

# THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATORY APPROACH IN REDUCING SOCIAL VULNERABILITY. THE EXAMPLE OF A SOCIAL INTERVENTION AIMING AT THE RE-HOUSING OF FAMILIES BELONGING TO A MARGINALIZED ROMA COMMUNITY

Gabriella TONK,<sup>1</sup> Imola ANTAL,<sup>2</sup>

Ágnes DAVID-KACSÓ,<sup>3</sup> Júlia ADORJÁNI,<sup>4</sup>

Olimpiu Bela LĂCĂTUȘ<sup>5</sup>

**Abstract:** *The paper explores the issue of how social interventions in deeply marginalized communities should be conceived in order to prevent further victimization of the most vulnerable groups within the community: children and women. The analysis relies on the example of a pilot project, which is implemented in one of the most marginalized and stigmatized Roma communities in Romania. Within the housing component of the pilot project, participatory social housing will be piloted in the context of coordinated intervention. 32 apartments outside the marginalized area will be built/purchased, destined exclusively to the marginalized communities in case. Since the number of housing units achieved within the project represents only approximately 10% of the total amount of housing units needed for the spatial desegregation of the communities living at present in the marginalized area, we face the issue of having to select those families, which could benefit from these apartments. At present, the Romanian public and private system of social assistance is not capable of ensuring the necessary support, either in terms of social services or in terms of financial support, in*

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<sup>1</sup> PhD project manager, Intercommunity Development Association, Cluj Metropolitan Area

<sup>2</sup> PhD: lecturer, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance

<sup>3</sup> PhD: lecturer, Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance

<sup>4</sup> PhD: process manager, Intercommunity Development Association, Cluj Metropolitan Area

<sup>5</sup> drd: process manager, Intercommunity Development Association, Cluj Metropolitan Area

order to surpass complex situations of vulnerability of families living in marginalized communities. Therefore, even if the project promotes the principle of the right to housing, the methodology fits into a housing ready policy. Without the intention to “reward” those who have more resources at their disposal, we needed to create an accession system, which is at the same time a complex system for assessing the needs and resources of the families filing for a social apartment. The project methodology adopts the perspective of rights, with express emphasis on children’s rights, and a systemic approach, which takes into account various levels of intervention. The paper presents and analyzes the participatory methodology used to create the accession system for the social housing. For this, we adopt the critical perspective, the model of structuralism and the notion of ‘structural violence’ in order to explain the interconnectedness of the community dynamics and institutional mechanisms that enhance vulnerability instead of reducing it. The participatory approach overarched the different phases of the intervention on both community and institutional level: the assessment of housing needs, the assessment of needs before and after moving to the social houses, and the development of eligibility and evaluation criteria. The paper advocates the participatory approach allowing the counterbalancing of power relationships not just between the community and the institutions, but also inside the community, thus attempting to protect the most vulnerable members of the community. The paper also reflects on the difficulties and limits of the participatory approach, and raises awareness on the institutional responsibility when creating the context and reality of participation.

**Keywords:** *participatory approach; social inclusion; housing; social vulnerability; children’s rights; structural violence; marginalized community; spatial desegregation*

**JEL Classification:** *J71, J78, R23*

## **Introduction**

The analysis relies on the example of a pilot project called Pata-Cluj, which is implemented in one of the most marginalized and stigmatized Roma communities in Romania, namely Pata Rât.

The Pata-Rât area is one of the most intricate cases of social marginalization in Romania, “cumulating the effects of polluted environment, geographical isolation, socio-territorial segregation, housing deprivation and cultural stigmatisation”. [1], According to the *Participatory assessment of the social situation of Pata Rât* research report[2],

around 1,156 people live in the Pata Rât communities, most of them they are Roma. The polluted environment, spatial isolation, the lack of housing security, the inaccessibility of public education and also of job opportunities, the precariousness of the dwellings (overcrowding, lack of toilet or kitchen, in some cases the lack of basic utilities like electricity and sewage system) are only some of the deeply troublesome aspects related to living in Pata Rât. The institutional response to spatial desegregation and social inclusion does not yet succeed to bring significant changes in this respect. Each area, each family and individual have their own history and different features; the structural factors determining the concentration of the population in this segregated area are being multiple: following the losing of jobs caused by the closing of state enterprises, relocations and evictions by the authorities etc.

### **Housing policies based on rights versus policies based on needs**

The social housing allocation policies are usually centered on the concept of “needs” of the families belonging to vulnerable groups [3], [4], [5]. Besides the proven need, in most cases the accession criteria are completed with other aspects, which take into account the characteristics of the applicant, like their capacity to maintain the apartment financially, whether the potential beneficiary belongs to the sphere of specific intervention, and their behavior, which would entail as few risks as possible on social level. These latter characteristics can be summed up as being “prepared” to be the beneficiary of a social housing unit [6]. Policies relying on this *housing ready* approach usually set up a system of accession criteria, to which the applicant needs to “be in line with”. Thus, the access of the most vulnerable groups is not easy, on the other hand structural violence (as used by David Gil, [7] as a cause is neglected. Within this methodological framework, emphasis is laid on the selection of social housing beneficiaries, which would be able on one hand to demonstrate the need they have, on the other hand to show they own the resources through which they can financially maintain their dwelling.

In Romania, social housing can be accessed provided that the applicant family is able to demonstrate both the existence of family resources and its vulnerability. The emphasis on incomes in the selection of beneficiaries is reiterated again by public discourse, circulated also by professional milieux, which highlights the fact that in case of a failure, the family is “guilty” for not being capable to maintain the apartment for financial reasons. Thus, the existing system favors the allocation of social housing units to families, which in many cases, having the resources specified by the criteria, would be suitable to receive other types of support as well (i.e. the subsidy of a rent on the private real estate market). It is the same with the studied area as well: often families which

need the most a social apartment are not considered eligible for accessing the public social housing system [8].

In turn, the advantage of the housing ready policy is the fact that it is capable of focusing on the specific needs of the target groups, promoting various types of specialized, home-delivered services.

The public policy recommendations, which respond to the *housing ready* approach by promoting the “relaxing” of criteria in order to improve the access of vulnerable families to social housing, are still situated in the above mentioned framework. However, policies supporting unconditioned access to social housing are also needed, based on the *housing first* program and on the principle of right to housing. The *housing first* policy is a response to the *housing ready* approach; its starting point is the idea that all people are “prepared” to live in decent conditions, it promotes that the threshold for accessing social housing should be very low, by sustaining that decent housing is the right of each person, and the majority of the vulnerabilities of families and people are due precisely to their precarious housing conditions, which, in turn are the consequences of the structural problems of the society. As a philosophy, Housing First is a belief that all people deserve housing and anyone can be supported into housing directly from homelessness. This belief holds regardless of the level or intensity of individual and structural issues that led to their homeless, and states that housing should be the first and most primary need to address in case of people experiencing homelessness. [9] According to the *housing first* methodology, the improvement of the social and economic situation of the beneficiary becomes an objective only after the housing condition of the family/person becomes stable, namely after moving into a social apartment. The methodology foresees a comprehensive assistance, which would respond to complex needs, and would be based on the voluntary participation of the family or person receiving the apartment.

The results of the assessment studies, carried out in several countries of Europe following housing first pilot interventions, even if the vast majority of these addressed homeless people facing a unique set of problems, reveal certain important aspects, that need to be taken into account when preparing and implementing a housing first type social housing program [10]:

*a. Need for support after moving into the new apartment*

It has been revealed that support needs to be ensured regarding the management of relationships with the owners and the neighbors, regarding the settling in the apartment, the payment of costs, obtaining personal documents for acquiring various social transfers etc. Isolation and loneliness were identified as major problems in the period following relocation. Relationships based on respect and empathy between the

professional workers and the beneficiaries (*service users*) was considered as a key factor in the improvement of life quality.

*b. The offered housing types*

The same assessment study [10] shows that housing in individual apartments usually is more successful than collective housing. The latter was more adequate for families which expressly preferred this type of housing, and in those cases, when intervention in individual apartments was not successful.

*c. Changes in the quality of life*

The improvement of life quality, in terms of health or the reduction of drug use, is being attributed to the “ontological security” (in terms as used by A. Giddens [9]) that is to the fact that decent housing ensures security through “daily routines, privacy and identity construction, and a stable platform for a less stigmatized and more normalised life”. [10]

Less positive results were also registered with respect to financial situation, participation at the labor market and social relationships. Regarding the improvement of the financial situation, success depended most from the social protection system existing in the respective country. Where the support system is weak, the success of the *housing first* program was heavily compromised (for example in Hungary).

*d. Integration in the community and in the neighborhood*

The success of community integration relied on several elements, for example, on readiness and effort made in order to participate in community actions, but it also depended on the financial resources of the families/individuals.

*e. Cost-efficiency*

Since the *housing first* policy requires the provision of an intense support, the costs of the intervention are considerable. In the same time, success, which is equaled with the achievement to maintain the dwelling and respect on the long term of the contractual engagements, is associated with programs which have enough funding for ensuring complex assistance. Failure, namely the incapacity to maintain the apartment under the valid contraction terms, is linked to an under-developed social assistance system and the lack of financial subventions granted to participants in the program, whose qualification is insufficient for participating in the labor market.

## **The Pata-Cluj social housing initiative**

Within the housing component of the Pata-Cluj project, participatory social housing would be piloted, and 32 apartments outside Pata Rât will be built/purchased, destined exclusively to the communities of Pata Rât. Since the number of housing units achieved

within the project represents only approximately 10% of the total amount of housing units needed for the spatial desegregation of the communities living at present in the Pata Rât area, families which could benefit from these apartments need to be selected.

At present, the Romanian public and private system of social assistance is not capable to ensure the necessary support, either in terms of social services or supporting services, in order to surpass complex situations of vulnerable families living in marginalized communities. [12] Therefore, even if the project promote the principle of the right to housing, the methodology fits into a *housing ready* policy. Without the intention to “reward” those who have more resources at their disposal, we needed to create an accession system, which represents also a complex system for assessing the needs and resources of the families filing for a social apartment.

Romania has acquired experience and validated methodologies in what concerns the allocation of social housing units, much too few alternative methods for supporting subsidized housing and complex assistance granted to families in order to maintain the houses, which could be at the base of the new policies. The Pata-Cluj project wishes to contribute to these efforts targeting the social inclusion of the most disadvantaged communities by ensuring decent housing conditions, as part of the integrated measures for social inclusion. Since the aim of this project is to pilot methodologies, on which interventions from the part of public authorities could rely on fulfilling their responsibility in implementing national policies of social inclusion, the results of the project will add a certain amount of know-how regarding various types of housing: social housing in rural and urban areas, assistance to families with complex needs related to inclusion, and to families with less complex needs (or even without any need for complementary assistance), housing in individual social housing units and collective housing units. Thus, within the project, a system for accessing the social apartments was elaborated. This system is applicable to heavily disadvantaged communities, whenever a selection of the beneficiaries is needed. According to the principles of the Pata-Cluj project, housing is a right, and not a mean for social control, where the “deserving poor” gain this “benefit” through individual efforts. In this context, the easiest way for “selection” would be to select in order to select those families, which wish to subscribe to this “competition”. In the social and economic context of Pata Rât, this would mean a *housing first* type intervention, where access to social housing is not linked to the fulfillment of certain conditions. We believe that in some cases, granting decent housing conditions would be sufficient for the social inclusion of the family. In other cases, social inclusion would depend upon the success of social assistance measures besides decent housing conditions, including both services and social transfers.

The Pata-Cluj methodology focussed on policies, with express emphasis on children’s rights, and a systemic approach, which takes into account various levels of intervention.

The system includes the criteria of accession to the apartments and the instruments for assessing the needs and resources of the families, which wish to apply for an apartment within the Pata-Cluj project. The intervention plan is completed on the basis of this assessment. Granting a social apartment is in fact part of this intervention plan, which, however, has to be linked to other measures in basic areas, like health, education and employment. The intervention plan again focuses on the child, and is centered on the family. [13] Thus, assessment is based on the perspective of the rights of child, meaning that it analyzes the resources and needs of the family in the context of raising and caring for children.

### **The limits of the Pata-Cluj intervention**

The project does not succeed to respond to the housing needs of the most vulnerable families, since it does not have at disposal either public or private resources needed to ensure complex assistance. As a result, even if intervention plans will be completed for all the families submitting a request for social housing, the assessment criteria will take into account both the needs and the resources of the families. Finally, the assessment would allow for the prioritization of the families, which at present need a more decreased level of assistance (in terms of finances and ability development), the Pata-Cluj promoter being able to ensure these resources also after the end of the financing.

The Pata-Cluj project does not support the “privatization” either of the issue of social housing or of the social apartments themselves. The fact that the intervention is carried out outside the system of public services - although it falls under the group of interventions which have to be ensured by public authorities - has both advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the interventions implemented in the private sector consists in flexibility, the possibility for experimentation and piloting. Since this is a pilot project, it is possible to try out and re-plan interventions in a short period of time, which would be much more troublesome in the public sector.

The disadvantage consists in the fact that the results, like the concepts, methodologies and instruments created within the project, may remain outside the public policies, as this depends to a great extent on their assuming by the responsible authorities.

### **The participatory methodology of elaboration of the accession criteria for the Pata-Cluj social housing**

The elaboration methodology of the accession criteria for the Pata-Cluj social housing has three distinct phases:

## **Phase I. The identification of the needs related to housing before and following the moving of families**

In order to be able to plan the assistance measure necessary for the preparation of families for moving, and for those needed after the moving of the benefiting families to the social apartments, through the method of focus groups, we collected information trying to find out the opinion of the members of the Pata Rât communities on what they think about would be the support needs before and after moving.

The focus groups were kept with the aim of identifying among the targeted population:

- (I) the needs generated by the possibility of leaving the community, of moving to the new apartments and of sustaining them;;
- (II) the costs considered to be “affordable” for the moving families;
- (III) the type of apartment they would find appropriate.

When organizing the focus groups, the specificity of the respective community was primarily taken into account. As the three targeted communities from Pata Rat have their own features, problems and needs, we decided to organize separate focus groups in each community. Since our intention was that the participants to the focus groups represent as homogenous groups as possible, we chose to form groups on the basis of gender and power position, thus to create a discussion model where the views of women could be expressed openly, as they embodied the same interest for us as the group of men. We preferred to organize separate groups for the leaders of the communities, in order to identify community dynamics and topics.

The recruitment of the participants was carried out following a vast information campaign and direct invitation of the members of the communities to focus groups and the registration of all people wishing to participate.

Thus, we organized one focus group for women (7 participants) and one for men (4 participants) in the first community; one focus group for women (10 participants), one for men (6 participants) and one for leaders (3 participants) in the second community; one focus group for women (9 participants), one for men (7 participants) and one for leaders (2 participants) in the third community.

## **Phase II. Community consultations in the Pata Rât area regarding the Pata-Cluj social housing accession system**

Taking into account the participatory approach through which the Pata-Cluj project implements the interventions in the community, the choosing of the consultation method entailed a special interest throughout the process. Thus, we organized information and



consultation meetings with the communities regarding the Pata-Cluj social housing accession system, where we discussed also about the way how the opinions of the Pata Rât population should be collected regarding the accession system. The *method of the questionnaire* was chosen following the request expressed by the members of the community. The reason for conducting a micro-research based on a questionnaire, applied to all households in the three communities, completed by an adult member of the household, is to ensure the possibility for each member of the community to express their options, irrelevant of their position in the community.

## Presentation of the research population

219 families were interviewed. Table 1 shows that the distribution of the answer rate is very similar to the distribution by families in the UNDP research [2].

**Table 1. The distribution of answers among the 3 communities**

Community	No. of collected criteria	Percentages	No. of families in the community*	Percentages
Cantonului	393	50.38%	111	49.78%
Coastei	161	20.64%	47	21.08%
Dallas	226	28.97%	65	29.15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>780</b>	<b>100.00%</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

\*Based on the UNDP research data [2].

## Phase III. The working out of the accession criteria with the implication of the consultative group of stakeholders

We have organized 6 meetings, with 21 participants from outside the project team, the participants being representatives of the academic field, of the civil society (social services providers and representatives of various Roma organizations) and of institutions which have responsibilities in the field of social inclusion. The criteria obtained by applying the questionnaire door-to-door in all the three communities, and the needs identified in the focus groups were presented both to the members of the team and to the stakeholders, as these results were the starting point for finalizing the eligibility and selection criteria using the *Delphi method*. The results of the Pata-Cluj team's work were presented periodically to the consultative group of stakeholders, which during our meetings formulated questions and comments, but also modification recommendations regarding the draft documents.

## Results

The topics resulting from the analysis of the focus groups are classified into four major categories: Support needs before moving, support needs after moving, rent and costs, housing types.

The resulting of the focus groups reflect the wish of the participants to improve their housing conditions, but they reveal anxieties regarding the success of such project. Thus we noticed that members of the Pata Rât community have mixed feelings regarding the moving out from the area. On one hand, the participants see a chance to improve their life conditions in the possibility to move. On the other hand, they express their anxiety when envisaging the change of the already known conditions, and their suspicion against the offered change, which is the result of past negative experiences. The need for guarantees is often mentioned regarding the reliable length of the contract, the ultimate wish being to become, in time, the owner of the rented apartment. The temporary character of the contract, especially uncertainty regarding its lifetime reduces the attractiveness of this solution.

In what concerns the opinionw of the participants on the families' needs before and after moving, these needs are similar to those specified in the literature [10]: support for settling in the apartment, the payment of expenses, obtaining personal documents in order to gain various social transfers, obtaining a job, support in the management of the relationships with the owners and neighbors etc. The preferred services are linked especially to financial and instrumental support to maintaining the apartment (subvention to the expenses, enrollment of children to school etc.); emotional needs and the preference of support targeting these needs are mentioned only regarding children, and very rarely in relation to the adults, although participants in focus groups expressed their anxiety related to changes which they think that may occur when attempting to integrate into a new community of the majority population. Regarding differences among the communities, the participants in the focus groups from the first community expressed more needs related to income and job, in groups formed by inhabitants of the second community rather needs related to children were expressed. In the third community the idea to receive support and help was quite unusual, no matter if it came from outside or other members of the community (with the exception of leaders). The members of the three Pata Rât communities are suspicious against each other, a person belonging to one of the communities wishing that people from the other two communities would not live in their proximity.

Against our expectations, the majority of young families with underage children prefer to move alone, only with the nuclear family, while part of the elderly people who have adult children prefer to move together with their children. The possibility to move is often seen as a way to give up an extremely polluted and violent environment, even at the price of

losing a community which, in certain cases, may have a protective effect. Regarding the apartments, besides the preferred structure, they refer to their quality, and emphasize the importance of respecting decent standards.

### **The criteria identified by consulting the Pata Rât communities**

The criteria formulated by the community reflect the two main directives present in the most frequently used policies when addressing the accessibility of housing: the needs and the capacity of the potential beneficiary to maintain the apartment, both financially and through behavior, implying the less risks on social level. Starting from this clear duality of the obtained criteria, we grouped them by sustainability criteria (which ensure higher chances to families with more resources, and able maintain an apartment), and criteria based on needs (granting more chances to those who are in the most difficult situation and lack resources).

**Table 2. The categories ensuing from the options expressed by the members of the communities**

Type of criteria	Criteria	No of choices	Type of criteria	Criteria	No of choices
<b>Resources</b>	Documents	17	<b>Needs</b>	Family	78
<b>Resources</b>	Non-aggressive behavior	124	<b>Needs</b>	Housing condition	35
<b>Resources</b>	School	66	<b>Needs</b>	Health	28
<b>Resources</b>	Family	8	<b>Needs</b>	Low income	33
<b>Resources</b>	Paying the costs	60	<b>Needs</b>	Documents	2
<b>Resources</b>	Maintenance	110			
<b>Resources</b>	Health	8			
<b>Resources</b>	Income	206			
	<b>Total</b>	<b>599</b>		<b>Total</b>	<b>176</b>

The criteria were grouped into two categories: sustainability/resources and needs. Table 3 presents the criteria specified by the members of the communities, respecting their way of formulation.

### **Conclusions**

The paper presents and analyzes the participatory methodology used to create the accession system for the social houses. For this, we adopt the critical perspective, the model of structuralism and the notion of 'structural violence' in order to explain the interconnectedness of community dynamics and institutional mechanisms which enhance

vulnerability instead of reducing it. The participatory approach overarched the different phases of the intervention on both community and institutional level: the assessment of needs regarding housing needs, the assessment of needs before and after moving in the social houses, and the development of eligibility and evaluation criteria.

The paper advocates for participatory approach allowing the counterbalancing of power relationships not just between the community and the institutions, but also inside the community, thus attempting to protect the most vulnerable members of the community. The paper also reflects the difficulties and limits of the participatory approach, and raises awareness on the institutional responsibility when creating the context and reality of participation.

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