Attitudes must change

Improving access to education has proved an easier task than find employment for Roma in the central Portuguese municipality of Coimbra

Bruno Gonçalves is a Roma Portuguese mediator in the university city of Coimbra, working on a project to improve employment access for Roma. His job ends in September 2013 and like most of the other mediators, he expects to go on unemployment. He thinks the approach of using mediators will work only when municipalities really understand what they are for.

*I am a mediator in the city of Coimbra, where I was born and raised. Most people in Portugal are prejudiced against the Roma. A recent study showed that life expectancy is 20 years less among the Roma. In Coimbra, we have two Roma groups. The one I belong to lives in social housing and speaks only Portuguese, the second poorer group lives in settlements and speaks Portuguese and Spanish, where they originally came from.

*I work in schools, building bridges between Roma people and officialdom. It’s about easing Roma access to local services and facilities, and improving communication between Roma and non-Roma. I think I’ve done good work. I’ve helped schools improve the integration of Roma pupils, and have encouraged Roma fathers to be more involved in their children’s schooling.

*I spend much of my time talking with parents at their homes. Education touches on health, employment, all areas of life. Most children don’t go to school because their parents don’t realise how important it is for their future. They don’t expect their children ever to find work because of widespread anti-Roma prejudice. We have been able to improve school attendance, but finding jobs is another matter. So far, I know of only one Roma who got a job – and he was hired as a street sweeper on a one-year contract.

*The mediators in this scheme are all Roma, which makes sense because the Roma know us and trust us. The situation for Roma has improved since I was a child. We now have the self-confidence to demand our rights from the government and the municipalities, which was certainly not the case in the past. Over the last two decades, Roma have learned to read and write. My father was illiterate, and in his day, most Roma worked as street vendors in fairs across the country. That work has dried up. Some families receive a small monthly benefit for the poor.

*The idea of mentoring is excellent, but I’m not sure its implementation works in Portugal. I think most mentors share my opinion. The government’s High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIDI) has become more sensitive to Roma rights, but the municipalities still have much to learn. Roma may trust us, but the municipalities don’t. They see us as a Trojan horse, a secret weapon. They want us to solve the Roma problem according to the way they see it. But that’s not what mediators are for. We are not meant to be activists, but neutral facilitators there to improve Roma inclusion without destroying the Roma identity.

*The Roma people have to grow up and get educated, go to university, become involved in politics and learn to use the available tools to fight for their rights. The problem is that with the economic crisis the government doesn’t have the money to put into strategies for Roma inclusion. It’s not a good time and I am afraid for the future.

Romed

This project is about hiring mediators with a Roma background to help tackle inequalities in access to jobs, healthcare and education. It is co-financed by the European Social Fund and the Council of Europe. In Portugal, it was promoted by the High Commission for Immigration and Ethnic Minorities (ACIDI), and ends in 2013.