



Hungarian Helsinki Committee

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STEPSS Follow-up project: Local consultative meetings for police officers and members of the Roma minority

Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC)

Project description – February 2011

1. Project goal

The goal of the project is to **improve the situation of the Roma minority**, especially as far as law enforcement and policing is concerned, through strengthening the Roma minority's ability to engage in the social dialogue and by contributing to reducing bias against the Roma among police officers.

2. Key aspects of the project

2.1. Problem identification: Ordinary **citizens in Hungary do not have much reliable information on the work of the police**, most of them getting in touch with the police only in the course of ID checks. Usually there is no informal channel of communication between the local police and the members of the local community and citizens have no chance to pose general, not case-related question and to express their opinion, concerns, experiences and needs regarding policing, law enforcement, crime and community safety. This may lead to the lack of common understanding and to a dysfunctional picture on the police as a whole, creating fear and distrust, hindering also the effectiveness of police work. In case of the Roma minority, the general distrust and fear is exaggerated by the fact that in light of empirical sociological research, **police officers are highly biased against the Roma**, which may seriously influence the way they treat Roma defendants, victims and other participants of criminal or petty offence procedures, the way they communicate with the Roma minority and the way they conduct their work in communities with Roma population. A qualitative research study carried out by TÁRKI in Hungary in 2005 showed that the Roma are indeed discriminated against in the context of ID checks by the police. It was concluded that ethnic profiling exists in Hungary, and there is an assumption among the police officers that correlation between ethnic identity and potential criminal behaviour exists. The HHC's STEPSS (Strategies for Effective Police Stop and Search) project, based on a six-month period of data collection by police officers themselves, concluded that Roma people are three times more likely to be stopped by the police than non-Roma persons, thus ethnic profiling exists in Hungary, while ID checks performed on the Roma are not more efficient. Furthermore, bias on behalf of police officers is widely experienced by Roma community members and also by lawyers and NGOs working in the field on a daily basis.

2.2. Project activity: The project idea of the STEPSS Follow-up project is to **organize local consultative meetings for police officers and members of the local community, especially for members of the Roma minority**. The aim is to improve the relation of local police officers and community members by offering a new approach towards problem solving, thus by **offering a framework for a structured conversation on the systemic discrepancies and the concerns and experiences of both groups, to combat bias, to encourage confidence and build links** between them and to **develop a common understanding** of issues of policing, law enforcement, crime and community safety locally.

The idea of consultative meetings is based on the concept of community policing, the basic principle of which is to develop links between the police and the citizens in order to contribute to the mutual understanding, confidence and cooperation. It shall be stressed that consultative meeting are not intended to serve as a forum for individual complaints in certain cases, but to ensure a less formalized channel for posing more general questions (e.g. Why is the number of ID checks so high? Why do investigations last so long? What are the duties of a police officer when proceeding in different cases? What kind of restrictive means may be used by police



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officers? What is the avenue of complaints?). Consultative meetings are designed for exchange of information, knowledge and experiences.

Since the Roma minority is the most vulnerable group as far as law enforcement and policing is concerned, consultative meetings are in the first place aimed at improving the situation of Roma minority in this respect. This goal is served in two ways. On the one hand, consultative meetings strengthen the Roma minority's ability to enforce its interests by offering and ensuring a structured framework for Roma minority members to express their opinions and concerns. Thus these **consultative meetings further the Roma minority's potential to engage in the social dialogue**. On the other hand, structured and direct conversation promotes mutual understanding and acceptance, which **contributes to reducing bias against the Roma among police officers** in the long run. Both of the affects above **contribute to the improvement of the society's esteem as far as the Roma minority is concerned** in a sustainable and enduring way.

2.3. Innovation: Tools based on the concept of **community policing are rarely used by Hungarian police forces and consultative meetings have never been organized in Hungary before** the STEPSS Follow-up project. Thus, consultative meetings offer a completely new social approach as to the relationship of the police and local communities in Hungary. This new approach is characterized by communication, cooperation, mutual understanding and confidence. Accordingly, consultative meetings offer a new solution for tensions between police officers and members of the local community, especially the Roma minority. As it was already described above, mistrust and fear on behalf of citizens in general and especially members of the Roma minority towards police officers on the one hand and bias on behalf of the police forces on the other hand amount to a serious social problem in today's Hungary. Consultative meeting are aimed at offering a new way and means of addressing this problem.

3. Project implementation

In the first project phase (**between June 2009 and March 2010**) **altogether four consultative meetings were held in two pilot sites** of the STEPSS project on the initiation of the HHC: one in the 6th District of Budapest, and three in Szeged. In the 6th District of Budapest the meeting on 27 November 2009 was attended by fourteen NGOs and local civic organizations, the District's MP and vice-mayor were also present. Many of the participants expressed their support for holding regular meetings in the future, and the head of the police headquarters promised to organize a consultative meeting every third month. The event was covered by the local TV channel and newspaper, a summary is also available on the police's website. In Szeged three meetings were held (3 December and 11 December 2009, 27 January 2010). Representatives of the local government, the elected MP and members of the local community and NGOs participated. These events were also covered by the local media.

According to the plans of the HHC, **at least five consultative meetings will be held until the end of the second grant period in June 2011**. The HHC has identified the new pilot sites of the project: consultative meetings are planned in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county (in Miskolc, Ózd and Sárospatak) and in the 6th and 8th District of Budapest. (The HHC has identified these pilot sites because the proportion of community members with a perceived Roma ethnicity is significant.)

4. Results of the project

4.1. Direct results

- 4 consultative meetings held in 2 project sites with altogether approximately 120 participants
- 5 consultative meetings planned in 5 pilot sites with altogether 150 planned participants
- altogether approx. 750 local community members informed about consultative meetings
- altogether approx. 1,500 local community members to be informed about consultative meetings
- 1 summary on the experiences of the project, available on-line



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- 1 methodology leaflet on organizing consultative forums, available on-line
- 1 information leaflet on ID checks and police complaints, available on-line

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4.2. Expected effect on target groups

Local community members: Their ability to enforce their interests will be strengthened, and will have an increased confidence in police officers. Local community members and the police will have a better common understanding of issues of policing and law enforcement, while the community members' awareness to their own rights and the duties of the police will be enhanced.

Local Roma minority: Local Roma minorities' ability to enforce its interests and rights will be strengthened and they will have better potentials to engage in the social dialogue. Awareness will be raised to the rights of Roma minority members and the Roma will be more aware of their own rights. The desired goal of the project is that bias against the Roma decreases among local police officers decreases and the society's esteem as far as the Roma minority is concerned improves in the long run.

Police: Consultative meetings will contribute to reducing bias among police officers on the one hand and reduce mistrust and fear on behalf of members of the Roma minority towards police officers on the other hand. Both results will enhance the effectiveness of police work and will contribute to a police force operating according to human rights standards in a more transparent way. Police will have genuine information of the problems and needs of the local community that also supports the effective, locally implemented operation of the law enforcement forces.

5. Organisational aspects and financing

The STEPSS Follow-up project is coordinated by a staff member of the HHC, being in charge for contacting the relevant police headquarters, for mapping local communities and organizations to be contacted, and for looking into the ways of enhancing the awareness of the meetings locally and facilitating attendance. In 2011, consultative meetings will be chaired by specially trained, independent moderators, identified and financed by the HHC. Furthermore, staff members of another Hungarian NGO, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU, www.tasz.hu), having established contacts with the Roma minority in Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county also agreed to cooperate with the HHC in the project.

The STEPSS Follow-up project **is financed by the Open Society Institute Budapest Foundation** until June 2011. The HHC is dedicated to continue the follow-up activities (e.g. methodology, dissemination of the methodology, etc.) of the project however it could be delivered only with a lower intensity including fewer activities. With eventual funding the project activities could be continued and new project elements could be included based on the experienced gained.

Budget for the 1st project period (June 2009 – March 2010): approx. 375,000 HUF (approx. 1,400 EUR)

Budget for the 2nd project period (August 2010 – June 2011): approx. 300,000 HUF (approx. 1,100 EUR)