Report on Meeting of European Studies Center's Working Group on Unemployment

Lodz, Poland -- September, 1993

The European Studies Center's Working Group on Unemployment reports that its meeting in Lodz, Poland in September introduced new and practical perspectives on assisting the long-term unemployed. After first studying the patterns and trends of unemployment in the four Visegrad countries and the New Länder, the Group turned its attention to programmatic responses.

In Lodz, the Group began by visiting the Lodz Voivodship Employment Office to learn about its active labor market policies. The Group noted that the Polish system has been challenged by the daunting coincidence of high levels of unemployment and limited resources. Some members were surprised that the Polish employment system separates facilities by gender and skill, and that one Employment Office in Lodz still lacks computers.

Next, the Group visited the International Women's Foundation, a non-profit organization which supports women's self-employment through training for business start-ups. Women who attended the IWF course told the Group about their experiences as they lost their jobs and looked for new ones, and about the support they received from the IWF. In addition, the women shared their hopes for their new businesses and identified constraints such as limited credit availability, work space, and family expectations. They all agreed, however, that while they are working harder now than they did as employees, they prefer self-employment to their former jobs.

The following day featured three other Polish programs: the founder of the Center for the Advancement of Women in Warsaw described her efforts to assist women with confidence-building measures, job search skills and placement services. She also presented research about what employers consider the "perfect employee", which illustrated the extra difficulties that women encounter when they apply for vacancies. The director of the EC PHARE program's Local Initiatives Program explained how they will support community efforts, whether in terms of creating jobs or providing social services -- depending on how each community identifies its needs. Regarding rural unemployment, the Group heard how the Women in Rural Enterprise Development Program of the Foundation for the Development of Polish Agriculture is offering training and seeking credit for small businesses, particularly in agro-tourism. After discovering that independent, nongovernmental initiatives already exist in Poland, and learning about their successes and frustrations, the Working Group and its guests heard about programs from outside the region. The Veterans Leadership Program (VLP), established by Vietnam Veterans in the United States to help long-term unemployed veterans, offered an instructive model of a nonprofit organization. Surprisingly perhaps, the veterans' experiences paralleled those of Polish women in a number of ways: while both groups have worked in the past, in military service or in the home, they both (1) have difficulty identifying their employment-related skills; (2) lack confidence and strategies for dealing with employer biases against them; and (3) need training on how to find and interview for vacancies. In terms of organization, when the Polish organization leaders heard about the VLP director's experiences -- including eleven years of ups and downs, learning from mistakes, changing approaches and inconsistent funding -- they discovered that building such programs invariably requires time, patience and determination. The Group also heard about a government program, the Massachusetts Employment Express, which is engaged in an aggressive, targeted campaign to prevent prolonged unemployment by mobilizing the unemployed before they became disheartened.

Finally, the Working Group made some interim observations about delivering services to the long-term unemployed: One sociologist observed that the long-term unemployed should be treated as clients rather than as victims, basing this on the belief that they must take responsibility for their own lives, and that programs should teach the

unemployed to work for themselves by providing them with the necessary infrastructure and resources. The founder of a Polish NGO praised the Employment Express Program for demonstrating how government can work to improve its services. She noted the potential advantages if local, independent organizations and Government worked together.

Two social scientists noted lessons about the role of independent organizations in a civil society. One member saw a need for the development of this sector as a link between people and government. Another participant commented that one person alone cannot achieve results, and that there is therefore a need to work cooperatively, form organizations to articulate arguments and share experiences.

From the government perspective, some participants questioned why the Employment Office in Lodz has not been paying for training offered by the International Women's Foundation. And from the business point of view, it was noted that like since NGO's involve risk, require identification of markets and demand, serve clients, and need credit and resources, they should be encouraged, developed and evaluated as entrepreneurial ventures.

While the meeting in Lodz launched a new area of study, the Group will continue its analysis when looking at Slovak responses and other model programs at its meeting in Bardejov in December.

Marcia Greenberg

STEM

The Centre for Empirical Research

was founded in early spring 1990. Since then it has systematically studied the living conditions, attitudes and value orientation of the Czech and Slovak populations. STEM is an independent, private organization, focusing mainly on the analysis of the political scene and social problems. Here we present in brief some of its findings, in an attempt to illustrate recent developments in the Czech Republic.

According to the STEM's data, the political and economic transformation can be described in terms of several developmental stages.

The Period of Revolution Euphoria - as compared to Poland, Hungary and Slovakia - is clear and intense. The fall of the totalitarian system was greeted with vigorous emotional support and strength in the Czech Republic. This fact can be related to the historical development of Czechoslovakia after 1918, as well as to the character of the Communist system after 1948 and after the Russian invasion of 1968. The breakdown of the communist domination occurred relatively late in comparison to neighbouring countries, it was rather sudden, and even spectacular. In its euphoria the population expected that - similar to "Velvet Revolution" - the change of the system would proceed fast and smoothly, and would be of substantial nature, bringing about a deep and lasting change of the system itself. In the first half of 1990 the people were markedly satisfied with the development of the political situation, but were increasingly impatient with the slow progress in the transformation of economy. STEM's data indicate that the revolutionary momentum on the side of the population has been to a large extent wasted and remained unutilized. At least in their statements the people were prepared to make their own share of personal sacrifice to the radical transformation process, but eventually there appeared to be no real necessity for it. The revolutionary euphoria thus slowly faded and in the press - typically for such a historical situation - one could even have read about "the betrayed revolution".

The support of the new regime has been mainly emotional, prevailingly irrational, perhaps even naive.

The euphoric period was defined by a high level of consensus among different groups of the population. This overall feeling of agreement, was then achieved and further facilitated by the existence of broad political movements, with somewhat unclear political profiles. Thus at the beginning of 1990 we could have observed the high level of simi-