

Recommendations Of The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) To The Belgian EU Presidency

In the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion -2010, the plight of the Roma should be put on top of the agenda. They are the minority facing the most discrimination and the poorest living conditions. The only way of overcoming such low standards of living is to develop policies with a holistic approach. The following are recommendations ERIO believes are crucial in attempting to ameliorate the situation of Roma, but should be taken into consideration within a multidimensional approach.

I. Education

Poverty faced by Roma is strongly linked to the discrimination they face, as well as the lack of access to education. The education of Roma and their (re-) insertion into the labour markets are two challenges to be met. In order to achieve these goals, ERIO calls upon the Belgian EU Presidency:

- To encourage all policies that help reduce the discrimination Roma face in the educational system. The majority of Roma children and young people are at the lowest level of the educational scale throughout the EU. Most Roma children and youth attend segregated schools and acquire very low levels of education; this consequently prevents them from accessing higher education and adequate employment. Investing in childhood and youth helps insure adequate employment for Roma and self confidence. ERIO strongly feels that the investment in early Roma childhood education and youth should be high in the priorities of policies developed in order to break the generational transmission of poverty.

- To educate on Romani culture in a positive light in order to break stereotypes and prejudices. Knowledge of both Roma and Mainstream population is key in overcoming

prejudices. As mentioned, the poverty Roma face is largely linked to the discrimination they endure. ERIO feels that the best way to overcome these prejudices is to educate on Romani culture. Roma should participate as equal partners in a societal dialogue and their culture should benefit from the same degree of promotion as the cultures of national majorities. Education helps Roma participate in the social dialogue. The education of the Mainstream on Roma culture helps them be more receptive to a different culture.

II. Employment

ERIO welcomes the fact that the Belgian EU Presidency has, in the wake of the recession, amongst its priorities the promotion of employment. This is a crucial issue for Roma communities since they are one of the most affected and vulnerable groups to unemployment and discrimination in the work place. In order to advance Roma employment, ERIO asks the EU Belgian Presidency:

- To develop Roma employment through capacity building. The possibility of access to employment is jeopardized for Roma who haven't had access to proper education. Capacity building should be seen as having two objectives: first to increase the qualifications of Roma in order to be (re-) inserted into the labour market. Second, ERIO also recommends that means be put into place to encourage local NGOs and national authorities to fully use European Funds. It is therefore important to improve the capacity building of Roma regarding the approach of EU structural funds, giving them the possibility to use all of the institutional tools available for them. ERIO finds this to be a crucial issue since the capacity building will help give Roma a political voice, and enable the political leaders to effectively represent and defend the interests of local Roma communities.

III. Gender Equality

ERIO welcomes the fact that gender equality is a priority for the Belgian EU Presidency. Roma communities throughout the different European Member States face high levels of poverty. However, Roma women face multiple discriminations: first, as women in their own community, and second, as Roma. They also face the biggest barriers in terms of access to adequate education and employment. It is also difficult to estimate the conditions that Roma women face since statistical data is missing, this is an obstacle in creating policies that ensure their inclusion. In light of these problems, ERIO calls upon the Belgian Presidency:

- To promote Roma gender equality through women education. Overcoming discrimination and barriers Roma women face is essential in the process of fighting against Roma discrimination, since women are the ones that take care of their families. Everything must be done to ensure they have equal access to social services and healthcare.

- To put into place adequate statistical data tools in order to assess the specific difficulties Roma women face in order to create the most adequate policies. Often, policies put into place don't reflect the realities lived, and thus policies fail, in order to avoid this it is important to use data in order to put into place the right policies.

- To support Roma Women's organizations who have expertise to assess the specific needs of this vulnerable group. Often, data isn't enough to put into place adequate policies, but it is good to have expertise knowledge as well. Roma women organizations are aware of the realities and are a source of valuable expertise to help create adequate policies.

IV. Migration

Roma migrants, both EU citizens and Third Country Nationals, are one of the most discriminated and socially excluded minorities in Western European countries, even within migrants' communities. Immigration of Roma has increased since the accession of the new Member States into the European Union, and this has led to an increase in the prejudices Roma face. Furthermore, Roma migrants have to overcome immense obstacles to access basic services such as healthcare and education; their freedom of movement is often strongly restricted as well.

In order to overcome these difficulties preventing Roma from living a dignified life, ERIO calls upon the Belgian EU Presidency:

- To ensure basic rights for Roma immigrants, especially children. Children shouldn't be penalized by administrative burdens and should be ensured equal access to basic services such as healthcare and education.
- To ensure protection from exploitation in the black market. Roma are subjected to extreme poverty, and thus they are the most vulnerable in exploitation in black labor. It is important to protect them and prevent the humiliation and dependency they suffer as immigrants from their illegal employees. Due to vulnerability and lack of free choice Roma women often become victims of organized crime, such as trafficking and prostitution. Urgent measures should be taken to eliminate these practices and provide help for those who have been victims.

The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) is an international advocacy organisation which promotes political and public discussion on Roma issues by providing factual and in-dept information on a range of policy issues to the European Union institutions, Roma civil organisations, governmental authorities and intergovernmental bodies. ERIO cooperates with a large network of organisations and acts to combat racial discrimination and social exclusion through awareness raising, lobbying and policy development.