



Greece 2009

Peer Review: Integrated Programme for the Social Inclusion of Roma

Short Report



On behalf of the
European Commission
DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities



Held in Athens (Greece) on 27-28 May 2009, the Peer Review was hosted by the Greek Ministry of Employment and Social Protection and the Ministry of the Interior. Also taking part were the Greek Ministries of Justice, of Health and Social Solidarity, of National Education and Religious Affairs, and of Public Works. In addition to the host country, five peer countries were represented: Finland, France, Germany, Hungary and Spain. Furthermore, Greek Roma representatives and the European Roma Information Office took part as well representatives of The Council of Europe and the Open Society Institute. Taking part for the European Commission were representatives of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and of the DG for Regional Policy.

1. The policy under review

This Peer Review was mainly forward-looking. It was held at a time when its recommendations can have a real impact on the renewal of Greek policy for the social inclusion of Roma. Previously, an Integrated Action Plan for the Social Integration of Greek Roma had been implemented in 2001-2006, with some support from EU funds. Independent evaluation showed that, while the plan did try to contribute to the creation of a cohesive policy on Roma issues in Greece, there were major organisational and technical shortcomings in its implementation. Problems with the continuity and consistency of financing were also noted. The Greek government has therefore drafted a new long-term, integrated **Action Plan** to be adopted within the framework of the fourth Community Structural Funds planning period and beyond. Greece therefore invited the Peer Review participants to discuss the issues covered by the new plan, particularly as regards **institutional form, managerial mechanisms and improved design of policies in relevant sectors**, such as housing and basic infrastructures; health; employment and vocational training; education; social welfare; culture and public awareness-raising as well as networking.

Provision is also made for **immediate interventions** in these fields. And there are detailed proposals for **more coordinated planning, management and evaluation** of the measures.

Study visit

Following the discussions of the Greek Action Plan, Peer Review participants visited two socio-medical centres, located in Ano Liosia and the municipality of Acharnes. The socio-medical centres which operate in 30 Roma settlements in Greece aim to assist the Roma population in integrating into mainstream-society. They provide help and guidance in the use of public services in fields such as health, education, employment and housing. The centres' activities include the provision of information, medical treatment, counselling and psychological support, education and training, awareness-raising and the collaboration with local and national institutions.

Peer Review participants appreciated the holistic approach taken by the socio-medical centres. However, they also emphasised the need to provide better links to mainstream services and to improve integration of Roma, particularly in education. The local authorities administered varied populations in their areas and the mayor of Ano Liosia stated his commitment to the goal of inclusion.

A short visit was also made to the Roma settlement in Acharnon where Peer Review participants spoke with local residents and saw for themselves the kinds of problems to be tackled by the Action Plan. These included shacks and houses built illegally in the vicinity of a hazardous electricity pylon, making impossible both the legalisation of such accommodation and the provision of necessary infrastructure, difficulties in employment and poor school attendance, as well as the issue of problematic criteria for housing loan eligibility.

2. Lessons learned

Among the main points to emerge from the Peer Review:

- An **institutional structure**, including the beneficiaries themselves, should have responsibility for the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of action to promote Roma social inclusion. It should set a dedicated budget and assign priorities, on the basis of an integrated approach. The Greek Interministerial Commission is one possible means of ensuring **policy coordination** provided it ensures its mandate. A separate government office, or assignment of Roma issues to one existing ministry, could be viable alternatives.
- **Mainstreaming** of Roma policy should be the aim, but with specific positive action to address existing inequalities. In particular, there is a need to **link anti-discrimination laws with social inclusion policies**. The laws, including transposed EU directives, should be enforced – through prosecutions if necessary and group action when possible. However persuasion will bring the best results in specific situations, both by convincing local authorities that integration is in their own long-term interests and by demonstrating good practice elsewhere and the benefits it brings for community cohesion.
- **Employment** is one important way out of poverty and exclusion. But Roma are active mainly in the grey economy. This employment needs to be regularised, in order to end exploitation and ensure social security coverage. Spain's Roma employment programmes are among the most successful and demonstrably transferable.
- **Preschool education** is crucial as a basis for tackling the intergenerational transmission of poverty. It will also enable Roma women to take up jobs outside the home, either directly by freeing them from child-care during pre-school hours or alternatively through skills training in these hours, improving their potential access to the labour market. Throughout Europe, all educational provision for Roma still leaves much to be desired. A good general education is the best way of improving Roma access to jobs and in order to ensure vital parental commitment, support is necessary in order to raise their awareness of the benefits of education for their children.
- Most Peer Review participants favoured **integrated housing** in which Roma and non-Roma populations live side by side, but the Roma themselves should be consulted on this in each case and, in all events, this should be accompanied by social support measures both before and after relocating families. Experience shows that hasty, poorly prepared integration is likely to fail. Loans for Roma housing raise various difficulties which need further consideration. However, this is a field where it has been possible to accord a certain priority to women, young people and one-parent families.

- **Health** is a field in which immediate benefits for Roma can be achieved, for example through vaccination schemes and screening programmes. However, low life expectancy is closely related to poverty and cannot be tackled by medical means alone. It requires anti-poverty measures, notably the promotion of employment. Greece's use of socio-medical centres, which also serve as contact points for Roma, was praised.
- The use of **Roma mediators**, as in Greece, is an important means of ensuring that Roma have access to the public services they need. The mediators' role should be expanded to become more pro-active, linking Roma more effectively to mainstream services such as health, education, employment, social support and housing.
- There should be a **two-way approach to integration**, stressing the mutual rights and duties both of Roma and of the society around them.
- **The quality of data** about Roma, notably demographic statistics, is in urgent need of improvement in order to gain a clearer picture of the scale of main problems. This is also essential for trying to set an appropriate budget for components of the national Action Plan. Local authorities may well have a clearer idea of the situation in their own areas but should be encouraged to carry out thorough surveys.
- **Participation** by those living in precarious situations is crucial to social inclusion. They need to be involved in the decisions that directly concern them. That is why the EU holds annually, in Brussels, a meeting of people who are experiencing social exclusion and poverty. Many Roma from the Member States take part.
- Rather than Roma-specific policies, the Peer Review's preference was for more **general policies which include Roma**. This approach tends to attract less opposition. But the Roma must not be forgotten.
- The new Greek programme should make greater use of **EU structural funds**. This is reliable funding which makes it possible to plan ahead, unlike the less sustained financing under the previous Greek scheme. But an element of **locally sourced funding** is also important. Otherwise, people will not feel that they have a stake in the projects. **Roma NGOs' capacity to access international funding** needs to be developed, as they have fewer network connections than professional fundraisers. The **EURoma** network (www.euromanet.eu), currently present in 12 European countries, is actively promoting Roma use of structural funding.