

SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: SLOVENIAN RED CROSS PRESENTATION by Secretary General, Mrs Renata Brunskole

Slovenian Red Cross is delivering aid and offering its services through the network of 56 local branches and 890 Red Cross local organisations with almost 14.000 volunteers, who annually dedicate more than half a million hours of their voluntary work. In the recent years the number of volunteers and voluntary hours is growing due to the heavy work load in the field of Social welfare, while almost 60 percent of all voluntary hours are conducted in the assistance of the most vulnerable.

According to the defined poverty threshold 14, 5 %, of Slovenes live below poverty line, while additional 20 percent are the risk for social exclusion. Official state statistics demonstrate that in Slovenia 291.000 people are living in poverty and 410.000 are socially excluded. On the top, there are 118.000 unemployed people, out of who majority are older than 50 years and young people, who are striving to get the first job. Considering overall population of Slovenia – 2 million inhabitants - these are very alarming numbers.

Our Slovenian Red Cross data show increased number of Social welfare beneficiaries. Since 2008 till today we have witnessed an increase of 54.000 individuals. Therefore, today, SLO Red Cross is assisting more than 160.000 socially deprived individuals and families.

Of course, numbers are important in order to be able to provide aid to the large number of vulnerable, taking into account limited resources, both human and financial wise, but in Slovenian Red Cross we are concerned by the tragic stories behind official numbers and new faces of poverty.

Before the global economic crisis, Slovenian Red Cross beneficiaries were mainly unemployed, homeless and socially deprived individuals, who were recipients of state financial aid. Nowadays, due to prolonged and lasting economic and social crisis, numerous bankruptcy of factories and loss of working places, we are faced with completely new vulnerabilities and different structure of beneficiaries, which is shifting to category of employed individuals, who are despite received income struggling with poverty – poor employed, families with both parents employed and retired people with low pension. In the last years we see that one of the most threatened categories are also single parent families and older female pensioners.

More and more people are seeking assistance from Slovenian Red Cross, the biggest humanitarian organisation in Slovenia, but at the same time it is worrying that also distress and quality of life of long term receivers of Red Cross aid is getting worse.

With purpose to alleviate effects of the poverty, Slovenian Red Cross annually distributes 3.700 tons of basic food parcels and 1.200 hygiene parcels, 2.390 tons of clothes, enables 1.200 children from socially deprived families with weeklong free, active holidays at the Slovenian Red Cross youth and Health Resort Debeli rtič, located at the Slovenian Coast. We also enable free holidays to 300 elderly persons. Slovenian Red Cross also assists more than 6.000 children with school supplies and through Hunger day campaign held in October each year, provides 33.000 hot meals for elementary school children from socially deprived families.

Special attention is given to the elderly, since the population is getting older and besides poverty, one of the hindering factor is also loneliness and in many cases social exclusion. Therefore local organisations are providing tailor made services and assistance to such individuals also through so called Red Cross stations (there are more than 444 across Slovenia), which are at one hand serving as info points regarding possible assistance and services (for example measurement of blood pressure and level of sugar) and on the other hand SRC volunteers are organising various lectures, workshops and activities with educating and preventing, as well as awareness raising topics. In recent years SRC also build a strong network of self-support groups for elderly and developed programme of companionship.

Throughout SRC is also very actively cooperating with the state authorities representing the voice of the vulnerable and advocates for their rights, as well as acts in regard to our auxiliary role, implementing Florence Call for Action defined commitments.

Actions of the state authorities are directed into improving current circumstances, however the desired effects will be visible after some years.

Slovenian Red Cross has many experiences in cooperating with state authorities in alleviating the consequences of poverty. Since 2006 my National Society is involved in distribution of EU Food for the most Deprived in the Community. This is a very important programme for the Slovenian Red Cross in order to be able to assist such big needs and huge group of beneficiaries, while it represents 60 % of all distributed aid. Most recently we are in regular discussion with the Government and Ministry of Social affairs, Labour and Equal opportunities in order to advocate for the debt relief to the most socially threatened individuals and finding lasting solutions for individuals and families faced with eviction. At the same time, there are still debates in regard to the food waste management and solving of legal considerations in dealing with food surpluses and in regard of humanitarian distribution of expired food.

However, poverty is very much present here and now and immediate actions are needed in order to safeguard the human dignity of the people in need. Slovenian Red Cross is therefore every year organising four regular fundraising campaigns ('It's nice to share, Let's take them to the see, humanitarian concert and Hunger Day) in parallel to numerous local level awareness and fundraising activities. We are also very much proactive in building partnership with private sectors in order to ease the poverty.

We are very much looking forward to share experiences from sister National Society and learn about good practices in dealing with poverty, as well as with organisational challenges – such as for example specific skills based training of volunteers in dealing with long lasting crisis and psychosocial approaches.

Being a new Secretary General, appointed only 5 months ago, I am also personally looking forward to our strengthen cooperation in the coming years in order to improve the lives of the most vulnerable and build the capacities of the Slovenian Red Cross at the same time.

Thank you for your attention!