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SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF WORK AND THE LABOUR MARKET IN FOUR ROMA COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract:

The article presents socio-economic aspects of work and labour market in four Roma communities in Romania. The theoretical framework presents the labour market, its risks and inequalities in relation to the Roma population. The data analysed in the article is based on a qualitative methodology and 123 people (Roma and non-Roma) were interviewed. The analysis presents the jobs of Roma people, the ways they are paid for the work they do and the determinants of the label given to Roma by welfare recipients who do not like to work. The data presented and analysed are obtained within the project "The role of religion and religious actors in Roma social inclusion: towards a participatory approach" PARI – RO-NO-2019-0586.

Key words: roma, labour market, labour remuneration, social benefits

1. Introduction

Both European and national policies promote equal opportunities for labour market integration of all employable citizens as well as facilities to improve access to existing jobs on the market and our article presents socio-economic aspects of Roma communities that can contribute to the implementation of these policies.

As far as the Roma minority is concerned, it is the largest minority group in the EU (Macías León, 2023) and it is difficult to determine the number of Roma in any country (Macías León, 2023). The European Commission estimates the European Roma population to be 10-12 million (European Commission, 2020) and Romania is the European country with the largest number of Roma (Macías León, 2023). The Roma ethnic minority in Europe is not homogeneous in the European context but there are high levels of exclusion and job insecurity in the Roma community in any country (Cârstocea 2022; Macías León 2023).

For Roma in Romania, working abroad (temporary migration), combined with local casual work and social benefits, plays an important role in providing income and improving living conditions for disadvantaged people and their families (Veres, 2023).

The prospects for addressing the issues of Roma work and especially their integration into the labour market can be very important in achieving community development goals aimed at the quality of life of all people.

2. Literature review

Both in Romania and abroad, many studies, researches and reports have been carried out presenting the problems faced by the Roma population (Ionescu & Cace, 2006a) and the socio-economic approach is found in most of them (Mărginean, 2001).

The employment situation of the Roma population has been addressed in research highlighting low employment rates (Zamfir & Zamfir 1993; Preda & Zamfir 2002; Ionescu & Cace 2006b; Duminică, 2006; Cace et al., 2010) and the need for measures to facilitate Roma access to the labour market (Ionescu & Cace 2006a; Duminică & Preda, 2003; Cace, 2007); their discrimination and marginalisation in the labour market (Breimo & Baci 2016, Moisa et al., 2019; Schmaus, 2020; Lazăr, 2020; Pascal, 2020; Crețan et al., 2021).

In Romania, there have been three different contexts that have influenced Roma policies on employment, migration of the Roma population abroad and their return to the country. These contexts are: 1. Romania's transition from communism to a market economy; 2. Romania's integration into the EU and 3. The COVID pandemic.

Regarding the first context, after enjoying minimal social protection during communism (guaranteed jobs, for example) (Berevoescu et al., 2002), after the fall of communism the Roma population in Romania was confronted with the systems and reforms of the market economy (Appel, 2023), most of the Roma suffered an obvious decline in economic, social and educational terms (Ionescu & Cace 2006; Lazăr et al., 2015; Anghel, 2019). It is also important to note in describing this context that Romania's transition to a market economy has also led to the official recognition of the Roma minority with the advantages that come with this status (Ionescu & Cace 2006).

Regarding the second context, Romania's accession to the EU in relation to national minority rights has been presented antithetically by scholars: on the one hand there are researchers who consider that EU accession has influenced the protection of their rights (Kelley, 2004b), on the other hand there are researchers who consider that the success of protecting the dept is limited because discrimination has continued after EU accession (Sobotka & Vermeersch, 2012; Sasse, 2008; Bieber & Bieber, 2021) especially in terms of Roma integration in the labour market (Ionescu & Cace 2006b; Cace et al., 2010; Preoteasa et al., 2010; Breimo & Baci, 2016; Anghel, 2019).

In the context of the COVID 19 pandemic (the third context), minority populations were likely to be affected by the economic crisis (Platt & Warwick 2020; Matache & Bhabha, 2020; Pareek et al., 2020; Macías León, 2023). The economic effects of the pandemic have been visible in more precariously employed population groups (Ocaña et al., 2020). Living conditions during the pandemic deteriorated to alarming levels in most European countries leading to increased food insecurity and new forms of discrimination and stigmatisation (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; Cârstocea, 2022). Roma were severely affected by the restrictions imposed in the pandemic (National Agency for Roma, 2020; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). COVID

outbreaks have been associated with relatively large numbers of people returning from abroad (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020).

3. Labour market in Romania

Pandemic and Standard of Living Report. Social Protection Policies by researchers from the Institute for Quality of Life Research shows that in Romania among the most affected social categories during the COVID 19 pandemic were people who recently returned from other countries (return migration) without income. (Arpinte et al., 2020). The Romanian authorities' data on returnees do not contain information on ethnicity and for this reason no estimates could be made on the number of Roma who returned during the pandemic (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Also, in Romania there is no data on how the closure of some businesses may have affected Roma (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, but the National Agency for Roma report on the need for intervention by the competent authorities for the benefit of members of vulnerable Roma communities in the context of the implementation of measures to prevent the spread of COVID 19 shows that Roma practising traditional crafts were deeply affected because they were not legally registered in the practice of crafts and could not benefit from support from the authorities (National Agency for Roma, 2020).

The study on Livelihood Strategies during the COVID-19 Epidemic in Materially Disadvantaged Roma Communities from Covasna County, Romania shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the material and income situation worsened for people previously employed in the informal labour market, for seasonal migrants, for people involved in precarious work and for those with very low incomes. Neither the regulations and legal measures introduced, nor the social protection system, were sensitive to the needs of the Roma, who were the most vulnerable to the social consequences of the pandemic restrictions (Veres, 2023).

According to the study Exploring the career development process in the case of roma students in Romania, several social factors have positively or negatively influenced the lives of young Roma. Among them, the family was the main source of moral support for all participants (Buhăescu-Ciucă & Ioniță, 2022).

Labour markets are unequal and discriminatory in terms of ethnicity (Lazăr, 2020). Studies have been developed identifying factors/barriers that block or diminish Roma access to the Romanian labour market such as low educational level, lack of skills required in the labour market, undeclared work, seasonal migration (Ionescu & Cace, 2006b; Cace et al., 2010; Preoteasa et al., 2010; Breimo & Baci, 2016; Anghel, 2019).

Factors favouring Roma labour market integration have also been inventoried (Cace, 2007; Preoteasa et al., 2010; Anghel, 2019). The role of external funds in financing programmes aiming at Roma labour market integration has been analysed (Cace et al., 2006; Ionescu & Banu, 2015; Moisa et al., 2017). The role of central and local authorities, civil society and international institutions in the development and implementation of strategic documents aimed at access of Roma to the labour market was also highlighted (Ionescu & Cace, 2006b; Moisa et al., 2013; Ionescu & Banu 2015; Moisa et al., 2017; Anghel, 2019; Pascal, 2020).

Roma participation in the labour market and their level of professional qualification is well below the national average (Cace et al., 2010; Cace et al., 2013; Horváth, 2017). An occupational typology of Roma has been developed which includes Roma who "work on the black market", Roma who "work wherever they can (e.g. collect scrap metal)", Roma with household activities, Roma with traditional activities (handicrafts, handicrafts and dairy), Roma with a job on the formal market, Roma with their own business, Roma who migrate abroad (work more in agriculture)(Preoteasa et al., 2010).

Although policies for the protection of national minorities, including the Roma minority, aim to respect cultural, linguistic and identity rights in order to avoid their marginalization (Corman, 2008), phenomena such as segregation and social marginalization continue to exist. The poverty of Roma families, the prejudices that continue to exist, the indifference of some Roma parents towards the prospects offered by their children's education, lead to marginalisation and limited access to equal opportunities (Mara & Corman, 2012).

Everyday experiences of racism resulting from interactions with non-Roma lead to Roma exclusion from the labour market and educational segregation. There is a desire for segregation including in the workplace (Crețan et al., 2021). The diagram of the causes of Roma discrimination in Romania made in the Evaluation Report on the Implementation of the Horizontal Principles in the European Structural and Investment Funds (2022) shows racism among employers and lack of access to education as causes for Roma informal activities (Lonean et al., 2022).

Rostas (2019), in his analysis of why Roma policies fail, argued that, along with a history of abuse, discrimination and poverty leading to the current situation, the lack of political influence of Roma and their lack of involvement in formulating policies relevant to them today can be considered the root causes of the failure of these policies. Therefore, it observes a low relevance of public policies, as they do not take into account the diversity of Roma groups and their problems, instead formally involving them in discussions without in-depth research on the situations they face (Buhăescu-Ciucă & Ioniță, 2022).

The economic profile of Roma people is discouraging characterized by low incomes from pretaiions or from carrying out low paid activities that cannot guarantee a secure income (Prodan et al., 2021). However, public policies for Roma have experienced an upward evolution (Ionescu & Cace, 2006), and from 2011 until now European institutions have adopted common framework policies for Roma inclusion (Anghel, 2019). Access to employment remains alongside access to health and education among the most pressing issues facing the Roma population (Albu, 2021). There are studies that argue that a high level of Roma employment integration could lead to significant economic growth (Ionescu & Cace, 2006).

Employment policies for Roma provide, among the directions of action, a higher employment rate of the Roma population, the development of programmes to develop the entrepreneurial capacity of Roma, the improvement of Roma skills in line with labour market requirements, the outsourcing of labour mediation services, information and professional counselling for job seekers (Ionescu & Banu, 2015).

The presentation of the socio-economic aspects of work and the labour market completes the picture of the specific issues that need to be highlighted, analysed and

addressed so that community development policies can achieve their objectives of socio-economic integration of the Roma population and improving the quality of life of the population.

4. Methodology

The data to be presented were collected through the research project "The role of religion and religious actors in Roma social inclusion: towards a participatory approach" (PARI Project). Part of the objectives of the project were: make an inventory of existing projects on a local level in two regions (Sibiu and Vâlcea) and promote best practice examples through workshops and trainings; carry out case studies in five local communities about the interaction between religious actors and the Roma population, exploring both institutional involvement and lived religion, by using a participatory approach, both in research methodology and through initiating new practices locally, in concrete contexts; launch small pilot projects based on the results of the case studies; promote a participatory approach in all parts of the research, especially by involving representatives of the Roma population.

The central objective of this article is to present socio-economic aspects of work and the labour market in four Roma communities in the counties of Sibiu (two communities) and Vâlcea (two communities). The data presented can be used in future community strategies for the labour market integration of Roma people.

In order to achieve the research objective, the study is guided by three research questions: where do Roma from the four communities work? How are Roma paid for their work? And Why do some Roma not work and rely solely on social assistance from the state?

123 interviews were conducted, both with Roma people and local social actors (social workers, religious leaders, doctors, teachers, etc.). Using a participatory qualitative methodology, local co-researchers were used to facilitate data collection. Data collection was carried out during 2022 and the sample had the following structure: 85 Roma interviewees (C1=30, C2=16, C3=22, C4=17) and 38 local social actors with a key role in the community (C1=20, C2=5, C3=6, C4=7). Two of the localities where the research was carried out belong to Sibiu county and two belong to Valcea county, the selection of localities and counties took into account the socio-cultural particularities mentioned in the PARI Project.

A thematic analysis of the data was carried out, allowing the identification of socio-economic aspects related to work and the labour market in the four communities studied.

5. Results

The data for this study was grouped along two dimensions: the perspective of Roma people and the perspective of key actors in the communities. We present below the two perspectives in relation to the research questions mentioned above.

From the perspective of self-declared and heterodeclared Roma, the results to the question where Roma work were grouped as follows: abroad, in the country as commuters

or even in the locality of residence as day labourers. The majority of Roma are migrants: *"Over there, ... harvesting, abroad, in agriculture..."* (F27H_r); *"in factories, strawberry picking, peas, cherry picking, whatever it takes"* (F30B_r). Other Roma left at home commute to neighbouring towns where they have job opportunities: *"for me, I don't know what is easy or hard, for me it's work... I commute and it's a daily routine, nothing out of the ordinary"* (F33FI). Other Roma also work as day labourers in their locality of residence: *"Look I work during the day in the village cleaning people's houses, in the garden ..."* (F42R_r); *"Now if someone comes or I go to work, I go, I don't refuse, I have to go, you don't have to work today, if you want, if you have the conscience to work"* (M64B_r).

In addition to the Roma who work in these places, there are also Roma who do not work or prefer not to work. Their motivation is related to their health, old age and in the case of young people to the lack of good employment opportunities or seasonal migration opportunities or very low wages: *"Rather than working for nothing, I'd rather stay for nothing"* (F42FR_r); *"I have no money and I don't work, what can I do? "* (F42FR_r); *'so if I don't work, I don't do anything, I can't, I can't, not that I don't want to...pretty much the same thing I do in winter and summer, so in winter I don't go and sit in the park, in winter I sit in front of the TV"* (M58B_r).

Most of the Roma interviewed who work in the country declared themselves dissatisfied with their salary, telling that sometimes it is impossible for them to live on such small amounts: *"with money ... you couldn't manage, no way"* (M40R_r). Despite the hidden costs of migration (Corman and Croitoru 2023), migration and especially seasonal migration is presented by Roma as a financial opportunity that allowed them to build a house and have a normal standard of living: *"I like what I do. I couldn't say anything. I love it. I'm helping my mother, she's 80 years old, there I'm helping my elders, I'm happy with what I'm doing. I wouldn't like to be on duty at the factory anymore, to be ordered by the manager"* (F52FI_r).

From the perspective of key actors in the community, the socio-economic aspects of work are different. They highlight the training and employment opportunities that Roma people have through projects that have provided training and vocational skills: *"they have been offered skills training and jobs.... We have no one to send and they are paid well, they provide transport... they come, they take you away, no one comes to take us from home, to take us to work"* (F42Fr_mb). Social actors in the community also highlight the insistence with which Roma express their grievances to the local authorities: *"It is not a day in God's life that Roma do not come to express their grievances"* (F45FR_mb). Aspects of aggression and other deviant acts by some Roma are also mentioned: *"There are many young people who don't work and they hit you or hit each other"* (F51B_mb). The sometimes unjustified financial demands of Roma when doing various jobs are also mentioned by community social actors: *"They don't come to work.... that if they come, they think I have money and ask for a lot"* (F51FR_mb). There are also people in the community who are dissatisfied with the fact that the financial aid offered by the state to Roma does not encourage them to work: *"most of them have the impression that the state is obliged to give them social aid"* (F50FI_mb).

There are also local social actors who highlight the importance of financial support for those at home by relatives who have gone abroad to work: *"they stay at home because*

most of them have children in England and they send them money... they make do with little" (F51FR_mb). The practice of handicrafts is presented as belonging only to the elderly: "The elderly work at making spoons, actually wooden jewellery. They work and work so hard. A wooden spoon is taken 9 times by hand, plus dried 9 times, I mean I know this from them. They work very hard, but they are the ones who are old, 75 years old, 80. The 50-year-olds don't make any more, they all went to the factory, they'd rather work to get a pension, so what can the poor do" (F55B_mb).

Local social actors not only have a negative perception of the economic and financial aspects of Roma work, but they also highlight the low wages or financial rewards in the country, which are very low, and the fact that many Roma have left the country for better incomes: *"Wages are low here... Why do you think they left? For a better salary" (M39FI_mb). The social actors also consider that those who like to work, are integrated in the work and respond to offers to do various jobs and services "Some of them we have integrated in the labour market and they are even eager to work.) They work at different tailoring companies, shoe companies, those from ... they all work, there are no social benefits" (F42FR_mb). From the perspective of local social actors, the labour market integration of those who are able to work is related to the financial expectations and willingness to work of Roma people.*

6. Limitations

One of the important limitations of our research is the use of a qualitative methodology without complementing a rigorous quantitative methodology with quantitative data collection tools applied to the population category to which the research can be extrapolated. Also, the specificity of local contexts is not highlighted in the analysis presented although it could justify and argue various points of view.

7. Conclusion

In this article we aimed to highlight the socio-economic aspects of work in the four Roma communities (two in Sibiu county and two in Valcea county), structured on two dimensions: the perspective of Roma people and the perspective of local social actors.

We found that the two perspectives are quite different when presenting the jobs, the opportunities but also the risks arising from work activities, with each perspective emphasizing something else. In the case of the Roma perspective, the reduced job opportunities, financial shortages and difficulties, individual and community needs are accessed. In the case of the local social actors' perspective, training and qualification opportunities for Roma people, access to employment, social benefits offered, but also deviant Roma behaviour are emphasised, as these imply risks in employment.

Interviewing a large number of people, both Roma and local social actors, allowed us to present a detailed picture of the socio-economic aspects of Roma work in the four communities. When asked where Roma people work, the answers centred on working abroad or at home. Those who work in the country are either commuters and work in factories or agriculture, or are day labourers or craftsmen (rudaries). When asked how

Roma work is remunerated, answers were grouped around the insufficient income of those who stayed behind and the higher financial expectations they have. When asked why some able-bodied Roma do not work and are satisfied with social benefits from the municipality, the answers were centred around unmotivated and very low wages that do not lead to efforts to integrate into the labour market.

The results presented, by presenting quite different perspectives on the Roma issue, provide an objective picture of the social reality and this picture can be the basis for future analyses on which to base Roma employment strategies on the Romanian labour market and community development strategies that take into account both perspectives.

8. References

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