

General and actual information on Roma issues in Finland

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According to the Finnish Constitution Roma people have the right to preserve and develop their language and culture. The Roma community is small in Finland in comparison with many other European countries. There are an estimated 10,000 – 12,000 Roma in Finland and about 3,000 Finnish Roma living in Sweden.

Roma people are Finnish citizens and they enjoy full civil rights and are subject to the civic duties these entail. Finnish citizens have access to social protection on an equal basis. All citizens, including Roma people, have access to social and health services and income support. Municipalities provide services to Roma people in the same settings as for the main population. If needed mainstreamed services are supplemented with special measures. This means that Roma children attend the nearest day care centre and school. The Roma also use the same health centres as other people. Roma people also have access to housing provided by the municipality in which the person is registered. Finnish Roma people have a strong cultural identity of their own but they also regard themselves as Finns. Finnish Roma are actively involved in building up the Finnish society.

The central organ in Finland's Romani policy and administration is the National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs, which was set up already 50 years ago in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. It serves as a platform for co-operation and expertise on Roma issues between the Roma people in Finland and the public authorities. In addition to the national board there are four Regional Advisory Boards on Romani Affairs in conjunction with the State Provincial Offices in the south, north, east and west part of Finland. They are financed by the State budget since 2005. The Advisory Boards act as cross-sectorial bodies for the Romani population and the authorities. They work with both provincial and local authorities.

The Regional Advisory Boards have increased the participation of the Roma in decision-making at local level. They have improved the possibilities to influence the situation at grass root level to benefit Roma people. Their tasks include increasing the understanding of Romani culture, promoting equality and preventing discrimination. The Regional Advisory Boards can also run regional and local development projects for improving the situation of Roma people.

National Policy on Roma under preparation

The Finnish Minister of Social Services and Health Ms. Paula Risikko has assigned a working group in January 2009 in order to prepare Finland's first National Roma Policy. The working group's task will be finished by the end of June.

The objective of the National Policy on Roma is equal treatment and inclusion of people belonging to the Roma minority in different spheres of life in Finland. The policy covers all sectors

and will be prepared in a Working Group consisting of representatives of Roma people's own organisations and representatives of the different administrative sectors and other relevant bodies. By mainstreaming the promotion of equal treatment and inclusion of the Roma into various actions by society the rights of the Finnish Roma minority can be furthered in the way required by Finnish legislation and obligations stemming from international agreements.

The programme will include concrete recommendations covering education, employment, welfare and health, housing, the police and prison administration, Romani language and culture, elimination of discrimination, institutional matters and international activities. The working group consists of a chairman and vice chair and 21 members. Five regional hearings with Roma people as well as a hearing with municipalities will be organised during the process.

Assessment of the Greek model on Roma inclusion based on Finnish experiences

First of all, we would like to congratulate Greece for an excellent work on Roma issues. We find the model described in the discussion paper very comprehensive and strategic. The model is in our opinion usable and transferable to other countries.

We welcome the work done on housing issues and education of Roma children. It is a good start and gives a solid base on which to proceed. We believe that one has to start with making concrete improvements. Prioritizing children and housing is wise, since both areas mutually reinforce each other. Housing issues and the welfare of Roma children and families are also closely connected. For example problems with the school attendance of Roma pupils are often linked with lacking or insufficient housing facilities.

Outcomes of measures taken both in early and primary education and housing require time. Our experience is that progress is slow and Roma people haven't always the patience to wait for things to get better. They want rapid actions. The Greek model on housing policies for Roma varies from the Finnish one. The Greek authorities have done a remarkable job with providing housing for Roma people. There is however still room for developing a more integrated housing policy.

Having worked with improving the housing conditions for the Roma population for decades we still face problems in Finland. Now the problems are more on discrimination and reconciliation of Roma's cultural habits regarding housing with the majority's lifestyle. In Finland the main problem Roma people encounter is that they for many reasons are not being selected to get apartments they have applied for. Low income narrows substantially Roma people's freedom of choice when seeking for an apartment. This creates pressure on an already narrow housing market.

However, important steps in improving the housing situation of Finnish Roma was made already in 1976 when special legislation was passed by Parliament in order to improve the socio-economic position of the Roma. Each municipality was obliged to provide housing (an apartment or a private house) for the Roma families and persons living in the municipality. Special funding was also available in the State budget for the municipalities. Many Roma families were travelling around in the country before that. The difference between the Greek and the Finnish model is that in Finland the special measures are earmarked for benefiting the Roma population but targeted to mainstream housing. In Finland there are no separated housing areas, quarters or blockhouses for Roma people only. Roma people live in the same areas and houses as other Finns. In

addition, the special legislation gave a number of Roma people possibilities to private ownership of apartments and houses. It also successfully put an end to a travelling life and moved towards a settled and more stable life.

The idea with parent´s schools in conjunction with increasing the school attendance and giving extra support to Roma children we find innovative and excellent. There are many reasons for this. First of all, many Roma adults have not received any systematic education themselves and they may even be illiterate. Secondly, receiving basic education help Roma parents to motivate their children in keeping up their studies. And thirdly, Roma adults get a possibility to meet other Roma people in the same situation and to support each other within their own community. Also in Finland Roma people have asked the authorities not only to give support to the children but in addition to give guidance and support to the parents. So-called summer schools for entire Roma families have been successfully arranged. Concrete help to parents with the daily upbringing of children is also needed.

The National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs in Finland has published early childhood material¹ for Romani parents. The material is distributed by all prenatal and child welfare clinics in Finland free of charge. The guide booklets have been bilingual in Finnish and Romani language. The Roma has very well received the guides.

Models for promoting participation and combating discrimination

The administrative model for promoting Roma issues in Greece seems to be quite centralized. The Inter-Ministerial Committee is a good start, but not enough, as stated in the discussion paper. Our experience shows that permanent bodies with stable funding and permanent staff are needed. In Finland the National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs was set up as already mentioned as early as 1956. The board has two employees; a senior officer and a secretary. The tasks of the Advisory Board are to:

- Monitor and report to the authorities on the development of the Roma people's living conditions and opportunities for participation in society;
- Take initiatives to improve the economic, educational, social and cultural conditions of the Roma people and to promote the employment of Roma;
- Work for putting an end to all forms of discrimination; including promoting Romani language and culture;
- Participate in international activities to improve the conditions for the Roma.

The Advisory Board has influenced the development of Finnish legislation and administration in matters concerning the Roma. Its main function is to ensure Roma people's participation in Romani affairs and provide expertise in all matters related to Roma.

¹ Read with the Child in 2006; Grow with the Child; Taking Care of Teeth with the Child coming up in 2009; Exercise with the Child coming up in 2010.

However, it is equally vital to have a legal instrument to protect the rights of the minorities. For that purpose, the office of the Ombudsman for Minorities was founded in 2001 in Finland. The Ombudsman together with the National Discrimination Tribunal ensures legal protection against discrimination of ethnic minorities according to the Non-discrimination Act, which entered into force in 2004. The office has nine employees.

There is a clear division of work between the legal instrument and consultative body instrument. Likewise, a body for supervising the legal rights of Roma people in Greece could be something to consider.

Since decisions affecting Roma people are taken at local level a greater involvement of municipalities and possible bodies for participation are needed. In Finland we have four regional Advisory Boards on Romani Affairs. The regional bodies were set up in 2005 and after some struggle the state funding for them is now secured.

Furthermore, some 20 forward-looking municipalities have set up official co-operative and cross-sectoral working groups on Roma issues. Our experience is that the local groups can settle concrete issues at the municipal level and pressure on the National Advisory Board with concrete problems will diminish. We would encourage the Greek authorities to consider setting up a similar model with regional bodies and local working groups supporting and implementing the Greek Integrated programme for the Roma population.

Empowerment of Roma organisations must not be forgotten. In the discussion paper we don't find information on the present situation of Roma organisations in Greece. What kind of organisations do you have and how are they funded? In Finland we have several Roma organisations. Some are focused on subgroups like Roma children, young people and women, some on thematic issues like art or religion. In 2007 an umbrella organisation, the Finish Roma Forum (Finitiko Romano Forum), was created, which comprises of 12 associations all over the country. The Forum carries out projects and lobbying activities as well as aims at strengthening the co-operation between Roma organisations. The funding of the Forum is project-based, which makes long-term work difficult. The Finnish organisations on Roma would need a permanent public funding and training in lobbying and international co-operation.

Since evolving international and national legislation in human rights, minorities and discrimination brings us all new tasks and challenges it is essential to ensure that Roma organisations and activists are able to contribute with their know-how in international Roma issues. The participation of Roma representatives should be ensured at all levels; local, regional, national and as well as international.

We are also convinced that good Roma role models in Music, Culture, Politics, Academia etc. can give visibility and support for Roma people. Outstanding personalities are also a gateway to political influence since elections are about individual votes to individual candidates. Unfortunately there are no Roma representatives in Finnish Parliament so far. However, we have been encouraged by the municipal elections last year (2008). There were over 20 Roma persons as candidates for mainstream parties and at least six of them were elected. Almost all of them received at least one Committee membership in municipal administration. We would be very interested to hear what the situation is in Greece?

Towards an integrated service provision model

Our main message to the Greek authorities would be to gradually integrate services for the Roma population with services provided for the rest of the population. From the discussion paper we find out that 27 socio-medical centres have been set up for the Roma population, sports and culture projects and programmes are tailor-made for Roma people and 13 educational and cultural centres for Roma have been established. We would like to know if there is a specific reason for organising segregated services for the Roma population? In Finland the starting point has been that services for Roma people are provided in the same settings and facilities as for the rest of the population. This means that Roma children attend the nearest day care centres and schools together with their peers. If extra support is needed to Roma children and families, that support is provided within normal settings. Specific projects, for instance family support, may be carried out in order to achieve equal opportunities in practice. We call it positive discrimination. Even if Roma pupils still drop out from schools more frequently than the main population, the general situation of Roma pupils has steadily improved.

In Finland the Roma population also attend the same health centres, child welfare and maternity clinics as the rest of the population. At the moment there are not big problems concerning the use of health services. Unfortunately we don't have enough facts on the use of health services and therefore we intend to make a special survey on promoting welfare and health among the Roma population in 2010. For instance, we believe that information about health promotion and healthy living conditions doesn't reach the Roma population fully. If that proves to be the case, we have to address the issue in some way.

The way forward

Employment of the Roma population is a common challenge to us all. The next step in Greece would be to focus on adult education and guidance and assistance for Roma people in order to enter working life. In Finland the level of education of the Roma population has slowly improved. Even if Roma people have passed the same exams as the rest of the population they still face problems in getting a job. Discrimination is reported to take place when employers hire staff and trainees. Roma people face specific problems in getting traineeships. Therefore, specific projects are currently running in vocational training centres to help Roma people find the right path to employment. The preliminary results are very encouraging.

We believe that in spite of the economic recession Roma issues and policies can and must be pushed forward. In fact the recession should be used for the benefit of Roma people. Many countries, including Finland, have adopted so-called recovery packages, which focus on building the infrastructure. For instance as a part of the recovery plan housing for Roma people can be addressed. We also believe that programmes and actions involving the local authorities are needed. Most of the problems can be addressed and solved at local level.

Concluding remarks

Finland warmly welcomes the Peer Review on Roma inclusion. We believe that we have a lot to learn from each other. We also believe that we can work more together at European level. First of all, we welcome the Council Conclusions on Inclusion of the Roma, which contains common basic principles on Roma Inclusion. Roma issues should be better addressed within the work of the Social Protection Committee as a part of the follow up to the Active Inclusion Strategy. We would for example need to collect more information on Roma issues. In Finland we have commissioned special surveys focused on Roma concerning employment, education and private entrepreneurship. Furthermore, work is in progress on indicators linked to discrimination. At European level knowledge transfer could be promoted on several issues, including the free movement of Roma people within the European Union. Also European funding for Roma projects could be further promoted. European Conferences on Roma Inclusion would be helpful for all Member States, the Commission and Roma organisations in order to raise awareness of the problems Roma people face and to seek solutions together. All measures must of course include Roma organisations and other relevant stakeholders.