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A fairer deal for the Roma in an enlarged EU?

In January 2007, when Bulgaria and Romania join the European Union, they will bring with them some 3 million Roma citizens - around two-thirds of them in Romania.

This will increase the total Roma population to an estimated 10-12 million people, making it the largest ethnic group in the EU.

Year after year, EU social inclusion and social protection reports have shown that the Roma comprise the most vulnerable and socially excluded community in Europe, suffering from higher unemployment, bad living conditions, poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment.

Centuries of exclusion and discrimination against the Roma have to be reversed. This is a responsibility for individual Member States, but a European response is also needed, and the Open Method of Coordination can assist in helping governments to identify and develop good policy and practice.

At a Round Table in November, to examine how the EU Structural Funds can be used more effectively to support Roma people, European Commissioner Vladimir Spidla stressed that they have a right to all the opportunities open to European citizens in the 21st century, not least so that the EU can achieve its Lisbon objectives. In 2000 to 2006, the EU invested some 275 million euro in Roma projects, and at the beginning of 2006 the Commission set up a high-level group for the social and labour market integration of ethnic minorities.

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Overlooked

The fact is, the problems the Roma face have been widely neglected up to now; or worse, deliberately overlooked because policy-makers fear that taking action will not win them public support.

The Commission's report on Social Inclusion in Europe 2006, which assesses Member States' National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPs/Incl) and their implementation, finds that "the Roma continue to be absent from the majority of the implementing reports, even in countries with a sizeable Roma population". Spain, Greece and Portugal do better than some others in this regard - with, for example, the creation of the Roma People Council in Spain and targets in Greece and Portugal - while the British and Irish reports include measures for Travellers and Gypsies.

Among the newer Member States, Hungary has a comprehensive programme covering

active labour market programmes, training and lifelong learning, healthcare, housing and education. The Czech Republic's NAP/Incl 2004-2006 included three examples of good practice for the social integration of Roma, and in 2005 the government adopted a new Roma Integration Policy Concept. The two incoming Member States have also proposed positive action for their social integration.

Unfortunately, and despite Europe-wide anti-discrimination legislation, abuses of the Roma's human rights continue. The European Roma Rights Centre points to an escalation of forced evictions in a number of EU Member States, pushing Roma families into segregated and substandard accommodation without access to basic social and economic entitlements. 2007 will be European Year of Equal Opportunities for all, and high time for real progress towards ending discrimination.

Going a step further

Some governments are developing specific initiatives for the future. For example in Ireland, a new Traveller accommodation programme has been launched to run until 2008, together with a strategy for Traveller education. The country has set targets and reported systematically on progress, but although it has been successful in reducing the number of Travellers living on unauthorised sites, meeting objectives for the education of children has proved harder.

The 2006 Social Inclusion report finds that despite a certain amount of progress in combating the exclusion of ethnic minorities in general, overall the situation has not greatly improved. Few countries have put forward specific objectives, making results difficult to measure. "The analysis needs to be more developed, and distinctions made both between and within groups," it points out. "More focus needs to be given to the Roma population."

Some principles of good practice

Through the Peer Review process, several principles have already been identified as fundamental to good practice. The first is the active involvement of Roma people themselves and the NGOs that work on their behalf. In the Field Social Work Programmes run by the

Czech People in Need Foundation, for example, one third of the social workers are Roma. In Slovakia, a scheme by the independent non-profit organisation ETP/Centre for Sustainable Development to build 20 homes and renovate a further 50, for low-income families in



Nalepkovo, has helped to change attitudes within the Roma population, diminishing levels of depression and scepticism. Local Roma community organisations have been involved in the selection of tenants for the accommodation, and this has served to boost motivation and enthusiasm.

Secondly, there needs to be a coherent partnership approach, bringing together different services to resolve the four main problems: bad housing, health, unemployment and poor education.

Thirdly, programmes need to increase people's social competences, helping them to under-

stand their rights and empowering them to gain access to the services and support they require to resolve their own difficulties. Roma are often unaware of the opportunities available to them and this, coupled with a lack of provision for their special needs, can create a vicious circle of exclusion. At the same time, not all Roma individuals face the same problems or want the same treatment, so assistance must be tailored to specific situations.

Finally, measures need continuity over time - and this means secure funding so that initiatives can be sustained and fully evaluated.

A brave move for Roma women

"Roma women face sexism, violence, and pressure to marry early, making them additionally vulnerable as women and as members of a minority," explains Slavka Macakova, from ETP Slovakia. "So sometimes they suffer a 'triple disadvantage', when they live in marginalised areas, or are victims within their own communities and families."

There are an estimated 320,000 Roma in Slovakia: half of them living in towns with the wider population, and the other half in 787 settlements - 619 of them spatially separated shantytowns with little infrastructure, mainly in the centre and east of the country.

ETP has been active in helping the Roma since 1998. Cooperating with local authorities and employment offices, it has set up community centres in 17 villages and towns, offering a friendly environment with activities for all ages, and trained personal advisers. They run clubs, ranging from chess to cookery, and courses to improve practical skills or academic qualifications.

"As a result of cultural values, Roma women are frequently excluded from public and economic life," says Slavka Macakova. Poor levels of education among the Roma community, and women's status within it exacerbate this isolation from society.

So ETP makes special efforts to invite Roma



women into the community centres, where they can make contacts, enjoy a coffee and find childcare. The centres offer health promotion courses or family planning classes, and encourage women to become active in the clubs. At the Rudnany kindergarten, Roma women have the opportunity to become classroom assistants, or to come with their children in the afternoon for craft or educational activities.

Some cooking, weaving and scarf-painting craft activities have developed into small businesses. The Cerchen association, for example, created by Roma women from Spisske Podhradie, has become a social enterprise, selling scarf paintings, handbags and woven crafts, at the foot of World Heritage Spis Castle. "Our experience is that the community centres can empower Roma women and members of their families," notes Slavka Macakova. "Sometimes Roma men will follow their example and venture in, to access job and social counselling."



Roma inclusion - a success story

"Living in a shack is the worst thing that can happen to you," says Maxi. "Sometimes, at three or four o'clock in the morning, the wind would rip off the roof. The children would have to be put in the vans. Then, to get them ready for school, they had to be washed in cold water."

Roma, gitanos, gypsies - they go by many names, and they are one of Europe's oldest and longest-excluded minorities. Maxi has few regrets for her old way of life. She is from Avilés, a Spanish city whose experience in integrating Roma is a success story in a field that has seen many failures. Since 1989, it has eradicated the Roma shanty towns that used to cling to derelict sites around the city. Instead, it has moved the Roma families into standard housing, alongside the other citizens of Avilés. The experiment seems to have worked. Most Roma have integrated well into local neighbourhoods. On 23-24 October 2006, a Peer Review drew a number of key lessons from the Avilés experience:

- Factors in the success of the Avilés experience include:
 - full participation, involvement and commitment by the relocated people themselves
 - positive expectations of the Roma and their willingness to change
 - clear leadership, broad political consensus and a sharing of responsibilities
 - thorough evaluation at all stages of the project and a willingness to change course, while maintaining momentum, when this proved necessary - notably by abandoning the approach of moving Roma to transitional, isolated housing and instead opting to integrate them fully into the community
 - full involvement of the different administrative levels (local, regional, national) and departments (housing, education, health, employment)



- activation, partnership and networking, with NGOs - and particularly Roma NGOs
 - playing a crucial part
 - permanent solutions, rather than temporary ones, with the aim of promoting sustainable inclusion
 - housing measures embedded in global action schemes that take account of other Roma needs but also lead to improvements for all citizens, Roma and non-Roma alike.
- It was generally agreed that the four pillars of Roma inclusion are housing, employment, education and health care.
 - At a time of increased devolution in many EU countries, the relationship between central and local government is of particular importance to Roma inclusion. Governmental bodies can develop overall strategies, promote mainstreaming, gather data and disseminate information. It may also sometimes be necessary for central government to monitor and challenge local actions that are in breach of the law. Broad-based support for local initiatives is essential, and Avilés is an excellent example of this. Action to benefit Roma benefits the community as a whole.
 - The transferability of the Avilés approach is conditioned by the different situations of the Roma in the various peer countries. In some, they are much more integrated and accepted than in others. It was noted that a strong political consensus was a major factor in the success of the Avilés experience.



- The need for a balance between mainstreaming and targeting of policies was generally recognised, although views on the correct balance varied considerably from country to country. It was suggested that the Irish practice of "poverty-assessment" all national policies might usefully be adopted in connection with Roma inclusion.
- Funding is an important factor in all Roma social inclusion programmes. The EU is one of the leading international donors in this field. Through the PHARE programme, more than €100m have been devoted to Roma

inclusion. EU structural funds were also seen as a source of assistance. Participants from most peer countries suggested that the European Social Fund could be used for targeted programmes in 2007-2013. From the Commission side, it was also pointed out that in 2007, the EU focus "PROGRESS" programme will give the opportunity to better integrate a social inclusion dimension with anti-discrimination, employment integration and gender issues. New calls for tenders could provide scope for the preparation of further projects on Roma inclusion.

Tackling debt - the Dutch way to a clean slate

The Dutch model of voluntary and statutory debt regulation is more or less unique within the EU, as it includes a procedure permitting the achievement of debt-free status after three years. This "clean slate" approach aims to achieve social inclusion and to encourage a full participation in the labour market by allowing over-indebted people to make a fresh start in life. A Peer Review in Rotterdam on 6-7 November 2006 examined it in detail.

The Municipal Credit Banks play an important part in debt resolution in the Netherlands. These non-profit organisations are owned by the municipalities, to which they are financially responsible. They have a range of "products" designed both to prevent over-indebtedness from happening in the first place and to help resolve it when it occurs.

Debt resolution may be voluntary, by amicable agreement, but it can also be regulated by law. This is the function of the Law on Debt Rehabilitation for Natural Persons (WSNP), which since 1992 has existed alongside the Dutch Bankruptcy Law. As its name implies, the WSNP process is available to individual debtors, if they are actively seeking work (except if medically unfit) or in work, and are willing and able to meet the requirements of the procedure, but not to companies, although it

can also be applied to the business debts of the self-employed. Provided that they fulfil all their obligations under a debt rescheduling plan, debtors accepted into the WSNP process will usually be declared to have a "clean slate" after three years, even if the debts have not been paid off.

Among the key learning elements identified by the peer reviewers:

- The possibility of a "clean slate" after three years under the Dutch WSNP procedure, rather than five or seven years or longer as in some other countries, impressed the peer reviewers. But there may be a trade-off between the length of time before the "clean slate" and the level of income that debtors are permitted to retain in the intervening period.
- The systematic approach of the Municipal Credit Banks was praised. However, municipal banking has a long history in the Netherlands. In the present-day context, it is unlikely that municipal banking systems would be created in countries where they do not already exist.
- The integrated range of services provided was another positive point. The integrated



services approach may be more easily transferable to other countries than a social banking system.

- The availability of skilled, verified trustees, who accompany the debtors throughout the process, is an important guarantee of quality within the Dutch scheme, as is the judicial supervision of the WSNP process. This promotes creditors' confidence in the system.
- The effective use of databases in the Dutch process was noted with great interest, also as a means of identifying serious debt risks at an early stage. But the public accessibility of these databases might be difficult to reproduce in some countries, due to concerns about privacy and commercial abuse. Privacy concerns were also expressed about the "postal blockade" under which the Dutch trustees intercept and monitor debtors' mail.
- The need to inform and prepare debtors for the debt rehabilitation process was emphasised.
- In all countries, there is a need to strike a balance between the interests of debtors and those of creditors, the Peer Reviewers emphasised. Tighter regulation of the credit market may be needed, perhaps at the European level, in order to prevent credit providers from knowingly pushing people into debts that they cannot service. It may be necessary to distinguish "good faith" creditors and to give them priority in the repayment of debts.
- In some new EU Member States, the problem of over-indebtedness is now emerging. So they may have a unique opportunity to build up an effective system in advance, by learning from the approaches of EU countries that have faced this problem for longer.
- Society's spending on debt management is cost-effective. For each euro spent on debt counselling and management, two euros are saved in other parts of society. Debt rehabilitation can reverse the descent into poverty and homelessness, and so promote social inclusion.