

Policy Brief

How to Improve the Situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe¹

Abstract:

Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe and live in large numbers often under extremely disadvantageous conditions in many parts of Eastern Europe. The situation of Roma is far more unfavourable in most of the new Member States than that of the majority population. Around 4 million Roma live in these countries but their situation in terms of housing, health, education and employment is often not much different than that of those living in third world countries.

The biggest problem perhaps relates to education: for the vast majority of Roma (7-9 out of 10 Roma aged 15 and over), the highest level of education attained is elementary schooling. In consequence, barely 10-20% of Roma of working age are in work (whether in the formal or informal economy). Their situation is not only worse than the majority population living in close proximity to them but even more unfavourable than the majority population in the country concerned in general since Roma tend to live predominantly in the most economically depressed areas where job opportunities and the chances of having a reasonable standard of living are in any case lower than elsewhere.

A number of factors combine to create these disadvantages. One of the main factors is segregation at school which leads to underachievement of Roma children who are often sent to special schools for those with learning difficulties, or the mentally disabled in much larger numbers than children of the majority population. Lack of education and a job tends to lead directly to severe poverty with poor housing conditions and limited access to basic services, which in turn results in poor health and high mortality and morbidity rates. The situation is reinforced by widespread discrimination in all walks of life: at school, on the labour market, in the health care system and so on.

A number of targeted policy measures and programmes have been implemented in the region in recent years to overcome these familiar problems; their effect, however, has been minimal. The priorities for policy are to focus on access to pre-school education, desegregating of schools, implementing labour market programmes targeted on the special needs of Roma at the local level and the potential opportunities open to them. In addition, medium- and long-term multi-dimensional projects should be launched covering housing, employment, education and health care with a conscious attempt made to ensure coherence between the different aspect. While, in general, access to data on ethnicity needs to be carefully controlled to ensure protection of human rights, the non-collection of any data at all denies policy-makers the quantitative information which would make it easier to design suitable policies and to monitor the effectiveness of the measures in place. There is a need, moreover, for anti-discrimination education and training for all those coming into regular contact with Roma if they are to be properly integrated into society.

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How to Improve the Situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe²

I. The issue

Roma³ are the largest ethnic minority in Europe and perhaps the most vulnerable. Roma can be found in most parts of the world but particularly in Eastern Europe. An estimated 4 million Roma live in the new EU Member States in Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe (CEE and SEE), most of them under conditions of extreme poverty and social exclusion.

The disadvantages which the Roma face arise from a complex interaction of interdependent factors, in particular, very low levels of education and employment, severe poverty, poor housing conditions and large families. Their situation is, moreover, aggravated by the fact that most of them tend to live in depressed regions where the lack of employment opportunities and basic infrastructure adds to their disadvantages. These are further reinforced by widespread discrimination. Although the latter clearly exists in the region, the focus here is on the structural dimensions of the problem and on the possible policy measures for tackling it.

The concern is to describe and assess the situation of Roma from a horizontal perspective, in other words, in terms of comparing the situation of Roma with the non-Roma population who live in the same areas, taking account of the common features and problems of the local environment in which they live. The concern is also (In the last section) to put forward policy recommendations of possible measures which could reduce horizontal inequality.

II. The facts

Number of Roma in Eastern Europe

The total number of Roma in Europe is estimated at around 10 million, and roughly half of them, 5 million, live in Eastern Europe, the majority in Central Eastern and South Eastern European (CEE and SEE) countries. (Table 1). The largest Roma community, of around 2 million people, can be found in Romania and there are also large Roma communities in other new EU Member States especially in Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia, the estimated number of people being at least half a million in each of these. Overall, some 4 million Roma live in the new EU Member States, the vast majority of them, as indicated below, in deep poverty and in an almost hopeless situation.

The vulnerable situation of Roma is familiar throughout Europe, and well documented by a number of international organisations⁴) The picture shown by the figures from the most recent empirical research may, however, be even worse than it might seem. The indicators derived from the most reliable comparable empirical research (UNDP 2005) carried out in 11 CEE and SEE countries in the areas in which Roma most live highlight the gap between Roma and their non-Roma neighbours in all of the countries covered. The situation in all 11 of these countries is considered here rather than only

² *The views expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the European Commission.*

³ *The official EU term for Roma is "Roma, Gypsies and Travellers", but we are using the term "Roma" in this paper, because this denomination is usually used by the Roma community, as a self-assignment, while the term "Gypsy" often used by other people but not Roma themselves and is often considered as a pejorative term by Roma. Traveller communities are living in Western Europe in general, but this paper focuses on Central and Eastern European Roma, therefore it is better to refer to this ethnic group as Roma.*

⁴ *See, for example, : The World Bank: Revenga et al 2002, Ringold et al 2005, European Commission: EU 2004 and 2005, United Nations Development Program: UNDP 2002.*

the EU Member States to enable a comparison to be made between the more and less developed countries and the findings for the EU countries to be interpreted within a wider context.

Table 1 Number⁵ and proportion⁶ of Roma population in Eastern Europe

Country	Roma Population (estimated number)	Roma as % total	Country	Roma Population (estimated)	Proportion of Roma
Albania	90,000–100,000	3.1	Macedonia	135,000	6.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	40,000–50,000	1.2	Moldova	20,000–25,000	0.7
Bulgaria	500,000–800,000	8.7	Montenegro	14,000	2.0
Croatia	30,000–40,000	0.8	Poland	15,000–50,000	0.1
Czech Republic	175,000–200,000	1.8	Romania	1,800,000–2,000,000	8.8
Estonia	1,000–1,500	0.1	Serbia	450,000–500,000	6.3
Hungary	520,000–650,000	5.9	Slovakia	480,000–520,000	9.3
Kosovo	45,000	2.3	Slovenia	8,000–10,000	0.5
Latvia	13,000–15,000	0.6	Ukraine	50,000–60,000	0.1
Lithuania	3,000–4,000	0.1	Total	4,389,000–5,219,500	Include EU total

Source: OSI 2006a and OSI 2006b

Low levels of education and employment are central factors underlying the vulnerability of Roma in the region since these tend to determine other aspects of the situation in which they live.

Education

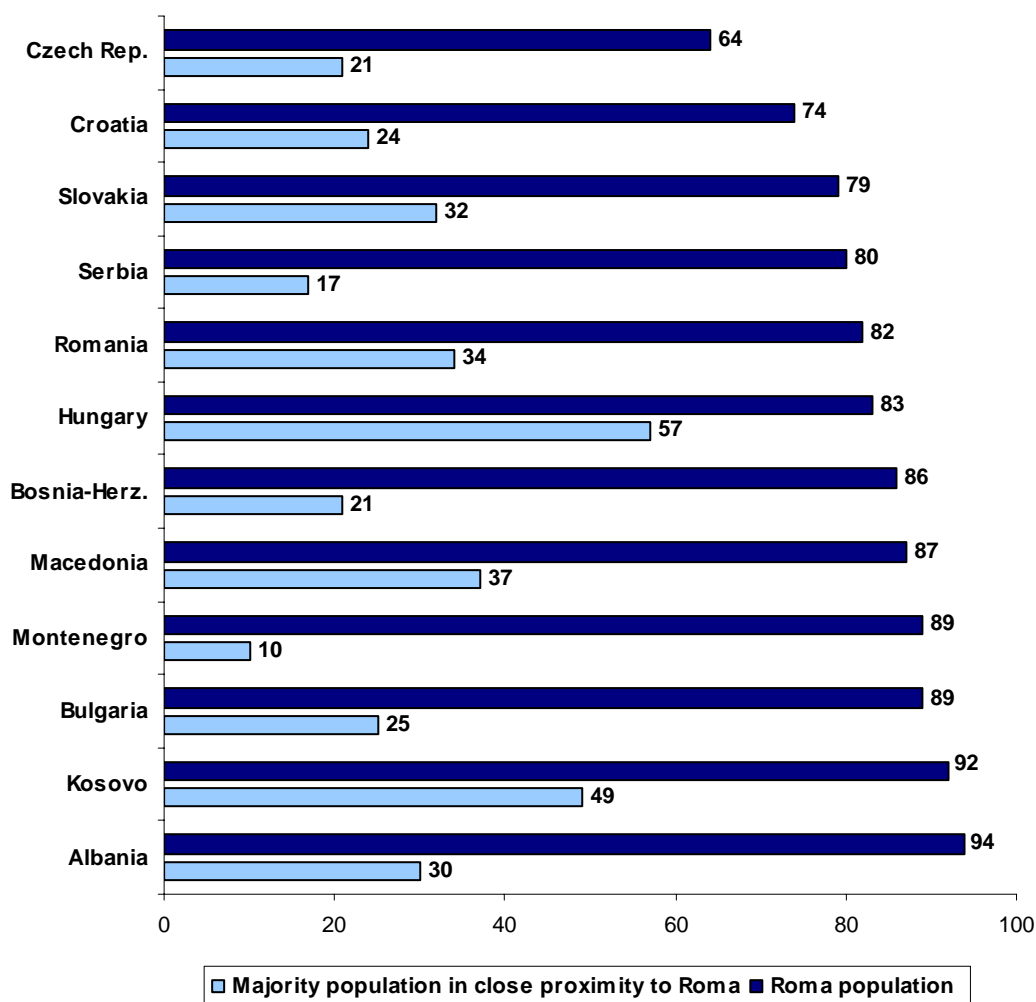
Poor education relative to their non-Roma neighbours is one of the most obvious causes of the disadvantageous position of Roma. The proportion of those with low education Roma is up to 9 times larger than among the majority population in the same area. There are substantial differences between Roma and the latter in all countries, most especially in Montenegro, the smallest difference being in Hungary, where the proportion of Roma with only basic schooling is around 45% larger than among the majority population, but the proportion in question still amounts to almost 85%. Indeed, the considerable difference between the Roma and the majority population in this respect is largely due to the very high proportion of Roma with low education:.. Around three-quarters or more of Roma aged 15 and over, therefore, have at most elementary schooling in all countries apart from the Czech Republic (64%), the highest rates being in Albania, Kosovo, Bulgaria and Montenegro, where 9 out of 10 Roma or more are uneducated (Figure 1).

⁵ Survey and expert estimates of Roma numbers tend to be accepted as being more reliable than official data (from censuses in particular), due to the tendency for Censuses to underestimate the size of disadvantaged minority groups as a result of respondents being reluctant to report their actual ethnic origin.

⁶ Based on median population estimates

Figure 1 Proportion of low level educated Roma and neighbouring majority

Share in percent of population 15 years old and above with 8 years elementary school as highest attained education level among Roma and majority population in close proximity to Roma



Source: UNDP 2005

The very low level of education among the Roma is closely linked with the low level of enrolment and early drop-outs from primary and secondary education. In Bulgaria and Hungary, only half of the Roma children aged 7-14 are enrolled in primary education, and much the same applies in the other countries. The rate of enrolment in secondary education among Roma aged 14-18 is extremely low, in most cases below 10% of the Roma in the age range who are eligible to be enrolled (OSI 2006a and 2006b).

School segregation

In addition to low enrolment rates and the early exits from the education system, school segregation and the arrangements pushing Roma children into special schools or classes have the effect of deepening inequalities in both education and more widely. School segregation occurs in all the countries in the region, most especially in Bulgaria, where every second Roma child attends a school in which the majority of children are of Roma origin, but the proportion concerned is significant in Hungary, Macedonia and the Czech Republic (25-32%) (UNDP 2005).

Because of their lower level of enrolment and their lower education attainment level, attendance at pre-school is more relevant for Roma than for other children as the more years spent in pre-school the greater the chance of attaining a level of education above elementary. Few Roma children, at present, however, attend pre-school.

Access to even a normal standard of education, let alone a quality level, is limited so far as Roma children are in general concerned. Roma pupils are sent to special schools or classes in large numbers. In several CEE countries, Roma children are over-represented in schools or classes designed for those with learning difficulties or the mentally disabled (Stigmata 2005). This process is also a form of school segregation and perhaps the most harmful kind, since attending a special school makes almost impossible to go into higher education and to obtain a good job later.

Several programmes have been launched by governments, local NGOs and international organisations to combat the educational segregation of Roma children and to improve the quality of education for the vulnerable and legislation has been implemented in several countries in the region, but the effect of these measures is minimal. Moreover, except in Hungary, governments have not implemented desegregation provisions into general education policies. (ERRC 2007a)

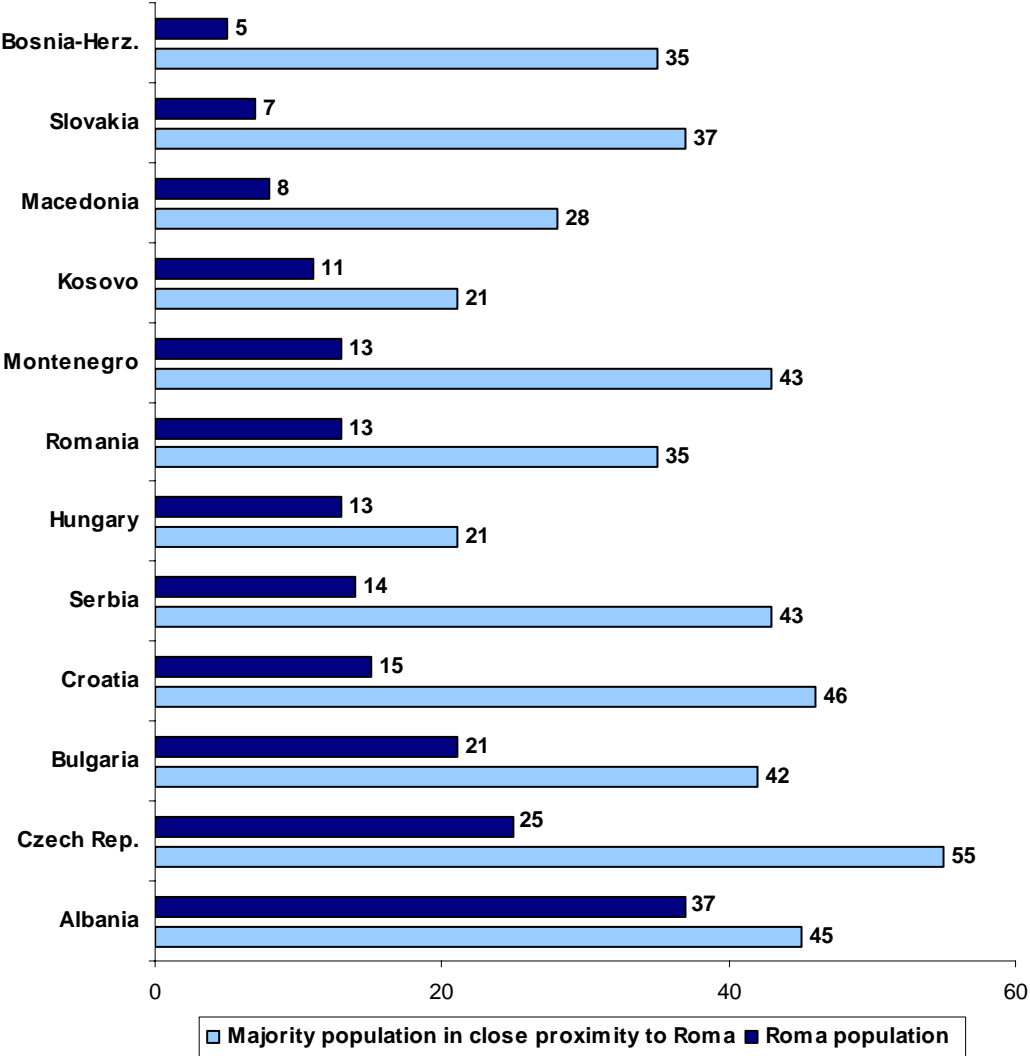
Employment

Low education levels lead directly to low levels of employment – both legal and illegal forms of employment in the case of Roma in CEE and SEE countries (UNDP 2002 and 2005). A third at most of Roma aged 15 and over are in work and earning income from employment in the region and the typical proportion is 10-20%, while the corresponding figure is significantly larger, though still extremely low, for the majority population in all countries. The smallest proportion of Roma in employment is in the ex-Yugoslavian countries in the SEE countries and in Hungary and Slovakia in the CEE countries, but employment is also very low in other EU Member States, such as Romania, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic (Figure 2). The smallest difference in employment between Roma and the majority population is in Hungary, where the proportion of the latter in paid work is still 60% larger than that of the Roma, while the largest difference is in Slovakia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where the share of the majority population in work is over 5 times that of Roma.

The larger the difference in employment rates, the more likely is it that discrimination in the labour market is a factor underlying this, even if other factors are also likely to be at work. Labour market discrimination is regarded as being widespread in the region but is difficult to measure. According to research (ERRC 2007b) carried out by the European Roma Rights Centre in the five CEE and SEE EU Member States (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria), two-thirds (64%) of working-age Roma have experienced discrimination in the labour market and half of them have been told directly that the reason for not being hired was their Roma origin. According to the research, in most cases, Roma were not employed purely because they could visibly be identified as being Roma. This crude form of discrimination is prevalent in jobs that require only a low level of education; more qualified Roma tend to experience more sophisticated forms of discrimination when their chances of promotion are limited.

A number of employment programmes have been initiated by governments, NGOs and international organisations, the results have been very limited. The effectiveness of employment programmes for Roma primarily depend on such factors as the educational level, experience and age composition of the unemployed concerned, the local facilities and infrastructure in place for setting up or operating viable businesses and so on. In consequence, it is difficult to define a concrete formula for effective employment programmes. Monitoring the effects of Roma employment programmes and evaluating the results is very rare.

Figure 2 Share of active earners aged 15 and above among Roma and majority population in close proximity to Roma (Share in percent)



Source: UNDP 2005

Housing segregation

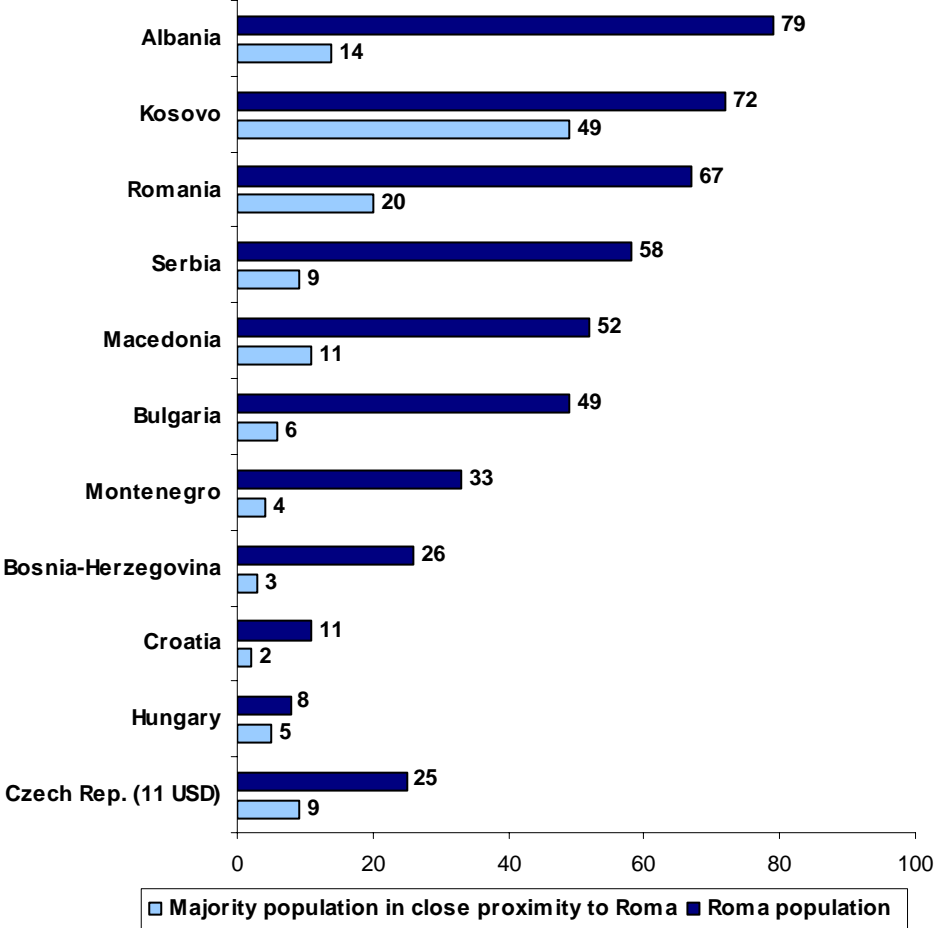
In addition to educational segregation, segregation in housing has a significant effect on the vulnerable position of Roma. Large numbers of Roma live in depressed regions where the low level of infrastructure, services and, as a consequence, a lack of employment opportunities induce all those with higher qualifications to move to more developed regions. Since few Roma have such qualifications, they have remained in the regions concerned; and, in consequence, many of these areas have become ghettos of poverty with disproportionate numbers of Roma. This is particularly the case in less developed countries, in the Balkans in particular, where, according to UNDP research (2005), the living standard of the population measured by poverty rates differ considerably by ethnicity within regions (Figure 3).

Poverty

In many CEE and SEE countries, the poverty among Roma cannot be explained only by their living in disadvantaged regions, but other factors, including perhaps discrimination, underlie the fact that their poverty rate is much higher than that of the majority population (UNDP 2005). In most of the Balkan countries, the figures indicate that Roma live in poverty in appreciably larger numbers than their neighbours.. Many research studies on Eastern European Roma highlight the existence of

discrimination which is reflected in the differences between ethnic groups within regions. Disparities in access to education, to jobs, basic services and so on all lead, in direct or indirect ways, to wide disparities in living standards.

Figure 3 Income based poverty among Roma and majority population in close proximity to Roma (percent of the respondents under the USD 4.30 PPP income based poverty line)



Source: UNDP 2005

Quality of housing

Housing facilities and access to basic infrastructure are far less among Roma households than among the majority population living in the same areas. This takes many forms, such as a lack of acceptable sanitation (no bathroom or toilet in the dwelling) or supply of clean running water. For instance, 8 out of 10 Roma (81%) do not have access to modern sanitation in Bulgaria, while just over a quarter of non-Roma (26%) live in the same conditions. Similarly, over two-thirds (68%) of Roma in Romania do not have access to running water, twice the proportion of non-Roma living in the same areas (UNDP 2005).

Health status

Poor housing conditions, lack of basic infrastructure, high rates of poverty and the general consequences of the economic inequalities lead to higher exposure to health-related risk, which manifests itself in lower life expectancy and higher mortality and morbidity rates compared with the majority population. The inferior health status of Roma is evident across the whole region and cannot be explained solely in terms of their deprived socio-economic situation but is a result at least in part of

their limited access to health care, which in turn results to some extent from the regional disparities noted above combined with a lack of health insurance and proper documents, though also from different forms of discrimination such as exclusion from quality medical services, denial of emergency aid, a refusal to treat Roma patients or segregation in hospital facilities (ERRC 2006).

Access to services and information

In general, access to basic services and information is often limited for Roma and other vulnerable groups living in deprived areas, who are often discriminated against in pubs, restaurants and so on or who are deprived of basic information. In addition, only a very small proportion of Roma can be considered as members of the information society and are capable of, or have the opportunity of, using PCs and the internet.

In sum, the vast majority of Roma live in serious poverty and under appalling conditions surrounded by a complex net of disadvantages combined with discrimination in many areas - education, employment, health care and so on. A number of policy measures have been implemented to combat the disadvantages of Roma in employment or education as well as to open up the ghettos or improve poor housing. The effect of these measures seems so far have been minimal.

III. Policy conclusions

Basic principles

Targeted programmes versus general measures

As the facts presented above indicates, the majority of Roma live in severely disadvantageous circumstances which is also partly the case in respect of the majority population living in the same areas, though to a much smaller extent. The significant differences which are evident between the Roma and the majority population reflect a range of factors, including a direct and indirect forms of discrimination. While policy measures can be addressed to vulnerable groups as a whole, irrespective of their ethnicity. Since the measures concerned should benefit Roma proportionately, to the extent that there is discrimination against Roma specifically, there is a need for programmes targeted at Roma as such.

Monitoring

All the policy measures and programmes initiated for improving the situation of the Roma, or indeed vulnerable groups in general, require close monitoring of participation in them and their effectiveness. This also means that there is a need to monitor programmes which target disadvantaged groups as a whole by ethnicity, in order to know whether Roma are proportionately represented in them or not and whether or not they are assisted as intended.

Barriers to data collection on ethnicity – legal versus policy-making aspects

Monitoring by ethnicity, however, is at present almost impossible because of legislation on data protection in many countries in which the collection of data by ethnicity is prohibited. Although it is clearly essential to respect the principle of human rights underlying this legislation and, accordingly, to protect the rights of the individual concerned, this does not obviate the need for data on ethnicity to design, monitor and evaluate policy aimed at assisting ethnic groups. Without accurate statistics by ethnicity, there is not way of knowing precisely how many Roma live in the region, what their demographic characteristics are and how they are distributed across the region; nor is it possible with a high degree of certainty to compare the circumstances of Roma and the majority population. Accordingly, there is a need to reconsider legislation on data collection by ethnicity with the aim of trying to ensure that the necessary basis for policy-making exists.

Locality, complexity and access to information

The need to take account of local aspects and experience

Roma live in many different areas in different countries with diverse social, economic, cultural and historical traditions and circumstances. Common policies and measures, therefore, are unlikely to be effective in all cases. Policies need to build on local experience by obtaining the views of local actors and NGOs and involving them in all aspects of programmes from planning through to implementation and daily operation. The compilation of information on and assessments of different local initiatives which have been implemented and examples of good and bad practice are, however, important for improving policy.

The development of local initiatives, therefore, needs to involve local stakeholders, such as NGOs and private firms to support and maintain services such as pre-schools or nurseries, schools and health care facilities. There is also need for ongoing long-term funding instead of finance being provided on a project-by-project basis, which makes for uncertainty in planning longer-term programmes and even more in maintaining institutions and basic social services.

Involving more Roma stakeholders

In addition to the above, there is a need to involve more Roma in the decision-making process and in the planning, organisation and maintenance of programmes and institutions aimed at improving their situation at, both local and country level.

Integrated programmes

Policies need also to take account of the complex interrelationship between the various factors which in combination are responsible for Roma being disadvantaged. Locally planned and managed integrated programmes need to be initiated for improving the situation of Roma and other disadvantaged groups as regards employment, education, housing and health care at the same time. The policies and measures introduced in these areas need accordingly to be consistent with each other in terms of targets and the measures used.

Access to information

Removing barriers to information is one of the most important objectives for vulnerable groups, irrespective of their ethnicity. Traditional methods of communication need to be improved and new technologies used to ensure an adequate flow of information in all areas, which means educating and supporting staff, such as social workers, and easy access to ICT and training on how to use this.

Improving human capital

Human capital development is a key issue for Roma and other vulnerable groups.

Education

Education at all levels is essential for improving the employability of disadvantaged groups and their chances of social inclusion. Measures which would help to increase education levels among Roma are:

- (1) universal admission to pre-school from the age 4 for all children regardless of ethnicity;
- (2) conscious action to discourage young people from dropping out of school before the age 16 or even 18;
- (3) establishing a special mentoring system in primary and secondary schools to help children from disadvantaged families;
- (4) employing Roma assistants in schools to support Roma children and to help combat prejudice;
- (5) desegregating schools and classes and taking action to reduce the over-representation of Roma children in special schools or classes by revising the arrangements for classifying children as requiring

special treatment and the criteria used and by establishing an effective monitoring system to ensure that the arrangements are not abused;

(6) developing after-school education for elementary and secondary school children from disadvantaged families and providing special assistance for young Roma people to encourage them to on to further education and training after compulsory schooling.

Employment

The low level of employment among Roma is partly due to their living in large numbers in economically depressed regions where the lack of employment opportunities affects everyone but Roma especially because of the large proportion with poor education, quite apart from discrimination. Structural policies are, therefore, needed in these regions to strengthen their capacity for economic development and their ability to attract investment and jobs. This needs to be coupled with the implementation of programmes aimed at employers to combat any prejudice they might have against taking on Roma and to fight discrimination.

Above all, the local initiatives need to be initiated with a special focus on local problems and possibilities. These need to involve Roma themselves in the work of employment offices, in the assessment of needs and in the search and selection of appropriate programmes as well as in the daily operation of these. Financial tools such as the micro-financing of small firms are useful in launching local employment projects but it is important that the activities concerned are responding to a real local need and are therefore viable in the longer-term.

It is equally important that these various measures are underpinned by action to combat prejudice and discrimination. This implies the implementation of training programmes not only for employers but also labour office staff, local government personnel, teachers, doctors, journalists, politicians and so on. Such programmes should not, of course, only apply to fighting discrimination against Roma but are equally relevant in respect of all minorities, ethnic and otherwise. It is against Roma, however, where the need seems greatest.

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