

» The Roma community

The year 2009, characterised by political commitments and bitter situations, has once again borne witness to the complex situation facing the Roma community in Spain and in Europe. A significant proportion of this population, estimated at over 650,000 in Spain and between 10 and 12 million in Europe, finds itself in a difficult social situation of poverty and exclusion suffering daily occurrences of discrimination.

Never before has the Roma issue been so present on national and European agendas as now in an attempt to harness these challenges. In response to violent and xenophobic attacks occurring in countries like Hungary and Italy serving as an example of how difficult it is to move forward in the area of co-existence, the major institutions and personalities

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at European level responded with forceful statements of rejection. The European Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs himself, V. Spidla, urged Member States to “ensure the personal safety of all people within their territories” and not to turn a blind eye to the “real problems” facing the Roma community in Europe. Similar statements were made by all relevant organisations within the Union and internationally, drawing attention to how far Europe is willing to go in defending the fundamental rights, equality and social cohesion proclaimed in the Treaty on European Union.

That may be why great expectations surrounded the meetings of the EU Platform for Roma Inclusion and the agreement reached regarding the 10 Common Basic Principles drawn up to guide the EU institutions, Member States and candidate countries in designing and implementing policies and actions for the social inclusion of Roma.

In 2009, Spain also decided to join forces with the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, an unprecedented intergovernmental



PRESENTATION OF THE PLATFORM FOR ROMA INCLUSION
(PHOTO BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION)

initiative which, together with international organisations, has agreed to pool resources to improve the situation of the Roma population in the 12 states which are home to a significant Roma population.

Also worth noting this year are the problems arising with regard to Roma from Eastern European countries, especially Romania and Bulgaria, who face the difficulty of being migrants and also belonging to the least accepted minority in most European societies.

The significant number of European initiatives, declarations and messages in support of the Roma community are not enough to offset the persistence of situations of exclusion which continue to prevail in different aspects of life. At the FSG we recognise the value of these political commitments and declarations but we hope that the next several years will bring more effective progress in improving the living standards of Roma families and in terms of respect and support for their cultural identity.

THE SITUATION IN SPAIN

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the Spanish economy but which did not benefit all citizens equally) is taking a particularly high toll on Roma who found employment during the boom years and significantly improved their situation. We find that the so-called Spanish model, i.e. the way of working with the Roma population which is recognised throughout Europe as the most inclusive and which has given rise to the greatest advances in different aspects of life, is facing a difficult test.

We are now confronted with challenges which unfortunately are being shouldered by those who are the least prepared to do so, in a context of greater need and lack of protection and we therefore regret the decision taken by the Government to reduce the budget allocated to the Roma Development Programme by two million euros. The issue here is not only the size of this budget cut (a two thirds reduction) but also the significance of the measure itself and the message being sent to local and regional governments that initiatives targeting Roma are expendable or can be reduced when times are tough.

We believe that now more than ever, at a time of economic recession, public authorities must make a concerted effort to protect our society's



COMMISSIONER V. SPIDLA AT THE PRESENTATION OF THE PLATFORM

most vulnerable groups so that the significant progress made by many Roma families in terms of social integration over the last ten years of economic growth is not lost in just a few short months and so that the recession does not stand in the way of the objectives of social cohesion.

Despite the headway made by Spain's Roma population, this minority continues to suffer from inequality and a standard of living substantially below that of the majority population. These inequalities are plain to see in the discriminatory treatment still received by people due to their ethnic origin and a social image plagued by prejudice. And this is all taking place at a time when a significant number of citizens of this minority group are still experiencing restricted access to mainstream services and resources which is having a negative effect on living standards and guarantee of equal opportunity in areas such as access to employment, quality education, housing and health.

EMPLOYMENT OF THE ROMA POPULATION DURING BAD ECONOMIC TIMES

The most immediate consequence of the crisis is the loss of employment in certain sectors and reduced employment opportunities for those who are most removed from the labour market. The particular difficulties faced by the Roma population are due to a number of factors including poor education and the persistence of prejudice against this minority group. This situation should serve as food for thought about the consequences of the economic growth and social model implemented over the last several years.

2009 data show an increasing number of people coming in to inquire about the FSG's

employment programme and participating in the labour market integration pathways but, at the same time, there has been a significant reduction in the number of contracts signed through the mediation of our organisation's employment programmes.

We know that an overall rise in unemployment has a direct effect on the number of Roma households suffering from decreased income and this social hardship exacerbates the inequalities characterising different strata of the Spanish population, including the Roma community. In this context, the FSG encourages prioritising actions to enhance the employability of Roma persons for eventual labour market integration as salaried workers and supporting sheltered and self-employment schemes.

Despite this difficult situation, the results of intervention in the area of employment, the ability to earmark resources and the commitment showed by local, regional and national governments and also by enterprise, have once again confirmed that the Acceder Programme is one of the most effective and stable inclusion initiatives leading Roma along the path towards labour market integration.

THE EDUCATION SITUATION

It was only a little over 30 years ago that Spain's Roma population became fully engaged with the mainstream educational system and, during the course of this period, practically 100% enrolment figures have been reached for Roma children at the initial stage of compulsory education. However, this significant figure remains tarnished by absenteeism, early school dropout and poor academic performance, especially during the final years of primary school, the situation of Roma youth only getting

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worse during compulsory secondary education.

This situation of early school dropout, significantly affecting Roma students' options to earn a higher degree and find quality employment, should be addressed by all stakeholders as a challenge: the educational community, the public administrations involved, Roma families and Roma children themselves, each accepting his/her part of the responsibility.

This being the FSG's approach, in 2009 the *Promociona* Programme was launched with the short-term objective of reducing early school dropout and achieving academic success for Roma students in several Spanish cities.

We must also bear in mind that the level of education of the adult population is lower than that of the rest of the Spanish population giving rise to the challenge of overcoming the 70% illiteracy rate (considering both absolute and functional illiteracy) among Roma over the age of 16, especially affecting women and the elderly.

ACCESS TO HOUSING

Over the last decade, housing has been a key factor both for the economy of Spain and



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for the inclusion of the Roma population. Construction has been one of the drivers of our economy and the sector with the greatest capacity to create employment and this spelled a qualitative change for many Roma families in gaining access to standard housing and mainstream resources.

The social exclusion of a part of the Roma population has been clearly mirrored by their residential situation down through the years where housing and habitat set the stage for processes of exclusion and of social integration. Housing and the conditions of neighbourhoods provide access to other goods and services but can also act as an insurmountable barrier.

Today it is safe to say that Spain is the European country, home to a significant Roma population, where most progress has been made in the residential integration of this community. However, as indicated in the *2008 Housing Map of the Roma Community* drawn up by the FSG in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing, we must not lose sight of the fact that 12% of Roma families still live in sub-standard housing and 4% live in shanty towns in our country.

Action to combat shanty towns over the last several years has been taken by city councils and some regional governments

but has met with resistance and rejection on the part of neighbours which could weaken political will to continue with this process.

The new 2009-2012 National Housing Plan featuring instruments for intervention in run-down neighbourhoods and shanty towns and for the implementation of regional housing laws (Catalonia and Andalusia), will provide opportunities that we hope will have an impact on the housing situation of the worst-off families and, in short, should guarantee housing as a basic right.

FACTORS DETERMINING HEALTH

The social context in which people are born and raised has a very significant influence on their state of health. Belonging to an ethnic group and one's surroundings are determining factors for health and life expectancy. These are just some of the conclusions published in the document entitled *"Hacia la equidad en Salud; Disminuir las desigualdades en una generación en la Comunidad Gitana. Estudio comparativo de las encuestas nacionales de Salud, la población gitana y población general de España"*, 2006 (Towards health equality; reducing inequalities within a

generation in the Roma community, a study of national health surveys comparing the Roma population to the overall population in Spain).

This report, drafted in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs, indicates that the Roma community is particularly vulnerable to the effect that social factors have on people's health and that health indicators are significantly worse for the Roma community in comparison to the population at large. In some cases, when comparisons are made with socially and economically vulnerable groups, this comparative survey shows that Roma women experience worse health when compared to Roma men and to Spanish women in general.

DISCRIMINATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

It is impossible to overlook the impact that the economic crisis is also having on discrimination, especially but not only in the fields of employment, education and the media, where the number of cases gathered by our organisation has been growing.

Paradoxically, despite the rising number of cases detected, most victims decide not

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ROMA FAMILY (PHOTO BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION)

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to press charges either because there are no resources available to support victims or because these individuals have suffered discrimination on previous occasions and are only too aware that in Spain no legal judgement has included compensatory measures for victims of ethnic discrimination.

Here we should draw attention to two fundamental issues underlying equal treatment of Spain's Roma population. On the one hand, the judgement handed down by the European Court of Human Rights in favour of the Roma widow by the name of M^a Luisa Muñoz in her pension suit against the Spanish government. And on the other, the creation this year of the Council for the advancement of equal treatment and non-discrimination by reason of race or ethnic origin in compliance with the legal obligation that we have been pointing to for several years. We trust that this important body will be able to obtain the resources it needs to carry out its mission of protecting and supporting victims of discrimination by reason of ethnic origin, boosting social awareness-raising actions, disseminating anti-discrimination legislation among key agents and conducting

studies on the spread and evolution of this phenomenon. We would also like to take advantage of the occasion to congratulate and pledge our support to José Manuel Fresno, former director of our Foundation and now presiding over this organisation.

We also celebrate the creation of a Special Service for hate and discrimination crimes by the Barcelona Public Prosecutor's Office.

THE SOCIAL PARTICIPATION AND RECOGNITION OF THE ROMA MINORITY

In the institutional arena, we must once again recognise the importance of two organisations which are doing solid work and providing opportunities for the Roma population to participate and that are working to bring about significant change in the social image of the Roma.

The State Council of the Roma People is the advisory body of the national government providing opportunities for the participation of Roma social organisations in areas having to do with the development and monitoring of policies targeting this community. In this connection we would point out that in 2009 the Council has focused its efforts on the new *2010-2012 Action Plan for the Development of the Roma population*.

The Roma Cultural Institute is a public foundation attached to the Ministry of Culture which, since its creation in 2008, has been instrumental in recognising the entire cultural heap that Roma has brought to Spanish culture. The Institute's mission is none other than recovering part of the cultural baggage which has become invisible down through the ages. To do that, it awards

prizes each year to disseminate and acknowledge the work done by Roma and non-Roma in different disciplines (painting, literature, politics, research, etc.) to enrich Roma culture.

Lastly, we would draw attention to the relevant political and institutional initiatives in commemoration of **April 8th, International Roma Day**, which is not only a cultural celebration but also marks a step forward in the recognition of the identity of this minority. Special mention should be made of the institutional festivities at regional parliaments and assemblies, at the central government and at European institutions, and the words spoken by personalities such as Hillary Clinton who, representing the United States government, delivered a message of support and recognition of the Roma population.

THE COMMON BASIC PRINCIPLES

The 10 Common Basic Principles on Roma inclusion aim at guiding the EU institutions and Member States when they design and implement new policies or activities aimed at the integration of the Roma people¹.

1. Constructive, pragmatic and non-discriminatory policies;
2. Explicit but not exclusive targeting;
3. Inter-cultural 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.

¹ These principles can be found in Spanish in issue No 49/50 of the publication *Gitanos, Pensamiento y Cultura* (Roma, Thought and Culture) (pp. 16-17).



THE "LA NENA" CASE IN THE MEDIA



RECALLING THE PORRAJIMOS (ROMA HOLOCAUST)



ROMA CULTURAL INSTITUTE AWARDS