

# The role of the new technologies in fighting against social exclusion in the rural areas of Bihor County

A sociological research report

realized by:

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## **Methodology of the study**

The fieldwork took place in June-July 2006 in the rural areas of Bihor County. The research included 14 interviews (8 with experts and 6 with socially excluded people) and four discussion groups. They were usually realized at the domicile of the respondents. The territorial distribution of the individual interviews was much larger than that of the groups of discussion. Totally, people from seven rural localities were included in the study: Avram Iancu, Cetariu, Cristioru de Jos, Gepiu, Hidiselul de Sus, Nojorid, and Sîniob. For a group interview and an individual interview the recording was of very poor quality, so the transcript for them is available only in part; notes were written down during the interviews, and we will rely on them.

A special importance was given also to the ethnic identity of the respondents, both Hungarian and Roma socially excluded people or at risk of social exclusion, and also experts which work with them being interviewed. Individual interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes, while the group interviews 2-3 hours.

### ***1. Discussion groups***

There had been organized four discussion groups, two with excluded people and two with experts. The interviewed in the discussion groups were:

- people in situation of social exclusion or in risk-of-social exclusion living in the rural areas
- Roma people
- social workers, members of the public organizations or associations, foundations who work with social exclusion in the rural areas (two groups).

The group of excluded people from Gepiu (called hereafter as the ‘main’ excluded group):

<b>First name</b>	<b>Status</b>
Lenuta (female, 53)	Health retirement, 4 children, takes care of a paralyzed nephew of 14
Florica (female, 47)	Housekeeper, newspaper distributor and day laborer, married, 3 children, takes care of her disabled husband
Ildiko (female, 40 )	Housekeeper, married, 7 children, poor family
Vasile (male, 15)	High school student, poor family
Ioan (male, 43)	Farm worker, married, 3 children, one heavily disabled
Valeriu (male, 38)	Unemployed, married, 5 children, poor family

Roma group (called as the Roma group hereafter) from Gepiu:

<b>First name</b>	<b>Status</b>
Dorin (male, 39)	Unemployed, not married legally, 3 children
Daniel (male, 37)	Deacon at the local Baptist church, legally married, 3 children
Alexandru T. (male, 24)	Unemployed, not legally married, 2 children
Florin (male, 20)	Unemployed, unmarried, no children
Alexandru R. (male, 44)	Unemployed, married, 5 children
Gheorghe (male, 25)	Unemployed, married, 1 child (wife pregnant)

First discussion group with experts:

<b>First name</b>	<b>Status</b>
Sebastian	Welfare officer at Holod city hall.
Judith	Former manager of Albin Foundation, an Oradea based NGO that has carried on several community development projects, including a telecenter in a village in Bihor county
Claudia	Social worker, former employee of FRCCF, an Oradea-based NGO that has implemented community development projects in villages in Bihor county
Jenica	Social worker, employee of 'Smiles Foundation' an NGO that provides charity for needy people in several villages in Bihor county.

Membership of second interview group with experts:

<b>First name</b>	<b>Status</b>
Daniel	Social worker, welfare officer at the Sânmartin city hall, has worked with Ruhama Foundation in community development projects in the Roma community in the village of Sânmartin
Alina	Sociologist, works with the Ruhama Foundation in community development projects in various Roma communities in the Bihor county countryside
Andreea	Social worker, works with the Ruhama Foundation, manages social services for elder and disabled people in villages in Bihor county.

There are some observations regarding the sampling for the group interviews:

1. The inclusion of the Roma people as a separate group was justified by the characteristics of their situation: they have the deepest social exclusion, from all spheres of economic, cultural and social life.
2. Specificities of the rural Roma communities forced us to solicit community leaders to select the appropriate persons for the group discussion. For reasons that we can only speculate (the patriarchal organization in Roma society or the busy schedule of the housekeeping Roma women with children) all the Roma that showed up were males. However, in order to avoid further biases we rejected the presence of the local leader at the meeting.
3. The recording of the Roma interview is of very poor quality therefore the transcript for it is available for the first 25 minutes only. However in depth notes were written down during the interview.
4. For the expert group 6 interviewees confirmed the participation but only 4 showed up to the discussion. We decided to go with the interview to make use of the knowledge and experience of those present and completed several days later the sample with a discussion with a group of three young experts. All experts were within the age range of 25-35.

Excepting the discussion with the Roma, all group interviews were moderated by a consultant. In the Roma group, the consultant teamed up with a Roma representative in moderating the conversation. The discussions took from 2 hours (the shortest ones, with the small groups of experts) up to 3 hours.

## 2. Individual interviews

Six interviews with the socially excluded people and seven interviews with social workers, public organisations representatives or associations, foundations which work with social exclusion in this region were realized. The individual interviews with the experts took place in the location of the City hall or the respective associations or foundations. The experts were within the age range of 25-55. The other six interviews had as respondents each of the typical cases of the most socially excluded: Roma, disabled, unemployed, aged, young people, and members of the families with many children. Interviewed who are socially excluded or at risk of social exclusion:

First name	Status
Andrei (male, 44)	Unemployed, married, 5 children, poor family, receives social help, Cristioru de Jos
Florian (male, 25)	Disabled, receives pension, Hidiselu de Sus
Sanda (female, 42)	Housekeeper, married, 5 children, poor family, Nojorid
Vasile (male, 68)	Roma, retired, lives with the wife, 2 children and 2 nephews, poor family, Nojorid
Petre (male, 37)	Daily worker, poor family, Nojorid
Carol (male, 14)	High school student, poor family, Cetariu

Experts interviewed:

First name	Status
Iuliana	Welfare officer at Avram Iancu city hall.
Petru	Welfare officer at Hidiselul de Jos city hall.
Mihaela	Welfare officer at Nojorid city hall.
Ioana	Welfare officer at Cristioru de Jos city hall.
Marian	Manager of Ruhama Foundation, an Oradea based NGO that carried community development projects, mostly with Roma people
Sandor	Manager of the Association of the Magyar Youth from Province (Asociatia Tinerilor Maghiari din Provincie) an Oradea based NGO that has carried many community development projects, including the open of some telecentres in the Villages fom Bihor.
Iuliu	Cultural referent at the Nojorid city hall. Deals with the problems of the youth and is responsible for the local telecentre.

### ***3. Description of the expert sample***

The interviewed experts activate in both public and private organizations. Those in the public sector are hired by the social department of the City hall. Usually they are trained or in the process of obtaining credentials as social workers, but not all of them have training in the field; some are simply transferred from other departments of the local council. They have executive jobs and complain that their initiatives are limited by the necessity of strictly obeying the law. That influences also their approach to the problem of the role of TIC in fighting against social exclusion. They seem rather passive, somehow similar with the attitude of the assisted persons, who they usually blame for their status.

The other part of the experts interviewed is from organizations or foundations involved in the fighting with social exclusion in the rural areas. They have both management positions in these organizations, being either general managers or program directors. The areas in which these organizations or foundation activate are diverse, ranging from youth organizations to Roma rights organizations and to those with different social work programs. They have usually university training in social work or sociology but also participate in extensive trainings and have experience in managing social work projects. As a result, they have a good knowledge of the initiatives in the field and a pro-active attitude towards the use of TIC.

### ***4. Value and limits of the research***

The individual or group interviews are important in order to discover the large variety of facts and attitudes linked with the social exclusion and the new technologies in this area.

What must be reminded, nevertheless, is that the interview is a qualitative research technique. Thus, the research findings are not representative for the situations, opinions and attitude or the whole of the rural population in Bihor County, and also for the assessments given by the experts.

However, the results of this study are of real value for preparing further researches in this field.



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## Findings of the research

### ***1. The living conditions of the social excluded or at the risk of social exclusion: the expert view***

#### **a. Which are the collectives considered to be in social exclusion situation or at risk of social exclusion?**

The main criteria used by the welfare officers from City halls to describe the social collectives their organisations works with is that these groups receive “social-benefits”, that is the amount in cash given by the state to persons in need. The experts from foundations and associations describe also several beneficiaries of their programs as their highest priority of their work. Generally, both descriptions match one with another, and also with the list of the socially excluded people.

The groups included in this classification by the experts are somehow linked with the target groups of their organization. For example, Sandor, who is the manager of a youth organization, only refers to this category as socially excluded. The description also varies with the geographical location where the interviews took place. For instance in the mountain localities like Cristioru de Jos, the most important group in situation of, social exclusion is those of the aged who does not benefit from any pension. There are very few Roma people in this area, as well as in Cetariu, while in other localities, situated in the fields, the Roma community is cited as the most important case of social exclusion.

However, we can synthesize from all interviews a typology of persons excluded or having a risk of social exclusion:

- Roma
- Youth who are unemployed, or have, giving their lower education, low paid jobs.
- Poor families with many children or with disabled persons.
- Other kind of persistently unemployed.
- Aged, singles or families, especially those that have severe illnesses or without pensions, but also those with no children or those with children moved in more distant cities.
- Women

It is interesting that the disabled are rarely referred by the respondents. This may be explained by the disinterest of the society, still very traditional in attitudes, towards this category of people. Another ignored category is that of single-parent families, a case rather infrequent in the traditional rural areas.

The risk of social exclusion is correlated with the following situations:

- School dropout – which affects youth from the poorest families, children and teens in the most remote villages, which cannot afford commuting or renting a room in town, youth from linguistic minorities (Romanians in mainly Hungarian areas and vice versa).
- Poor access to information on economic opportunities – this affects especially the peasant families that could be heavily affected by the EU integration for which they are unprepared
- People living in remote villages – in this area the infrastructure is worse, access to markets is poor and the population is usually older, therefore investments are sparse.

### **b. What are the differences between this area and other rural areas in Romania or in the European Union?**

Usually the respondents emphasize that this rural area is slightly wealthier than the rest of the country, but far less developed than the rest of the rural areas from the European Union.

Assessing the differences between Romanian and European countryside in terms of social exclusion, of policies to alleviate exclusion and of access to IT, some of our experts admitted they have little knowledge of European situation. The most extensive direct experience narrated refers to Hungary. Therefore, evaluations with general validity could not be made. Most of the statements are based on second-hand knowledge or are mere impressions.

In our experts view, the situation in EU is radically different because of the greater availability of money for social policies. Greater wealth for individuals and families, better social capital – especially a better educated population, better infrastructure are also factors that radically reduce the risk of social exclusion in EU countries compared to Romania.

In terms of anti-exclusion and social policies the experts remarked in some EU countries (the most extensive examples were brought from the neighbouring Hungary) the following features:

- greater decentralization of policy design and fund allocation, that enables local authorities to plan programs better suited for the local needs
- more use of community resources in fighting local issues, like the use of community mediators or the better involvement of community members in the local decision making and implementation of programs.
- Social services are more often contracted to specialized companies or NGOs which provide a greater effectiveness in social service provision.

These features are made possible by two other peculiarities of the institutional and cultural infrastructure: a more accountable and responsive administration and more active citizens. Romanian citizens should be blamed for their lack of readiness for involvement in collective action and claim of rights.

### **c. Which are the most relevant characteristics of the social exclusion or at-risk-of-social exclusion processes for these groups?**

The most important problem that affects these persons is the economic exclusion. People have no financial means to live a decent life. Moreover, Roma people have less access to the public infrastructure that will improve their quality of life. The second dimension is the exclusion from labour market, frequently associated with the lack of formal instruction and qualifications, but, in the case of the Roma people, also with the discrimination from employers. Social and cultural exclusion are less frequent cited, and only in the case of Roma people. Some of the interviewed even deny that such phenomena exist.

There are specific characteristics of the situation of different social excluded groups that can be outlined here.

#### ***Roma people***

The acute problems of this group are:

- *The geographical isolation.* They have their houses build at the margins of the localities.
- *The precarious infrastructure* is inherent to the improvised character of their dwellings. In many cases they lacking electricity, current water supply, access roads
- *The housing conditions* are often very bad: very small houses, with little surface per person, no utilities.
- *Improper food and clothing* received mostly by humanitarian help or begging.

Q. And the food?

A. *Yes... the food... they all benefit from social help. And they occasionally work for they neighbours, collect wood fruits, mushrooms and sell them. Thus they live in the summer; the winter is a little bit harder, then only the social assistance helps them. (Petru, expert)*

- *Numerous children*, usually five or six, not enrolled in the school or with frequent school dropout cases.
- *Precarious relationship with the majority.* While hired by the local citizens on daily bases, the Roma people are usually rejected: their children are enrolled in the less qualitative schools, with badly trained teachers, because most of the Romanians refuse to register their children in the same classes with them. Moreover, they are spatially and institutionally segregated from the rest of the population.

*Most of those from the majoritary population do not want that their children to learn in mixed classes with Roma children because their lack of access to the community resources by the latter makes them to go to school dirtier, using another kind of language. (Marian, expert)*

### ***The aged***

For the aged people, the more sensitive problems are the following:

- In the rural areas, those elders who had not been employed do not benefit of any pension or their pensions are very small in amount.

- Those who live single are mostly affected by this.
- There is a chronic lack of social services for those persons, so they can only rely on a small social help from the city hall, for those who live with less than 13 Euro per month, and the help of the extended family or that of their neighbours.

*“They are localized in Cristioru de Sus, 5 kilometers away from the center of the town, a village on the mountain, with scattered houses... They do not have access to many utilities. [...] And the access to them is very difficult. They are on the top of the mountains. The youth fled this village [...] Normally they do not live with them, because they would have to commute to the town, have little children, and that would be very hard for them”.* (Ioana, expert)

*“Pensions are very low and to work in agriculture is not profitable. You cannot gain as much as you invested in the land.”* (Iuliu, expert)

*“Those with very low pension [...] or with agricultural pension of only several hundred thousand euros [10-15 Euros per month, n.n.] These pensions are below the subsistence limits. These persons live mostly with the help of their children who come from the town to visit them, but their daily needs are met with the help of their neighbours. We can say, then, that the neighbourhood is much more important in the rural areas than in the urban ones”.* (Marian, expert)

- They live in old houses, with electricity but without current water and very few utilities.
- They are most frequently very ill, and depend on medication to which they often have no access, because they cannot afford to buy it combined with the deficiencies in the Romanian health system that offers them very few possibilities of acquiring them at lower prices, because this would require to get to the cities, and this would imply other expenses and physical power to do that.

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- Even in the most desperate cases the elders do not solicit the institutionalisation (who are not so frequent) but because in the traditional village this would imply a stigmatization.

### ***The disabled***

The characteristics of the disabled persons in this area are the following:

- They suffer handicaps in several degrees. Those in the first degree have the right to receive a personal carer, usually a member of their families and with the status of employed of the city hall. This had the problem, until 2005 at least, with the situation that they hadn't been paid because of the lack of funds.
- Those with a lighter handicap receive a much smaller help from the authorities, which they complete by doing diverse activities in their household, neighbours or relatives.

*“They complete [their income] if they own domestic animals, a little land that could be worked by them.” (Petru, expert)*

- In the rural localities mostly the disabled in wheelchairs have no physical means to get to the institutions because of the lack of entrance facilities for handicapped.

*“By lack of the access platform to the institutions, those with locomotors impairments will remain, in the proper meaning of the term, outside the institutions. I saw cases when a person in the wheelchair had to be lifted by other citizens in order to mount the few steps to the city hall.” (Marian, expert)*

- The rural families are usually less wealthy than those from the cities. Those with disabled members care themselves for them, making their situation much more difficult, and only in extreme cases they use the institutionalization.

### ***Families with numerous children***

Families with many children from the rural areas have the following characteristics:

- The high number of children is mostly associated with the low instruction level of their parents, with the unemployment or with the employment in badly paid jobs, usually as manual workers.
- The high number of children requires the presence of the mother at home, thus lowering the total income of the family. The mothers can only work occasionally.
- Their houses show the evident sign of precarious living conditions: little space, less utilities.
- The situation is even worsened by the frequent alcoholism of the household members that makes disequilibria in the household budget.

*“For most of them the allocation received by for their children is the only stable source of income. They work occasionally, but if they are alcoholics they spend all money on alcohol.” (Petru, expert)*

- Being also poor, the families with many children are also stigmatized by the rest of the community, thus increasing their chances to develop deviant behaviours.

### ***The youth***

The *youth* from the rural areas have the following characteristics that make them more probable to be in an exclusion or risk-of-exclusion situation:

- In many of the rural localities there are available only primary schools. This happens mostly in the villages situated at some distance from towns, and characterized by the process of the aging of the population. In these cases, youth will have to travel many kilometres each day on very bad roads in order to get to school.
- The lack of the endowments and well-trained professors for these schools is another reason why the school performances are lower

- After completing their studies, the youth from the rural areas have no possibility to jobs in their locality because there are no such jobs available, and the agriculture is no more profitable. Those from the distant areas cannot get jobs in the towns because of the unaffordable cost of the commutation.

*Most of the time the youth chose to move to cities where they may enrol in a qualitative school and the city offeres them a chance to remain there, empowering the rural population of all that means vitality, future, perspective, youth. This would be an explanation for the fact that the most part of the population from rural areas is aged. (Marian, expert)*

- Those who remain in the villages and look for jobs in towns are less competitive for the well-paid jobs. Many of them finish 8 classes in the village and do not seek to continue their studies, also because their parents, low educated, do not stimulate them. Thus, they stay home, without finding a job. One of the experts links this situation with their association with delinquent groups:

*Children do not go to school, they go less to school and as a consequence they find nothing to work, only hard manual work, which they abandon later, maybe. (Iuliu, expert).*

*They cannot or do not want to continue the school if also their parents have no interest in it, so they stay home and they join with already excluded groups, drunken, hooligans, delinquents and there is a risk to become themselves like that (Petru, expert).*

### ***The women***

There are a couple of reasons given by the experts in order to include this category among those excluded or at risk of social exclusion:

- Not having the possibilities to find a job in the rural area, with a lower instruction level, women, mostly from Roma communities, marry at early ages and have only domestic activities, they take care of the children.



*In one way or another the women from the rural areas are used to stay at home with the children.[...] In most of the comities of the parents in the school I saw no father, only mothers. (Marian, expert).*

- Those with many children cannot find a job even if they would like to. Thus, they are more likely to be socially excluded.

#### **d. The causes for the perpetuation of the social exclusion in the rural area**

Social exclusion means primarily lack of access to opportunities, being associated mostly with poverty. According to the experts in most cases poverty is transmitted from one generation to other due to some vicious causal circles and aggravating situations. Poor socio-economic background in family determines school dropout which prevents the individual from occupying a stable pace in the labour market. In such families dropout is often forced by parents who put their children to work instead of attending school. For some groups discrimination against is another important factor that produces or sustains exclusion. This is the case of Roma, although the case of rural people was also mentioned. There are several situations that contribute to the perpetuation of exclusion which were mentioned by experts:

1. Isolation, the lack of beneficial connections, may negatively affect access to opportunities in various ways:
  - a. Absence of support networks, i.e. extended families that affect negatively many old people, among others.
  - b. Long distances to economic and cultural centres in the towns and city that affect inhabitants of the remote villages. Often youth from this areas dropout from school or people do not accept employment because of the high cost of commuting.
  - c. The status of linguistic minority may also be a negative condition, as children do not find education in their native languages and have difficulties adapting to the education of the majority. Examples of this sort were provided for both Romanians and Hungarians being in minority.

- d. Absence of transportation facilities for disabled people put them in a state of isolation where some of them are forced to stay for years in their houses.

Lenuta. We went with the boy to the Commission again. The way he is, crippled, we bring him by car. I bring him by car and I have to pay...I paid 400 [around 11E] to bring him to the Commission.

Ioan. If they assure transportation I bring him....From the countryside, transportation is difficult.... (group discussion – excluded, main group)

2. Improper knowledge of law and information that pertains for accessing entitlements which is determined usually by precarious education.
3. Complacency, the absence of agency for finding a way out of poverty or exclusion. This might be a proxy of powerlessness and is evidently a factor behind the permanentization of exclusion. Concepts like culture of dependency could also be invoked to give sense to such situations.
4. Irrational spending. In the view of our experts many Roma invest in expensive entertainment devices – like DVD players, or flat screen television sets or pay mobile phone subscription though they live in the most deprived conditions.

The last two points indicate to another category of interest in our research, the so called disreputable poor. Our experts agreed that in some cases exclusion is just mimicked to mask or sustain lifestyles at the margins, which could be parasitical of mainstream society. It is the case of Roma communities specialized in begging or in pick pocketing.

## ***2. How those excluded or at risk of exclusion characterize their situation.***

### **a. General aspects**

#### ***Main activityy/occupation***

Men hold usually low qualified and low paid jobs while women primarily are employed in housekeeping. We had in the Gepiu main group of men: a chimney

sweeper working illegally, a contract farm worker and a high school student. All of them are also engaged whenever possible in day labour in the village. Among those individually interviewed, only two are working, doing manual work for other people in their village, in agricultural sector. The women take care of the children or of the disabled members of the family. One of them, visibly active and energetic, despite the age, gets a legal wage distributing newspapers in the village and gathering firewood together with her 19 year old daughter.

Except two members of the Roma group none is employed on a regular basis. The deacon of the local Baptist church and the aid to a veterinary surgeon are evidently the best well off. The rest live on day labour, especially in agriculture.

### *The family situation*

In the main interview group, except for the youngest interviewee, all are or were legally married and have several children i.e. five persons are legally married while one divorced woman lives in concubinage with a man with whom has 2 children. The number of children varies from two – the least – to six, and is evidently above the Romanian average. Problems conducting to risks of social exclusion are directly associated in two cases with offsprings, when the child or nephew are severely disabled. The most complicated case is that of a woman living in concubinage that takes care of six children, two of the current partner, two from her previous marriage and two from the concubine's previous relationship. In two other cases exclusion is associated with family or marital problems: in one case an unfaithful wife has produced much suffering to her husband and two children while in the other the family has to bear the burden of a disabled husband. The youngest subject lives with his father and siblings being virtually deserted by his mother which has left the family to work abroad two years before.

The Roma subjects' family situation is similar with more occurrences of concubinage. Of the 6 participants in the dedicated discussion group, three are legally married; one is not involved in stable relationship while two live in consensual partnership. According to our knowledge the incidence of legal marriage is higher than expected, but this distortion can be explained through the interviewees' Religious belonging: neo-protestant churches emphasize moral discipline and reject concubine. The number of children is also similar – with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 5, with the exception of the young men who is not involved in any relationship.

Among the individual interviewed, all the adults are legally married, except one who is single. They, and have between two and six children and they usually live with the extended family, thus making between three four and seven persons who live in small houses, about two rooms each. Those from the first generation in the extended family are usually very old and ill (some of them paralyzed) and they constitute a burden. In some of the households there are also members, even young, who are disabled, and this increases the risk of social exclusion for these families.

### *The relationships with the community*

Most of the subjects claim having positive relationships with the neighbourhood as well as with the whole community. Romanians, Hungarians and Roma narrate several examples of helping behaviour (neighbours allow the use of phone for emergencies, share food and information etc.).

Ildiko: yes, yes, always....we are living a hard life, on the child allowance, or their welfare, whatever...but if we have merely a slice of bread we share it. We help each other a lot... (group discussion – excluded, main group)

Q. Well, since you don't have a telephone, how do you call the doctor or...?

Ioan: Well, I turn to my neighbors and I ask them.

Q.Are you paying them or...?

Ioan: No. I have never paid, they are fine people, so we did not have any arguments... (group discussion – excluded, main group)

The Roma from Gepiu, however, blame the Romanian majority of discriminating them against – i.e. they are less likely hired in day-labour or have longer waiting periods when hitchhiking but the worst stories they can tell about their relationship with the public administration. Another source of intra-community tension is Religion – some of the Neo-protestants accuse the Orthodox majority of religious hate.

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## **b. Economic resources, work and household**

### ***The economical resources and sources of income. Work expectations***

The incomes of the families of the interviewed differ in terms of their source and stability. The amount of monetary in-flow and their constancy makes the difference between economic security and severe hardship. The best are those that have at least a wage earner, a pension or some secure social benefit. At the other extreme are families with no secure income.

Two Roma families are in this extreme situation, of not having any wage, pension or welfare and relying entirely on day labour wage. If we sum up the seasonality and uncertainty of this income with the lack of education and of future access to welfare, the lack of any property – they live in mud houses with no drinking water, electricity or even a firm roof over their head we can have the picture of extreme poverty in which they live. Living depends for them often on the food they gather from the garbage cans in Oradea (according to their own stories) and on what they succeed to earn begging (supposedly).

An important income source is the state provided child benefit. For each legally registered child the family gets the equivalent of 7EUR. Some Roma families failed to register their children at birth, or have lost their papers or even did not succeed to make the necessary paperwork do not get this money.

Another income is the so-called “social-benefit”, a means-test monetary state provided benefit for the poor which is around 40-60E per family. The paperwork needed to obtain this aid explains the fact that two Roma families in the sample of group discussion do not benefit from it, though they live in the most extreme poverty.

In families with disabled persons one member of the family can get from the state a salary as ‘helper’ which amounts to more than 75E/month. Three families from the main interview group and one in the Roma group have this salary.

Most of the work able persons in the groups we have interviewed work only on a day-labour basis and very few have access to pensions in their families. The only regular salary, of a person working in a private farm is roughly 100E/month. Health retirement pensions are much lower.

All in all the family incomes of the needy persons that were interviewed vary from nil or several E/month, in the worst cases, to around 200E which are earned by the most prosperous families, one Romanian and one Roma.

The work expectations of the interviewed are at very low level. Almost all perceive the lack of instruction as drastically limiting their possibilities to get a job decently paid. Most of them tried to get a job but the repeated failure makes them to give up. For others, the possible salary, minus the costs of commuting, and the regular time for work and going and returning to the workplace is too low for such an occupational status to be preferred.

*A. I tried to be hired by Transylvania Import-Export [the main employer in the area], but they will not hire you because you need training, high-school, and so on. Besides, the salaries are low. I didn't make any objection; I did not make any solicitation because I saw you couldn't manage to get a living with their wages. I have two children at school in next town that need money for transportation, and besides my family is big, you cannot manage, you only spend your earnings for travelling, and nothings remain for the daily life.*

*Q. You expect in next months or next years to find a better paid job?*

*A. Who knows, it may happen if we enter EU, maybe they will get us something better, or maybe it will be worse, we have no guarantee..." (Andrei, excluded, Cristioru de Jos)*

The implicit reason for this behaviour is that they can get social help from the City Hall and still have time to work on daily basis, without declaring these black market incomes.

### ***Who they live with and where***

Where and with who people live depend on the subject's life-cycle and economic status. Some of them live separately with their husbands/wives or concubines and children. Three of the youngest subjects – one Roma, a Romanian and a Hungarian – still live with their parents. Most of them are living also with some members of the extended families.

The quality of dwellings is generally low in terms of space and comfort. In the most extreme situation, which is most general in the case of Roma, all families live in single roomed mud houses with no endowment, not even electricity or drinking water. One Roma from the discussion group is complaining of the lack of roof and asks for

help to fix the problem. Living on soil brings among other health problems, especially for the lungs of the younger children. Other security problems arise as well:

Dorin: *Rats are swarming among us during the night. I and my wife have to stay awake to protect the children from being bitten.* (Roma, group discussion)

Lack of electricity was a problem for two members of the Romanian group in Gepiu as well. One of them is currently without power, his house not being ever connected to the network actually. He has given up hopes of having power in the near future. In the other case, that of the younger student, the family had been disconnected a year before for not being able to pay the subscription.

### **c. The education**

#### ***The level of instruction***

Usually the level of instruction of the interviewed is below the Romanian average. Most have graduated the (thirty years ago) compulsory 8 grades or vocational school, which was for children from lower status families the most probable educational route. The young people still aspire for better credentials, and sometimes blame the educational system for their lack of success.

Q. What you would need now?

A. *To achieve. Because if you're going to a better school they will not let you pass the exams.*

Q. And how can be accomplished these needs?

A. *The professors should be more exigent. They haven't been enough exigent with me.* (Carol, at risk of exclusion, Cetariu)

As for the Roma, the situation is grimmer. Three out of six people from the interview group have no formal education (despite the mandatory character of basic education this is a frequent situation especially among Roma). The rest completed 7-8 years of formal schooling but, according to their accounts, some of them are in various degrees functionally illiterate. T.A., which has completed 7 years, admits not being able

to read or write. For all these failures, the Roma subjects blame the lack of material resources – one man had to take care of his ill mother - and the members of the teaching staff who acted in a discriminatory way against Roma pupils. For example, one young man (F.) who was used to be labelled “dumb” was expelled from the foster house – though the state guaranteed at that moment either formal free schooling. The lack of schooling is reproduced in the most extreme cases of social exclusion. D’s children are not admitted in school for not having identity papers – which the parents have lost.

#### **d. The needs**

##### *The main needs of the people in the area*

Among the needs the social excluded people mentioned are the following (or solutions to situations felt as undesirable) as urgent for the community (where the order is random):

- a new family physician
- jobs for poor people
- eradicating corruption in the local administration
- a subsidized crèche
- provision of houses for young families

*Lenuta: It is not better now. The physicians stayed the same, there are the same people in the government and everywhere. Nobody helps us with anything, nobody cares of the lives of people. (Group discussion – excluded, main group)*

*Valeriu: I am thinking of this corruption at the city hall...there are a lot, a lot...So, I see that the mayor is purchasing tractors, sewing machines...I have a wretched Dacia, in front of his house there is an Audi A4. He has 4 or 5 cars, he has a VW Golf too. And this is not all, I see him selling the fields [which should be given to somebody else]... (Group discussion – excluded, main group)*

As for themselves, they mentioned the following needs:

- some money
- a job



- the accomplishment of the children
- availability of electricity in their houses
- decent housing conditions

For the Roma community which is highly homogenous and living in poverty it was a difficult task separating community and personal needs. Therefore we list below the needs mentioned as stringent for the Roma community in Gepiu (the needs are ranked in the descending order of importance which was established, approximatively of course, through discussion in the group):

- connection to electricity
- drinkable water in community
- sewerage
- improvement of houses or provision of houses, which includes property rights assigned by the city hall for small plots of land for construction
- jobs and other financial relief that could help eradicate the famine
- improvement of the roads in the community, which are impracticable after rains

### ***If they receive some sort of social help***

A significant part of the respondents receive social help, mostly under the form of “social-benefits”, i.e. the minimum income. Practically none of them report that they are the beneficiary of receive other forms of social work.

Most often the child benefit, then helper benefit and least social aid. People in the main group get help, such as – medicines worth of 17E per month, from a charity organization. The family of L. from the main group, which takes care of a nephew of 14 with a severe brain injury (he has been in coma for the last four years) was provided by a Dutch charity with a specially equipped room. Ironically, she would prefer cash instead of this help. More Roma qualify for social aid from the state – according to the means testing criteria they are poorer – but apparently they get less charity. Instead they are being helped with information by Roma emancipation groups, which increase their access to social entitlements.

Access to welfare is another indicator of exclusion. For example, only one of our respondent’s children going to school received the 200E voucher for a computer that the state provides to the poorer children. Because of poor information as well as because of

some apparent abuses on behalf of the local school management the vouchers were distributed to more well-off families. Roma subjects have reported abuses concerning the distribution of the social aid by the local city hall.

### **3. The uses of the New Technologies of Information and Communication (TIC)**

#### **a. How the experts see the problem**

##### ***How much developed are the infrastructures of the TIC in this region***

Each rural locality is in the area of at least one national mobile phone network, even if the signal is some cases too weak to permit the use of mobile phones inside the houses. Indeed, in the villages close to Oradea there is a rapid increase of penetration of mobile phone use, of fixed telephone and of cable television. While 6 years ago even a fixed telephone subscription was a rarity, almost every regular household has a mobile phone, subscription to fixed telephone network and a subscription to cable television network. This evolution is due mainly to the investments made by phone and television companies, but to the general increase in living standards and shifts in living standards. As J remembers, 7 years ago in C there was only one public phone while now, more than 25% of the inhabitants have subscription to a fixed telephone network. Computer use and internet connectivity is less spread, but increases rapidly as well.

The above mentioned increase has a much slower pace in remote villages and in the Roma pockets of poverty. In the aged villages that are far from every main roads or in the Roma ghetto, even in those close to the Oradea, the IT infrastructure is as weakly developed as 5 years ago. The only improvement is the access to mobile phone networks which reduces the isolation of the people living in those areas.

The situation with computers is mixed. Although the majority of the households still do not have a computer, the situation is rapidly changing in the cases of families with school children. About Internet, with the notable exception of some of rural localities, included in special programs of “Telecentres”, the only locations where Internet is available are the City hall and the schools. In the last case, though, the available bandwidth is too small for a proper use of the Internet.

*“Those from the Ministry of education started the program of introducing the in schools, and in that time the Internet was also introduced. But where the Internet was introduced through Romtelecom (the national public telephone company) the Internet is very slow or even does not work at all.” (Sandor, expert)*

Availability of IT in the households in the rural communities to which our experts referred is variable. There are communes in which computers or fixed telephones are rarities and others in which, according to the experts, half of the households with school going children have a personal computer. Additionally, one or two local well-off households have also access to the Internet.

The variability is due to several factors that determine the availability of computers, internet and telephones, which were the focus of our discussions.

1. First and foremost, well being determines directly if a family purchases a computer or a phone subscription. Thus, IT is more frequent in wealthier communities than in the poorer ones. This is clearest in the case of the access to internet which is not subsidized: in the most deprived communities, internet is absent.
2. Because of the generation gap in IT use, households with school children have a higher probability of having computers and internet connection.
3. Access to the 200E social program directed at alleviating the eExclusion of the poorer children, can level the access to computers. If there was leadership and competence in helping the neediest families of children, many families had been able to purchase a computer using the 200E voucher provided by the government. For example in Diosig, 17 computers had been bought in this way in the Roma community in the last year (the Roma community has 2000 souls). Welfare programs provide easy access to fixed telephone services too: many disabled, old or even poor persons have such subsidized subscription, through which they can make emergency calls or be called.

Computers and internet can be available also collectively in businesses like gaming clubs or internet cafes which started proliferating even in the rural areas. Our experts named several examples of computer clubs in the countryside, some of them having access to internet, others not, which are used mainly by the youth for gaming, surfing and chatting. Such clubs are in place in far less than half of the county's communes.

One of the experts noticed that huge improvements had occurred within the last several years concerning access to telephony, computers and internet. She noticed that ten years ago in Biharia, there was only one public telephone and a handful of telephone

subscriptions while now almost every household has a fixed telephone subscription. Increases in well being and recent investment in communication infrastructure made this improvement possible. In the same time the gap between the mainstream society and the people most disadvantaged – like the Roma from the village ghettos, has deepened, as for those of these groups even electricity is not available.

***How much developed are the TIC into the Public Administration that works in favour of the social excluded collectives or in risk-of-exclusion***

Similar trends can be noticed for the penetration of IT in the local public administration. Wealthier communes had been better endowed with computers, faxes, copy-machines, telephones and so on several years ago while the less fortunate city halls have just bought their first computers several months ago. According to one of our experts, working in the local public administration, all city halls have procured computers and other office devices recently, in a governmental program.

“An association from Bucharest instructed the public servants on the use of the computers (ECDL), with the help of the County Council, who financed this program” (Ioana, expert)

Each local council has at least one computer connected to the Internet, but from the reports of the interviewed the use of the Internet is rather infrequent. The public administration uses extensively only paper to function, and the process of the development of the electronic interfaces for the work with the public is very slow.

“We have [in the City Hall] only a boy who works [on computers]... we also enter [on the Internet] sometimes, but rarely. We don't have much time... [...] People are more interested to work than in this...” (Iuliana, expert)

“What is sadder is that there are City halls in which there is a computer, but they simply cover it. It is only a decoration, a sort of furniture inside the City Hall. So, even if such infrastructure exists, it is not properly used, because there is no one with a passion for the computer. [...] The Internet is also a problem.

*As a matter of fact, to have a computer without Internet means a handicap concerning the relationship with outside” (Marian, expert)*

Q. You use [the Computers and the Internet] to help the excluded?

A. *Now... what can I say...? I cannot say concretely... [...] Yes, I have forms that can be printed if, for instance, we need to do a survey, to give a certification... (Mihaela, expert)*

The introduction of IT in schools and administration has been received often with rejection. It was a problem of adaptation and of motivation as well. Public servants often resisted the use of computers and internet not only because this meant learning new abilities, which is costly, but with less rational reactions like panic (fear of doing mistakes), misunderstanding and fear of being under surveillance (through internet).

*“There are local authorities that still work [only] with papers. [...] With those high piles of papers, in which they wrote with the pencil, you know... That is because they are more resistant to change, or maybe because these persons were accustomed for so much time to work with paper” (Marian, expert)*

### ***How much developed are the TIC in the social organisation which work with excluded or in risk-of-exclusion***

Practically each association and foundation that works with socially excluded people has at least a computer with access to the Internet. The personnel of these organizations are more used to access the resources available on Internet. These organizations are functioning on the basis of grants with which they have already bought high quality computers, office supplies, and pay telephone and internet subscription. Moreover, these organizations need the new technologies to implement these programs.

*“NGO-s, usually, are organizations that have [computers and Internet]. They have access because they understood the importance of these instruments. [...] The organizations cannot put into practice their programs without information.” (Marian, expert)*

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However, in rural areas the number of such organizations is rather small. We found only one having the headquarter in a village. Most of organizations are located in the city or the towns. Even so, this organizations have had a good impact on access to IT in the communities they have deployed their programs, through donations.

***How much developed are the info-structures (training and capability of citizens for making use of the TIC) in this region in order to use and have access to the TIC.***

Practically all the experts agree that most of the citizens in the rural areas were not formally trained to use any of the new technologies. Those working in organizations (NGO-s and sometimes the public administration) and other professionals are an exception. This is mainly linked with the absence of the infrastructures, making futile any attempt to teach citizens skills that will not have the opportunity to exercise later in life.

*“We have enough experience in this field, as we organized a lot of introductory courses. The initiation is not at all efficient if a person goes home, where has no computer, and slowly forget how to use the computer...(Sandor, expert)*

Another aspect is linked with the general level of the instruction of the citizens, which is lower than the national average that makes much more difficult any instruction process. An extreme case is the Roma minority; the illiteracy of its members makes impossible any further instruction in the use of computers and Internet. On the other hand, respondents appreciate that the instruction on the use of mobile phones is realized by the young members of the families themselves.

The skills of computer and Internet use are to be found mainly among the youth. This generation issue happens for two main causes:

- Schools have programs of computer literacy and almost all children leave the compulsory education with some skills for using computers and internet (if available). In the last couple of years the computing equipment of rural schools has been improved due to national or local programs of improving rural education.

- For people over 40 or for those involved in stable low qualified jobs, acquiring computing or internet skills is regarded as futile or perceived with little understanding.

*“As I said, only the young have the capacity... The middle aged has no interest for the Internet. Only five percent of them are interested. Maybe the small farmers, those who are surfing on the Internet.”* (Iuliu, expert)

*“No, the citizens are instructed by their children who were trained and gone to school... [...] They already learn at the school and teach their parents, and so on...”* (Petru, expert)

Although youth are somehow skilled in using computers, surfing the web or using mobile phones, the experts in our panels expressed negative views of the ways youth from the deprived categories use these abilities. In several instances the experts stressed that computers or Internet are used strictly for entertainment (music listening, watching movies, playing games, chatting). Worse, sometimes these abilities are elements of the undeserving behaviour of some people, like of the beggar Roma from the village of Leş which spent the money gathered begging in internet cafes.

### ***The role of local administration and social organisations in the development of the info-structures***

In the opinion of the experts, the local public administration and the organizations active in social domain have a key role in the increase of people's ability to use IT, mainly because they keep direct contact with the community. From that perspective, some of the experts interviewed criticize the lack of involvement, mostly from the local administration.

*“I think the City halls are not sufficiently interested in these problems. There are secondary problems for them.”* (Sandor, expert)



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The practical ways in which this can be made are already suggested in the observations mentioned above:

1. Local administration can help developing the infrastructure needed for the uses of IT. Some rural areas aren't yet connected to the power grid. Local administration can also provide the space and even financial support for the setting up of telecenters that could be of public use.
2. Local administration can also push the local schools to expand the scope of IT education and even to start programs of adult education in this area.

The NGOs, at least those active in welfare, can provide the management and know how for designing, accessing funds and implementing various programs that make the access to IT in the communities better.

“They can take further this problematic from the city halls, and if they don't have the capacity to handle this problem, they can signal the competent administration in order to find a way to solve this problem” (Sandor, expert)

## **b. The vision and experiences of the excluded persons**

### ***Which media are used for getting informed***

Media used to access information depends on the available media and on the information needs.

The television is the most generally available electronic media and was most frequently cited as used as source of information, with radio and newspapers much seldom mentioned. As other sources of information are missing, and even television is not always available (since several of the homes of our interviewees are not connected to the power grid) people rely heavily on informal networks to share relevant news and knowledge on important issues. Indeed, in the rural area the interpersonal communication and other traditional means of transporting messages of public interest are still very important.

Q. Where you look for information that you need daily?

A. *Now, speaking with others... If someone dies the church bell is ringing...*

Q. This is the radio of the village

A. *Yes, the radio of the village, the church bell... But people speak about what's happens, you see... Here someone died, here this or that happened, it was an accident... (Vasile, excluded)*

*"From the neighbors, where I could go now, if I cannot walk, I stay all days here, outside, on the street, and they come, they come, and we're talking..." (Florian, excluded)*

Here we can notice another facet of exclusion, as *exclusion from public information*. Important information on laws, rights, administrative procedures and regulations are not directly accessible to them as they are not able to access and process the raw information and, on the other hand, their trustworthy connections within the administration are weak. Their own opinion leaders, on which they rely to access the most relevant information are not always entirely competent to digest the information for their audience. Regarding this topic, the circumstances of main group of the discussion or of the individually interviewed and of the Roma population are somehow different. Roma people rely heavily on their leaders and organizations that support Roma emancipation for accessing the valuable administrative and legal information. Instead, the most needy from the Romanians are less organized but have better outside linkages, are better connected (have children working in administration, better educated, living in cities etc.).

### ***Which are the most interesting themes they are informed usually***

On the top of agenda of people when consuming media are the news and the entertainment, but sometimes both are intertwined in the news programs.

*"I like the politics, I always liked... [] And events, what happens in the country... crimes or other kind..." (Vasile, excluded)*

*"Popular music, that what I like, the weather..." (Florian, excluded)*

Some of the interviewed also make reference in their answers to the information about their occupations.

*“Well, we look for what happens in the country... and for us, from the mountain, is we’re not in a good area for the agriculture, what possibilities they give us...”*  
(Andrei, excluded)

Also religious affiliation plays a role in the selection of the themes of interest, as neo-protestant reject the entertainment promoted by conventional media hence they limit their interest to news.

***How they communicate with their family and friends? Which are the media people use to keep in communication with them.***

Most of the people from the main group of discussion and also from those individually interviewed have subscription to a fixed telephone network but very few none has currently mobile phones. They are called at home but they admit that this happens rather rarely. Most of the interactions happen face-to-face, people visiting each other or mediated through acquaintances.

Q. But [how you communicate] with the rest of family?

A. *By mobile phone, my wife sometimes call them, communicate together, or we go and visit each other (he laughs), because they are not so far... (Andrei, excluded).*

Some of the subjects consider a fixed telephone to cover their needs as they are mostly at home – it is the case of housewives. Others cannot afford a mobile phone though they admit that it can be useful in their work – the chimney sweeper is visited at home by possible customers! People from the younger generation have mobile phones more often which they use to keep in touch with friends and mates but they also borrow to their older relatives in state of emergency.

People in the Roma community of Gepiu are in a much worse situation. As there is no electricity in most of the colony nor proper papers and property documents, subscriptions to fixed phone networks are excluded. Roma can communicate outside the community only using mobile phones and prepaid cards which are, apparently paradoxical, more frequent here.

### *The familiarity with TIC and their view about their uses*

It is important to note that neither computer nor Internet is high on the agenda of the excluded people from our group discussions and interviews (excepting a respondent 14 years old).

None of the excluded persons or of the persons at risk of social exclusion which is above 30 years have ever used a computer or have been educated in the use of computer. Among the youngest interviewed, a high school student, wasn't neither educated to use the computer, as the school had only one computer. He admits being able to do very basic operations with a PC, ability that he had acquired playing on friend's computer. One of the men from the main group has at home a PC, bought for the use of his two children. It is a second-hand device which he has never used. Another individually interviewed bought a personal computer for their children, using the governmental subsidy of 200EUR. A third interviewed received a second-hand computer from a relative who worked abroad. It is relevant that for most of the interviewed the computers are mainly entertainment centres, whose primary use for gaming or listen music. Only the younger persons reported also the use of the computer and Internet for a help with a homework.

The excluded people's contact with IT is usually mediated through the younger generations primarily and though their contacts with aid workers, be them local or foreigners. Several members of the main group have children or younger relatives that are much more computer literate, using computers in their professional activity or in their schooling. In this respect we could speculate about a generational rejection of innovation, where older people rejects the contact with the newer technology considering it reserved for the younger people and holding other domains as relevant for them.

Q. Would you like to have Internet at home?

Vasile: *What would I do? I would talk, I would search for ideas...Especially when I'll be in the high school I will need a computer, because I am going to learn architecture, I will have to make projects, to do this and that, I will have to search a lot, it won't be easy.* (group discussion – excluded, main group)

Q. But you were never interested in this (computers, Internet)?

Valeriu: *Well, a little bit but... I am not sure, rather for the music ...I like music a lot, I like music a lot whereas others are always playing games.* (group discussion – excluded, main group)

Q. Do you think the net could be helpful for you?

Ildiko. *A, a lot.*

Q. What for?

Ildiko. *For the kids.*

Q. What would the kids do with the net?

Ildiko. *My daughter would like to learn informatics. She wants to do a lot of things.* (group discussion – excluded, main group)

The Internet is also merely a topic of rumors. As in the case of computers, the needy people we have discussed with find difficult to relate to IT as they hold the topic of very low relevance for them. However when digging deep in their memories they can find interesting aspects on the usefulness of Internet. L. remembers amazed that one neighbour could talk for free to her daughter in USA via the net.

Our subjects accept that IT (computers and internet) can be useful, but have difficult time trying to be more concise regarding the ways in which could use themselves. On both the members of the main ethnic group and the Roma subject this acceptance seems to be a reflection of social desirability. However, computers and internet have been, so far, apparently, of no use for most of our subjects.

Mobile phones were mentioned as necessary in cases of emergencies. In this case, having a phone is of utmost importance. Interestingly, Roma, Romanian and Hungarian interviewees referred to phone as necessary to first call the ambulance.

While in the case of persons having severely impaired persons in family this is understandable, for the Roma this situation reflects their poor health status, the low quality of local health care and the difficulties poor people from the villages confront when traveling, for example to medical treatment in the city. In other words calling the ambulance is a solution for the sick poor when they are excluded from local infrastructure and public services.

## **4. The place of TIC in fighting against social exclusion**

### **a. The views of the excluded persons**

Little ideas were produced by the excluded people on the use of IT for helping them. Helped by the moderator or the interviewer, both the people from the main group and those individually interviewed expressed amazement that computers and Internet are worth more than the music and games.

Assisted by the moderator, they have agreed that computers and internet could be used to:

- access markets (to sell and buy thing on the net); Roma people insisted on finding jobs
- access information on laws, welfare etc.
- communicate with other people and communities

But even when they gave positive assessments of the role of computer in their lives, the perspective of using these instruments is too far from them. It is like those are on another planet.

A. But, from what you saw, these technologies can help you in some way?

A. *If you would have a job, they would help you, but if you stay home... very little... no... you wouldn't need them...* (Andrei, excluded)

However, in order that these uses of IT to become reality several needs have to be covered:

- many of the extreme poor do not have electricity – not to mention computers
- families need computers and computer literacy
- excluded people have to be educated on the benefits of IT to surpass the cultural barrier that hinder their contact with modern technology.

### ***How do get informed on the types of social help***

Most of those who receive social help are firstly informed by they neighbors and relatives about the availability of such help. After that they visit the social department of the local council in order to receive the detailed information and to proceed with filling forms. To give information about all these is the role of the welfare officer from the city hall, and this is done only by face-to-face interaction. There is no evidence that the

potential beneficiaries of the social help would consult documents, in electronic forms or not.

Q. How you are informed about these things [social help]? By who are you informed?

A. *Why, Mrs. Welfare officer, she explained to us, how many days you must work [in order to receive the help] ... and Mr. Mayor also instruct me, and from the law...*

Q. And other persons gave you information about the social help?

A. *That what we asked for, we need no other, cause' once Mrs. Welfare officer and Mr. Mayor explained to us, why ask from others, because they know everything. (Andrei, excluded).*

In Gepiu, the excluded people get informed about the welfare available mainly through television, printed press and through local informal network. Local officials responsible of welfare are seen as rather opaque, not ready to share information and unreliable. People in the panels displayed an active information searching behavior and assessed – especially the Roma – that the quality of information they have is rather poor.

### ***Do they think these technologies can help to solve the people needs?***

The excluded people or those who are at the risk of social exclusion do not have a clear idea of the way the new information technologies would help people in general to meet their needs, other than the strict need of communication or getting help in case of incidents or disease (like calling the police, the ambulance of the fire-fighters). There are some references also to the availability of information on the jobs on the Internet, but there is no clear image on how this can happen.

Q. But do you think these would help you, personally, to satisfy your needs?

A. *It would help us too, if you would have time to work on it, but of you have nothing to work it cannot help you. It would be good to learn to use it if anytime an opportunity appear, a job, something... (Andrei, excluded)*



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Helped by the moderator the people from the main discussion group expressed amazement that computers and Internet are worth more than the music and games. Assisted by the moderator, they have agreed that computers and internet could be used to:

- access markets (to sell and buy thing on the net); Roma people insisted on finding jobs
- to access information on laws, welfare etc.
- to communicate with other people and communities

***What would be necessary to be done in order that the excluded people to use TIC for alleviating their problems***

Most of the interviewed agree that, in order that the socially excluded or those at risk of social exclusion to use TIC to solve their problems, there is the need for such equipment exists. Computers are easier to buy for the children, using for example the Governmental program that subsidize with 200 EUR each student suffering from economic deprivation, and one of the interviewed complains the fact that their children cannot benefit of it because they are not enrolled in the school.

However, the respondents having a computer in the household seldom perceive the need to be instructed on the use of it or to connect to the Internet. There seem to be a general representation that computers and Internet are for their children, not for them.

Q. In which way could be the computer used?

A. *For example for the children, with all their homeworks, if you have 'nt got the Internet you cannot get them...* (Sanda, excluded)

Even when they seem to perceive the need of their instruction, they invoked the chronic lack of time.

## **b. The view of the experts**

*How do the collectives in social exclusion or in risk-of-social exclusion access to information related to work, social and cultural resources that are offered in order to reduce, improve and transform their situation?*

Regarding how do the collectives in social exclusion or in risk-of-social exclusion have access to information related to work, social and cultural resources, the experts' answers are mixed. Some of the respondents criticize the public administration for not being pro-active in giving to people in need the necessary information. On the other hand, those who are working in the public administration complain about the lack of interest from the part of the assisted persons for the employment and other opportunities available. They are arguing that the dependent persons are only interested in getting and securing material benefits from social assistance offices. Both categories of experts emphasize the necessity of the existence of specialized persons to have a direct interaction with the excluded groups and to inform them about the economic and social opportunities, giving the fact that this information are only available from the authorities, in forms that cannot be processed efficiently by the excluded persons.

Deprived people are, according to the experts poorly informed regarding jobs, welfare or other opportunities that could help them out of their situation. Poor information and abilities of information seeking were diagnosed even for those better educated and with stronger links with the city.

*"...we have worked with youth, among whom some are from Oradea or higher education graduates, [they] didn't know where and how to search. Then, how could know a child who has dropped out of school when in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, has a family model, his neighbours to follow, so, it is a disaster?" (Judith, expert, group discussion)*

However, welfare receivers are seen as rather well informed concerning the information on welfare which is direct relevance for them.

Several causes were mentioned for the poor information of persons in situation of social exclusion:

- Information of public interest is precariously delivered by public institutions, both at local or national level. Public information campaigns, like those regarding the SAPARD funds, had been received with biases and prevented many farmers from attempting to access funds for agricultural development. Local institutions like the city halls lack a proper communication service. Even worse, public institutions are accused of being often opaque with the public.

*“There is a style to wait the people to come to your office then when they have arrived: well can’t you read what is written on the door? So this is the general attitude. There are very few open institutions or very few people from the institutions are open or have the patience to deliver information.”* (Andrea, expert, group discussion)

- Citizens do not search actively for information. Even if it is because of poor education or because they expect to be turned down by the officials, even those who would benefit from some information show little interest in acquiring it.

*“...not very many feel the lack of information and the absence of abilities of becoming aware...”* (Judith, expert, group discussion)

As main sources of useful information, the experts mentioned television and informal networks.

***How do the TIC help or could help to palliate the economical and labour market exclusion and, in which social collectives could be more effective?***

This is the questions were most of the respondents gave answers. They stressed the availability of the working opportunities information directly to the Internet, and the fact that the individuals can use very easy this information.

*“I think that if they would have Internet access ... they would find jobs or they would have better possibilities... to be hired, because many of those with high-school or college diplomas don't find something that fits them.” (Iuliana, expert)*

*“Why... to be hired. To obtain information about who employs, which qualifications are needed...” (Iuliu, expert)*

The information available on the Internet would be also useful, in the opinion of our interviewed experts, for the online selling of the farm products, and also for agro tourism.

These opportunities, however, were only available to young people with a minimum knowledge on the use of computers. They give examples of young unemployed who found jobs in the country or abroad. Another kind of example is the use of the mobile phone to keep contact with the relatives and friends that work abroad and to learn of the job opportunities. This would be the use of the TIC for perpetrating the so-called “immigration networks”.

***How the TIC help or could help to palliate the social and cultural exclusion and, in which social collectives could be more effective?***

An example of such approach is given by an expert who cites the case of rural elders who are in permanent contact with their families by mobile phones. The problem of cultural exclusion is mostly perceived by Roma activists who speak out the specific needs of the Roma to maintain their cultural identity.

An example of a project that could have an indirect effect is that, through the Internet available in a telecenter in a locality populated by Hungarian minority people, a network of related localities in Romania and Hungary was established.

*“I can say for sure that, without the communication brought by this technology, these relationships could not be established.” (Sandor, expert)*

***How do the TIC help or could help to palliate the social exclusion related to the citizen participation and, in which social collectives could be more effective***

Only a few such experiences were cited regarding to this, although the general idea is that the interconnectedness and the access to information provided by the new technologies has the effect of empowerment of the individuals from these social groups, rising their trust in the fact that can do something in the benefits common. This looks like a corollary of the theory learned in their training than the result of such experiences with socially excluded people in the rural areas of Bihor.

An interviewed from Cetariu cites the example of the local council who voted for giving facilities to the local cable company, in return for a dedicated TV channel by which the citizens were informed about the most important aspects that require participation of the citizens at the government of the community.

***Final remarks on the goal of the TIC into the tasks against the social exclusion and risk-of-social exclusion***

Practically all experts consider that the new technologies of information and communication may have an important role in dealing the social exclusion and at-risk-of-social exclusion. For the welfare officers from the City halls, the perception of how TIC can contribute in front of other social work initiatives against the social exclusion and the risk-of-social exclusion is rather confused. Most of them answer at this question by stressing the necessity of development of their personal skills for accessing the resources available on the Internet, in order to transmit the information to the excluded groups. The experts from social organizations, however, emphasize the capacity of TIC to provide an efficient communication adapted to the needs of the people in need.

These experts have made several proposals concerning the use of IT in programs targeting the alleviation of social exclusion, generally or on its various dimensions.

A remarkable consensus was recorded for the solution of telecentres operated by community mediators. As various useful information can be accessed via the internet

but most of the needy people are not able to use effectively the web and often the infrastructure is also not sufficient, the establishment of such access points is regarded as necessary. A trustful person from the community that holds the required skills should make the queries on the web, upon request from inhabitants of the community. Other activities could also be fulfilled by such services, like posting announcements on the web or servicing web pages of local public interest, like the communes web page. Various benefits of such an institution could be enumerated:

- Deprived persons could have valid information regarding the welfare laws, facilities and institutions.
- Economic exclusion can be reduced through a more precise and quick information on job vacancies and access to markets (which operate a lot online and marketing, even for agribusiness, but for agro tourism as well, can be done very effectively on the web). IT literacy courses for adults could also be beneficial for the recipients' access to economic opportunities.
- Though for cultural and social participation the enumerated benefits were seldom some of them had been suggested – like a better communication of the commune with the outer world (which adds to the so called linking social capital of the village – Woolcock) or the preservation and promotion of local cultural treasures, in the case that such resources are collected on the commune's web page. Moreover, indirect benefits of these telecenters are also upon civic involvement. Better informed individuals, with more confidence in themselves as public actors will be more effective in the public sphere and will be more motivated to approach the officials, to raise problems, to claim rights and to participate in decisionmaking at the local level.

Concrete solutions of this sort are already in place but none in the frame described above. There are telecentres in some villages in Romania, but they are not oriented towards information delivery. Internet club likewise. Much closer to our solution are the CABs (Citizen Advice Bureaus) which have been operating in more than 70 locations in Romania, under EU funding. Although they formally do not limit themselves to distributing legal, procedural or institutional information to citizens, basically this is what they do with a great reliance on web resources. More important, there are less than 15 CABs in the countryside in Romania at the moment.

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Other solutions mentioned involving the use of IT for combating social exclusion were local television and radio, that could make the public debates more inclusive, although the experts that at village level face to face communication remains the most effective mean of participation.

Problems that hinder the effective use of IT for fighting social exclusion were highlighted by the interviewed experts:

1. In many actual programs, IT is involved without being the result of a valid needs assessment. IT courses or computerized institutions are established although they do not fit into the list of priorities of the community members. Such actions are quickly regarded as useless and turned down by their prospective beneficiaries. For many disabled or poor people, computer or internet use is opposed to the concreteness of their needs and hostility to such externally induced programs arises easily.
2. Generally, programs promoted by external institutions or organizations are not regarded with much trust. Reciprocity warns people that nothing is for free, therefore something is awaited from them if they take the fruits of some programs.

Based on these observations and on their experience, the experts have made some recommendations about the way programs involving the use of IT in fighting exclusion should be put into operation:

- The infrastructure should not be regarded as the only side of the problem. A special attention should be paid to the issue of human resources necessary to use the IT technology and put it at use for the public. Local leadership is also very important as important local resources should be invested in any program and trust is also an important resource for the success of the programs.

*“My conclusion, after all that we have discussed here is...it is not enough there to be a machine, be it telephone, computer or whatever, if the human resource required to use it and that needs to be active in the locality is missing. Whether there is a group or are several groups, clusters of trustful people interested in local development, the use of a computer from an available office changes immediately” (Judith, expert, group discussion)*

- Any such program should be put in practice only following a proper need assessment. This should be done in participatory ways such as the members of the target groups appropriate the solutions, activities and outcomes of the programs and go through a process of learning. The use of IT in programs which have them as beneficiaries has to have a clear rationale.

Q. And what could the administration do?

A. *To identify the real needs and proceed in small steps. It is no use in entering a community and start distributing information on computer and internet use just like this because half of the students could be beneficiaries of welfare who do not have a slice of bread at home and are going on the field daily to make ends meet. (Jeni, expert, group discussion)*

Andreea: *...Actually, what do they expect...From the moment they understand that we are doing meetings or a kindergarten...for them the kindergarten means absolutely nothing. I mean it means nothing because with the kindergarten his plate will stay empty.*

Alina: *Well, but he will be happy and will send his kid to school because the kid will have in this way at least a sandwich. This is a motivation.*

Daniel: *I have discussed a lot with their parents and they told me that they are aware of what is going to happen and they are sending their children firstly to learn, and they also told me that they don't need the sandwich we are giving to them.*

Andreea: *I don't think they are all like this. Look at this very concrete stuff, the milk and roll program...many of the children go to school only for the milk and piece of roll. Why? They put them into the pocket and share them with their siblings. (experts, group discussion)*



## **Executive summary**

### ***1. The living conditions of the social excluded or at the risk of social exclusion persons in the sample***

- The collectives considered to be in social exclusion situation or at risk of social exclusion are: Roma, the unemployed or low educated youth, families with many children or with disabled persons, other kind of persistently unemployed, aged, singles or families, with severe illnesses or without pensions, and women.
- The risk of social exclusion is correlated with the school dropout, which affects youth from the poorest families, reduced access to information on economic opportunities, and living in remote villages.
- The situation in EU is considered to be radically different because of the greater availability of money for social policies, better human and social capital, but also greater decentralization of policy design and fund allocation, more use of community resources in fighting local issues like the use of community mediators, and a greater effectiveness in social service provision mainly through the use of specialized companies or NGOs.
- The most relevant characteristics of the social exclusion or at-risk-of-social exclusion processes are labour market exclusion and the lack of access to the public infrastructure. The social and participatory aspects of exclusion are less frequent referred to. Each excluded group has, specific problems.
- Roma people suffer from: geographical isolation, precarious infrastructure, disastrous housing conditions, improper food and clothing, and precarious relationship with the majority.
- The aged were unable to meet their needs because of the very low level of pensions, combined with a chronic lack of social services and a prejudice against institutionalization. They have precarious housing conditions and very low access to health services.
- The youth from the rural areas suffer from a deficit of instruction because of the large distances to schools and the lack of well-trained professors; that reduces the probability of their insertion in the work market.

- The women, mostly, but not only from the Roma community, have low instruction levels. They marry at early ages and have only domestic activities. The numerous children do not permit them to find regular jobs.
- Among the causes for the perpetuation of the social exclusion in the rural areas, the experts mentioned: the spatial, social and cultural isolation, lack of information that pertains for accessing entitlements, the complacency with their situation, caused by learned powerlessness, and irrational spending.

## ***2. How those excluded or at risk of exclusion characterize their situation.***

- Men hold usually low qualified and low paid jobs while women primarily are employed in housekeeping. The legal marriages are predominant among the Romanians, while the concubinage is the most common strategy for Roma people. Most of the respondents have positive relationships with the community, but some of the Roma blame the Romanian majority of discriminating them against.
- Most of the interviewed receive some kind of social benefits: a small amount for each child (about 7EUR), pensions for disabled or age retired (not above 50 EUR), salaries for a carer of a disabled member of the family (around 75E/month) and a means-test monetary state provided in benefit for the poor which is around 40-60EUR per family. Few of them receive salaries from daily labour, and only one a regular salary, not over 100 EUR.
- Most of the interviewed have low work expectations, giving the lack of instruction, repeated failures to get a job and the high cost of commuting.
- The nuclear family is predominant, but three or four generations living in a household are not unusual. The quality of dwellings is low in terms of space, comfort and utilities. The most extreme cases are those of Roma from Gepiu, living in single roomed mud houses with no endowment, not even electricity or drinking water.
- With levels of instruction below the Romanian average, they usually graduated the compulsory 8 grades or vocational school. Only the young aspire to improve their educational status. For the Roma, the situation is rather extreme, a half of

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them having no formal education, and some of their children are not admitted in school for not having identity papers.

- The urgent needs of the communities are the following: a new family physician, jobs for poor people, eradicating corruption in the local administration, a subsidized crèche, and provision of houses for young families.
- The personal needs reported by the respondents are: to have money, a job, the accomplishment of the children, availability of electricity in their houses, and decent housing conditions.
- For the Roma community it was a difficult task separating the community and the personal needs. They referred to: connection to electricity, drinkable water in community, sewerage, improvement of houses or provision of houses, jobs and other financial relief, and improvement of the roads.
- A significant part of the respondents receive social help, mostly under the form of “social-benefits”, i.e. the minimum income. Practically none of them report that they receive other forms of social work. Roma subjects have reported abuses concerning the distribution of the social aid by the local city hall.

### **3. *The uses of the New Technologies of Information and Communication (TIC)***

- Except for the fixed and mobile phones, that dramatically increase their availability in the last years, the infrastructures of the TIC are considered to be rather undeveloped. The majority of the households still do not have a computer, although the situation is also rapidly changing. The Internet, nevertheless, with the notable exception of some of rural localities included in special programs of “Telecentres”, is only available in the City halls and the schools, but the latter have a too small bandwidth for a proper use.
- Availability of IT in the households depends on average level of well-being in the community, the presence of school children, and the capacity of the community leadership to inform people on the available subsidized computers and to support the implementation of the telecenters or the gaming clubs.
- The penetration of IT in the local public administration follows the same trends, with the wealthier communes being better endowed. However, the use of the Internet is rather infrequent. Public servants often resist the use of computers and Internet learning because of the cost of learning new abilities, but from fear

of doing mistakes, misunderstanding and fear of being under surveillance through Internet.

- The TIC are much more used in the social organizations because of their functioning on the basis of grants which allowed their endowment and because of they need the new technologies to implement social programs. The personnel of these organizations are more used to access the resources available on Internet. However, in rural areas the number of such organizations is rather small.
- Most citizens in the rural areas were not formally trained to use any of the new technologies. The reasons are their lower level of the instruction and the absence of the infrastructures.
- Because of the programs of computer literacy in schools and their relative better instruction compared to those of the middle and old ages, the skills of computer and Internet use are to be found mainly among the youth. However, they use computers or Internet mostly for entertainment.
- Because they keep direct contact with the community, the local public administration and the social organizations a key role in the increase of people's ability to use IT. The public administration can help to develop the required infrastructure, and push the local schools to expand the scope of IT education and start programs of adult education. The NGOs can provide the management and know how for designing, accessing funds and implementing various IT-related programs.
- Media used to access information by the excluded persons are mostly the television. As important information on laws, rights, administrative procedures and regulations are not directly accessible to them, in a process that can be called *exclusion from public information*, people rely heavily on informal networks to share relevant news and knowledge on important issues. Roma people are somehow different, because they have a greater confidence in their leaders and organizations that support their emancipation.
- People consume mostly news and the entertainment. They sometimes communicate with family and friends by telephone (only by mobile phone in the Roma community of Gepiu where is no electricity available). Most of the interactions, nevertheless, are face-to-face, people visiting each other, or mediated through acquaintances.

- Mobile phones were mentioned as necessary in cases of emergencies. Neither computer nor Internet is high on the agenda of the excluded people. Their contact with IT is usually mediated through the younger generations primarily and by their contacts with the aid workers. They accept that these new instruments can be useful, but cannot be more concise regarding the ways in which could use them.

#### ***4. The place of TIC in fighting against social exclusion***

- Assisted by the moderator, the excluded people agreed that computers and internet could be used to access markets, finding jobs, access information on laws, welfare etc., and communicate with other people and communities. However, they don't imagine themselves using these instruments.
- In order to use TIC, they mentioned the needs of the availability of electricity in their houses, of a personal computer and of IT literacy
- They get informed on the types of social help by informal network and by the welfare officer from the city hall, only in a face-to-face interaction. The Roma from Gepiu also look for information at television.
- The excluded or those who are at the risk of social exclusion do not have a clear idea of the way the new information technologies would help people in general to meet their needs, other than the strict need of communication or getting help in case of incidents or disease.
- They stress that in order to use TIC to solve their problems, such equipment should exist. Those owning a computer in the household rarely perceive the need to be instructed on the use of it or to connect to the Internet.
- Deprived people are, also according to the experts, poorly informed regarding jobs, welfare or other opportunities that could help them out of their situation. This is caused by the precarious information delivered by the public institutions, and the lack of an active quest for information by the excluded themselves.
- The experts stressed the availability of the working and marketing opportunities information directly to the Internet, and cite some examples where excluded people used this information in their benefit.

- The problem of cultural exclusion is mostly perceived by Roma and Hungarian activists who speak out the specific needs of their people to maintain their cultural identity. As positive examples are cited the use of telecenters is making contact with people from localities speaking the same language.
- Interconnectedness and the access to information provided by the new technologies have, in the expert's view, the effect of empowerment of the individuals from these social groups, raising their trust in the fact that can do something in the common benefits. As an example it is cited the experience of a dedicated TV cable channel by which the local council diffused important information throughout the village.
- All experts consider that the new technologies of information and communication may have an important role in dealing the social exclusion and at-risk-of-social exclusion. The experts from social organizations emphasize the capacity of TIC to provide an efficient communication adapted to the needs of those excluded or at risk of exclusion. Several suggestions concerning the use of IT in such programs are made: the use of telecentres operated by community mediators, who should make the queries on the web, upon request from inhabitants of the community, post announces on the web or service web pages of local public interest, like the communes web page.
- Concrete solutions of this sort are already in place, but none in the frame described above. There are telecentres in some villages in Romania, but they are not oriented towards information delivery. Much closer to our solution are the CABs (Citizen Advice Bureaus), operating with EU funding, but with low distribution in the countryside in Romania at the moment. Local television and radio were also mentioned.
- Several problems that hinder the effective use of IT for fighting social exclusion were identified: the lack of a valid needs assessment before the start of the programs, the low level of public confidence in the programs promoted by external institutions or organizations.
- Several recommendations were also made: to pay a special attention to the issue of human resources necessary to use the IT technology and interface with the excluded, to take account of the local leadership, and to proceed to a proper need assessment before the implementation of any such programs.