

Peer Review

Municipal programme of shanty towns eradication in Avilés (Principality of Asturias)

Short Report



On behalf of
European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



The Peer Review was held in Avilés (Asturias, Spain) on 23-24 October 2006 and hosted by the City of Avilés, the Principality of Asturias and the Spanish Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. In addition to the host country, seven peer countries participated in the review: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia. Among the observers from the host country were representatives of Roma associations, as well as Roma beneficiaries of the Avilés programme who related their first-hand experiences. Also taking part was a stakeholder representative from the European Roma Rights Centre, an observer from Estudios Económicos y Sociales (Madrid) and representatives from the European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.

Presented in Spain's 2005 National Plan for Social Inclusion as a best practice, the Avilés experience of integrating Roma people is a success story in a field that has seen many failures. The eradication of shanty towns was a political and social concern for Avilés right from the advent of democracy in Spain. The time was right. The social, industrial and urban fabric of Avilés was in urgent need of renewal, and the shanty towns eradication could be presented as part of the city's general drive for a better future. Avilés then had seven shanty settlements inhabited by Roma. Their main work was waste material collection and street trading, but this did not produce enough income to give access to regular housing. In any case, anti-Roma prejudices meant that most doors were closed to them.

In 1989, the City Hall proposed the municipal plan for the integration of ethnic minorities, which included a programme for the eradication of shanty towns. The relocation of the shanty town inhabitants to transitional housing was envisaged, as well as the relocation of some of the people to standard housing. During the first ten-year eradication programme (1989-99), the choice made was to build a special settlement – 36 homes in an isolated area of the municipality. In 1997, the social housing town of Valliniello was inaugurated. But up to the year 2000, twenty families were relocated into standard housing elsewhere, in non-Roma neighbourhoods.

From 2000 onwards, after an evaluation, it was decided that the programme should not continue to use special settlements. Such segregated, isolated areas did not foster the social inclusion of these families in Avilés. So a second programme for the eradication of shanty towns was drawn up, in which the major decision was to relocate shanty town people into standard housing. This plan was adopted unanimously by the various political parties on the City Council. They also agreed that relocation should no longer be a party political issue. Together with strong leadership from the City Hall, and the assistance of local groups ranging from the media to the trade unions, this proved decisive in overcoming initial hostility to the relocation of Roma families into some neighbourhoods. Although some Roma experienced difficulties in adjusting to standard housing, the great majority settled in quickly and are now on good terms with their non-Roma neighbours. Throughout the programme, back-up has been available from social workers, mediators, educationalists, job placement advisers and other specialised staff. However, only about 10% of the Roma moved to standard housing have required any intervention at all. For Roma on low incomes, subsidised rents are available.

The second programme has run from 2000 to the present. At the time of the peer review, nine families remained in Valliniello, waiting for relocation to standard housing. The demolition of Valliniello began the week before the seminar.

Key learning elements from the peer review

- A number of major **factors in the success of the Avilés experience** were identified:
 - 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
 - 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
 - medium-term commitment and action, bearing in mind that approaches to Roma take some time to produce demonstrable outcomes and that short-termism would therefore be a waste of resources
 - an individualised approach based on community support, which should take cultural factors into account but should not overemphasise them, as this can lead to new, unjustified stigmatisation of Roma as a group
 - regular monitoring to prevent overcrowding or the emergence of new shanty towns in areas to which Roma have been relocated.
- 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. This also raises issues of transferability, as no such consensus exists in some of the peer review countries. Some participants felt that elements of the Avilés programme might be transferable separately. Others argued that a piecemeal transfer would be unlikely to succeed, as the Avilés approach is an integrated one.
- It was generally agreed that the **four pillars of Roma inclusion** are housing, employment, education and health care. However, there was some debate about the order of priorities. Some felt that decent housing is the best springboard for inclusion, as it leads on to better jobs, schooling and access to health facilities. Others argued that regular employment needs to come first, as it generates the income needed for real inclusion.
- 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. One suggestion was that the legislative framework in each country should place a positive obligation on public institutions to undertake proactive measures to integrate Roma. Local bodies can themselves develop relevant and viable initiatives. 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 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. In social policy (education, health care, employment), there will always, to some extent, be a mainstreaming approach. In many cases, this will need to be combined with targeted policies, in order to address the specific situation of the Roma, but such targeted approaches must be carefully monitored to ensure that they are leading towards standardisation, rather than establishing a parallel policy. It was suggested that the Irish practice of “poverty-proofing” 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 PROGRESS programme will integrate social inclusion with anti-discrimination, employment integration and gender issues. A new call for tenders could provide scope for the preparation of further projects on Roma inclusion.