

Improving living conditions for the Roma minority in Europe

Alexandros Tsolakis works as a policy expert at the European Commission's Directorate General for Regional Policy. Here he talks to *Early Childhood Matters* about how the EC's ongoing work on including Europe's Roma minority can play a part in improving the physical conditions in which young Roma children are growing up, and therefore enhance their healthy development and prospects in life.

The lack of infrastructure which characterises many Roma minorities in Europe must translate into difficulties for their children. We can imagine, for instance, that lack of reliable running water will make it difficult to maintain hygiene standards, roads which become impassable in heavy rain will make it more difficult to access school and medical facilities, and so on.

Yes, it's evident from all available studies that poor living conditions are a key factor in the twin vicious cycles of discrimination and social exclusion faced by many in the Roma minority in Europe. For example, a mother would feel ashamed to send a child who wasn't clean to school, for fear of the child being stigmatised. Health problems caused by insanitary living conditions also keep Roma children from school. And if those children don't get an education, they will be less able to break the cycle of poverty for their own children.

As well as physical conditions, of course, it is necessary to understand that from the point of view of some Roma, it is seen as protecting their children to keep them in an environment that is isolated from wider society. So all efforts to improve physical conditions must be accompanied by working with the natural desire of Roma mothers, like all mothers, for their children to have better life than their own. This is where early childhood education is very important, as it permits the mothers to understand that education is not a process through which they have to abandon their children, but one through which they help their children to build a future. It is clear everywhere that women – and, in particular, mothers – have a pivotal role to play.

In several countries, government social housing policies could actively contribute to segregating Roma communities. What are the

disadvantages of this in terms of creating healthy environments for young Roma children? What can be done about it?

The segregation issue is extremely difficult and complex, and you cannot have a dogmatic policy that applies in all locations. Spain's experience shows that it can be done, as Spain has practically managed to desegregate, although it has taken them many years. But you have to consider local circumstances – what works in Spain may not necessarily work elsewhere. Roma communities, like every other community, differ from place to place – there are some families who are keen to join the mainstream, others are open but in need of help, and still others for whom the idea is anathema. You have to ensure that incentives exist for the Roma to integrate – who are we, the majority, to say they don't have the right to live among themselves if they want to?

Here again early childhood education is a pivotal entry point, because desegregation in education is easier to achieve than in housing, which is really a long-term project. If children get high-quality early education, even if in a segregated environment, then that makes it more likely that they will proceed through primary and secondary education in more mixed environments. And that opens up choices, in terms of where to live, that simply don't exist for much of this generation.

We also need to avoid the general tendency to see the Roma as beneficiaries of some kind of passive process, such as giving them houses to encourage them to relocate. Normal citizens don't expect the state to give them houses, so this can actually perpetuate the sense of the Roma being seen as apart from the mainstream. Instead we should see the whole housing process as an opportunity to engage the Roma people economically, for example by creating opportunities for them to work with building companies in creating new housing and infrastructure. This creates economic activity that can begin bringing some of the families into the mainstream. It is very important to create a movement that can support those who want a better future for their children and who see that this cannot be outside of mainstream society.



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Following the EU framework adopted on April 5 2011, member states submitted their National Roma Inclusion Strategies in December 2011. What is your general assessment of the commitment of different member states to improving the housing conditions and ending residential segregation of Roma community? Are there concrete targets linked to financial resources?

For the time being there is not much that is concrete. These are very theoretical plans, not yet operational. We are engaged in convincing member states to be more concrete about it, so that these plans do not remain beautiful policies on paper which have nothing to do with reality. We are in a dynamic process, and one that should bring change.

Thanks to a recent change in regulations, funding is available from the European Regional Development Fund for investing in social houses for Roma. However, it seems that very few countries are currently intending to take advantage of this. Is this a reason to be pessimistic about the prospects of achieving tangible progress in the housing conditions of Roma people?

No, this is normal: we did expect it would be difficult for member states, as this cannot be a top-down approach. It requires municipalities, or regions, to become interested in committing to a long-term process. When we talk about an integrated approach it means proper participation, so that the marginalised people living in these neighbourhoods are involved in infrastructure planning. Also the majority population must see this as something which benefits the whole community, and not just as a privilege given to the gypsies. These are big operations and it takes time to create the right conditions.

In fact, I can say that there has been more interest than one might have expected. We have four municipalities in Bulgaria that are ready to start the process, and four more in Romania where we are now hoping for a green light from the Government.

What examples could you point to of existing good practice in successfully taking a holistic approach to enhancing housing conditions for Roma communities? For example, are there lessons learned from the progress made in Eastern and Central Europe which can help other EU countries to make progress in Roma inclusion, or the other way around?

We have certainly learned that when projects have not had the desired results, it has tended to be because of a lack of administrative planning for and commitment to the long term. In terms of good practice, we could point for example to the city of Ostrava, which has made momentous progress in integrating its Roma communities through a 10-year plan, since being the subject of landmark European Court of Human Rights verdict in 2007 which established that the practice of segregating Roma children into special needs schools was an unlawful one.

However, we must avoid thinking of a replicable model and instead think in terms of methods that can be applied in relation to the very varied realities on the ground. The exchange of good practice is mostly an exchange of understanding about methods. These have to be tailored to the local needs of real communities because that's where people live, where exclusion is experienced or overcome, where discrimination is expressed or not expressed.

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Is there a role for the philanthropic and non-governmental sectors in child-centred holistic approaches to improving the living conditions of the Roma?

Of course, we need civil society to bring added quality to the work, to learn and apply methods – within the understanding that this is a long and complex process, one that requires transcending the typically sectoral thinking of our time and recognising the importance of varied realities at local level. Naturally, there still needs to be national and European organisation among governments and civil society for exchanging experience and ideas.

What can be done to ensure that Roma communities themselves are effectively involved in addressing the current situation and ensuring healthy environments for their children?

We have to make a real shift from a charity mindset to an approach of social development and economic growth, engaging the Roma as actors in the economy. If we don't have that, we will never help poor Roma communities to get out of where they are, and instead we will continue to see them as a burden on our philanthropic conscience. That means putting together proper infrastructure planning, with work on education and health, so people begin to get organised and

engaged with the mainstream economy. All of these things need to be put together and nobody has done that before, so it is indeed quite a process.

It is, however, a process we can look to with qualified enthusiasm. For more than 20 years I have been working on issues affecting the Roma within the European Commission, and I can say there has never before been such a high level of interest among colleagues in different areas – employment, education, social, regional, agricultural, and so on. This is an important opportunity and it is imperative that we succeed in capitalising on the political commitment that currently exists.

