



WG Social Inclusion meeting, Working with Roma

Ghent, 4-5 November 2009

Notes of key learning points from meeting of Eurocities Working Group on Social Inclusion held in Ghent, Belgium 4/5th November 2009

Key conclusions

The WG agreed that in its work programme for 2010:

- it will focus on one or two topics in 2010 due to the heavy workload related to the 2010 campaign;
- it will continue to focus on local inclusion strategies, especially on how to work with people facing multiple problems;
- it will prepare two 2010 campaign events: child poverty and area-based approaches to social inclusion.

With regard to the issue of Roma, the WG agreed that:

- Anna Drozd and Simon Underwood will map how and if the issue is discussed within Eurocities;
- it will explore the possibility of developing a peer project on the subject of working with Roma;
- it will see if a theme on Roma can be integrated into the Eurocities four events under the 2010 year campaign.

Presentations

- EU policy developments and EURO CITIES developments update (Anna Drozd, EURO CITIES)
- Situation of Roma and ways to work with the Roma population in Ghent (Marieke Lataire, Ghent)
- Local inclusion policy in Ghent (Joris Beaumon, Ghent)
- Traveller Liaison Office in Belfast (Frank O Hagan, Belfast)
- Situation of Roma in Europe and policies aimed at Roma in the EU (Guillermo Ruiz,

European Roma Information Network, Brussels)

- Presentation of the Traveller Mediation Centre in Walloon Region (Ahmed Ahkim, Centre de Médiaton des Gens du Voyage en Wallonie, Namur)
- Presentation of housing segregation among Roma in Hungary (Ivan Tosics, Metropolitan Research Institute, City of Budapest)

All presentations can be found on the members' area on the EURO CITIES website.

Minutes

Introductory comments - key points

- Effective working with Roma is the theme of the seminar - so a constructive, progressive dialogue is encouraged.
- Are Roma the most excluded communities in Europe? - They probably are.

1. Working with Roma in Ghent - Marieke Lamaire, City of Ghent

(presentation uploaded to the members' area)

- Ghent has fairly sophisticated ways to measure the number of new EU citizens - with or without papers in their city
- They estimate they have approx 3000 Roma, most living in very poor conditions squatting etc
- The city has motivated a wide partnership of over 100 agencies from public sector and NGOs which provide many services
- They have a multi-agency strategy of providing access to basic services but also moving also moving people into legal situations and cutting down on non legal situations [employment, housing, education, health etc]
- They work proactively to encourage positive media and public opinion.
- They try to set work with Roma in the context of a wider integration policy that is anchored in supporting local diversity.
- There are challenges for the future to be tackled at the city/region, national and EU level.
- There is an important need for more co-operation and learning between cities on this issue.

Discussion and learning points raised

- Belgian cities have the facility to be able to count the number of people from new EU countries present in their cities at any one time. From this they estimate the number of Roma. How many other countries have this facility?
- Can other cities learn from the positive policies of Ghent?

2. The situation of Roma in Europe, policies and initiatives aimed at Roma - Guillermo Ruiz, European Roma Information Office, Brussels

[no slide presentation]

- We must recognise the huge diversity of the Roma and gypsy population in Europe
- The inclusion of the accession East European states has opened up the issue of Roma to the rest of Europe - local and national governments do not know how to work with Roma
- Under communism Roma in East Europe had low grade work and housing. The move to a free market system ended this. In about two year we had massive socio economic collapse among Roma communities
- Massive poverty in East Europe Roma communities - e.g. In Romania 70% do not have running water. Bulgaria 85% attend segregated schools - often for the "mentally retarded".
- Racism and discrimination is rife - including attacks and deaths
- There is popular support for the rise of right wing parties - and right wing governments in Hungary and Czech Rep.
- But there are also positive changes in the last 3 to 4 years - lobbying and resolutions of European Parliament - 5 since 2005 - and high level EU officials have visited camps and are learning. 10 principles of Roma inclusion have been agreed.
- There have been Roma summit conferences and more are planned under the forthcoming Spanish presidency.

Discussion and learning points raised

- We need to consider the possible role of Eurocities in the lobbying at EU level. But it is a busy field with established agencies already active. Eurocities will need to be careful and spend time learning, using the OMC [Open Method of Coordination] clarifying its own position and building alliances first. Working with agencies like ERIO will be important.
- Likewise at a city level, learning and building stronger links with Roma communities and agencies is vital.
- There is a definite role for the development of rights and legislation based pressure on countries improve their position on Roma
- We need to understand more about the drivers for migration between particular states.
- We need to learn more about the diversity of Roma and their situations.
- The attitude, understanding and skills of staff working with Roma is vitally important.
- How to we deal with the "catch 22" of a countries or a city being welcoming to Roma and then being faced with more migration than they can cope with?
- What should the balance of European strategy be? Improving the situation in countries of origin in East Europe or improving the situation in receiving countries in West Europe?

3. The Work of the Travellers Liaison Unit, Belfast - Frank O Hagan

www.belfastcity.gov.uk/travellers/trainingdvd.asp

- Irish Travellers are not Roma but there are many lessons that can be learned from the experience of work with this also excluded group who share many characteristics.
- Belfast City Council has had a Traveller Liaison Unit since the late 1980s. The City also has massive experience of dealing with inter-community conflict.
- Key elements of their strategy include - a multi agency approach; a mix of high level positive policy initiatives with on the ground work; creation of “neutral spaces” for interfacing/ meeting; the use of “challenging”; the use of outreach initiatives/ specialist team/s.
- Failure must be seen as another challenge not as an excuse to stop.

Discussion and learning points raised

- How do you get the support of local politicians? Surely there are no votes in supporting Travellers / Roma? - But there are in sorting out problems for all communities....
- You need support from the top but how do you get senior politicians and leaders to back a positive strategy? - see above.
- Use a mix of threats and inducements to get agencies to work with you.
- Travellers want something in return for co-operation - be prepared for this.
- Be prepared not to be liked if you work with excluded groups and are trying to bring about change.
- Work through community spokespersons, often more notice will be taken of them than of another city official.

4. The Travellers Mediation Centre, Walloon Region, Belgium - Ahmed Ahkim

Website of the Centre: <http://www.cmgv.be/>

- This project was set up by the regional government in 2001 as “a space between travellers, the government and other agencies and the local population”
- The first thing they noticed was the huge gaps between these three - and across all dimensions of life - health, education, culture etc
- They use mediation principles - all participants views are valued, all people are valued etc.
- Local issues escalate because they are seen as problems - and people further away from the issue [like mayors] make commitments to solve it which they cannot fulfil, so making the problem bigger - the Centre works to diffuse these type of situations before they grow.
- The small minority of Roma who beg trap the majority into a negative general image/ dialogue.
- There are administrative complexities in Belgium for Bulgarian and Romanian citizens around permission to work which drives people into illegal situations.
- Don't think the issue is not popular - if you produce positive results on integration it is. Local politicians have got re-elected on this basis.

- Travellers only want space to live and organisational procedures to follow, not rules to bind them....
- Overall, the Centre has about a 75% success rate.

Discussion and learning points raised

- Their illegality does not remove people from the concern of city or state authorities. But many authorities chose to take this view as an easy way out.
- The issue of begging and its implications is important - we should learn more about it.
- Enforcement versus integration - is it either /or? What balance is to be drawn?
- Roma and host communities need to both recognise that all people have rights and responsibilities.

5. The situation of Roma in Eastern Europe - Ivan Tosics, Budapest, Hungary

(presentation uploaded to the members' area)

- There are estimated to be 8 to 12 million Roma in the EU 27 countries.
- In many countries it is forbidden for authorities to ask if a person is Roma.
- Generally the location of Roma is in; rundown peripheral areas of cities, ghetto concentrations, other miscellaneous poor dwellings in cities, and there are many in poor rural areas and villages.
- The main problems faced by Roma communities are illegal settlements, lack of infrastructure and services, usury [money lending].
- Under socialism homelessness and unemployment were in effect illegal. Roma would travel in and out of cities to work. Then the collapse of employment and the rise of travel fares left them stranded.
- For about 10 years East European Governments did little or nothing about the issue. Now some action is happening but also prejudice is rising. Roma are engaging with agencies.
- Various nations are doing things to replace [improve in some cases] the physical buildings and infrastructure of settlements but little is being done to increase integration.
- Note that 2005 to 2015 has been designated "the Roma decade" with initiatives in new accession countries covering health, employment, education and housing, but limitation on the use of EU structural funds and local political opposition limit this.
- There are some innovative ideas being employed - e.g. in Hungary there are requirements on integration and desegregation as a condition of receiving EU funds.
- Further action is needed before 2013 or East European countries will lose these structural funds and the opportunities will be missed.
- The Open Society Institute has a programme of valuable work.
- Cities can use their experience of work with other minorities e.g. Somali, Kurdish etc to help their work with Roma.
- Overall there is an issue for cities of what is their objective - what degree of integration and in what areas of life?

Discussion and learning points raised

- In some countries such as the UK, neo-liberal concepts such as “choice” in education and healthcare actually mean that people can increasingly self segregate.
- What is our objective in terms of an “integration spectrum” from toleration to cooperation to assimilation?
- Roma aspirations can often be low in areas such as education, people say they “just want a happy environment”
- What needs must be met first - is it housing then education?
- Is there a tactical value in having positive initiatives “imposed” from a higher EU level in that it may relieve the political pressure on the local politician?
- We need to educate local politicians and leaders about the issues - when they understand then resources may be made available.

6. Plenary discussion - Chair Simon Underwood, Newcastle

Discussion and learning points raised

- There is potential for much more mutual learning and support on this issue among eastern/southern and western/ northern cities.
- Western cities must not patronise eastern cities. Their comparative positions must be understood.
- Likewise there is potential for much more learning from experiences of working with Travellers and other minority groups.
- But at the same time we must also understand the particular diversity and particular circumstances and viewpoint of Roma.
- There is a “bottleneck” or pressure in the need for much more awareness, understanding and skills among professionals.

Action points

- We will circulate notes of this meeting.
- Anna and Simon U will escalate the issue within Eurocities to find out what other work is going on and whether relevant other working groups are prepared to work with WGSi on this subject [economic development? Migration and integration?]
- We will explore the possibility of developing a peer project on the subject of working with Roma.
- We will see if we can weave a theme on Roma into the Eurocities four events under the 2010 year campaign.
- We note that 2010 is to be an EU “light year” on migration and integration and this may present opportunities to feed cities’ experience and views in the EU policy making.
- We will follow up progress on this issue at the next WGSi meeting.