



***An ecumenical contribution of European Churches
and diaconal organisations to the
EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies***

On the invitation by the Reformed Church in Hungary on 14 and 15th February 2011, members from Eurodiaconia¹ and the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME)² held a joint consultation in the Synod office of the Reformed Church in Hungary to discuss the proposed **EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies**. The aim of this meeting was to develop a contribution to the proposal for an EU strategy for consideration by the Hungarian Presidency and the European Commission's Roma Task Force.

Eurodiaconia and CCME warmly welcome the initiative of an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies and are delighted to see the Hungarian Presidency committed to taking a significant step towards to adopting a European Strategy during its Presidency of the EU. We would like to thank particularly MEP Járóka Livia and the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs who drafted the report on the EU Strategy on Roma Inclusion. The adoption of this report on 9th March 2011 demonstrates a serious political commitment at EU level to improve the situation of the Roma in Europe and we hope that with the adoption of the strategy by the European Council in June, the Member States will also make a serious commitment to establishing and implementing effective national strategies.

In order to contribute to the successful implementation of such a framework, we wish to offer our recommendations to those concerned with the planning of the strategy. Our commitment to Roma inclusion is based on the Christian conviction that every person is created in the image of God and shares equal rights and dignity as human beings. As representatives of churches and church-related organisations in Europe, we trust that our proposal will be taken seriously and that we will be considered as partners in the process of Roma inclusion.

Members of CCME and Eurodiaconia emphasize the importance of the role of churches and church related organisations in combating poverty and social exclusion, also in relation to Roma communities. Many Churches and diaconal organisations are in an ideal position to work with Roma communities, and we regard this as both a moral obligation and a professional responsibility. For example, the Reformed Church in Hungary provided Roma with career opportunities in the Central and Eastern Europe region already in the 17th century and continued to do so until today. Churches and church-related organisations are among the most important providers of social and health care services, which include caring for people experiencing social exclusion and poverty. Churches and related organisations also regard it as an obligation to work for reconciliation in societies, and to overcome segregation. We recognize and promote the continuous need for reconciliation between the churches and Roma communities. Because of these endeavours and practice, churches, church-run institutions and church-related organizations should be recognised; both on the national and European level, as relevant actors in advocacy and grass-roots work with Roma communities.

¹ Eurodiaconia is an ecumenical federation of churches, non-statutory welfare organizations and NGOs in Europe operating at national and international level.

² CCME is the ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. Members are Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Councils of Churches as well as church-related agencies in presently 18 European countries. CCME cooperates with the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.

Recommendations from the churches and diaconia

General remarks

Any strategy for Roma inclusion must have a long-term perspective and long-term sustainability. To expect significant results in a relatively short time may not be realistic as generations have grown up with segregation. Certainly, access to social and health services as well as education needs to be and can be improved more speedily. Integration, however, implies participation and a two-way process in societies, which requires a change in attitudes. Changing attitudes takes much longer, and some patience may be required on the side of all stakeholders in this process.

- We welcome the European Parliament's Report and in particular how it calls on the European Commission to incorporate an **enlargement dimension** into the strategy involving candidate countries as well as potential candidates. Roma issues reach beyond the EU and should therefore take into consideration the wider Europe. It is also important that the report calls on the Member States of the European Union to appoint an official or administrative body to act as a **National Contact Point** for the implementation of the Strategy.
- During all stages of the planning, implementation and evaluation of EU and national strategies, the participation of Roma and Roma experts is vital. This may also provide for the empowerment of Roma communities, which is an important goal. However providing leadership opportunities and skills to participate in policy discussions requires resources also from EU funds.
- As the question of Roma is not limited to the territory of any single country but is a common challenge for the entire EU, we emphasise the need for a common EU Framework for Roma inclusion. The EU Framework must be flexible enough to allow for implementation at national level and to reflect contextual variations at grassroots level.
- Member States will have to ensure compliance with the principles laid out in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, the Lisbon Treaty and with the Equality Directives.
- The European Commission ought to monitor the progress made by Member States by using clear indicators and the so-called 'Roma Scoreboard'.
- Although the strategy is targeted to the Member States, a pan-European perspective is necessary when we consider Roma who are migrating between the Member States or from third countries to EU Member States. Member States must respect the European value of freedom of movement and thus the human and social rights that go with this freedom including social security and access to the labour market.

An integrated and comprehensive approach to integration

- Simplistic approaches must be avoided. Roma integration needs a comprehensive and integrated approach from all stakeholders which considers people's needs in a holistic manner.
- It is necessary to underline the interrelated determinants of Roma inclusion which include access to employment, education, housing, health and social care, again emphasising the need for an integrated approach to improve the social situation of Roma.
- Member States and the EU should support Roma grassroots organisations that provide important information services for social and health rights.
- Although education should be a priority, in its own right, it is not enough. National governments and local authorities need to help bridge the transition between education and work and to develop and implement programmes that support Roma persons' access to the local labour market.
- Roma face significant discrimination in the labour market, therefore national authorities must ensure that labour markets are inclusive and free from discrimination. The need to improve the general state of the labour market must also be taken into account so that jobs are available in the first place.

- One major obstacle that prevents many Roma from accessing social and health services is the lack of identification documents often leaving Roma officially “stateless” and putting into question their legal status as citizens. We would insist on the simplification of administrative processes and removal of financial barriers for civil registration across all Member States, particularly for children.
- Roma ought not to be victimised by being handed out donations. People need to feel empowered to make changes and take ownership of their lives. Social and societal integration is a two way process and every individual must have the opportunity to be active in that process.
- We do not ignore that social rights come with responsibilities. Indeed the conditions must be in place for Roma integration, but Roma people must also take a step to be integrated in society and willing to contribute to and participate in their local community.

Cultural diversity: Majority and minority communities living together

- Inclusion, integration and assimilation should not be equated. We are convinced that the programmes for Roma inclusion will benefit if the terminology is clarified first.
- European and national inclusion strategies must take into account the cultures and traditions of Roma, and the diversity among the Roma communities.
- Concepts of assimilation should be avoided. Majority societies as well as governments should facilitate that Roma communities can find place and space to live their identity in Europe. At the same time, segregation – whether intentional or by choice – ought to be avoided.
- Although some Roma groups are in many ways segregated from the majority of society, they do not live in complete isolation. The local context and community must be recognised in all strategies and social inclusion should be a goal for all, not only Roma.
- European societies are in a continuous and accelerating transition. This poses challenges particularly for disadvantaged or minority groups; yet, it appears much more challenging for Roma communities to adapt to these changes and, at the same time, to retain their own identity. EU decision-makers should pay attention to these developments and ensure that the most vulnerable in our societies - including Roma communities - do not fall through the gaps in the social systems and become more excluded.
- Efforts need to be made to change the attitudes of majority and minority societies alike. It is not enough to merely break down prejudice, but mutual respect and trust are necessary and need to be built. Enhancing self-esteem and sound self-assessment of local communities is key in this process.
- Educating the majority population about Roma communities and their history, and promoting Roma-Gadje dialogue is important to prevent racist discourse, stigmatisation and stereotyping. Appropriate fora need to be established to facilitate open discussion on the necessity of reconciliation between communities. Church-related organisations and local congregations can play an important role in bridging communities and providing fora for such discussions and community dialogue.
- Recognition and teaching of Romani languages could facilitate better understanding. If mediators, social workers or volunteers received training in Romani languages, communication and dialogue could be enhanced tremendously.
- National governments should actively tackle public discrimination and racism through education about Roma history, culture and identity as part of school curricula for all pupils.
- We welcome the Council of Europe’s 2010 Strasbourg Declaration, in particular the training programme for Roma mediators. We would like to encourage the EU to replicate or rather partake in this initiative.

EU Funds and tenders

- When planning strategies, as well as when discussing the future of structural, cohesion, rural development and other EU funds, the EU should respect solidarity as a crucially important core value.
- The EU Framework must give Member States clear guidance which EU tools, instruments and funding are available that can support the implementation of the national strategies.
- Inclusion or integration of disadvantaged communities can sometimes take decades, while many European funding programmes usually offer financial support only for a few years. Short term project-based solutions should be used selectively. Core and long term programme funding are needed to achieve sustainable solutions.
- Competing for Structural Funds needs to be reconsidered for the next planning cycle as the current system is inadequate to support Roma inclusion programmes. Some of our members feel that they cannot compete with other larger organisations to receive EU funding because bigger projects or programmes are given priority, while the co-funding requirements for such programmes are quite difficult and risky, even more so in larger projects. Very often, smaller projects may prove more effective than large undertakings. Therefore some possibilities for micro-grants ought to be considered and tested. Furthermore the need to constantly reapply for funds is a burden for small NGOs and is a constant concern for the sustainability of their services. It would be helpful if some funding could be earmarked for small CSOs and NGOs in a multi-annual programme.
- The financial administration of grants should be made simpler and auditing should as a priority focus on content aspects or long-term impacts of a given project over the financial aspects.
- Taking into account the potential long delay of tangible results, Member States that do not implement the strategy effectively within a reasonable timeframe and do not use EU funds efficiently must be reprimanded.

Concluding remarks

We would like to see the European Commission, European Parliament and EU Council working closely together to make this strategy a reality and a success. The European Commission is encouraged to build up its expertise by calling on Roma and non-Roma experts to give guidance and advice at all stages of the implementation. We would also encourage close cooperation of the EU institutions with the Council of Europe to avoid duplication of work.

The EU should continue to provide the space for mutual learning and best practice sharing on Roma inclusion among the Member States through the already existing *Integrated EU Platform for Roma Inclusion*, and as part of the wider Europe 2020 strategy and the European Platform against Poverty and Social exclusion. We would like to stress again that such a strategy will prove redundant without the political will of the Member States to implement it at national level.

Since the national governments and European Institutions do not always have the resources to reach individuals and communities at grassroots level, NGOs and in particular churches and diaconia find themselves in a unique position. We would therefore strongly encourage the cooperation between local and national authorities, churches and diaconal organisations and other grassroots organisations working with Roma. We would appreciate if all stakeholders were consulted and invited to participate at all stages of the process if we want to see an EU strategy for the inclusion of Roma leading to real and long-lasting results.

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