



Towards a European Social Agenda also for Roma

Statement of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO)¹

The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) welcomes the “renewed” Social Agenda launched by the European Commission on July 2nd 2008, which aims at addressing the challenges of socio-economic changes taking place in Europe. The fact that over 78 million people are living in poverty in Europe proves the urgent need of re-shaping and implementing more effective policies and legislation for eliminating social exclusion and poverty². Since its establishment, ERIO has been calling upon European institutions and national governments to undertake urgent measures to fight social exclusion faced by Roma. Here, it should be stressed a wide range of studies give account that social exclusion and poverty among Roma is much higher than within the majority society.

Nevertheless, the priorities set up in the “renewed” Social Agenda are drafted in the assumption that Europeans and people residing in Europe, are living in a society of full employment. Constraints of the globalised free markets, which lead to systemic unemployment and the social consequences of this, are not taken into consideration. Those key areas are not oriented to address the needs of people systematically excluded from the labour markets and from accessing social benefits. Furthermore, children do not belong to the labour market and can not be targeted through such policies. The needs of disadvantaged ethnic minorities, as Roma, people living in poverty and especially those living in extreme poverty, are not addressed by the Social Agenda. There is no focus on how these people can access adequate employment, self-employment and social benefits and services which come easily to others.

The European Roma Information Office believes that the new Agenda for a social Europe should be based on a human rights approach, specifically on promoting the societal framework conditions for the full exercising of socio-economic rights by all people living in Europe. The social meaning of the original Lisbon Treaty should be re-affirmed in the renewed Social Agenda.

¹ The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) is a human rights advocacy organisation promoting the rights of Roma communities throughout Europe and acting to combat racism, discrimination and social exclusion faced by the majority of Roma. ERIO lobbies European institutions, national governments and international organisations in order to bring about improvements in policies concerning Roma communities. ERIO cooperates intensively with Roma organisations and supports them in establishing their concerns and demands to European and national decision-makers.

² See further information on poverty in Europe in the website of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) on: <http://www.eapn.eu/content/view/57/55/lang,en/>

“Children and Youth – Tomorrow’s Europe”

➤ Promoting inclusion and equal treatment of Roma children and young people

ERIO welcomes that priority is given to youth under the key areas for action of the renewed Social Agenda. Despite this, the needs of disadvantaged youth, especially those of young Roma, are not taken into consideration. Large numbers of young Roma live in poverty, even in extreme poverty, throughout the European Union. Most Roma children and young people face discrimination in education systems in Europe and do not have access to mainstream education. A majority of Roma children and young people attend segregated schools. Segregation is done on a discriminatory basis, and as a result of this unequal system, many young Roma do not develop the necessary skills required to access higher education or to adequate labour.

A key measure for promoting equal treatment and social inclusion of Roma children and young people is to implement comprehensive policies of school desegregation. In countries where segregated schooling of Roma is practised, national governments should be encouraged to implement national strategies that enforce school desegregation. National governments should be also galvanised into carrying out awareness campaigns on discrimination at schools and in ensuring that Roma children and young people are treated the same as their majority society counterparts. The European Commission should give the example and multiple its efforts for promoting school desegregation what has been missing until now. The EC Programme “Education and Training 2010” should aim at filling the gap concerning the education of minorities, and specifically the education of Roma in the EU. The renewed Social Agenda should move from the perception of young people as producers and to treat them as citizens with social rights.

Concerning problems faced by Roma children and those from other disadvantaged minorities, such as pre-school education, should also be promoted in order to facilitate school attendance.

“Investing in People, More and Better Jobs, New Skills”

➤ Promoting integration of Roma into the labour market and adequate self-employment

ERIO welcomes that the renewed Social Agenda calls to invest in the quantity and quality of jobs and on overcoming skill shortages taking into consideration that most of the Roma are excluded from the labour markets. Very high rates of unemployment (in most countries over 60 per cent) and under-employment, as well as unqualified and low-paid jobs, characterise the situation of Roma in the labour markets³. This situation is greatly the result of low levels of education prevalent amongst Roma and the discrimination they face in the labour market. Guaranteeing Roma access to fair and

³ For more information on Roma and employment read: European Roma Rights Centre (2007): The Glass Box. Exclusion of Roma from Employment; available at: <http://www.errc.org/db/02/14/m00000214.pdf>

equal employment and payment is fundamental to promoting their social inclusion and to fighting the high rate of poverty they face.

A useful instrument for encountering the unemployment faced by Roma is to promote comprehensive Lifelong Learning programmes that can provide Roma with the skills required to access adequate labour and self-employment opportunities. The promotion of Lifelong Learning should be a priority of the renewed Social Agenda for filling the gaps left by education systems promoting inequality. Lifelong Learning Programmes should focus on providing Roma and other disadvantaged minorities with adequate education, as well as vocational training programmes and complementary education to fill the gaps produced by unequal education systems, in order to enable Roma to gain access to adequate employment and self-employment.

Discrimination faced by Roma in the labour market should also be strongly contested. The anti-discrimination legislation should be properly implemented at national level. It should be ensured that European citizens easily bring grievances to the court and to anti-discrimination bodies on discrimination-related issues. Furthermore, it should be ensured that the European Commission and Member States promote anti-discrimination awareness-raising campaigns and anti-discrimination trainings with regard to Roma, especially within the framework of the EC's *Progress Programme*. These campaigns and trainings should target employers and administrators, especially those working in employment agencies.

In order to compensate existing inequalities "positive action" should be introduced as a compulsory provision for promoting employment of Roma and other disadvantaged minorities in the administration. Private companies having "positive action" as a principle under their recruitment policies should obtain advantage by Member States and European institutions in the competition for public contracts.

Provision of and access to micro-credit options for self-employed Roma should also be counted as a priority in programmes aimed at Roma integration in the self-employment sector. It should be ensured that the EC, especially through its *Progress Programme* and Structural Funds focus on this issue.

"Mobility"

➤ Guaranteeing mobility and integration of Roma throughout Europe

Mobility is crucial for Roma communities. As with many others, a great number of Roma move looking for better work or living conditions. Most Roma who move throughout Europe are coming from new Member States to Western Europe. However, many Roma are hindered in their right to mobility. The right to free movement of many citizens of Roma origin is systematically abused despite the fact that freedom of movement is a human right acknowledged in the Charter of Human Rights and as one of the basic rights of the European Union. Some Member States prefer to choose a restrictive interpretation of the EU legislation possibility to expel EU citizens. For example, the recent case in Italy of mass expulsions of Romanian citizens of Roma origin took place. Such an approach is in conflict not only with international human rights standards but also

violates fundamental rights and the principle of equal treatment stated in EU Charter of Human Rights and EU Directives regulating the free movement within EU.

Member States should respect the principle of equal treatment and the European standards for free movement by interpreting the relevant legislation in a way which ensures that EU citizens exercise their rights to free movement. Member States should put an end to any interpretations on the limit the free movement of EU citizens and more particularly those of Roma origin; they should not to carry out collective expulsions on nationality and ethnic grounds leading to the stigmatization and criminalization of entire groups of citizens. They should follow the joint Resolution of the European Parliament discussed on November 15th 2007, on the right of EU citizens and their families to move and reside freely within the territory of the EU, which reaffirms the value of the free movement of persons as a fundamental principle of the European Union.

“Longer and healthier lives”

➤ Filling the health gap among Roma

The investment in longer and healthy lives of Roma is urgently needed. Roma and other disadvantaged ethnic minorities face the greatest disadvantage in health care systems and have the most dire widespread health conditions. Many reports, such as those from the World Health Organisation (WHO), illustrate that life expectancy among Roma is much lower than among members of the majority societies and that there is a higher incidence of preventable diseases, particularly those avoidable by routine vaccine, among Roma. This is directly related to the substandard housing conditions in which the majority of Roma live and to the fact that Roma do not have access to the same quality of health care as members of the majority societies. In particular, countries in Central and Eastern Europe do not often have the necessary infrastructure to meet the health needs of segregated Roma settlements and villages. As such, most Roma communities do not have access to preventive health services. Discrimination and mistreatment of Roma even by medical personnel and public health administrations are common. Guaranteeing access to adequate healthcare for Roma represents one of the main challenges of European institutions and national governments.

By implementing the new EU Health Strategy, adequate health care for Roma and other disadvantaged minorities as well as having access to the same health care services for Roma as the majority societies will take high priority which should be ensured. Member States should develop strategies to meet the healthcare needs of Roma communities. Such strategies should include improvements to the infrastructure of health services provided to Roma; ensuring a healthy environment for Roma communities living in substandard conditions; carrying out disease screening in Roma communities living in poverty; carrying out health information and prevention campaigns which specifically target Roma communities and tackle inequalities between Roma communities and the majority societies in health systems. Health policies targeting Roma should consider the special needs of the communities, which could include, for example, carrying out intercultural trainings for medical personnel and implementing programmes for health mediators.

The shocking health conditions which occur with frequency in large Roma communities are related to their substandard accommodation conditions. A great number of Roma households in countries

such as Romania and Slovakia, do not have access to running water and electricity. Many Roma settlements are segregated, located in unhealthy environments and isolated from essential public services (health care and education). In other countries such as the Czech Republic, Italy and Turkey, Roma people are being victims of forced evictions, whereby Roma settlements are destroyed by the police without any compensation or resettlement programmes.

Guaranteeing accommodation to Roma and other disadvantaged minorities should be included in the EU Sustainable Development Strategy. The improvement of Roma housing conditions in the discussion on an integrated urban policy should be included. The development plans of the deprived areas where Roma live should be comprehensive in nature, including education and training, health, employment and leisure aspects. Furthermore, relocation measures in order to provide Roma with adequate housing conditions should be taken into consideration. Housing policies, especially relocation measures, should be implemented in consultation or cooperation with the Roma communities to be affected.

National governments should end the destruction of Roma settlements under the pretext of urban modernisation programmes. Such programmes should only be implemented upon proper consideration of the population to be affected. Families should be relocated and provided with adequate housing. A compensation programme for affected families should also be implemented.

Furthermore, comprehensive policies combating poverty among Roma communities should be implemented. These policies should include urgent measures addressing extreme situations, as health care access, emergency housing and micro finance programmes. Only by combating extreme poverty among large Roma communities and other disadvantaged groups can a step forward towards “longer and healthier lives” of European citizens be taken.

“Combating poverty and social exclusion”

➤ Promoting social inclusion of Roma communities

The large communities of Roma throughout Europe are living in poverty, or in extreme poverty. In acute cases urgent measures are needed. Comprehensive policies combating poverty among Roma communities should be implemented. These policies should include urgent measures addressing extreme situations, as health care access, emergency housing and micro-finance programmes. Only combating extreme poverty among the large parts of Roma and other disadvantaged groups will a step forward towards “active inclusion” of European citizens be made.

Feminisation of poverty is very noticeable among Roma communities. The majority of Roma communities throughout Europe are living in poverty, but of these, the most vulnerable groups are Roma women and children. Roma women confront the biggest barriers in access to adequate education and employment. At the same time, Roma women, en masse, do not have access to social benefits. As Roma women are the most affected by unemployment, specific programmes should be created to target them which would take into account the particular needs of Roma communities. Policies targeting all Roma should promote the active participation of Roma women as key actor of Roma communities. Projects targeting Roma should also take into account the

special needs of Roma women. They should participate in decision making processes at all stages of a projects' implementation. Social inclusion policies targeting Roma women should give special attention to the education and employment fields.

Immigrants and Roma are the most vulnerable groups at risk of living in poverty and social exclusion. The situation of Roma immigrants does not differ from that of Third Country Nationals. Both are in a disadvantaged position in the education sector, in the labour and housing markets and lastly, in health services in comparison to the citizens of the majority. However the situation of Roma refugees and asylum seekers is by far the most grave. In many Member States, Roma refugees cannot exert their basic civil rights, and are often barred from working or following higher studies. In addition to experiencing social exclusion in asylum countries, Roma are often threatened to return to their countries of origin despite the fact that conditions there are still far from adequate for return.

Member States should undertake all needed measures for guaranteeing the integration of Roma immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. There is a need to simplify bureaucratic procedures defining the legal status of Roma refugees in host countries, thus facilitating their integration and contributing to equal access opportunities in the fields of employment, education, housing, and healthcare and in the exertion of their civil rights. Roma refugees and asylum seekers should also be given the opportunity to stay in the host country, if they so wish, and means for their integration into the host country's society should be provided. The legal provisions applicable to refugees and foreigners should always respect the principle of non-discrimination. Furthermore, Member States should undertake effective action to combat and work at the eradication of xenophobic attacks against Roma and media campaigns spreading negative stereotypes of Roma communities.

Structural Funds should be used more effectively in order to tackle social exclusion faced by Roma. In order to ensure an effective use of the Funds, Roma organisations should have at least a consultative status with regard to the selection, design, implementation and evaluation of projects funded by the Structural Funds towards Roma. Additionally, the European Commission should develop capacity building programmes for Roma organisations so that they can apply for Structural Funds.

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on Social Inclusion and Social Protection should focus on Roma issues, especially in countries with representative Roma populations. Roma organisations should be involved in the draft and implementation of the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion. The 2010 European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion should also serve to address poverty and social exclusion faced by Roma.

“Fighting discrimination”

➤ Promoting equal treatment of Roma

Numerous reports give account of discrimination and racism faced by Roma. According to a recent *Eurobarometer* on discrimination in the European Union, over 25 per cent of European citizens, in some countries even over 50 per cent, would not feel comfortable with having a person of Roma origin as a neighbour⁴. Unfortunately, the anti-discrimination legislation which comprises the Race Equality Directive at the national level has failed to effectively encounter discrimination faced by Roma. Several Member States have not implemented the legislation properly. Apart from this, the current legislation does not cover segregation as a form of discrimination and multiple discrimination; a factor which would enhance considerably the protection of Roma from discrimination. Furthermore, Member States should be enforced to promote positive action as a means to encounter existing inequality. With regard to policies, anti-discrimination campaigns focusing on combating anti-Gypsyism should be implemented at the national and European level.

Intercultural and anti-discrimination trainings should be promoted and intensified targeting people within administrative bodies which Roma and other minorities are most often confronted with: school administrators, teachers, personal of employment offices, police, judges and administrative personal of the judiciary systems.

Anti-discrimination policies should fit with promoting intercultural dialogue. ERIO welcomes the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID). Given the extreme patterns of discrimination and social exclusion faced by large Roma communities, they are not currently equal partners in intercultural dialogue. Intercultural dialogue should take place between equal partners, so that the socio-economic and political framework conditions should be ensured for guaranteeing equal participation in this proposed intercultural dialogue. It is clear, Roma cultures are mostly considered as inferior and do not find a place within mainstream cultures; thus Roma cultural forms of expressions should also be respected as those of the majority societies are.

Discrimination also affects levels of participation in decision making processes among Roma. Most of Roma are excluded from decision making. This is reflected in the very poor political representation of Roma at the national and European level. In most cases, participation is denied to Roma. They often face discrimination from main stream parties and their voters. Political parties throughout Europe should show a clear commitment to anti-discrimination and equal treatment also within their own organizational structures.

⁴ The Eurobarometer is a series of surveys carried out on behalf of the European Commission for giving account on public opinion on certain issues. See the aforementioned Eurobarometer on: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_296_en.pdf

“Opportunities, access and Solidarity on the Global Scene”

➤ Promoting social inclusion of Roma in Candidate Countries

Large Roma communities live in the candidate and potential candidate countries: Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), Serbia and Turkey. Several reports of intergovernmental bodies and human rights organisations and even the Monitoring Reports of the European Parliament on the Accession of the candidate and potential candidate countries, reveal that Roma face strong patterns of social exclusion and widespread poverty in these countries. Violations of human rights, the demolishing of Roma settlements, substandard living conditions and high rates of unemployment and of school absenteeism among Roma children, are the most noticeable characteristics of the situation of Roma in the candidate countries. The improvement of living conditions among Roma communities in the candidate countries should be ensured. The European Commission should demand from the candidate and potential countries to establish the legal and material framework conditions for the improvement of the situation of Roma. The improvement of living conditions of Roma in the candidate and potential countries should be a requirement for achieving the accession. The agenda for the accession into the EU should be developed establishing minimal standards for the respect of minority rights.

Improving the Open Method of Coordination (OMC)

The Open Method of Coordination (OMC) was created to be an instrument for improved policy coordination in the field of social inclusion and social protection. Unfortunately, the OMC has not fulfilled the expectations for an improved policy making method on social inclusion. This failure is more evident in the case of social policies targeting Roma communities. In most of these cases, Roma have not been targeted in the National Action Plans on Social Inclusion and Social Protection, 2004-2006 and 2006-2008. Even in countries with representative Roma populations, Roma communities are not strategically targeted with long-term and measurable objectives in the NAPs on Social Inclusion. In these countries, Roma organisations have not been included in the discussions and/or the development of the NAPs on Social Inclusion. In the Peer Reviews on Social Inclusion, projects targeting Roma communities are nearly forgotten. Given this, it should not come as a surprise that the patterns of social exclusion faced by Roma throughout Europe remain the same.

There exists an urgent need to focus the OMC on Roma since they are one of the vulnerable groups at highest risk of living in poverty, even in extreme poverty, and of being social excluded. The National Action Plans on Social Inclusion should include strategic objectives explicitly targeted at Roma communities. Specific problems require specific solutions. Roma organisations, together with other Civil Society Organisations, should be included in the discussions to provide shaping, monitoring and evaluation of the NAPs. Finally, evaluations should be carried out according to measurable indicators.

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