



Caritas for the human dignity of Roma

Habesj, Roma settlement

Enhancing the human dignity of the Roma population in Europe presents a significant challenge as structural inequalities and generational poverty persist on a large scale. Meaningful change is still needed to help Roma people realise their rights and live a dignified life.

Why is it important that Caritas works on Roma inclusion? The Caritas network shares a mission of supporting the most excluded in society all over Europe, which obviously includes the Roma communities too. In fact, nowadays, Roma citizens are still systematically treated in a discriminatory way and their voices are often not heard or valued. Also, more needs to be done, especially on a political level. Investing in the empowerment of Roma is crucial to break the cycle of generational poverty.

Caritas organisations have been pushing for structural change for decades, and to be even stronger in our advocacy mission, Caritas Europa started a Community of Practice (CoP) – a group of experts – that works on Roma inclusion. At the moment, the group includes Caritas staff from Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Portugal, Serbia and Slovakia and we look forward to expanding it.

Within the CoP, we share experiences on how we support the Roma communities in our respective countries. Although our contexts and ways of working differ, we learn and see how other projects are innovative, useful and effective in supporting the integration of Roma people.

In 2023, we went on a study visit to Slovakia hosted by Caritas Slovakia in Bratislava and its dioceses in Poprad and Košice (near the Polish border). We visited the highly populated Roma settlements there and met with priests and sisters who live and work in these communities to support children and adults to have a better life. We also visited Caritas social centres and a housing project in Slovakia supports Roma families to build their own houses.

The Roma ethnic minority is part of Slovakia's history. According to the last official data from 2021, there were 67,179 persons counted as Roma people in the country, or 1.23% of the population. However, the number of Roma is usually underreported, with estimates placing the Roma population at 7-11% of the population. Therefore, the actual number of Roma may be over half a million.

Caritas Slovakia, in collaboration with the Catholic Church, actively promotes Roma inclusion. Through consistent efforts, they enhance educational opportunities, support vocational training and facilitate healthcare access for the Roma community. Many of their initiatives also focus on social integration, cultural preservation and housing. But, similarly to other European countries, they face many challenges.

Witnessing the exclusion and extremely poor living conditions of the Roma settlements in Slovakia was emotionally tough, but it also made us want to focus on solutions. Although immediate change is not possible, long-term planning can help a lot.

What are the key elements for change? Firstly, what Caritas and local Churches do to help the Roma communities is remarkable, but to achieve structural change, the whole society at the national and local levels should be involved. Secondly, we firmly believe that the Roma communities must be directly involved in decision-making and treated as fellow actors of change.

In 2023, we published a position paper that tackles more recent challenges, such as Roma fleeing the war in Ukraine, the energy and cost-of-living crisis and EU countries' low prioritisation of their national Roma Strategic Frameworks. Over the years, Caritas organisations have persistently advocated for structural reforms. The ambitious objectives outlined in the EU's Roma Strategic Framework to be implemented nationally offer a significant opportunity for progress.

Key goals within this Framework include improving housing conditions, education and access to clean drinking water. All these goals are and must be achievable.

We are happy to invite you to read the stories from our study visit to Slovakia. We hope you find more inspiration and motivation to continue pursuing a better and more dignified life for all in your daily work.

By Dorien Van Haute, Chair Community of Practice on Roma Inclusion Deputy Director Caritas Flanders, Belgium.

Photos courtesy of Caritas Europa's Community of Practice (CoP) on Roma Inclusion.

The price of water and air in the Romani settlement “Habeši”

Nearly 2,000 people live in a slum surrounded by uncollected garbage as the local authorities refuse to remove it if the inhabitants do not pay their taxes. Even the water is only available to purchase.

By Jelena Mićović, Project coordinator Caritas Serbia, Caritas Serbia

Coming from a non-EU country where I have been working for years with members of the impoverished Roma community, I was excited to participate in the study visit of the Caritas Europa Community of Practice on Roma Inclusion. Although I knew that the Roma community in Slovakia still struggles to become completely included in Slovak society, I expected to see and learn how an EU member state has been dealing with this social challenge, hoping to get ideas and inspiration from projects and measures that could also be implemented in my country, especially as Slovakia and Serbia are similar in size in terms of both the general and Roma populations. Unfortunately, I was disappointed very quickly when I saw that the living conditions of the Roma communities in Serbia and Slovakia are almost equally bad. In both countries, a large proportion of the Roma community is still trapped in a cycle of poverty, discrimination and marginalisation. The fact that Slovakia is an EU member state has no influence whatsoever.

This realisation was very disillusioning as I regarded the EU a community of shared values where the value of equality has a crucial societal role. However, this is not the case when Romani people are concerned – wherever they may live. Sečovce, an idyllic town of 8,500 inhabitants in the Trebišov District in southeast Slovakia, lies approximately 20 kilometres east of Košice on the road to Ukraine. When driving from Košice, you can see the buildings and the tower of the old church in the centre of Sečovce from far away, but approximately two kilometres before you reach the old town, on the right side of the road, lies the Roma settlement of Sečovce, popularly called Habeši. Habeši in Slovak means Abyssinia (former name of Ethiopia). Nobody knows exactly how many inhabitants the settlement has, but estimates are that between 1,700 and 2,000 people live there. The settlement consists mostly of sheds. In the centre are three very damaged apartment buildings, most probably abandoned relics from socialist times.

In front of one of the buildings is a water tap, where inhabitants of the settlement can buy water. Yes, buy. Next to this building is a small stone church built by a Catholic priest with the help of Romani neighbours. This little church is the only decent-looking building in the whole settlement. Although there is an uncultivated field between the settlement and the first houses of Sečovce, there are no plants in the settlement, just dusty roads and shuge piles of garbage.

The smell of garbage is everywhere and unbearable to anyone who does not live there and is not used to it. The local Caritas colleagues explained that the inhabitants of the settlement do not have enough money to pay for the removal of the garbage and, therefore, the local administration has stopped providing the service. But let us go back to the beginning. The first house in Sečovce when coming from the Roma settlement is a Caritas community centre for children. It is a nicely decorated and adequately furnished house with a green playing yard behind it, where children can play, learn and stay every working day of the week.

The head of the centre explained that they aim to support children in their education and upbringing and prevent them from leaving school too soon. But they also want to give the children the opportunity to play and socialise in a safe and clean environment, to be away from the dust and stink of the settlement for at least a couple of hours per day.

The very harsh reality we saw during the visit confirmed my belief that we have to continue advocating for the rights of Roma people with our Caritas CoP on Roma Inclusion, especially for their right to live in humane and decent conditions.

However, I am sceptical that we will achieve significant changes, considering the fact that poverty is more and more regarded as an individual problem for those who are poor. In this highly individualised world, our dedicated Caritas colleagues and members of the Church from Slovakia have shown us another approach: being close to those in need, establishing community centres and assisting Romani children and young people to overcome poverty through education. I hope we will find the strength and resources to follow their path in Serbia.



Habeši, common water source



Habeši, garbage piles

The House of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Lomnička

Established by the Congregation of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, the House represents an important focal point for the Roma community of over 3,200 inhabitants. Here, the nuns provide help to more than to people of all ages.

By Iva Kuchyřková, Social policy and advocacy officer Caritas Czech Republic

As part of the study visit to Slovakia by Caritas Europa's Community of Practice (CoP) on Roma Inclusion last May, we had the opportunity to see the House of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in the village of Lomnička. Established by the Congregation of the School Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, the House represents an important focal point for the Roma community of over 3,200 people. Here, the nuns have been providing different kinds of social services since 2007 and approximately 150 people of all ages attend the centre daily. Their work focuses on education, the pastoral accompaniment of children and youth and the personal assistance of people in need of health care.

The clergy has been present in Lomnička since 2004, supported by the local municipality and other non-profit organisations, such as The Return (Návrat).

The nuns are also involved in social counselling, social rehabilitation, assistance in preparing for regular schooling and leisure activities. They also run a youth choir, music groups, sports activities, Bible meetings for both children and adults, formation meetings, cooking and baking classes and more. There is also a football field and sports equipment can be rented within the parish grounds.

As life in the village is very difficult, the House of the Immaculate Heart of Mary works daily to improve housing conditions, waste management, sanitation, education and the environment, amongst the most urgent issues. The nuns want to do their part, especially in developing the abilities of young people to help their neighbours.

Currently, there are two social service facilities in the House: the Low Threshold Social Service for Children and the Community Centre. The Community Centre runs a low-threshold programme for people who are dependent on different substances, from Monday to Friday during regular working hours, with activities divided by age group and tutoring assistance. For adults, there is a social counselling service that helps the Roma inhabitants with raising awareness about their civil rights. All these services are provided free of charge.



One of the most innovative and strategic aims of the Community Centre is to facilitate a culture of democratic participation in the decision-making process by having a representative body such as the Community Centre Council.

At the moment, the Community Centre focuses on three areas: managing garbage in the village, clothing supply and educational support. For the latter, the aim is to help individuals develop their communication skills with the authorities, fill in documents and inform them about opportunities to increase their skills through basic counselling.

The House of the Immaculate Heart of Mary received special recognition from the Slovak Ministry of Culture for its important social role.



Lomničkai, House of the immaculate



Lomničkai, House of the immaculate

The inspiring story of Father Kuffa in Žakovce

After a life-changing experience, the Slovak priest runs a centre that provides shelter for people facing very vulnerable situations such as domestic violence, homelessness or substance addiction. “We cannot turn a blind eye to their suffering,” says Fr. Kuffa.

By Ana Pinto, Caritas Viseu in Portugal

On 31 May, I had the pleasure to attend the study visit to Slovakia by the Caritas Europa Community of Practice (CoP) on Roma Inclusion. We visited Žakovce, a village in the municipality of Kežmarok, near the Polish border. Here, Father Marian Kuffa runs a centre that provides shelter for people of different ages and origins who are facing very vulnerable and complex situations, such as domestic violence, homelessness, life after imprisonment, severe poverty or substance addiction.

This centre is predominantly populated by the Roma ethnic minority. Fr. Kuffa’s charitable work consists of more than just the provision of immediate support – such as food, hygiene and sleeping facilities –, it also represents a sustainable model of social economy. From baking bread to farming and cattle raising, the local community also works on gardening, cooking and any other necessary maintenance operations. This community of about 300 persons are deeply involved in the daily operations of the Centre, which includes a farm and a bakery. The residents participate in the day-to-day chores as well as in all the tasks needed to promote the centre’s sustainability and production of goods that are sold to the broad public.

During this visit, we soon learned Father Kuffa is also an active member of this community, working closely with the staff and the residents to create a supportive and nurturing environment. His inspiring words resonated in the Chapel, where he told the group about a life-changing experience that strengthened his Catholic faith and brought him to a path of serving and loving others. After suffering a life-threatening accident when mountain climbing that took him months to recover from* young Marian Kuffa felt it was his prayers and his faith that saved him. In his words :



God was giving him an opportunity to become a better person, to live his life with a deep purpose and to devote his mission to the community, especially to persons struggling with very delicate life situations, with little to no support (nor sympathy) from their family, the social services or other entities.

He decided to become a priest and since then he has been sharing “the bread” (both literally and spiritually) and providing warmth and support to others. As we noticed in the centre, his generous and compassionate vision has been leading his work and his life, granting him the respect of a broad community and increasing the ties to local and national organisations, partners and even volunteers who want to take part in this mission.

Besides the shelter in Žakovce, Father Kuffa also works on a regular basis with the Roma communities who live in marginalised settlements without sewage, electricity or running water, which is unfortunately a common reality for Roma in Slovakia, as we observed during the study visit. He shared with the CoP his thoughts on how important it is to not turn a blind eye to these unacceptable situations, the infringements on dignity and human rights. He spoke about the importance of being present, to get to know the situations and to provide spiritual support or other help that is needed. And to use our voices and our knowledge to take the experiences we have seen (and felt) to other fora, to other networks, so that they are not forgotten.

From what we had the opportunity to observe on our visit, the work that is being done in this centre in Žakovce constitutes a living example of Father Kuffa’s warming words: to live in love and to care for one another. A lesson to keep us going – hopefully, heartfully – on this long and steep journey Caritas is in, walking towards equality for all human beings.



Žakovce, Marian Kuffa



Žakovce, community bakery

The Salesians' social work in the Košice Luník IX neighbourhood

Nearly 5,000 Roma people live in a remote village in eastern Slovakia. Despite the many challenges, new housing projects and smart use of public space give hope for the future.

By António Ramalho and Susana Criado, Caritas Viseu in Portugal

The Luník IX is a very isolated social district located in the Košice region in eastern Slovakia. It is like a mini village, currently home to 4,000 to 5,000 Roma people.

This social neighbourhood is composed of different housing structures, from classic buildings to settlements along its margins. However, people in all structures live in very poor conditions. Luník IX residents are essentially divided into different categories according to their different housing and economic conditions. Among those who work, some are active locally, in jobs outside the settlement, while others perform seasonal jobs in nearby countries. Most of the inhabitants of this neighbourhood do not have regular work contracts and most of them depend on social benefits to make a living.

Compared to many other Roma settlements, the residents surprisingly do not recognise a leader figure here, so the stratification of groups of residents is more related to aspects such as family and neighbourhood relations. To support this population, the Salesians of Don Bosco have been working in the neighbourhood since July 2008, with the help of the Salesian Sisters and numerous volunteers. That year, they took over the construction of the community centre “Saleziáni Don Bosca – Košice Luník IX – Komunitné Centrum”, which was inaugurated in 2012 and visited by Pope Francis in 2021 (this visit prompted a muchneeded cleanup of the area).

Komunitné Centrum Saleziáni Don Bosca

The facilities of the community centre, as well as the activities that take place there, provide a warm and educational environment of peace and security, allowing the Luník IX residents to develop and strengthen their learning capacities. They are supported in acquiring new skills that gradually contribute to promoting their social inclusion. The main activities focus on pedagogy, where young people receive support with schoolwork, through individual or collective tutoring. They also have access to a library. The centre also has a spacious multifunctional gymnasium, where the residents can practice different sports. This space is also used for other purposes, such as cultural shows and performances. The community centre also has a public laundry, where the Luník IX residents can wash and dry their clothes; it is run by a fellow resident. There is also a kitchen, where mainly the young people cook and bake. Preparing and enjoying good food together helps in creating a friendly environment.

Finally, the centre provides music classes for volunteers and external collaborators to learn play musical instruments.

Housing project of ETP Slovakia – The project “We are building hope in Luník IX”

In the Luník IX district, the Caritas Europa Community of Practice on Roma Inclusion also discovered the “We are building hope in Luník IX – building self-help family homes in Luník IX” project in the housing settlement. It started with the need for new housing and aims to be an innovative social strategy through the construction of houses for families with low economic resources who are unable to get traditional bank loans. Selected households receive a micro-loan on the condition that for a specific period of time (at least one year) they save an agreed minimum amount monthly and then build their own homes.

This investment is complemented by the essential support from private donors and the micro-loan fund of ETP (Centre for Sustainable Development), which also provides professional assistance in constructing these houses. The model house is already under construction and can be replicated by other families in the Roma community.

This model is based on the effective and continuous support of strong partnerships. The municipality grants the land and the building permits, while some private sector companies provide building materials and technical support in engineering and architecture, among other services. The ETP uses the facilities of the community centre to deal with all matters related to this ongoing housing project in Luník IX.



Luník IX Residences



Saleziáni Don Bosca, Komunitné Centrum

**“ I ask everyone with
political responsibility
to remember two
things: human dignity
and the common good.**

Pope Francis, Twitter,
1 May 2014



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