Local engagement for Roma inclusion

Locality study

Hrabušice (Slovakia), 2016

Authors: Marek Hojsík, Zuzana Polačková

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1. Executive summary

The municipality of Hrabušice, located in a disadvantaged region of Slovakia, has a large Roma population, however, the level of inter-ethnic tension is low and the local Roma inclusion initiatives are relatively successful. Yet, during the LERI research implementation, the local research team encountered passivity and a lack of enthusiasm among the community: locals were able to clearly articulate their needs and the challenges they faced, – even propose realistic solutions – but were reluctant to participate in their materialisation. Therefore, this report focuses on answering: what are the underlying reasons for this apathy and how can it be overcome.

The main factors contributing to social stability and relatively good interethnic relations in Hrabušice include: the relatively narrow social gap between the Roma and non-Roma populations, largely a result of social stratification within the Roma population (ranging from middle-class families running their own businesses to families facing poverty); effective local government, which is able to more or less to address the needs of the population; and finally, none of the groups is extremely marginalised, excluded from all societal structures, despite the fact that serious economic, social and power inequalities exist within the municipal community.

There are also significant barriers to effective Roma inclusion in Hrabušice. Employment opportunities in the region are scarce, being a challenge for the population as a whole. This is exacerbated for Roma due to discrimination and the low level of human capital. Even educated and skilled Roma are frustrated in their attempts to secure employment due to their ethnicity and limited social capital. The local government is effective, but has limited capacity to address all the needs of the village – or the structural problems within the region. Centrally designed national policies, particularly in the fields of employment, social welfare and the use of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESFI) do not effectively encourage integration and development at a local level.

The LERI research in Hrabušice aimed to overcome the passivity and empower the locals. The Roma decided to design and construct an amphitheatre. The amphitheatre was built; however, for legal reasons, it was not built on the plot of land next to the Roma settlement as planned by the locals, but in the community centre garden, as directed by the local government.

Participants also analysed the needs of the local community and developed small projects to address them. However, although the LERI research could have financed the proposed projects, only one materialised.

A substantial proportion of the activities concerned children and youth: Roma and non-Roma pupils from the local elementary school conducted a needs assessment among Hrabušice’s residents; youngsters had the opportunity to participate in an international youth exchange; and international youth volunteers organised a summer camp for children from vulnerable families.

The report concludes that for active citizenship and participation of vulnerable populations – such as Roma – policymakers and donors should firstly focus on meeting their fundamental needs of quality of life, employment and human dignity, which are challenged by social exclusion and discrimination. Additionally, resources should be invested into nurturing and supporting participatory behaviours.
Keywords/Tags:
community development, youth, participation, top-down governance, passivity

2. Description of the local context

Hrabušice is a village in north-eastern Slovakia, located in the Spiš region, which is known for its high rates of unemployment and poverty. Employment opportunities in the village are limited to summer tourism (e.g. accommodation and a horse-riding centre) and small wood-processing companies.

According to mapping data, Roma in Hrabušice represent some 40% of the village’s population of 2,400.¹ The Roma population in the village is socially stratified: those who live in a segregated neighbourhood on the outskirts face extreme poverty and social exclusion; the middle-class Roma who live centrally are active in local politics, and in social and business life. However, unlike the general trend of growing anti-Gypsyism across Slovakia, the interaction between Roma and non-Roma populations in Hrabušice tends to be straightforward and cooperative. However, there is a significant social gap between the better-off and the poorest Roma.² Additionally, the village is located close to one of the most marginalised Roma communities in the region. The proximity of the fully segregated Letanovce Roma community is perceived as a threat by both non-Roma and Roma from all social groups in Hrabušice, and they avoid any interaction with this community.

There are a range of issues that need addressing in Hrabušice: the main issue is the high level of unemployment, which significantly affects the Roma community, particularly the poorest: some Roma families lack decent housing. However, the Roma middle class is able to find work – at least during the construction and main seasons for tourism (some Roma own hostels in the village). The mayor and school principal stated that dropout rates of Roma students in secondary school education are also higher than that of the non-Roma, which worsens their employment prospects. Young people also have limited leisure-time opportunities and are vulnerable to marginalisation and antisocial behaviour.

The local government is trying to address the problems and demands of the local population. It has developed a local strategy for the inclusion of marginalised Roma, which reflects the above-mentioned needs. Some of the planned interventions have been implemented, such as investment into local infrastructure (roads and social housing); the desegregation of kindergartens; health assistance and income-generation activities (which are however limited to the extensive implementation of a state-subsidised community works programme).

An important part of the local government’s activities focuses on the development of tourism: the municipality manages a summer resort in Podlesok and cooperates with businesses in the resort, and is responsible for maintaining public paths in the nearby national reserve and collaborates with the national

² Roma themselves label the better-off Roma living in the village as ‘better Roma’, and poorer ones from the settlement as ‘worst Roma’.
park authority. These activities go beyond the usual governance of municipalities in Slovakia and overburden the local government’s capacities. Thus, Hrabušice is not typical of municipalities in Eastern Slovakia with a high proportion of Roma or high numbers of marginalised Roma, where local governments often neglect the needs of this section of the population or even intentionally act against their interests.

The LERI local team was composed primarily of two field experts. Before starting the research in Hrabušice, the LERI team (the field experts not being themselves based in the particular locality) was not previously engaged in any local community activities in the locality, therefore it could not build on previous experiences with local stakeholders, community. Initial contacts had to be established with inhabitants as well as with potential key local stakeholders. The mayor and the local Roma NGO’s leader have helped to approach the community. However, the lack of long-term presence in the community on a more frequent basis than the LERI research conditions could allow, limited the potential local actions and also the interactions with the local community. During the research implementation, two local co-researchers joined the LERI team: one Roma man having experience in community activism and social work and a young Roma woman who had been previously engaged in youth work and activism.

3. PAR methodology employed

Since the beginning of the project’s presence in Hrabušice, it has been noted, that until then most of the planning and implementation of initiatives in the village had been carried out in a top-down manner, under the full control of the local government, with only limited, if any, active involvement of the local Roma population. As a local government representative explained the situation, it was due to the (assumed) passivity of Roma; and the lack of trust that Roma would be able to be proactive and act autonomously:

"They request the municipality to do things for them and we try. But we cannot rely on them in contributing or participating. They promise, but do nothing. Or do not even promise and say that the local government is responsible."

Yet, during the initial needs assessment and the consequent project activities, many Roma were able to articulate very specific needs and priorities to be addressed. Therefore, the LERI in Hrabušice identified the need (not included in the existing municipal strategy) for community empowerment and participation, with a particular focus on youth.

The main research question of the LERI in Hrabušice thus became: if the assumed passivity of Roma (or the local population in general) is real, is it a consequence of an effective local government that addresses their needs rendering civic activity unnecessary, or is it caused by the government’s (unintended) paternalistic approach, which tends to maintain control of any initiative? This question could be transformed into a research hypothesis that,

3 Local government representative, personal interview, 18 October 2014, non-Roma female.
in the local (Roma) population, there is a dormant potential for activity, which – if there are favourable conditions and sufficient support for realisation – will develop and express itself. And if this assumption is true, under what conditions would it be possible to activate the existing potential of locals?

The LERI research activities in Hrabušice therefore focused on supporting the activation of different social groups of local Roma, who could become proactive partners of the local stakeholders, particularly the local government.

The original LERI local project plan (LPP) had included planning a community centre, and developing a municipal social enterprise. However, the envisaged state funding to carry out these activities was not available (due to delays or having been discontinued at central government). Furthermore, working with other municipalities, the LERI team had found that setting up social enterprises required complex processes such as economic analyses and technical negotiations with local government, which were not conducive to a participatory approach envisaged to be used in LERI research. Therefore, the LERI research activities in Hrabušice focused on youth activation.

Several PAR techniques were used within the needs assessment phase of the LERI in Hrabušice. The main techniques were interviews and micro-narratives. They helped to establish initial contact with the local inhabitants and stakeholders, for whom the LERI research and the LERI local team were unknown. These techniques, applied through informal but semi-structured talks, seemed to be the most natural way to establish communication and the involvement of the interviewees. Representatives of local government who were interested in establishing the municipal social enterprise were interviewed. Micro-narratives were mainly used with local inhabitants when we spoke with a number of people (who we met either randomly, or within organised events or meetings) about what they perceived to be most needed in their village/community and possible solutions.

The other PAR technique used was focus groups. As it would not have been appealing for locals to participate in focus groups if presented as a research tool, the actual focus groups took place in the form of diverse events. Within the meetings, participants were guided in discussions about the needs of their village and community, and the limits and possibilities of addressing them. One of the focus groups, for example, took the form of a small community-based project development training.

The charrette technique was also used in the initial stage of the LERI in Hrabušice aimed at increasing the locals’ motivation to participate in the project activities. Under the guidance of a famous Slovak academic sculptor, Mr Juraj Opršal⁴, the locals constructed a model of the planned community amphitheatre; this technique enabled participants to view the activity as something potentially real and tangible. The meetings did not have a formal agenda; Mr Opršal led informal discussions with the participants about their design. The outputs included a model and technical plan of the amphitheatre.

In addition, during the needs assessment, the LERI team relied on a participatory survey run by pupils from the local school. This activity was not

⁴ Information on the artist are available at: www.oprsal.net.
originally planned, but developed by the LERI team in response to problems encountered during interviews when the approached interviewees either declined to speak with the (external) researchers, or the interviews were in danger of creating unrealistic expectations among locals. The participatory survey was based on a short questionnaire (four qualitative open questions) developed by the LERI team field experts and consulted with the pupils. The questions focused on development needs as perceived by local inhabitants. The local research team was composed of Roma and non-Roma pupils who collected answers from a randomly selected sample of 68 interviewees. The response rate of 100 per cent was obtained in all socially diverse areas of the village (in the better-off majority and Roma-inhabited areas as well as in the segregated neighbourhood inhabited by marginalized Roma). This confirmed the LERI field experts’ assumption that people are more willing to answer when they feel that they help the interviewers (in our case, local pupils). The pupils provided a very positive feedback on the activity and even proposed to process the collected data in a form of a map. While the participatory survey was initiated and designed by the LERI field experts, through its implementation the control over the exercise became gradually shared by local experts and participants – what can be attributed to a process of learning through the research itself.

Similarly, for the LERI activities aimed at youth participation, the “learning by doing” approach was planned. Learning by doing is a fundamental concept underlying participatory action research. The plan was for the participants of the upcoming youth activities (international exchange, youth volunteer camp) to join the LERI team already in designing, organising and managing the activities. Such a collaboration would have twofold added value: firstly, the youngsters would learn how such activities are organised and possibly use the newly acquired skills in the future for other youth activities in their community. Secondly, their participation in shaping the activities would provide even better insight into the needs of the local community and the participants. Unfortunately, the expectations for the local participants of the youth exchange were too ambitious. The LERI team’s expectations of their involvement in the logistics of the exchange turned out being unrealistic and the preparation meetings with the participants focused instead on supporting their social skills and building confidence.

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

Following the preparatory phase in the first half of 2014, the implementation of the LERI research started in Hrabušice in the second half of 2014, as the village was one of the LERI pilot localities. Therefore, more time could be devoted to the preliminary needs assessment than in other localities. Linked to these activities the LERI team organised a community project development training in response to the local preferences. It took place at the end of 2014.

The following year (2015) was devoted mostly to the implementation of the Local Project Plan (LPP) that was finalised in collaboration with the local stakeholders in the first half of 2015. The implementation of this plan actually started in early 2016 and the local activities have concluded during fall 2016.

During the preliminary needs assessment, participants articulated several needs – some of which could be addressed through LERI, others were beyond the project’s scope and resources (e.g. jobs and infrastructure). The former included a need for leisure-time opportunities, particularly for youngsters; community activities; and the need to strengthen the locals’ capacity for developing their own small projects to be initiated and led by the community.

The local government has been the main partner of the LERI research in Hrabušice. The local government employs several staff who are specifically in charge of agendas related to socially vulnerable populations (mostly Roma): field workers and a health assistant, as well as coordinators of community works – in which most of the unemployed people (both Roma and non-Roma) participate in to receive social aid or a supplement to their social aid. The local government provided the LERI team’s field experts with contacts, credibility among local stakeholders and inhabitants (and even authority, as the project could be perceived as part of the local government’s activities), as well as material and organisational support. The LERI field experts communicated and coordinated directly with the mayor, who was interested in and regularly updated about the activities. The mayor’s motivation was probably a genuine interest in using the opportunity provided by LERI for the development of the municipality.

At the beginning of the project, the mayor proposed one of the community work coordinators (employed by the municipality), a Roma woman, who is also the leader of a small NGO, for the position of LERI local co-researcher. She helped making contact with the local Roma community and organised the first meetings, which were very fruitful and brought several good ideas to the LERI in Hrabušice. Particularly interesting was a group of educated Roma female members of the civic association who suggested activities that proved to be very attractive among other inhabitants of the village.

Unfortunately, the position of this NGO leader radically changed when she decided to run against the mayor in the municipal elections (perceived by many locals as being disloyal). The campaign for the municipal elections also revealed an internal division within the Roma community; the NGO leader was not supported by many Roma (possibly because she is not originally from Hrabušice, but had married a local). When the mayor was re-elected, she did not extend the NGO leader’s contract as a municipal employee.

The relationship between the NGO leader and the LERI field experts also broke down following problems with a small cookery project (see below), and she did not participate in further activities. Unfortunately, as a consequence the Roma women and local youngsters, with whom the project activities had been planned during the first meetings, also stopped participating in any LERI activities. This development affected the implementation of the project, as some of the planned activities lost their main promoter. Moreover, after the cooperation with the director of the Roma NGO broke down (because of her attempts to use the LERI in Hrabušice for political purposes and problems with reporting on one activity), the LERI field experts failed to find an effective replacement as community leader and co-researcher from the local community. This can be one of the reasons for
a subsequent low level of participation of locals in project activities, as explained in later part of this report (section 5).

Based on the discussions with locals, four specific project activities were planned:

1. development and implementation of small community projects by local inhabitants, who would firstly learn how to develop projects and subsequently deliver them with funds available within the LERI research;
2. construction of an outdoor meeting place, which could also serve as an amphitheatre for community events, and would also be interesting for tourists visiting the village;
3. participatory planning of the community centre that the local government would establish within a program planned by the central government;
4. development of youth engagement through learning by doing – youngsters from Hrabušice would firstly participate in youth activities in another location, and subsequently using their experience they would launch some youth activities in their own village.

The expectation was that these activities would mobilise the community to participate in further activities and partnership dialogues with local government about planning and developing local activities, particularly in relation to the community centre, municipal social enterprises and tourism – all of which were to be implemented by the local government with financial support from European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF).

Members of a local Roma-led NGO had come up with the idea of organising training in small community-based project development:

"On TV we see that people receive money from private foundations [Orange Foundation mentioned] to do things together in their villages. We would like to get money for our activities, too. So we want to learn how to apply."

The LERI field experts considered such capacity-building training as a good opportunity to learn more about the community and their perceptions of local needs and priorities. Framing the focus group as a small project development workshop helped the participants to analyse the identified problems from a perspective of possible solutions.

However, after the cooperation with the local NGO leader broke down, no one from the local Roma-led NGO attended the training, despite the idea of the training having emerged from community meetings of the NGO. The LERI field experts were not able to determine whether the NGO members did not attend because of the conflict between the mayor and the NGO leader or for other reasons. The common explanation for non-participation in the training was the lack of spare time.

During the one-day-long workshop held on 24 November 2014, eight women (local Roma women had requested separate activities for women and men), both Roma and non-Roma, together analysed the needs of local inhabitants and, with assistance from the LERI team, developed a basic intervention logic and an

6 NGO representative, focus group, 19 October 2014, Roma female.
outline of small projects to address certain needs. Several interesting project ideas emerged from the workshop: an outdoor community meeting place or playground, apprenticeships for graduates of vocational schools with local craftspeople or small-scale entrepreneurs, and a women’s club. The participants were asked to conduct a needs assessment in the village, develop simple projects and submit them by an agreed date.

Unfortunately, following the workshop, the participants did not carry out any of the steps agreed – they claimed they had not had the time or capacity to undertake the needs assessment or to develop the project proposals in written form. Therefore, additional assistance (meetings, phone calls) was provided to four of the women to develop a very simple written project proposal. The possibility of a small remuneration for the project promoter was announced to increase motivation to develop and deliver the projects. As it seemed unlikely that the women were going to put their ideas down on paper, it was agreed that the project could be proposed in the form of a video. In the end, three project proposals were video recorder and also summarised in written form:

- afterschool club for children from the poorest part of the Roma neighbourhood, organised by young mothers from the neighbourhood to help the children with their homework;
- a cookery course to learn cost-effective and healthy recipes and household economy and, at the same time sharing money-saving tips and recipes among the female participants;
- revitalisation of the old preschool facilities for use as a community centre.

The other two project ideas generated during the workshop have not moved forward:

- the women’s aerobics club (open to all local Roma and non-Roma women);
- the apprenticeships with local employers aimed at providing Roma students with work experience, to help them get their first job after graduating from vocational school.

The Roma-led NGO agreed to implement the afterschool club and cookery course with the involvement of Romani women. The community centre idea was to be realised with a grant from the central government (a national programme of support of community centres was envisaged within the ESIF 2014–2020) and through a summer youth volunteer camp. The fourth and the fifth project ideas seemed promising, but their authors discontinued cooperation and communication with the LERI team, despite several meetings and proposals to support them in project development. The women explained that they had other commitments that prevented them from participating in community activities (one of them found employment and the other had serious family problems).

To show locals that funding for their project ideas was actually available, financial support to organise the cookery course was provided, which was to be followed by training in household financial management. However, the NGO was not able to fulfil all agreed conditions of the small project’s implementation required by the LERI team and the cooperation with this NGO on this activity ended unsuccessfully. The NGO did not implement the other planned project idea, the afterschool club for children, either.
The opportunity to receive a small grant was also announced through local media (municipal broadcasting and a newsletter\(^7\)), field social workers and the municipal government, but no one showed any interest (neither offering project ideas nor asking questions about this opportunity). Despite several extensions of the deadline for project submissions and offers of further assistance in project development, no proposals were submitted by locals. Following the training on small community-based project’s development, the LERI field experts tried to engage one of the participants, a young Roma woman, as a local co-researcher to promote local LERI research activities. She seemed to be a strong personality, respected by locals for her obvious intellectual capacities and good ideas. Unfortunately, due to her complicated family situation, she was not enthusiastic about taking on a leadership role and engaging in community activities.

The other LERI research intervention in Hrabušice, **construction of an outdoor meeting place (amphitheatre)**, emerged from a need identified independently from the initial needs assessment in the community organised by the local NGO, and later within the training in small community-based project development. The idea was presented to local government, which welcomed it and promised support for the project. While the idea itself was positively received by everyone in the municipality (from all social and ethnic groups), the location of the meeting place became a matter of debate and controversy. The first meeting, organised by the municipal field worker, introduced the idea; at subsequent meetings the details of the design, construction and location of the amphitheatre were discussed. Twelve local men from diverse social and ethnic groups expressed interest in taking part in the construction work, and the local government offered to provide the necessary administrative support, helping in the provision of construction materials and remunerating the participants through a government-funded community works scheme.

Opinions started to differ when the location was discussed. Marginalised Roma living in the segregated neighbourhood on the outskirts of the village wanted it next to their houses. This idea was also supported by local government, which considered this option an opportunity to improve the disadvantaged area. However, the non-Roma and well-off Roma living centrally in the village opposed this idea, preferring to locate it in the centre of the village. When it was eventually decided that the amphitheatre would be built in the segregated neighbourhood, the non-Roma and well-off Roma men lost interest and left the meeting. The remaining eight members of the group were from the segregated neighbourhood and, beyond the prospect of having an amphitheatre, they were probably also encouraged by the mayor’s proposal that participation would qualify as a community work programme.

The mayor envisaged that the outdoor amphitheatre and performances of Roma folklore in the segregated neighbourhood would attract tourists to the village. Interestingly, the mayor did not have any concerns that tourists might be reluctant to visit the Roma neighbourhood (in Slovakia, most of mainstream society has never visited a segregated Roma settlement as these are falsely

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considered to be dangerous places and, conversely, Roma living in such settlements are not used to non-Roma visiting them).

During the participative planning in Hrabušice, the revealing of the model was a significant moment – when participants saw a small model of the planned construction, their trust that the planning was real and could lead to a tangible and meaningful result increased; there seemed to be a significant difference between just speaking about a topic and actually seeing a visualisation of the plan. The LERI team presented the model to the mayor, who promised to support the construction: arranging the provision of necessary construction materials, legal authorisation for use of the municipally-owned plot selected for construction by the Roma themselves and construction authorisation, as well as safety supervision during its erection.

The construction had been planned to be informal as, to our knowledge, such small-scale constructions did not have to undergo an administrative process. However, in subsequent discussions with suppliers and a member of the local council we were strongly advised to obtain construction permit, which was necessary, from their perspective, for safety reasons. Involvement and support of local government was very beneficial on the one hand, on the other, formalisation of the project forced us to involve authorised architects who had to prepare a technical construction plan, according to building regulations, which lead to a delay.

The plan was submitted to the building authority in June 2015, but the actual construction took place a year later because of a series of delays: firstly, locals advised not to build the wooden amphitheatre before winter due to the risk that poor people would dismantle it and use the wood for heating. Therefore, construction was postponed until the following summer. Secondly, the construction was dependent on the local government’s active involvement, because the municipal office was in charge of administrative matters, procurement of materials from suppliers and organisation of the workforce from among local men, as well as their supervision being required by the work safety rules. The local government postponed the launch of construction works several times because, for example, additional information was needed by the suppliers, and due to the competing priorities of the municipality. The LERI team initially interpreted these delays as a loss of support from the local government, which could not be easily explained as the idea had been welcomed and promoted by the mayor. However, a well-informed source explained:

"At the beginning there was a genuine determination. It could, however, have decreased because there are so many problems with the Roma neighbourhood – there are lawsuits about the land under the neighbourhood, and the local government must engage in them. Owners of the land under the neighbourhood want a substitute from the local government – and the municipality possesses only valuable land in the touristic resort. The local government is overwhelmed with the agenda and does not have time to deal with less important initiatives, even if they like them."^8

^8 Information source wished to remain anonymous.
Finally, the local government built the outdoor meeting place (amphitheatre) at the end of summer 2016. But despite its originally planned location next to the segregated neighbourhood, it was finally erected in the garden of the former ‘Roma kindergarten’ in the Roma part of the village centre, which has been vacant since the Roma pupils were integrated into the main kindergarten building in 2014. The local government explained the need for the change of location was due to a lawsuit about the land under the Roma neighbourhood. The change in the amphitheatre’s location was interpreted by locals as both negative and positive: negative in that it was not built where the locals had chosen to put it (although the garden is in proximity of the Roma neighbourhood), and will be less accessible to them (the municipal garden is locked and local government employees have to open it for public use). On the other hand, locals admitted that the amphitheatre in the municipal garden will be protected, and that it will be connected with activities of the planned community centre, which will be located in the former kindergarten premises. The change of the location was not considered as important by better-off Roma – probably because the community garden is in their neighbourhood. On the contrary, Roma from the segregated neighbourhood, where the construction had been originally planned, were more disappointed. They perceived that the construction would indicate a material and symbolic improvement of their neighbourhood, and usually they feel less comfortable in other areas of the village than their neighbourhood (including the better-off Roma’s neighbourhood). Yet at the same time, even Roma from the segregated neighbourhood admitted that the wooden construction would probably disappear during the winter (for heating), if placed as planned.\(^9\)

A substantial part of the activities within the LERI in Hrabušice was related to youth activities, which could engage the participation of young people in community life and provide them with opportunities for spending their leisure time meaningfully. The planned youth-oriented activities included international youth exchanges abroad and, later, the organisation of an international youth volunteer summer camp in Hrabušice. They were proposed by the LERI field experts based on meetings with local inhabitants and youth, who identified a need for activities for youngsters, but were not able to specify the kind of activity. A youth exchange was proposed, because it was seen by the LERI field experts as a good opportunity for positive emotional experiences and inspiration from meeting other young people who are active in their communities. The summer camp in Hrabušice could provide an opportunity for participants of the exchanges to apply locally some of the knowledge and skills acquired.

Two international youth exchanges were funded by Erasmus+. The first provided local youths with an opportunity to travel with youngsters from other countries to Armenia. Despite initial interest in the exchange, none of the candidates were ultimately willing to participate. Some claimed they could not travel for family reasons (for example, their spouse would not allow it), but others admitted they were afraid to travel abroad. As the place for a young person was reserved in the exchange, a young Roma woman, who was not from Hrabušice, participated at the end and was later engaged as a local co-researcher in Hrabušice.

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\(^9\) Local community representatives, personal and telephone interviews, 20-21 October 2016, Roma males and females.
The second international youth exchange to Finland involving six LERI municipalities from Slovakia, Hungary and Finland was organised, taking into account lessons from the previous attempt. Several months before the exchange took place in May 2016, the local Roma co-researcher, with recent experience of travelling abroad, agreed to help the candidates to prepare for the exchange. The mayor offered the opportunity to several young Roma women that she considered ready to participate. Recruiting candidates by invitation was opted for after the failures of the previous activities using an open call for recruitment of participants (no community projects implemented, no one travelled to Armenia despite apparent interest). It was important to minimise the risk of dropouts, because this would mean financial loss and administrative problems for the organisation that was funding the international exchange. The mayor, who as a former teacher is apparently well informed about the youngsters in the village, their interests and capacities. The recruitment by invitation was effective, and no one complained about the selection method. Three young women expressed serious interest and started to meet the local co-researcher on a regular basis (at least once every month). She shared her experiences with them of travelling to Armenia, and they discussed any fears or concerns they had and prepared all details of the trip. With the assistance of the local co-researcher, the young women prepared a presentation about their village and Roma in Slovakia and decided to prepare a traditional dinner for participants in Finland. One of the group members dropped out, but the other two continued to prepare. Shortly before the trip it seemed they might back out but, due to the intense support from the local co-researcher, they went on the exchange. The emotional support and detailed preparation for the trip (such as what would happen at the airport, or training for the presentation to be given by the participants) by a Roma peer who had experience of a youth exchange and could understand the participants’ fears, proved to be crucial; as the interviewed participant claimed within the activity evaluation, without this support, the candidates would have again failed to participate.

The participants assessed their experience positively. They travelled abroad for the first time without their families (both of them had travelled internationally before and even lived abroad before, but with their families). They appreciated also to learning about Roma’s lives in other places:

"On the one hand we have seen that in other places, Roma live even poorer than in Hrabušice, and are less skilled or experienced. On the other hand, we witnessed that in Finland, for example, Roma are not discriminated like in Slovakia."^{10}

It was agreed that the participants of the exchange would participate in the youth camp in Hrabušice.

The international youth camp in Hrabušice took place from 4–8 July 2016 with the active support of the local government, local school and two Slovak NGOs – EPIC, which is active in social inclusion and local development^{11} and had a history of cooperation with Hrabušice (related to social entrepreneurship), and INEX,

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10 Community member, personal interview, 5 July 2016, young Roma female.
which focuses on international volunteering and informal education. The LERI research financed the volunteers’ accommodation, food for children and volunteers, and insurance, and INEX brought volunteers from 10 countries, who covered their travel costs and organised leisure activities for the children. Parents of participating children had to contribute €0.50 a day for food. The premises for the summer camp were hired from the local Catholic association.

Despite the original plan, neither of the two international exchange participants took part in the summer camp. One of them had moved to the United Kingdom; the other refused to volunteer. She explained her refusal as being a consequence of her frustration at not being able to get a job (teacher), even though she is a qualified teacher.

The selection of participants had been agreed in advance between the LERI field experts and the local elementary school: the opportunity to participate would be presented to pupils of the lower grades (ISCED 1) as a reward for their school attendance and motivation, not for school results and the aim would be to have both Roma and non-Roma children. Finally, the school proposed to change the selection criteria and accept all children from poor families who applied, without taking into account the school performance improvement, as they have no other summer activities. This amendment was accepted by the LERI field experts and eventually 40 pupils, half of them Roma, were admitted to the summer camp.

On the first day of the summer camp, only some of the children appeared. When investigated, it appeared that some parents, particularly Roma, were afraid to send their children, even though the camp was in the village and the programme finished in the afternoon, when the children had to return home for the night. The other reason why some Roma parents, particularly from better-off families, did not send their children was due to a minor conflict with the local government (presumably, by not sending their children they were protesting against the local government’s recent decision to employ a particular Roma person). But on the second day, after the participating children had said how much they had enjoyed it, more than the originally planned 40 children appeared. The actual number of children varied day-to-day, but the demand largely exceeded the camp’s capacity. At the end of the camp, the volunteers and children organised a community event in the municipal dancing hall. Every volunteer presented their country and served traditional food from their cultures. Some 150 locals and the mayor participated in the event called ‘Festival of Cultures’.

Parents of the participating children asked the LERI team whether it would be possible to organise such a summer camp next summer, as for many children it was the first organised summer holiday activity. Local inhabitants, even those without children attending the camp, were very well informed about the summer camp and assessed it as a refreshing and attractive event. Some approached the LERI team and requested organisation of similar activities for other groups. For example, older Roma women said that they would like similar activities for them:

12 Information about the NGO available at: www.inex.sk.
"We need to get out more/need a change of scenery – we would like to have organised trips or community meetings, we would even bake cakes and refreshments."

When asked why they did not organise such an activity themselves, as it does not require many resources, they said that it would not be possible as no one would attend if organised by locals. On the other hand, if organised externally, they thought people would attend; an NGO or the field worker (employed by the local government) should undertake it, according to local women.

Beyond the planned needs assessment activities, an additional PAR activity took place – a participatory survey – involving pupils from a local elementary school. The LERI field experts believed that within traditional methods of needs assessment, people tend to either express all their frustrations with life (rather than focusing on specific, achievable priorities), or have their expectations raised that anything mentioned within an interview or focus group will happen, or do not want to participate (express their needs) at all. The participatory survey, administered by pupils, was selected because the LERI team believed that residents would be more open to speaking to children and sharing ideas about their needs with them honestly without too much venting of their frustrations (as they cannot consider children to be responsible for their problems). The initial assumption was that if some needs, which could be realistically addressed by the LERI research (considering its scope and budget), were identified within the survey, they would be included in the LERI local project plan.

The LERI team presented the idea to teachers and the mayor, who welcomed and supported the idea. One of the teachers is genuinely interested in pupils from marginalised backgrounds and their families and she communicates with them with empathy and respect. She was the one who adopted the ownership of this idea and was keen to participate in the process. The LERI team prepared the survey, which was initiatively developed further by the pupils. The original methodology included only a simple collection of information from the village’s inhabitants. The pupils themselves proposed to visualise their findings from the survey and collected data in the form of a large drawn map of the village that they used to present their findings to the mayor. We agreed on the involvement of children from the fourth grade (10 years old). In the fourth grade there are two classes, one purely Roma and one mixed class. The director initially proposed the involvement of the Roma class, finally we agreed to mix the classes together and, based on the interest of children, involved about twenty of them.

During the week of 15-19 June 2015, five groups of researchers, each consisting of four Roma and non-Roma pupils, visited households in diverse parts of Hrabušice and surveyed the needs and interests of local inhabitants. Groups of pupils visited parts of villages where they do not live and may never even have visited (Romani pupils from the segregated neighbourhood went to well-off areas and vice-versa).

The children collected 68 questionnaires and asked the following four questions:

1. What is missing in the part of the village you live in?
2. What is missing in Hrabušice?

13 Community member, personal interview, 5 July 2016, older Roma female.
3. What are you proud of in Hrabušice?
4. If you had €1,000, how would you use it for the benefit of the village (not for you or your family)? What would you spend the money on?

Among the most frequent answers were ‘roads and pathways’ – either in their answers about missing things or the things they are proud of. This may be related to the fact that, before the municipal elections, the mayor invested a lot of money into the (re)construction of pathways in the centre of the village, but roads are still problematic, similar to the most of municipalities in Slovakia, and there are areas without new pathways. Interviewees often mentioned jobs as the thing they miss the most and surprisingly frequently they mentioned the lack of a swimming pool (which may be related to the fact that the survey took place during hot days). If they had €1,000, they would invest them in activities for children, a playground, benches, waste bins and improvements in public traffic signs. These findings confirmed some of the previously identified needs – leisure-time activities and improvements in the public spaces in the village. The findings of the survey were included in the local government’s plans for investment in the public spaces.

On 22 June 2015, the pupils presented the survey’s findings within an organised ‘breakfast with the mayor’ event.14 The event lasted about 90 minutes and was held in the meeting room of the local government council. The survey went surprisingly well; the feedback both from children, as well as involved teachers and the director, was very positive. The children drew a big map of Hrabušice detailing the proposed improvements. The mayor decided that the map would be framed and hung in the municipal council hall.

The participatory survey proved very successful. LERI’s assumptions about the benefits of having the children administer the survey were shown to be true: all the interviewees responded very well to the survey, the children did not experience any negative attitudes, and, furthermore, as children were asking the questions, false expectations among the interviewees were not raised as they might have been with other interviewers. The pupils and the teachers enjoyed it a lot and, according to the teachers, are very keen to participate in further activities like this.15

The LERI team agreed with the local government that the benches and waste bins would be purchased from the LERI local research fund and installed in the village as a result of the survey. In September 2016 it turned out that the local government decided to pay for the benches and the waste bins finally from the municipal budget. They were purchased and installed in autumn 2016. Consequently, the saved funds were earmarked for the follow-up summer camp in 2017.16

The original local project plan included planning activities for a community centre to be established and run in Hrabušice with funding from ESIF. The

15 Teachers, personal interviews, 22 June 2015, non-Roma females.
16 Due to time constraints of the LERI project by the end of September 2016 and also still ongoing negotiations with the FRA on the feasible reallocation and –use of the rest of the local funds dedicated to Hrabusice, organization of a more structured local decision-making procedure (e.g. citizens’ forum) was not possible any more.
central government was to launch a programme for the support of community centres by autumn 2015 at the latest, and municipalities with the most marginalised Roma communities would be entitled to funding. Unfortunately, by autumn 2016, the programme had still not been launched and no information about it had been published by central government. Therefore, the community centre was dropped from the LERI in Hrabušice: activities could not be developed without a clear idea of the criteria, and locals might feel frustrated and deceived were implementation not possible within a reasonable time frame. A certain amount of tension had been created between locals and the mayor and between the mayor and LERI as a result of very general discussions about the possibility of a community centre: the mayor did not have the resources to undertake this without funding from the national programme.

5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

The main challenge that the LERI research faced in Hrabušice was the unexpected passivity of the locals to participating in activities. While during the needs assessment activities the participants were able to very clearly articulate their needs and priorities and often claimed to be keen to participate in designing and implementing solutions through the LERI, in practice, they were not proactive. Typically, inhabitants were able to organise themselves quickly and participate when the LERI field experts were present, but between the two visits they tended to disregard anything they had agreed to do.

The best example of this was observed in the training on small community-based project development. Local inhabitants explicitly requested this training, most of them aware of the existence of community projects in other municipalities and they wanted to gain skills to apply for funding to support community activities (see for example, funding from private foundations established by corporations such as mobile operators or banks, which are often presented in TV shows). People were promised that if they developed a good project, it would receive funding through LERI. They participated in the training and were able to collaboratively identify realistic and feasible project ideas, which they were asked to develop into a simple written structure by the LERI field experts’ next visit. However, despite regular contact and support via phone, the participants did not produce anything. After this attempt failed, the LERI team proposed an alternative verbal presentation of the project ideas, which were video recorded and later transcribed by the LERI team (to have a written output for project management). Participants presented the three project proposals and LERI provided the local Roma NGO with funding for the implementation of the first (it was agreed with the locals that after successful completion of the first project, LERI would finance the other two). Unfortunately, the first small community project (the cookery course) with the local NGO failed – apparently only few women participated and the NGO did not report on the activity as expected. After this (but probably also due to the conflict related to the election of mayor, described above), the NGO stopped cooperating with the LERI research in Hrabušice. LERI addressed several other people who had participated in the training, and proposed that they could implement the projects, but in vain – no one was willing to get involved.

There are primarily two observations made during these activities: (1) locals are not willing to proactively participate in community-based activities.
at all, and (2) the LERI research as the external factor was not able to activate the community potential.

While examining the first, related to the apparent passivity of the locals with interviewed residents of the village, three possible explanations emerged, which are not mutually exclusive.

The first possible explanation is that the local government is so responsive and effective in meeting many of the needs of the local inhabitants that they see no reason to be proactive. This is reinforced by the mayor’s obviously well-intended paternalism, wanting to take care of the whole village, and to lead all initiatives. The municipality of Hrabušice has achieved considerable results in many areas that are under the control of local government, such as pre-primary and primary education, community events, the local technical infrastructure, social housing, social services, often going far beyond the achievements of many comparable municipalities in Slovakia.

However, on occasion, the residents ask the local government to act, but it is unable to do so, as in the community centre example mentioned above. Some locals concluded that the mayor was not willing to undertake the activity. Ironically, the activities in question were very similar to the ideas identified during the small project development training that never materialised due to the lack of participants’ interest in leading them.

At the same time, the local government’s capacity to fully satisfy the inhabitants’ needs is limited, which can lead to its criticism. Firstly, the local government, objectively, is not able to effectively address important structural disadvantages in the region – particularly the lack of job opportunities or regional marginality. Secondly, local governments in Slovakia have to manage a very large mix of local policy issues, which are on the edge of their physical capacities and any additional initiative goes beyond it:

"The mayor does not have time. She has too many tasks and when people come with additional requests, she is nervous." 17

"The mayor does everything herself, she cannot delegate tasks to others." 18

A good example of this problem, although not related to Roma inclusion, is the development of local tourism, which can overload a local government’s capacities:

"The local government gives too much attention to the tourist resort development at the expense of the village." 19

Support from the central government seems to be insufficient. In some cases, one can even say that the central government blocks the local government in its endeavours – for example by extensive administrative burdens, lack of assistance in problems of marginalised populations from the past (see lawsuit about the land under the Roma neighbourhood), complications in use of the ESIF (see delays in launching national programmes aimed at Roma inclusion) and national policies, which do not reflect the needs of municipalities and its

17 Community member, personal interview, 4 July 2016, Roma female.
18 Community member, personal interview, 5 July 2016, non-Roma female.
19 Community member, personal interview, 5 July 2016, non-Roma female.
inhabitants (such as active labour policy measures – community works programme, very low welfare benefits).

The second possible explanation for the passivity of locals is that they have a legitimate expectation that they will be paid. This is particularly strong among Roma who experience discrimination and whose access to formal paid work is even more difficult than that of disadvantaged non-Roma inhabitants in the region:

"I did everything society required from me – I am educated, live and behave like non-Roma, but still I cannot find a job. So I expect that I should be paid for my work. Why should I do anything for free, while non-Roma receive money for their work?"  

The idea of a proactive, self-helping community is without doubt plausible. However, people in Hrabušice live in poverty and deprivation, definitely not the worst situation in the world, or even in Slovakia, but obviously still frustrating. We can assume that in such situations, volunteering in the community, with uncertain outcomes and impacts for the individuals involved, would not take priority over seeking paid work.

This assumption is reinforced by the varying attitudes of the diverse socioeconomic groups among Roma towards community works. Organised by the municipality within the governmental programme of activation works, this represents one of the few, if any, opportunities for the poorest population to increase their social income. Better-off Roma consider the obligation to participate in community work as degrading, and is a frequent source of conflict between them and the local government, (which is not responsible for this policy, but must implement it on behalf of the central government’s administration), because they have other opportunities to increase their income, such as seasonal works and to a limited extent jobs at the municipal office. On the other hand, poor Roma are much more willing and disciplined while participating in the community works:

"We even do not have to manage or supervise them, they are able to organise themselves; they are responsible in executing their tasks, particularly women. You can go to the [segregated neighbourhood] and see – everything is arranged. They value that they have at least some job."

Moreover, the opinion of several interviewees is that employees of the local government are paid, so they should take care of the needs of the local inhabitants and the village. From this logic, local inhabitants are used to requesting what they need from the mayor and, in many cases, the local government sooner or later fulfils these requests (if they are within their remit).

Finally, the third possible explanation is that the passive attitude experienced in Hrabušice could also be related to shared cultural patterns and

20 Community member, personal interview, 4 July 2016, Roma female.
22 Local government representative, personal interview, 5 July 2016, non-Roma female.
individual constitution that may be linked to the legacy of the communist regime.

Here, however, the distinction has been made between participation in decision-making and volunteering. The communist regime was based on an authoritative top-down model and excluded democratic participation in decision-making. In many rural and marginalised areas of Slovakia, we observed that people believe that the local government should make decisions on their behalf and this mindset is even shared by local politicians, who do not want the public to scrutinise or oppose their decisions.

On the other hand, the legacy of the communist regime also embodies a culture of collective action. As one of few younger inhabitants, actively engaging in almost any initiative in the village, explained:

"The young generation, both Roma and non-Roma, are not used to doing anything for the community for free. There is a gardening association in the village but, except me, only old people are members. We put plants in public spaces and take care of them, we spend our own money on it. But no one from the younger generation has been willing to join. The elders learned this during the communist regime, when community activities were organised and obligatory and now they do it themselves. The younger generation does not have this habit."

Thus, we can assume that there is an interaction between two mutually reinforcing factors: on the one hand the shared collective culture, which does not recognise individuals’ initiatives, and on the other hand individuals without the mindset to participate.

The second observation of the locals’ reluctance to participate in the LERI activities was suggested as being due to LERI being an external initiative. This has never been articulated by anyone (on the contrary, some locals claimed that any activity in the community must be driven by external agents or the local government), but rather suggested by experts in community development, and this seemed plausible to the LERI team when reflecting on their experiences. The project team started activities in Hrabušice without previous knowledge of the local community (some cooperation had been undertaken with the mayor only).

The LERI research in Hrabušice had to establish contact with local people, gain their trust and find potential partners – community leaders – to cooperate with. This revealed three specific problems: power relations, leadership and trust.

The LERI research in Hrabušice entered into a network of interpersonal relations, interests, loyalties and power asymmetries, which has been gradually mapped (and even now, after almost two years, is not fully understood). As the LERI research had been perceived as a potential resource (of finances, opportunities, prestige), locals tried to use it for their own interests and to strengthen their positions. This was evident in the political (and subsequently personal) struggle between the mayor and the leader of the NGO, instigated by the election.

Despite the LERI field experts’ intentional withdrawal immediately before the

23 Community member, personal interview, 4 July 2016, non-Roma female.
24 Discussion at regional LERI project meeting, 23 March 2016.
elections, there were more or less explicit attempts to use the project and related resources (real or imaginary) for the local campaign. After it was made clear that the LERI research in Hrabušice could not be used in this struggle against the mayor, and the failed community cookery project, the NGO leader – and also her allies – stopped participating in any activities. In another example, some other locals, particularly Romani women from better-off families, tried to take advantage of the weakened power situation of the NGO leader to oust her from her privileged position in the local government (coordinator of community works) and as the mayor’s liaison for the Roma community, as well as in the LERI research. This manifested in criticising her while speaking to the LERI field experts and in the common belief that she was paid by the LERI research (that was not true).

There has also been a problem in identifying community leaders. The NGO leader appeared as the leader of the local Roma community, but this position did not have to be due to her community initiatives. It could be rather due to her position in the local government, where she was coordinator of community works, which are one of very few, if any, opportunities for unemployed to increase their income.

We can assume that different social groups or social networks have different informal leaders. However, any external actor who enters an unfamiliar community and establishes contact with specific social networks or groups, inevitably becomes part of it, gaining a specific position in the community, which is often beyond their control, or even conscience.

The remedy for this limitation requires a long-term continuous presence in the community. The NGO leader started to cooperate with the project, and replacing her after she left could have been interpreted as a lack of loyalty. This could be why it was so difficult to find her replacement. This has, however, never been overtly explained in this way, so it remains a hypothesis. The usual explications for not taking up opportunities to lead project activities included lack of time or family commitments – which could also be true.

Another explanation, derived from the statements of participants of the small community-based project development training, was that locals had already experienced similar externally designed and implemented projects aimed at community training or participatory planning, which had not lead to any positive outcomes or impacts on their lives, and therefore they did not want to engage again:

"In the past there have been some people coming to Hrabušice and doing some trainings for Roma – projects, participation, human rights. We have heard about all of this already. They talk about it, but nothing changes in our lives – we are as poor as before."\(^25\)

This is related to the third issue, which is trust in externally initiated projects by unknown people or organisations. This lack of trust is not unusual in rural contexts where all the inhabitants have known each other for several generations. The fact that the NGO leader is not originally from the village was

\(^{25}\) Community member, focus group, 25 November 2015, Roma female.
mentioned as one of reasons for not supporting or trusting her. Or, as already mentioned, it could be due to previous experiences with projects, which the locals did not consider as meaningful. Their experience is that the only stable and credible stakeholder is the local government, which has power to initiate and deliver activities that have an impact on their daily lives:

“If we need something we go to see the mayor and she helps us. Sometimes it takes time. But sometimes even she cannot help us. We need decently paid jobs.”

The hypotheses about leadership and trust were supported by experiences of the international youth exchange. Prospective participants were recommended by the mayor, who knows the local youth, including their capacities and personalities, and was able to accurately assess who would be ready to participate in the exchange. Correspondingly, the fact that the mayor, who is a trusted authority, assured the youngsters that it would be safe and recommended they consider taking part, was probably one of the crucial factors in the success of this activity.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to build and activate a local community from outside. External actors can only assist and support the formation and organisation of local activity; a long-term, intense (ideally daily) presence in the community, to build the trust of the local inhabitants, is indispensable for any community-based activity.

According to experienced NGO professionals, who have had some success in supporting community development, it takes at least five years to form a functional and proactive community and this process is ongoing. The time frame of typical projects supported by public sources (e.g. government grants, ESIF as implemented in Slovakia) or private donors is insufficient, regardless of the available resources. This could be why many projects fail to produce visible results and their impact is often perceived as a waste of money. Projects spend a lot of money in a relatively short period of time; it would be more effective to spend less money over a longer period of time.

To create a community and involve it in the project or programme activities of an external agent (for example, an NGO that has not been established by local inhabitants), trust between the locals and the agent must be built. This includes the involvement of locals in the decision-making. On the other hand, the participation of local inhabitants must be done in very cautious manner to avoid raising unrealistic expectations, which would lead to the loss of the hard-fought trust. People often confound discussions about needs and possible solutions with promises of solutions.

Another risk is that an external agent unwittingly enters a hub of power relations, loyalties and shared interests, and it is unrealistic to assume they will be able to maintain a ‘neutral’ position. The very act of engaging with specific stakeholders, members of different social networks or groups, positions the external agent within the local structure of relations and power.

26 Community member, focus group, 25 November 2015, Roma female.
27 Community member, focus group, 25 November 2015, Roma female.
28 Discussion at regional LERI project meeting, 23 March 2016.
External professional agents and local inhabitants also use different communication codes that can lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. An agent’s short-term presence in a community does not enable them to acquire the codes and meanings of the target groups.

Externally initiated projects are sometimes not meaningful for the target groups, as they do not address their most significant problems. For example, if people face basic problems of poverty, initiatives aimed at participation will not seem relevant to them, even if the initiative could potentially, to some extent, provide a solution to their problems. This cannot be explained in theory; people need to realise this for themselves through participation.

6. Conclusions and recommendations:

In Hrabušice, the local government is the main driver of change. It often responds effectively to the various needs of its inhabitants – who seem to focus on their daily business, rather than to the issues related to politics and policy.

Due to their relative levels of well-being and the absence of more serious interethnic tensions in Hrabušice, the local government makes efforts to address the problems of all social groups, including those of the poor and the socially marginalised. This is probably also due to the presence of an external threat in the form of an extremely marginalised Roma community in the neighbouring municipality of Letanovce, that encourages locals to identify with Hrabušice, to distance themselves from Letanovce. However, this apparent unity could change if the growing body of educated, middle-class Roma remains marginalised and excluded from participation in governance and public institutions (such as schools), and if the poor, often segregated Roma community continues to grow in number and the level of deprivation deteriorates further (this does not only depend on local government, but mostly on central government’s policies). This could advance social and/or ethnic tensions and destroy the relatively stable status quo.

Politics, with the exception of elections, remains the domain of a relatively narrow local political stratum, which reinforces the existing power relations in the municipal community. However, even though the policymaking process appears to be top-down, without formal procedures for bottom-up participation, there is in reality a continuous process of two-way communication and negotiation between the local government and the inhabitants. This is due to the size of the community, which is small enough to facilitate direct personal knowledge and communication between all its members; but also benefits from the relative openness of the local government to listening to the inhabitants. From one perspective this could be interpreted as a functioning example of representative democracy, where the population selects their delegates to make public decisions on their behalf. On the other hand, where participatory processes are not formalised, there is a risk that when the political leadership changes and is replaced by less responsive individuals, the voices ‘from the bottom’ would be ignored.

Therefore, the participatory culture should be intentionally cultivated in the long term, which could contribute to political stability and continuity, improve the quality of the decision-making process and strengthen the inhabitants’ satisfaction with local governance. This could be achieved through providing
deliberate and systematic support to develop civil society on all levels, including the local level.

At a local level, formal procedures of participation and consultation could be established with the inhabitants. We can realistically assume that this will be an additional burden for the local administration, which is already overwhelmed with a variety of tasks. At least in a short term horizon the formal procedures will not lead to any significant valuable inputs to the public decision-making process, especially because most people do not have enough information about the complex and highly technical agendas. But such efforts will strengthen the democratic legitimacy of public decision-making and help the public to understand the local government’s situation, which cannot fulfil everything that is expected of it. In the longer-term this could contribute to the emergence of a functional civil society and genuine participation, which would add value to public decision-making.

Local governments in municipalities with underdeveloped civil societies, and a lack of proactive attitudes among the inhabitants can also encourage any signs of initiative. If an individual has an idea for a community activity, the local government can support him/her – finances are not always needed and in-kind support, such as the provision of premises or materials for activities, or advice or mentoring is often more effective. At the same time, the support should not be excessive; the local government should not do things for people who came with the initiative, if they are able to do it alone. Such help, even if well-intended, prevents people from developing and can discourage bottom-up initiatives. Enthusiasm should be publicly acknowledged as a positive contribution to the community, while possible failure should not lead to scepticism or excessive criticism, as this could discourage others.

There are national programmes of paid community works in place that would allow local governments to remunerate participation in community initiatives as part of local development projects. Nevertheless, municipalities are usually using the community works programme for cleaning of public spaces as these are the typical community works financed by the national active labour market policy programs in Slovakia. Instead, municipalities could offer paid community works also for proactive individuals who develop local initiatives and organise them and get remunerated for such type of community work, as well. The inclusion of the amphitheatre construction into the local community work program in Hrabušice is a good reference example for such a change in the local community work programme implementation.

In relation to the higher level of public administration and other resources of financing, including private donors, the current trend in grant-making should be softened. The trend is to redefine NGOs from associations representing common interests to service providers that are intended to substitute public stakeholders in the provision of social services. Logically, this leads to (at least informally) the introduction of business principles into the NGO sphere: orientation towards measurable and predefined results, high level of competition and requirements for a high technical, administrative and financial capacity. However, the very existence of a vivid and functional civil society is of value in itself and should be supported and developed regardless of these market requirements.

Public grant-makers should therefore resume support of NGOs as independent associations that represent citizens, which would be a base for genuine community participation and self-organisation. The grant-making process should
not take into consideration only the expected results in terms of the programme’s targets, but also the added value of development of local civil society.

If sustainable results are to be achieved, the support must be long term and build on local human capacities, which are usually weak at the beginning in most municipalities, particularly those that are rural and comprise a small number of inhabitants, with few educated people. Therefore, mentoring through more experienced civil initiatives and learning should be supported both by civil and government programmes to develop the participatory practise.

However, if inhabitants of marginalised regions are to benefit from such support, first their basic needs must be satisfied. It is naïve to believe that people who are frustrated by poverty, deprivation or discrimination will become active citizens, driven by altruism towards their community. That was the case when we witnessed failure to involve educated Roma into the LERI activities in Hrabušice. They expected that if their capacity is needed, they should be regularly paid for – as it is the case in the mainstream society.

If we want to see participation of people, we must first invest to increase their capital: their economic capital through paid employment, cultural capital through education and their social capital through rich and diverse interaction with others. Only then they will be able to take advantage of available opportunities to participate. Therefore, large investments in employment, even in form of subsidised, economically non-self-sustainable jobs should be made in marginalised regions and communities, in parallel with an improvement in the quality of education and greater support of mobility.

While this requires adjustments in national policies, local governments can also support the motivation of members of marginalised groups. Local governments should support their access to employment in public services, such as schools, social work, etc., as well as in local administration, by affirmative actions, if not otherwise. The justification for this is twofold: firstly, exclusion from employment kills any motivation and life aspirations. Secondly, the invisibility of Roma in the workplace and in institutions reproduces stereotypes about ethnic laziness on the one hand, and pessimistic attitudes on the other: that no amount of effort on their part will change the situation for the Roma.

The local government is sometimes the only, often the most stable and (positively or negatively) reliable stakeholder for local inhabitants, as opposed to external agents such as NGOs, because the local government has been continuously present and its actions have the most visible and tangible impact on the daily lives of inhabitants. Central government does not support local governments sufficiently in their integration efforts; on the contrary, it often seems that it even creates additional barriers. For example, in Slovakia the municipalities must implement the compulsory works programme according to guidance of the labour offices, which decides who will undertake unpaid community work; however, the inhabitants blame the local government for their selection, which is perceived as unjust. Another example is the mismanagement, by central government, of ESIF in Slovakia. The launch of national projects aimed at Roma inclusion (such as project on community centres) has been in delay in 2016. As the national public television’s news reported in August 2016: “150 municipalities, which according to the government need the most urgent support for Roma, had to receive grants for community centres and field assistants among the firsts. Instead, for eight months they have been waiting for
money. Most of the local governments fired all employers and community centres are empty. All this is because the authorities failed to prepare the new programming period of the EU funds.\textsuperscript{29} In the previous EU funds’ programming period, the resources allocated for Roma inclusion were not spent effectively, as UNDP reported in 2012.\textsuperscript{30}

Next to the bureaucratic deficiencies, Roma integration activities are also politically unpopular among the mainstream population in most of the Slovak localities. Moreover, there is a correlation between the level of exclusion and political risk connected with any attempt to tackle it: the more a local vulnerable group is marginalised and the greater the social problems are, the more unpopular it is for the national government and local governments to be engaged in this field.

Thus, \textbf{local government’s motivation and capacities should be increased} – for example, the ESIF could invest less into infrastructure, which will be amortized, in favour of skills, knowledge and the innovation of public administration. National authorities could provide intense external technical assistance in local policymaking and project management. The assistance could take the form of assistance in developing inclusion policies and designing project proposals (if external funding is needed); in relation to implementation, local government officers could be trained and mentored to enable them to deliver these activities and also to balance local feelings on these developments. As the local government has limited financial resources, any additional activity should be designed to cover increased personnel costs. Moreover, in the execution of local governments’ original competences, the national government should differentiate transfer from the public budgets according to the problems that specific municipalities have to face, or even take over some of their specific tasks that they are not able to fulfil, if the problem is beyond their capacities.

As people usually do not make a distinction between different levels of the public administration, local governments are often blamed for ineffective or even destructive political decisions made by the central government. Therefore, policies that have a direct impact on the functioning of local governments should be made in close consultation with them. If central government introduces policies that will have an uncertain impact, they should be critically revised after some time, using evidence from the level where they have been implemented and feedback from the stakeholders involved in the implementation.

As the Member States are obviously reluctant to implement these principles, their application should be conditional on their use of the EU’s cohesion assistance.

\textsuperscript{29} Správy RTVS (2016). \textit{Pomoc pre Rómov} (Help for Roma), 26 August 2016. Available at: \url{http://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/9936/103590977}.