



The Roma community

The television announcement which the Foundation produced this year depicting a young girl at a work interview and

the difficulties she faces as a Roma woman symbolically expressed by the *box* which follows her around wherever she goes, is an accurate reflection of the situation faced by the Roma community in our country. What we have is a young and increasingly heterogeneous community where many families have managed to improve their social situation over the last several decades thanks to the universalisation of social welfare policies, a healthy Spanish economy and the effort made by Roma themselves. Many Roma, however, still come up against obstacles and are *boxed in* thus preventing them from fully exercising their citizenship.

In 2007 we must continue to underscore the persistence of certain aspects which require a firmer commitment from public authorities and all citizens in general so that, once and for all, Roma men and women are able to exercise their citizenship on an equal footing with the rest of society:

- Some of the obstacles and pending issues are found in the area of social and social inclusion policies which still affect a significant proportion of Roma families in Spain.
- Others, relating to the guarantee of rights, institutional recognition, equal treatment,

combating discrimination and improvement of social image, affect the entire Roma community.

DISCRIMINATION AS AN OBSTACLE

The persistence of a negative image and prejudices against the Roma people and their consequences in the form of discrimination are aspects which merit our attention. Two studies conducted by the CIS (Sociological Research Centre)¹ were concluded in 2007. Both of these have drawn attention to the fact that Roma continues to be the social



CEREMONY AT THE PRESENTATION OF THE ROMA CULTURAL INSTITUTE AT THE ZARZUELA THEATRE

¹ Preliminary Report on Study No 2745 (Dec. 2007) entitled "Discriminaciones y su percepción" (Discrimination and its perception) and the *Encuesta sociológica a hogares de la población gitana* (Sociological survey of Roma households) (CIS Study No 2664).

group facing the greatest degree of rejection from the society at large.

The *2007 Report on Discrimination and the Roma Community* compiled by our Foundation illustrates, by describing 146 documented cases, how in many instances the Criminal Code prohibiting ethnic discrimination is not enforced and sheds light on the difficulties faced in applying inversion of the burden of proof in court proceedings and the general lack of sensitivity in recognising and applying specific circumstances of disadvantage affecting a part of the Roma community. The Report also illustrates the persistence of covert discrimination which is difficult to demonstrate and all but ignored by the courts.

Although discrimination is one of the key issues affecting our society owing to the injustice suffered by its victims and the barriers it erects against the social incorporation of excluded

groups, society's response is not very encouraging. This legislative term has ended without constituting the *Council for the advancement of equal treatment and non-discrimination* and six years after the approval of the European Directive prohibiting discrimination based on ethnic origin it is safe to say that the latter's implementation and effective enforcement in our country is still clearly inefficient.

CHALLENGES FACED IN THE AREAS OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

The worrisome situation facing the Roma minority as concerns education and educational mainstreaming, weaknesses in terms of access to employment on an equal footing with the rest of the society, the persistence of some shanty towns and the precarious housing situation are just some of the issues which continue to come up year after year in this Report. While improvement can be observed in these areas, in general terms there is no policy focused on resolving the *Roma issue* over the next few years.

In the area of **employment**, 2007 ended with the announcement that the economic growth cycle had come to a close. The experts now speak of crisis or economic recession, a climate in which the Roma community may have even fewer opportunities. With an unemployment rate which is four percentage points higher than that of the overall population and an under-employment and covert unemployment rate affecting a quarter of the occupied population², the weakness of the labour



1 CONFERENCE ON ROMA CULTURE ENTITLED “ROMA AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SPANISH CULTURE” ORGANISED BY THE ROMA CULTURAL INSTITUTE.

2 *Población gitana y empleo* (Roma Population and Employment): Madrid, Fundación Secretariado Gitano 2006.

market is one of the major barriers standing in the way to the social incorporation of Roma.

This year the Government approved the new Multi-Regional Operational Programme to Combat Discrimination for the period 2007-2013 which, as during the preceding period 2000-2006, includes social-labour market integration initiatives specifically targeting the Roma community. The new *Acceder* Programme which our Foundation is managing will have a budget of €41 million until the year 2013 to boost these measures. It is our hope that the rest of the Operational Programmes financed by the European Social Fund managed by our Autonomous Communities also implement actions promoting access for Roma to vocational training and employment.

Education. Today nearly 100% of all Roma children are enrolled at school. However, the high percentage of Roma students who fail to complete their compulsory studies and the very few examples of students who go on to complete their high-school diploma, vocational training or university studies, clearly points to the fact that this is one of the main barriers to the social inclusion and equality of Roma in the future.

Seventy percent of Roma youth over 16 have failed to complete their primary school studies. As regards secondary studies, 80% of the Roma students who enter the first year of compulsory secondary education (Spanish acronym ESO) do not complete that stage. This is especially true of Roma girls, fewer of whom enrol in this stage of education as compared with their male counterparts.

Early school leaving, a concern of our educational system given that it is one of the highest in all of the EU, is more pronounced among the Roma community thus making it more difficult for Roma youth to gain access to employment on an equal footing with the rest of the Spanish population.

We would also draw attention to the fact that Roma students tend to concentrate in certain schools which are characterised by lower academic achievement figures and are tantamount to segregated education.

Public authorities are responsible for implementing bold and specific measures to remedy this situation where basic rights are being infringed. Measures taken must sure up students' remaining in school during the compulsory period and must expose students to higher studies or vocational training. They must also raise awareness and involve the rest of those involved: school teachers and Roma families themselves requiring the latter to make a greater commitment to keeping young Roma in the educational system.



CONFERENCE ON HOUSING AND THE ROMA COMMUNITY

The **housing** situation. One of the most striking paradoxes we find today is that in the EU country where close to 800,000 homes have been built yearly (more than in all other EU countries combined), there are still shanty towns and sub-standard housing in many Spanish cities. These are settlements isolated from the cities and hence from opportunity where inhabitants (mostly Roma) live in conditions which breach the basic rights advocated by our society and government. Conditions which today should not be tolerated and are unjustifiable in one of the planet's most prosperous countries.

Despite the different initiatives which City Councils and Autonomous Communities implement to palliate these conditions, political will (to take decisions which are often unpopular) and economic effort is insufficient in most cases. Urban planning operations continue to be the main formula used to eradicate these shanty towns.

RECOGNITION OF THE ROMA MINORITY

Two of the most relevant instruments designed to promote the participation and social and institutional recognition of the Roma community in Spain were initiated in 2007.

The State Council of the Roma People which, over and above the specific actions implemented this year, is attracting the attention of many government ministries and departments raising the latter's awareness of the situation facing the Roma community through dialogue with the Roma organisations represented there. This year a number of working groups have been formed with the

participation of Roma organisations and government representatives to promote measures in areas such as employment, housing, health-care and education.

In December 2007 the Roma Cultural Institute was officially launched and that same month it organised its first congress at the National Library on *Roma and Roma influence on Spanish culture*. The Institute was created as a foundation governed by public law and its Board of Trustees, chaired by the Ministry of Culture, is composed of noteworthy members of the Spanish Roma community and representatives from different ministries. The Institute's founding mission is to promote co-existence among different cultures, to develop and promote Roma culture and language and to preserve and develop the cultural acquis of the Roma community.

The Board of Trustees of the Fundación Secretariado Gitano has applauded this initiative considering it as one of the most important steps forward taken by our institutions in favour of the institutional recognition of the Roma community and has expressed the commitment and support of our Foundation for this new institution.

Another aspect of great relevance in the area of institutional recognition has to do with the expressed incorporation of the Roma community in the texts of the Statutes of Autonomy of those Autonomous Communities which are re-drafting these documents. Following the lead of Catalonia and Andalusia which did this in 2006, Aragon and Castile-Leon undertook a similar initiative in 2007 and in the case of the latter our board member Fernando Rey took part in their drafting. As expressed by the FSG, this act of recognition

has, in a certain sense, paid the secular debt that the institutions had with the Roma people and has underscored their commitment to equality.

As we have for the last three years, we must once again highlight the institutional relevance of the 8th April **International Roma Day**, a celebration featuring festivities at the headquarters of some Town Halls, Parliaments and Regional Assemblies and Central Government offices and European institutions. These acts send a positive message to the society at large which we believe is very important in promoting a change of attitude towards the Roma community.

THE ROMA MINORITY IN EUROPE

Roma is the largest ethnic minority in the European Union totalling nearly 12 million

people. In most countries, in addition to their ethnic condition, cultural characteristics and common origin, they also share a social situation characterised by severe discrimination, social rejection, poverty and social exclusion.

This condition as an excluded and stigmatised minority has attracted the concern of different EU institutions, the Council of Europe and the OSCE which call on the different governments to promote improvement processes especially in the aftermath of the recent accession to the European Union (2004 and 2007) of countries with large Roma populations.

Undoubtedly, one of the most relevant events of 2007 was the programming of the Structural Funds for the period 2007-2013. These funds are the main financial



PLENARY SESSION OF THE MINISTRY OF LABOUR AND SOCIAL AFFAIRS STATE COUNCIL.

instrument which the EU uses to promote convergence and territorial cohesion, with special mention of the European Social Fund to promote the social inclusion of excluded groups. Most of the Central and Eastern European countries with large Roma populations have expressed their willingness to implement operational or action programmes specifically targeting Roma.

In this connection, we would draw attention to the creation of the *European Network on Social Inclusion and Roma under the Structural Funds*. This Network, promoted by the Spanish Government and the FSG, was designed as an area where the 12 EU countries participating in this initiative can share knowledge and promote a use of these Funds which is better adapted to the social inclusion of the Roma people.

Within the framework of the *European Year of Equal Opportunities for All*, the High-Level Group on Minorities which the European Commission entrusted to compile a report on the social inclusion of ethnic minorities submitted its results in 2007 which include a specific chapter with recommendations concerning the Roma minority. It stresses the need to break the vicious circle of poverty by investing heavily in education, by encouraging legislation and affirmative action to combat discrimination and also puts an accent on the opportunity to carry out projects using Structural Funds specifically targeting the social-labour market integration of Roma.

In the European context, special mention should likewise be made of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), successor of the European Monitoring

Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), which has greater powers and has been assigned new duties. The Agency is a European Union body which provides technical assistance on fundamental rights to European institutions and Member States in the implementation of measures or the taking of decisions regarding actions in this field. In addition to its advisory role, it also collects data and information, makes analyses, conducts research and collaborates closely with the civil society acting as a bridge with European institutions. This change and the implementation of the new Agency represents an improvement in the objectives of the Union not only in the fight against discrimination but also the promotion of equal treatment.

In 2007 the FRA had already published several relevant reports which, in consonance with others compiled by the ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance) or UNESCO, to mention only two, continue to denounce the social situation faced by the Roma population and warn about the problem of racial discrimination.

Other international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE or the World Bank and different European initiatives such as the Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) and the Roma Education Fund (REF) continue with their work of allocating funds and resources and promoting policy improvements to offset the situation of social exclusion and discrimination affecting the Roma community in Europe.