

Opening

Roma have the right of free movement but they have nowhere to go. This is the starting point of the presentation of the outcomes on the focus group with Roma organized by Caritas Slovakia. These focus groups included 15 participants (Roma people with various backgrounds) gathered to discuss about citizenship in the frame of the European Year of Citizenship. Are they aware of their rights? Can they exert them? A lot of them did not know with which rights they were entitled as country citizens, but as European citizens as well. Many obstacles prevent them from exerting their rights as the negative image and stereotypes on Roma conveyed by media, discrimination in employment or the Roma issue being played and abused by extremist politicians. The starting line is different for Roma and non Roma community. Find the video [here](#).

Bernard Bober, archbishop of Kosice, presented the conference by focusing on poor people in need of spiritual assistance and guidance for them to receive the possibility to feel love. According to him, our society receives a new order; currently the essential situation is a failure of the system responsible for non-social inclusion of groups of all levels. It is all about sharing responsibilities and sharing cohesion.

Jorge Nuno Mayer, Caritas Europa Secretary General presented to the audience a very illuminating Roma legend to illustrate his point: “when the lord made the lord, he formed the human beings, put them in the oven, first it took very long so it created black people. The second time it was not that long and it created white people. The third time the timing was perfect so that it created Roma people”.

Anna Zaborska, a Slovak MEP said that she sees that after having spent ten years in the European Parliament, many European Roma programs have not worked. She admitted that Caritas Slovakia was working a lot on it and that everyone should let the voice of charity be heard. She ended by stating that voices of charities want to tackle the real problem: the loss of human dignity.

According to Maria Kadriakova from the European Commission representation in Slovakia, the [EU Framework for Roma](#) bridges the gap between Roma and non-Roma communities in society and all member States have adopted the strategy to tackle exclusion of Roma. However, she said that on local level Roma are not engaged or integrated because the recommendation of the EU should be a part of national programs.

Various Caritas MOs presentation

Caritas Slovakia - activities of the community centers in Stropkov ([here](#))

Caritas Slovakia presented its activities in the community centers in Stropkov since 2002. They aim to provide social devices for housing, unemployment and education projects while trying to leave an important place to leisure time. 16 villages are now monitored by this successful project.

Caritas Bosnia-Herzegovina – inclusion and education of Roma ([here](#))

Caritas Bosnia and Herzegovina presented its activities about economic incentives on Roma education. The project aims to connect the educational and social segment with the housing

component: social workers are supporting the families and Roma mediator support teachers at school and social workers. This project is a success and it is lead in partnership with the government of Luxembourg; local partners as the Ministry of education of regions, centers for social work in projects municipalities and the “Be My Friend” association and the LEDA association that implement it.

Caritas Flanders, Roma living in Ghent ([here](#))

The diocese of Ghent presented its initiatives for Roma that table on education and health care. Some specific social initiatives are implemented as well, as social service to teach language to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, social assistance on medical care and food. Two permanent staff is involved. The diocese cooperates on a project with Caritas Slovakia on pre-school education that aims to teaching Roma children the Slovak language for school.

Caritas Romania - From day care to community center ([here](#))

For Caritas Romania, education is not enough. They presented projects that aim to enlarge their activities to health promotion and access to health services, but funding are difficult to find. Caritas try to put the system in a new context because communities cannot be developed from outside but it has to be led by the communities.

Caritas Luxembourg, mission in south Serbia ([here](#))

Caritas Luxembourg presented projects that focus on education, health care and housing, with the objective of poverty reduction among Roma and vulnerable people.

They concluded their presentation by saying that the main lessons learned during the implementation of the projects are to be close to the people and work with them and to avoid positive discrimination.

Secours Catholique – A mee Rom, solidarité avec les Roms

Secours Catholique presented projects implemented in collaboration with Caritas Romania and Secours Catholique, which aim to improving housing conditions and provide social accompaniment to obtain rights and help the Roma people in France and in Romania at the same time to understand better the population and fight against discrimination against Roma.

Caritas Czech Republic – a village; a cohabitation

Caritas Czech Republic presented projects which aim at helping poor people with a focus on Roma communities. They help Roma people building houses for themselves and as it was a success they try now to enlarge their action to after school education of children.

Other organization inputs

European Social Development Fund's support for community projects in Slovakia ([here](#))

The European Social Development Fund's support for community projects in Slovakia presented its on in-field social work as an important tool of the integration of Roma communities. Their projects are currently being implemented in the country mainly through 258 municipalities which plan to provide high quality social services to 80 000 citizens, by meeting their individual needs and focusing on their everyday problems.

Don Bosco association – Lunik centre ([here](#))

For the Dom Bosco association working with Roma at the Lunik Center, the most important thing is that social workers have to live among Roma communities for building stable structure. The issue is not about money it is about leading them to a change of mentality, which could help opening the vicious circle. According to them, the basic pillars of sustainability are a need of a leader organization, a team corporation, the inclusion of the majority, to involve the leader of the Roma community and educate Roma leader to be politically involved and interested. They ended their presentation saying that personal experience was an asset and the personal quest for change was also a component of the success of projects.

Daniel Skobla – Poverty reduction and Roma inclusion officer UNDP, Europe and the CIS, Bratislava regional center ([here](#))

The UNDP office on poverty reduction and Roma inclusion in Bratislava presented its project to build an atlas of data on Roma communities in order for decision making authorities to address negative situations existing with marginalized Roma communities. This research project has a direct political aim: signing of partnership agreement between Slovakia and the EU for Slovakia to map the issue on what European finances should be aimed at.

Panel discussion

What obstacles are encountered by Roma people in enjoying their full citizens and social rights – links with access to education, employment, housing and health care?

One of the questions was: what is the chance we give to Roma children if we consider them as different from other children? For most of the participants, attending specialized primary school is not a solution for children with difficulties because they have then to attend secondary specialized schools; this solution does not give them any chance on the labor market and does not end the vicious circle of poverty. One of the answers was that when organisations help Roma or vulnerable groups, they had to think about them as individuals and not as a part of a big group with vulnerabilities.

The panelist highlighted also that only a systematic work could improve the situation. Moreover, the support must be comprehensive: the educational and employment opportunities should go in hand. It is difficult to decide which support should be delivered first: sometimes it is access to housing, sometimes to education. All depends on external circumstances.

Closing

Jorge Nuno Mayer, Caritas Europa Secretary General, stated that through this conference, Caritas organisations had chance to learn about various experiences in different countries. According to him the main issue is to analyze the causes of poverty and discrimination. That is why it is important to listen to Roma. Roma projects have to be community oriented, having a higher responsibility of Roma for themselves. Christian community has to create awareness in society. As education is a core issue, projects have to be mainly family oriented and direct support like giving food or housing is only acceptable if it is done with engagement for the development of Roma community. He said that networking is a great asset because no organization has the solution on its own. Finally, he shared his views that local authorities' have to help and European funds have to be used more efficiently by governments.

Dominic Verhoeven, Director of Caritas Belgium Vlaanderen, presented the collaboration with the state as essential, as it is the prior partner for tackling the issue, especially in financial terms; Caritas organisations cannot overtake this role. He concluded by saying that one of the main issues is to fight against stigmatization and generalization about Roma communities. (see the presentation [here](#)).