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Published online: 28 Oct 2014.

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The plight of Romanian social protection: addressing the vulnerabilities and well-being in Romanian Roma families

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To adhere to the European Union, Romania was obliged to adopt the entire range of international human rights laws for children's rights, disability rights, women's rights, minority rights and non-discrimination. However, Romania's practice of human rights falls behind the letters of these laws, especially for populations exposed to intersectional vulnerabilities (e.g. being both Roma and child or woman). The introductory sections of this article describe the cumulative vulnerabilities faced by the Roma, and discuss the main anti-discrimination policies and international treaties adopted in Romania in the context of recent EU developments, including the strategies for the Roma Decade. The main body of the article discusses the barriers to effectively addressing the rights of the Roma in Romania. Using available (yet scarce) ethnically segregated data, we draw attention to the multiple risks faced by Roma families in Romania confronted with traditionalism, poverty, violence, lack of services and proper housing, and other risks. By exploring the attitudes of social workers and other care-staff towards Roma beneficiaries in Romania, the authors seek to understand what contributes to the failure of anti-discrimination laws and policies in that country in protecting those most exposed to poverty. Looking at the poverty and other vulnerability indicators of the Roma in Romania, we acknowledge the social distance that exists between the disadvantaged Roma living in Romanian rural areas and their helpers. We consider the current status of anti-discriminatory social work practice in respect of the Roma population in Romania. The evidence considered regarding the plight of the Roma in Romania leads to the conclusion that policies should (a) elaborate more on bridging the gap between professionals and their beneficiaries and (b) translate anti-discrimination policies also into codes of conduct designed to more effectively protect and empower victims such as the Roma children and women who receive the services of professionals such as social workers.

Keywords: Roma rights; vulnerable Roma children; Roma Women; social work; social distance

Introduction

Overcoming social disadvantages has been a longstanding aim for Roma people, in Romania as well as all over the world. After the Romanian political shift in 1990, the hopes of Roma for improvement of their social and citizenship status were embedded in a new social, cultural and political context that evolved parallel with European politics and regulations, and the enlargement of the European Union (EU). Soon after the fall of

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the communist regimes, the tensions between various ethnic groups revealed some of the specific minority issues of the Roma, leading the Council of Europe to declare in its 1203 Recommendation adopted by European Parliamentary Assembly in 1993 (Parliamentary Assembly Recommendation 1203/1993) that Roma are 'a true European minority'. European politicians recognised the vulnerable status of the Roma minority across Europe and formulated general policy recommendations to assist member states in addressing discrimination and promoting tolerance. According to the United Nations (UN), human rights and anti-discrimination policies and overcoming the marginalisation of minorities lead to national development and inclusive growth, whereas discrimination and racism are major factors contributing to poverty and inequality.[1]

In this article we attempt to raise questions related to Romanian Roma people's (including here children and women) basic human rights to non-discrimination, dignity, respect and equal chances to development and how these rights are perceived and served by Romanian social workers. We will focus on several areas of discrimination (e.g. regarding children and victims of domestic violence) aiming to understand what hinders the progress towards realisation of human rights for Roma. The objective of the article is to integrate relevant strands of research data on the social lives and inclusion of the Roma families – with an emphasis on children's quality of life and Roma women's rights – with the analysis of empirical data on professionals' response to Roma people's needs for protection.

EU framework for national Roma integration

The new European advancements in Roma policies, especially those related to the Europe 2020 Strategy, reframe Romanian policy requirements and renew the hopes of Roma civil movements. Within the 2020 EU strategy, which has planned for 'inclusive growth', the 'European platform against poverty' recognises that sustainable development has to fight poverty and social exclusion and has as its target to ensure 20 million fewer people are at risk of social exclusion. The efforts of member states in regard to achieving this target are supposed to follow three indicators: the at-risk-of-poverty rate (after social transfers), the index of material deprivation and the percentage of people living in households with very low work intensity.[2] Roma people, representing the largest European minority group (estimated to reach 10–12 million people in Europe[3]) are named as bearing a disproportionate share of material and social deprivation.[4] To pursue the goal of economic integration of the Roma, the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020[5] fixed a wide range of social targets to compensate for the disadvantages finally acknowledged as impeding the Roma population's economic integration: access to education, employment, health care and housing. The document formulates that such 'positive actions' adopted to prevent or compensate for disadvantages linked to racial or ethnic origin do not contradict the principle of equal treatment.[6] Looking at employment and demographic trends, and taking into account that the Roma population is much younger than its co-nationals, EU and UN Development Programme (UNDP) documents also emphasise the economic rationale of inclusion policies. Therefore, affirmative policies are not only intended to break the cycle of poverty that has affected Roma for several generations, and bring them relief, but also to impact Europe's economy by creating a better-educated future workforce. The recent resolution of the European Parliament (by December 2013) on the progress made in the implementation of the National Roma Integration Strategies shows the commitment of the EU to follow up on the integration processes which have been undertaken in the member states,[7] including, among others: the goal to end anti-Roma prejudices and negative attitudes; to produce disaggregated data on the socio-economic

situation of Roma, while fully respecting data protection standards and the right to privacy; to develop baseline indicators and measurable targets for monitoring the progress of policies and programmes, with particular regard to the education and well-being of children and youth, and gender issues.

Romanian policies of inclusion

Romania is known in Europe as the country with the highest number of Roma ethnics, for whom the 2011 Census data show 3.1% (621,573 self-declared Roma citizens out of a total population of 20,121,641),[8] with national estimates of 4%, and EU minimal estimates 8%.[9] After the shift in political regimes in Romania, steady progress has been registered in the last two decades, and especially in the pre-accession period, in adopting international human rights and anti-discrimination legislation. In spite of this, the ostracising of Roma continues and the existing laws 'rarely require public authorities to take specific actions or to achieve measurable results'.[10]

The evolution of the situation of the Roma population in Romania has been a complicated process with a slow growth of a middle and upper class and with some indicators that show improvement in political representation, self-consciousness, civic movement and also in social-educational indicators.[11]

The trends in the area of education show some improvement as primary education was completed by 71% of Roma in 2004 and 83% in 2011, and the lower secondary education attainment rate increased by 11 percentage points. But this is not enough to result in a significant change in the future employment prospects of the young people, as lower secondary education attainment by Roma aged 17–23 was in this period below 50% and was rarely followed by enrolment in upper secondary education.[12] Pre-school facilities are few in localities with a higher than average share of Roma inhabitants and in spite of the anti-segregation education laws more than 20% of the Roma pupils, aged between seven and 15, attend schools with a predominant Roma student body and less qualified teachers.[13] As indicated by a UNICEF report focusing on Romanian children in difficult situations not documented by official data, among children from severely poor households, Roma children have an even higher risk of leaving school before time compared to children from other ethnic groups.[14] This source indicates that being a Roma child is the strongest predictor for school dropout and early school leaving, 'irrespective' of the child's age, gender, health status, the mother's level of education, number of children within the household, number of parents at home, residential area, and household spending related to school (or household income). These results can also be found in the UNDP research that collected data on school drop-out and early school leaving for children of Roma ethnicity compared with children other than Roma living in neighbouring communities. However, the differences reported seem rather small and provide a ground for hope that there is an increase of the value being placed on schooling for the Roma.[15]

In spite of some progress, numerous reports recognise burdens that affect the Roma population's capacity to thrive alongside other ethnic communities in Romania. The government's initiatives in supporting Roma are still fragmented and in most of the domains indicated by the 2020 targets (improving housing conditions, increasing employment rates for both genders, better health services, harnessing of the social economy, improving education attainment and policies for young people, effective social protection and access to essential services) the results are much less than optimal. Romania has had a law on the right of citizens to social aid since 1995,[16] but this benefit depended on the resources of the local authority, meaning that the poor local authorities could not pay

benefits to their poorer families. By adopting the Law No. 276/2010 on guaranteed minimum income, Romania undertakes to grant social aid so that a minimum income is guaranteed to every citizen. In spite of the high number of its non-profit social services and the growth of public services in general, as well as the development of an administrative monitoring system for their quality assurance, Romania's social security is disproportionate in regard to active social measures versus passive measures, with 26% of national resources going for social services, and the rest for benefits.[17] The contribution of the government from its gross domestic product (GDP) to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was 13.2% before accession that dropped to 12.8% after accession.[18] In its attempt to reduce public expenditure in a period of economic crises, Romania reformed its social security system. This it did by eliminating added social assistance benefits and increasing the share of expenses for those with the lowest incomes. Romania also introduced supplementary restrictions in the allocation of the benefits in order to drastically reduce the number of persons having the age and capacity to work who are dependent on the social security. As presented by The Foundation for Civil Society Development (*Fundația pentru Dezvoltarea Societății Civile* – FDSC), only 31% of localities had an accredited social service in 2010, while the percentage of NGOs in the total accredited services has dropped from 73.8% in 2006 to 48.7% in 2010.[19]

In spite of the reforms intended to raise the social security of the most disadvantaged, according the UNDP and Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) data, 81% of the Roma continue to be qualified as living under the relative poverty line,[20] revealing thus the failure of the Romanian social security system to effectively assist Roma to step out of what is often a miserable living circumstance.

Governments and local authorities are late in acknowledging the capabilities of the Roma and the advantages that would accrue from social investments that could help address the social gaps between Roma and non-Roma populations. There are estimates, for Romania, that about 21% of new labour entrants are Roma, and that non-employed, working-aged Roma in Romania account for losses per capita of at least €2,596 annually.[21] These economic arguments should be taken into account, especially when considering the data of *Decade Watch* for Roma inclusion, which shows that less than a quarter (22.9% in 2009) of Roma in Romania are economically active, most of them being enrolled in informal economic activities.[22]

Romanian National Inclusion Strategies and social services

As for the National Roma Inclusion Strategies (NRIS), the recent findings of the Civil Society Monitoring Reports show that for Romania there are no clearly set priorities or lines of action and outcomes. Furthermore, responsibilities are diffuse, resources are very limited and mechanisms to allocate funds are lacking.[23] Romania has also been criticised for its inability to improve its social housing policy:

> (in Romania) the most remarkable feature of the housing policy in 2012 seemed to be forced evictions and 'resettlement' of Roma families in remote locations far from city centres, often without basic amenities. In cases documented by ERRC and Amnesty International, families with young children have been forcibly evicted in breach of international law, and relocated to waste dumps, abandoned toxic industrial sites and remote fenced-in patches of agricultural land.[24]

The Romanian National Institute of Statistics (RNIS) has also been criticised for not being sufficiently child-centred beyond consideration of schooling. Even when targeting

for education, the indicators lack precision and impede measurement. In his analysis on education of the Roma in a comparative European perspective, Brüggemann gives the example of Romania's use of an obscure indicator in assessing aspects of the functioning of the educational sector: 'affirmative educational conditions for early childhood development' assessed through a vaguely formulated category called the 'ensured appropriate environment'.[25] The same author observes how proposed indicators lack a baseline, as there are no ethnically segregated data for Roma children attending preschool or early education institutions.

In spite of implicit professional knowledge and a large number of reports concerning the high rates of Roma children,[26] women, unemployed, displaced, chronically ill, and other vulnerable people among those who need social assistance, there seems to be little professional literature on anti-discriminatory social work practices with vulnerable Roma people. Romanian and other reports have recorded the low level of social assistance for Roma families[27] in spite of the existence for some time in Romania of a law specifically addressing the involvement of public services in combating 'social marginalization'.[28]

In the area of youth work and childcare, a law for children's rights banning corporal punishment was adopted in 2004[29] after which the structure of services for child welfare and protection against violence was reformed, a larger variety of services were developed, professionals were trained and case management of child victims of violence became regulated as per official guidelines and a data collection system was put in place.[30] Notwithstanding the aforementioned improvements in youth work and in the childcare system in Romania, there are as yet no government plans to collect data on the number of children with Roma ethnicity taken into care, or those who need assistance through public or private services.[31] In the area of domestic violence, the legal reform was slower, state investment in services was much less extensive and less successful.[32]

Assisting and supporting the good development of Roma children and counselling young or adult Roma people are tasks that are greatly negatively influenced by the social distance the general public has created in regard to the Roma. Some researchers speak about a low tolerance to Roma in general, while others consider that the reluctance to integrate the Roma socially is due to the way of life of the Roma, marked as it is by so much by poverty,[33] and – in the case of professionals such as social workers – probably to as a result of the difficulties experienced in effecting improvements in the lives of the beneficiaries. For example, the chance that abused Roma women living in Roma communities in Romania could escape from domestic violence has been described by professionals as being lower than for other women in similar circumstances. Roma women-victims have less trust in those who could intervene (social workers or police), less access to any resources (legal representation) or services. For these Roma women violence mostly takes place in front of their large families and children and the humiliation is even worse; the opportunity to find shelter for a woman and several children is limited, and if professionals visit a woman's home there is likely to be no privacy to talk about abuse and to create a plan to escape from it. Roma women have also reported in interviews that they did not think that they had been understood by professionals (police and social workers) or really helped.[34] Again, there are no ethnically segregated data on Roma women who have been subjected to domestic violence and who apply for or benefit from shelter in centres for female victims of domestic violence, trafficking or of homelessness, nor are there such data for those Roma women placed for long-term care in hospitals for chronically mentally ill patients, among whom there are many so-called social cases (persons receiving social benefits assistance).[35]

Setting priorities and ethnically segregated data

In relation to setting priorities for children and youth, an important obstacle for Romania as for other European countries is the lack of systematic collection of ethnically segregated data. This prevents researchers from being able to draw contextual profiles for Roma children and their families, which provide critical information for improving local and regional social policies for this population.

While being aware of the risks of estimations based on general population data, and looking at the poverty indicators in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and EU countries, one finds that Romania has the worse figures on almost all the indicators in regard to implementing the rights of its children.[36] Data on indicators of child deprivation based on EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) from 2009 show that Romania is the country with the highest percentage of children aged 0–17, with 25.5% of them living in relative poverty – defined as living in a household in which disposable income is less than 50% of the national median income. More than that, when looking at the Deprivation Index developed to compare child poverty, although approximately 85% of almost 85 million children (aged one to 16) in 29 European countries have at least 13 out of the 14 quality of life items that made the index,[37] in Romania over 70% of children lack more than two of the measured items (far ahead of other countries like Bulgaria, Hungary and Latvia from the same group of GDP/capita, while among the richest 15 countries this deprivation index is under 10%).[38] As indicated by the authors of the report, the divide between wealthy and not-so-wealthy nations is not so clear-cut, as Hungary, Slovakia and Estonia, for example, are seen to have a smaller proportion of children living in relative poverty than the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain or the United States, probably because the incomes of most poor households in these former centrally planned economies do not fall as far behind the median level of income for the nation as a whole.[39] As for Romania, our hypothesis is that the comparatively large share of child poverty relative to other European countries is partly due to the far-reaching gap between high and low incomes (as shown by its highest rank among the European countries[40]), but also due to the significant percentage of poor Roma families with children (as Romania has the highest number of Roma minority with a significant young population compared to the majority and other minorities).[41] Having in mind the description of the deep poverty faced by children living in poor Roma communities, as described by several authors[42] and reports,[43] it is not surprising that Romania leads all the columns for the proportion of children living in poverty who lack not only two, but also three, four and five and more of the items in the deprivation index (for example, 46.8% report more than five items missing, while the next country in this column is Bulgaria, with 36.3% and Hungary with 16.75%).[44] The significant contribution of Roma children to child poverty in Romania is also evidenced by Romania experiencing the smallest proportion of a reduction of child poverty due to the system of social transfers[45] (compared to Ireland, the United Kingdom and Hungary, with similar relative poverty before taxes and transfers, but a much smaller share of relative poverty after these). This is in large part due to the fact that numerous Roma children do not have official records and do not benefit from social transfers. The profile of living with low parental education (92.4%) and in jobless families (95.8%) completes the picture of a large share of children in poverty in Romania living in poor Roma families. UNICEF Romania reached similar conclusions: Roma children in poor families are often in the worse situation, accumulating disadvantages on all dimensions of child well-being. They are invisible for authorities and do not appear in official data, especially if their parents are poorly educated, if they live in a

single parent household and/or households with three or more children, in dwellings with deficient hygiene conditions, have limited access to information, health services and have substantially lower food expenses, suffering hunger. 'Such analysis is not available based on representative national surveys and so ... the households included in our study are a living proof that the national social protection system, although very complex, provides only a loose safety network through which many children fall and are trapped for years into cumulative deprivations.'[46]

Similar to children, Roma women also face intersectional disadvantages as documented by several researchers and Roma feminists.[47] In dialogue with Roma women, some note their vulnerable status and even find similarities between their present-day situation and the situation of women in some Islamic states and communities, including: 'obsession for virginity, the concern for controlling women reflected also in the custom of early marriages, the tendency to confine women in the private space, the limitation of education opportunities'.[48] When confronted with domestic violence or any form of sexual abuse, or harassment, they have few chances to obtain protection through the police, public or private social services or via the justice system.[49] Accordingly, in the case of battered, exploited or trafficked Roma women they do not have the chance for reparation of their self-respect and dignity as do those who take action and receive a remedy through the justice system. Not only is there a lack of access to services and justice for Roma women victims but there is also a lack of data that could document different forms of discrimination against Roma women by various societal institutions in Romani. When these Roma women victims turn to professionals, such as social workers, for assistance, the professionals tend to respond to such issues as they usually do with women belonging to the majority or other ethnic groups, rather than with the appropriate cultural sensitivity to their Roma clientele in particular.[50]

According to Enikő Vincze, Romni's (Romani women's) multiple discrimination status (as women, as Roma and as poor) has been long disregarded by European ideologies which were late to recognise (i) the multiple discrimination against Roma women and (ii) the dilemma for these women, confronted as they are with their traditional culture assigning them a particular domestic and sexual role as women and the latter being pitted against, in some ways, their universal rights and individual freedom to self-determination.[51] This author argues that 'one major challenge to Roma feminists is to protect women's and children's rights within their own communities while deconstructing the way in which mainstream positions are reproducing convictions according to which Roma are an inferior race performing pre-modern/primitive practices'.[52] These dilemmas are especially visible around issues of the reproductive health of the Romni, where mainstream ideologies recommend family planning and frame the issue as a woman's right to get control of her own body and reproduction capacity, but where such a perspective contravenes, in the eyes of many of the Romani, the traditional Romani culture and the role it gives to women in family life to bare children and assure their survival.

Early marriage, reduced access to reproductive health and poverty largely influence parenting capacities and early childhood development. In the absence of structural measures to tackle the systemic significant societal disadvantages suffered by poor Roma families, public discourse concentrates instead on stigmatising early marriages as infringing the human rights of Roma children (mostly girls), adversely affecting their health, educational status and reproducing poverty cycles. Open Society Foundation[53] data from 2006 cited in a European Roma Rights Center document show '53% of Romani women surveyed, and 43% of their daughters, married before the age of 18; in addition, the average age of childbirth for Romani women was 5 years younger than the national

average age of 24'.[54] Reducing rates of early child marriage in Roma communities has become one of the EU's human rights targets, but it also illustrates the controversies around what are the appropriate culturally sensitive interventions to be implemented that take account of Roma cultural traditions. Within the cultural-based–rights-based intervention controversy, some Roma activists warn against blaming Roma families and their communities for early marriages since this is a strategy of traditional communities to reduce the burden of poverty and sometimes is intended to protect young women from the possibility of losing their virginity before marriage. On a human rights view, child marriage is considered a form of sexual abuse and exploitation – that especially affects girls – and feminist activists warn about the adverse consequences of early marriage on the girls' opportunities for education and on future career perspectives given the assigned duties of young wives and the responsibilities of (likely) early motherhood. These opposing stances are often represented in the media, which often points to child weddings organised by rich Roma families in their demonstration of culturally valued customs. In consideration of the best interests of children; a 2011 European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) requested that the states parties to CEDAW, set a minimum age under which marriages are not legally binding.[55] In Romania, the legally set age limit is 18, the official age for maturity. According to the law in Romania,[56] to be declared legally wedded those who are below 18 'need medical proof for a special condition', parental agreement – which is not an obstacle if marriages are arranged by families – and also consent from the local authority for child welfare. Although there are no recorded data on the number of marriages for underage Roma, the proposed minimum age measure obviously will limit the number of weddings of Roma under 18 but will not prevent the occurrence of forced undeclared marriages in the Roma and other communities in Romania. In these circumstances community services of any kind, but mostly health mediators and social workers, would be needed in order to prevent parents forcing marriages on their children.

Housing and segregation

Another distinctive feature of the poor Roma communities in Romania is their housing segregation, both in rural and in urban localities. A circle of disadvantage for the Roma is created due to this type of segregation, and the twentieth century did not bring any remedy for the Roma in Romania regarding the housing conditions of the majority in this population. The poor Roma still, as previously, have housing: on landfills, in blocks of flats without running water heating or electricity, or reasonable access to medical, educational, health or shopping facilities or services. As highlighted by European documents[57] and demonstrated with extensive arguments by Cristina Raţ,[58] multiple deprivation is represented not only in their low income but also in the lack of basic utilities like access to safe drinking-water, sanitation facilities, gas and electricity, shelter from insects and from a polluted environment. As such, the housing dimension is essential for boosting inclusion of the Roma, but the responsibility of improving the housing situation for Roma in Romania was not undertaken by the Romanian government. In spite of a law adopted in 2002 in Europe (to combat the marginalisation of certain groups and reduce disadvantages for the poor) that stated the obligation of public authorities to offer support, including social housing, benefits, services to the marginalised people in order to fight exclusion,[59] there are no unified instruments to evaluate priorities and emergencies for distributing social housing and the 41 counties plus six Bucharest sectors each have their own procedures to consider the relevance of being poor, having children, being sick, and having or caring for someone

with a disability.[60] These criteria for housing assistance eligibility unfairly reduce the chances of getting access to social housing for the poor and marginalised, favouring instead people with stable jobs and higher education, in spite of the fact that they would have more chances themselves to solve their problems with housing.[61] Children's rights to living on secure basis are also dramatically infringed by forced evictions. Evicted families with children are sometimes offered temporary shelter in dilapidated buildings, without access to essential services such as water and heating, or even left without any roof over their heads, in conditions which endanger their health and even their lives.[62] In other places,[63] for example in Cluj,[64] forced evictions disregard the rights of children to schooling and health care, as families with children integrated in schools have been displaced in remote areas with no access to schools, hospitals or social services.

To sum up this part, poor Roma communities expose the most powerless family members to hardships due to poverty, discrimination and inadequate housing conditions; to early school abandonment, low rates of employability, poor health conditions, involvement in begging, and participation in delinquency or trafficking.

Helping professionals and the Roma

In order to evaluate the chances of the Roma population overcoming the mentioned and not yet mentioned gaps, to enjoy forms of social solidarity and participate in the existing social transfer system in Romanian society, the second half of the article considers the way the social protection system and its professionals are contributing to the removal of the barriers to social inclusion for Roma co-nationals in Romania. Reports written under the auspices of international organisations active in the area of human rights and/or promoting Roma rights are often critical of the Romanian social protection system that has not overcome structural barriers (poverty and discrimination) to Roma community progress. In fact these reports reveal that public institutions with social responsibilities in social welfare reproduce inequalities and foster dependence instead of capabilities in the Roma population.

EU policies, civic organisations and Roma activists often point to the need for anti-discriminatory practices. In this article we argue that social work in/with poor Roma communities has to respond to these calls and incorporate anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices.

Values affect how society views the vulnerable; whether as victims or criminals and thus whether or not it provides public assistance, depending on the dominant belief system in this regard.[65] According to this point of view, perceptions regarding the beneficiaries as deserving victims or as sinners will define priorities for services and policies and will influence the ways social workers intervene on behalf of all the members of the Roma communities, different ages and both genders included. Local authorities and public services are more likely to provide assistance to those seen as not responsible for their vulnerability, such as children, the elderly and the sick, but not to unwed mothers, drug addicts, convicts, etc. The idea that through dominant societal perceptions some people are erroneously regarded as lacking in certain human characteristics was theorised by Haslam and Loughnan, who considered *dehumanization* and *infrahumanization*[66] to be a form of ethnocentrism by which people tend to perceive out-group members as less human than in-group members and are not willing to accept their (the out-group's) humanity in areas like intelligence, linguistic or emotional expression, and individuality. Those who stereotype the out-group as a whole fail to spontaneously consider the unique individual characteristics and personality of the out-group's individual members.

As mentioned in the introduction, in Romania Roma children, women and their families need to overcome gaps due to poverty, low education and marginalisation. They need access to proper housing, employment, health, education and recovery services and in this process they depend on professionals who design and manage institutions and services.

To examine the way Roma children and families are served by professionals and whether dehumanisation processes can be identified in the relationship between service providers and Roma beneficiaries, we shall revisit the results of an earlier survey that targeted social workers in 1900 rural communities in Romania and aimed to investigate institutional relationships between local authorities and Roma and the ways these contacts influenced the perception of the local Roma communities in particular and the Roma minority in general.[67] Our research question is framed around the role of helping professionals, namely social workers, in enforcing the human rights of the Roma, empowering them, representing their interests and improving their quality of life by connecting them to services, resources and networks. Being aware of the overwhelmingly negative representations of the Roma within the general public, we are especially interested in understanding the image of the Roma as beneficiaries of social benefits in respect of professionals' attitudes.

Our point of departure for this investigation was that local authorities – more specifically the social workers – are institutional actors with direct experience of most of the projects and development programmes targeting the Roma in Romania. Moreover, these institutions are supposed to mediate between national and local levels. According to their roles, social workers in mayor's offices of villages are supposed to have a better overview of the state of art of the Roma communities than other employees in the municipalities because they have regular contact with members of the local Roma community and therefore better insight into their socio-economic situation.

When asked to compare the economic situation of the Roma households with those of the majority, a clear majority of the social workers (71.1%) characterised the living conditions of the local Roma community as more precarious than those of the majority, though 20.9% considered that the living conditions are approximately the same. As for employment, while 39.4% declared that the majority of Roma were unemployed, 10.8% reported that the majority of local Roma had official employment, 25.2% said that a majority practised some forms of a traditional profession or were small entrepreneurs (Figure 1) and the same percentage (25.6%) said that they do not know what Roma people would do for a living. These results are in line with other survey data as well[68] and show that the views of the social workers on Roma 'not being employed; meaning they do not work' are similar to the usual representations of the general public on this issue.

Another set of questions referred to the frequency and types of collaboration the social worker and, generally, the municipality have with other institutions in the locality and various representatives of the Roma community. The most frequent collaboration in both cases is with the local police departments and schools. In localities where the percentage of the Roma population is between 20 and 50%, the frequency of contact with schools and other educational institutions rises significantly (at least on a daily basis).

Social workers were also asked to answer the question whether they organise field (family) visits to Roma families and whether they collaborate with other institutions. Results show that while approximately 4% of the social workers do not organise field visits, 38% of them visit the Roma families in collaboration with police departments and 18.1% in collaboration with representatives of schools. Contacts through 'field' or 'family visits' were less frequent,[69] although these are essential social work methods, and are recognised as efficient ways to formulate policy needs and adequately apply the resources provided by the social security system (by developing an in-depth knowledge
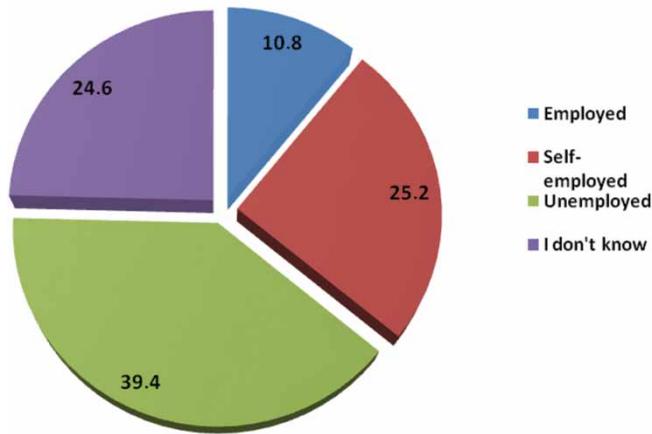
Roma persons are...(%)

Figure.1.   Assessment of social workers on the employment situation of local Roma population (%).

of the situation and problems of the local Roma families through direct contact with the possible beneficiaries). Instead of regular field visits by social workers to Roma communities being the norm, social departments of the mayor's office maintain professional contact on issues related to the Roma community with representatives of other state institutions (see Figure 2). This strategy might contribute to the maintaining of a deeply
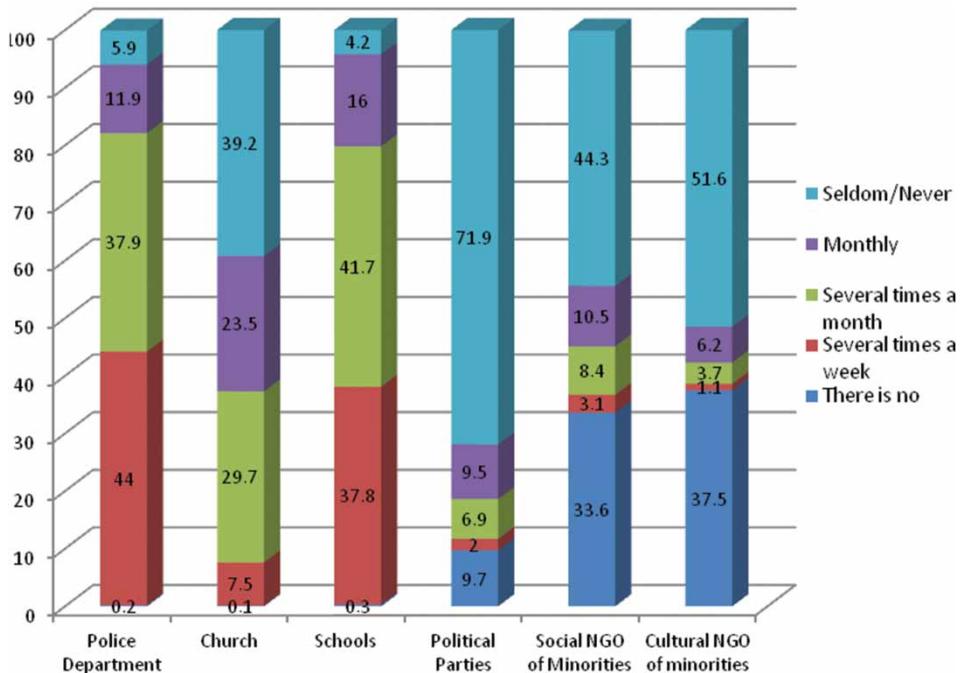

Figure 2.   Frequency and type of collaboration with institutions (%).

paternalistic approach to Roma families and continuous reinforcing of the '*blame the victim*' type of attitude toward Roma, as we will see later.

We have also learned from the data that the longer someone works as a social worker; the more often s/he collaborates with the local police department. In the case of collaboration with schools we can also say that social workers employed before 1989 collaborate more often than the younger ones; however those social workers employed after 2000 seem to collaborate more often than those employed between 1990 and 1999. The reason for the latter finding might be that Roma school mediators appeared on the scene as local representatives who contribute to the maintenance of contacts between different actors on the local level. There is no significant relation in the case of other institutions (political parties, NGOs and so on) in terms of length of experience of a representative and extent of direct contact with Roma communities.

We were also interested in whether the social workers have regular contact with different representatives of their local Roma communities. Approximately half the respondents declared that there are no such representatives in their locality. The most frequent collaboration is with the health mediator. Where there were mediators or local Roma councillors, contact of the Roma community was less frequent with other institutions or professionals. This could mean that in the situation where the community has a mediator the social worker of the local authority delegated some of his/her responsibilities to the mediator, in spite of the lower level of qualification and payment the mediator would receive (see Figure 3).

An important factor is the presence of Roma representatives or mediators in the locality in promoting collaboration between different institutions and the social worker and the way the social worker is informed about the local Roma community. Mediators are ethnic agents who are persons from the specific group being served and who can enhance culturally sensitive interventions regarding social services. The mediator's role is to mediate between the members of the ethnic group and the service delivery system.[70] The presence of Roma
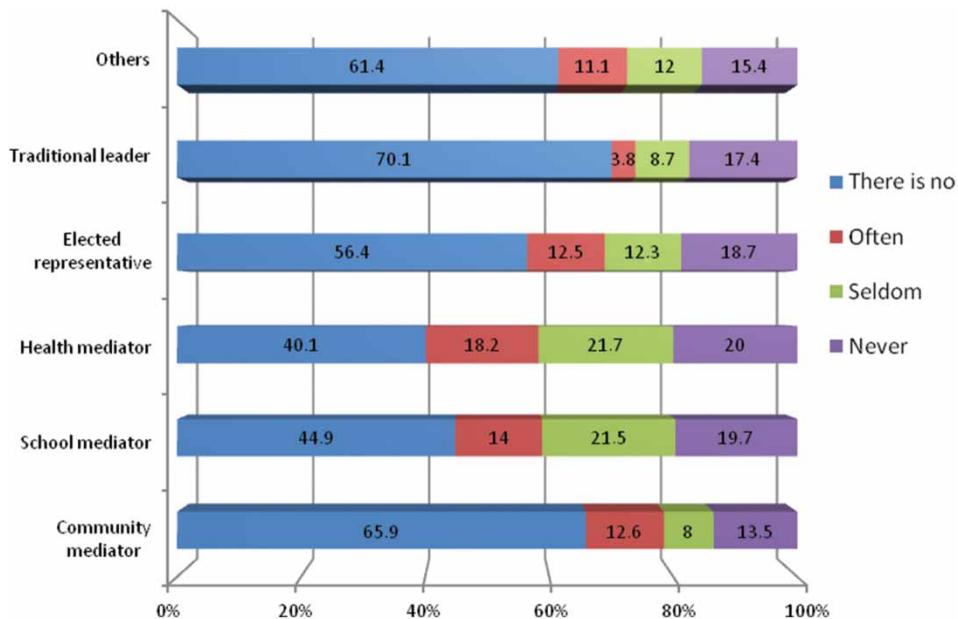

Figure 3. Social worker's contact with representatives of the local Roma community.

mediators depends heavily on the type of the Roma community involved. It is more likely that there is a health mediator in the village if the Roma population lives in compact communities, and the more compact the community is, the more often the health mediator meets the social worker. The elected representative of the Roma community is characteristic for both dispersed and compact communities, compared to the traditional leader whom we can find mostly in compact communities[71]. For example, in the localities where there is no school mediator, the social worker knows less about the Roma people in the community; for example, many do not know the status of the local Roma in the job market (54.7%). On the other hand, when there is no mediator, meetings are favoured in the cases where the Roma are unemployed or self-employed. We did not observe the same relation with the health mediator but the health mediator has another specific role in the local society. The rare contacts with the elected Roma representative are not perceived to help the social workers to know about the Roma community and the position of community members in the job market.

We can infer from the above presented data, although not conclusively, that the presence of a Roma ethnic representative (be that a mediator, a Roma counsellor or local expert) does contribute to the collaboration between social workers and the local Roma families, and deepens the knowledge about the situation and problems the Roma communities face on a daily basis. Still, the fact that in more than half of the localities there is no Roma representative employed in institutions undermines the direct communication of professionals with those in need.[72] Instead of directly approaching the marginalised families, social workers emphasise and maintain collaboration with other institutions – police departments, schools, even the church. This practice might have at least two indirect consequences. First, by maintaining contact mainly with other institutions, the *responsibility* for dealing with local problems is shared between those who are seen to have legitimate authority and the power to intervene, a practice which does not necessarily contribute to developing strategies for efficient intervention. Instead, such a strategy might lead to the abandonment of responsibility. On the other hand, by not involving local Roma communities on any level in collaborations between local actors (especially regarding issues directly related to the Roma families), professionals reinforce and legitimise their own paternalistic attitudes towards the marginalised Roma. Thus, the attitudes and actions of professionals will automatically be considered as the legitimate, authorised and superior ones, while power relations between them and local Roma tend to be unidirectional. This type of power relation is not characterised by collaboration, communication and mutual understanding and, on the contrary, as mentioned, it contributes to the *dehumanisation of the Other*.

The attitudes of the social workers express exactly the erroneous ideas circulated in mass media, namely that the Roma themselves carry the responsibility for their precarious situation and have a lack of willingness to integrate but also suffer from the lack of coherent local development programmes from which they might benefit. In fact these expressed attitudes show us the lack of one of the conditions of good governance in multiethnic communities, which is consensus seeking. One of the key indicators of this condition is whether public servants are willing to accept and respect the diversity of the community.[73]

The next two questions asked about general causes of the disadvantaged situation of the Roma and measures that should be taken to improve their situation.[74] Here the accusatory attitude of the social worker respondents can be clearly seen in their replies to some questions: the statement 'because they have many children' received an average of 3.95 and 'because they have never taken any initiative of their own, they expect everything from society' received an average of 3.87 (on a scale from 1 to 5). The same attitude pops up in some answers to the next question: 'In your opinion what is needed to ameliorate the situation of the Roma in Romania?' In this case the highest level of agreement was with 'the Roma

should be more diligent', 'improve the will of the Roma' and 'Roma representatives should be more efficient'. At the same time, the answers show some level of understanding of the difficulties faced by the Roma. Some of the highest ranked answers to our interview questions were that Roma have precarious health (3.91), they suffer from prejudices (3.73), they cannot find work (2.9), and their family circumstances are such that they were disadvantaged as children (2.7). A slight majority of respondents thought the Roma do not like to work (2.65), but there seemed to be less agreement on answers like they do not want to integrate (2.02) or they lack professional skills (1.95), showing some level of trust of the social workers in the capabilities of the Roma populations they are working with (see Figures 4 and 5).

It is most striking that the lowest agreement was on the statement that prejudices about Roma should be reduced (1.20 out of 10). It seems that the surveyed social workers in our study do not identify with the official anti-discrimination stand of the profession in regard to social work with Roma ethnics. This attitude amongst professionals might be a result of the general anti-Roma attitudes of Romanians and a contributor to the slow progress in effectively implementing inclusion strategies. Ambivalence is also evidenced as social workers largely agree on the fact that the Roma should get more help from society (8.55 out of 10). It is striking that social workers almost all favour Roma children being segregated in separate schools, in spite of the school anti-segregation law (8.99 out of 10). This might show on the one hand that the social work respondents in the study see integrated schooling as not being efficient, and on the other hand it may reveal that the social work professionals do not endorse the profession's anti-discrimination policies and do not differentiate themselves from the general population which also favours separate schooling for Roma children.

We also asked whether the social workers have ever participated in courses on intervention methods in interethnic/multicultural environments. We were interested in whether the
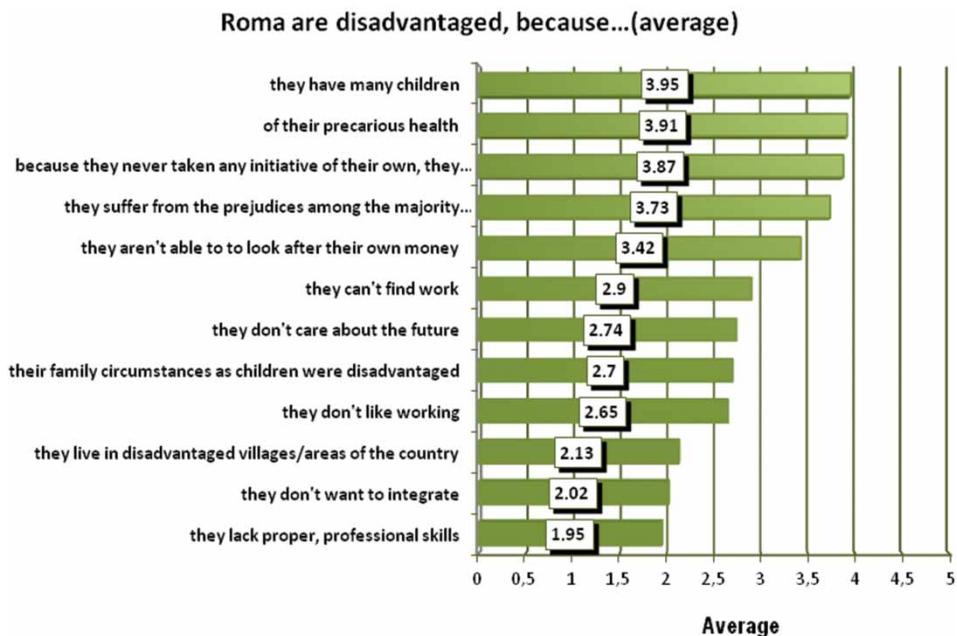

Figure 4.   Perceptions of social workers on why Roma are disadvantaged (average scores on a scale from 1 to 5).
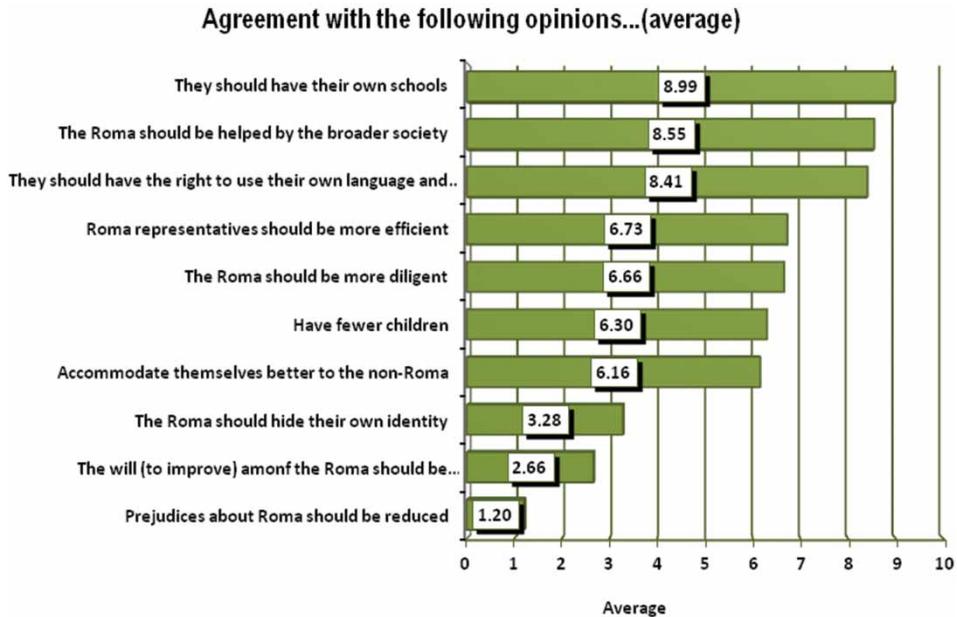
Figure 5. Perceptions of social workers on possible ways to improve the situation of the Roma (averages on a scale from 1 to 10).

completion of such courses influences the tendency for the social worker to collaborate in one way or another with different institutions. The only significant positive correlation was found in the case of courses organised by social and cultural NGOs. The same correlation appears again in the case of conflict mediation courses. Probably these courses were organised by different associations in the region. As regards the participation of the social worker at different community meetings, data reveal that there is a strong association between collaboration with police, schools and different organisations. Those social workers who work in localities where the Roma families live in compact communities, or more or less in compact communities, have participated more in different courses concerning intervention in multiethnic communities (89.7% compared to 63.5%). The finding was that it is more probable that the social worker has taken some kind of conflict mediation course if she/ he works in localities with a non-dispersed Roma population.

What can we infer from these results? The questionnaire was sent to social workers in mayors' offices in rural settlements in Romania with a significant (self-declared) Roma communities. We hypothesised that since the majority of Roma depend for a regular income on one or more forms of social benefit, and managing these benefits is part of the social workers' task, there should in general be extensive contact between the local authorities and Roma in living in the locality. In fact, these data showed that where the Roma communities are not institutionally represented in one way or another, the number of contacts – and, we can also assume, the type of contacts – is lower, and the stereotyping attitude is stronger than in localities where the Roma community are formally represented by 'mediators' employed by the municipality or by an elected Roma councillor. These results are consistent with those of previous research conducted by UNICEF[75] and of project SPER,[76] which showed that the problems of the Roma are often left invisible, not tackled and not reported by social services.

As Steven Vertovec also pointed out in analysing Great Britain's local authorities' attitudes towards minorities,[77] their relationship is deeply determined by well-established but erroneous representations about minorities (and migrants) and by the way the authority is deployed. By stereotyping Roma people, the Romanian general population and many professionals create their own 'stranger' whom they can be afraid of, but where this attitude is characteristic of the local authorities' representatives, then this 'stranger' status of the Roma becomes even more powerful through the authority of the institution.

Conclusions

As explained earlier, in Romanian social protection passive measures are disproportionately overused compared to active measures that would significantly improve the quality of life for the Roma. Among the important barriers to the effective implementation of active measures is the lack of social work interaction among Roma and professionals – interactions that could foster and sustain the motivation of the Roma to seek and achieve higher levels of education and be in a better position to compete on the job market.

Instead of promoting social inclusion, the results of the survey with social workers show ambivalent attitudes to Roma beneficiaries, often marked by exclusionary practices and infrahumanising attitudes, which claim that Roma have a propensity to school abandonment, crime and anti-social behaviour. Such discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes understandably contribute to feelings of exclusion among the Roma and the distrust of the vulnerable in those who have the capacity to offer help. These issues are further complicated by the tensions arising from the role of social workers in attempting to address the extensive needs of the Roma communities, the scarcity of their resources as professionals, as well as their often unsuccessful efforts to obtain support for their beneficiaries and make more inclusive societal connections. At the same time, Roma mediators are generally recognised for their results in improving the relations of the Roma with institutions and neighbourhoods, but their qualification is generally lower compared to that of social workers.[78]

The lack of de-segregated data collection also impedes improvement in understanding the rates of vulnerabilities among the Roma, and especially in poor Roma communities. There is then little or no documentation on the need for specific services in these poor Roma neighbourhoods. This is likely a contributor to the difficulties social workers experience in initiating contact with the Roma and in implementing strategies to improve, evaluate, inform and promote more active measures for the Roma population needing help.

As reported here and in other research,[79] discriminatory attitudes amongst professionals in social services increase the vulnerability of some Roma children and women to become victims of violence or trafficking. Working with the Roma might and should be tackled through cultural sensitivity education and information. In addition, such perspectives can be challenged through professional bodies (i.e. codes of ethical practice) and by Roma rights activists. A truly inclusive and anti-oppressive social work practice with Roma communities should increase the potential to understand the cumulative risks faced by Roma people, strengthen community ties, develop community infrastructure and allow options for active participation of the Roma in all social sectors, like education, health care and the labour market. Monitoring children's rights and victims' rights to assistance and non-discrimination should be effectively monitored and security measures guaranteed for all victims of violence, independent of ethnicity.

Instruments and procedures should be developed and enforced by a collaboration of services from different domains to end impunity for human rights infringements (i.e. hate speech, discrimination of any form, child abuse or neglect, early marriage, exploitation

and trafficking of any kind, or any form of domestic violence) that have hampered the progress towards a good quality of life for Roma communities. Following Neil Thompson,[80] we consider that the characteristics of such social work practice are: sensitivity to the existence of discrimination in our environment; the recognition that one is part of the solution, or part of the problem leading to discrimination. The key to such effective social work practice is taking equal opportunities policies seriously and promoting all forms of inclusion for Roma children, young people, women and men in domains such as education and employment and encouraging active use of helping services. Traditional forms of practice should be amended to ensure the empowerment and partnership of victims in the planning of the services, in all the phases of the helping process. In addition, anti-discrimination practices should also be assessed and evaluated by beneficiaries to understand their strengths and weaknesses.

An essential part of social work with the Roma should be to apply equal protection and application of the law principles. As for other sectors of society, there should be zero tolerance to any form of breaching the law – including all forms of violence to children, domestic violence, trafficking, hate speech and marriages at earlier ages than allowed by law. Assisting Roma victims of discrimination and/or violence requires also that social work professionals understand the values, histories and experiences of Roma people. The rapport and relationship between social work professionals and Roma beneficiaries of all ages and genders could be improved by raising awareness of the cultural specificities and sensitivities in Roma communities. The adoption of a culturally sensitive stance, however, must not be prioritised above every Roma individual's entitlement to equal rights and anti-oppressive practices. In our view, cultural sensitivity and regard for human rights entitlements are two perspectives that can and should complement each other.

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45.   Transfers refer to all non-contributory social benefits that directly affect household income. Although its citizens have the right to most of the social benefits usual for Europe (like family benefit, that increases with the number of children – but only up to the fourth child –universal child allowance, unemployment benefit, disability benefits, etc.), Romania has one of the lowest shares of costs for protection from unemployment and social exclusion. Benefits depend on registration of identity, based on a stable residence (domicile), while a significant portion of the Roma living in poor communities cannot provide documents on legal residency. *Government Decision 1291/18 Dec. 2012 to Modify and Approve the Methodological Norms to Apply Social Benefits*. http://legestart.ro/legislatie-hg-nr-12912012-pentru-modificarea-si-completarea-normelor-metodologice-privind-venitul-minim-garantat/
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64.   On 17 December 2010, 76 families, most of them with several children, were forcibly evicted by the local authorities from the centre of the city of Cluj-Napoca to a landfill area and a former

chemical waste dump. People, especially children, were terrified by the local police force and dogs while being embarked on trucks to be taken to an unknown domicile. http://www.fightdiscrimination.eu/news-and-events/romania-roma-families-forcibly-evicted-cluj-napoca-still-waiting-justice-and-adequat

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68. Fleck and Rughiniş, *Come Closer*; and data from UNDP-WB-European Commission Regional Roma Survey 2011.

69. Social workers were also asked to answer the question whether they organise field (family) visits to Roma families and whether they collaborate with other institutions. Results show that while approximately 4% of the social workers do not organise field visits, and 38% of them visit Roma families in collaboration with police departments and 18.1% in collaboration with representatives of schools.

70. Alfreda P. Iglehart and Rosina M. Becera, 'Social Work and the Ethnic Agency: A History of Neglect', in *Introduction to Social Work*, ed. James Mandiberg (Madison: Corsewise Publishing, 2000), 72–9.

71. In this case, by compact communities we understand neighbourhoods where several households are identified by the social workers as being Roma, and are also geographically segregated as Roma communities.

72. The data set shows that in 71.6% of the rural Mayor's offices there are no persons of Roma ethnicity employed, while in only 28.4% of the cases there are Roma representatives working.

73. *Good Governance in Multiethnic Communities. Conditions, Instruments, Best Practices. Ways to Achieve and Measure Good Governance at the Local Level*, EDRC/King Baudouin Foundation, 2007, 61. In fact this guideline also bears some tendentious statements. For example, on page 17: 'The local public servants are prepared to deal with the potential conflicts at the local level, thus they are trained to accept and respect diversity and to mediate conflicting situations. The local public administration is aware of the potential for conflict at the local level and of elements that hold together the community'. We cannot deny the importance of the above-mentioned aspects, but it also highlights one of the most important and sometimes erroneous aspects of these trainings, that is, approaching ethnic groups and communities as totally separately entities, the boundaries being clearly defined, emphasising the importance of continuous contact between different ethnic (or any kind of) groups.

74. We asked the respondents to note, on a scale from 1 to 5 and on a scale from 1 to 10, respectively, their agreement with the above statements where 1 represents a strong disagreement and 5 (10) represents strong agreement.

75. Stănculescu et al., *Being a Child in Romania.*

76. Fleck and Rughiniş, *Come Closer.*

77. Steven Vertovec, 'Multiculturalism, Culturalism and Public Incorporation', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 19, no. 1 (1996): 49–69.

78. Social workers in Romania have a bachelor diploma in social work, while mediators only require an upper-secondary school diploma, and their training is much shorter (some weeks or months).

79. Neil Thompson, 'Antidiscriminatory Practice', in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Work*, ed. Martin Davies (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), 238–44.

80. *Breaking the Silence. A Report by the European Roma Rights Center and People in Need. Trafficking in Roma Communities* (European Roma Rights Centre, March 2011). http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/breaking-the-silence-19-march-2011.pdf