



Improving the situation of Roma people in Europe: Challenges and open questions

Communiqué

The Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) and the Conference of European Churches (CEC) held a joint consultation on the theme "Improving the Situation of Roma People in Europe: Challenges and open questions" under the auspices of the Greek Presidency of the European Union. This consultation took place in Athens from 5-7 May 2014 on the gracious invitation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. CCEE and CEC met recognizing our common call from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ to be salt and light in society.

The term "Roma" commonly used in Europe refers to Roma, Sinti, Kale and related groups in Europe, including Travellers and covers the wide diversity of the groups concerned, including persons who identify themselves as "gypsies":

The Deputy foreign minister of Greece Mr Kyriakos Gerontopoulos greeted the conference and emphasised the importance of "social integration of Roma while preserving the Roma cultural traditions and lifestyle". The consultation took stock of the churches' ministry with the Roma minorities, the history of Roma in Europe with its different facets and aspects of exclusion and inclusion, political initiatives over the past years, and the current situation particularly with regard to education and employment. The President of the European Roma and Travellers Forum gave an overview of current concerns among Roma organisations in Europe and highlighted the concerns regarding anti-zyganism and hate speech across Europe.

- 1- As representatives of Christian churches, we affirm our conviction that every human being is created in the image of God and should be equally respected regardless of their ethnic identity. Roma brothers and sisters have been part of church life for centuries. We recognize the important role of churches in improving the situation of Roma in many parts of Europe. With their long-term engagement and presence in all parts of Europe, churches can be instrumental in showing solidarity with Roma minorities, particularly advocating for their safety, social and economic development and their participation in society.
- 2- Churches are aware of the diversity among the Roma minorities across Europe: while related, they have developed more than 150 different dialects; the majority have settled in European countries, others are travelling.

- 3- Roma struggle with exclusion from societies, particularly with regard to education, employment, housing and health. They are regarded as “the others” by large parts of our societies. In contrast, for Christians, based on the biblical message, the “other” is our neighbour who deserves dignity. We appeal to all churches to become more inclusive at local level and welcome and meet “the others” in the spirit of love.
- 4- Integration of Roma in society should not be mistaken as assimilation; Roma cultures, languages and lifestyles contain values which should be appreciated and preserved. At the same time, some phenomena related to segregated, ghetto life such as petty crime should not be portrayed as Roma culture with the negative ascriptions to the population.
- 5- Education is one of the main routes to improve the situation of Roma people, and churches in many countries are engaged in providing education. Therefore, churches could promote a culture of education and learning among marginalized communities.
- 6- All children have the right to education, including Roma children; therefore access to complete and quality education needs to be ensured everywhere building on existing good practice. Churches deplore segregated special schools because they do not enable pupils to reach their full potential. In the case of predominantly Roma speaking areas, a quality school for a majority of Roma children may be the best solution and should not be seen as segregation.
- 7- The teaching in Roma languages should be available at all school levels, in order to value and preserve the Roma culture and languages. This should not be restricted to the Roma community, but be available to the wider local community.
- 8- Roma should assume primary roles in community development. Training of Roma in Peer Programmes has been successful in education and mediation and should be further developed.
- 9- Roma people are citizens of European countries with rights and duties. In the European Union, freedom of movement and the choice to settle in different parts, taking up employment where it is available, are rights of all EU citizens which have to be respected for Roma minorities, too.
- 10- The lack of access to the labour market is one of the main causes of poverty of Roma people. Churches appreciate that public and private funding shall be allocated to the support of employment of disadvantaged members of our societies. This funding needs to be made more targeted, sustainable and effective to achieve the aim.

- 11- Racism and words conveying hatred are harmful, as they foster negative attitudes in our societies, and should therefore be eliminated from the media and political discourse. Prejudice and anti-Roma sentiments should not be used for political gains; we call on politicians to refrain from anti-gypsyism. Media should communicate more realistic portrayals of Roma.

- 12- The history of Roma people as part of national history needs to be elaborated with the participation of the Roma communities in the respective countries, and subsequently become part of national curricula.

- 13- Testimonies shared during the joint consultation confirmed that local parishes provide the space for intercultural encounters between the different communities, fostering acceptance and trust. Thus churches are regarded as credible partners by many Roma communities. In light of their permanent commitment, churches should also be considered as reliable partners by local, national and European authorities in the implementation of their integration programmes.

- 14- Successful integration will require more than a project-centred strategy: it demands long-term commitment and a comprehensive approach to community development, participation and equality.

The Council of European Bishops' Conference in Europe and the Conference of European Churches reaffirm their commitment and will consider effective follow-up measures of churches to improve the situation of Roma people in Europe.

Athens, 7 May 2014