



European Economic and Social Committee

SOC/337
Intercultural dialogue and
the Roma

Brussels, 16 June 2011

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

Intercultural dialogue and the Roma: the key role of women and education
(additional opinion)

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Rapporteur: **Ms Sigmund**
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On 24 July 2009 the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(A) of the Implementing Provisions of the Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an additional opinion on

Intercultural dialogue and the Roma: the key role of women and education.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 27 May 2011.

At its 472nd plenary session, held on 15 and 16 June 2011 (meeting of 16 June), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 127 votes to 2.

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 With regard to the following proposals, the Committee takes the final sentence of the Commission's Communication of 5 April 2011¹ as its principle for action.
- 1.2 It emphasises that from now, instead of developing strategies **for** the Roma and carrying out analyses **on** them, specific measures must be developed together **with** the Roma and the organisations representing them.
- 1.3 Within the limits of its competences, the Committee is ready to participate in such measures or, as previously, to take its own initiatives in close cooperation with Roma organisations (e.g. hearings, conferences).
- 1.4 The Committee will develop its relations with institutions, organisations and other bodies active in this field and work towards joint action².
- 1.5 The Committee sees intercultural dialogue as a suitable instrument to achieve integration, or inclusion, of the Roma, with regard both to the role played by Roma women in this process and to education.
- 1.6 Where possible, the Committee will endeavour to participate in local initiatives - not least through its existing networks - or to launch them itself.

¹ "Now is the time to change good intentions into more concrete actions." (Commission Communication on *An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*, COM(2011) 173 final).

² See Appendix: "Initiatives, Programmes, Studies"
(http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/SOC337_additional-info.pdf).

2. Background and approach

- 2.1 In its exploratory opinion of 9 July 2008³, the EESC made a number of recommendations on how to step up the integration of the Roma minority in Europe. A two-track approach to the education of Roma children, coordinated between EU and national levels, was recommended, and the Commission was urged to implement an overall strategy and fund awareness-raising campaigns. Active involvement of Roma representatives in the process was recognised as the only way forward.
- 2.2 The European Commission⁴ took up this recommendation, noting that the EESC⁵ had identified "*the mainstreaming of Roma issues into all relevant European and national policies ... [as] the most promising way to achieve inclusion.*"
- 2.3 The principle behind the present additional opinion is that of intercultural dialogue, based on the view that both parties – in this case the Roma minority and the non-Roma population in Europe – should engage voluntarily in impartial dialogue. Such intercultural dialogue requires us to look at both similarities and differences in traditions and lifestyles, in order to better understand what exactly is happening and to design workable solutions.
- 2.4 In terms of content, this opinion focuses on **education**, the first pillar of integration⁶, and the one which the EESC sees as being the most important; in the same context, it also discusses the particular role of women in integration of the Roma.
- 2.5 The Committee supports the European Platform for Roma Inclusion strategy, and in particular the ten Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion established by the 2009 platform⁷.

3 EESC exploratory opinion on *Integration of minorities – Roma*, point 5.3, (OJ C 27, 3.2.2009).

4 Communication on *The social and economic integration of the Roma in Europe*, COM(2010) 133 final.

5 EESC exploratory opinion on *Integration of minorities – Roma*, point 5.3, (OJ C 27, 3.2.2009).

6 In connection with the four integration objectives set by the Commission: access to education, the right to employment, access to healthcare, and the right to housing together with associated basic residential services.

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1. Constructive, pragmatic and non-discriminatory policies
2. Explicit but not exclusive targeting
3. Intercultural approach
4. Aiming for the mainstream
5. Awareness of the gender dimension
6. Transfer of evidence-based policies
7. Use of Community instruments
8. Involvement of regional and local authorities
9. Involvement of civil society
10. Active participation of the Roma.

3. General comments

- 3.1 One of the slogans commonly used to describe the European integration project is "**unity in diversity**". In this context the Roma are an impressive example of European cultural diversity, an aspect which is further enriched by the fact that the Roma⁸ themselves embody diverse cultural identities⁹.
- 3.2 Since 1999¹⁰ the Committee has taken a broader view of culture, as embracing not only art, tradition and cultural heritage, but also - for example - education, science and research. Seen in this light, education is also of particular relevance to intercultural dialogue, especially with the Roma.
- 3.3 The Committee refutes arguments against multiculturalism¹¹; although some of the points made are valid, they are open to misunderstanding given that they do not apply to a European community held together by a shared "core culture"¹².
- 3.4 In line with this view of culture as an acknowledgement of shared values, we might well conclude that European identity has primarily to do with cultural identity, as confirmed by Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, which sets out the EU's values. Intercultural dialogue is therefore an appropriate means of making a long-term contribution to integration in general and the Roma in particular. The Committee sees **tolerance** as being of particular importance.
- 3.5 Tolerance means other people's right to be different, both in terms of exercise and acceptance of this right. This applies equally to Roma and non-Roma. However, in intercultural dialogue, there is yet another fundamental dimension to tolerance: it is not just about resolving potential conflicts between differing standards, but it also requires sensitivity to other ways of life, thus creating the empathy which is needed for coexistence.
- 3.6 The initiatives by the European Commission and Parliament to improve the situation of the Roma¹³ are an excellent means of creating the legislative and political framework for specific measures and programmes; however they are intrinsically top-down measures which will not

8 The term Roma is used here to refer to Roma, Sinti, travellers, Kalé, etc.

9 See also Committee of the Regions opinion CdR 178/2010 fin.

10 ESC Opinion on *The role and contribution of civil society organisations in the building of Europe*, OJ C 329, 17.11.1999, point 5.2.1.

11 The multicultural society model is not characterised by binding common values and is essentially an agglomeration of coexisting groups.

12 See *Europa ohne Identität? Die Krise der multikulturellen Gesellschaft*, Goldmann Verlag, p. 181 by Bassam Tibi, Professor Emeritus, University of Göttingen.

13 See Appendix: "Initiatives, Programmes, Studies" (http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/SOC337_additional-info.pdf); Commission communication on *An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* (COM(2011) 173 final), and the report by MEP Livia Járóka on *The EU strategy on Roma inclusion* (2010/2276(INI)), (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A7-2011-0043+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>).

achieve the desired outcomes unless accompanied by corresponding bottom-up initiatives by civil society, if need be with support from public bodies at national, regional and local level.

- 3.7 In view of this, the Committee welcomes the Commission's latest communication, and in particular supports its view that action is now needed; this concerns not only public authorities at national, regional and local level, but also and above all civil society stakeholders on both sides.
- 3.8 At both Community and international levels, considerable sums have been spent on the integration of the Roma; however the results have not been by any means proportionate to the amounts invested so far. In the Committee's view, this has to do partly with the fact that although numerous initiatives, conferences and meetings have taken place and continue to take place at Community level, many of them are unsatisfactory with respect to implementation of the measures which they propose, despite being valid in terms of content; among other things, this is due to a lack of involvement at local level of the Roma concerned and their representative organisations.
- 3.9 Acting within its competences, the Committee would like to help remedy this mismatch between good strategic proposals and inadequate tactical implementing measures. It will therefore endeavour to capitalise on its role as a bridge to European citizens and use its networks and the organisations represented by its members in local events to help ensure that there is greater willingness to accept available services and meet commitments.

4. **The role of Roma women**

- 4.1 Various reports show that in Roma families women generally do most of the child-rearing before school¹⁴, whereas fathers are also involved once children start school. Bringing up girls, even after they have started school, tends to remain the responsibility of mothers. However, since children's most formative years are the pre-school years, it is important for all children to already be prepared for school at home. Measures are therefore needed to persuade mothers of the importance of their children's - especially daughters' - education and encourage them to give their children specific preparation for school.
- 4.2 However, these measures are only likely to succeed if services are available (especially at local level) that take the various traditions into account. In this context, public authorities have a duty to provide appropriate training programmes and prevent segregation.
- 4.3 In addition, capacity-building programmes to promote skills and knowledge transfer are needed in order to equip Roma women so that they are in a real position to play this key role.
- 4.4 In traditional Roma families several generations live together under one roof; in such households, grandparents are also influential in child-rearing - sometimes more so than

¹⁴ See "I am a European Roma woman" conference, held in Athens on 11 and 12 January 2010.

parents - and it is therefore important to involve grandparents too, since they serve as an example to the next generations.

- 4.5 If such specific measures and initiatives succeed in mobilising the capacity of Roma women to shape the future of their children, one additional benefit will be that they help to overcome stereotypes about Roma women. Too often, Roma women are characterised as having a submissive role, whether as victims of discrimination, domestic violence, or other forms of abuse or disrespect. Of course, such perceptions are important and should not be ignored. And of course appropriate steps must be taken to remedy these problems. However, the Committee feels it is also important to highlight the active role of Roma women in their communities and their importance as active players outside their communities, through their participation in intercultural dialogue.
- 4.6 The Committee will support initiatives to support Roma women's own awareness of this identity, and work within its capacity to ensure that Roma women have access to information or means that help them play their part in their families' integration.
- 4.7 Thus where it can, the Committee will take part in local events to seek ways not only of promoting the dissemination of specific information, but also of encouraging participation.

5. **Education**

- 5.1 The goal is to secure social inclusion of the disadvantaged groups of the Roma community, without the loss of their Roma cultural identity. Good education is of utmost importance, for two reasons. Firstly, education can and should provide citizens with a set of basic common values that enable different ethnic groups to live successfully alongside one another. One such value is openness towards other cultures. Secondly, education can be an important integration tool in itself, as it ideally implies interaction between different cultures. Although it is never too late to acquire new knowledge and new skills, it is important that good education should start as early in life as possible. A child's strong self-image and awareness of his or her role in a bigger group and ultimately in society are key to success later on in life.
- 5.2 Policies should aim at providing and guaranteeing equal access to quality education for both Roma and all other minority groups, as the ultimate goal must be to equip them with skills, including social competences, for the labour market. People must be put in a position to take control of their own lives and to function as responsible citizens who are aware of their rights and duties and are able to exercise them.
- 5.3 As well as being a social problem, inadequate participation in the labour market also has a significant financial impact. In view of this, while spending on education does represent a cost, in essence it must be seen not just as expenditure but primarily as a worthwhile investment in the future.
- 5.4 The Council of Europe's Education of Roma Children initiative includes a training programme for mediators and school assistants which the Commission is also involved in.

The Committee is willing to act as an intermediary, as part of future institutional cooperation in this field. For example, it could use its existing channels of communication to help publicise the programme and its achievements or to present examples of best practice from the programme in countries not yet covered by the Council of Europe's project.

- 5.5 There is known to be a disproportionate number of early school-leavers among the Roma compared with non-Roma students¹⁵; we therefore need to consider steps that can be taken to improve the situation, in cooperation with the relevant authorities.

6. **Education: examples at national level**

- 6.1 Most EU Member States have adopted strong anti-discrimination and equality legislation in order to comply with European standards. Unfortunately, discrimination is still practised and experienced at the local level, and national legislation often lacks mechanisms for bringing complaints and abolishing discriminatory practices where individuals feel they have been subjected to discrimination. It should also be noted that weak monitoring means that countries can get away with cosmetic changes that just worsen patterns of segregation.

- 6.2 This is not to say that *no* EU country is committed to improving the availability of certain fundamental rights, including the right to education, to their Roma citizens or that *no* domestic judicial system is capable of upholding their rights. Certain local or national courts have ruled that segregatory practices against Roma children violate national anti-discrimination laws. As early as 2004 – before Bulgaria's accession to the EU – Bulgaria's Sofia District Court ruled against the Ministry of Education and the municipal administration, as well as school officials, for depriving Roma children of their right to equal education by practising segregation¹⁶. However, such rulings are only in response to specific incidents and will not necessarily compel local authorities to alter discriminatory practices that in many European countries seem to be endemic features of the education system.

- 6.3 Hungary has mobilised considerable political commitment and resources to support measures for improving the socio-economic circumstances and participation of its Roma citizens, with education as a central concern¹⁷. An important feature of Hungary's integration initiatives was that they were enacted within the framework of general educational policies. This is in contrast to other countries such as Romania and Bulgaria which have approached integration in a more ad hoc and patchy manner¹⁸. Hungary's approach has flaws, however, as conflicts

15 Roma Education Fund, Country assessments; <http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/publications/country-assessments>
Open Society Institute, No Data—No Progress, Country Findings, August 2010;
<http://www.romadecade.org/files/downloads/General%20Resources/No%20Data%20No%20Progress%20Country%20Findings.pdf>.

16 See: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=2411&archiv=1>.

17 See: Kezdi, G. & Suranyi, E., "A Successful School Integration Program" Roma Education Fund Working Paper No 2, 2009. At: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/a_succesful_school_integration_kezdi_suranyi.pdf.

18 See: European Roma Rights Centre, "The Impact of Legislation and Policies on School Segregation of Romani Children: A Study of Anti-Discrimination Law and Government Measures to Eliminate Segregation in Education in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia" ERRC Report, February 2007. At: http://www.errc.org/en-research-and-advocacy-reports-intro-details.php?article_id=2743.

exist within education policy measures and between education policy and health, social, and housing policies, which has consequences for education; the potential for such conflicts should be noted and taken into account by all countries.

6.4 In this connection, the German model of intercultural education and learning should be given particular attention (joint learning by people from different ethnic backgrounds)¹⁹.

7. Summary

7.1 In the context of efforts to ensure better integration of the Roma, it is regrettable that the Community's approach to integration is limited to third-country nationals, and is not applicable to the Roma, who are indeed generally EU citizens.

7.2 It is all the more important to keep pointing out that the Roma - in theory at least – are entitled to enjoy all the rights and fundamental rights associated with EU citizenship. Obviously, the Roma have to meet their obligations as EU citizens, and failure to do so has legal consequences; at the same time, the system of penalties provided for should take effect in cases where they are denied the above-mentioned rights.

7.3 The Committee once again emphasises its view that it is crucial to engage in intercultural dialogue with the Roma. By its very nature dialogue is always an interactive process which is based on equality between parties and allows participation. Intercultural dialogue can help to reduce prejudices and build trust. The Committee feels that overcoming prejudices and stereotypes on both sides is an essential prerequisite for specific steps to ensure more harmonious coexistence and genuinely equal opportunities. The Lisbon treaty has opened up new possibilities for the Committee in terms of developing structures for civil dialogue. In doing this work, the Committee will also strongly endeavour to put intercultural dialogue with the Roma on the right track.

Brussels, 16 June 2011.

The President
of the
European Economic and Social Committee

Staffan Nilsson

¹⁹ See Hanna Kiper, "Interkulturelle Pädagogik" 1992, p. 161; Franz Hamburger, "Die Vielfalt der Kulturen als Herausforderung für den Bildungsauftrag der Schule", Frankfurt/Main 1989.