

The progress of the Gazela slum resettlement project, Belgrade, Serbia



CEE Bankwatch Network's mission is to prevent the environmentally and socially harmful impacts of international development finance, and to promote alternative solutions and public participation

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Summary

The Gazela Bridge in Belgrade, Serbia is in urgent need of renovation. Three hundred families, predominantly Roma, who live in informal settlements under the Bridge are to be resettled. So far the resettlement process lacks proper planning and open public consultation with affected communities and Roma experts. And also the EBRD's involvement as a technical assistant has not led to the establishment of the institutional, financial and legal solutions that are necessary to effectively promote Roma inclusion. The issue paper identifies major issues and concerns on the ground and offers recommendations for the EBRD's engagement.

Background

The Gazela Bridge over the River Sava in Belgrade, Serbia, is more than 30 years old and in urgent need of renovation. Three hundred families, predominantly Roma, and a smaller number of non-Roma refugees live in informal settlements under the bridge on both sides of the river. The City of Belgrade, together with the EBRD and the European Agency for Reconstruction (EAR), is planning to resettle them as part of the bridge renovation project. The City of Belgrade will provide EUR 7.5 million and the EAR has granted EUR 2 million.

The project should be a model, setting standards for similar projects in the future. However, from the outset it has suffered from unsuitable planning and poor communication with those directly and indirectly affected. Neither the City of Belgrade nor the EBRD has disclosed any report on the project's progress or on plans for the Gazela resettlement. This was starkly highlighted after September 2008 when the City of Belgrade suddenly attempted to resettle the Gazela settlement to the suburban village of Ovca. The plan faced strong opposition from local residents in Ovca due to infrastructural constraints.

Unfortunately this most recent failure has led to neither a more inclusive process nor to effective solutions being proposed.

The recent bulldozing of an unregistered Roma slum near new flats built for the Universiade games that will take place this July in Serbia, and plans to bulldoze slums in other parts of Belgrade, have been played down by the Mayor of Belgrade, Draga Djilas, who unrepentently states that no one who stands in the way of Belgrade's development will be spared.

This is a clear sign that the Belgrade institutions are not mature enough to deal with the burning problems of the Roma population. It also leads to the conclusion that the EBRD's involvement in the Gazela resettlement project as technical assistant has not led to the establishment of the necessary institutional, financial and legal solutions to effectively promote Roma inclusion.

This is especially important because of the re-admission to Serbia from the European Union of approximately 300 000 war refugees and 'illegal' immigrants (mostly Roma) and problems related to Internally Displaced Persons from Kosovo. Currently in Serbia there are more than 800 000 Roma living without identification documents and/or address registration, and a large number of them live in roughly 2000 slum settlements.

It is thus clearly important to effectively involve the Roma National Council, Roma political parties, and other civil and expert Roma institutions in the Gazela resettlement process in order to ensure transparency, consensus, sustainability, viability and the transfer of good practices for future projects.

Details from the ground

The Resettlement Action Plan (RAP), a precondition for the EBRD's financing of the reconstruction of the Gazela Bridge, is not yet ready. Even simple questions to the city authorities about the status of the plan remain unanswered. Moreover there are signs that the City of Belgrade is planning to develop some kind of non-standard 'provisional RAP', including ad hoc solutions and the forced expulsion of people either with no identity papers or who have come to Belgrade from other parts of Serbia. This is in clear violation of people's right to choose where to live.

The primary issues and concerns that we see within the RAP formulation process are:

- 1. A lack of open public consultation with the resettled and the host communities.** Where communication and negotiations are carried out, this is done with selected representatives of the Roma community. Given that the main issues are housing, schooling and economic provision for the households, it is striking that the process to date lacks any attempt to actively include women.
- 2. A lack of sustainable economic solutions for the employment of Roma people.** The establishment of the EcoPlan company for waste collection, aimed at providing Roma with good conditions for selling the waste they collect, failed last year. There is a City of Belgrade plan to employ at least one person from each of another 100 Roma families in the Public Utility Companies, but this has still to be implemented.
- 3. Alternative scenarios have not been assessed in any depth in consultation with the Roma and host communities, as the EBRD's policy on resettlement prescribes.** The only scenario to have been made publicly available – but only after research carried out by the affected host population – was the Ovca suburban settlement, which was to host the Gazela community and other socially vulnerable inhabitants and their families from different parts of Belgrade. This would inevitably have led to ghettoisation, a point recognised by some representatives of the responsible Ministry for Social Affairs and the political representatives of the Roma community.
- 4. The proposed sites for the construction of new settlements appear to have no valid land use permits.** This situation may lead to legal status problems for the settlement and the people living there in the future, making them more vulnerable as a result of a lack of tenancy rights.
- 5. A lack of systematic solutions for the inclusion of Roma children in the school system.** The previous RAP proposed a year's preparatory work by NGOs with the children from the Gazela community, and the creation of social clubs in the host communities. This inadequate approach to the problem demonstrates that failing to involve competent parties such as the National Education Council results in partial and short-term solutions. Various practices already exist, eg. in Voivodina, Roma children have class assistants, yet here they have not been given due consideration.
- 6. A lack of personal identification documents for the Roma.** Only a few Gazela inhabitants have the documents necessary for medical care, schooling, official employment and so on. A census of the community was conducted two years ago – so far, however, very few people have obtained IDs.

Conclusions and recommendations to the EBRD

1. A transparent and consultative process for the development of the RAP should be ensured. Progress reports and evaluation documents should be disclosed.
2. All national Roma institutions should be effectively and actively involved, in order to ensure future use of the project as a model.
3. The transfer of best practice for the inclusion of Roma children in schools should be ensured by drawing on experience in communities where class assistants already exist, and transferring it to those that are less developed in this issue.
4. Gender balance should be ensured for the planning and implementation of the RAP process, including equal employment opportunities.
5. A programme of issuing IDs and registering all Roma in Serbia is crucially important for any progress in the process of achieving Roma inclusion.

For more information

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