No water for the poor?
Barriers in Access to Water in Roma/Gypsy settlements in Slovakia

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Context

• Slovakia is characterized by a number of deep and contrasting divides.

• One of the most visible divisions is articulated in the regional asymmetries – between the growing capital city and other cities in the western part on one side and the much poorer rural areas. Another differentiations are alongside class and ethnicity.

• These divisions often intersect and are particularly visible when it comes to rural municipalities of eastern and southern Slovakia.

• Previous research confirmed that the situation of the Roma is characterized by high unemployment, insufficient infrastructures, poor housing and living conditions and a general lack of social integration, (e.g. Guy 2013, Filadelfiova, Gebrery, Škobla 2012, Alekseeva, Zalesak, Szilvasi 2013, Filcak 2012, Vašečka 2001 and others)

• In recent decades, the segment of Roma population characterised by the somehow technocratic term as ‘marginalised Roma communities’ became an object of political debates, policy-making initiatives and general modes of governing the poor and disadvantaged.

• Different initiatives have been launched on international, national or regional levels of governance. Governments and NGOs launched various projects and schemes aimed at fighting exclusion, improving livelihoods or assisting the growing number of poor and excluded segments of the population.
Roma settlements


- Despite these localities serve as a permanent residence, they are characterized by dilapidated housing and often by absence of basic physical infrastructure (sewage system, water pipelines/wells, paved roads, lighting...).

- These settlements often have ambiguous legal status (are considered informal, are not registered in *cadastre*, houses are not officially approved).

- Often, households in settlements are in debts in relation to municipality, for not paying for collection of garbage.

- *Atlas* identified more than 150 Roma neighbourhoods/settlements in Slovakia where not one house was connected to a public water supply, and more than 370 were without sewerage systems in place.

- *Note: Roma settlements in Slovakia are not places with temporary accommodations of huts, tents, or other structures typically used by itinerant Roma, but places inhabited for several generations by sedentary Roma communities.*
Right to water as a political commitment

Barriers in access to water has been referred in many international conventions and development strategies on the national level:

• UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) adopted General Comment no. 15 on the right to water, which recognizes the right to water as an indispensable factor for human dignity (2002)

• UN General Assembly’s Resolution A/Res/64/292 formally established access to safe drinking water and sanitation as a human right (July 2010)

• The Strategy of the Slovak Republic for the Roma Integration through 2020 established, as one of its main targets, to ensure the access to and quality of drinking water in Roma communities. It quotes the older version Atlas, which pointed out that only 39 % of households in Roma settlements are connected to a water supply.

• The key Slovak programming documents for the EU structural funds investment 2014-2020 the Cooperation Agreement focuses on narrowing the gap in regional disparities, among others, by means of building a water infrastructure for inhabitants.

However: we suggest that governmental strategies and allocation of funds does not necessarily and automatically mean that living conditions for Roma are improved.
Two, inter-related levels framing and/or facilitating ‘access’ to water:

• central level/nation state that the guarantee of access as recognized in various strategical documents, laws, etc.

• local level/municipality; this is the space where national-level policies collide with local-level decision-making and social practice.

*In our research we are primarily concerned with exploring a social space at the local level, tentatively, called the ‘access to water’.*
Access to water field

- According to P. Bourdieu, ‘field’ represents a structured social space with its own rules, hierarchies, and actors.
- ‘Field’ is a social space in its own that operates relatively autonomously from the wider social structure, in which people relate and operate through a complex of direct and indirect social relations.
- Even though a ‘field’ is not fixed, activities inside the ‘field’ follow ordered patterns and have some predictability.
- ‘Field’ is hierarchically structured: not everyone inside is equal and there are some who are dominant (and who have decision-making power) and some who are subordinate.
- Groups of people and individuals may occupy more than one ‘field’ at a time and there are relationships between ‘fields’, which make them inter-dependent.
Methodology

• The fieldwork for this research was conducted over three weeks and consisted of short visits in 17 municipalities.

• In the first step we pre-selected villages and towns according to the *Atlas of Roma Communities* (Mušinka et al. 2014) according to 2 criteria:
  - Roma settlement/neighbourhood without water pipelines while the rest of the municipality is supplied by public water, and
  - Proportionality from geographic and demographic perspectives: i. e. quota selections for regions, degrees of segregation and sizes of population.

• In the second step, from this list we randomly selected final number of municipalities.
Veľká Ida: settlement located behind the mounds of slag and below chimneys of a nearby monumental steelworks factory (900 people)
Only one water tap, where accessibility of water is restricted to just a few hours per day. At the time of our visit the water tap was open from 7am to 5pm.
Janovce: Roma neighbourhood (600) is located in a small valley overlooking the village. No house is connected to a water pipeline and sewage.
The only water source is a single water conduit serving the community of 600 people.
Positionality of the Roma within the social field

• Positionality of Roma occupying the lowest position in social stratification is understood as ‘natural’ and is made legitimate by the ‘doxa’ on Roma: ‘shy of work’, ‘irresponsible’, ‘scrounging social allowance’, ‘tricking’ that are common parlance.

• The relative stability of social structures and hierarchies, is sustained by ‘unspoken truths’ and by ‘what is taken for granted’ (‘doxa’), thus reproducing Roma marginalisation.

• In other words, the social hierarchies at local level are sustained via assumptions regarding the Roma that do not need to be verified, which are consequently recognized in the structures of everyday life.

• This set-up of the ‘field’ sustains mechanisms of the reproduction of social inequalities, which in turn are exemplified in the appalling conditions in which most Roma live.
Conclusions 1

• Often, inactivity of municipality (in improving housing and/or access to water) is justified by ambiguous legal status of the settlements and households lacking land titles and/or construction permits („we cannot do anything, since the land underneath belongs to unknown/private owners“).

• Often, municipally-incited indebtedness (and by management of the accumulated debts for waste disposal) keeps local Roma at bay. (Most of the Roma households in the settlement are indebted to the municipality for payments such as municipal waste disposal, normally running to several hundred Euros). This indebtedness also serves as a tangible justification that local Roma ‘do not deserve’ and as a legitimisation of status-quo/inactivity.

• Several municipalities were ready to install water pipelines only to particular Roma households who ‘deserve’ it – meaning, e.g. those few better-off who had bought the land underneath the dwelling or did not have any outstanding debts.

• Only those Roma, who were in the eyes of the municipal authorities seen as ‘orderly’, ‘deserving’ and ‘unproblematic’ were selected to become the subject of their attention or some assistance.
Conclusions 2

• We identified asymmetrical the power relations and structural violence at local level. Ruling class who accumulated considerable social/economic capital also has control and determines how are resources used. Under such conditions, based on plethora of formal and informal decisions the funding is used in line with interests of the dominant group rather than in with interests of marginalized.

• The lack of access to water for the Roma is perceived as a ‘natural’ consequence of Roma ‘undeservingness’: in environment of widespread discrimination and contempt, the poorest Roma are seen as ‘non-entitled’.

• Municipal policies of ‘tough fist’ regarding the Roma are often perceived by local non-Roma as a sign of ‘competence’ and ‘good governance’ on the part of mayors.

• Lacking any Roma political representation, in practical terms the decisions-making process (not only for improving access to water) often leaves Roma neighbourhoods neglected.
Conclusions 3

• Given the dimension of structural oppression in Slovakia, it would be naïve to expect isolated policies formulated at the national level and materialized in various strategies and official documents, to remedy the plight of the Roma.

• Their marginalisation and segregation is shaped in a complex web of political, social and economic structural forces, history of inter-ethnic relations, cultural legacies and individual actions and cannot be solved simply.

• Negative capital of the Roma is functional to lack of political will (both centrally and locally) to address Roma poverty in any efficient manner.

• However, we believe that even some of the short-term measures at local level (such as access to water) could in some degree mitigate inequalities and discrimination and can be basis for further confronting long-term structural problems.
Thank you