

## **Bridges Out of Poverty in Bystrany in Slovakia**

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### **Where?**

Bystrany is a municipality situated in the Spiš region in eastern Slovakia. Peaceful and non-confrontational coexistence of majority with minority is typical of this municipality, while majority are Roma (about 2,500 of the total number of about 3,250 inhabitants). In the last few years after November 1989 it has come to an significant and positive changes in the Roma part of the village, called “colony”, thanks to the effort of Roma themselves. The primary settlement of worst appearance has changed to a village with new brick houses and repaired roofs. This transformation has been carried out using financial resources of local Roma and their family members living in Great Britain, mostly in Sheffield.

The municipality itself supports construction of new family houses and sells building lands, which are in its possession for this purpose. It has been also successfully providing terrain social work for 6 years. Roma mayor and majority Roma municipal board accommodate new ideas and encourage submission of project plans.

### **When?**

Since 2013

### **What?**

The project titled “Education of young Roma with incomplete primary education in Bystrany” was implemented in Bystrany. It was co-financed by the European Social Fund. The aim of the project was to increase the interest in education of young people from marginalized Roma communities through innovative and alternative forms of education, and to promote their ability to succeed on labor market. A square was built within this project in the settlement. It was designed and built by young Roma from Bystrany.

### **Target group**

84 young Roma about the age of 16 – 26 years with incomplete primary education were involved into the project.

### **How?**

Non-profit organization “Úspech” proposed the concept of “Bridges out of poverty” as a basis for educational activities for young Roma in Bystrany. “Bridges out of poverty” became a ground for the project “Education of young Roma with incomplete primary education in Bystrany”. The idea was adopted and newly created team (together with Bill Baker from USA) conducted training with young Roma in Bystrany during the first half of 2013. “Getting Ahead” module became a part of the training.

### **Project outcome within “Bridges out of poverty”:**

1. Decision of a few Roma to complete their primary education
2. Some young Roma decided to raise their education level
3. A group of young Roma established civic association “Young owls” (for explanation: an owl can be found in the municipal coat-of-arms of Bystrany)
4. A common result of the educational activity of “Bridges out of poverty” came to be the plan to renew a public space, later named Sheffield Square

### **Sheffield Square as part of the project**

Young Roma chose a dump space at the beginning of the settlement. They also projected the final construction and cleaned the area. Subsequently, they dug the foundations for three rows of seating; they built the stage and the amphitheater with walls and roof. Stones paved the area around. They named the new cultural center of the village and municipality in 3 languages: Slovak, Roma and English. Fero Guldan and Ľuboš Polák came to decorate the side wall of the amphitheater with mosaic. More and more people began to come and visit – Bill Baker with friends from USA, curious members from Center for Community Planning in South Morava, Andrej Bán with Jozef Majchrák from weekly magazine “Týdeň”, cameraman Jakub Kratochvíl, film director Jaro Rihák with producer Judita Gembická, music band Phurikane Gíňa with Jana Belišová, etc. Many of them came to the opening of the Sheffield Square held on August 2, 2013. At the beginning of the ceremony, about 1,000 people gathered to give tribute to the memory of Roma victims of the holocaust. The opening celebration extended into the night thanks to enthusiasm of performing musicians from different parts of Slovakia and to very friendly and grateful audience. The police patrol came few times to have a look at this non-traditional cultural event but they had no reason to intervene. Everyone with a good intention was and will be welcome. The Sheffield Square is being used as a community meeting space for children and youth, for common prayers, open handcraft courses, cultural events and is naturally becoming a living center of the settlement.

### **What's next?**

The civic association “Young owls” is very active and its largest and most famous achievement is the construction of the Sheffield Square itself. Young members of the association came with new ideas and they started to implement new activities, which will build upon the construction of the Sheffield Square. The very first such activity was an assistance in creating a sculpture in the shape of a large owl, which is not only in the coat-of-arms of the village, but also in the name of the association. At present, they are involved in the community center project and in the social enterprise project in Bystrany. In the near future, they would like to print postcards for self-promotion. Another idea is to collect and process information about social change in the settlement since the fall of communism.

### **Conclusion**

“Bridges out of poverty” made young Roma in Bystrany more active and helped boost activities in the settlement.

Miro Pollák, 26.10.2014