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The Role and the responsibilities of the Local authorities in integrating Roma Migrants

Introduction

The social integration of Roma migrants into a host society always has a very strong local dimension. For this reason, national and European policies aiming at strengthening social integration and equal opportunities for the resident population have to consider the local, mainly the urban, context.

First, some remarks about the concept of integration and the current importance of this issue. The paper on *The situation of Roma in Europe: a challenge for local and regional authorities*¹, states that the concept of integration is understood as the process of inclusion of Roma migrants in the core institutions, relations and statuses of the receiving society. For the Roma migrants, integration means a process of learning a new culture, acquiring rights, accessing position and status, building personal relations with members of the receiving society and growing to identify with it. For the receiving society, integration means opening up institutions, giving migrants equal opportunities and publicly welcoming their integration into society.

This paper differentiates between the dimensions of structural integration, cultural integration, interactive integration and identity integration. This is the base for developing a framework for identifying integration needs and policies in an urban context. Needs and policies should relate to the framing of the immigration situation; general and specific policies of integration have to view the Roma migrants as actors and not simply as objects of measures by others. Although by no means all Roma are in a precarious situation, certain groups face a difficult situation which has the potential to threaten urban and societal cohesion.

Defining 'integration'

Integration as a concept may be defined as the stability of relations among parts within a system-like whole, the borders of which clearly separate it from its environment; in such a state, the system is said to be integrated.

Three other meanings refer to processes of integration and the resulting degree of interconnectedness or quality of relations within the whole: a) the process of relating single elements to one another and, out of these, forming a new structure, b) adding single elements or partial structures to an existing structure, to form an interconnected whole, and c) maintaining or improving relations within a system or structure.

These definitions are applicable to any area of study; they can, of course, be made more concrete by specifying the elements, the resulting structures and their particular properties.

¹ <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1858595>

Integration, in a sociological context, refers to stable, cooperative relations within a clearly defined social system. Integration can also be viewed as a process – that of strengthening relationships within a social system, and of introducing new actors and groups into the system and its institutions. The integration of migrants is primarily a process: if this process succeeds, the society is said to be integrated.

Interactive integration

Interactive integration means the acceptance and inclusion of migrants in the primary relationships and social networks of the host society. Indicators of interactive integration include social networks, friendships, partnerships, marriages and membership in voluntary organizations. Certain core elements of cultural integration, particularly communicative competencies, are preconditions for interactive integration.

In the first phase of the integration process, interactive integration into the social systems of the ethnic colony is a help to migrants – through the support and solidarity of relatives and co-ethnics, and through their sharing of information and experiences. In time, however, such integration may hinder the migrant in creating links with the host society and in acquiring the cultural and social capital necessary for competing in the core institutions of the host country.

Identity integration

It is not possible to participate in a host society's core institutions without having first acquired the cultural competencies by which these institutions function. It is, however, possible to participate without *identifying* with the goals of these institutions and without having developed a feeling of belonging to the host society. This feeling of belonging may develop later in the integration process develop as a result of participation and acceptance. Inclusion in a new society on the subjective level – identificational integration – is indicated by feelings of belonging to, and identification with, groups, particularly in ethnic, regional, local and/or national identification.

Rejection and marginalisation

What is commonly referred to as a Roma problem is a misnomer provoked by a serious of factors – stereotyped images, different culture and behaviour, age-old diffidence and distrust – which prevail in a particular community in its relations with a different community.

The problem mainly arises because the local population views the Roma community in its midst as foreign, even if this community is a long-time native of the country they live in or EU citizens exercising their right to move within the EU. In other words we are dealing with an issue where non-Roma Europeans are rejecting and marginalizing other Europeans who happen to be Roma.

It is a rejection which unavoidably happens at the local or regional level. Inter-community conflicts rarely extend beyond a limited territory. It is therefore incumbent on the locality which is facing such conflicts to seek solutions for peaceful cohabitation.

It is not unusual that local or regional authorities take measures to improve the living conditions of the Roma in their town or region. Such measures, however, are often **sporadic, short-term** and **uncoordinated**. Integrating the Roma population in a particular area involves improvements in a wide number of sectors – health, education, employment, and housing – and is dependent on the full commitment of the authorities and a change in the mentalities and perceptions of the non-Roma majority. It is a long-term process which requires a well-planned holistic strategy.

Nevertheless, municipal policy is embedded in a specific national background. The migration history of a country as well as the nation's philosophy and its concept of integration have an influence on the local policy: the national framework defines to a certain degree what municipalities can do with regard to the integration of migrants.

The strategy

When studying the integration of Roma migrants into existing systems and institutions, the question arises: Which institution is crucial to the integration of migrants? Roma migrants will not always be received with open arms in the institutions and systems to which they aspire. They will encounter barriers to integration, which this paper will conceptualise as prejudice and discrimination, or as limitation of the institutions to accommodate migrants. For such barriers to be overcome, the host society must engage in a mutual process of integration. Therefore the local or regional authorities should develop a strategy, tailored for the locality, which follows and fits into the national strategy as recommended by the European Commission.

Aim of the strategy

The ability of municipalities to develop an integration strategy depends, first of all, on the general degree of political, legal and financial autonomy they enjoy within national constitutional structures. Some countries have a strong tradition of municipal autonomy; other states are more centralised. However when these conditions are met the Strategy should aim at ensuring **the well-being of the Roma community on a par with the other citizens of the locality** and the **peaceful and harmonious cohabitation of the Roma with the majority population**.

General principles

In order to obtain a success in integration of Roma migrants the Strategy should be **feasible, realistic** and **credible**. Care should be taken that it is not counter-productive by provoking negative reactions amongst the non-Roma public. To avoid such reactions, measures, wherever possible, should be mainstreamed for all vulnerable groups.

Time-limits should be set for the implementation of measures proposed and the authorities responsible for implementation should be clearly identified prior to drafting of the strategy.

Furthermore the strategy should take into account the cost/ benefits not only short-term but particularly long-term and therefore a proper financial plan should be developed **to make sure**

that there is financial resources for any single action outlined in the strategy. The marginalization and exclusion of the Roma community will in the long-term prove more costly to society in terms of an uneducated, unemployed and socially frustrated population. Funds used for improving the standard of living of the Roma are an investment in the future of both the Roma and non-Roma population.

The authorities, however, must avoid raising expectations which cannot be realised. It is better to develop a modest strategy which can be implemented than an ambitious one that cannot.

The authorities should obtain **basic data about the situation of the Roma** for planning their strategy. They should however avoid too much effort on collecting data. In any case, urgent measures should not be postponed or delayed on the pretext that data is still being collected.

The authorities should involve the Roma community in the strategy in general and in the specific measures and projects proposed. Doing things with them ensures that they get what they really want, creates mutual trust and confidence and makes them feel responsible. The Roma community should not be rendered dependent through paternalism.

Indispensable measures

Whatever the legal situation of the Roma concerned is, the local authorities must ensure:

- that all Roma children receive normal schooling and
- that all Roma men, women and children have full access to the health services available for other citizens.

Specific measures

Education

In a knowledge-based society, children from Roma background remain in a weak competitive position. Lack of human capital is the main explanation for this. Increasingly, the low-skilled jobs that their parents held (or hold) are disappearing or will disappear as general qualification demands rise. Since parents mostly lack the social and cultural capital to facilitate their children's educational success, support has to come from outside the family to improve the children's prospects.

Education is compulsory in practically all member states. It is a law which applies to all citizens and should apply to the Roma community too. Roma parents should not only be encouraged but compelled to send their children, both boys and girls, regularly to school.

Measures are needed for ensuring regular attendance:

Municipalities can intervene in pre-school preparation for formal schooling; they can also support measures for Roma migrant children in schools. For example, language problems are a major stumbling block for many migrant children when entering school. Pre-school language training then, is of prime importance. Support for improved school performance can be provided through different forms of mentoring. For instance, mentoring for individuals and small groups is quite often carried out after school hours. In many countries, this is a normal form of social work with children from disadvantaged families (including migrant's children), carried out by private individuals, welfare organisations, NGOs and publicly employed social workers. The language handicap is often mistaken for mental disability leading to their placement in special schools.

Furthermore, school mediators preferably Roma, should be appointed to encourage parents to send their children to school and maintain contact between the Roma parents and the school. Teaching assistants should be envisaged to support Roma children in class and teachers trained to deal successfully with the Roma pupils.

Successful schooling is heavily dependent on living conditions. Roma children brought up in a shanty town without water, electricity or drainage are shunned by the non-Roma children who see them as dirty and possibly carriers of infectious diseases. The location of the shanty town is an added obstacle if there is no transport to the school.

All these factors have to be kept in mind in trying to get Roma children to school.

Housing and health

The Roma communities in general tend to concentrate in areas with poorer housing, environmental problems and poor public and private services.

The living conditions of the Roma in the countries they move to is, to say the least, appalling, and affects all other aspects of life. We have seen its impact on education. It has an even worse impact on health.

Providing decent housing needs to be a top priority in the strategy. "Migrant" Roma arrive penniless and sometimes settle in shanty towns made up of makeshift huts. All essential services – water, electricity, drainage - are absent and the settlement is a nuisance to the neighbouring areas. No social inclusion is possible under such conditions.

Roma living in a shanty town should be moved to decent lodging. Under no circumstances should Roma be evicted without alternative accommodation. If this happen they would be forced to move to another area to build up another shanty town. Evictions only perpetuate the problem.

The authorities should keep in mind that majority of Roma are sedentary and do not own caravans for moving around.

Therefore the Housing integration policy and measures should aim at reducing social segregation, both within Roma migrants and within the general population. Measures can be of a general nature – for example distributive social housing policies aimed at preventing building up new shanty towns. The housing policies can promote either segregation or desegregation; this is an area in which municipalities can play a legitimate and effective role.

Regarding health, there are two aspects that are important to be explained.

The first aspect concerning housing. The living conditions of the Roma in the countries they move to is, to say the least appalling, and affect all other aspects of life. We have seen its impact on education. It has an even worse impact on health.

The second aspect concerns availability of and access to health services. As said above, this should be accessible to all Roma residents whatever their legal situation, not only for humanitarian reasons but also for less altruistic reasons. The refusal of access to health services, particularly vaccination, could lead to the spread of infectious diseases (e.g. tuberculosis, skin diseases) to the rest of the population. Women and children need to receive special attention.

Accessibility is dependent not only on the commitment of the authorities but also on the knowledge and willingness of the Roma themselves. The Roma community needs to be informed of the services available. The best way to achieve this is the appointment of Roma health mediators who not only transmit information to the community but also assist in putting Roma patients in contact with the medical staff. Health mediators should also provide information on basic hygienic conditions to avoid making a bad situation worse.

Both the authorities and health staff should be fully aware of the Roma culture in health matters. Roma women tend to be secretive about their ailments and the Roma in general tend to see hospitalization as the last step before death.

Family planning should be introduced with caution. The Roma tend to be diffident of measures which they see as an attempt to reduce their population. Forced and uninformed sterilization of Roma women has been practiced widely in both Western and Central and Eastern Europe.

Employment

For the Roma unemployment is the source of all evil. Without employment the Roma cannot rent lodgings and are therefore compelled to live in shanty settlements, with all the negative effects on education and health. It is a vicious circle which can only be broken by providing work for the Roma.

Measures for providing work are highly dependent on the situation of the locality where the Roma are living. The following are a few measures that are feasible in the present economic crisis:

- provide information on how to access to employment services;
- get the support of employers to encourage recruitment;
- recruitment within the local authority's workforce;
- encourage self-employment and small business development, particularly in traditional crafts.

The municipality can also provide trainings and requalification processes for the Roma migrants and for the local population. This particularly applies to assisting young people from the communities the transfer from the school system into the labour market: relevant measures might include supporting apprenticeships, providing additional vocational training and counselling parents and young people about applicable employment and training opportunities. Municipalities can also cooperate with local chambers of commerce, migrant organizations and other NGOs to persuade local employers to provide job opportunities for young people from migrant backgrounds.

The local authorities can also establish favourable conditions for new business investment and improving labour market opportunities for both locals and migrants. For example as a special measure, municipalities/employment agencies could develop programmes for training the unemployed – especially second and third generation young migrants. Furthermore the municipalities can organise programmes to support setting-up and running of ethnic small businesses. Such support could include counselling for start-up initiatives in legal affairs, tax issues and financial and organizational matters as well as assisting with access to enterprise support programmes. The municipalities could negotiate with local chambers of commerce and local employer associations in integrating the small business into the general entrepreneurial community, as well as into consumers' awareness.

Empowerment and participation

No measure or project will succeed unless there is the commitment of the authorities to work with the Roma and the willing participation of the Roma themselves.

Possible measures that could be undertaken are the following:

- Develop light structures for giving a voice to the Roma community. Avoid bureaucratization and, where possible, use existing structures for minorities;
- Ensure that in any representation in building up the strategy and preparing projects the Roma leaders are consulted and involved along with as far as possible, health and education mediators who have a good knowledge of the situation.

Municipal policies dealing with intergroup or intercultural relations must aim at minimising conflict and establishing peaceful relations between Roma migrant communities and the local population. Improving intercultural relations cannot be identified as belonging to any one area of political action. Policies dealing with intercultural relations cover a wide range of both actions and actors. When such policies are successful they create a climate of trust and goodwill between migrants communities, the native population, different ethnic groups and religions. Such a climate also contributes to a subjective feeling of security, and to greater security as measured by a lower crime rate. Furthermore, a more peaceful social climate can contribute to the local public discourse surrounding the issue of migrant and their position in society. Municipalities must make a fundamental decision regarding intercultural relations. For this purpose the local authorities should:

- Organise meetings of Roma parents of schoolchildren with non-Roma parents;
- Roma and non-Roma women;
- Roma and non-Roma children;
- Organise events (school outings, town festivals) bringing the two communities together;
- Encourage the Roma to participate in local life and in local politics.

The local authorities should lose no opportunity in combating stereotypes and prejudices. One possible action is to support interethnic and interreligious dialogue; another is to create events aiming at initiating a dialogue between local population and the Roma migrants. Such activities could indirectly contribute to diminishing conflicts. Prejudice tends to be persistent, and the eradication of them takes time; it is important, therefore, to be aware of it and to introduce both formal and informal mechanisms of social control that prevent prejudice from turning into active discrimination. Law enforcement agencies have a major role to play in this process; as part of it, municipalities could establish joint programmes with churches and religious representatives to support mutual awareness and acceptance. The municipalities should also condemn without hesitation, racist statements in the press or by politicians.

The local authorities should join or set up a network of other municipalities which have a Roma community in their midst with a view to sharing experiences and good practices.

Conclusions

The above described situation and possible actions that could be undertaken by the local authorities' clearly shows the role and the responsibilities of the local authorities, municipalities have in promoting successful integration of Roma migrants in various countries.

At the European policy level, major steps towards establishing a European framework for integration of Roma migrants are underway. However, these activities mainly involve actors from the national member state level, such as national institutions and national contact points. They should be complemented by a 'bottom-up' involvement of relevant actors from the local and regional level. Focused on the concrete implementation of integration policies and the effectiveness of its measures, this initiative could provide data for policy-making on the European level, and could effectively support the consensus building process in a European framework for integration policy. It also could support the dissemination of such a consensus. This is where the MIGROM project can contribute with its findings and expertise which could result with establishing a European framework for successful integration of Roma migrants.