

ERGO's strategy on active citizenship through empowerment and grass roots mobilisation

January 2009

Time for a Strategy

Following the Council conclusions on the inclusion of Roma, dated 8th of December 2008¹, and the European Commission's renewed commitment to non-discrimination and equal opportunities, as mentioned in its Communication of 2nd of July 2008², ERGO considers it imperative to inform its partners at European, national and local level of its active and effective contribution to the process of Roma inclusion.

In anticipation of an improved legal framework to be realised by the European Institutions in the area of anti-discrimination, and its further implementation by the Member States of Europe, ERGO, in its role as a civil society actor, considers that it is time for a Strategy that promotes long-term change, by uprooting the entrenched causes of Roma stigmatisation. For too long, emphasis has been placed on short-term projects aimed at improving the basic conditions and immediate needs of Roma in the areas of health, employment, education, and housing. We now need to collect our experiences and focus on tackling the roots of exclusion.

In preparing our activities for the 2010 "European Year for combating poverty and social exclusion", ERGO will continue to assist Roma grassroots organisations in taking up their civil responsibilities and executing concrete actions. This document puts forward our Strategy on the promotion of **active citizenship** through the mechanisms of **empowerment** and **grass-roots mobilisation**. We would like to share our good practices and experiences and elaborate on the role that ERGO can play as a valuable **partner** in this process of change.

We strongly hope that this Strategy will further stimulate **reflection** and **debate** on how to **link the actions** of all parties, in order to come to a coordinated and integral future approach on the inclusion of Roma.

Root cause of exclusion: stigmatisation

The stigmatisation of Roma is one of the root causes of their social exclusion. Roma are regarded as a threat to the stability and well-being of society and are often portrayed as undeserving,

ungrateful and untrustworthy sub-citizens. They are perceived as inactive citizens, incapable of contributing to the creation of a healthy social environment in which they can partake in their social, economical and political rights. Due to this stigmatisation, Roma *have no control on the way they are perceived*. Anti-Gypsyism in schools, in the mass media, in the workplace and in the public eye, confirms prejudices and stereotypes. An overwhelming number of European citizens are willing to openly express their profoundly derogatory views of "what a gypsy is" and "what is to be expected from a gypsy", based purely on stereotypes. Roma themselves *internalise* the negative images projected onto their ethnic group and often accept them as normal, reflecting and strengthening the attitude of the majority. Due to the harsh stigma attached to Roma, many are afraid to identify themselves as such, regardless of their social status. Instead, they prefer to assimilate with the majority or to integrate into better perceived minorities (such as Hungarians in Romania or Turks in several other countries) rather than to assume their own ethnic identity.

ERGO contributes to the dilution and eventual elimination of this stigma, which will allow Roma to hold a respected place in society, without renouncing their ethnicity. ERGO believes that Roma and non-Roma should both assume their responsibilities and duties as active citizens and act forcefully and effectively against anti-Gypsyism. We consider that non-Roma should recognise the long-term damage that such stigmatisation has caused. Such a realisation needs to go beyond the use of politically correct language. Moreover, change has to come from within Roma, with help from ERGO member associations, to identify and to rupture the damaging internalisation process.

1 Council of the European Union, 15976/1/08 REV 1, Brussels, 8th of December 2008.

2 Commission of the European Communities, *Communication from the Commission: Non-discrimination and Equal Opportunities – a Renewed Commitment* (2008), 420 final, Brussels, 2nd of July 2008.

Active-citizenship

ERGO promotes awareness of active-citizenship and works to give Roma an equal and respected place in society. **Active-citizenship** refers to the shared ownership of society, the principle of self-determination and its associated values, such as care, dignity and responsibility. Through active citizenship, people develop a sense of identity and belonging to society. Active citizens are aware of their rights and responsibilities and act accordingly; they are able to exercise and defend these rights while assuming their responsibilities and duties. Currently, most Roma projects or policies perceive Roma as socially problematic and passive beneficiaries, placing the focus on poverty and dependency. Strong emphasis is placed on the responsibilities of Roma towards non-Roma, in the form of indisputable requirements: Roma need to change their culture, they need to put their children in schools, they need to respect the laws, and to adapt themselves.

ERGO advocates changing this paternalistic attitude. We believe Roma should participate as active fellow citizens in their own societies, by taking up the responsibility to alter their own situation and to contribute to the shaping of society. Citizenship is often reduced to a set of formal rights and downplays the participatory dimension. However, ERGO promotes a more dynamic concept of active citizenship, starting with fundamental citizens rights and moving towards more abstract rights, such as own identity and universal respect. In putting this into practice, our member organisations assess the dynamics among all actors; Roma as well as national, regional and local authorities and NGOs. We identify the different priorities for these actors, the questions that need to be addressed, where support is needed and how we can help. Our support is tailor made to the group and the situation. In this way, we support both Roma and non-Roma in creating internal and external relations, which enhance the qualities of citizenship within both parties and further develops mutual understanding and respect.

ERGO mechanisms of change: empowerment & grass roots mobilisation

ERGO invests in the empowerment and mobilisation of Roma at grassroots level, by supporting activism and leadership.

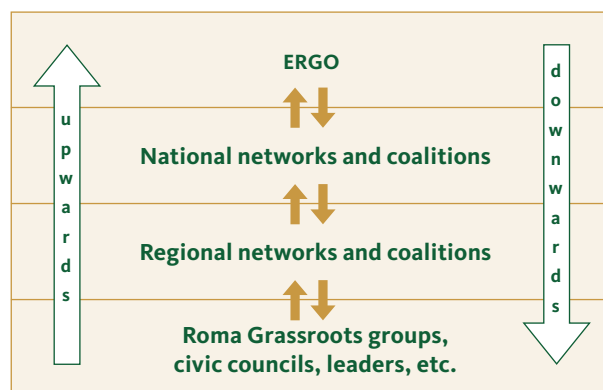
Empowerment is a process that enables people, individually and collectively, to take control of their own lives and act together to produce change in their societies. Our concept of empowerment is based on a **process oriented approach**, which focuses on the mechanisms of change that provide Roma the possibility of overcoming stigma and better negotiating their interests in society. There is a general tendency for Roma

Empowerment of Roma women in Albania

A grassroots group of Albanian Roma women successfully negotiated the inclusion of a Roma culture section in the Albanian national museum. This success and the subsequent debate amongst the Albanian public regarding the position of Roma culture, helped to make grassroots Roma women aware of their capacities to impact upon the position of Roma in society.

projects to focus on project management, special services and technical skills development, rather than encouraging self-organisation and activism. ERGO's approach is different. The work carried out by our partner organisations is **long-term** and oriented towards sustainability. ERGO believes the main priority is the **process of change** rather than short-term solutions.

Our mechanism of change has a participatory, long-term and bottom-up approach. By assessing dynamics between Roma and non Roma within communities and society at large, we propose concepts, methods and role models. Through **empowerment and grassroots mobilisation** we strive for active citizenship. **Grassroots mobilisation** is a process which brings people together and enables them to fight for a common cause. Our main concern is to mobilise Roma in different countries in order to help them to organise themselves, to identify priorities and to introduce them on the political agenda of responsible institutions at local, regional, national and European level. Since most Roma policies are created at the highest national level, we promote a bottom-up approach, taking into account grassroots priorities. ERGO functions as a communication chain that facilitates the exchange of information and knowledge, as well as serving as a watchdog over the relevant authorities. The figure hereunder, illustrates the two-way flow of information of the communication chain.



Upwards & downwards flow of information

Upwards: experiences from grassroots level concerning impact of Roma policies on municipal level (assessment and evaluation of Roma policies)
Downwards: information concerning EU and national Roma policies and available opportunities for grassroots Roma to improve their position

As illustrated in the figure, ERGO support networks and structures that unite Roma groups at all levels; ERGO network members (Roma organisations) unite grassroots organisations and put them into contact with national and regional Roma networks and coalitions. Information flows from ERGO member organisations, through the networks (at European, national, regional and local level), to Roma groups and to individuals, enabling the exchange of information and good practices and elevating the voice of Roma in decision making processes. ERGO networks are **inclusive** and open to Roma from all social and economic backgrounds, while giving particular attention to the inclusion of Roma women and Roma youth. By attracting Roma from all sectors, we involve and unite Roma for a common cause.

In doing so, ERGO aims to provide an alternative to the practice of many (inter)national donors and Roma organisations that target exclusively lower-income Roma.

“Lonely Riders”

In the context of developing Roma integration policies, Bulgarian authorities appointed Roma individuals as experts on ethnic and demographic issues. Although these experts have pre-determined roles, many of them are given limited responsibilities. Often, they are mediators between Roma and institutions in their region, and do not have the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of Roma policies or to sincerely represent Roma interests. The lack of an effective mandate in this respect generates a great deal of frustration amongst these experts. In addition, they may find themselves ostracized by the broader Roma community. ERGO creates relations and structures to help these “lonely rider”. We support them in becoming team players and legitimised spokespeople for Roma, with a view to ensure the involvement of capable actors in the process of change.

In order to counteract the process of self-segregation, ERGO works with *role models* of successful Roma, to which other Roma can relate and take pride in.

ERGO member organisations engage in:

- Introducing role models by inviting them to network meetings and linking them to awareness raising campaigns
- Reflecting together with Roma leaders, women and youngsters on the ‘internalisation problem’ during community meetings, networks and platform meetings
- Initiating campaigns with networks and community groups that promote a positive image of Roma

Promoting role models in Bulgarian schools

In Bulgaria, Roma secondary school students receive support from a project which distributes textbooks and small scholarships. Students are also introduced to strong role models. Young people discover the difference between ethnicity and citizenship and they learn how they can interact with their community representatives and with their country fellows as citizens and members of ethnic groups. They are encouraged to explore their rights as citizens by interacting with their local authorities, while respecting their civil duties.

ERGO member organisations assist Roma in identifying and exploiting the **available resources** in their communities as well as those at regional and national level, which allows us to run low-cost, effective projects. Most of the time, our interventions are simple, but since they tackle priorities identified by Roma,

they are well received and valuable. It is important to mention that our projects and activities are only a starting point. They constitute the first step in raising awareness amongst Roma of their own potential in achieving their goals.

ERGO members engage in:

- Stimulating the organisation of community groups and committees through small scale projects
- Creating and facilitation of networks, coalitions and other representative structures of grassroots leaders
- Establishing communication streams between networks at different levels, through which information is exchanged

Mission of the ERGO network

The European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network is a network of Roma and non-Roma organisations, focused on the **empowerment** and **grassroots mobilisation of Roma**. We promote active-citizenship awareness as a means of enabling Roma to hold a respected place in society. ERGO assesses the dynamics and priorities among Roma and non-Roma in communities and proposes successful concepts, methods and role models to build up active citizenship. With the aim of developing a strong Roma grassroots movement, ERGO supports activism and leadership among the Roma at all levels of society. We create opportunities for Roma to have their voices heard.

We work in close **partnership** with several European organisations and institutions, such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe, ministries of all European Member States, local and regional authorities, NGOs and consultancies.

We would be pleased to work in partnership with you in future cooperation. Please visit our website at: www.ergonetnetwork.org

Contact ERGO

Mrs L. Makaveeva, Chair of ERGO:
l.makaveeva@gmail.com

ERGO Members

RAA Albania,
Împreuna, Romania
Integro, Bulgaria
Tarna Rom, Moldova
Združenie Spolu, Slovakia
Roma Progress, Macedonia
EDROM, Turkey

Associate members

Ruhama, Romania

ERGO secretariat

www.ergonetnetwork.org