

**USAID/University of Northern Iowa
Orava Project:
A Collaborative National
Education Restructuring Program**

The Orava Project, named for the region in Slovakia in which it commenced, has been on-going for over three years. The project, which was originally conceptualized as a seven to ten year effort in three phases, is designed to develop the behavior and understandings essential to democratic citizenship, attitudes and values which are lacking among the citizens of former Communist countries. How people in these countries perceive their roles in society, their responsibility for community acts and inaction, their commitment to leadership and to each other must change in order for democracy to take hold. The Orava Project aims to introduce a "spirit of democracy" into the Slovak educational system by bringing to the Slovak educational system methods of teaching which promote the development of democratic behaviors, processes and values among future generations of Slovaks and prepare the citizens of Slovakia for their roles and responsibilities in a democracy.

The impetus for the Orava Project came from the then Slovak Minister of Education Jan Pisut, when during a visit to the U.S. in 1991 he endeavored to find out how democracy is taught. Under Communism, the state, which well understood the importance of controlling the minds of its citizens, used schools as a tool for the indoctrination of society and to repress nonconformist thinking. Mr. Pisut's question led him to the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), a premier teacher training university in America. UNI undertook the initial Phase of the project, the preparation and design phase, on their own with some financial assistance from the Iowa International Development Foundation.

This first phase was completed in May 1993 after fourteen months of collaboration between UNI and Slovak educators. Based on the results of this first phase, the UNI directors designed a collaborative national education restructuring program which met the needs of their Slovak colleagues, and submitted an unsolicited proposal to USAID for Phase II of the project.

Phase II, the initial implementation phase, got under way in July 1994 with a \$1 million grant from USAID. During this initial implementation phase, the UNI directors have been working with educators in the Orava region, which includes 64 basic schools and 46 communities, and with faculty members at Comenius University in Bratislava. Fourteen faculty members from Comenius University and 35 U.S. educators are involved with project initiatives, and more than 350 teachers in the Orava region and over 1,700 administrators from all over Slovakia have had direct involvement in the project.

The Orava Project was designed to counter the attributes of the former Communist regime by fostering behaviors fundamental in a democracy: independent, critical thinking; personal empowerment and responsibility; collaborative work; constructive problem solving; and enhanced tolerance through its project initiatives. The primary objective of the Orava Project is to activate the change process at both the inservice and pre-service levels of teacher education.

-At the university level, emphasis is placed on developing exemplary teacher training and leadership programs as well as changing teacher and administrator perceptions of their role in the larger educational community. An important step toward institutionalizing and disseminating the Orava Project at the University level will be realized when the "Orava Project Educational Leadership and Management Program of Study," which is pending approval any day now from the Slovak Ministry of Education, receives final approval. This program of study is expected to be offered at Comenius University starting January 1, 1997 and will be offered as a continuing academic course for school directors. The curriculum and course sequence for this newly established program of study is based on the democratic management principles and practices developed by the Orava Project.

-At the school practitioner level, effort is directed toward development of a group of core teacher and school director leaders who will act as trainers for dissemination and diffusion of the project objectives and serve as a continuing resource for educational renewal in Slovakia. Two groups of core teacher leaders in the Orava region, one group for grades 1 to 4 and the second for grades 5 to 8, have been trained and both groups have begun to deliver workshops based on the democratic education principles taught by the Orava Project to their colleagues. Approximately 350 teachers in the Orava region receive instruction from these core teacher leaders per semester. A group of educational leaders have also been trained and are delivering workshops to approximately 600 school directors around Slovakia per semester. The Orava Project Directors are pursuing accreditation for the inservice training courses being offered by the project which, if received, would allow teachers and administrators who complete these courses to become eligible for salary increases, an added incentive for participation.

Phase III, project expansion and dissemination, will get under way in the 1996-97 school year and will run through the 1999 school year. This phase is being funded by a \$2 million grant from USAID and will enable the project to work on issues of institutionalization and dissemination of the methods being introduced by the Orava Project. In addition to Phase II partnerships already under way, the work will be expanded to include a major effort in Bratislava and Nitra school districts and the Nitra Pedagogical University and Economic University in Bratislava. A core teacher leaders' group for grades 1 to 4 from the Bratislava school district began their training during Fall 1996. By July 1999, the end of Phase III, it is expected that over 4,000 teachers and administrators from around Slovakia will have been directly involved in the project.

Project initiatives are numerous and varied. However, in addition to impacting current classrooms and tomorrow's teachers, the project also aims to help Slovakia chart new ground in educational leadership and administration and in school/community partnerships. The project is helping to make such concepts as parental involvement, teacher initiatives and community leadership part of the educational vocabulary. Estimates suggest that parent involvement programs have reached into over 2,000 homes during the initial implementation phase and based on responses from parents to these programs it is clear the potential for impact is enormous.

Although the Orava Project is unique to Slovakia, the USAID offices in Romania and Albania are already involved in learning lessons from the Orava Project to adapt to educational reform programs being developed in these countries.

While other elements of the SEED Act assistance program target youth, community leaders, political parties, non-governmental organizations, local government, it is clear that for fundamental changes to take place in attitudes and behaviors, a long-term investment is critical. By focusing on changing the attitudes and behaviors of primary school age children, the Orava Project is paving the way for future generations of Slovaks to grow up understanding the "ethic of democracy" and tolerance for divergent views.