
Letters from the field

In various occasions the possibility to talk to "office" people becomes rather difficult. We, the "field" people have a different perspective of our work and of the result we obtain. Office people read well written reports, look at photos and listen to grassroots organizations talking.

My response to the questions we are discussing is yet another question: Is there trust between us? Do you, trust us the grassroots organizations and what is this trust based upon? How much longer does the Roma community have to prove to the non Roma that yes we are capable of taking care of our own community? Real life is hard, not only for the Roma community but for all the people in a society lacking basic human rights and lacking elementary acts of decency.

Many trainings, seminars and workshops have been organized for the Roma grassroots organizations because they need capacity building. What happens with the Social welfare offices, the healthcare centres, any institution that you normally come to and you get discriminated? Just because of the colour of your skin or because you do not speak perfectly the language of the country you actually live in? What do I do in my everyday life when I encounter an Austrian distinguished lady, in the subway sitting next to me who starts to harass a young Turkish woman and her small boy, just because she speaks on the phone in her mother tongue?

There are no seminars, trainings, workshops that can teach me how to behave in the circumstances when the coordinator of a huge ESF project implemented by 12 Roma organizations wants to shut down the project just because the Ministry for Social affairs lacked a competent person to manage the project and now the Roma organizations get to pay back the resources they have already spent. Excellent the results but bad programming.

On various occasions I have suggested to have you, the "office" people come to a Roma settlement and see for yourselves how the real life of the Roma community looks like – I truly admire Thomas Hammerberg and Pier Mirel who actually took the effort to visit Roma settlements and see the hardship of their daily lives.

The Roma are seen primarily as part of the respective social structure in the forefront are the problems of their marginalization, which are usually seen in socio /economic terms. A great number of NGO managed projects have been implemented to overcome this inequality, followed by national programs and then also by European Union project lines.



The leading concept of this approach is that Roma should not be treated as a “normal community”, with its own identity, ethnic culture, but as strongly marginalized and to a great extent anomic community, that needs constant special care and social patronage. The entire ethnic community is viewed and identified only with its problematic section and as a result Roma is no longer considered and accepted as a distinct ethnic community with its specific ethnic culture.

How much do we really know about this community, about its culture, customs, tradition and language? You can argue with me and say that there are too many different groups under the same name Roma. I accept that. You are right. But in all these groups women are the ones that are always left behind, that are

never asked what are the needs of a modern Roma woman and therefore a modern, European Roma family standards.

Allow me to tell you a story. In the fifties of the last century, in an African country a donor wanted to invest in rice production. So the representatives came to visit this particular village and they spoke to the local community. They provided the necessary seeds and they explained how and what to do with it and then they left. They returned the next year and of course nothing was done. So they did it again, provided the seeds, explained the proceedings and then left. A couple of years it goes on in the same manner. At some point someone asks what did they do wrong. Well, the production of rice was entirely made by women and at those meetings there were no women.

The role of the women in the modern Roma society is not much different than what it was 50 years ago. The women are the decision makers. It may come as a surprise to some, but in a Roma family women are the ones who make many important decisions and they should be considered as counterparts equal as the Roma men.

Some might argue that this is not true or that the life of women is too complex and for some even difficult, I agree with that. I also agree that Roma women need a valid role model, someone to look up to and also to look like. For far too long the Roma mother-in-laws played the leading roles and these ladies have always pursued the same model of instructing young Roma women as the tradition dictates. I have also been told that I have to learn how to cook and clean and take care of my children since my mother-in-law will be telling off my grandmother and my mother as well as whole of my family for failing to raise me as a good Roma woman and a good Roma daughter-in-law. My reply was that I am not going to marry a Roma guy who has such an outdated mother.



In the Western Europe urban environment today the status of the Roma women has not advanced much. Many Romnja can work, it is true. Many have also attended school, some have also acquired a degree. But many of my women compatriots still today strive towards the so called “safe” jobs: coiffeur/hairdresser, manicure, kindergarten assistant and cleaning lady, the famous “putzfrau”. God forbid suggesting they could become/do something else! The woman is the regular cleaning Lady, that’s what she knows best. Suggesting she could be a “filialeiterin”, a manager, is equal to making a sort of an undecent proposal!

Further, the lack of self-esteem of the Roma women is ever so obvious. Fault of the wrong upbringing. The same as I have received it. But I had many role models. Women in my community who yes have married Roma men but have also had good education. They insisted their daughters attended university just because they could not or were not allowed to.

I am happy that during my work in the Roma community I became the role model for these women. According to the statistics and to the direct talks with the young Roma girls, at the University of Economy in Vienna there is only one Roma woman student and on other University there are a couple of Roma, who declare themselves to be Roma on the University where they study music, at the Kunst akademie.

Unfortunately I can not give you a reply why is this so. I know that many projects for Education have been implemented and the Strategies in all the EU member states have education as one of the main pillars for the integration of the Roma community. I suggest the EU should establish mechanisms to monitor projects results of projects financed from the EU budget, not only for the implementation success but also if these and such projects goals really work for Roma and how much and into which extent. The EU member states institutions can and should introduce these project achievements, good practices of the NGO sector and further finance and implement.

I sincerely suggest Roma to be consulted in creation of projects to be implemented and involving much more and more often educated Roma experts for Roma inclusion and integration. Also to involve Roma in the evaluation and design of indicators. Good practice examples should be more used and spread. The integration of the Roma community is a two way street, office people meet grassroots ngo’s in order to have a true, meaningful and long term impact in the Roma community. AND those of us who feel that they are true role models, will continue to motivate communities to pave their ways towards integration, striving towards self-empowerment and ownership.



For boosting Roma inclusion some key points I agree with and that have emerged from the research the Agency for fundamental rights has issued recently upon the research in 11 Eu member countries. The research involved engaging with Roma and local authorities to understand why many Roma inclusion efforts fail to produce tangible results. It also sought to identify succesful practices for creating social inclusion at the local level.

Some key points are:

- **Building trust** – after years of discrimination, poverty and social exclusion as well as the many failed inclusion efforts, managing expectations and building trust among the Roma is the key to successful integration. This involves keeping everyone informed and finding out what they most need.
- **Meaningful participation** – participation can take many forms from simply being invited to meetings through to helping to implement actions. However, whatever shape it takes, Roma should be involved as equals, rather than as a token gesture. For this, it is important to agree on specific goals that will deliver concrete meaningful results. This helps ensure local participation of the Roma community and motivates them to remain engaged.
- **Empowering people** – giving Roma the chance to engage in dialogue with local authorities empowers them to claim their rights. By listening to each other's views, a shared understanding is created and expectations are better managed. In this way stereotypes can be broken and the Roma will feel respected and stand up for the rights.
- **Learning from the past** – a deeper understanding of the reasons for successes and failures can help shape future efforts. By learning lessons, and being open about what went wrong and why, challenges can be overcome and future projects, policies and approaches adjusted. Ultimately this can improve the chances of success.



Community work and policy making: same objectives, different tools.
Who needs what to make the change possible?

Papusza is the Romany name of Polish poet and singer Bronislava Wajs. Being born and raised in a “cumpania” a group of Roma living together and traveling around Poland, Papusza had little chance of attending school. But she did understand that reading and writing was very important in life. So she traded her work for lessons, according to the film Papusza. She became a poet and therefore different from her fellow Romnja. She was given in marriage to a much older man at a young age and she was very unhappy in that marriage but she continued writing poems. Her community at first did not understand what power she had by knowing how to read and write. As it always is, an educated woman is a powerful woman. However, she is and remains a powerful role model for many young Romnja.

The problem of early marriages is a complex issue. It is not related to a specific ethnicity or nation, it is not related to a specific country either. Some research papers (Amnesty International) say that there are around 15 million girls sold or forcibly given in marriage every year. The only commonality is the economical poverty of the persons, usually parents who sell or forcibly marry their child.

In an informal Roma settlement in Italy, Romania or Bulgaria, as a common stereotype one could expect such a phenomenon. But in a well integrated society such as the Austrian is it is really an issue you could expect the least. And even so the phenomenon occurs. They explain it that it is the way they are preserving the Roma tradition. And they are right. They do so.

In other countries, less organized countries this phenomenon occurs and there are also settlements. The problems are not diminishing since the rate the settlements are enlarging is much faster than the enlargement of the EU, every 13/14 maximum 15 years a new family is formed. So the civil society organizations have always a lot of work. As well as the social welfare offices. And that’s something even birds on a tree know.

What is a peculiarity is the phenomenon in a well organized country as Austria is. The families arrange a marriage between their children, they prepare a huge wedding and this usually can be done both in Austria or in Serbia, since the majority of Roma immigrated to Austria from Serbia. Once the huge “circus” is over and done with, the girl continues to attend school. Until she gets pregnant. Then she can not attend school anymore. She turns to the Youth office, Jugendamt, and she tells the officer in charge of her case in the office that she is pregnant and she can not attend school anymore. She does not live with her parents

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anymore since her parents are severe and she is afraid of how would they treat her. So she gets to be protected by this lovely family who accepted to host her since she is a person in need (her inlaws). She is entitled to child benefit, single parent benefit, and the family that host her gets benefits in form of discounts for electricity, gas or rent. So, it is a rather good business, it's a sure win situation and the best part of this is that you and I can do nothing about it. The Law is equal for all.

In this particular situation how can we tell them that the girls health is endangered, that she has lost part of her childhood, and as she no longer goes to school, she becomes less competitive on the job market. But she is well married and she has her own family. She can always become a good putzfrau/cleaning lady.

Now, the situation is not as green as it seems. There are things that can be done. Very good results have been provided by the projects of afterschool help for the Roma children. Somewhat like peers help. A Roma student helping young Roma children to do their homework. Excellent role model. Always needed and hopefully continuing. The good thing is that now local schools in Vienna approach Roma civil society organizations asking for these projects to be continuously implemented. Especially the first couple of years of elementary school with the teaching mediator speaking Romany and /or Serbian. Many first grade children speak poor German due to poor attendance of preschool.

The role of the ngo's in this terms is essential. A very strange discovery was at least strange for me, regarding the work of ngo's. By originating from a hoping to become a member of the EU family, becoming a Roma activist signified a lot of seminars, workshops, conferences, round tables community meetings and community visits I have personally organized and attended. In all those numerous meetings and gatherings I acquired a lot of informal education and I have become an expert in my line of work. The successes of the projects I implemented are the result as well as the proof of my professionalism and expertise.

However, today I find myself in a very strange situation. I collaborate with many organizations in many parts of the EU and just a few of these organizations have the capacities to come up with some ideas, make a project proposal and implement an EU project. The capacity building expected and done in the preaccession countries with the Roma organizations is at a much higher level and now the strangest thing is happening. The institutions also have little knowledge of how the projects are implemented, how to deal with projects an ngo is implementing and to understand that the institution should take over the



results and continue, practically take over the project and continue. This is what happens now in Austria with the ESF project. The Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs and twelve Roma organizations in Austria are implementing a three years project. The results are excellent but bad programming.

The community work is giving good results only when all the relevant stakeholders are involved and cooperating and when yet again there is mutual trust and support.

This is very important for a more swift cooperation on very delicate issues. On one side we have an ngo related directly to the community and depending on the trust it represents in the community. On the other hand the institutions the ngo put their trust in for colaboration and continuation. Somehow somewhere it seems that the line has been broken between all of them and we need to find it and join hands for better results.