Fighting poverty and social exclusion in Spain – reports from literacy research

The aim of this paper is to outline the importance of projects such as Together Against Poverty (http://tap-project.eu/) in the European context, but particularly in Spain, due to the conditions this country has been facing in the recent decades but especially due to the crisis and recession. Although those two factors have affected the entire European Union, this impact has not been uniform in all countries: in some of them, the impact of austerity policies to deal with the crisis, has hit hardest the most vulnerable layers of the population.

**Key words:** poverty, Spain, TAP project

1. Data from official statistics - the background of poverty in Spain

Spain is one of the most developed countries is suffering from the economic crisis. Inequality has increased a lot between 2009 and 2014. This is evidenced by the strong upward trend of the Gini index, which had remained relatively constant between 2005 and 2008. In 2014, 20% higher income is almost 7 times higher (6.9 times) than the poorest 20%. Considering the comparison between the richest 10% and poorest 10%, the distance reaches 14 times (10% richest has equivalent to half of the population income) (www.eapn.es, accessed on 26 July 2016).

The latest Survey of Living Conditions (ECV - 2015) reflects, among others, a stagnation of the risk of poverty and social exclusion in Spain (AROPE rate), affecting nearly 30% of the population (28.6% - 13.2 million people approximately) (www.eapn.es, accessed on 26 July 2016).
Moreover, the Global Vulnerability indicator worsened in 2014 compared to 2013, from 17.6 to 18.4 (an increase of 0.8 in just one year). The percentage of people who are at risk levels from high to extreme risk has increased, while the percentage of those in prominent risk has decreased. Although most adults are placed in a level of prominent high risk, there is a 7.5% of people in situations of social exclusion, it is, at very high or extreme risk (superior to 50). This percentage has also increased slightly since 2013, when it reached 7.3% ((www.eapn.es), accessed on 26 July 2016).
Additionally, although Spain is not one of the countries with more risk of poverty or exclusion in rural areas, it is categorized as so referring to the urban areas: Spain has the seventh highest rate of population at risk of the whole EU (34.8%), just behind Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, Latvia, Hungary and Croatia (www.eapn.es, accessed on 26 July 2016).

Children are especially affected by poverty and deprivation. In this sense, the poverty of children under 16 years has suffered in the last year a substantial increase and has now reached 30.1%, 8 percentage points above the rate for the whole Spanish population. In the European context, Spain has the second highest rate in the EU, just behind Romania (www.eapn.es, accessed on 26 July 2016).

Finally, a special case that Spain has and differs from other European countries is the fact of immigration from Latin-American countries. Latin-American immigrants started to come to Spain in the last quarter of the 20th century mainly because of three factors: violence, unemployment and politic instability in their countries. Their aim was to find in Spain a stable job and, therefore, economic stability and a higher quality of life. Plus, we speak the same language, what favors adaptability to a country. Most of Latin-American immigrants are women, and they usually travel with a temporary visa, but they stay longer. They normally work in sectors which demand low qualification, like: construction, home, shops and restaurants. Due to the economic crisis, job offers were reduced and the contracts became precarious so not only they had difficulties finding a job, but also salaries were low. Finally, we must not forget racism, that is another difficulty in finding a job and which sometimes creates conflicts.

A thorough examination to cold statistical data from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics allows to outline a profile of citizens most at risk of falling into poverty: the (non-European) foreign young people with secondary education, unemployed, unmarried but with a child or dependent and living in Andalusia they are the ones most likely to fall into social exclusion, according to social variables analyzed by the INE. On the opposite side, the portrait robot of citizens with less risk of poverty is Spanish, educated, married but childless and living in Navarra. Retirees over 65 are also included within this group with little risk of falling into poverty (www.economia.elpais.com, accessed on 26 July 2016).

2. Poverty in Spain – review of owns research

The nature of poverty in Spain is a bit different than in other countries involved in the project, which were identified as countries of "high risk" or in the Netherlands, whose situation is much better. Spain, as one of the key economies of the old continent, has been fighting with
fairly major problems for several years, especially when it comes to the labour market situation of young people.

One woman, participating in the survey, said:

I don’t have any child because we don’t have enough money. We can only pay for the water and electricity but we cannot afford to pay the community fee [...]. I came to Spain 11 years ago, 10 of those years I worked in a supermarket, childcare etc., but in 2013 I was fired for no reason, we all got fired, the ones with more than 5 years of experience in that company and they didn’t pay me the severance payment... So really bad, and since then I’m receiving the unemployment benefit that it is only 426 euros a month. So just trying to find a job, trying to improve my education, but the training courses are very expensive so it is very difficult [...]. Now we are trying to find a social apartment or something because we can’t pay the flat where we live now.

I can’t pay for my flat. My boyfriend is also having problems with the banks, he had two flats but because of those problems he doesn’t have them anymore... and he owns them money... 60000 euros. [Woman, aged 34]

The other one, confessed:

I don’t work. My husband works 10 hours a day. Financial assistance provided by aid institution is a significant portion of our budget. We don’t run out of this money. We prioritize what is more important to pay. [Woman, aged 36]

In this survey took part also men, who told about their situation:

I don’t have any income, but my wife has a job. She earns 800 euros working 8 hours a day, but with the expenses that we have we are broke by the 15th of every month. [Man, aged 35]

Respondents had problems with credit rates payments which eat up their whole current income or the payments are not possible which results with the loss of capital of some of the persons.

I’m currently unemployed. I’m a housewife now [...]. I’m constantly unsatisfied, because we have to pay the loan every month, and it is a lot of money [...]. My husband is self-employed so depends on the month he brings more or less money. During the months he doesn’t have enough work we live from the savings. [Woman, aged 36]

Their troubles in ensuring current fluency of households start in situation when one of the members loses their job. Also, unfavourable conditions can appear when the only person bringing income to the household is running their own company. Sometimes the investment in
running the business takes up significant part of the family budget and in the case of unexpected spending; the situation can be very hard.

I’m receiving the unemployment benefit because I don’t have work. It is 200 euros, which is not enough [...]. My husband is self-employed and he had to buy a van recently which was 1500 euros and we had to ask for it, because we didn’t have money [...]. [Woman, aged 41]

An important element in the picture of Spanish poverty (already mentioned) is the problem of immigrants, who in own countries often work on prestigious positions and in Spain their qualifications are not recognised. This situation causes very large difficulties in financial situation of these people.

I used to work back home as an accountant. I have almost 20 years of working experience. But here in Spain I couldn’t find that kind of job so I started working in houses... childcare for 4 years. At first I came to Spain with a family visa that didn’t allow me to work in Spain, but now that I have my legal residence I can’t find a job, so I’m currently working in houses as I said before, also my age it is a problem... [Woman, aged 44]

Respondents notice the link between the poverty and social exclusion, although this is not a very frequent observation. Analysis of the situation often leads to the observation that other people live in even worse conditions. Some respondents, despite own problems and very difficult situation, are able to share resources with those who need them the most.

There is always something... Sometimes you can pay your rent, other months you can buy food... There is always lack of something. We always try to find the way to survive, sometimes we have to ask for money but... Yes, last year one of my relatives died so we had to send our saving to my family there, because their situation is even worse than ours. The resources we used... we had to work a lot more. We are under poverty situation, but we are not homeless. mean the situation is bad, but it could be worse so... [Woman, aged 54]

The problem of debts of households, troubles in finding a job, lack of sufficient income result in the fact that many people, also in middle age, decide to live together with parents in order to save costs of rent and be able to take advantage of benefits of older members of the household.

I’ve been waitress in a restaurant. We live in my father’s house. The situation is really bad. In Spain there is lack of work, with low incomes and very bad conditions. With my father pension, we all survive. [Woman, aged 46]
Break down of Spanish labour market impacted very wide social spheres. Young people, persons without qualifications and also immigrants experienced the results of lack of satisfying job offers. It caused the necessity or undertaking any jobs in order to be able to survive.

3. Summary – how TAP-Together Against Poverty project helps people at risk of poverty

Regarding the former data, TAP project gains importance within the objective of helping people at risk of poverty of social exclusion. The profile of people we have been working within the context of the project accomplishes the criteria mentioned before. Around 60% of them were immigrants, young women, unemployed and with children depending on them. Although as some of our partners already mentioned it is difficult to assess whether a project will have real impact on the situation, we think it will have. For now we have just implemented a pilot phase, which participants have evaluated very positively, and with which they report having acquired certain competences which are helping them, or will help them in a future, to find a job; they have also been working on motivation and self-consciousness in order to promote a real change in the way the faced their situation. Although so far we have not worked with enough people to promote a significant change (bear in mind that Spain gathers more than 40 million of inhabitants, and more than 3 live in Madrid), we really hope this methodology will continue reaching targeted people, both at risk of poverty or social exclusion and policy makers, to help the formers fight their situation and the latter to understand it and behave consequently.
References:

http://economia.elpais.com/economia/2016/05/24/actualidad/1464082093_364713.html (accessed on 26 July 2016)