

Newsletter

NetWorks/ DECE June 2022

When I lived in the UK my neighbours were nice people. I think I lived next door to them for around 8 years and during that time I don't think they were ever in my home and I was never in theirs. We would exchange a wave and smile when we happened accidentally to find ourselves climbing into our cars on our respective driveways at the same time.

Although I never thought about it at the time, the truth is, I knew nothing about them, or their lives or their families lives and they knew nothing about mine.

Life amongst the Roma is so very different.

Large extended families, everyone in and out of one another's homes. Everyone knows everything about everyone else.

Those who gathered around my kitchen table in the winter, now gather on my terrace in the warm summer evenings.

There is always so much joy that it would be easy to believe that these people have no problems but as I listen to their conversation I wonder how they are able to stay so cheerful.

The cost of all basic foods is rising fast. In May the annual inflation rate increased to 14.49% which is the highest it has been since November 2003.

Flour and oil have gone up between 40% and 60% over the last 6 months and the cost of medicine is rising quickly.

Still there is no work. The casual day work in construction that usually appears in the spring didn't appear. In fact since the onset of the pandemic there has been very little of the 'grey market' work upon which many of the families depend.

This year it seems that the reason is that building materials have risen sharply in price which has delayed construction projects.

All of this means that many families are left without an income. Unicef in April this year identified the very real risks faced by the poor and especially the Roma when they reported that "In the EU, 85% of Roma children are at risk of poverty compared to 20% of children in the general population."

Very few of the Roma I know have any savings. When day work is available then any surplus money is invested in the home. Concreting and tiling mud floors, or plastering old mud walls, repairing roofs etc. They have nothing set aside for a "rainy day" and the only access to credit they have is through loan sharks whose interest rates are "eye wateringly" high.

Prior to the pandemic it was very clear that things were slowly improving. There had been a slow and steady reduction in the number of people seeking crisis help etc. The increase in the cost of living (food, electricity, medication etc) and the reduction in the availability of day work has caused very real hardship.

Last night I sat and listened to people as they talked about sick parents or children, about letters received from the electricity company threatening disconnection, about what they had eaten that day and I was stunned that they were able to smile and laugh together.

When I asked them about it, the answers were:

“This is life”

“If we were sad or stressed, would it help?” (They all laughed again.)

Over the years many of my neighbors have been out of the country, trying to get seasonal (grey market) work in places like Germany, Italy or the UK. Some have settled there but many return with sad stories of working long hours and making just enough to live and returning with nothing to show for their efforts.

Desperation is now causing some young people to “try again”.

They will often borrow relatively large amounts of money in order to leave some money with their families to buy food and to pay for transportation as well as the first few days (accommodation and food) in a foreign land.

Some take their families with them but most go alone, leaving family behind.

As I sat with people last night in the warm summer evening air, I couldn't help but think about the rising price of fire wood and the coming winter.

Whilst Covid disrupted school attendance with the stop-start policies that were in place, once the restrictions were removed, our challenge was to encourage children back into state school rooms.

Many parents have worked hard to get their children back into education which has been great to see, but there are many who simply don't believe that their child will ever catch up again and I can see that there are too many children hanging around on the street during the day, when they should really be in school.

The summer vacation is about to start and one of our challenges over the summer is going to be positioning parents well to get their children started again.



Having said all of that, our own school programs are well attended. In fact our school in Checheci is completely full and our waiting lists are growing. We now have 21 children in high school (2 boys and 19 girls) which is simply amazing. Even more so because in Roma communities it is still common for girls to drop out of school early. We have 3 students who are applying to go to University this year we are just hoping that they will get places.

Empowerment

Rising food prices have meant that some families have turned back to growing their own food. At this point in the year we have gardens producing peas etc and greenhouses producing early peppers and pretty much everything else is looking good and still on the way.

If you have ever tried to fix something without the right tools then you will know how hard that can be. Our tool lending program is in high demand as people are trying to fix what they can with the materials they have.

The pre and post natal care program is running very well. The vision has always been to create a growing group of young women who know their rights and how to access them to reduce maternal death and child mortality within the communities.

Our nurse has done a fantastic job and we now have people in the communities who are acting as best friends to their neighbours in this way.

Our mums and toddlers groups are going strong and are about building on the community dynamic and providing support and basic education to young mums.



Employment

In the present economic situation I have people coming to me every day asking for work.

Our social enterprises are going well and we have a growing number of orders which means at the moment our workshops are at maximum production.

We also have some interesting opportunities for manufacturing of goods for companies who are willing to increase their orders in line with our ability to increase our production!

Scaling is going to be our continuing challenge as we go through the summer.

If we can get this right then my sincere hope is that we will be able to steadily and significantly increase the number of people we can provide with work as we move towards Christmas.



Alfa

You will recall that we have been working with families living on a rubbish dump site in Arad (called Alfa).

This spring the mayors office sadly began demolishing homes in Alfa to make way for sports facilities funded by the EU.





Around 45 homes have been demolished so far. Some of the residents have been rehoused by the local authority in apartment style social housing but there are many who have not.

The remainder have scattered, either leaving the country to try to find space with family on one of the many "platz" (camp grounds) around Europe, or have gone back to their birth place to see if they restart there and some have moved into Cheheci close to our base.

We are doing our best to keep track of people and to continue helping however we can.