

## Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Integration of minorities — Roma'

(2009/C 27/20)

On 27 October 2006 the European Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

*Integration of minorities — Roma.*

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 10 June 2008. The rapporteur was Ms Sigmund and the co-rapporteur was Ms Sharma.

At its 446th plenary session, held on 9 and 10 July 2008 (meeting of 9 July 2008), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 130 votes to 4, with 10 abstentions.

### Recommendations

The radical shift that is needed in relations between minorities <sup>(1)</sup>, especially the Roma, and the majority population, including their integration and a change in their socio-economic position, is a long term process that nevertheless requires a 'two track' approach:

- a) on a short term basis, dealing with those issues, which need immediate emergency action, such as for example, adopting legislation in Member States to make enforceable and effective the European antidiscrimination legislation which defends the rights of citizens.
- b) by initiating a long-term process that will take decades, in particular at the levels of the Member States and/or the regional and local level, such as for example the improvement of the schooling of the children and of the young Roma girls and men, the promotion of the Roma language and culture etc.

The solutions are therefore not only at EU level, but essentially at Member State, and regional and local level requiring greater cooperation and partnerships.

Integration of minorities, especially Rom requires:

1. a legal basis for action that builds on the *acquis* as well as on the pertinent areas of the open method of coordination (education, employment, social protection and social inclusion);

<sup>(1)</sup> Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly RECOMMENDATION 1201 (1993) Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the expression 'national minority' refers to a group of persons in a state who: reside on the territory of that state and are citizens thereof; maintain longstanding, firm and lasting ties with that state; display distinctive ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics; are sufficiently representative, although smaller in number than the rest of the population of that state or of a region of that state; are motivated by a concern to preserve together that which constitutes their common identity, including their culture, their traditions, their religion or their language:  
<http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta93/EREC1201.htm>.

2. a coherent and long-term umbrella policy strategy from the Commission;
3. structured, transparent and sustainable cooperation between all organised civil society players and the promotion of capacity building for NGOs;
4. the active responsible involvement of the Roma representatives in the process, and
5. a responsible institutionalised platform structure for the practical implementation of specific steps;
6. positive action programmes to be developed around education, training and employment, including self employment.

Additionally the Committee calls for the establishment of a Jean Monnet chair of Romani (the Roma language) and Roma culture.

The recommendations will not be met if this is to be a top-down approach. Only by persuading the Roma community, especially the male leaders, can positive developments be achieved. This requires investments in the training of Roma. The European Structural Funds could be used in this context.

### 1. Introduction

1.1 In a letter dated 27.10.2006, the vice-president of the Commission and Commissioner responsible for inter-institutional affairs, Margot Wallström, asked the Committee, on the occasion of the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All 2007, to draw up an exploratory opinion on 'how to promote concerted efforts in order to maximise the impact and effectiveness of all relevant instruments in order to fight discrimination and promote the integration of minorities, notably Roma'.

1.2 Since the Committee has already addressed the discrimination of minorities in various areas of everyday life in a number of opinions <sup>(2)</sup>, it initially draws attention to the points made therein and their relevance to the Roma and concentrates in the present opinion on the particular situation of this minority in all areas of life. The Committee hopes its proposals will help to mainstream this issue and stresses the importance of a coherent umbrella strategy to bring the Roma into the process of European integration.

## 2. The Roma in Europe

2.1 **The Roma and their history:** Since the historical origin of a particular minority has a commensurate impact on its social and political identity and on the associated potential for conflict, knowledge of one's own history is of the utmost importance for both the minority and the majority.

Roma have lived in Europe for more than seven centuries. The presence of a variety of Roma groups in almost all European countries since the end of the fifteenth century is as well documented as the measures taken to discriminate, exclude and persecute them. In some countries Roma were victims of slavery and in the twentieth century Roma were subjected to particularly horrendous, state-sponsored persecution: the number of Roma victims of racial persecution and genocide under the Nazis is difficult to generally considered to exceed half a million.

In short, the history of the Roma in Europe is one of persecution and persistent discrimination down the centuries, which understandably has frequently led to many of their number being traumatised.

This is why every effort must be made to help the Roma cast off the mantle of victim hood and transform themselves from — more or less mistrusted — passive objects to active players who are ready and able to take an active and responsible role in society, in particular in the Roma related policies.

2.2 **The Roma and Roma demographics:** A lack of reliable statistics means that there are no meaningful demographic data on Roma. As a result, the number of them thought to live in Europe ranges from ten to twelve million (between seven to nine million in the EU). An estimated 60 % of these live in the

<sup>(2)</sup> EESC-Opinion of 13.9.2006 on *Immigration, integration and the role of civil society organisations*, rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 318 of 23.12.2006), EESC-Opinion of 10.12.2003 on *Immigration, integration and employment*, rapporteur: Mr Pariza Castaños (OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004), EESC-Opinion of 5.6.2000 on *Measures to combat discrimination*, rapporteur: Mr Sharma (OJ C 204 of 18.7.2000); EESC-Opinion of 1.12.2003 on the *European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia*, rapporteur: M. Sharma (OJ C 80 of 30.3.2004).

direst poverty on the margins of society <sup>(3)</sup>. The pattern and extent of exclusion are similar in all the Member States, though there are differences resulting from historical and socio-political factors.

Demographic trends among Roma differ from those of the majority population: their increasing proportion — despite high infant mortality and a low rate of life expectancy — in the total population over the long term is a big challenge for all areas of social and education policy. Without significant improvements to Roma education and skills levels, Member States will have large and growing numbers of poorly trained and low-skilled people, who will act as a brake on economic development and become a drain on welfare systems. This calls for education and employment policies and strategies that are sensitive to Roma traditions and socio-economic living conditions. Only if educational opportunities, and training to go with them, are provided and taken up will the Roma be able to make that active contribution to the society to which they belong that is legitimately expected of them.

2.2.1 **The Roma and their Language:** Romani is an Indo-European language spoken in numerous forms in Europe's various Roma communities, Romani variants/dialects exist; nevertheless a large common vocabulary is understood by most of Roma throughout Europe. Romani is even the mother tongue in many communities. An exception is those countries, such as Spain, for instance, where the language was banned and has been partially lost. Recognising the importance of Romani, as well as standardising and teaching it, is of the utmost importance both within and outside the minority. Apart from the Paris *Institut des langues et des civilisations orientales*, only the foreign languages faculty of Bucharest university has a lectureship in the language. Work is also conducted on a local Roma dialect at Prague's Charles University and Eötvös University in Budapest has an initiative for a language course under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Research is also being conducted in the University of Manchester.

A common language fashions a common identity. The promotion of their language is of fundamental importance, therefore, for the social recognition and cultural identity of the Roma.

<sup>(3)</sup> The following are some of the main documents dealing with the issue. The sites contain numerous other references and links, as well as examples of good practice and different used linguistic versions, where available.

'The Situation of Roma in an Enlarged Europe', Report of the European Commission, 2004

([http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/fundamental\\_rights/roma/](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/fundamental_rights/roma/))

'Avoiding the Dependency Trap', UNDP, 2003

(<http://roma.undp.sk/>)

'Final Report on the Human Rights Situation of Roma, Sinti and Travellers in Europe', Council of Europe, 2006, by Alvaro Gil Robles, High Commissioner for Human Rights

([http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/documentation/default\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/documentation/default_en.asp))

'Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti Within the OSCE Area'

([www.osce.org/odihr/](http://www.osce.org/odihr/))

'Analysis of the Anti-Segregation Policies in the Countries Participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion'

([www.romadecade.org](http://www.romadecade.org)).

For this reason, the Committee calls for the establishment of a Jean Monnet chair of Romani and Roma culture.

### 2.3 *The Roma as a component of European culture*

That the Roma have made their contribution to the diversity of European culture down the centuries is amply demonstrated in areas such as music and the visual arts. Given that 2008 is the Year of Intercultural Dialogue, this is a good opportunity to highlight and intensify this interconnectedness.

## 3. The Roma and their alternative lives

**3.1 The Roma — A life of discrimination:** Today, societal and institutional discrimination, including anti-gypsism, presents itself almost daily and is often reproduced in the media; this is unacceptable under European legislation. Roma are citizens of an enlarged Europe and have rights under the ratified Treaty, particularly under Article 13. Failure to grant these rights constitutes discrimination, which is even, in some cases, institutional.

**3.1.1 Before and after birth:** Inherent discrimination within the social systems results in many poor, malnourished, uneducated Roma girls growing up to become poor malnourished mothers who have underweight babies. Antenatal care within minority communities is generally absent resulting in both mother and baby being nutritionally deficient. Health provisions for delivery are limited, with outreach midwifery and health visitor services being restricted and access to hospitals dependent on travel provision or financial ability. This results in the babies being unregistered legally and unvaccinated in their early years. Simply including Roma in existing health care systems is not sufficient to reduce unfavourable health trends. Emergency culturally sensitive measures are needed such as health awareness and family planning, massive revaccinations and TB screening for entire communities. This should be encouraged with the active involvement (through training) of Roma women and Roma health mediators, through health mobile units, information accessible and understandable by the Roma communities. Member States should ensure that each Roma baby figures in the birth register and has his birth certificate.

**3.1.2 Early childhood development** is essential for the successful school participation and integration as 'first years last forever'. From this respect mother-baby programmes, play groups strengthen the mothers just like parent education programmes but also provide an integrated approach in all meanings and take into consideration the families' needs. The Sure Start programme introduced in the UK and spreading in many EU countries is a good example of inclusion of mothers and young children and offering day care provisions as well.

There is a shortage of good quality day care opportunities in almost all EU countries according to the Barcelona targets and Roma children are often refused.

**3.1.3 School age (6-14):** Poor school attendance of Roma. Lack of registration and parental reluctance to send their children (especially girls) to school, segregation and substandard teaching are additional factors recognised in many reports<sup>(4)</sup>. Tools to strengthen school attendance, overcoming segregation are essential to break the cycle of generations of uneducated Roma. CCT (Conditional Cash Transfer) introduced in some countries is an option to encourage school attendance and should be accomplished by the need to prove that children are registered and have their birth certificate. School attendance can be expected in case children are integrated and provided with all the needed services and education methods to be able fulfilling the requirements (language, delays etc.). Free school meals (subject to means testing) and text books for all primary school children should be reintroduced. If education is to be a long term priority, governments should reconsider this.

Segregation in education arises in the first instance from the geographical separation of Roma settlement areas from the majority population. In addition, non-Roma will often remove their children from schools if the percentage of Roma children in a class gets too high, which in turn leads to the creation of segregated schools or classes for Roma children. For a variety of reasons, these schools do not meet the required standards, which in turn results in perfectly capable Roma children being channelled into special schools and usually excluded from the possibility of continuing their education.

A particular problem is the placing of Roma children in special schools for children with learning difficulties. This is often done through discriminatory school admission tests, but sometimes also through spurious incentives, such as free transport or school meals. The practice of unwarranted placement in special schools is a blatant contravention of fundamental rights and must be opposed with all legal and administrative means.

It must also be said here that one reason for failure to attend school is poverty, since parents either cannot (or will not) pay the costs involved or they set their children to work either helping to support the family or looking after younger siblings. Girls are especially affected by this.

<sup>(4)</sup> 40 % of Roma children do not attend school (compared with 0.5 % of the majority population) and 38 % drop out (compared with 4 % in the majority population). Girls are at an even greater disadvantage, with only one in three finishing primary education (compared with 19 out of 20 in the majority population).

Only 8 % of Roma children complete secondary education (compared with 64 % in the majority population) and less than 0.5 % embark upon tertiary education (data on completion of tertiary education are not available). Source: UNDP.

### 3.1.4 Adulthood

3.1.4.1 **Housing** is marked by poor living conditions and continued segregation. Slum facilities which are of poor infrastructure or maintenance, lacking in utility resources and containing high environmental and sanitation pollution, provide the occupants with no property rights and do not give them a permanent address for which to register their rights to welfare benefits or employment or rights to education, employment and health provision. Many of these issues result from societal discrimination and 'anti-gypsism'. It is worth mentioning that their nomadic lifestyle is the consequence rather than the cause of their exclusion. Although the overwhelming majority of Roma are now settled, the choice of a nomadic existence is still often cited in attempting to explain their exclusion.

3.1.4.2 **Education** is one of the most fundamental investments in the future. The high illiteracy rate and the low level of Roma education generally bode ill for the future. Member States need to ensure their education systems do not discriminate against Roma, and additionally allow for adult programmes towards literacy, numeracy and life long learning.

It is inordinately difficult for Roma to reach higher levels of education and get good vocational training. As well as efforts to integrate them into the normal education and training system, Member States should also make use of models that recognise informally acquired skills and be much more generous in recognising qualifications attained outside the country.

The integrated language education policy introduced by the Commission, one of whose aims is to promote the learning of minority languages, should also be enlisted to benefit the Roma.

3.1.4.3 **Economic integration** requires members of minorities to surmount a series of hurdles that often reinforce one another<sup>(?)</sup>. Having no or very low educational or training qualifications or inadequate or unrecognised qualifications automatically discriminates against the individual, whilst additional anti-gypsism doubles the obstacles. Dozens of documented cases prove that unemployment of Roma is often due to racial discrimination. Members of minority communities have practically no access to measures promoting lifelong learning.

The average Roma is very much capable of thinking and acting entrepreneurially; ways and means can therefore be found to bring Roma out of the shadow economy and to enable them to participate in regular economic activity, for example by means

(?) The High Level Advisory Group of Experts on the social integration of ethnic minorities and their full labour market inclusion presented its report 'Ethnic Minorities in the Labour Market' in December 2007. It lists the most important obstacles to access to the labour market. ([http://ec.europa.eu/employment\\_social/fundamental\\_rights/pdf/hlg/etmin\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/fundamental_rights/pdf/hlg/etmin_en.pdf)).

of microcredits and business start-up and support mechanisms, in order to overcome the challenges and barriers.

Many Roma household incomes are highly dependent on welfare payments and other government transfers (e.g. pensions or child benefit), while participation in the formal economy is relatively limited. This makes Roma participation in social protection systems asymmetrical (i.e. as a group they receive more than they pay). This asymmetry is an important cause of social tensions and prejudice and ultimately exclusion.

Additional resources could be provided to make official work more attractive, following the principle of 'positive benefits for positive efforts'. Otherwise, a major systemic source of racial exclusion will persist. Welfare to work programmes could be introduced in partnership with both public and private sector organisations

Discrimination in the workplace, and during the application process, is well documented and legislative measures must be enforced against this practice. However, access to relevant vocational training so that Roma can move from unskilled or semi skilled needs to be identified to create a total culture change.

3.1.4.4 **Healthcare:** The low standard of living (lack of income) and the poor living conditions (dirt, low quality sanitation, lack of clean water) constitute a severe health risk. Access to health services in Roma settlements is restricted, particularly as most were not registered at birth and therefore remain unregistered in the health system. Where admission is made to a mainstream facility it can very often be within a segregated ward, this is discrimination. Access to quality services is a basic right for all European citizens.

3.1.4.5 As a rule, **Roma women** have a low status in the family hierarchy, poor or no schooling and consequently poor employment opportunities. They often marry young and are frequently pregnant. Domestic violence, which very often goes unreported, should also not be underestimated. It is particularly disturbing that this is now compounded by prostitution and human trafficking.

However it is important to recognise that whilst not always apparent to non-Roma, Roma women are also the engine of change within the community, especially towards capacity building and cultural change, such as highlighting the importance of education of their children especially girls. Involvement of, and the assumption of responsibility by, mothers in parents' associations has a very positive impact on children's schooling.

3.1.4.6 **Societal discrimination and Anti gypsism** in the form of stereotyping and prejudice facing minority communities, especially Roma, is deep rooted and stem from generations of ignorance and cultural difference. The prejudice that these communities are of less value to society is widespread, which only leads to further isolation, poverty, violence and finally exclusion.

## 3.2 Roma — A life of integration

3.2.1 Integration is not a one-way street, but a process that goes in two directions and demands efforts from both the minorities and the majority. Fearful of having to give up their principles, traditions and identity in the course of integration, many Roma harbour great reservations when it comes to integration measures. Likewise the inherent discrimination over generations makes it difficult for non-Roma to put their prejudices to one side and welcome the Roma culture.

3.2.2 On the other hand, 40 % of Roma do not live in poverty, but in — albeit sometimes only modest — prosperity. These may not be the most visible Roma, but they are proof that Roma are in essence able to integrate into the society in which they live without renouncing their identity.

3.2.3 Numerous documentation from Roma organisations to increase visibility, active participation in society and awareness-raising have been produced as a progressive way forward<sup>(6)</sup>. More can be done by investing in the communities where commitments, ownership and responsibility are made part of the contract. The use of micro credit systems, traditionally used for entrepreneurship, could be used as funding levers to support infrastructure or learning systems. Funding could be given in small amounts in return for honoured commitment such as sending children to school or regular health visits<sup>(7)</sup>.

3.2.4 The equal participation of minorities in society presupposes effective, durable and tailored measures. While these should be targeted, they should not exclude other groups. They need the will of politicians, business and society as a whole to simultaneously apply the principle of non-discrimination, promote equal opportunities and manage diversity. Here the European Structural funds could be used to support programmes.

<sup>(6)</sup> For example: <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma>, [http://www.romeurope.org/?page\\_id=14](http://www.romeurope.org/?page_id=14), <http://www.romnews.com/community/index.php>, <http://www.enar-eu.org/>, [http://www.unionromani.org/union\\_in.htm](http://www.unionromani.org/union_in.htm), <http://www.romanicriss.org/>, <http://www.erionet.org/>, <http://www.grtleeds.co.uk/index.html>, <http://www.etudestsiganes.asso.fr/>, <http://www.fnasat.asso.fr/>, <http://romove.radio.cz/en/>, <http://www.spolu.nl/index.html>.

<sup>(7)</sup> Nobel Prize 2006 Muhammad Yunus. The Bangladesh model of Grameen Bank could be adapted for Roma communities.

Every effort must be made to dismantle the reservations and prejudices of Roma and non-Roma alike, by not only taking the — necessary — practical steps, but also — with the help of leaders and mediators on both sides — working out common strategies for the future. Role models from the Roma communities have a particular part to play here.

## 4. The Roma and Europe

### 4.1 The European Commission

4.1.1 The Commission has long been engaged in helping to solve the problem of integration. The establishment of a Commission inter-services group for Roma issues a few years ago improved the flow of information between different Commission services and achieved a certain measure of coordination between the numerous areas of activity.

4.1.2 The High Level Group on the Social Integration of Ethnic Minorities set up by the Commission in January 2006 produced its — critical — report in December 2007<sup>(8)</sup>, which includes recommendations for 'policies to improve the situation of Roma in terms of education, employment, health and housing'. The group of experts made it clear in its report that only the right policy mix, coupled with a pragmatic approach, could bring lasting solutions.

4.1.3 The **European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights** deals with this issue in depth<sup>(9)</sup>. Mention should also be made of the wide-ranging studies, reports and events of its predecessor, the **European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia**.

### 4.2 The European Parliament

4.2.1 The European Parliament has long been vigorous in its cross-party work on minority issues, the integration of Roma and combating their discrimination. Thus a number of reports and resolutions on this issue have already been adopted, the most recent on 31 January 2008<sup>(10)</sup>.

<sup>(8)</sup> 'In spite of many programmes and initiatives targeted at Roma, change has been slow and results have been worse than anticipated, mainly due to structural problems. It needs to be underlined that, although equality mainstreaming should be a strategic goal in the EU and the Member States, specific and targeted action for Roma inclusion is needed.' (see footnote No 6).

<sup>(9)</sup> 'Roma and Travellers in Public Education', EUMC/FRA, 2006 ([http://fra.europa.eu/fra/material/pub/ROMA/roma\\_report.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/fra/material/pub/ROMA/roma_report.pdf)).

<sup>(10)</sup> Resolution adopted by the European Parliament on 31.1.2008 on a European Strategy on the Roma, point 6: 'Urges the European Commission to develop a European Framework Strategy on Roma Inclusion aimed at providing policy coherence at EU level as regards the social inclusion of Roma and urges the Commission at the same time to comprehensively shape a Community Action Plan on Roma Inclusion with the task of providing financial support for realising the objective of the European Framework Strategy on Roma Inclusion.' (<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2008-0035+0+DOC+XML+V0//FR&language=FR>).

### 4.3 The Council

4.3.1 The European Council most recently addressed this issue on 14 December 2007 in connection with the European Year of Equal Opportunities <sup>(11)</sup>.

### 4.4 The Council of Europe and OSCE

Both organisations have contributed in numerous areas to improving the situation and are continuing their work through measures specially targeted at Roma. Of particular importance for the protection of minorities (and therefore the Roma) is the CoE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The Dosta! Campaign also is an excellent positive example to raise awareness among the majority population about prejudices and negative stereotypes.

4.5 The **European Court of Human Rights** has delivered a series of breakthrough judgments creating important cornerstones for the implementation of Roma rights <sup>(12)</sup>.

4.6 The **United Nations** has been promoting the integration or Roma for years, especially within UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO.

### 4.7 Organised civil society

4.7.1 The Open Society Institute, supported by the World Bank, has initiated the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015 <sup>(13)</sup>.

4.7.2 The recently established **EU Roma Policy Coalition (ERPC)** <sup>(14)</sup> has pledged itself to the principle of inclusion through participation and 'aims to promote the participation of Roma in all relevant processes'.

<sup>(11)</sup> Presidency conclusions, § 50. In this connection, the European Council, which is conscious of the very specific situation faced by the Roma across the Union, invites Member States and the Union to use all means to improve their inclusion. To this end, it invites the Commission to examine existing policies and instruments and to report to the Council on progress achieved before the end of June 2008.

([http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3\\_fo/showPage.asp?id=432&lang=fr&mode=g](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=432&lang=fr&mode=g)).

<sup>(12)</sup> (<http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/portal.asp?sessionId=7828574&skin=hudoc-en&action=request>).

<sup>(13)</sup> The concept of the 'Decade for Inclusion of Roma 2005-2015' was adopted at the June 2003 conference on 'Roma in an expanding Europe — Challenges for the Future' with the active collaboration of the Commission. The participating countries (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro) adopted action plans which included proposals for reaching the four main goals — education, employment, health and housing. A Roma Education Fund was also set up at the conference. A Roma Education Fund was also set up at this conference. (<http://www.romadecade.org/>) (<http://romaeducationfund.hu/>).

<sup>(14)</sup> Members: Amnesty International (AI), European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), European Roma Information Office (ERIO), European Network against Racism (ENAR), Open Society Institute (OSI), Spolu International Foundation (SPOLU), Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) and the European Roma Grassroots Organisation (ERGO). (<http://www.romadecade.org/portal/downloads/News/Towards%20an%20EU%20Roma%20Policy%20ERPC%20-%20Final.pdf>).

4.7.3 The **European Roma and Travellers Forum (ERTF)** <sup>(15)</sup> merits particular mention: it was set up at the initiative of Finnish president Tarja Halonen and has a partnership agreement with the Council of Europe which gives it a privileged status vis-à-vis this organisation and enables it to take part in its work.

4.7.4 Since one of the priority areas of Roma integration — employment — falls particularly within their remit, the **social partners** also have an important part to play on this front. The experience of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), as well as of national trade unions and European and national employers' organisations, can be important elements in the process to be initiated.

## 5. Conclusion

5.1 The realisation that the all efforts so far to include Roma and to enforce their rights have proved inadequate is a recurring theme through all work in this area.

5.2 The necessary measures lay both within the competence of the Union as well within the competence of the Member States. In line with Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, non-discrimination directives were passed in 2000 and these provide an important impetus and an institutional framework for addressing the discrimination against Roma. The Commission should explore how Community legislation can be expanded in order to address the situation of the Roma, such as through adoption of a Desegregation Directive. Furthermore the integration of Roma should be a priority in the use of structural funds.

5.3 Where the competence for issues affecting the Roma lies within the competence of Member State; a possible and effective approach to a solution was found in the 1990s with the **Open Method of Coordination (OMC)** <sup>(16)</sup>. The Committee proposes, therefore, building on the OMC and extending it to minority issues, especially the integration of Roma. As a first step, we suggest that the situation of the Roma be considered in the different existing processes of the OMC (particularly employment, social inclusion and education). The OMC and its tools can be shared between Member States to assess best practice models, whilst additionally reviewing global models or grass roots community based projects. For those projects to be successful and sustainable they must be cross sectorial and building action plans with all interested parties (particularly the Roma organisations). Those action plans must have commitments, activities, evaluations, feedback and dissemination mechanisms, supported by adequate funding, including via the

<sup>(15)</sup> European Roma and Travellers Forum. (<http://www.ertf.org/en/index.html>).

<sup>(16)</sup> The Lisbon European Council applied the Open Method of Coordination to the Lisbon process in the areas of employment, social protection, child rearing and education, enterprise policy, innovations policy and research, as well as structural economic reform. The Gothenburg European Council extended its scope to immigration and asylum. OMC has since been extended to the area of youth issues. In its Communication on a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world ((COM)2007 242 final), the European Commission proposed applying OMC to the area of culture. In so doing, it expressly stipulated that the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions should be involved in the process.

Structural Funds. The Committee is convinced that the OMC is an ideally suited and effective approach to many legal, social and historically emotionally charged issues related to minorities, especially Roma concerns.

5.4 The success of these initiatives will depend crucially on whether a functioning network of cooperation between **all** the players can be established. The Committee has on many occasions demonstrated its added value as the bridge to organised civil society <sup>(17)</sup> and will contribute through institutionalised, and therefore sustainable, cooperation to tackling the integration of minorities, especially the Roma.

5.5 The High Level Conference on Roma Inclusion planned for September by the Commission would be an appropriate context for public discussion of its proposals for improving the efficiency of EU and national policies and for the first concrete steps in this process.

On this occasion, the Committee could present the concrete measures planned as a follow-up to this opinion. Thought should also be given to modes of cooperation with the media that pursue long-term goals and go beyond merely reporting on incidents as they happen.

## 6. Final comments

6.1 The Committee initially began its work with reference to the year of Equal Opportunities, but then — in agreement with

the Commission — adapted it to the context of the Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

Culture, as the Committee understands it, is a process that impacts on all areas of life, a proclamation of shared values, a shared way of life, and an essential means of communication as part of any effort towards better integration in all areas, as it combines rationality with feelings and thus offers a holistic approach to solving problems that need to be addressed. This social dimension of culture helps to make intercultural dialogue an instrument of peace and stability both internally and externally. In terms of minorities, but particularly the Roma, this means that the intercultural dialogue is the best means to gradually do away with the stereotypes of mistrust, prejudice and lack of understanding that have grown up over centuries and to find together in an atmosphere of mutual respect a form of integration acceptable to both sides, underpinned by a strong legislative framework.

6.2 The Committee hopes that the first concrete steps towards implementing its proposals will be taken before the Year of Intercultural Dialogue is over, with further steps following in the course of 2009, the European Year of Creativity and Innovation and also 2010, the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

Brussels, 9 July 2008.

The President  
of the European Economic and Social Committee  
Dimitris DIMITRIADIS

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<sup>(17)</sup> See the work of the Consultative Commission on Industrial Change (CCMI), the Lisbon Group and the Liaison Group between the European Economic and Social Committee and European civil society organisations and networks.