

Event Report: Roma Network Meeting

Addressing Participation and Inclusion of Roma

18 – 20 September 2019, Novi Sad, Serbia

SUMMARY

On 18 – 20 September 2019, a group of 56 representatives from Eurodiaconia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and HEKS – Swiss Church Aid gathered in Novi Sad, Serbia to discuss Roma participation and representation in civil society as well as in political decision-making processes. The meeting was based on the observation that Roma people have adapted to changing circumstances, patterns of discrimination and marginalization over decades. Moreover, policy efforts have often pictured Roma as a homogenous group and failed to acknowledge the desires of Roma people.



The event stressed the need to change approaches and institutions by involving Roma people, as expressed in the “with Roma and for Roma” paradigm. In practice, this can be achieved by working on cross-cutting issues, where outcomes tend to mutually reinforce themselves and contribute to empowerment and trust building, especially for the most marginalised groups. National and EU level approaches should support these participatory bottom-up strategies through capacity building and financial support. Finally, the event has shown that participation cannot be isolated from exploring practical ways to tackle the manifold aspects of discrimination against Roma people.

In detail, the following **obstacles to participation and inclusion** were identified during the event:

- Unequal distribution of resources
- Gap between policy discussions and problems at the local level
- Lack of (well-working) consultations in designing and implementing approaches and projects
- Lack of dialogue, in part due to limited trust in efforts on paper and institutions
- Anti-gypsyism and its many manifestations in institutions and society
- Limited time and financial resources to implement promising practices, which may lead to lack of motivation
- Limited access to education for children and adults is at the core of many problems
- Lack of understanding of the marginalisation of Roma children and women as well as Roma who migrate to other EU countries

In order to overcome these obstacles, the following **enabling factors** were discussed:

- The need to change paradigms, not Roma people
- Going beyond provision of “receipts” and learning how transformative change happens
- Strengthen community building for bottom-up approaches to inclusion
- Foster dialogue to mitigate stereotypes and to discuss common goals between Roma and non-Roma people, demonstrating that the commitment of Roma is also of value for society
- Increase long-term partnerships among civil societies and authorities
- Involve Roma professionals at all levels and in civil society organisations
- Foster empowerment, including through education
- Covering the immediate needs of vulnerable groups, such as EU mobile Roma, through ensuring access to health care services
- Strengthen the role of Roma and civil society in monitoring progress, for example in the context of the EU framework
- Holding authorities responsible to deliver on non-discrimination goals and legislation.

Wednesday, 18 September 2019

The first official day of the conference focused on the participation of Roma in both the political and social components of European society. Speakers conveyed the reality of Roma people who do not have access to resources to overcome poverty, inevitably hindering the possibility of integration into society. This separation from European society can be seen clearly in the lack of Roma participants in local and national governments.

- **ROMA PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS**

Marcos Andrade, from the Council of Europe and the Program Manager of ROMACTED, presented on “Ensuring Roma Participation from the European to the Local Level” and outlined the new strategic action plan for 2020-2025 of the Council of Europe which emphasizes the importance of equality of outcomes. He also stressed the ineffectiveness of expecting Roma to change and adjust to the norms of non-Roma society, claiming that if we want Roma to integrate, both Roma and non-Roma must change. **Osman Balic**, President of the Standing Conference ROMA CITIZENS ASSOCIATION (SKRUG) of the League of Roma, spoke on the “State of Play of Roma Participation in Serbian Politics,” and listed the reasons Roma are not more involved in politics, one of these reasons being the physical political institutions in place. Furthermore, he urged the group to consider what role Roma can and should be in politics. Finally, he illuminated hope for Roma by portraying the progress Roma are making in society.

- **SELF-REPRESENTATION OF ROMA IN CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS**

After having the opportunity to both self-reflect, as well as reflect in a small group, three organizations presented on the participation and self-representation of Roma in civil-society organizations.

Anna-Sofie Gerth, from Berliner Stadtmission, spoke on “City-Station,” a place where those living in poverty can come and shower, eat and sleep during cold months. City-Station helps 80 people per day and offers German language courses, as well as culture classes. Anna-Sofie and her colleagues continue to implement new ideas as to how all visitors to the station can improve their relationships between one another, regardless of their background. **Benjamin Ibrahim** danced to introduce Diakonie Kosova’s many classes offered for Roma in their community. His dance portrayed a fun and interactive way to include everyone in personal reflection. Then, **Bernd Baumgarten** highlighted a few of the programs offered

including a hairdressing course, construction training and German courses. To conclude the good practice presentations, **Miroslav Oláh**, from Missio Reformata Slovakia, presented on the idea of togetherness. Missio Reformata Slovakia offers camps that open space for creativity and collaboration for the community.

- **INTERSECTIONS OF PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION**

To end the first day of the network meeting, the correlation between participation and empowerment of Roma began to be discussed. **Slavica Denić**, the Roma Inclusion Coordinator for the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) in the Government of the Republic of Serbia, outlined the Serbian Government's goals in the upcoming years including the creation of social policies to support minority groups. More specifically, the government wants these policies to be focused on social inclusion for Roma members of society; furthermore, she stressed the essentialness of educating and employing Roma youth. Finally, she assured us that the Serbian Government continues to address Roma inclusion, but cooperation between all areas of the government ensures a greater chance for social change.

Thursday, 19 September 2019

On the second day of the Roma Network Meeting, the sessions continued to elaborate on social inclusion and empowerment of Roma. In the morning, the group visited the Ekumenska Humanitarna Organizacija (EHO) Center to explore ways to incorporate employment and housing into projects facilitated by both Roma and non-Roma. EHO employs 118 people and has programs in the areas of Humanitarian Work, Interfaith and Interethnic Cooperation (Ecumenical Work), Diaconia, Social Services and Civil Society Development. EHO also successfully contributed to a House Upgrading project in the municipality of Stara Pazova, that has secured access to quality housing including water supply and sewage for the local Roma population. During a study visit on Friday, participants could learn more about this specific project.

- **INTERSECTIONS OF PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION**

Following the tour of the EHO Center, Policy Expert **Shejla Fidani**, from the Regional Cooperation Council, shared information on the implementation of "Roma Integration 2020," specifically on the strengthening of obligations of Roma integration goals in mainstream

policy development. Reducing the socio-economic gap between Roma and non-Roma is also a necessity for “Roma Integration 2020.”

- **MAKING THE DIVERSITY OF ROMA HEARD**

During the good practice presentations, **Sam Fraser** emphasized the importance of empowering the EU mobile Roma by illustrating different resources available for Roma through Skåne Stadsmission. Their project “Tackling Anti-Gypsyism Against Roma Migrants in Malmö”, involves close cooperation with the Roma community and focuses on tackling anti-gypsyism, advocacy and raising awareness and reporting of hate crimes against Roma migrants. **Marko Tosic** and Mina Lukic from Svратиšte, a drop-in center for youth integration, shared different approaches on empowering children and youth. He stressed the importance of education, as it is one of the only ways to effectively help Roma exit the poverty cycle. On the concluding day of the event, participants had a chance to visit this project as part of a study visit. Due to Svратиšte, there have been over 1,000 beneficiaries thus far. **Kriszta Naszádi**, from the Hungarian Reformed Church, shared a large number of opportunities offered to children to learn and reflect on Roma culture including National Roma Prayer Day, a performance at the National Day of Reformed Unity, and a poetry contest. Finally, **Isak Skenderi** from VoRAE, Kosovo, presented on “Working with Municipal Action Committees to Develop, Implement and Monitor Local Action Plans for Roma Inclusion.” His presentation stressed the importance of working “For Roma With Roma,” to improve living conditions and housing, education, employment and policy. These specific objectives continue to be addressed in the “National Roma and Ashkali Integration Strategy 2017-2021.”

- **EUROPEAN UNION UPDATE**

Following the good practice presentations, **Mirjana Maksimovic**, Program Manager for EU Policies at the EU Delegation in the Republic of Serbian, gave an update on “EU Policy Priorities post 2020 in Supporting Roma Inclusion.” In short, plans are currently being made for the framework on policy following 2019. While the European Union previously focused on national level inclusion of Roma, there will be a shift to more local level government policies, including, but not limited to, employment inclusion and housing. Mirjana Maksimovic also gave a brief overview of portfolios for each country, explaining how they differ from country to country depending on necessities for specific areas. In conclusion, she assured the group that the changes will be complete and finalized in the spring of 2020.