

# **Managing Conflict through Cooperative Planning: Partners Hungary's Work on Majority - Minority (Roma) Tensions**

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This case study for the Reflecting on Peace Practice project examines the efforts of Partners Hungary, a Hungarian non-governmental organization, to address the growing social tensions and cases of outright violence that emerged in the 1990s between Hungary's Roma (Gypsy) minority and the majority population. Partners Hungary describes its work as preventing conflicts through the establishment of the necessary structures to deal with social tensions.<sup>1</sup> The case study is based on a visit to Hungary from August 27 to September 5, 2000, 25 interviews (with Partners Hungary director and staff, leaders of other NGOs and Human Rights organizations, representatives of local governments, donors, Roma activists and politicians), and Partners Hungary's reports and internal documents.

The case presents the background to the current Roma-majority tensions in post-Communist Hungary and describes other governmental and non-governmental initiatives underway to address these problems. It then examines the origins, goals and methods of Partners Hungary's work in the context of the larger Partners for Democratic Change International Network, of which it is a part. Finally the case describes in detail Partners Hungary's work with Roma issues in two Hungarian communities, one in which there has clearly been a strong positive impact and another that has been more problematic. The detailed description of the latter case, the town of Tiszavasvari in Northeast Hungary, gives an account of the dynamics of PH's work with the community over time and presents different views on the impact of these efforts to date, as well as my own analysis about the lessons to be drawn from the experience.

## **I. BACKGROUND: HUNGARY'S ROMA POPULATION**

The Roma are believed to have arrived in Europe from northern India in waves of migration from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though they have traditionally been called 'gypsies', today many prefer to be called Rom/Roma (which means man/men in their language) because the term Gypsies has a pejorative meaning in many societies.<sup>2</sup> The Roma are by far the largest of Hungary's 13 recognized minorities, representing 5% to 8% of the population or approximately 500,000 to 800,000 people. There are three distinct groups, who, though sharing an experience of discrimination and prejudice in Hungary, are differentiated by language, culture, and history, and the degree of assimilation into mainstream society.

The *Romungro* (or Magyar/Hungarian Roma) make up 75% of the total Roma population. Traditionally musicians, they came to Hungary around 500 years ago and now are by far the most assimilated and integrated into Hungarian society, often through intermarriage. They speak Hungarian as a first language and have little connection to Roma traditions. They tend to live in separate Roma districts in the cities and bigger towns, but their lifestyle (family size, values) is quite similar to that of the Hungarian majority.

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<sup>1</sup> Forward to Working Conference Report: Planning and Cooperating: Gypsy Minority Governments, Partners Hungary, Budapest, January 24/5, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Rights Denied: the Roma of Hungary, Human Rights Watch, July 1996, p. 7.

The *Olah* or *Vlach* Roma (approximately 20% of the total Roma population) are Romany speaking and arrived in Hungary around 250 years ago from the Balkans. They traditionally were traders (of horses and clothes) and have retained many of their traditional values and lifestyle, and so are very marginalized from mainstream Hungarian society. They live in traditional extended family structures, women marry and give birth very young, and it is common for families to have 6 to 10 children. The Olah tend to live in isolated districts at the edges of Hungary's small towns and villages and are concentrated in the northeast of the country.

The third and smallest group, the *Beash* (a total population of 50,000) came to Hungary from Romania around 150 years ago and speak a dialect of Romanian. Like the Olah, have retained their traditional language and lifestyle at the margins of Hungarian society. They traditionally were woodworkers and live in separate "Gypsy districts" in the small towns and villages in the Southwest of the country.

## II. THE 'ROMA PROBLEM' IN POST-COMMUNIST HUNGARY

Though the political and economic transition from Communism has been difficult for Hungary overall (today approximately 30% of the population lives below the official poverty line), the worst off by far are the Roma minority. Roma activists, Hungarian and international NGOs, and local authorities interviewed all reported that the "Roma problem" was the biggest social issue facing Hungary today. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, anti-Roma prejudice is widespread, and there is broad segregation and deprivation. Roma are generally absent from political, academic, commercial, and social life, and discrimination is pervasive and long-standing.<sup>3</sup>

The problems facing Roma are a complex mixture of economic and social ills with the primary issues being massive unemployment, under-education and lack of basic housing resulting in a vicious cycle of poverty and related social problems (crime, alcoholism, violence) and increasing hostility and outbreaks of violence with the majority community.

*Employment:* Under the Communist system, the vast majority of Roma had been employed in low-skilled factory work, and were the first to be laid off with the transition to a new capitalist economy. Since the early 1990s, a huge portion of the Roma population has been unemployed - up to 90% in many areas outside the major cities. Though the Hungarian economy has recovered somewhat (national unemployment is now around 10%), because Roma are low skilled and because of widespread prejudices, they have not been hired by new businesses. In fact, authorities in areas with large Roma populations claim that their presence deters new investment. Such perceptions fuel tensions with the majority population who also face high unemployment in some regions (especially the industrial North-East). Unemployed Roma families live almost entirely from state subsidies.

*Education:* According to reports by international and Hungarian NGOs, one of the main problems facing the Roma is systematic under-education. The 80,000 Roma children in public education are frequently taught in separate classes (channeled into special education programs

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<sup>3</sup> Focus: Roma in Hungary, Published Materials 1996-1999. European Roma Rights Center. Page 58.

for 'mentally disabled' children) and receive substandard education. On an annual basis, only 500-600 proceed onward to secondary school and only some 300 attend college or university.<sup>4</sup> Widespread prejudice accounts for this as a result of the intellectual inferiority of Roma.

*Housing:* Unlike the Hungarian majority, most Roma could not take advantage of the cheap privatization of housing early in the 1990s and do not own their homes, living instead in social housing. The economic difficulties and increase in open discrimination has resulted in a housing crisis because of widespread forced evictions of Roma families unable to pay for rent or utilities by town and city authorities. Roma activists charge that Roma are being singled out because of their ethnicity as town officials, with the support of the population, try to rid themselves of their 'Roma problem'.

*Crime:* Along with this dire economic situation for most Roma, crime rates have risen dramatically, and though no official statistics are kept on 'Roma crime', it is clear that much of what police call 'subsistence criminality' (small scale theft and burglaries) is committed by Roma. The widespread view that 'all Roma are criminals' has led, in some areas, to bans on all Roma entering stores, restaurants and pubs. Roma leaders call for measures to address crime with social programs for unemployment and education, while the majority population sees tougher policing as the solution.

*State and non-state violence against Roma:* Over the last decade there has been a rise in violence between Roma and the majority population, and numerous documented cases of police brutality and abuses of human rights against Roma suspects. Hungary's Ombudsman for National and Ethnic Minorities has stated that police brutality is the key issue facing the Roma, yet critics claim that very little has been done to address this widespread problem. Attacks against Roma by skinhead groups peaked in the mid-1990s, and then diminished as the skinhead movement failed to take hold in Hungary (but some observers claim that skinhead violence is on the rise again). Violence against Roma by non-skinheads is definitely on the rise however. (For example, during my visit some Roma children were shot while stealing fruit from a shop in a Northeastern Hungarian town). Critics charge that rarely are these crimes prosecuted as hate crimes and people are given light or no sentences for violence against Roma.

One of the more notorious cases in Hungary, the northeastern town of Hajduhadhaz, illustrates many of the problems above. The town came to the center of a media storm in 1998 with the attempted stabbing of several Roma children by a mentally unstable local secondary school teacher. In the town, Roma and non-Roma students use largely separate school facilities, and non-Roma protect their houses with barbed wire fences, 'against the Gypsies'. The town is also the site of serious allegations of police brutality against local Roma. By 1998, judicial and prosecutorial proceedings were open in 42 separate cases against the town's police officers and human rights groups called police abuse against Roma "rampant" in the town. This included severe physical abuse during interrogation by police officers as well as the practice of extracting exorbitant fines from Roma for minor offences such as not carrying personal identification

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<sup>4</sup> Focus: Roma in Hungary, Published Materials 1996-1999, European Roma Rights Center

documents.<sup>5</sup> However, as of August 1999, there had been little serious disciplinary action taken against police officials.

In response to public pressure, after a hidden camera of a Budapest TV channel showed police violence and human rights organizations convinced the OSCE to raise the issue with the Hungarian government, a national level investigation took place after which one officer was transferred, and a conflict resolution program was ordered to be implemented in co-ordination with the Interior Ministry. A visit to the town however showed that tensions were still strong and there was widespread fear and prejudice against the Roma. In fact, Boiskoikert, the sister village of Hajduhadhaz, had recently split off from the town so as to rid itself of responsibility for “the Gypsies”, who resided mainly in Hadjuhadhaz.

### **National Legislative Measures to Address Hungary’s Minority Problems**

In the 1990s, Hungary took numerous legislative measures to improve the situation of minorities generally. The amended 1989 Hungarian Constitution forbids discrimination and mandates the participation of national and ethnic minorities in political life. In 1993, the Hungarian Government adopted a Law on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities, and also the Law on the Parliamentary Commissioner on Citizen’s Rights (Ombudsman). In 1995, the first Ombudsman for National and Ethnic Minorities was appointed to investigate complaints and make recommendations. In 1993, the National Roma Minority Self-Government was formed, through which 53 representatives now operate under a president in a regional network. In 1994 the first elections for local Roma National Minority Self-Governments were held across the country. In 1996, the Hungarian Parliament amended the Criminal Code to facilitate the prosecution of those who commit crimes against individuals because of their national, ethnic, or religious affiliation.<sup>6</sup>

On paper, these measures look significant – Hungary’s Law on National and Ethnic Minorities is considered a model for Europe, with funding for national minority self-governments and cultural and language guarantees for minority groups. However, critics charge there is no political will behind such provisions and that they were enacted primarily to exert pressure on neighbouring countries, especially Romania and Slovakia, where there are substantial Hungarian minorities. As well, the law grants only cultural rights (such as the right to native languages, schools, churches and to spell one’s name in the local language) but does not give the Roma Minority Self-Governments (hereafter RMSG) any power over the deep social problems of poverty and unemployment affecting the Roma. This body of legislation however, is seen as very significant in providing a human rights and minority rights legal infrastructure which Roma rights activists have increasingly begun to utilize.

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<sup>5</sup> ERRC Report: Focus on Hungary, page 66, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Above summary taken from “Roma and forced migration: lessons of recent Canadian cases” by Arthur C. Helton, reproduced in “Focus on Hungary: Published Materials 1996-1999, European Roma Rights Centre”.

Critics also charge that only token resources are made available by the government to deal with the problems, and that successive Hungarian post-communist governments have not had the situation of the Roma seriously on the agenda. There is a strong consensus among the national and international NGO community that Roma-majority ethnic tensions could be reduced if serious programs addressing unemployment, education and housing were developed. However, widespread anti-Roma attitudes among the population and elected officials, as much as lack of funds, prevent such measures. Many local officials interviewed claim that "Hungarians are poor too" and explain the Roma problem as one of inherent social deviance and criminality.

Many in the local and international NGO community see real dangers for Hungary in not addressing the Roma issues now. They are concerned that as Hungary's economic difficulties continue (and in some regions they are increasing) social tensions could erupt into larger scale violence against the Roma or that a deeply frustrated and volatile new Roma generation could emerge. Others expressed concern at the threat to Hungary's new democracy from far right parties which blame the current economic difficulties on Roma (as well as Jews, homosexuals, foreigners and refugees). According to many Roma and non-Roma activists interviewed, the fact that the Roma are a physically distinguishable minority (darker skinned than most Hungarians), and tend to live in separate "Gypsy districts" has made them an easily identifiable scapegoat for the many frustrations of the society at large.

### **Non-Governmental Action on Roma Issues**

Since the early 1990s, Hungarian and international NGOs have, in different ways, tried to address these problems. While these groups and organizations differ on how much assimilation is desirable for the Roma, there is no difference between groups as to the larger goal of ensuring a fair deal and equal status for Roma in Hungarian society. The work of Partners Hungary, must be understood in the context of these other efforts to promote change.

#### *Human Rights Approaches: Focusing the National and International Spotlight*

Since the mid-1990s, Hungarian human rights lawyers and national and international Roma rights organizations have used the national and international media and existing legal mechanisms to force change by drawing attention to abuses of the rights of Roma. They claim their strategy is to explicitly increase conflict in a variety of ways, by educating Roma about their rights, by pressing high profile court cases against police officials and authorities, by mobilizing national and international pressure, in order to put the issue on the national agenda. Their strategies rely heavily on leveraging international pressure. Hungarian human rights activists, in cooperation with foreign partners, have publicized abuses to the various bodies of the European Union, OSCE and Council of Europe. In some cases this has clearly produced results - for example the national government only seriously looked into the cases of police abuse and forced reforms in Hadjuhadhaz once the OSCE brought it up formally. As well, prominent court cases against local authorities forced the town of Tiszavasvari (discussed in detail later) to desegregate its schools. However, some Roma rights activists (themselves Roma) are uncomfortable that, once having exhausted what they can do through the media and the courts, they often leave local people with the same problems, in a situation of worsened tensions with the majority population and the authorities. However unsatisfactory this situation, they report

that they have no mandate, resources, or ability to do otherwise.

### *Economic Development Approaches*

There is widespread agreement between all sectors that an improvement in the economic and employment prospects for the Roma would improve the situation. But while the Hungarian government claims it has no money for such programs, critics charge that the government simply lacks the political will. During my visit, several local government officials interviewed admitted that any measures to explicitly assist the Roma would be highly unpopular and would lose them important votes in elections. In this vacuum of serious government action, some NGOs have attempted to address Roma unemployment. The most notable is the *Autonomia Foundation*, which has conducted over 1000 small and medium-scale income generation programs to encourage entrepreneurship and create jobs in the Roma community. *Autonomia* claims that its programs employ the immediate Roma families involved and often result in a notable reduction of crime in a given local, but that such businesses are rarely sustainable in the current conditions in Hungary. As well, they see such NGO activities as a small drop in the ocean compared to the needs of the Roma communities.

### *The Role of International Pressure*

By all accounts, outside pressure from states and international organizations on Hungary to bring its legislation up to European standards has been a key factor in the development of the exemplary legislative framework outlined above. Hungary's accession to NATO (in 1999) and hopes of EU membership make it extremely sensitive to outside critiques, and national and international human rights organizations have targeted their reports to these outside actors and lobbied other governments to examine Hungary's record with respect to Roma rights. As part of the process of joining Western institutions, since 1997 Hungary has ratified several international and European agreements on minority rights.<sup>7</sup> However, many claim this trend has resulted in Hungary adopting liberal laws that the vast majority of the population does not actively support. Further, critics claim that the government's inaction in prominent cases involving abuses against Roma show that there is little political will to enforce these formal provisions.

### **Impact of Governmental and Nongovernmental Approaches**

There is a sense among some in the Roma activist community that the net result of these governmental and non-governmental efforts has been to create more conflict over the Roma issue, especially at the local level. New national regulations on Roma Minority Self-Governments (RMSGs) have been established and many RMSGs set up, while local governments have come under extreme pressure from media and human rights groups drawing attention to problems in enforcing these national level provisions. (The national legislation states that local authorities must provide funds 'within the limits of their abilities' to the RMSGs, but in

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<sup>7</sup> Including the International Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, and Recommendation 1201 of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, which provides for the recognition of collective rights for minorities. ([Focus on Hungary](#), ERRC, 1996-1999.)

Hungary's current economic situation even well meaning local authorities are unable to devote much funding to this.). So while important, precedent-setting cases have been won in individual towns, most local governments and Roma organizations in Hungary are left with ineffective formal institutions, and little contact or communication between them. Local authorities complain of being isolated and left to deal with their problems alone, and of woefully inadequate resources to address the enormous social problems of the Roma.

### **III. PARTNERS FOR DEMOCRATIC CHANGE**

Partners Hungary originated as one of the first of the 10 national centers established in the 1990s by the U.S.-based organization Partners for Democratic Change (PDC).<sup>8</sup> All the national centers are entirely locally managed and staffed and share the same mission - *to build sustainable local capacity to advance civil society and a culture of change and conflict management worldwide*. To do so, the Partners centers work within communities to facilitate the resolution of disputes and build consensus on neighbourhood, business, majority-minority, and citizen-police issues.

Each center has developed unique areas of expertise relevant to the problems in their countries and the focus of the different national directors (see appendix). However the Partners centers all use a common set of methodologies they call 'change and conflict management skills' – consisting of communication, negotiation, mediation, third-party facilitation, and cooperative planning skills with some local adaptations made by the national centers.

The programs conducted by the Partners centers consist of:

- Directly training NGO, government, and private sector leaders in communication, negotiation, facilitation and mediation skills.
- 'Training trainers' to allow for the wider dissemination of conflict management skills.
- Directly applying such processes (mediation, facilitation and cooperative planning) to achieve consensus on real issues.
- Promoting public policies that recognize and legitimize the use of mediation processes.
- Introducing the study of conflict management into universities and schools.<sup>9</sup>

Partners Hungary's use of these methodologies in its work with the Roma must be understood in the context of how these methods and the Partners for Democratic Change International Network emerged and evolved into what it is today.

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<sup>8</sup> PDC national centers are currently located in Argentina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Partners International consists of PDC offices in New York and San Francisco.

<sup>9</sup> Partners for Democratic Change, Organizational Overview

PDC founder Ray Shonholtz is an American who had worked on pioneering community-planning boards in San Francisco in the 1970s. While in Eastern Europe on a Fulbright Fellowship in the late 1980s, he was struck by how the region, while facing enormous social, economic, environmental, and political problems after decades of communism, had highly corrupt and ineffective legal institutions and virtually no functioning mechanisms to deal constructively with conflict. At a time when the dominant model of technical assistance to Eastern Europe was to fund short-term outside (Western) consultants, Shonholtz had an alternate vision of building a culture of conflict resolution 'from the ground up' using local capacities. PDC was founded in 1990 with this goal in mind, and to work specifically in countries where there was already a commitment to democracy in order to help people acquire conflict management skills to navigate the democratic process.

### *Academic Base*

PDC began by partnering with departments of sociology and psychology in leading universities in six Central and Eastern European countries (including Hungary) to develop conflict resolution training programs. It was hoped that these programs would be a springboard for future community work. PDC calls this work a 'moderate success' in that conflict resolution courses were established at 30 universities and were well received. Interestingly, counterparts reported that the hands on "American teaching methods", such as case studies, role-plays and simulations, had as big an impact as the material itself. By 1993 however, PDC saw that these university programs were not realizing its goals of directly affecting communities and was increasingly frustrated with the difficulty of working with rigid educational bureaucracies.

### *NGO / Training Focus*

While maintaining the university programs, in 1993 PDC established locally-based NGOs in the six countries and provided them with guaranteed funding for the first two years. These funds were raised with relative ease by the US office as at this time there was plenty of funding available for NGO development in Eastern Europe. The goal of these NGOs was to promote change by spreading what PDC called 'a culture of conflict management'. They essentially became training centers - training as many people as possible in different sectors (ministries, social services agencies, the private sector). Initially, these concepts were completely alien to many of the staff of the NGOs and the wider population and there were many difficulties. For example, PDC staff relate how the terms 'trainings' and 'partners' had to be simply translated phonetically as they had strong, sometimes negative, connotations in the various Eastern European languages.<sup>10</sup> As well, recruiting people for trainings in such unknown concepts was a challenge, and the Partners centers used tactics ranging from free food, to door to door soliciting, to ads in local papers in order to recruit participants for the free training sessions. However, by 1994, PDC was training 3000 - 4000 people per year in the region, and getting feedback that these trainings were valued and were reaching the right people. However, the national centers were frustrated that it was difficult to feel any concrete impact in the communities and were

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<sup>10</sup> For example, some PDC Romanian staff were highly suspicious of 'training' as the word in Romanian was used in the context of a 'lion trainer' at the circus - and thus carried the connotation of taming vicious beasts with whips!

reportedly 'clamouring to do more direct interventions'.

### *Direct Intervention Focus*

Consequently, from 1994-96 PDC's mission shifted to building a 'service delivery capacity' and a New York office opened up explicitly to provide more support to the national centers to do so. The US side provided intensive, advanced trainings in mediation and cooperative planning, and funding for intervention projects. Among these, projects were launched in several countries with minority problems including neutral community-based structures to mediate disputes relating to ethnic and minority issues that became known as *ethnic conciliation commissions*. As well, direct mediation work became a key activity for the national centers, along with mediation advocacy with governments. By 1999, over 1000 cases annually were being mediated by the Partners centers, and according to PDC approximately 85% of these solutions 'stuck' (similar to the effectiveness rate for mediation practice in the US).

The fastest growing sector of Partner's work, however, was not mediation but "cooperative planning", a methodology which involves third party facilitators engaging multiple parties (stakeholders) to work on complex and diverse problems. These processes are highly inclusive and deliberately involve potential 'spoilers' since a stakeholder is defined as anyone who can block an agreement on a given issue. Partners speculates that this approach caught on so well because facilitation may seem less threatening than mediation in these new democracies. "While drawing on negotiation and mediation techniques during the course of a cooperative planning or problem solving process, facilitation strengthens the imagery of responsible parties as decision makers and reduces the impression that the 'third party' is authorized to promote any resolution of differences."<sup>11</sup>

Though the basic methodologies used in each center are similar, Partners has learned that when it comes to actual projects, each area requires a unique approach that should be determined by the national centers. (PDC staff sum this up as "Warsaw is not San Francisco, Sophia is not Warsaw, and Tirana is not Sophia".) As well, Partners work has evolved to focusing on using the generic conflict management methods to help divided communities address specific, concrete issues. Their experience has been that, 'it is the kiss of death to tell communities that you want to help improve their ethnic relations'.

Today Partners is moving again in new directions and developing new centers in more difficult areas (Slovakia, Croatia, Georgia and most recently Kosovo), and in Latin America with a center in Argentina and others planned in the region. In the original Eastern European centers, the prominent role of PDC USA has faded and much of the work consists of 'East- East' projects, with the older, established centers providing training for newer centers. According to all interviewed, this model has worked very well. Reportedly, the Partners centers are more sensitive to the need to adapt the basic methods (as they have done it in their own countries), and the East Europeans claim it is easier to work with those who have experienced similar conflicts

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<sup>11</sup> "Applying Collaborative Processes in Former Communist Countries", by Kinga Goncz and Raymond Shonholtz, Improving the Practice, First Quarter 2000. The International Association for Public Participation.

themselves. At present, five of the national centers including Partners Hungary are now completely self-sufficient and raise their own funds from international donors, local and national government structures, and private business. PDC USA still acts as a funding conduit for the newer centers, but concentrates most of its energies on 1) opening new centers, 2) providing new skills and capacity building to the existing centers, and 3) organizing and providing funding for growing cross-border work among the centers.<sup>12</sup>

PDC's concrete strategies for dealing with conflict have changed continually over the decade of its existence, as it has learned from past successes and failures. The Partners Network that exists today is the result of many different factors, but staff report that the 'push and pull' relationship between the national centers and the US founding office is what has most shaped its evolution.<sup>13</sup> This has not always been a painless process and both PDC US and Partners Hungary staff relate stories of difficult periods of tension and conflicting interests. Initially the US organization was by self-admission more paternalistic and now is more responsive to local needs and demands.<sup>14</sup> However, substantial changes have been and are constantly being made as the network seeks a balance between maintaining a common Partners approach and ensuring that the national centers undertake programs that truly address the needs and problems of their countries.

### *PDC Regional Partnership*

Another recent development has been the creation, in 1998, of a Regional Partnership Office, whose primary mandate is to develop and manage Partners 'East-East' work. This office was established in Budapest (in the offices of Partners Hungary) and staffed by a Regional Manager whose role is to work with the national centers to develop and raise funds for joint regional-level projects as well as to represent the East European Partners centers. (Increasingly there is an attempt to share knowledge and skills between the centers and establish regional-level projects

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<sup>12</sup> What is most striking is the level of contact and communication between the centers. The PDC US office is in touch with half of the centers every day, and the national centers provide monthly reports to PDC USA, which are also sent to all the other centers. PDC USA talks about once a week with each national center, and the directors of all the centers get together on average five times a year for meetings and trainings. According to the US office, this intensive level of communication now exists in response to problems that arose in the early years, when the US center was a big source of funding and the relationship was more paternalistic.

<sup>13</sup> Partners US office was frank enough to even call this a 'love-hate' relationship at times as the national centers resented their dependence on the US office and viewed its demands for strict financial accountability (as PDC initially reported to the donors on their behalf), as a sign of mistrust. Interview with Brad Heckman and Jennifer Lofing, PDC International Office, New York. August 3, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> The national centers felt that new projects initiated by the PDC US office were foisted on them with little consultation and promises were made to donors on their behalf. PDC US claims it 'learned the hard way never to go ahead with anything unless the center is fully informed and committed to it'. As the center most involved in raising funds for cross-border activities, PDC US claims its attitude to new areas of work was often 'why not', while the national centers response was often a frustrated 'but why?' A balance has been created now - with the US centers still pushing some programs but now much more sensitive to the concerns of the national centers - and much more communication back and forth goes on about new ideas and initiatives.

with one of the national centers as the lead agency). The Regional Partnership office also acts as a clearinghouse for the enormous amounts of communication within the network and as a 'broker' of new ideas and initiatives between the centers.

In theory, the Regional Partnerships office should further enhance the responsiveness of the Partners International Network to the concerns and priorities of the national centers. According to the current Regional Manager, this is already happening. She sees the fact that she is a Hungarian national as 'leveling the playing field' for the centers in negotiating new projects, and reports that center directors have no difficulty openly telling her that a project idea is irrelevant in their countries, whereas they would be less transparent with PDC USA, the founding organization. As well, if its ability to raise funds increases, the Regional Partnership's office will provide another step towards full self-sufficiency of the East European centers. At this stage however, it is experiencing difficulties establishing an effective presence and authority for itself in a context where the directors of the national center in Hungary or the Partners USA office have a much higher established profile.

#### **IV. PARTNERS HUNGARY**

Partners Hungary (hereafter PH) was officially set up as an NGO in 1994, headed by Dr. Kinga Goncz, a medical doctor and a psychiatrist teaching at the social policy and social work department of the Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest. Though the first year of funding was provided entirely by PDC US, by the second year PH was already raising much of its own funding. By 1998, PH had set up a for-profit company to provide fee-based conflict management services to the private sector (providing a large part of the funds to support its other projects). PH currently receives a small amount of funding still from PDC US, mainly for its participation in regional programs.

However, though not financially dependent, its relationship to the US organization remains close, and according to PH, the US side has been indispensable in providing:

- Trainings (especially at the very beginning, the 'practice-oriented' American approach to trainings was new and refreshing).
- The link to an international network to be able to share experiences and learn from that of others and provide different and useful perspectives on the work. (PH raises its own funds to be part of PDC's international meetings).
- Independence resources (through direct funding and opening the doors to US/Western funders) that allow PH to maintain its independence and to conduct programs that it feels are 'right' and 'important'. There are few desirable sources of domestic funding in Hungary, and PH is reluctant to accept government funds, which could risk its independence and ability to "follow its values" (versus those that are on the agenda of the ruling party). Ironically, the fact that PH is well respected and on the board of the Hungary programmes of several international foundations has limited its ability to access those international funds.

Over the years, like the other national centers PH shifted from being essentially a training organization to providing wide-ranging assistance for long-term institutional cooperation,

process planning, strategic planning, organizational development, and cooperation between different sectors of local communities.<sup>15</sup> Now PH conducts trainings only as part of these more comprehensive processes.

PH consists of 12 full-time staff, all Hungarian nationals, and selected local consultants who work on particular projects. Throughout most of its wide-ranging activities, PH plays the role of a neutral, third party to help communities solve problems because of the lack of democratic traditions of public participation. Its mission is defined as "to prevent and resolve the tensions and conflicts implied by the everyday practice of democracy, the emergence of new social, political, market and institutional structures, to popularize the related techniques and procedures and to manage change".<sup>16</sup>

Partners Hungary works with municipalities, national government institutions, human service organizations, minority (primarily Roma) self-governments, civic organizations, NGOs, international organizations and private companies. The programs it undertakes are:

- Conflict management and conflict prevention programs (setting up conflict management structures, conducting negotiations, collective problem solving, and strategic planning).
- Organizational development programs (team building, diagnosis of company problems).
- Mediation in conflicts within and between organizations, and in social conflicts.
- A wide array of skill-building courses (effective communication, interest representation, mediation, negotiation, cooperative planning, change management, time management, project management and proposal writing, as well as "burn-out training" for human service professionals).
- College and University courses in conflict management issues.

### *Methods and Approaches*

The conflict management methods used by PH originate in trainings received from PDC US. PH staff report that they have found these methods, with some exceptions, useful and relevant in the Hungarian context. They also report spending a lot of time discussing the cultural relevance of these ideas and models and adapting some of the methodologies. An example of what didn't work in Hungary along the lines of the US model was the concept of the ethnic conciliation commissions. Among other problems, the very word *commissions* carried negative Soviet-era connotations. As well, PH found that rather than setting up new structures, it was better to keep this conciliation work informal, operating through key individuals. In fact, the very concept of

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<sup>15</sup> Annual Report 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Annual Report, 1999.

conflict management had no cultural resonance initially in Hungary, but now, after 10 years of PH's work the term 'conflict management' has emerged in the Hungarian vernacular - showing that the idea, if not the practice, has caught on and entered the mainstream. (However, PH reports there is still no culture of going to an outside third-party in Hungary to deal with problems and so PH initiates almost all its programs).

PH uses three basic 'change management' methodologies in its programs:

- *Mediation* is used if there is a concrete and specific problem to be solved.
- *Cooperative Planning* is used in communities where problems are very complex (and not amenable to mediation) but not considered emergencies. It involves a medium-term commitment (generally two years) by PH to bring together the principle decision-makers to identify and build a consensus approach to community problems, and to provide trainings, facilitation, and other support, as the process requires. It has been found to be most useful when it targets concrete issues, like housing, or education for example. Experience has shown PH that by focusing people on pragmatic issues, it is possible to improve relationships at the same time.
- *Cooperative Problem Solving* (a similar method but with a shorter time frame) is used when problems are considered more urgent.

#### *Lessons from its experience*

PH describes the single biggest lesson of its years of work as that, "training alone is not effective". They claim this did not emerge out of any particular project failures, but rather quite organically as they were asked to provide more and more support to people and organizations who, after participating in trainings, would ask - what now?

PH's main dilemma now is how to continue its not-for-profit work and find sources of politically independent funding in the face of dramatic reduction in assistance funds for Hungary (soon to 'graduate' out of major assistance funding and possibly accede to the EU). As a response to this situation, PH is exploring the option of doing more cross-border and regional work, as international donors have expressed an interest in funding PH to conduct programs in Southern Europe and Slovakia. Thus PH stands poised to make the jump into more ongoing work outside of Hungary, which may solve the financial dilemmas.

## **V. ROMA-FOCUSSED WORK OF PARTNERS HUNGARY**

PH's involvement with Roma issues in Hungary came about soon after the first elections for the local Roma Minority Self-Governments (hereafter RMSGs) in 1994. PH had been in contact with Roma people in certain regions before the elections and was invited by a representative of the local authorities in Zala County (Southwestern Hungary) to meet with the new RMSG in the town of Nagykanizsa. While initially PH relied more on mediation to deal with Roma-majority problems, it soon learned that these issues were too complex for mediation to be very useful. As

well, PH and its Roma partners identified the need to build capacity of local Roma organizations (NGOs, RMSGs) to be able to effectively represent Roma interests. (Most of the new Roma leaders had low levels of formal education and felt ill prepared for their new public roles). PH began to provide trainings in basic communication, organizational and budget management skills, and interest-based negotiation and conflict resolution to members of certain RMSGs. In a short time, PH was approached by other RMSGs and local governments for similar assistance.

By 1996 PH had synthesized its experiences into a three-step training and problem solving process that involved:

- 1) Assessing the needs and interests of diverse parties
- 2) Conducting a skill building training
- 3) Conducting an interactive facilitation process that trained parties in facilitation skills while they cooperatively designed an agreement to address social or economic issues.<sup>17</sup>

As a general rule, PH initiates such projects - approaching the parties in a given region where problems and tensions have emerged. They begin by providing a minimum two-year commitment to work with the community. In addition, PH does not offer funding for concrete community projects that may emerge, but instead helps identify and contact funding sources. This is a principle that PH feels preserves the integrity of the community planning process (since people get involved without the promise of funds), and that ensures that outside funds are injected only once the community is already cooperating.

PH has given a lot of thought to how to evaluate whether its processes have made a difference, and has determined internally and in reporting to donors that:

- A long time is needed to see real changes, their success and durability. (According to PH, it takes five full years before you know a cooperative planning process is successful – success meaning that the community continues to use the process independent of PH).
- Many effects have an influence on the community at the same time and it is very difficult to pick out one element and know its separate role in the whole process.
- There are few objective indicators for evaluation, and there is difficulty in separating out subjective views. However, it is possible to monitor concrete implemented actions by participants in the processes that PH facilitates, and use these as concrete indicators.
- The most important indicator of impact for PH is that the Roma people begin to participate in the management of their own affairs.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Applying Collaborative Processes in Former Communist Countries,” Kinga Goncz, Raymond Shonholtz. Improving the Practice: First Quarter, 2000. International Association for Public Participation.

<sup>18</sup> Above discussion of evaluation issues taken from "Public Participation Project in Tiszavasvari", Partners Hungary internal report, 1998.

- Finally, as the problems of the Roma in Hungary stem largely from serious socio-economic problems, PH believes that the contribution its efforts make to addressing these issues (and thereby reducing tensions) is in conjunction with other efforts, namely the work of NGOs addressing human rights issues and state/NGO agencies addressing economic problems. (Other NGOs from the above sectors interviewed valued PH's work and claimed its approach to working with Roma is unique and much needed in Hungary).

### **PH work in Nagykanizsa, Zala County**

As mentioned above, Zala County was one of the original areas of PH's work with Roma organizations. PH, Roma leaders, and others now see it as an unambiguous success story. In 1994, eight RMSGs were created in Zala County, but Roma leaders soon realized they did not have the basic skills to represent their community to the political authorities. At this point, PH approached them through a contact in the regional government. PH met with them, discussed their needs and provided a basic training in communication skills and problem solving methods (paid for completely by PH). Unlike other areas of the country, the three Roma groups in Zala County were quite united, which allowed the new RMSGs to work with a sense of common purpose with the authorities on the key problems - education for Roma children, unemployment, and housing. Many large-scale programs were initiated (with PH support), facilitated by the fact that the local government and the RMSG had developed an effective and close working relationship<sup>19</sup>. (The President of the Nagykanizsa RMSG has since become a co-trainer for PH's work with other RMSGs.)

Because of its substantial achievements in providing concrete programs, the Roma community in Zala County sees the RMSGs as very relevant and successful. As a result, in the 1998 elections 32 RMSGs were elected (a huge leap from the original 8). Furthermore, the Nagykanizsa Roma leader (and PH co-trainer) was drawn into national level politics, and has become the deputy president of the National RMSG.<sup>20</sup>

Zala County's Roma leaders give much credit to PH for helping them become effective representatives of their people's interests. They claim that PH's assistance came at exactly the right time, as they were open to new ideas and approaches and looking for some way to manage their new role in the RMSGs. They also emphasize that PH's support has been long-term, flexible, available (the door was always open), and informal - Roma leaders would consult with them frequently on issues that arose. They note that they felt treated as real partners, as PH has often invited them to participate in conferences and workshops on Roma issues. They claim that unlike other well-meaning NGOs, "Partners Hungary never speaks about the Roma without the Roma".

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<sup>19</sup> A Social Interest Conciliation Network was established to prevent local conflicts and enhance tolerance. A Gypsy Community House has been created and provides remedial education. Long-term trade and entrepreneurial training programs, as well as a legal aid office have been established.

<sup>20</sup> He had not been involved in any national level Roma issues before, and claims he was courted by the most powerful Roma political party because of the reputation of his work in Zala County.

PH's efforts in Zala County are the most successful example of its work, but only one of a dozen similar projects across Hungary. For a closer examination of how PH's methods play out in practice, it was agreed I would visit another area, where the work had begun more recently, and where there were more difficulties and fewer concrete results.

### **Tiszavasvari, Northeast Hungary**

Tiszavasvari is a town of approximately 15,000 inhabitants in the largely industrial Northeastern region of Hungary (Szabolcs-Szatmar-Bereg county). This area overall was hardest hit by the economic transition as many of its communist-era factories were closed or restructured. Unemployment throughout the 1990s has been over 20% (versus 10-11% nationally), and there have been no new jobs created since the 1980s.<sup>21</sup> The situation seems to be getting worse – during my visit an important pharmaceutical factory was sold to private buyers and approx. 2000 of its 3000 workers were laid off, dramatically worsening the unemployment situation.

15% to 20% of the population of Hungary's Northeast region is Roma, the largest concentration in the country. The Roma population of Tiszavasvari (approximately 1200-1600 people) includes a smaller Romungro community (approximately 400-600 people) who live in *the Bud district*, at one end of the town, and a larger Olah Roma community (approximately 800-1100) who live at the opposite far end of town in an area known as '*Szelez street*'. There is little contact and great cultural and social differences between the two groups. Intermarriage is rare and because of their physical separation at opposite ends of the town, their children attend different schools.

There are also large socio-economic differences between the Roma groups. While Roma from the Bud district face high (about 45%) unemployment today, in the communist era there was almost 100% employment. As a result, the standard of living in the Bud district is not very different from the Hungarian majority community, with large single-family houses, gardens and paved roads, and many Roma from the Bud district work in the summer in the unregulated 'black economy'. While there is some interaction with the majority community through work, there is less and less social contact. While non-Roma used to live in the Bud district in the communist era, many moved out in the 1990s in response to increasing crime.

By contrast, much of the Olah Roma population lives in abject poverty and is completely isolated and marginalized from the majority population. Prior to 1989, only 30% of Olah adults had been employed,<sup>22</sup> almost entirely as unskilled labourers in the two industries later worst hit by the transition - construction and agriculture. They were the first to lose their jobs and have no work prospects today, with so many skilled workers unemployed in Hungary. As a result, the Olah community lives almost entirely from state subsidies. Many of the small (two-room) houses on

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<sup>21</sup> Conversation with Istvan Benicsak, Tiszavasvari branch, Szabolcs-Szatmar-Bereg County Labour Office. August 30, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Istvan Benicsak, Tiszavasvari Labour Office, August 30, 2000.

Szeles street lack parts of the roof and window glass, there is no running water, only small stoves provide heat in winter, the street is strewn with garbage, and wild dogs pose a health hazard. The surrounding land is waterlogged for much of the year, contributing to health problems, and in recent years, several people have died from tuberculosis. Extended families of up to thirty people live in each small house, the vast majority young children.

Not all of these problems are new to the post-Communist era. By all accounts, while the living conditions of the Olah Roma were always far worse than in the rest of Tiszavasvari, they deteriorated dramatically in the 1990s as unemployment reached 100%. Though during the communist era, Roma largely lived in separate districts, work and school gave opportunities for contact with the majority community. This is no longer the case, and the result is that the Olah are today almost completely isolated from the majority society.

By 1996 "the Roma problem" was the biggest issue facing the Tiszavasvari municipality. A dramatic increase in crime (home burglaries, thefts from shops, car thefts, and street muggings) and violent and aggressive behavior fed anti-Roma prejudice among the general population. There was the widespread perception that the Olah Roma "steal, are violent, beat up innocent people, and are arrogant."<sup>23</sup> The Roma districts became known as dangerous areas, and non-Roma families moved out, selling their houses for virtually nothing. Many of the Roma in the Olah community were themselves afraid to leave their homes, and non-Roma were afraid to go there. A defacto segregation of schooling in the town emerged (use of different school facilities, dining rooms) as parents demanded that their children be separated from Roma kids for sanitary reasons.<sup>24</sup> In turn, there was increasing frustration among the Roma, who "felt that Hungarians want to exclude them in all ways" and a whole generation of Roma children was growing up never having been exposed to parents who work. The mayor was considered by the Roma to be 'a fascist', and Olah Roma refused to use a new Community House built for them by the authorities in Szeles street. Local authorities in turn were frustrated because there was no individual or organization that they could deal with who represented the Roma community or its interests.

### **Partners Hungary: Public Participation Project**

An academic working at the regional university (a friend of staff at PH) contacted PH about the situation in Tiszavasvari and arranged a first meeting with the mayor in May 1996. The local authorities were very open to cooperation and wanted PH's help "to establish local representation of the two Gypsy communities so that the municipality could conduct negotiations with them".<sup>25</sup> After several formal and informal meetings with local authorities and the Roma, PH identified the main problems as:

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<sup>23</sup> For example, people reported incidents where Roma men spit on people and mocked workers, claiming "we can make more on state subsidies by having children, then stupid Hungarians who are working".

<sup>24</sup> Given the impoverished conditions they live in, many of the Olah Roma children have head lice and eczema.

<sup>25</sup> Partners Hungary, 1998 Annual Report.

- The lack of Roma-Roma (Olah-Romungro) cooperation.
- Difficulties in communication and cooperation, and open conflicts between Roma and the majority Hungarian community.

From May to November 1996, PH held several meetings with the local authorities and Roma representatives and selected people who would be invited to a cooperative planning meeting. To prepare participants, a pre-meeting training covering communication skills, interest-based negotiation, and cooperative skills was held in November 1996 involving 15 participants (from the local government structures, teachers, and six members of the Roma community - four from the Bud district and two from Szeles street). Participants expressed satisfaction with the training and agreed to hold the cooperative planning meeting in January 1997.<sup>26</sup>

#### *January 1997 Cooperative Planning Meeting*

PH facilitated this meeting, during which participants voiced different but sometimes coinciding interests. The local government wanted organized representatives from the Roma community and, concretely, wanted to activate the new Community House in the Olah Roma district. The Roma also wanted to establish Roma organizations and leaders who could represent their interests and be candidates for an elected RMSG. School representatives wanted a Roma organization to work with on education problems of Roma children, and the Labour Center wanted to reduce unemployment among Roma people. Working in small groups, the participants came up with a long list of concrete proposals to improve the situation of the Roma and Roma-Hungarian relations in four different areas:

- concrete improvements in living conditions in Szeles street and in the Bud district,
- measures to improve education and work prospects for Roma,
- measures to ensure vaccinations of Roma children, and,
- measures to unify & mobilize the Roma community to set up a RMSG in the 1998 elections.

Soon after the meeting, the first local Roma organization, *the Tiszavasvari Roma Association*, was established in January 1997 composed of 12 members of the Romungro community. Its goals were to organize cultural and sports activities for both Roma communities, and advance Roma health concerns and interests overall. The association received financial assistance from the Mayor's discretionary budget, showing the goodwill of the authorities.

At their request, in May 1997 PH conducted a two-day training in effective communication and negotiation skills for members of the Roma Association, with the Mayor's office providing facilities and hosting a joint meeting with his representatives. After this training, the Roma Association further defined its goals as supporting Roma higher education, maintenance of

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<sup>26</sup> At this stage, PH work in Tiszavasvari was supported by grants from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Mott Foundation.

cleanliness in Roma areas, intensive cooperation with the local government and bringing about the election of a RMSG for Tiszavasvari.

### *Graduation Scandal*

Soon afterwards however, in June 1997, Tiszavasvari came to national attention when Hungarian media revealed that a primary school in Tiszavasvari had held separate graduation ceremonies for 17 Olah Roma children. In the flurry of media attention that descended on the town, it also emerged that Roma generally learn in a separate building in the school and were not allowed to use the school buffet or the gymnasium. These practices were justified by school authorities on the grounds of protecting the non-Roma students from infection by the Roma children. The local government came under intense national and even international pressure.<sup>27</sup>

The National Ombudsman for Ethnic and Minority Issues investigated the case and found that there had been ethnic discrimination, since though most of the Roma kids did have lice, some did not and yet had been separated out all the same. The Foundation for Roma Civil Rights, a Budapest NGO, sued the school on behalf of 14 of the 17 Olah youths affected. The court ruled in favour of the Roma plaintiffs and the town paid each child financial compensation. However, the town is still appealing the decision to the Supreme Court.

The new Tiszavasvari Roma Association at first took a hard line against the authorities, but after much consultation with PH (who advised them to focus on the interests of the Roma community instead of the emotional politics), they conducted an investigation and agreed with the authorities that there had been a hygiene issue. They tried to focus public opinion on improving the health and hygiene conditions for Roma children by activating the moribund Community House. They also tried to play a buffer role by providing objective information to the national media about the problems and interests of Roma in Tiszavasvari, such as organizing discussions on national television with the Mayor and a representative of the Olah community.

By all accounts, the negative publicity generated by the graduation scandal redoubled the efforts of the local authorities to address the problems of the Roma community in Tiszavasvari. Many of the recommended proposals from the 1997 cooperative planning meeting were realized in the subsequent year. At the elementary school, Roma and non-Roma students were sent to school in the same building and only two separate Roma classes were retained. Furthermore, an agreement was reached between the Roma Association, the local government and the school authorities for pupils to participate in a common graduation ceremony for 1998 if they, 1) had finished the appropriate level, and 2) met minimum standards of cleanliness. This solution satisfied parents and children from both the Olah community and the Hungarian population.

### *Community Planning Process: 1998-2000*

PH continued its intensive involvement in Tiszavasvari with staff visiting from Budapest once (sometimes twice) a month to plan activities and conduct trainings or cooperative planning

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<sup>27</sup> Tiszavasvari was featured in a US State Department report on treatment of Roma and town authorities claim they were later refused a visa to visit the U.S.

meetings. PH offered training in cooperative skills and agenda building for candidates in the RMSG elections and a RMSG was elected in 1998.<sup>28</sup> Its members credit PH's efforts entirely for this outcome, claiming that before PH came, there was no concept of "Roma politics" in Tiszavasvari. However, all parties agree that the new RMSG is not truly representative of the local Roma population – four of its five members are from the Romungro community and only one from the much larger Olah community. Reportedly, this happened because the Olah and Romungro candidates couldn't agree on a united platform and ran separately, and many non-Roma voted in order to ensure Romungro (and not Olah) candidates would be elected.<sup>29</sup>

In its continued work, PH has served essentially two roles:

*1. Building the capacity of the RMSG separately and jointly with the local authorities.*

PH provided further training on the legal framework for the RMSGs, basic finances and administration, involving as well representatives from the local authorities to get them acquainted with the new RMSG. Later trainings were provided as specific needs arose in the cooperative planning process - on conflict prevention but also program planning, application writing, labour rules and norms, and agricultural production as the process generated proposals for income generation projects (kitchen gardens, goat rearing) for the Roma community. (With assistance from PH, in 1999 the RMSG received funds from the Autonomia Foundation for the kitchen gardens project.)

*2) Acting as a third party facilitator of the cooperative planning process involving the municipality and the Roma, and in separate meetings involving only the two Roma groups.*

The cooperative planning process shifted to dealing with issues of long-term unemployment and job creation, and PH sometimes worked exclusively with the Roma groups to develop unified proposals to present in the meetings involving the authorities. Through 2000, a half-dozen meetings were held to develop the goat-rearing project, and the participation of the Olah community in the process increased once agricultural trainings were offered.

PH also gave members of the RMSG a chance to link up with other RMSGs to share experiences. In January 2000, PH brought RMSG members from Tiszavasvari to participate in a Partners Hungary national level working conference, "Planning and Cooperating: Gypsy Minority Governments" in Budapest.

### **Results and Indicators of Impact to Date:**

Those interviewed reported various indicators of impact– some concrete and some less concrete. A few are directly related to reducing tension between the Roma minority and the majority in

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<sup>28</sup> The three-person PH training team included two nationally prominent Roma politicians as co-trainers.

<sup>29</sup> A lack of clarity in the law means that everyone can vote in elections for RMSGs. Critics claim that this, and the fact that the MSG's are dependent on local governments for funding means that often RMSG represent the interests of the Hungarian majority more than the Roma population.

Tiszavasvari, but most suggest an indirect impact through improved Roma participation in community decision-making.

#### Concrete Indicators:

*Creation and Functioning of a Roma Minority Self-Government:* All sides agree that the RMSG elected in 1998 to represent the interests of the Roma community is among the main concrete achievements of PH's involvement. That said, the MSG is clearly not yet seen as effective by the local authorities, PH or the Roma community. (They have not been able to successfully realize any concrete projects -the 'kitchen garden program' was discontinued as very few people paid back the loans and the goat-rearing project is not yet realized despite almost a full year of discussion). Nor is the RMSG viewed as well representative of the Roma population (due to the lack of Olah participation).

*Increased Participation of Many Olah Roma in Community Planning Processes:* More Olah representatives are participating in the community planning project now that it is focusing on agricultural issues and job creation, while very few came to the earlier community planning meetings. Furthermore, an Olah consultant has been brought on to advise the RMSG. (All parties see getting the Olah involved in decision-making about their problems as a key element of resolving Roma-Hungarian conflicts in the town.)

*Development of Concrete and Detailed Plans to Improve Basic Conditions for Roma:* The town authorities credit the meetings with helping them incorporate Roma views into a 1997 *Mid-Term Action Plan* detailing concrete measures to improve the condition of the town's Roma. This plan is quite unique in the region and is seen as a model by neighbouring communities.

*Some Concrete improvements in the Olah Roma district, and with healthcare and education:* A new school is being built, Roma children now receive three full meals a day at school, the road in Szeles street was improved, public hygiene measures have been taken (to exterminate rats and vaccinate the wild dogs, provide garbage service and community water taps). Washing facilities and a regular medical service are provided in the activated Community House (and immunization rates for Roma children have improved). As well, the local government helped the Roma access national subsidies and build a new street of 30-40 houses, which has relieved some of the overcrowding. In the Bud district, the streets were resurfaced and garbage collection improved. Overall, the town authorities and the RMSG cite real improvements in the last few years. However, there is a sense of unfulfilled expectations in the Olah community. For example, a very popular proposal was made to create a special school for Roma children that would provide a great array of services (baths, meals, education, talent development programs, household skills, and life-style education). The town did not fulfill this due to the high cost (and the fact that it would reinforce the total segregation of the Roma children), but several of the Roma interviewed expressed real disappointment with this.

*Sensitization of Teachers to Roma culture and language:* According to town officials, teachers from Tiszavasvari now are trained in Romology and Roma languages.

*Less Roma-Hungarian Violence:* Town officials and PH staff claim there has been a significant reduction in violence between Olah Roma and the majority community.

*More positive contact between the two Roma Groups:* The Roma Association was able to bring the Olah and Romungro communities together in several sports and cultural activities.<sup>30</sup> Reportedly, the two Roma groups also now sell houses and cars to each other.

*School attendance of Roma children has increased:* The president of the RMSG feels the project is a success because now more children are going to school.

The Less Tangible Indicators Asserted are:

*People take Responsibility:* Town officials credit the meetings with getting people to take responsibility for follow up (as people take on tasks and must report back).

*People learn a new culture of dealing with problems:* PH sees the results of its work in the cooperative planning process itself, as people gain more skills the sessions go more smoothly. Town authorities report that Roma officials are now better able to communicate with town authorities.

*Slightly Improved Olah-Romungro Relationships:* Both Romungro and Olah representatives claimed that there are somewhat better relations (through football games, informal contacts) though serious problems remain. The unease of the Romungro representatives of the RMSG in visiting Szeles street with me demonstrated that relations are still very difficult (They expressed concern that their visit would be seen as encroaching on territory of the Olah RMSG representative).

*Attitude Shifts in the Olah Community:* Town authorities report that 'the mentality and attitudes' of the Roma have changed so that they take more initiative to help themselves. For example, there is a noticeable improvement in the maintenance of the new houses. School officials also reported noticing a small group of Roma is emerging that is receptive to new approaches.

*Increased receptiveness to Roma problems by Local Authorities:* The representative of the Olah community claimed that when Olah people went to the local authorities about problems, they got a better reception, now that local authorities know some of the Roma community leaders well. Town officials comment that thinking together with the Roma representatives at these meetings has been a very positive experience that has helped establish constructive relations.

*A Consensus has been forged among the Local Authorities:* Town authorities report that within the municipality, there is now a consensus that did not exist before about the need to help the Roma community.

**Reflections on the Process to Date**

*Roma Views:* The RMSG feels that PH's involvement has been highly beneficial and has essentially given the Roma of Tiszavasvari a political voice. However they emphasize that deep

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<sup>30</sup> For example, a joint Olah/Romungro football team took part in several county level competitions in 1997. The tension between the communities is evidenced by the fact that even this mixed team refused to use the same bus.

divisions between the two Roma communities and the lack of representation of the Olah community (who experience the worst problems) has made it extremely difficult for the RMSG to accomplish much concretely. They credit the authorities with much goodwill and effort, but also resent the condescending attitudes of some of their municipal counterparts. They however at the same time share many of the views of the authorities, that the Olah Roma are in many ways responsible for their own situation and need to 'change their attitudes'.

*Local Authorities' Views:* The town authorities feel the project has improved their contact and communication with the RMSG, and helped them create a clear road map for change (the 1997 Interim Plan). They are strongly supportive of it, though they are frustrated by the lack of major change in the living conditions and attitudes of the Olah community. Town officials interviewed viewed 'the Roma character' is the true stumbling block, claiming "they do not persevere in the face of difficulties, do not acknowledge or value what is done for /given to them, and they gave up on good projects (such as the goat breeding project) when it ran into complications". Town authorities feel uneasy that they seem more committed to the process than the Roma themselves.

Town officials also see a lack of two-way communication, with neither the town nor the Roma well informed about the steps that the other side has taken. This undermines the confidence of both parties that the process is delivering some concrete results. Finally, they worry that they have little ability to affect one of the main issues for the Roma community - unemployment. They claim more national money is needed for training, education, and job creation in order to help Roma become skilled workers with a more secure future.

*PH Views:* After 4 years of involvement, Tiszavasvari remains a problematic project for PH. Though they see that relationships have been built and communication eased between the authorities and the Roma leadership, this has not translated into successful joint efforts and concrete projects to address key problems. They claim that while the municipality has shown much goodwill, the leaders of the RMSG, though absolutely honest and well intentioned, lack the charisma and energy to follow-through on good ideas. They are concerned that divisions among the two Roma groups have proved difficult to bridge, and that there has been little change in the deep-seated anti-Roma prejudice of the majority population.<sup>31</sup> PH sees the main lessons of its experience in Tiszavasvari as, 1) investing in the establishment of dialogue between the RMSG and the local authorities pays off in the long run, and 2) incorporating a concrete employment-oriented program (like the agricultural program) helps ensure high participation of the most marginalized Roma groups.

## **Reflections on the Role of Partners Hungary**

*Roma Views:* The members of the RMSG felt that PH had 'given them Gypsy politics' and the PH work embodies real partnership with the Roma people. They noted that the participation of Roma co-trainers with PH greatly increased the participation and 'endurance' of the Roma participants. They also claim that, "PH doesn't work on behalf of Roma, it works with the Roma,

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<sup>31</sup> Report to Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, August 2000.

and the decisions are always in the hands of the Roma".

*Town Officials' Views:* Town authorities stress that PH has provided much beyond the meetings and trainings. They credit PH staff with providing an enormous range of useful advice and support (helping to gain information, sharing experiences from the rest of the country, taking responsibility for proposals and seeking resources to realize them, contacting national authorities (and the ombudsman) on behalf of the town). Town officials also note however that the personal appeal and prominent role of the key PH trainer in the process may be fostering a problematic dependency. They claim the Roma place enormous faith in this person to solve the problems and so do not come to the municipality to take simple actions themselves.

According to town officials, Partners Hungary plays a very important role as an outsider to the community, who is 'not involved in any of the fights' but has authority (through its national reputation) and credibility with all sides due to its well-publicized work with other Roma minority governments. In this sense it is PH's demonstrated experience in Hungary gives it credibility and authority with local people, and town officials felt a non-Hungarian agency would have less credibility for local people. As well, local officials sympathetic to the Roma feel that having an outsider enter the picture gives more weight to their views.

But being an outsider has also had drawbacks for PH. One town official commented that PH did not strategize the early meetings properly because it did not (and could not) understand the nuances of relations within the Olah Roma community. (He claimed that the community is actually made up of three families in great conflict with each other, and it was necessary to invite an equal number of representatives from each family. As it was, some families were not represented and he claims the early PH process lost the chance to reach much of the Olah community.)

*PH views:* PH believes that its third party role continues to be necessary in Tiszavasvari, as the RMSG is not strong enough to maintain the program alone, and there are no strong supports for the RMSG in the surrounding region. PH feels that more training in negotiation, communication and cooperative skills are necessary, as is more network building with neighbouring RMSGs to share information. Furthermore it sees playing a role in consultation and problem solving over the specific concrete problems. The hope is that the Tiszavasvari RMSG can eventually provide support to other RMSGs in the region, as has been the case in Zala County.

### **The TELSE project - Focusing on Olah Roma needs**

In mid-May 2000, PH lent its support to a new local initiative focusing on the problems of the Olah population. TELSE, a local NGO focused on social assistance to the needy, had become aware of the desperate situation of the Olah Roma during a clothing distribution. They raised funds from the EU PHARE project (for conflict management programs) to start a community planning program for the Olah district. TELSE is headed by two very young women (one Roma/Vice President of the RMSG who had taken part in the PH project, and one non-Roma) and they had encountered resistance and some hostility from the local authorities to their initiative. They contracted the PH trainer to facilitate these meetings because of his stature and

influence with all the parties concerned, feeling that the authorities would not try to obstruct him.

In June 2000, this process began with two large-scale cooperative planning meetings held at the Community House on Szeles street (involving unprecedented large numbers of the Olah residents). The first such meetings brought together 17 Roma representatives, 4 TELSE staff, and a local government representative. A subsequent meeting (involving 40 participants) was facilitated between the Roma residents of Szeles street and municipal representatives for education, sports and culture to address resident's needs in these areas. At these two meetings, many concrete proposals were made to address the needs of the Olah community directly to the municipal administrators who were present. At one meeting, the mayor announced that a new 12-class school would be built near the Szeles street community, which would provide vocational education as well. Another proposal to set up a school board involving Roma parents is expected to be realized this fall, though reportedly the authorities have strong reservations about this. A cooperative planning meeting is to be held this fall to work out differences about this proposal.

While this new process has just begun, TELSE staff feel it has already shown some important results:

- It is symbolically important that representatives of the local authorities came to the dilapidated and 'dangerous' 'Szeles street' district, and that despite their open hostility toward the authorities, the Olah showed up and most 'conducted themselves well'.
- A Szeles street resident offered to conduct a census of the population (the first time someone has taken the initiative to help the authorities work with the community).
- Olah Roma are 'interested' in the process and frequently ask TELSE about the next meeting.

The organizers (TELSE) report that the fact that PH is involved in the process has been enormously helpful – they claim PH acts as an 'outside monitor', and the local administration is afraid to refuse to participate for fear of looking bad and being reported to people in Budapest. As well, local authorities clearly respect and trust the PH trainer and feel his participation adds real credibility to the effort. (In fact, the town authorities do not mention TELSE's role in this work at all and see this project as another PH initiative). For their part, representatives of the local authorities expressed satisfaction that now, with these meetings, large numbers of Olah were finally very involved in the process.

On the negative side however, there are still tensions between TELSE, the authorities, and the local population over this new project. TELSE has been refused support from local businesses explicitly because of their work with the Roma and feels continued hostility from the town authorities. As yet, there is little support for these efforts among the general population beyond a few people with personal interest in the Roma, and these report that they are often seen as 'suspect' or 'half-Gypsy' by their Hungarian friends, neighbours, and relatives.

## **VI. ANALYSIS**

- PH's work in Tiszavasvari has been very effective in promoting better communication and mutual understanding. Town officials demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the Roma communities and the RMSG expressed understanding of the town's financial constraints and frustrations. This seemed to translate into a more cooperative attitude and some empathy towards the other side's positions. In a context where some communities are attempting to forcibly evict Roma, I was impressed by statements from the authorities like, "[I]t is a complex problem, the Roma need to mobilize, express their interests but also Hungarians need information about them too", and "[I]t is not an ethnic problem between Roma and Hungarians, but a lack of information about each other is the problem".
- This case illustrates an interesting intersection between the work of a conflict management organization and human rights organizations. A combination of confrontational human rights approaches (media spotlight, lawsuits) and the behind-the-scenes cooperative approach of PH both were necessary to find solutions to the graduation and school segregation problems in Tiszavasvari. While the town authorities were clearly spurred to real action because of intense negative media attention, outside pressure and the lawsuit, the existing PH-facilitated cooperative planning process provided an inclusive forum for the town and Roma representatives to resolve the problem.
- Similarly, these measures have had such effects in a context where international pressure is very effective – as Hungary is a small country with strong aspirations to join Western multilateral institutions like NATO, the EU, etc. Thus, pressure on the national government to adopt European standards in turn results in pressure on local governments where problems occur. The Hungarian context also includes a very healthy local NGO community and strong independent press able to apply pressure on national authorities to act on Roma issues.
- PH's credibility in Tiszavasvari initially derived from its status as an outsider (from Budapest), with a national reputation and credibility due to previous work, and as an insider (Hungarian) NGO with a detailed understanding of the issues. This initial credibility was maintained due to PH's responsiveness (providing a very wide range of formal and informal support to all parties), and the personal qualities and commitment of the PH staff. With the TELSE project, it remains to be seen whether PH's credibility can be transferred to another *very local* organization.
- The PH project seems to play an important role in maintaining lines of communication between the Roma and the local authorities, while neither has the ability to do much to address the fundamental issues of unemployment and cycles of poverty that affect the Roma. Some local officials claimed this PH process at least ensures that "all communication between the Roma and non-Roma does not break down." While this is a positive thing if that communication translates into action to address problems, it could be problematic if it ultimately has the effect of appeasing Roma leaders. Some Budapest NGOs expressed concern that because such programs are 'low cost' to the authorities (the municipality feels that unlike human rights organizations, PH doesn't blame or shame

them or make easy judgments) there is a danger they can become 'shop window' efforts that are easy for authorities to engage in, and provide a cover for the lack of serious action. As well, even if undertaken in good faith by the authorities, if they fail to be backed up with resources to affect the problems, they could create high expectations among the Roma community that, when unfulfilled, could worsen tensions.

- The cooperative planning process involves a small circle of officials and Roma representatives but has little ability to affect the views of the Hungarian majority and those groups who might be responsible for future anti-Roma violence. Those interviewed in Tiszavasvari saw no perceptible change in overall public attitudes in recent years. (According to one school official, most of the teachers in his school are against the Roma kids attending their classes, and have no positive experiences of the Roma community). It is an open question whether this is because the RMSG is not very effective yet, or because the current PH-backed effort has little ability to affect general attitudes?
- The PH community planning process has ended up working mainly with the RMSG and the town authorities. The Olah community, which is experiencing the most severe problems and so is an essential part of any solutions, was not adequately represented in the RMSG (because of strategic voting of the majority) nor in the community planning process (due to their self-imposed isolation). The Bud Roma (who largely don't share these problems) have been put in the position of 'speaking for Szeles street' to the authorities, and so it is not surprising the concrete impact of the project has not really been felt yet in Szeles street.
- There may be an unintended effect of PH's approach to building the basic capacities of the Roma Minority Self-Governments. The emphasis on the need for skills trainings and lack of preparedness of the new Roma leaders may inadvertently undermine their confidence in their own abilities (The leaders of the RMSG seemed very unsure of their qualifications and readiness to take on big responsibilities). The municipal authorities also spoke of their counterparts as 'not yet ready' to be effective, and this may undermine the seriousness with which they treat the RMSG and its concerns now.
- PH stands poised to take on more work outside the region, in part to resolve funding problems. However, it seems one clear reason why people value PH so highly is because they are a national NGO, with a deep understanding and credibility to work on these problems, and also because of their informal, ongoing support that comes from being in country, and available and accessible in Budapest. In working more internationally, PH may find that distance makes such ongoing support and responsiveness more difficult to provide.
- One key element of PH's work with Roma is that PH defines the problems in very concrete ways (of poverty, education, housing, etc.) and unsurprisingly, as a result very concrete solutions are sought through these cooperative planning processes. Perhaps as a result of the orientation of the key staff at PH (doctors, social workers, sociologists) Roma issues have not been framed so much as an ethnic problem or primarily as one of attitudes that must be changed. This may be because no experience of large-scale

violence has hardened attitudes completely on both sides. The Partners network up until now has worked almost exclusively in burgeoning democracies that have experienced very little large-scale violence. With the new initiatives in Kosovo, it remains to be seen whether these methods will work in war-hardened and much more divided societies.

- The Partners International Network and PH's relationships with Roma and local government partners in Hungary are all characterized by a very high degree of personal contact and communication. (Meetings of all Partners national directors five times a year and visits of PH to Tiszavasvari at least twice a month). This seems to be a very important part of the evident cohesion and effectiveness of the network. A strong lesson of the case seems that it is necessary to make substantial investments of time and money in people and relationships, at least in the context of Eastern Europe. (It was noted often in my interviews that Eastern European societies are 'relationship oriented societies' where personal contact is extremely important, even in the age of email!).
- This case strongly suggests that that methods of conflict management widely used in North America (mediation, community planning, etc.) were on application found to be very relevant in Hungary with few, and it seems to me, relatively minor, adaptations. While the results were mixed in Tiszavasvari, a process is underway that people are committed to and find valuable. In other areas such as Zala County the results of PH's involvement are more concrete and impressive. Thus even though the concepts had little cultural resonance at first, over time they were taken up as good ideas that had proved some merit – suggesting that injecting new (alien) ideas and providing hands on support for people to use them (PH's role) has made a an important contribution to how certain communities in Hungary are managing the tensions between the Roma and the majority communities.

## **VII. List of Interviews**

### **Partners Hungary (Budapest)**

**Dr. Goncz Kinga**, Director

**Haga Antonia**, Trainer and Ethnic Program Coordinator

**Herbai Istvan**, Chief Trainer

**Papp Csaba**, Program Assistant

### **Partners for Democratic Change, Central and East European Regional Partnerships (Budapest)**

**Kinga Szuly**, Regional Manager

### **Partners for Democratic Change, US Office**

**Brad Heckman**, Director of International Programs

**Jennifer Lofing**, Program Manager

### **Tiszavasvari**

**Benicsak Istvan**, Head of Department, Tiszavasvari Labour Office

**File Gaborne**, Education Officer, Municipality of Tisavasvari

**Koti Erno**, President of Roma Minority Government, Tiszavasvari

**Szekine Pal Edina**, director TELSE, Tiszavasvari

**Katona Jozsefue Ilona**, Headmaster, Tiszavasvari Elementary School, TELSE

**Olear Laszlo**, Principle, Vasvari Pal Secondary School, Tiszavasvari

**Magine, Dr. Csirke Erzebet**, Chief Notary, Municipality of Tiszavasvari

**Rostas, Gyula**, Representative of the Olah Roma Community, Tiszavasvari, Outside consultant to the Roma Minority Government

**Rezmuves Szilvia**, co-director, TELSE, Vice President Tiszavasvari Minority Government

**Budapest-based NGOs, Media outlets, donor representatives**

**Claude Cahn**, Research Director, European Roma Rights Center, Budapest

**Csongor Anna**, Autonomia Foundation, Budapest

**Geberle Elizabeth**, Member of Schoolboard and Cultural Committee, Budapest City Council

**Gabor Bernath**, director, Roma Press Center, Budapest

**Gabor Miklosi**, international coordinator, Roma Press Center, Budapest

**Kocze Angela**, Human Rights Education Director, European Roma Rights Center, Budapest

**Judit Almasi**, Cida Representative, Canadian Embassy, Budapest

**Roma Representatives from Zala County**

**Nagy Jozsef**, Head of Zala County Roma Minority Self-Government

**Teleki Laszlo**, Vice President, National Roma Minority Government

### **VIII. Sources Consulted:**

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Shapiro, Ilana. New Approaches to Old Problems: Lessons from an Ethnic Conciliation Project in Four Central and Eastern European Countries. *Negotiation Journal*, Vol. 15, no.2, April 1999.

### **Partners Hungary Materials:**

Various funding proposals

Partners Hungary Annual Report 1999

Partners Hungary Annual Report 1998

Final Report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, August 2000

Public Participation Project in Tiszavasvari, 1998

Planning and Cooperation: Gypsy Minority Governments Working Conference report, January 24-25, 2000

## **IX. APPENDIX : Listing of Partners Centers and their areas of work**

### **Partners for Democratic Change International, San Francisco, CA**

Main fields:

- New Center Development
- Planning and program Development
- Regional Initiatives
- Sustainability and fund-raising

### **Partners Bulgaria, Sofia**

Main Fields:

- Child and Youth Rights
- NGOs and community development
- Promoting mediation
- Women development

### **Partners Croatia**

Main Fields:

- Post-war conflict management
- Youth empowerment
- Media
- Leadership skills

### **Partners Czech**

Main Fields:

- Ethnic conflicts
- Divorce and family mediation
- Youth rights
- Street law

### **Partners Georgia**

Main Fields:

- Youth participation
- Local governments
- NGO development

- Women's rights

### **Partners Hungary**

Main Fields:

- NGO development
- Ethnic conflicts
- Local governments
- Human rights and the police

### **Partners Baltic**

Main Fields:

- Youth Participation
- Women's Issues
- Work with disabled people and its NGOs
- Intercultural learning

### **Partners Poland**

Main Fields:

- Citizen's Participation
- Peer and community mediation
- Disaster preparation for local communities
- Public communication systems

### **Partners Romania**

Main Fields:

- Local governments
- Community development
- Manual development

### **Partners Slovakia**

Main Fields:

- Ethnic conflicts
- Peer mediation
- NGO development
- Street law