



Contribution from the EESC study group on Roma inclusion for the post-2020 Roma strategy

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Introduction

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) considers the integration and inclusion of the Roma community a priority. Over the years, the EESC has adopted a number of own-initiative and exploratory opinions and in 2014 launched a project entitled *Better inclusion of the Roma community through civil society initiatives*. This project served to explore the impact of relevant European legislation from a civil society perspective.

The experience with this project emphasised the need for further involvement in Roma issues. For this reason, this project further developed into a study group on Roma inclusion, pursuing the following objectives:

- To evaluate the implementation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 as well as the strategies adopted by the Member States;
- To promote the level of involvement of Roma representatives and organised civil society in Roma issues at EU level;
- To offer a platform for identifying and sharing good practices;
- To encourage concrete action in the policy areas in which the Roma community still face discrimination.

Over the last few years (2018-2020), we have sought to gather recommendations for the post-2020 Framework for Roma Integration. The present Framework, which will expire this year, has provided an impetus for instruments targeting Roma inclusion at EU level and has registered progress in education for the Roma. Notwithstanding this, the situation of the Roma remains precarious, with no observed improvement in employment and access to housing¹. Antigypsyism is once again on the rise and this problem has become even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic². This has strengthened our resolve to engage with relevant partners to better understand the realities faced by the Roma and to gather knowledge which can help strengthen the upcoming framework to bring about much needed change.

We have organised several events and activities, including public hearings and country visits, and worked on an opinion on the situation of Roma women, which all provided an invaluable opportunity for discussion with relevant stakeholders, who included Roma experts, Roma representatives and civil society organisations. We would like to thank them for sharing their experience and the knowledge they have acquired through their work with the Roma communities. The recommendations in this report are based on the information and knowledge they have provided during these events and activities. We feel that their ideas should be emphasised and brought to the fore since their commitment to the Roma makes them well placed to offer recommendations on the policies and actions needed to achieve real inclusion and integration for this community.

¹ Commission Communication (2018) [Report on the evaluation of the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies 2020](#).

² EESC declaration (2020) [Protecting minorities in these difficult times: the situation of the Roma community](#) (also available on p. 14 of this report).

General recommendations

The policies and actions needed to change and improve the Roma situation are generally well known. However, the right political and social attitude for implementing them is still lacking. It is unacceptable that the Roma continue to be blamed for low education achievement and social exclusion, without addressing the root causes of these problems. EU governments need to change their approach when dealing with Roma issues. Instead of focusing on how to change the Roma so that they are included, authorities should examine how societies can become inclusive for all people, including the Roma as well as Travellers. The Roma situation cannot be improved simply through general strategies without consequent implementation or hand-picked policies such as the prohibition of begging, but through the adoption of structured policies, which target the cause of their misery and are able to affect the Roma in the whole complexity of their existence.

Strategies and mechanisms for the Roma cannot be effective if the Roma themselves are not consulted, involved and accepted in shaping their future, but instead have experts thinking and speaking on their behalf. The Roma need to be represented in the public and political sphere and the current lacunae in their representation addressed urgently. Regrettably, today there are still several National Councils, National Agencies, National Offices and other government structures responsible for Roma inclusion, which neither employ nor involve anyone hailing from the Roma community. When Roma are employed in such agencies, they are sometimes so few in number that they still end up being a minority in an office which is supposed to represent them. The Roma's active presence within these structures would facilitate their involvement in the planning, design and monitoring of policies aimed at improving their situation. Continuity in policies is crucial and these should not be constantly rethought, reshaped or discarded after every election and change in the government officials responsible for Roma issues, since this undermines any progress that has been made.

The EU needs to push towards more involvement of civil society organisations (CSOs) in designing policies geared towards the Roma. CSOs in various Member States make remarkable efforts to seek to improve the lives of the Roma: they organise teacher training and projects to work against stereotyped perceptions towards the Roma; they organise employment workshops and partnerships with potential employers to increase the Roma's participation in regular employment; they support the dissemination of knowledge on health care amongst the Roma; they educate Roma parents on the importance of preschool attendance and help them to meet enrolment fees; they organise various programmes to increase school attendance amongst Roma children; they help poor Roma families secure alternative accommodation to Roma camps and carry out activities on financial planning and budgeting to curb problems such as loss of homes due to unpaid rents or loans; they represent the voice of those who are suffering due to the segregational politics of the majority.

However, despite the invaluable recommendations that CSOs can offer in view of their experience with the Roma community, consultations with CSOs in the various Member States are hardly ever conducted in a proper manner. In several instances, CSOs are given a tight timeframe to react to policies and have to face other forms of prejudicial and disadvantageous practices, preventing them from raising pertinent concerns. Often, the results they achieve are not taken into consideration and their suggestions are not accepted for implementation. Many more roundtable discussions which offer concrete opportunities for common decision-making between Roma representatives, CSOs, municipalities and government authorities need to be held on a regular basis, with the involvement of Roma mediators who can help facilitate the organisation of such meetings.

CSOs need more reliable information on how to access EU funding. Whilst some Roma CSOs have already availed themselves of EU funds to carry out their projects, many are still unaware of their availability and how to apply for them. This information would be crucial to encourage even more initiatives from CSOs in favour of the Roma.

Safeguards are needed so that the EU funds received by Member States for Roma integration are truly directed to their respective aims. There should be a much higher level of control on EU funds from the part of authorities in the respective countries. The provision of EU funds to Member States can be subject to adherence to certain principles. By way of example, the allocation of funds can be conditional on the inclusion of Roma children in mainstream schools, the presence of a particular number of Roma children per class or setting up centres offering legal and social services, including access to registration for the Roma. The budget available for actions targeting Roma should foresee allocations for Roma health mediators and Roma school mediators, especially in view of the sterling work they carry out in encouraging Roma inclusion and safeguarding Roma health. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that although funding is important, changes in the living situation of the Roma cannot be achieved solely through projects. Although the funding of projects should be encouraged, permanent changes can mostly be achieved via legislative changes, dedicated and verifiable structural policies, and binding legal instruments which support human rights protection.

More committed collaboration with the media is needed to help increase the public's awareness of the problems faced by the Roma community. Unfortunately, the media still often portrays the Roma as being responsible for their problems, and thus continues to exacerbate the current negative public and political opinion about them. It is still common that individual shortcomings and criminal acts are assigned an ethnic character, which clearly goes against collective rights. Positive campaigns, for instance through videos or posters, festivities, commemoration events and other occasions which bring members of different communities together and promote constructive coexistence in socially and culturally diverse environments, should be encouraged and promoted to tackle antigypsyism and make Roma culture more visible.

In 2011, in its opinion on the then incoming Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, the EESC had expressed its belief that "thanks to the combined efforts of the EU institutions, governments, Member States and local authorities and communities, the EU may now be at a historic turning point: it may finally produce a policy to benefit the EU's most excluded and disadvantaged ethnic group, based on a common approach that is likely to end not in costly failure but in intelligent, humane results."³ Judging by the living situation of many Roma however, this "historic turning point" has still not materialised, with segregational politics still shaping the reality for most of them. The post-2020 strategy, should tend to offer binding strategies for Roma inclusion, rather than simply recommendations. Recommendations do not necessarily bind local authorities to take measures to address the problems, and in a great number of cases this is affecting the authorities' willingness to act, especially since some of them fear negative responses from the population in general. The strategies for Roma inclusion should be monitored continuously and evaluated regularly by independent researchers, experts familiar with the Roma community, as well as by the Roma

³ EESC (2011): [Societal empowerment and integration of Roma citizens in Europe](#).

themselves. This way, the strategies can remain up-to-date with the evolving situation on the ground and allow responsible stakeholders to tackle newly emerging issues in a timely manner.

Key points:

- For policies to be effective, the Roma have to be consulted and represented in political and public spheres; Government structures such as agencies set up for Roma inclusion should have people of Roma origin amongst their workforce;
- Continuity in the approach and in the implementation of policies is crucial, and these should not be changed constantly with every new legislature;
- CSOs should be duly consulted in the design of Roma policies, in view of the invaluable contribution they can offer; Roundtable discussions between Roma representatives, CSOs, municipalities and government authorities, which offer concrete opportunities for common decision-making, are an indispensable precondition to achieve progress and effective implementation of policies for Roma;
- Safeguards can help verify that EU funds for Roma integration are used only for this aim; The granting of EU funds to Member States can be conditional to the adherence to certain principles;
- Funding should be planned for an increase in Roma health and school mediators;
- Projects for Roma integration should complement, rather than replace legislative changes and binding legal instruments; representatives of the Roma community should be able to check, control and have a say in decision-making;
- Positive campaigns and the media can help in the fight against antigypsyism, increase awareness on Roma culture and encourage peaceful coexistence;
- The post-2020 strategy should tend to offer binding measures rather than only recommendations;
- A regular and independent evaluation of the strategies on Roma inclusion is crucial so that these can remain up-to-date with the evolving situation on the ground.

Antigypsyism⁴

Roma currently face antigypsyism on a daily basis in important fields such as education, employment, housing and law enforcement. The Roma and Travellers endure a disproportionate level of stops and searches, as well as other discriminatory policing practices, including fines for minor infringements such as crossing the street where there are no zebra crossings or for broken bike equipment. This situation is not just unlawful and endangers the basic principles of rule of law, but fosters the feelings of distrust felt by the Roma in relation to police and other authorities. Standard training for police officers all over Europe on what constitutes discriminatory policing practices, discriminatory law enforcement, discriminatory border control practices and unlawful profiling should be provided. Some Member States already have platforms in place which encourage dialogue between CSOs and police forces. Such platforms aim at establishing guidelines for police forces on how to tackle incidents of hate crime and discrimination and should be expanded. EU funding can help in the dissemination of existent positive practices in this area to strive towards fair and non-discriminatory policing.

⁴ Further information: EESC news story (2018) [Europe's Roma still facing discrimination and ethnic profiling, say NGOs and policy makers](#).

Currently, incidents of hate crime go largely unreported both out of the victims' fear of repercussions and also due to a lack of follow-up of the complaints. Effective enforcement of antidiscrimination legislation and the criminalisation of hate speech can help encourage victims to speak up and approach the relevant authorities. In some countries, there is still no definition of what constitutes hate speech, making it even more difficult to take concrete steps against such actions. Independent and regular assessment of the functioning of law enforcement authorities in the area of antigypsyism should be foreseen by law.

Similar measures as those taken for antisemitism are needed to tackle antigypsyism. A coherent population survey on antigypsyism should be held on a regular basis, as in the case of antisemitism, whose results could then help elaborate adequate policies to tackle antigypsyism and adapt the current ones to the present realities. Antigypsyism needs to be given proper attention in the social inclusion policy measures in place in the Member States. As things stand, some of these measures do not take the National Roma Integration Strategies into account, and therefore lack a Roma dimension. The high level of acceptance of antigypsyism and its growth in some countries, especially in the political sphere and in law enforcement is worrying, making independent advocacy and research indispensable.

Antigypsyism, together with concrete measures to eliminate it, should also feature prominently in the post-2020 strategy. These should take the form of mandatory guidelines for implementation in all Member States. A stronger focus on antigypsyism is even more crucial now in view of its increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which in some countries has affected the Roma communities in particular, and in some cases saw the Roma population blamed for the spread of this virus. This amid emerging reports of how lockdown measures were being implemented in a discriminatory and disproportionate manner for the Roma populations residing in camps and informal settlements, including via heavy policing in these zones.

Key points:

- Training for EU Member States' police officers on what constitutes amongst others discriminatory policing practices and unlawful profiling should be provided;
- Existing platforms for dialogue between CSOs and police forces should be expanded;
- Antidiscrimination legislation should be enforced effectively and hate speech criminalised;
- Independent and regular assessment of the functioning of law enforcement authorities in the area of antigypsyism should be foreseen by law;
- Regular surveys on antigypsyism can help in the elaboration of policies which truly match the current realities;
- In view of its upward trend, also in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, antigypsyism and the fight against it should feature prominently in the post-2020 strategy.

Education⁵

A comprehensive strategy to facilitate Roma children's access to education is needed, which should include advanced pedagogical programmes, community-based approaches as well as catch-up mechanisms.

⁵ Further information: EESC hearing news story (2018) [Inclusive education and tailored approaches can help combat poor educational outcomes for Roma](#).

Access to regular schools is crucial to facilitate the societal and labour market integration of Roma. Notwithstanding this, in some countries there is still a high share of Roma children attending special schools. This is always a sign of a systemic breaching of these children's fundamental rights, who are being exposed negatively to improper diagnosis methods and qualifying procedures. Stricter controls of the diagnosis methods used to assess whether a child needs to be enrolled in a special school are urgently needed, whilst the instruments used to gauge mental disabilities need to conform to up-to-date medical and scientific standards and be supervised on a regular basis. Assessments carried out should be subject to verifications by independent specialist institutes. The execution of such verifications should be unhindered, especially in view of the consequences that unjustified assessments can have on the children's future. Individuals who have been mistakenly diagnosed should be provided with the legal assistance, proper compensation and assistance for the disadvantages they have been forced to experience.

Policies are needed in all Member States so that children at risk of dropping out early from school, as in the case of Roma children, are kept in the schooling system as long as possible and offered quality education like other children, including early childhood education and care. The schooling system should be assessed against practices leading to segregation and systemic regulations which trigger discrimination. CSOs can play a crucial role in assessing the situation against school segregation. They can also help decrease the rate of early school leavers, via their participation in setting up after school programmes which target academic achievement through tutoring and mentoring.

Early school leaving should be addressed through a cross-sectoral approach, which encompasses measures geared towards housing, health and reducing poverty, since these all impinge on Roma children's participation in school. Many Roma children in fact are forced through life circumstances to provide for the family and thus have to leave school to take up work. In view of their lack of qualifications however, their chances of securing a proper job with a proper income are minimal.

The precarious accommodation that these children live in is not at all conducive towards following up on the assigned studies and homework. There are many Roma who still live in segregated ghettos and camps, in dilapidated, overcrowded houses or shacks lacking the basic necessities and surrounded by environments which surely do not encourage studying and learning after school. Some of these camps are not connected to the transport grid or are too far from the city centres, with Roma children ending up either participating for just part of the school day or none at all. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated Roma children's chances of participating fully in education and has exposed even more the disparity in opportunities they face when compared to other children in EU Member States. Besides the fact that many Roma families cannot afford the IT devices necessary to enable their children's participation in the online activities organised by schools, the location of the ghettos and camps they reside in does not always allow for internet connectivity⁶.

To achieve positive changes in education, raising parents' engagement and inclusion in their children's schooling experience is crucial. Work with parents, however, should not be limited solely to encouraging them to send their children to school, but should rather start before the birth of the child, and include work on issues such as disease prevention, gender equality and family planning. Illiteracy amongst parents does

⁶ Further information: EESC declaration (2020) [Protecting minorities in these difficult times: the situation of the Roma community](#) (also available on p. 13 of this report).

not help, since this impedes them from following their children's education. Educational projects planned for Roma should therefore foresee investment in the parents' education.

The number of Roma school mediators should be increased, especially in view of the positive results that have been recorded in various schools after they were introduced. In fact, in some countries, these mediators have managed to increase Roma children's attendance in schools in a short time, carried out sterling work in disseminating knowledge amongst educators about the Roma, organised education activities in schools to raise awareness on antigypsyism, facilitated dialogue between parents and schools and encouraged more Roma to go into higher education.

Information on Roma and other minorities should become part of the curriculum to ensure basic knowledge about these groups' history and culture. Integrating Roma culture in the classroom not only helps make education more attractive to Roma children, but also helps increase knowledge on cultural diversity. Roma culture is currently mostly excluded from school curricula. Education on cultural diversity should not be geared solely towards students, but also towards educators and school management staff, who should receive training thereon.

Key points:

- Measures against institutional segregation and catch-up mechanisms should be part of the strategy aimed at promoting the Roma's access to education;
- The diagnosis methods and the assessments used to identify a child's need to enrol in a special school should be subject to controls and continuous verifications;
- Quality early childhood education and care should also be a reality for the Roma;
- CSOs should be involved in the measures taken to reduce the number of early drop outs;
- A cross-sectoral approach encompassing housing, health and poverty is needed to tackle early school leaving amongst children at risk;
- The state and lack of connectivity of these camps affect Roma children's educational attainment, with the current pandemic impinging even more on their participation in education;
- Engagement with parents is crucial to achieve positive results in education, and should go beyond simply encouraging them to send their children to school;
- An increase in Roma school mediators is needed;
- Information on Roma culture and other minorities should become part of the curriculum.

Employment⁷

Education and employment are closely related. Surveys such as the EU-MIDIS II (2016) confirm that education, especially early childhood education can help bring better future prospects⁸, hence supporting access to formal and non-formal education is essential for the Roma's employment in proper jobs.

⁷ Further information: EESC hearing news story (2019) [Structural antigypsyism and poor education are main adversaries of Roma labour market inclusion](#).

⁸ [Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Roma – Selected Findings](#) (2016).

Although there are training and educational projects targeting Roma, these do not always result in actual employment opportunities for them, as these are not mainstreamed and lack links with other policy measures. For this reason, it is crucial that such projects are followed up on to reach their intended goals. Member States should encourage stronger engagement of businesses, particularly at local level in these projects. Employment programmes targeting Roma should provide opportunities for interventions in policy-making to encourage adequate social policies that can truly address the problems faced by the Roma. Member States should also consider supporting the development of social enterprises to create sustainable workplaces for Roma, with a particular focus on Roma women. Licences needed to be able to sell certain goods or to practise certain manual professions should also be made more easily available for the Roma. It is crucial to develop methods geared towards validating skills learnt in informal and non-formal settings, especially for the Roma who, driven by circumstances, do not always manage to finish secondary schooling. This leaves them without any certification of their skills and abilities, making their future employment prospects even more bleak.

Many Roma find it difficult to access scholarships to continue with their education. Faced with the lack of education and of employment prospects, some Roma aspire to become entrepreneurs but find that they are not equipped with the necessary skills and microcredit tools to start their own enterprise. EU funds can help in this regard, by assisting the Roma in setting up cooperatives and giving them access to microcredit.

EU funds should also provide for projects that help Roma get regularised status. Although offering opportunities for training is important, the Roma will not be able to get any regular employment if they remain undocumented. The problem of undocumented Roma has been persisting for decades and needs to be solved urgently in view of the huge difficulties this is creating for Roma's access to employment. Besides lack of documentation, the Roma's employment prospects are also hindered by the fact that they continue to be viewed in a discriminatory manner when applying for jobs. Although most companies have antidiscrimination measures, these are rarely effective in practice. Awareness raising is needed amongst companies, supported by measures in Member States aimed at combatting antigypsyism in employment. Positive discrimination can be an important tool to raise the number of Roma in employment, with tax credits offered to employers who hire Roma employees. The upcoming Youth Guarantee should also be updated with a part specifically dedicated to the Roma, to cater for the multiple obstacles they face in accessing training and employment.

Key points:

- Training projects for Roma should result in concrete work opportunities and should therefore provide for the engagement of businesses;
- Roma employment programmes should result in the adoption of adequate social policies;
- The development of social enterprises, a decrease in bureaucracy to attain certain licences and assistance in setting up cooperatives can help support Roma employment, also for Roma women;
- Solutions are urgently needed to solve the problem of undocumented Roma, since their irregular status impinges on their prospects of getting regular employment;
- Awareness raising, measures targeting antigypsyism in employment as well as positive discrimination measures can help improve the Roma employment rate;
- The upcoming Youth Guarantee should provide for measures specifically adapted for the Roma.

Housing

It is important to devise minimum acceptable standards for housing: supply of drinking water, electricity, drainage and sewage facilities, amongst others. This is particularly relevant especially in view of the current situation in certain remote and disconnected neighbourhoods, in which Roma live in overcrowded shacks or containers. These conditions make it extremely challenging to keep up preventive measures such as social distancing and hand washing in view of the pandemic, making it even more crucial to make long-term investments in infrastructural projects which take into account the dire realities faced by this community.

Living in camps is not only difficult given the obvious discomforts and dangers presented by the prevalent lack of hygiene and scarcity of services. Having a Roma camp listed as one's residential address is not considered positively by employers and can be detrimental for the Roma's search for employment. Besides, the distance and inaccessibility of some of these camps from towns and cities also affects one's employment and educational prospects negatively.

Policies need to be devised to help Roma get out of the camps and other segregated areas to live in decent dwellings. Dividing families in various communal homes and persecuting people for offering shelter to those in need should not be part of the solution. The issue of camps also cannot be addressed through forced evictions, especially during the winter months, but rather through a well organised plan developed with the inclusion of those concerned, that combines voluntary moves to other municipalities and concrete housing solutions. The housing solutions afforded to the Roma should not be situated in remote and isolated areas, but in areas which are connected to the transport grid so that the Roma can travel to work and educational establishments easily. Investment in social housing is particularly needed and should increase, especially since house prices have continued to rise in many countries, making accommodation even more inaccessible for people who do not have the means. Accommodation solutions for Roma should also be dispersed around different areas to promote Roma integration amongst the community in general. More possibilities for Roma to become home owners need to be established. Successful projects have been carried out in some Member States in which Roma were actively involved in building their own houses via micro-credits, thereby acquiring their own accommodation.

The Protection against Discrimination Act should be fully enforced, including in the context of Roma housing. Specific policies are needed to eradicate residential exclusion, especially in view of the discrimination faced by Roma when seeking to rent accommodation once the agents learn of their Roma origins.

Travellers also face discrimination when it comes to housing, necessitating adequate policies. Travellers encounter problems accessing mortgages for mobile homes, and are often not allowed to conclude insurance contracts once the insurance company realises that the postcode of their mobile home corresponds to a camp site. They often find it difficult to find caravan sites which accept them and sometimes are denied access to electricity and water. A network of official caravan sites should be established, in collaboration with Roma and Traveller organisations. Whilst this is already in place in some areas in Europe, this needs to be extended. The participation of Roma and Traveller organisations in this exercise is crucial, in view of previous instances in which official caravan stops were set in areas next to motorways or landfills, where people were obviously reluctant to reside.

Key points:

- Minimum acceptable standards for housing should be established;
- Policies are urgently needed so that Roma can live in decent accommodation rather than camps; Dividing families in communal homes and forced evictions without offering real accommodation alternatives are inhumane practices which should be controlled consistently;
- Investment in social housing is crucial;
- The Protection Against Discrimination Act should be fully enforced; Policies aimed at eliminating residential exclusion should be envisaged;
- Policies are needed to fight effectively the discrimination faced by Travellers, in accessing mortgages for buying their mobile homes and insuring them, amongst other things;
- Roma and Traveller organisations should be involved in drawing up official caravan sites.

Health⁹**1.1 General recommendations on health**

In some countries, Roma as well as Travellers experience significant obstacles in access to health services. General practitioners (GPs) sometimes refuse to treat Travellers because of a lack of an official address. Alliances between CSOs and public health departments can help disseminate information amongst GPs on practical issues when treating Travellers, including in cases where they lack an official address. Member States should commit themselves to the principle of equal access to health care, whilst the necessary legislative measures should be taken to guarantee that Roma without basic health insurance are covered.

Roma health mediators have proven to be important, however, their number remains extremely limited. Roma health mediators can guide the Roma to available health services, disseminate health information and monitor particular health issues amongst the Roma community. An increase in the number of health mediators is crucial to guarantee basic health rights and to help address the significant disparity in the average life expectancy that exists between Roma and non-Roma.

Roma women have limited rights in terms of reproductive health, and often fall victim to rejection and denigration when receiving health care. Member States need to urgently abolish health care practices that violate reasonable ethical standards. They need to urgently set up and operate well-equipped mobile health units for the Roma communities living in inaccessible or ghettoised areas¹⁰. Home visiting programmes, which would include a nurse and a health mediator, are highly recommended especially for young teenage mothers. By showing them new horizons, these health care professionals can not only guide young mothers on how to take care of their health as well as that of their babies, but also encourage them to seriously consider going back to school rather than stop their education completely.

⁹ Further information: EESC hearing news story (2018) [The situation of Roma people in relation to health and their access to healthcare is still dire. EESC hearing reveals.](#)

¹⁰ EESC opinion (2018) [The situation of Roma women.](#)

Key points:

- CSOs and public health departments should work together to provide GPs with the practicalities on how to treat Travellers when they lack an official address;
- Equal access to healthcare should be the guiding principle in all Member States;
- An increase in the number of Roma health mediators is needed;
- Health care practices which breach ethical standards should be eliminated;
- Well-equipped mobile health units in appropriate numbers should be in operation to reach Roma communities living in inaccessible areas;
- Home visiting programmes for teenage mothers are recommended to encourage them not to give up on their education because of parenthood.

1.2 The situation of the Roma community and the COVID-19 pandemic: EESC declaration



Protecting minorities in these difficult times: the situation of the Roma community

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and its study group on the inclusion of the Roma join the call of Members from EU institutions as well as civil society organisations to raise concern over the worsening situation of marginalised communities, amongst them the Roma, during this difficult and uncertain period. We praise the volunteers and employees of Roma organisations for the invaluable work they are carrying out to continue assisting the Roma community in this challenging time, during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Yet their efforts cannot replace the governments' responsibilities for taking care of the whole population of their countries, including the Roma community. Nor should they replace the EU's duty to strive towards inclusion and equality for the Roma.

Many Roma in Europe have been living in destitution for far too long, and their situation now risks spiralling out of control with dire consequences for the members of this community. Many live in overcrowded camps with no access to running water, making it extremely hard to maintain the social distance and the hygiene necessary to suppress contagion. Lacking internet connections and the necessary hardware, Roma children cannot participate in any of the online educational activities organised by schools during their closure. Besides losing out on their education, Roma children are now also facing a lack of food, since school attendance often represented their only means to get a warm daily meal.

Many Roma work in the informal economy, not out of choice, but because they have no other way of feeding their family given the discrimination they face when applying for regular work. In view of restrictions on movements, they can no longer carry out these tasks. Not eligible to apply for unemployment benefits or other schemes set up by governments to sustain workers who have lost their jobs, they are being pushed into an even deeper poverty level. At the same time, antigypsyism is on the rise as the Roma are getting blamed for the spread of the virus in some regions, facing even more hostility than before.

In the light of the numerous reports that are emerging from various organisations concerning the dire situation of the Roma communities during this pandemic, we call on the Commission to monitor more than ever the Roma situation in the Member States. We urgently call on Member States to live up to their responsibility of protecting the Roma's right to health and to take into account the specificity of the living situation of the Roma community when applying emergency measures. We call for access to clean and safe water supplies, so that the rules on hygiene and sanitation can be adhered to. Temporary access to accommodation should be given to Roma communities residing in camps amidst dismal conditions, to allow them to properly follow the rules on social distancing. The Roma should be given access to medical care, medical tests, masks and treatments as all other citizens in the Member States where they reside. The

protection of fundamental rights should be universal, and should not differentiate on the basis of one's ethnicity or residential address.

We call on the European Commission to ascertain that the EU actions and programmes designed towards assisting citizens during this pandemic and offering much needed recovery thereafter, take into account the realities and difficulties faced by the Roma. We consider in this regard the importance of continuous dialogue with representatives of the Roma communities and Roma organisations, who can offer key recommendations so that the actions developed truly address the difficulties faced by the Roma community. As the voice of civil society, the EESC is committed to facilitate this dialogue to reach out to the most vulnerable in the current crisis.