

SUMMARY REPORT

Working with Roma and Sinti People – a consultation among Eurodiaconia members

Attendees: John Stringham, Sebastian Ludwig, Geesje Werkman, Davide Rosso, Emese Zavodi, Gyorgy Lakatos, Kati Jaashelainen, Marco Jourdan, Anne Marie Boile Nielsen, Tuomo Leinonen, Anca-Loredana Enache, Julia Hettenhausen, Heather Roy, Clotilde Clark-Foulquier, Catherine Storry

Speakers: Ivan Ivanov (ERIO) Doris Peschke (CCME)

On 6th October in Brussels, Eurodiaconia held its first consultation with members on working with Roma and Sinti people. The aim of the meeting was to provide an opportunity for exchange and discussion on this topic, to hear from some Roma experts and to try to draw some conclusions for the future work of Eurodiaconia. Heather Roy, Eurodiaconia, opened the meeting with a short devotion. Catherine Storry, Eurodiaconia welcomed the participants and explained the purpose of the day which was to gauge from members the level of work being done in their organisations with Roma and to see what role they feel Eurodiaconia could play in this area of work. She introduced the first external speaker Doris Peschke from Eurodiaconia's ecumenical partner the Churches Commission on Migration in Europe (CCME).

CCME

Ms Peschke explained that CCME is an observer at the Council of Europe, where CCME sees good progress in the condemnation of public authorities' discriminatory rules, especially through litigation and the work of the European Roma Rights centre. However, crimes against Roma persist, especially in the context of the current social crisis, and Roma inclusion remains a challenge (see the recent example of Northern Ireland). Whilst the EU can help, she stressed that most work with Roma needs to be done on a local level. Ms Peschke welcomed cooperation with Eurodiaconia on Roma and suggested that this could involve joint EU projects, work on education and advocacy. She also suggested that we look at the [Bratislava declaration](#) which some churches use as a basis for their work. She also promoted the idea that political lobbying would be useful for instance to push for the history of Roma to be part of the education curriculum in Europe. One important challenge according to Ms Peschke is that racism sometimes still persists in the church and people still have the idea that Roma belong somewhere else. Ms Peschke also pointed out that in the past the church had excluded Roma and that the church has to realise its responsibility in improving dialogue with Roma.

ERIO

Ivan Ivanov, Director of the European Roma Information Office (ERIO) explained the three pillars of their work: providing information about the EU to Roma, advocacy and networking and capacity building. ERIO is involved in giving recommendations to the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and a Parliament intergroup which has recently been established. There is also a Roma unit in the Council of Europe which works with ERIO. Mr Ivanov explained that since the fall of Communism, there has been a lack of strategic process in funding and projects: no policy has been put in place during project time to ensure continuity if found to be good practice. Mr Ivanov also stressed that lack of evaluation is one reason why projects fail. In addition, the lack of communication between government agencies and NGOs has led to poor coordination and the repetition of mistakes.





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He explained that another weakness of governments has been their paternalistic approach which leaves Roma communities in the role of the 'beneficiary'. This is also accompanied by Roma culture not being taken into account and therefore culturally inappropriate projects failing. Segregation, he explained, also exists in Western Europe from health services to education, creating a vicious cycle of exclusion. Access to the legal system is also another challenge and race equality directives are also not effective for Roma. Mr Ivanov explained that at a high level, there *is* political will, but this is not followed up with concrete measures. There now exists a European Roma Platform; however it is still unclear to NGOs what the purpose is and what the outcomes will be.

Mr Ivanov also explained that the lack of role models in the Roma community is a problem. People from Roma communities who are educated and get good jobs don't stay living with the Roma community, leaving children and youth without positive role models and hope for a better future. He recommended reading the Open Society Institute paper on 'The Cost of Non-Inclusion' which highlights that the cost of exclusion in the long run will be much higher than the cost of investment in education, housing and health now. Mr Ivanov also pointed out that local churches were a good channel to get information to and from Roma communities.

Member projects

Participants were asked to prepare a short presentation on current Roma projects, some of the challenges they faced and the needs for working on these projects.

Anca-Loredana Enache from the Helsinki Deaconess Institute in Finland talked about her work in Romania, highlighting the lack of continuity of projects before Romania's accession to the EU. Whilst mediators were successful, after the project ended, social workers and local mayor had lost contact with Roma families. She also pointed out that trying to talk to, advise and reach Roma communities through contacts with another Roma subgroup is not effective as the subgroup would still be considered outsiders. She therefore stressed the need for communication strategies, to teach people that not all Roma are the same. Furthermore, they have no access to political participation. She also stressed the role of the media and their often negative influence on society's perception of Roma.

John Stringham introduced the [Roma Gadjie Dialog through Service](#) initiative. This initiative aims to give Roma, especially from communities in Central and Eastern Europe, opportunities to journey outside their own communities to volunteer in social, environmental and cultural projects in Eastern, central and Western Europe that will broaden their knowledge and skills and enable them to contribute to the further development of their communities and the situation of Roma in general after their service. Mr Stringham stressed the need for project leaders not to be paternalistic and the need to listen and invite Roma to meetings and ask them for their opinions. He also emphasised that Roma need to be included in the leadership regardless of qualifications and language skills. He pointed out that lasting change is not possible in five years; there is a need for continuity and perseverance. Building bridges is the aim of the initiative however this is difficult in countries where during communist times volunteering was not voluntary. He also said that the situation was different for girls and boys as from a Roma cultural perspective it is easier to send boys away from their families for a few months rather than girls.

Kati Jaashelainen from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland explained the situation of Roma in Finland. Despite the existing legal and institutional systems for preventing discrimination, Roma people face discrimination in, for example, education, housing, employment, working life and access to public places, such as restaurants and bars. The housing conditions of the Roma are still problematic. Municipalities and their rental housing corporations are nearly exclusively responsible for the housing of Roma.



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Regarding education, Ms Jaashelainen explained that Roma children are continuously treated unequally compared to children of the majority population, especially in education. The school drop-out rate of Roma pupils is still high, and there are not enough Roma teachers and pre-school material published in Romani. However the recruitment of Roma support persons and school assistants to support families, children and teachers has produced good results.

The Roma in Finland are especially active in Pentecostal churches, although officially 90% are supposedly in the Lutheran church. Ms Jaashelainen explained that in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland there is an advisory committee on Roma where half the members are Roma and they advise and support the churches in their activities with Roma. Until now the Church council has monitored the situation but has not given recommendations to parishes on work among Roma migrants. The main challenge is to achieve full inclusion of Roma in the Parishes which includes increasing employment of Roma in parishes.

Tuomo Leinonen from the Helsinki Deaconess Institute introduced two projects 'VAMOS' and 'Rom Po Drom'. 'Vamos' is a project which seeks to help youngsters under the age of 21 who have been out of education and have no job. Deaconess Institute has hired two social and health care professionals, one nurse and one Romanian-language-speaking social worker for the implementation of the 'Rom po drom' project. The project works to build the first phase of a confidential relationship with Roma in the street. The purpose is to examine their ability, willingness and access to work in Finland. They inform Roma about the Finnish society and Finnish conditions, such as employment conditions and social and health services as well as explain opportunities to return to his home country. One major challenge, he explained, was access to health services and lack of civil rights, such as European Insurance cards. Roma are considered as tourists and therefore they are only able to receive emergency treatment. Also, a lack of language skills is a barrier to finding a job. The main aim of these projects is to build is relationships and support people where they can. Housing is also a major challenge in Finland, as it is expensive and there are no affordable places to stay for Roma. In addition there is a wave of 'new' Roma since the accession of Romania and Bulgaria which created a new type of stigmatisation.

Julia Hettenhausen from DW der EKD explained that in Germany there are very few projects focussed only on Roma although many services will include them. There is a third group of projects similar to development aid projects where they try to create better infrastructure and employment for Roma originating from the Balkans who cannot access the labour market and are therefore often deported from Germany. The main challenges in Germany were lack of residence permits and lack of social rights. She also explained that all projects involved only one Roma community, because often there was only one contact person for each community. Lack of financial means is also a challenge. The most noted success from their work was simply to maintain contact and stay in dialogue with someone from the Roma community. Ms Hettenhausen suggested a Facebook page as a way of networking and an email service for Eurodiaconia members to share information and resources.

Geesje Werkman from Kerk in Actie explained that for Roma in the Netherlands the big challenge is access to schools and health care. Roma have a kind of 'stateless' status meaning that certain services are not guaranteed for them. She also talked of some of the congregational activities and increased involvement of Roma. She also suggested that we might look at *Amnesty International* and *Medecins du Monde* - to see what work they are doing in various countries.

Davide Rosso from Diaconia Valdese gave examples of three Roma projects. The first being a voluntary project with Roma and Gadge. The second was a joint project started a long time ago near Turin, by the Valdesian church, the Catholic church and the municipality to help Roma children with their homework, and although the project stopped, the children now live in houses in the municipality and are well integrated. The third project was in Florence, where the church parish supported one boy's education, and when the Roma camp was moved far away from the school, the church paid for his travel because he wanted to continue



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going to the school. He added that many of the Roma in Italy that come from Spain build their community in the Pentecostal churches, and the church was important community which helps them to survive very difficult and complicated situations. Marco Jourdan explained that they have not developed many projects with Roma and they were very interested in this consultation to learn about projects of fellow members and they hope to suggest some example projects at their next annual meeting in March.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the group felt that Eurodiaconia could be lobbying on an EU level for access to social services for Roma, but that the solutions need to be implemented at national level. There is a need for a strategic process which is currently not in place at EU level. It was suggested that identity cards were needed at EU level for Roma, and not in just one EU country.

It was also suggested that churches and Christian organisations need to work to change the attitudes of people in churches. Eurodiaconia could help give an overview of the situation in cooperation with the CCME. The reconciliation process and dialogue however should be done by the churches. Churches can also help promote the concept of voluntary work to Roma. It was suggested there could be a role for the western church to play to question/improve the current state of the relationship between Roma and other communities.

The group proposed that Eurodiaconia facilitate access to resources such as funding, partners and people. It was suggested that Eurodiaconia could provide a platform for networking, for sharing of experiences and best practices. Eurodiaconia could also provide information through a simply mailing list or on Facebook for example, giving links to other information resources such as films or Roma organisations. It was recommended that Eurodiaconia looks at the Bratislava declaration of 2001 and decide with CCME if we could start working with churches with this as our strategic framework.

It was stressed that we must involve Roma in meetings and not allow language barriers to prevent inclusion. Finally, it was emphasised that the gospel gives us a long term vision and determination to continue working with Roma that goes beyond short term projects.

