

Daniel Gerbery – Ivan Lesay – Daniel Škobla (eds.): A Book on Poverty: Social Aspects and Public Policies

Bratislava 2007, Priatel'ia Zeme CEPA, 144 pages.

This very relevant collection offers seven contributions on poverty and social policy in Slovakia. The editors had an ambition to map the development of poverty in its complexity and therefore include many different perspectives. They define their approach in comparison to a narrow economic viewpoint emphasizing that poverty is mainly a social phenomenon and poor people face not only material needs but also exclusion from participation in society. The book is exceptional in its critical attitude, aspiring to change the situation of the needy as well as social policy in general. Because of the important political role of Slovak reforms in the Visegrad region, interest in this book will not be limited to only Slovak scholars

The first five studies analyse five dimensions of poverty and social exclusion: life cycle, work, space, housing and environment. The title of the chapter 'life cycle' is rather misleading because the author, *Jarmila Filadelfiová*, provided a much broader analysis. She offers an overview of an occurrence of poverty and of the role of different social factors according to data from the last five years. The system of social support seems insufficient. Because of its inapt targeting and low benefits, it is not able to solve the situation of the most vulnerable poor – children. The following chapter shows that a relatively large part of the working population in Slovakia is facing poverty. One-income households seem as endangered (by poverty) as job-less households. The biggest portion of the chapter is devoted to the politics of employment and the labour market. Inviting foreign investors and the flat tax seem to be the main strategies in the fight against unemployment. In 2004, social benefits were radically lowered. Moreover, they were conditioned by activation work the meaning of which has been called into question. A change in government did not bring any significant changes. The resurgence of left-wing parties has, paradoxically, been accompanied by a political marginalisation of the poor. The author, *Erika Kvapilová*, looks for possibilities of intervention at the local and regional levels. Even though her conclusions are intuitively convincing, it is necessary to mention that the analysis of "the relationship between work, poverty and social exclusion," which was supposed to provide the basis for her conclusions, is missing.

The chapter 'Space' by *Roman Džambazovič* shows that the special inequalities and concentrations of poverty in Slovakia have been systematically increased. The state has played an important role in this growth by its preference of policies supporting short-term economic effects. On the other hand, regional and local municipalities have neither the sufficient means nor the authorization for the implementation of effective development policies. The analysis by *Katarína Šoltéssová* and *Martin Fotta* of housing policy shows that the state supports investments in housing for the upper middle class. This policy has contributed to a significant worsening of housing situation for people with lower income. Therefore, segregation

in Slovakia has increased. The social housing fund is administrated inefficiently and specific policies have often even created segregation. In the fifth chapter, *Richard Filčák* points to the relationship between poverty and the level of exposure to environmental risks. The author asks for a complex solution of the poverty problem through "green" development strategies aimed especially at the local level.

The second part of the book is focused mainly on the broader context of social policy. The collection concludes with a chapter analysing trends in policies regarding the fight against poverty. *Daniel Gerbery* deals with the increasing role of activation work and other preconditions for receiving social benefits. The effect of these policies is found to be relatively inefficient. In their chapter, *Daniel Škobla* and *Ivan Lesay* analyse the role of international development organisations, primarily the World Bank and the UNDP, in the creation of social policies in Slovakia. While the UNDP, the Open Society Institute and the European Union have had relatively little influence in the struggle against poverty, the pension reform has been greatly informed by the expertise of the World Bank which included the pension reform as a condition for receiving a loan for financing reform packages. The analysis of the preparations for the pension reform is empirically the richest part of the chapter. The most important questions were, however, only identified and not answered. How can we characterize the role of the most important foreign actors? Why does their influence in the area of poverty seem negligible while in the area of the pension reform it seems crucial? Is this a reflection of these actors' interests and priorities or of the Slovak reformists' demands? Unfortunately, many of the answers are only suggested, they are not empirically verified or denied. One of the strengths of Škobla and Lesay's writing is the fact that they try to use theory in their explanation of the analysed phenomena. However, the theory of hegemony is applied only axiomatically and the interpretation is very shallow. The authors only claim but do not empirically prove that the international actors exercise hegemonic power – it seems like the theory is replacing an empirical "finding". Moreover, particular kinds of hegemonic mechanisms are not analysed systematically. In neo-Gramscian theory, which the authors draw on, and ultimately also in the work of Gramsci himself, the emphasis is put on the variability of hegemonic power mechanisms at all levels, including national and global. Škobla and Lesay have a lot of rich and interesting data at hand but the material has not been fully utilized in relation to the theory.

The collection provides a valuable documentation of trends in the development of poverty and social policies in Slovakia. The author's critical attitudes and their attempts to search for solutions among structural causes are rather unusual and welcomed. However, readers might miss a more systematic analysis and evaluation of the impacts of radical Slovak reforms. This kind of information is present in the collection but not lucidly systematised. Most of the chapters suffer also from insufficient argumentation. The authors are often unable to outline the main arguments clearly. The structure of some chapters is rather chaotic, conclusions don't fulfil their function, the authors often devote a lot of space to banal truisms, and the

theoretical parts broadly present other scholars' arguments, concepts and classifications that are not later utilised in the following analysis. These shortcomings could have been compensated with a well-structured introduction and conclusion, identifying the main findings, but the editors do not offer any. Notwithstanding these imperfections, I recommend the collection both for its informative and analytical value – I have hopes that it will be inspiring for similarly oriented research that would surpass it.

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