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## **The Role of Political and Civic Self-Organization in the Fight Against Marginalisation and for the Creation of Equal Opportunities**

I would like to start my presentation thanking the Southeast Europe Association for gathering us here in a very special moment. I hope it is a crucial moment in the advancement of the European Roma people.

In my paper I will briefly present to you the following issues:

- Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG)
- Most relevant pending issues of the Spanish Roma population
- NGOs` role in the Spanish context as well as FSG`s main lines of action
- A view on the current European context and expectations

**A. Fundación Secretariado Gitano** is a Spanish non-profit, intercultural social organization, which provides services for the development of the Roma Community mainly throughout all of the Spanish territory. With more than 40 years experience and 76 offices, our mission is the integral advancement of the Roma community based on respect for cultural identity.

The purpose of this mission is to support access of Roma to rights, services and social resources on an equal footing with the rest of the citizens. In carrying out this mission FSG develops two types of actions:

- Provision of direct services in order to improve their living standard in the fields of education, employment, health, women, youth, etc, awareness raising initiatives, etc.

- Actions aimed at fostering more proactive policies for this minority (studies, training and technical assistance to public administration, etc).

## **B. The Spanish Roma Population**

The Spanish Roma population is estimated of around 700.000 persons and has put down roots in the country (as far as we know) around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. This is a very heterogeneous, young minority. And it is immersed in a deep change process.

Many Spanish Roma families managed to achieve improvements in their social situation during the last decades due to the fact that, as well as the other Spaniards, they benefited from welfare policies: universalisation of education, the health system, etc. In particular the access to normalized housing through reallocation initiatives. In this context of general policies, it was noticed that some citizens, the most excluded ones, could not access these resources in the same way as the rest of the Spaniards, and here is where NGOs working with the most vulnerable groups, including Roma, started to work in the role as service providers.

Unfortunately we have to talk about this community with similar problems than the rest of the Roma in other countries but maybe the difference is the severity of the problems.

-Some of the obstacles and pending issues that the Spanish Roma have to overcome are found in the sphere of social inclusion and still affect a significant proportion of the Roma families.

- **Employment:** with an unemployment rate which is 4% points higher than that of the rest of the population, precarious jobs and low qualification the economic worsening situation means fewer opportunities for some Roma, which already do not have equal access the labour market due also to direct or covered discrimination.
- **Education:** nearly 100% of all Roma children are enrolled at school. However, early school leaving or absenteeism is more pronounced among the Roma community thus making it more difficult for Roma youth to gain access to employment.

The tendency of Roma students is to concentrate in certain schools which are characterised by lower academic achievement figures and which are similar to segregated education

- **Housing:** Persistence of shanty towns and isolated settlements. Even though this situation has improved significantly, around 12% of Spanish Roma people still live in substandard houses.

-Other aspects related to the guarantee of rights, institutional recognition, equal treatment, combating discrimination and improvement of their social image, affect the entire Roma community.

- Persistence of a negative image, prejudices and the consequences of discrimination. Sociological reports keep on showing Roma as the most rejected group
- Recognition: which has been very recently addressed with the creation of the State Council of the Roma People (2006), the Roma Culture Institute (2007), and the recognition of the Roma contribution in some regional statues (Catalonia, Andalusia, Aragon and Castile-Leon).

### **C. FSG main lines of action/ACCEDER**

In order to achieve the advancement of the Roma community we carry out many activities in the fields of social inclusion as well as fostering more proactive policies. We have taken over the role as service providers and focus on the social inclusion of the Roma people.

Even though FSG carries out around 340 projects and programmes in the fields of education, health, housing, culture, volunteers, training, international cooperation, equal treatment, community social action, women, youth, inmate population, etc. I will focus on ACCEDER: our employment initiative. The ACCEDER program (Spanish word for access) started in the year 2000, based on the belief that employment, and especially salaried employment, is of key relevance for the social inclusion of the Roma community, so that the main objective of the program is to promote the Roma's access to the labour market, thus promoting equal opportunities. This initiative is funded by the European Social Fund through the Multioperational Programme *fight against discrimination*, and co-financed by the State, Regional and Local Administration as well as private funding. After seven years, the results have shown that it has been an effective program, considered "best practice" by UN-HABITAT (United Nations) and the European Commission, ACCEDER today is a reference in Europe for other countries that are considering transferring its key ideas to their territories, which is done in Bosnia and Romania. Lets see how it works over there.

**Between 2000 and 2007 the quantitative results are the following:**

- Number of users: 37.754
- Number of contracts achieved: 28.519
- Number of trained people: 7.304
- Collaboration agreements with 350 enterprises

But beyond the quantitative results, the ACCESS program is successful for having changed the mentality in relation to access to employment for the Roma population, the Roma themselves, the governments, the business people and society as a whole.

The 2007-2013 programming period of the SSFF incorporates the ACCEDER programme also including new activities adapted to the new context, for example the development of educational measures, initiatives addressed to Roma from Eastern Europe (mainly Romanian and

Bulgarian) now living in Spain, among others.

**Some of the lessons learnt by the FSG in implementing the ACCEDER programme:**

**a)** The need to combine mainstream and targeted approaches, meaning, on the one hand, the need for general policies with the possibility of adapting them to Roma beneficiaries and, in cases of a clear situation of disadvantage, it also means setting up specific targeted services, but always with a view to lead to mainstreaming. In other words, tailored but not segregated services.

**b)** Integrated approach concerning the social and economic dimensions: Inclusion pathways approach as a standard model, taking into account that social inclusion requires closer relation between active employment and other social measures.

**c)** Combination of the national and local approach: A nation-wide programme allows greater efficiency and larger investment in common actions with the implementation and adaptation to the local level.

> Mutual learning among regions

**d)** Strong public-private partnership with regional and local public administrations, enterprises and other social organisations. Nowadays FSG holds more than 350 collaboration agreements with public and private entities.

**e)** Methodology specifically focused on efficiency and achieving objectives. Positive results have a multiplier effect, contribute to a change in the mentality of Roma themselves and also serve to raise the expectations and the degree of involvement of government administrations and other players.

This means that results must be measured and efficiency must be proved.

**f)** NGOs have shown to develop a proactive and valuable role in our societies, counting at the same time on the trust of citizens and working very closely to the targeted families/groups.

The role of service providers obliges these organizations to be innovative and flexible to adapt to different contexts and needs. It is crucial that these tasks are carried out by mature organisations with experience in implementing programmes and ensuring transparency, quality and strict management.

**g)** Interculturality and professionalism are of key importance in implementing projects. Our entity fully supports an intercultural society, fostering mutual learning and respect for people from diverse origins, which is how our working teams are formed, interculturality and professionalism teams providing targeted but non segregated services.

**h)** Long-term planning: especially when addressing structural issues as education, housing, equal treatment we need the possibility to plan interventions with more than 12 or 18 months. Quality and quantitative results require time and adjusting.

#### **D. Current context**

2008 will be remembered as the year when the 1<sup>st</sup> Roma Summit took place and unfortunately, this year will also be remembered because of some rejectable and punishable acts against this community in some member states.

We believe that Roma inclusion can be given a major boost if this is convincingly placed at the centre of the instruments and common policies which we already have as:

- The anti-discrimination policy seeking greater effectiveness in the implementation of the Directives and other instruments and paying special attention to the Roma issue in future regulatory developments.
- The Inclusion Strategy for 2010 making the Roma issue one of the priorities for active inclusion and one of the priority goals at the OMC (Open Method of Coordination).
- The Structural Funds and especially the European Social Fund providing the structure for national policies targeting Roma and promoting their transnational dimension. Today a large proportion of these funds and opportunities are concentrated on the newest members of the EU with the largest Roma populations which is why it is important to stress this focus.

In this sense, I would like to highlight the creation of the European Network on Social Inclusion and Roma under the Structural Funds EUROMA ([www.euromanet.eu](http://www.euromanet.eu)) promoted by the Spanish Government and supported by the European Commission. It provides a forum for the ESF Managing Authorities and the departments responsible for Roma policies of 12 EU countries (Bulgaria, Czech Rep, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Sweden and of course Spain) with the clear aim of enhancing the effectiveness of programs financed by Structural Funds and targeting Roma. Especially because these funds have shown that properly used they can make a difference in the social inclusion of vulnerable groups.

It is therefore necessary to emphasize the “co-responsibility” of the different players and not only Member States’ Governments which naturally play a key role in the designing of policies and measures and the allocation of funds, etc., but also other levels of the administration and civil society which should also take a pro-active, constructive, efficient, responsible and innovative role.

The role of mass media is of key importance. Being opinion builders for society they also have to be responsible for the image of the Roma people. As an NGO we can fight against prejudices and stereotypes of the major society, make nice awareness rising campaigns but with the headings of a newspaper, or with a one-minute- interview you are sometimes showing just a partial image of the Roma and losing months or sometimes years of work on the path to equal opportunities.

Each one should do its part and we should work together, there are good and meaningful initiatives and entities: departments or divisions inside the EC /EP, COE, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues within the OSCE, FRA, Roma Decade (REF included), World Bank, European Roma Policy Coalition and the declarations/ work lobbying, international NGOs: ERRC; ERIO; ENAR, Open Society among others. We need to coordinate and join our efforts.

We have a lot of expectations on the next European Council, next 15<sup>th</sup> this month: the Roma still need protection policies and measures that will help them exercise their full citizenship, their rights and their obligations in an equal footing. So, let's have more inclusion policies and less discrimination working jointly for a real inclusive Europe.