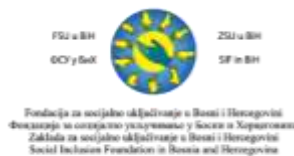




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Strategies of social inclusion - the significance and role

Within the project “Build up for Social Inclusion Advocacy Platform in Bosnia and Herzegovina - Will You Stop and Listen” supported by the Delegation of the European Union and UNICEF, and implemented by the Social Inclusion Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (SIF in BiH) and the Initiative for Better and Humane Inclusion (IBHI) an important activity is the initiation and the preparation of the social inclusion strategies in the entities and the Brčko District of BiH.

The social inclusion strategies for the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska and the Brčko District of BiH for the period 2021-2027 were prepared by experts and with the broad participation of members of the Coalition of Marginalised Groups in BiH “KOMA” /COMA/ at round tables or online.

Constitutional competencies in the areas important for social inclusion are at the respective levels of the entities and the Brčko District of BiH and, therefore, three strategies have been prepared. They were prepared on the basis of the same methodology, a single approach and the assessment of key issues, while respecting the particularities of the entities and the Brčko District of BiH. They are therefore harmonised and *de facto* form a common strategy for the whole country in terms of goals and EU standards with particularities arising from the differences between the entities and the Brčko District of BiH.

Consequently, by building policies from the bottom up, through the coordination system, it would be possible to reach an official, common 2021-2027 social inclusion strategy for BiH, which is an EU requirement.

The EU Delegation to BiH did not accept this and reject the proposal to continue this project.

What is it about?

1. In a much broader sense, since the end of the last century, a new concept of development has been developed conceptually and increasingly in practice. Its current phase is Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2015-2030) with 17 global goals the first of which is “Combating Poverty”. The emphasis is put on the economic development, the social inclusion and the environmental sustainability. The key viewpoint is that a man is the means and the goal of development, and that they must be involved, without any discrimination, in the development of the society. The EU has been significantly engaged in the implementation of Agenda 2030. Among other things, the European Commission adopted a document in 2019 entitled “Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030” in which one of the priorities is to “Ensure social justice and support for a just transition to sustainability where the social rights promotion and the welfare of everyone contributes to the social cohesion in the Member States and throughout the EU”.
2. In the described broader context, the social inclusion is a tool for the implementation of sustainable development. In 2004, the EU Council defined the social inclusion as follows:

“Social inclusion is a process which ensures that those at risk of poverty and social exclusion gain the opportunities and resources necessary to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life and to enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live. It ensures that they have greater participation in decision making which affects their lives and access to their fundamental rights.”

Therefore, the social inclusion is a general approach to the development in which a man is its basic development factor. Improving the social position of the marginalised is a precondition to come from the margins to the center of social development and decision-making about it. At the same time, social inclusion means a change in social policies, from passive social protection that should keep the user alive, to an active policy of inclusion in the working world. This prevents poverty and marginalisation; it is not social assistance but an investment in people and a society of equal opportunities.

3. The Opinion of the European Commission about BiH's membership in the European Union clearly defines fourteen priorities - requirements for accepting the candidature. The thirteenth priority is “to improve the protection and inclusion of the vulnerable groups, especially persons with disabilities, children...”. The Analytical Report (Chapter 19) attached to the Opinion of the European Commission concretises the poor assessment of social policies “there is no state strategy for poverty reduction, social inclusion, and protection...”
4. For the two years that have passed since the EC Opinion, our authorities have done nothing for the implementation of the fourteen priorities (except for a couple of political ones, such as the Mostar elections), especially in the most important areas. In growing national-political conflicts, both the authorities and the opposition fight for their own self-sustainability without having any sense of social and economic realities or the interests of citizens. It is paradoxical, and at the same time the biggest criticism of the authorities, that two non-governmental organisations are working on the implementation of the thirteenth priority with the support of external experts and 121 members of the Coalition of Marginalised Groups “KOMA” /COMA/. This especially because the result is tangible, specific and is not an endless “support” for agitation for the EU integration of our “project industry”.

The social situation of marginalised groups

1. Poverty in our country is becoming endemic due to the lack of interest of the authorities to focus on this growing problem. Our statistical institutions give wrong information about the situation, reducing the number of people who are poor by using the wrong methodology. The latest official data is from 2015, when the last Household Expenditure survey was conducted. Using the wrong methodology of relative poverty, they came up to 16.9% of the poor population in BiH. In the same year, using the same methodology, it was found out that the average of 24% of population in the countries of the European Union is relatively poor. Is the EU poorer than BiH or are they making fools of us by using the wrong methodology? This methodology measures the income gap rather than poverty - the more developed a country is the greater the income gap is. It is fair to use the methodology of absolute poverty. Independent analyses indicate that 23% of the BiH population is below the line of absolute poverty. UN and World Bank estimates correspond to this assessment. Social peace cannot be preserved by hiding issues. Sustainable poverty reduction policies, such as social inclusion, are necessary.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic, makes the already bad situation even worse. The World Bank has estimated that 35,000-85,000 people in BiH will additionally become poor. The relatively small decline in employment is an illusion. The decline in the income of workers in service industries who are formally employed and receive minimum salaries and state payments of taxes and contributions is not taken into account. Even less attention is paid to the fact that 200 000 people worked “off the books” and are now left without income. They do not lose formal employment that they have not even had, but they lose real income.
A decline in economic activities, remittances from the diaspora, insufficient government assistance and support to the economy will exacerbate the problem in 2021.
A special problem is that there is no support for marginalised groups for overcoming the COVID-19 consequences. People with disabilities, with low disability benefits for example, need to “manage” for protection against the pandemics, face masks, disinfectants, restricted movement, etc. Why are they not provided with one-off or multiple support to cover their extraordinary and living expenses?
3. The existing social protection system, and we will repeat this a thousand times, is inefficient; transfers are directed according to status, not according to needs. The latest analysis from 2014 (World Bank and IBHI) shows that the richest one-fifth of the population (20%) receives more total social transfers than the poorest (17%).
The important developments such as the new Law on the Protection of Families with Children in the Federation of BiH, which radically improves child protection, remain an exception.
The approach must be changed; “minimum funds” are basically not a budget cost but a capital investment into human resources. Not to mention the demographic disaster.
4. The poor general social situation affects marginalised groups by far the most.

Social Inclusion Strategies 2021-2027

The strategies themselves, in the development of which most of you participated, can be found on the websites of the SIF in BiH and IBHI, so it is unnecessary to elaborate on them.

All three strategies, namely those of the Federation of BiH, the Republika Srpska and the Brčko District of BiH, are harmonised, aimed at addressing the following key issues of social inclusion:

- Social position of children and youth, especially in the context of the demographic decline
- Poverty and the necessity for reducing it through social inclusion policies
- People with disabilities and the fight for a society of equal opportunities
- Gender causes of social exclusion
- Elderly people and a return to a dignified life without poverty
- Ethnic causes of social exclusion and the importance of full national equality

Expertly developed strategies with the participation of those who care the most about the progress in this area, marginalised groups, have had an important impact on decision makers.

The completeness of the project “Will You Stop and Listen” largely contributed to this by changing the general public perception of the possibilities of the marginalised - from the film “Will You Stop and Listen”, which was broadcasted by all public TV services and numerous local TV stations, to media announcements, short stories, and videos.

Have we succeeded?

In contrast to the large amounts of money thrown into the domestic and foreign “project industry” the results of which are not measurable, for they do not exist, we can state the following:

The goal of component 1 of the “Will You Stop and Listen” project is to “initiate and expertly prepare draft strategies for social inclusion in the Federation of BiH, Republika Srpska and the Brčko District of BiH.

1. At its session held on 18 February 2021, the Parliament of the Federation of BiH adopted the Development Strategy of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina proposed by the Government of the Federation of BiH and prepared by the Federation Institute for Development Programming with the participation of a large number of actors, including our project.

In this Strategy, Strategic Goal 2: Priority and Inclusive Social Development, Priority 2.5. Reduce poverty and social exclusion, measure 2.5.1. Improving the social inclusion of marginalised groups, the following is stated: “...In the coming period it is necessary to adopt a comprehensive strategic document (Social Inclusion Strategy), which would contain specific policies and programmes targeted at groups of the population who are socially excluded or at risk of poverty and social exclusion... It is necessary to constantly develop public awareness of the significance of social inclusion” (p 51).

The Action Program entitled “Framework for Evaluation, Implementation, Monitoring and Reporting” sets out as a measure 2.5.1 the “Adoption of the Federation of BiH Social Inclusion Strategy”.

2. The Government of the Brčko District of BiH adopted the “Development Strategy of the Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021-2027” (draft) on 21 October 2020, which was discussed at a session of the Assembly of the Brčko District of BiH held on 12 May 2021. In several parts of it, it relies or takes over the text of the “Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina Social Inclusion Strategy for 2021-2027” prepared within this project. Part of Priority 2.2. “Improving the system of social inclusion according to needs” takes over the basic findings of the mentioned Strategy. The basics of expertly prepared Brčko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina Social Inclusion Strategy for 2021-2027 are fully integrated into the Development Strategy of the Brčko District of BiH, which is a great progress compared to the previous strategy of the Brčko District of BiH.
3. The work plan of the Government of Republika Srpska for 2018-2022 includes the drafting of “Republika Srpska Strategy for the Development of Social Protection in 2021-2027”. The Republika Srpska Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, which is fully focused on the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has retained this position although the development of the “Strategy for the Development of the Social Protection of Republika Srpska” has not even begun. In January 2021, the document “Republika Srpska Social Inclusion Strategy for 2021 -2027” was submitted to the Ministry with a recommendation to use it in making their own strategy.

The members of KOMA /COMA/ from the Republika Srpska have agreed to engage in advocating the development of the “Republika Srpska Social Inclusion Strategy for 2021-2027” on the basis of an expertly prepared document within the project “Will You Stop and Listen”.

What to do?

The project “Will You Stop and Listen” ends on 30 June 2021. The only thing we can do is to solemnly and with best wishes pass the relay to the EU Delegation in BiH on 25 May this year. We will pass the torch of support of the KOMA /COMA/ Coalition, which with 121 members and seven years of sustainability and activity has shown what can be achieved with a joint motivation and a common interest along with seriousness and wit.

The implementation of the fourteen priorities is not just a matter of authorities, even if it were good, let alone when it is not. This concerns the whole society, the CSO sector and all those who are socially vulnerable. It is time for the EU Delegation to start supporting the implementation of its documents, the CSO projects that support the implementation of the fourteen priorities. Especially when the implementation of the thirteenth priority is concerned.

That is the reason why “KOMA” /COMA/ is passing you the relay torch that has been carried so far by the Social Inclusion Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.