

DEPO LOW-THRESHOLD CLUB DEPO IN COEXISTENCE VILLAGE

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Introduction

The well working model of coexistence of Roma and non-Roma population in Ostrava is worth mentioning within good practice examples from the area of social work in excluded localities. It is a comprehensive social project called Coexistence Village in which ten Roma, ten non-Roma and ten mixed families, i.e. 135 persons in total, are living at present. The project helps families and individuals from socially disadvantaged environment to integrate into daily life. The Coexistence Village (Vesnička soužití) is situated in the locality of Silesian Ostrava-Muglinov and was opened in autumn 2002. The project was implemented by the Ostrava-Opava Diocesan Charity in cooperation with the citizens' association called Vzájemné soužití (Mutual Coexistence). Thirty housing buildings were built in the Village for citizens of Silesian Ostrava affected by the 1997 floods. The Coexistence Village includes the Community Centre – a multifunction building for implementation of a long-term social program. That shows that the Coexistence Village project deals not only with the housing issue but focuses on the humans with all their needs. The target group consists of children and youth aged three to eighteen years, endangered by socially undesirable phenomena, ethnic minorities, persons in crisis, persons living in socially excluded communities, persons leading a risk life style or endangered by such life style, and families with children. The workers active in the families or in the Community Centre provide the target group with the following social services: basic and special social consultancy, socially activation services for families with children, preschool club, field service and low-threshold facility for children and youth. The goal of the article is to point out the need of intensive social work with people in excluded localities, primarily with children and youth, as well as the need of continuous personal development and education of the workers who provide social services, in view of the particularities of the target group.

Social Services in the Coexistence Village

The Coexistence Village is situated in an excluded locality of the city of Ostrava, with a great number of socio-culturally disadvantaged citizens, specifically the Romani. The area confronts a high level of socio-pathological phenomena like truancy, criminality,

drug abuse, promiscuity, unemployment, financial indebtedness, etc. The pathological phenomena in children are often supported by the parents, not only by the personal example of the parents but also by intentional instigation aimed at obtaining advantages for the family. The provision of social services in the Coexistence Village differs markedly from any other social work. The Roma community has a specific temperament; hardly a day goes by without quarrels, loud communication, vulgarisms, physical attacks, but also spontaneous musical and dancing productions in the public. Further, the own rules of the Roma community must be considered, as they are often diametrically different from the rules of the majority society. Each new worker in the Coexistence Village must first get acquainted with the particularities of the work with the Roma, to avoid useless misunderstandings and conflicts.

Housing is a priority for the adult inhabitants of the Village. The adults ask for professional consultancy services most frequently in cases of crisis, when for example their living in the Coexistence Village is endangered or when they are in a financial crisis. If something incurs the adults' displeasure, meetings of the inhabitants of the Coexistence Village are convoked in the Community Centre and, in spite of stormy and loud discussions of the hot-tempered inhabitants, the word of the director of the facility is respected.

All disputes and conflicts are forgotten during social events where the differences between the inhabitants and the workers fade away and the "coexistence" atmosphere can be fully seen, for example at celebrations of the anniversaries of the establishment of the Village, at dancing and musical performances of children, at Miss Roma elections, etc. The latter event, i.e. Miss Roma, brings mutual unification of the whole family and huge common effort aimed at their girl's respectable representation of the whole family. At the days just before the competition, the mothers borrowed dresses from wedding parlours for their daughters and adapted and remade them in the night. At the very event, not only the mothers but also the aunts, grandmothers, cousins and friends of all competitors gathered to watch their favourite. And at the end, according to the Roma tradition, the fathers of the award-winning girls experienced the highest prestige and fame. Such events are discussed long days afterwards.

Young families increasingly use the socially activating service for families with children (hereinafter referred to only as "SAS") in which the workers support and motivate the parents in the area of preschool education of their children and offer the parents help with the general development of their child. It turns up that the attitude of traditional Roma family to education, or to preparation for education, respectively, changes only very slowly. If the mothers had the opportunity to put their child to the preschool club, they perceived the service only as "watching" over their child while they could do their own things. Therefore the services focused on joint activities of the parents and the children prove to be more efficient. A positive result of the work with the Roma community consists in the finding that some young parents become aware of their drawbacks in parental competences and of the need to change the upbringing of their children. The SAS workers help the families both in field and in ambulant form, offering support in all areas of the family activities, e.g. training of care for the child, housekeeping, economic

activities, nutrition, etc.; they also mediate contacts with the social environment (school, physician, authorities, etc.), offer socially therapeutic activities and help at exercising rights and interests.

The low-threshold facility for children and youth (hereinafter referred to only as "LTFCY") in the Community Centre is the most frequently used service in the Coexistence Village; it is visited by children and youth not only from the Village but from wide surroundings including the localities of Muglinov, Liščina, Hrušov and Přívoz. And this is where the opportunity for slow change of thinking and life style of the incoming generation of young people starts.

Depo Low-Threshold Club

The target group of LTFCY consists of children and youth from six to nineteen years, primarily from Silesian Ostrava and the closest surroundings. LTFCY can be visited by clients from the target group regardless of gender, nation, faith, mother tongue, health condition and economic situation.

The LTFCY mission is to create a safe space for children and youth living in a low-stimulating social environment, to be supported during childhood and adolescence. The workers are close to the clients in difficult life situations, support the clients in mastering them and motivate them to active solution. To fulfil the LTFCY mission, the workers make use of consultancy and of custom-made educational and entertainment activities.

The LTFCY service aims at helping the clients with social integration among their peers, including involvement in the events of local community, at preventing or reducing health risks related to the clients' life style, at developing their abilities, skills and knowledge, at improving their quality of life and making positive changes in their life style. The LTFCY clients often have difficult access to adequate leisure time activities appropriate for their age, due to their social situation (lack of funds, unsatisfactory family environment, negative influence of social environment, etc.). Therefore the LTFCY workers strive to let the children and youth from the Coexistence Village and its surroundings in the facility as long as possible during its hours of operation, to enable them to go in for high-quality leisure time activities and to establish and maintain high-quality interpersonal relations. In such way, the facility tries to prevent socially pathological phenomena committed by young people who rove about the streets without adult supervision and are bored.

The Depo low-threshold club offers non-structured leisure time activities for children and youth in the premises of the Community Centre in the Coexistence Village, but it also organizes activities outside the centre and cooperates with other similar facilities, for example when organizing sports matches.

How are the services in the Depo club provided? The workers respect the following principles: We make no distinctions between each other. You need not tell your name. We are here for you. You can choose what you want to do and you can come and leave at any time during the opening hours. The club is free of charge. Nobody will learn anything

about you from us. The clients have rights and obligations including mutual respect, not hurting each other, not damaging the facility property, not using drugs, etc. The clients can have a talk with the workers about anything that worries them. The LTFCY workers are often the only persons to whom the children entrust their worries. As there are Roma persons among the LTFCY workers, the Roma children consider it easier to find a way to them and to trust them. Further, the clients can attend preventive, educational and pedagogical programs, discussions, debates and composed programs, e.g. the program for prevention of drug abuse, prevention of gambling, prevention of sexual abuse, debate on the topic of solution of crisis situations, etc. In spite of the Roma traditions that force the children to learn to know life primarily through practice, the children and young people are open to discuss friendship, bullying, criminality, drugs, but also partner relations, sex, contraception, etc. The Roma people are very curious, they like to ask questions, they even ask the workers about very personal and intimate things and want to know everything at once and sincerely. The LTFCY clients like sports activities, primarily the calcio (table soccer), ping-pong or other parlour games and activities. The workers often help the clients with their homework; the clients learn to work and to make use of the PC for learning and for entertainment; they can listen to music, watch films, go in for creative and artistic activities in the studio or play music instruments and sing in the music studio. The clients like new things to happen, they get annoyed by monotonous activities, by orders and bans, they love trips to the nature and to other towns. Many children know only the way to and from school; sometimes they even don't suspect how big their town is. Therefore the clients are glad to participate in trips lasting one day or several days, in workshops, discos, sports tournaments, etc. The offer is really very broad and many events and activities are initiated by the clients, e.g. the Miss election, dancing competitions, sports tournaments, concerts, external events, etc.

But even such a broad range of activities and leisure time opportunities does not satisfy every individual. The LTFCY is attended also by children and young people who cannot and don't want to get involved in the activities, refuse to change their habits, provoke conflicts and incite other clients to break the rules. Another problem for the workers consists in children who share their joys and worries with them one day, while another day, the same children are vulgar and rude against them, fight or intentionally destroy the LTFCY properties. Unfortunately, there are even children under ten years who smoke, abuse alcohol or other habit-forming substances, which makes their behaviour unpredictable. Everyday solving of conflict situations and the need to "be always on the toes" is very exhausting for the workers; it is therefore necessary that they carry out their job with love and professionalism at the same time. The Roma children find out very quickly that a worker doesn't like them; but on the other hand, they are able to quickly misuse a worker's weaknesses and missing borderlines in their relation.

In LTFCY, the children and adolescents get opportunity to trouble-free integration into the society; they have greater chance to change, as compared to their parents; it is only up to their choice to make use of such offer.

Fight in the Depo

Jožo (16 years) had a fight with Karel (17 years) in the Depo premises. It started by a sharp verbal fight, including vulgar words, and culminated by a fist fight. Everything occurred very quickly, and before the club workers had time to react, there was even blood. The worker separated the boys and started asking what had happened. All clients present in the club made an attentively listening public. Each of the boys loudly defended his truth; finally, the incident participants confirmed Karel's version stating that Jožo was the first to call names because of a past conflict; Karel didn't cope with the verbal fight and was the first to argue with his fist. The worker imposed a ban on entry for two months to Jožo and for one month to Karel; the sanctions were imposed in compliance with the club rules. Karel and other friends calmly left the club but Jožo was angry and, when leaving, he shouted that he wouldn't tolerate it and that he had right to be there.

On the next day, Jožo came to the club again and even managed to enter with a group of other clients; he didn't respond to the worker's repeated calls to leave the club. At one moment, he shut himself in the WC and intentionally spilled water on the floor. The worker repeatedly tried to banish Jožo from the club, but he was running around the room inciting the other clients to break the rules too. Then he took a ball gun from his bag and shot on the clients and on the worker. The worker called the facility director and threatened Jožo with calling the police. Jožo didn't react to anything and kept provoking and destroying the club property. After consulting the director, the workers announced a premature closing of the club, they turned the lights off and escorted the clients out of the club. Jožo was the last to leave and outside, he unloaded his anger on rubbish bins. On next days, Jožo didn't come any more.

The incident was discussed during supervision, the whole situation was analyzed and new measures and procedures for similar situations were adopted. Potential conflict triggers were gradually found out. Jožo had been visiting both the Depo club and another club in the locality where the rules are different from Depo; the clients often fight there and nobody cares about it. In addition, Jožo uses drugs, smokes weeds from time to time and snuffs pervitin. At the time of the incident, he was trying to get weed. Jožo is the youngest child from a large family where most siblings (seven) abuse habit-forming substances, the father is in jail for thefts and physical attack and the mother consumes too much alcohol. Jožo is a "street child" from his early years. On the day of the incident, there were many big boys, primarily irregular clients who didn't know each other well; tension could be felt from the beginning. On the next day, there were many small children who were loud, wild and required attention; therefore the workers overlooked Jožo entering the club. The motive of Jožo's behaviour on the next day probably was revenge for "public shame" suffered by Jožo when handling the incident. The workers had not experienced similar situation; they tried to solve the situation as they could, but nothing worked. In addition, the workers later became aware that they were tied down by fear how Jožo's aggression could escalate; they feared for the small children in the club and for each other. The fear for themselves arrived only later.

The supervision brought the following procedures and measures: don't solve any disputes between clients "in public"; try to preserve the client's dignity; make use of preventive

measures to prevent potential clients' aggression (plan activities, change activities, music, reduce number of clients in the club, individual talks with risk clients, etc.); increase the number of workers in afternoon clubs when older clients come (e.g. make use of help of volunteers and interns); contact and arrange "emergency" cooperation with one of the Roma inhabitants of the Village who is a city policeman; have emergency buttons for quick calling of help on the phone; have the opportunity to trigger alarm in the building; establish cooperation with local police through personal negotiations and agreement of forms of cooperation; training of all club workers (including volunteers and interns) on the particularities of work with the Roma community and instructions on work with aggressive clients; use of communication skills for conflict solving, e.g. work with voice, space, etc.; have retreat paths; also risks of use of inadequate defence were discussed. The incident was a great experience for all club workers. The clients also felt the need to speak about the events; it turned out that they favoured the workers, that they didn't want such things to occur in the club, as it is one of the few places where they feel safe. The clients condemned Jožo's behaviour, they linked his emotion with drug abuse. Many clients appreciated the worker's procedure during the fight, they recognized her staying calm and being able to pacify boys who were a head taller than she was. The workers discussed the rules of the club, the meaning of the sanctions and bans, the club mission and building of mutual respect with the clients. A debate about drugs, their influence on the psyche and on the individual's behaviour followed. Policemen came to the club too and agreed regular rounds near the club in afternoon hours with the workers. The workers were trained on the particularities of work with the Roma community, on communication and efficient conflict solving. The incident with Jožo was a great experience for all persons involved (both the workers and the clients), as well as an opportunity to learn new skills for more efficient solving of crisis situations.

Conclusion

The provision of social services in the Coexistence Village includes permanent building of mutual trust and respect among the workers and the inhabitants. The workers must have not only the relevant education, but also personality qualities for work with the Roma. For the Roma, it is not easy at all to accept the fact that a "white" young worker tells them how to live, how to bring up their children, how to cook or how to manage their funds. But the Coexistence Village project has been working for fifteen years already, and children of the first clients start visiting LTF CY now. And the workers can continue the initiated change of mind and life style of new generation, with patience, kindness and professionalism.

References

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