on leaflets."*<sup>34</sup>

The goal of the local LERI research was defined to encourage parents to take a more active position with regards to the education of their children. It was expected to support parents in actively monitoring the performance of their

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<sup>34</sup> Project coordinator at the Sokolov office of People in Need, female, informal conversation, March 2016.

children in school and to exchange ideas concerning the motivation of the children. In order to motivate parents to take part in this activity, the local LERI research combined training with free-time activities, partly outside of Sokolov.

The **second step** of the local LERI research implementation was outreach in the community. Potential participants were informed about the planned project by members of the local LERI team, and invited to an information meeting. This information was also provided in leaflet form. Participants were also asked to share the information with their friends. The large number of interested families attending this information meeting, and the relatively large number of children per family, made it clear that it would not be possible to invite all families to all activities. The participants of the meeting were therefore assured that each would be given the opportunity to attend at least some activities. The parents liked the idea of activities and especially welcomed the fact that they would be offered free of charge.

The local organisers also used the information meeting to present the ideas behind the local LERI research. They stressed that the research structure would combine leisure-time activities that had an educational value with discussions on children's education, and also the opportunity to come up with their own ideas for activities that could support their children's educational opportunities.

The **third step** of the local LERI research was the realisation of individual meetings and activities. The following table offers an overview of all the activities for participants undertaken in this phase of the LERI research in Sokolov.

#### **Overview of local LERI activities**

<i>Month</i>	<i>Activity</i>
<i>January 2016</i>	Realisation of informational meeting with interested families (ca 5)
<i>February 2016</i>	Realisation of trip to historical town of Loket, with selected interested families, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ visit to the castle with guided tour;</li> <li>○ visit to the public library, which included a book-binding exhibition and paper-making workshop;</li> <li>○ interviews and discussions with parents, reflecting on their children's school performance during the first half of the year (trip took place a few days after).</li> </ul>
<i>March 2016</i>	Seminar with Roma families from Sokolov in Bublava (11 March–13 March 2016). The total number of participants was 21 (out of which 4 were staff, 11 children and 6 parents): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● programme for children (walks, plays);</li> <li>● workshop for adults covering educational questions;</li> <li>● joint activities for parents and children (watching skiing, walks, children's dance competition).</li> </ul>
<i>May 2016</i>	Visit to Chomutov Zoo with children and parents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● public transportation (train);</li> <li>● workshop with adults, programme for children.</li> </ul>
<i>June 2016</i>	A planned visit of Karlovy Vary had to be postponed until July due to low

	interest.
<i>July 2016</i>	Visit to Sokolov's museum and exhibition on Merkur technical toys.
<i>August 2016</i>	<p>Visit to Karlovy Vary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House of the Butterflies;</li> <li>• Mini Zoo;</li> <li>• Tower Diana;</li> </ul> <p>Visit to Plzen Technical Museum, Technomania.</p> <p>Visit to Sokolov's technical museum and historical anti-nuclear bunker (Sokolov)</p>

The families contacted showed great interest in participating in the activities. There was much more interest in participation than available resources. Hence it was not entirely clear what the best way to select the participants would be. It was decided to ensure that those who would not be able to participate in the first activities offered would be given a chance to participate at a later point. This was also seen as a way to enlarge the research target group. In accordance with these considerations, selection operated on a 'first come first served' basis. Interested families who were not able to participate were promised to be considered for one of the next activities.

The vast majority of participants were very satisfied with the activities. While one might argue that some of the programme elements were more tourist trips than educational activities, it was striking to see that major attractions in Sokolov's vicinity (such as Loket Castle, or the mountains around Bublava) were unfamiliar to some of the participants, who had never been to these places before. The experience from the trips further indicated that all participants were more interested in activities they could self-direct, whereas the reaction to more traditional presentations (e.g. a tour guide in the castle) was somewhat less positive. The focus of many activities was on museums with a technical orientation, which gave children the opportunity to test out technical toys thereby potentially stimulating their interest in technical toys and professions. The feedback of the participants to these offers was particularly positive.

The most important activity was the workshop held in March, which led to very interesting findings concerning the parents' experience with the education system. We will return to these insights in the next section. At the same time, it is important to mention how the problematic relationship with the hotel owner in Bublava, who was overtly racist, affected the programme during this seminar. While claiming to be concerned for the guests' well-being, the owner made it clear that he dislikes Roma.

The planned evening programme was, for example, disturbed by a conflict between a restaurant staff member and some of the participating mothers. The staff member had complained about the behaviour of the children, who were playing with little supervision in the restaurant. This intervention led to an outburst of protest from the group. Many of the participants refused to remain in the restaurant and went to their rooms. This reaction has to be taken in the context of earlier experiences with the restaurant owner, who during the entire

stay did not hide his negative attitude towards the group and his conviction that activities like ours are "*admirable but totally useless*".

Realised in parallel with the third step, the **fourth step** aimed to initiate a dialogue with teachers and the educational institution. The idea of the LERI team in Sokolov was to initiate, prior to the Bublava workshop, a meeting with teachers from the schools with the highest proportions of Roma children. The purpose of this meeting would be to ask teachers about their experiences with children from the Roma community and to describe situations that typically endanger the schools' success. When talking to the parents during the Bublava seminar, we were hoping to discuss some of these situations from their perspective.

The LERI field expert contacted the schools in January with a leaflet about the LERI research. Later on, the local LERI coordinator contacted some teachers and invited them to a meeting that was to be combined with lunch (to be financed with resources from the project). The assumption behind this strategy was that it would be more attractive for the teachers to accept the invitation when presented as a working lunch. As it seemed unlikely that all teachers would be available at the same time, the local LERI team agreed to hold a number of meetings; each meeting was to comprise of invitees from a single school to prevent a situation where teachers might be reluctant to discuss the school's problems to avoid losing face with representatives of a competing school. While the plan seemed well conceived, the implementation was disappointing. Several teachers contacted refused to meet the local LERI team at all. They stated that there was no need for such discussions, as the problems they face can only be solved with political measures outside of the school system (stricter rules for social welfare, police measures). Nevertheless, a few teachers agreed to meet. However, they rejected the proposed format of the meeting in a restaurant or coffee shop. Consequently, a number of interviews were conducted within the schools.

The main challenge mentioned by the teachers interviewed was the low motivation of Roma children and parents. Teachers described how children had no interest in their education, and parents that could be very difficult to contact and/or refused to spend money on their children's education.<sup>35</sup>

As the LERI research in Sokolov had already focused on parents that had shown interest in education prior to this project by seeking assistance from People in Need, it was rather difficult to directly relate this negative experience of the teachers to the insights gained in our project. At the same time, however, the local LERI team had experiences when proposing participation in some project activities to other Roma families that did very much correspond with the frustration voiced by some of the teachers. Even though the LERI activities were open to all kinds of families in different social situations with no financial barriers to participation, the discussions and interviews realised with the participating parents during the events revealed that most of the participating Roma parents were within the frame of their limited financial possibilities, trying to spend the free time with their children in an active way that would give them positive inputs (e.g. trips to cultural sites, walks, bike rides). This, however, is not really

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<sup>35</sup> e.g. English teacher in one of Sokolov's elementary schools, male, formal interview in May 2016.

the norm in Roma families from socially deprived milieux. According to one member of the local LERI team, who had tried to propose participation in some of the trips to families that seemed unlikely to ever engage in such activities, families without such habits showed no interest in the activity at all. Apparently, they saw no benefit to participating in such trips, or had other reasons for refusing to participate. We can assume that it is this group that feels the biggest distance away to the educational institutions. While the LERI research project can say little about their situation, it led to important findings concerning the situation of those children and parents who are motivated to some extent, yet nevertheless often have serious problems at school. These findings are summarised in the next section of this report.

The **fifth step of the research** aimed to link the local LERI research with the planning process on the city level that was launched with the new partnership for local inclusion in January 2016. As explained above, the LERI field expert agreed with the representatives of the Agency to hold a joint workshop, which would provide input to the project planning being undertaken by the city and individual schools and kindergartens. The aim of the workshop held on 20 June was to have open debate on the educational needs of children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and in particular, Roma. While the usual work of this group covers, almost exclusively, technical and financial issues, this debate focused on problematic issues, such as the low motivation of parents and insufficient educational preparation of children. It also sought to come up with solutions that could be translated into project proposals.

At this workshop the results of the research with the Roma parents were presented. The experts were asked to consider how to react to these challenges in the form of projects or activities. The workshop revealed that the heads of schools feel they have limited capacity to address such problems. They feel that "*irresponsible parents*" try to shift their educational responsibilities to the schools and the schools stated that they were not willing to accept this and suggested that other institutions needed to play this role. On a practical level, the schools are afraid of the administrative burdens linked to EU funding. All of this leads to a rather defensive position. The results of the workshop will be used by People in Need for their project planning. The written documentation of these workshops should also be made available to the schools, the city and the Agency for Social Inclusion.

The **sixth step** of the local LERI research implementation was the attempt to realise one idea, suggested by some of the participants during the Bublava seminar in March 2016, where a number of Roma mothers had expressed their regrets at having finished their education at such an early stage. They stated that they have problems supporting their older children, as they were learning things their parents were never taught in school. Looking forward to times when their children would be older and depend less on their parents, they also realised that their incomplete education represents a serious obstacle for success in the labour market. They stated they were interested in adult education that would strengthen their ability to support their children with homework. During the workshop in Bublava, several potential formats for such activities were discussed (morning vs afternoon, training together with children or without children, the possibility to gain a formal diploma vs informal activity, individual vs group training). While this debate showed that it might not be easy to accommodate all preferences, discussions seemed to imply that the interest is really quite strong.

This was pleasant surprise for the local LERI team members, who began to consider how to transform this idea into a regular activity by People in Need.

As it took a while to develop a format and to contact potential teachers, this new activity was presented to the parents as a pilot summer school. On a first meeting with potential participants, the Roma parents were asked what kind of training they would be interested in. This revealed that there is strong interest in foreign languages, especially German. Some of the participants had participated in earlier project activities, others had only just joined.

However, the meeting showed, at the same time, how difficult it is to achieve steady participation. While about 15 people had said that they planned to come only four did in fact show up at the meeting. Unfortunately, some of the participants of the Bublava seminar who had initially come up with the idea were no longer able to participate for various reasons (emigration to the United Kingdom, pregnancy). A large number of other people from the local community had stated they were interested, yet ultimately did not show up. When contacted individually afterwards, they claimed they had confused the time of the meeting or were prevented from participating by unexpected circumstances. The meeting was therefore rescheduled. Again, a number of people had expressed their interest but in the end not a single person came to the meeting. The local team interpreted this as a clear signal that interest in this activity was not as great as initially thought. Possibly, the summer was not a good time to launch the activity, as it is generally more difficult for People in Need to maintain ties with the families at this time of year.

The **seventh and final step** of the research included evaluation interviews with four families who had participated in the local LERI research. These interviews were held in their homes in the format of a semi-structured qualitative interview that lasted about an hour. In most cases the children also participated in parts of the interview. The interviews focused both on the participants' assessment of the project activities and the families' situation, in particular in relation to the educational progress of their children. These interviews were only one element in a broader evaluation design, which also included written feedback from participants in the form of questionnaires, and collation of information concerning the education performance of the participating children in school.

## 5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

### Analysis, discussion, lessons learned concerning the topic of the research

- Representatives of educational institutions saw the general **lack of motivation** from Roma children and their parents as the key problem. Teachers, heads of schools and other interviewed education professionals considered the lack of motivation as a problem, to which the educational institutions have no response. As the LERI research in Sokolov targeted mostly parents and children from the Roma community that had a proven track record of being interested in education, our project did not really allow clarification of the mysterious origin of this phenomenon. However, interviews with experts from a number of social institutions on a local level, and the interaction with the participants, allowed the formulation of at least some hypotheses. First, the social situation of many families is

highly complex due to the combination of various factors, such as long-term unemployment, indebtedness, inappropriate and unstable housing situations, and drug abuse by family members. What appears as laziness, culturally defined differences in the value system, or even as the result of the welfare system – which some interviewees perceived as rewarding passivity – might in some cases better be interpreted as symptoms of much more complex social problems. Teachers are often not aware of these complex problems and also do not consider it as their task to reflect more deeply on the overall situation of the families. While a better understanding of these problems on the side of teachers could help them react more appropriately in individual situations, addressing these issues requires measures that go far beyond the education system.

- Somewhat related to the above-outlined issue is the question **how parents from the Roma community define success in school**. The discussions with parents and the debate on specific situations revealed that the parents who participated in the local LERI activities tended to focus first of all on the well-being of their children, and on fulfilment of formal duties (proper clothing, proper school bag, prevention of absenteeism, timely arrival in school) while the children's actual performance in school was less of an issue. Parents were concerned whether the child felt good at school, that the teachers acted nicely, and that the school offered a safe environment for the children. When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of certain schools, parents participating in the project also stressed questions such as the ease of orienting oneself in certain school buildings. However, many of the children were achieving relatively poor marks in a number of crucial subjects, such as Czech language and mathematics. While the parents were aware of this, they did not give the impression of being particularly concerned about this. Possibly, this reflects the lack of social interaction with parents from outside the Roma community, where such poor marks are likely to be much less common. Another factor is the comparison with their own experiences of school; parents perceived today's schools in general as more demanding and faster paced than the schools they attended (in many cases special schools, officially for children with special educational needs). Last but not least, the parents are able to monitor the formal questions yet often lack the formal education to support their children in regard to the content of the school education. This is particularly true when it comes to older children.

Related to this is the experience of teachers and social workers, who felt that parents from the Roma community underestimate the complexity of the learning process. Parents would, for example, assume that homework support (or, in another example, involvement in a preparation class before school) would lead to very rapid, measurable improvements. Confronted with the fact that progress was not as rapid or significant as expected, they would at times lose patience. Clearly, most important would be the strengthening of **awareness of the parents' own role in the education process** and the **building of effective cooperation** between the parents and all persons and institutions participating in the education process.

- A possible obstacle to the building of such cooperation is the attitude of the **schools, which are reluctant to accept more and more additional tasks**. The heads of schools declared that they do not want to

be overwhelmed with new administrative tasks, which is one negative aspect of project-based activities. The quality of the cooperation between schools and NGOs, which offer supportive measures that could help children in a difficult situation, is mixed. While some schools valued the positive impact of homework support and other activities, others apparently saw these activities as being in competition with their own activities, and expressed the opinion that educational offers outside of the school system are problematic. The ongoing partnership for social inclusion might offer the city an opportunity for greater involvement; they would be the best institution to launch and administrate a project, which would build upon the cooperation of schools, NGOs and other relevant institutions. At a national level, the new provision for the support of educational inclusion represents an additional positive result, which could ease a school's access to financial resources for integration measures.

- The single biggest need that was identified on the basis of the interviews and debates with the participating parents is **after-school homework support**. While this service is offered in Sokolov on a limited scale, the availability is nowhere near sufficient in view of the high demand. A number of participants claimed to be in urgent need of such a service, as their children's performance in school was poor and the parents' own education was insufficient to help their children. As there is strong political resistance in the Czech Republic towards anything that could be perceived as favouring Roma, one ethnically neutral and at the same time effective way of targeting such services would be to focus on children with very young parents and on children whose parents never completed elementary education in a regular school. Through giving easy access to various financial support schemes, the partnership for social inclusion would be the right vehicle to promote the establishment of such a systematic instrument.
- Another very important question to be addressed is the timing of interventions that target the educational success of children from socially weak minority backgrounds. The LERI research in Sokolov revealed that the role of parents in the education of their children is a more complex question than many parents might be aware of. It concerns not only the direct approach towards the school and dealing with the duties of parents and children that are part of school attendance but, for example, also the way the family spends its free time, the parents' ability to balance their concerns for their children's security and well-being on the one hand, and the child's need for independence on the other. According to some local experts interviewed, parents' abilities to support the education of their children in the best possible way is challenged by the very young age of many mothers and the large family sizes in the case of many Roma families. While the first phenomenon would result in the transfer of many parenting duties from the mothers to the grandmothers (who are often less educated than the current generation of parents), the larger family size would result in the focus of the family's attention on the baby and a certain neglect towards older children, who are perceived as already being able to take care of themselves. While it is certainly not easy to react to such challenges in a culturally sensitive way, which respects cultural otherness, it seems important to focus on the children and their parents much earlier, long before school enrolment. Having increased the

enrolment of children of Roma ethnicity in kindergartens, the coalition of municipal kindergartens and People in Need's children's club have achieved a very significant change, which is likely to positively influence the school performance of Roma children in the years to come. Yet there is still space for activities that focus on children at an even younger age, and their parents (in particular mothers), such as activities for mothers with newborns and also activities for pregnant mothers. Such activities could provide a very valuable space for the dissemination of information concerning health and nutrition and at the same time increase awareness of the relationship between the attitudes of parents and the subsequent school performance of their children.

## Analysis, discussion, lessons learned concerning the application of PAR methods

- For a long time, the LERI field experts and their local partners found it difficult to identify feasible planning processes and structures that could benefit from interaction with members of the Roma minority. Without this, it was not clear how to ensure that participation and research would also result in action.
- Another reason why the action dimension of the PAR method was less strongly developed than the participation and research dimensions was the interests of the participants. While the participants were quite eager to participate in the offered activities, they did not appear to welcome the prospect of self-organisation. Possibly, this has to do with the chosen topic, education, where the Roma families depend on external support to improve the educational performance of their children. Asked about their willingness or interest in organising activities by themselves, some of the participating parents mentioned their lack of self-confidence and fear of responsibility as reasons why they would rather see themselves as participants than co-organisers.
- In the end-phase of the local LERI research an opportunity emerged that seem to allow the linking of the research with an official planning process. However, the highly technocratic character of the local partnership for social inclusion working group, where the participants had to focus on the administrative rules for anticipated calls for proposals, made it rather difficult to combine these processes in practice. While the character and goals of this working group were beyond the control of the LERI team in Sokolov, the lesson learned is that it is important to be aware that rules that are too complex and inflexible can turn into a serious obstacle for non-professional groups, preventing them participating in the policy process.
- One important question that should be addressed is, to what extent the created situations, during which the conversations took place, influenced the statements of the interview partners. Children's education is a topic with a strong moral connotation and parents are certainly aware that society usually expects them to express their acceptance of the importance of education. The presence of social workers from the partner organisation might have provided additional incentives for conversation partners to present themselves and their ambitions in more appealing ways. Related to this is the question, to what extent the researcher

influences the content of the conversation by suggesting certain topics or by driving the conversation in a certain direction. Methodologically, the LERI team in Sokolov sought to address these problems through a focus on observation and participation. Where possible, interviews with the participants were not realised as separate conversations, rather, questions were inserted within normal conversations that had developed among participants, or followed observations made by the LERI researchers during the interactions.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations:

The experience of the local LERI research in Sokolov **showed that the application of PAR methods can be very difficult and cannot succeed in all situations**. Crucially, the LERI field experts and their local partners found it **difficult to identify relevant planning processes or structures** that could benefit from interaction with members of the Roma minority. One reason for this was the rather slow working speed and lack of continuity in the LERI research. The first mapping phase of the research leading to the needs assessment and to the first draft of the action plan had to be repeated after a lengthy break (when the project focused on two pilot localities). At this point, a number of significant factors – such as the city government – had changed, and the LERI field experts were not fully aware of certain new developments, which could have offered new opportunities.

The outlined problems led to a **project strategy, which combined leisure-time activities for families with children with education workshops**. The LERI research in Sokolov sought to capture how Roma parents and their children perceive education. It provided space for the invention of new ideas on education that could be applied either by the city and municipal schools or NGOs. While most of the activities targeted inhabitants from one local Roma neighbourhood, the last phase of the project included attempts to use the insights gained for planning processes at the level of local municipality.

The experiences of the LERI in Sokolov allowed the **formulation of two sets of recommendations**. The first set is directed to the city of Sokolov and other local stakeholders who play a role in the field of education. The second set of recommendation is directed towards the FRA or other institutions that are interested in the application of PAR methods for policy planning:

### Recommendations concerning the position of Roma in the school system of Sokolov

- The city of Sokolov made considerable progress in the area of inclusive education. The 2000–2014 city government closed one highly segregated school, transferred the children from this school into regular classes, and changed the school districts in a way that should minimise the risk of segregation in future. In addition to this, the city's kindergartens have been successful in increasing the number of children from Roma families that enrol in kindergartens. All of these achievements are very important and reasons for the city to take pride. However, the research revealed that some of these achievements are perceived as controversial. Most importantly, in recent years, the city seems to have lacked a coordinated approach to education, which would have helped the schools manage the

new situation and to maintain the already achieved progress. The **new partnership for social inclusion between the city of Sokolov and the Agency for Social Inclusion could be a chance for the city to become more active in the area of education.**

- While many school representatives were sceptical about whether educational efforts would be successful in altering the situation of the Roma, many stressed that a complex project, undertaken by the city at the time of the segregated school's closure, was very helpful. It seems advisable to use this **past project as a starting point for the planning of new activities**. Importantly, the administrative burden in that case fell to the city, not on the individual schools.
- There is a **very high demand for homework support**. While such services are offered in Sokolov free of charge, the existing capacity is insufficient. We recommend focusing on children from families where the parents have not completed elementary education.
- Another recommendable strategy to tackle segregation and to increase the interaction between children from the majority and minority populations is the **after-school programme**. Today, these programmes are attended by only a small proportion of children from socially disadvantaged Roma families. We recommend increasing the capacities of these afternoon programmes and, at the same time, ensuring their quality. High-quality after-school programmes could be a powerful tool to increase the identification of children with their schools and to give space for the development of talents and interests, which are allocated limited time within the normal curriculum (e.g. technical skills, sports, art).
- We further recommend **focusing on vulnerable children from families with a poor educational background at the earliest possible moment**. Ideally, there should already be programmes for young pregnant women, which combine socialisation with the dissemination of information concerning education, child health and nutrition. The next step could be programmes for mothers with very small children, which could combine activities for the children and mothers with the dissemination of information. The third step in such a structure, a pre-kindergarten, which already exists in the form of the People in Need's children's club. If the positive trend of increasing enrolment of children from the Roma minority in regular kindergartens continues, this intermediary step between family and normal kindergarten might focus on children of a younger age (e.g. aged 2–3). The creation of the structure outlined would benefit from the involvement of additional stakeholders, such as gynaecologists, paediatricians and psychological counselling centres.

## Recommendations concerning the application of PAR methods

- The authors of this report suggest that the **application of PAR methods should not be a stand-alone goal**, rather one element in a broader project that leads to concrete activities. Development projects that are supported by ESF would offer an excellent opportunity for such an approach. However, a number of conditions would have to be fulfilled to avoid the involvement of the target group becoming a bureaucratic formality. First of all, the process needs time and flexibility. The best way

to integrate PAR in funding schemes might be to operate the grant procedure in two stages. In the first stage, the donor would fund the realisation of a PAR project on a particular topic with the aim of developing a project application, which could gain funding in the second stage of the process. Ideally, the technical rules for the second project phase would not be too complicated, to minimise the barriers for people belonging to the target group to take part in the process.

- The LERI research sought to identify the most suitable localities and potential partners for the implementation of activities at local level in a highly structured and scientific way, which led to the writing of several internal reports and consumed more than half of the overall time available for the research. Despite this careful approach, the LERI field experts found it **difficult to identify actors and institutions that would be genuinely interested in using inputs from the participatory framework**. It seems that the participatory approach applied was ultimately too slow and inflexibly for identifying opportunities where the application of PAR methods could have been interesting for the policymakers. In the field expert's opinion, **interest in such approaches will, in many cases, be the result of a fortunate political constellation** or in response to a particular challenge that leads to a demand for new approaches. As such situations do not last long, it seems recommendable to use informal knowledge in order to identify a suitable opportunity and then launch the local intervention.

## 7. Additional Information

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