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## Subjective perception of coping by destitute Roma communities in Slovakia and the importance of education as a strategy of pulling them out of poverty

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### Abstract

Our contribution offers an insight into current results of successive qualitative studies. The first study conducted in 2012 is focusing on life strategies of Roma people in Slovakia, with educational strategies included. The next study conducted in 2014 is dedicated to Roma people's perception of personal crisis and strain situations. The results of this study have not been published yet. Approximately 50 interviews will be analysed in our contribution.

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## 1. Introduction

Poverty is a serious social problem and it has its own individual form. It has a great influence on decision-making, deprives the person of his freedom and possibilities, it has a serious impact on his present, future, goals and overall success. Sen (1983) defines poverty as a deprivation of capability which is based on indicators for the freedom of individuals to live a life that would be of value. We can include health, nutrition and education to the basic needs (Nussbaum 2000, Alkire 1998, Desai 1995). The concept of social exclusion offers a broader understanding of social deprivation and mechanisms, which lead to it and at the same time prevent any counteraction. Many authors are trying to define this concept (e.g. Abrahamson, 1995, Atkinson, 1998, 2000, Berghman, 1995, Mareš, 2000, Džambazovič, 2004 and others). They agree on the fact that social exclusion is the result of unequal access of individuals or groups of the population to basic resources of society, it also means the denial of possibilities to participate in society and this is reflected in a number of dimensions, which can be identified and characterized in specific geographical areas.

Despite extensive quantitative research of social deprivation and living conditions, we know relatively little about its subjective perception, definition and management. We know even less about some parts of the population, which are less accessible for researchers – for example homeless people, people who come from orphanages, Roma who live in socially excluded communities. How do these people perceive their own life situation? What causes their discontent? What worries them? What makes them happy? What is important for them?

The so-called subjective concepts of poverty are based on the reflection of one's own life situation and experience. There are many methods and indicators based on subjective testimony of respondents – from a simple question to complex mathematical indicators, which determine the subjective perception of poverty (Džambazovič, 2004, p. 12). Their basis consists of subjective statements, past experiences, expectations, emotions and opinions of respondents (Mareš, 1999).

The authors of this paper were also interested in the subjective Evaluation of their situation by people, who are considered to be socially deprived according to objective indicators. They focused on a particular ethnic group of the Roma, which is (not only) in Slovakia, considered to be one of the poorest.

### 1.1. Roma in Slovakia

The Roma have been living in Europe since the middle ages and the earliest mention in the territory of Slovakia is from the year 1322.

They are among the most numerous ethnic minorities and their status is officially recognised as a national minority. Approximately 403 thousand Roma live currently in Slovakia (Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku, 2013) dispersed in different types of communities.

Table 1. Typology of Roma communities in Slovakia.

Typology of Roma communities	Brief characterization
Living dispersed among the majority population	46,5 % Roma from the whole Roma population. Their living conditions are diverse, but they share most similarities with the majority population.
Levels in municipal and urban areas	Urban units inhabited primarily by Roma located mainly within a municipality (e.g. streets, neighborhoods, etc.). 12.9% of the total Roma population in Slovakia live here.
On the periphery of municipal areas (villages, towns)	Urban units located on periphery of villages and towns (with no spatial separation from areas inhabited by the majority of the population). 23.8% of the total Roma population in Slovakia.
Remote locations (segregated)	Often several miles away from the "parent" municipality, or separated by a natural or artificial barrier (e.g. river, railway). The poorest and highest-risk

conditions. 17.0% of all Roma in Slovakia live in segregated communities (68 540 people).

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Source: Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku, 2013

## 1.2. Social deprivation of Roma

Although this statement cannot be generalised, it is true, that a high percentage of Roma live in poorer conditions than the majority population. The majority of authors agree, that Roma are in a worse situation, than any other population group in Slovakia. Absolute poverty is typical for some residents of poor excluded Roma settlements and it is transferred intergenerationally and is connected to social exclusion (including spatial segregation) and living in appalling conditions. Poverty is generally considered to be a crisis situation. Life in a segregated and socially weak community means, among other things, very limited contact with the "outside" world. The findings of several studies (e.g., Radičová 2001, Rusnáková 2009) suggests that the residents of such communities do not compare their life situation with anyone outside of the community and their definition of poverty and wealth is reflected only from the local point of view. Poverty is associated with absolute deprivation (absence of food, absence housing) and from this, their own assessment of their situation unfolds. *"I am satisfied, if only my roof didn't have a leak. Some people here have it worse."* Said one respondent, who lives in an overcrowded shack by the woods.

## 2. Subjective evaluation of one's own life situation (qualitative research)

The authors of the paper were interested whether the inhabitants of the socially deprived Roma communities consider their conditions adverse and how they define poverty. How would who is born and lives only in an environment of absolute poverty coupled with the social exclusion and segregation interpret his situation? What does he consider to be a burden and a crisis? Does the type of a community and its rate of segregation affect the subjective definition of a crisis?

We tried to get answers to the previous questions through the means of qualitative interviews within the project VEGA 1/0206/13. We approached 50 residents of all types of Roma communities (as indicated in table Roma communities) in two regional districts of the Slovak Republic. The research was carried out at the beginning of 2014, and its results have not been published anywhere yet.

### 2.1. Briefly on the results

The majority of respondents is quite satisfied with their life, regardless of the community and the conditions therein. Satisfaction was expressed even by those respondents who live in overcrowded dwellings, without basic essentials (connection to water, bathrooms, furniture, etc.). Most commonly they are unhappy with housing (quality, size, location and essentials) and the regular absence of cash (there are periods when they don't even have money for basic food). Such situations are considered to be annoying, but they are not "insurmountable problems" – they always somehow manage to survive, "somehow solve it." They realize that they are living scantily, but they can handle it, and somehow they manage to survive. Respondents who live in the vicinity of the majority of the population were more critical. Even though they live in relatively better conditions. Employed Roma expressed greater dissatisfaction with their lives – who, despite all their efforts have to fight deprivation and debts. Even so they enjoy and value their jobs and they have a desire to keep them.

An explanation could be a "learned" modesty. Most of the Roma are living in the same place for long periods of time, their life does not undergo any major changes (and they do not expect them) and so they had "time" to adapt to these conditions, which were considered unmanageable by most interviewers.

Only part of the respondents addressed the issues associated with poverty or poor living conditions when asked about their troubles. Several respondents reacted to a more specific question from the interviewer (e.g. Are you worried about the way you live?) Nevertheless, a large proportion of respondents experience the situation, in which they don't have anything to eat on a regular basis. In such a case, they use the option of debt (to relatives and

acquaintances or non-banking institutions) they purchase food in local stores on “debt”, the cook from what they have left in their reserves. Several respondents said that they have nothing left but to “starve”. Some have mentioned the problems associated with the dwelling (heating, lack of drinking water or electricity).

Why haven’t all Respondents identified their living conditions as adverse? One of the possible reasons was offered by Jaro (Roma activist living among non-Roma). “They live in poverty throughout their lives and know nothing else. These generations no more have experience with employment and those, which had, slowly die out. They actually got used to it and know nothing else.”

They mentioned stressful situations such as:

- Situations associated with diseases, injuries, and associated complications (surgery, hospitalization)
- The death of family members or other loved ones
- Troubles with children (e.g., truancy, poor discipline)
- Conflicts within the family and in the neighbourhoods
- One respondent mentioned a particular situation linked to “modern slavery”. Her partner was the victim of a scam and had to work for free abroad, received beatings and was denied freedom. After some time he fled (without any personal documents and without any money) and returned home.

What makes them most happy is having children (their own children, grandchildren and children of relatives). But also a family (other family members, joyous events, etc.). Own health and also health of other family members was of great importance to the respondents. Good health is considered a positive trait. Conversely, negative situations are often associated with diseases and injuries. They compare their situation with families in the neighborhood – hence their assessment is affected by the quality of life in the community. The segregated a community is, the more limited knowledge of standards beyond the community they have. Each respondent knows someone who “is doing even worse”. “*We are not poor or rich.*” is a typical sentence. Even Roma living among the majority are not willing to compare their conditions with non-Roma neighbours. Non-Roma have work, have it easier in life (access to the labour market, education, heritage from their ancestors, contacts and acquaintances, etc.) and thus, cannot be compared with them. “*Our parents came from the colonies, had nothing, had to start from scratch. They (non-Roma) inherited houses, money, fields, and forests. They could afford to go to school, and didn't have to worry about anyone but themselves...*”

They see their future as uncertain and unclear. “*I prefer not to think about the future.*” They want to have a better life, but often, they do not know what and how they could change. It would be good to have a job and to have enough to live and have a better housing. Some would like to move out of poor areas. However they do not expect any major changes in their lives for the future. Many respondents expressed a clear helplessness. The more active Roma, who have a job – but they are disappointed that they did not have the resources to have “a better life” for example in the form of being able to move out, from the community to a better environment, the elimination of debts, improved housing.

The lack of planning for the future and adapting to changes in life, which would counter their poverty and the presence of strategies aimed at the survival “here and now” may be regarded as essential (and to some extent even rational) as a consequence of poverty. Scant opportunities to actively induce changes do not give a lot of space for future planning. Surviving „day by day” is one of the characteristics of poor and socially excluded communities.

Table 2. Quotes from interviews.

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"The hardest thing is when you don't have anything to give the children to eat, you spend everything, and you don't have nothing to put in their mouth." (Jozef, a segregated Community)
"We live modestly, just like everyone else. I would like to work somewhere, but I can't, so I do not know how to change the situation, so we could live a better life..." (Jano, community on the outskirts of the village)
"Maybe some clothes, if it were better, it would look better. We always have to wear the same old clothes, which were given to us by others, and so on". (Jano, community on the outskirts of the village)
"Some people have it even worse. We always have enough to eat. And when we don't have money, we go buy things on debt or we borrow money from someone. We are not poor because if we were, we would not have

anything to eat. " (Mária, living among the non-Roma)

"I am among the poorest of our village. I work, but even so, it is not enough. Often we do not have basic supplies. " (Denisa, living among the non-Roma)

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### 3. Education as one of the strategies to counteract poverty

Education is generally considered as an effective resource which can be used to improve one's way of living. For example Burawoy (2000) allocates education as a skill in his system theory of assets. A well-known fact is that socio-economic background of the family has a substantial impact on success in school and at the same time on educational aspirations. The lack of opportunities in the present and weak prospects for the future affect goals related to education. Education as a strategy is mainly utilized by families, which already are educated. Poor families anticipate that education will bring them an improvement of the quality of their lives (Rochovská 2011).

The level of educational attainment among the Roma is significantly lower than that of majority population and the lack of vocational training and qualifications is referred to as one of the primary reasons for their poor implementation on the labour market (and of all the consequences of unemployment and low income).

How do poor Roma perceive education and what importance do they attribute to it? Do they see education as an opportunity for positive change? The authors of this paper are also focused on these questions in one of the presented qualitative research projects (research project VEGA 1/0596/10 Life strategies of residents in poor and socially excluded Roma communities).

#### 3.1. Briefly on the results

Part of the Roma does not have a clear stance to the significance of education. On one hand, they recognize that, it is important for the labour market ("*they won't give you a job anywhere without school now days*"). On the other hand, not even education beats the obstacles they encounter. Society has prejudices against the Roma (as well as employers), there is a high unemployment rate, the lack of contact with people, who could grant them access to jobs. However, when asked about the education of their children, their answers are show similarity: education is important, it can be a means to get the job, those who are educated know how to better establish themselves in society, has a better relationship with the majority (e.g. offices, at work ...).

There is some inconsistency on the subject of what school the Roma should choose for e their children. Parents often make decisions on further studies of their children on the basis of distance of the school and costs of the study (they refuse expensive scopes, where students need expensive equipment).

The following text illustrates the diversity of their views on the focus and the level of education for Roma.

- Branch of studies with highest demand on the labor market.
- School has no sense for Roma – even with it, they will not get established into the labor market and they will never be accepted by the majority.
- Spatially least remote schools (because of traveling costs).
- Financially least demanding branches of study (where they do not need to buy expensive tools).
- Any education is good. Always better than without it.
- Craft unions (best suited for Roma).
- The higher the education, the better.
- Roma need people with higher education.

### 4. Conclusion

Action against poverty and social exclusion is one of the main goals for the European Union and at the same time, is a struggle for human dignity. Research has a great significance here. It helps understanding the reasons and

consequence of poverty, understanding the current situation and the effect of social programs. This research should also be the first step to which others will follow, focused on practical and systematic help to the poor. Ondrejkoivič wrote: "...poverty includes the categorical imperative and we can not be satisfied by mere description, analysis of the causes and consequences of, or an explanation the form of fate or personal fault." (Ondrejkoivič, 2006, p. 10).

Respondents do not see a lot of possibilities for positive change in their lives. In many of the interviews "helplessness" and resignation was present. They don't have enough resources and opportunities emerging from poverty. Adaptation to environmental conditions appears to be rational, as an "emergency" strategy. On the other hand, however, this strategy is an obstacle to the establishment of a positive change. Limit external conditions impact subjective perception and bring, among other things, a lack of initiative from people with social disadvantages. Approaches, which are focused on activation of poor communities are embedded in social sciences. We also know approaches which emphasise the need for reforming the society which puts some groups in a disadvantageous situation.

The process of change has to be a result of a complex approach and a sincere interest in helping the poor. Education can be a good choice to avert poverty – if it will become a part of complex and systematic changes. The respondents themselves consider it as one of the favourable strategies but even this is limited by deficiency (primarily financial).

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