

Inclusive development for Roma: Top-down and bottom-up

By Hacer Foggo

Momentum for mobilization

The last few years in Turkey have seen an increasing openness by the government to addressing the Roma issue. This openness has been paralleled by a process of grass-roots mobilization to give voice to and represent the local Roma and other disadvantaged communities with the hope of changing their socio-economic condition.

A series of legal changes and amendments made to laws from 2006 onwards to eliminate discriminatory articles and language targeting Roma marked the beginning of the process. A series of public meetings since 2009 firmly put the Roma issue on the government agenda. At the same time, the EU, which had taken visible steps to political commitment on the Roma issue, also spurred local grass-roots mobilization across Turkey. A very positive development was the founding of the Roma Rights Forum of Turkey (ROMFO) on 12 November 2012, with the participation of 70 Roma associations from all around the country. Forming this representative body was a big step for Roma communities. The founding of ROMFO was also referred to as a positive development in the European Commission's 2013 Progress Report for Turkey. The members of this forum raise issues and concerns particular to Roma communities, communicate them to the concerned government authorities, and make efforts to turn the individual solutions into state policy.

At the national level, the first Roma Workshop organized on 10 December 2009 with the participation of representatives of five Roma federations and 80 Roma associations was the first step the Turkish Government took to begin a consultation process with Roma community leaders about the problems their communities faced. During the workshop, Roma representatives expressed their views and made suggestions to improve their life conditions including combating discrimination and improving their access to public services such as housing, education, employment, health and civil rights. They also gave examples of how difficult and, in some cases, even impossible they found communication between Roma and public authorities and institutions.

The gradual process of government openness to the concerns of Roma most recently culminated in the democratization policy package adopted for the country in which provisions for Roma were also included. It includes plans for the establishment of a Roma language and cultural institute, and the design of new housing for Roma within urban development projects, which caters to the particular needs of Roma.

Even though such actions have helped to raise public awareness about problems facing Roma communities and have signalled the government's commitment to addressing them, a structured government policy has not yet been adopted.

The urban housing challenge

Housing is one of the key challenges facing Roma in Turkey. Ninety percent of Roma live in big cities, the majority of them in the marginalized and poorer areas of town. Roma neighbourhoods are in great need of genuine social rehabilitation programmes due to their overwhelming demographic and social vulnerability. However, they are increasingly harmed or sidelined by the dynamic of urban regeneration projects and housing redevelopments across Turkey, which were enabled by the legal changes passed in July 2005. Law no. 5366 authorizes municipalities and TOKI (The Mass Housing Administration of Turkey) to carry out urban renewal projects in historic areas, and forms the basis of the recent urban transformation processes in historic neighbourhoods of Istanbul. Such projects often exacerbate the problems the Roma face instead of offering a viable solution for needed social transformation.

Urban redevelopment projects often have a very damaging effect on Roma because they uproot Roma from their homes, dispersing many historical communities. Matters of resettlement and compensation are rife with problems. Most often, families who are relocated receive compensation only for the land to which they hold title of property, not for the houses on them, which are deemed as illegal construction. This deprives them of the choice to return as home buyers to the new developments emerging in their old neighbourhoods. Many return as renters in neighbourhoods close to their old ones, which is unsustainable once the compensation money is used up, and they find themselves without shelter. New slums are often the result.

In many cases, families have been provided with alternative accommodation. However, social housing flats are located far away from the old neighbourhood, on the city's edges, disconnecting Roma and other poor families from their community and their sources of income. As resettlement is mostly done without the necessary groundwork and provision of social services, Roma often face greater suffering in their new settlement areas. This is evident in urban projects in Sulukule, Kağıthane, Sarıgöl and Küçükbakkalköy in Istanbul; the Sapanca district of Sakarya; and Samsun 200 Evler, in the Kamberler neighbourhood of Samsun.

There is an urgent need for projects to be jointly prepared by public authorities and Roma associations together, taking into account their needs and ideas for tackling problems related to Roma employment, housing, education, social services and citizens' rights. Such projects should be based on an integrated approach and implemented with a purely public service driven mindset, regardless of the political tendencies of Roma communities in different places. The ultimate goal would be to adopt a state policy that embraces all the above mentioned objectives.

Human rights improvements

Various attacks and lynching attempts on Roma also constitute a deep concern. The most recent incident took place in the İznik and Yunuseli districts of Bursa when about 2,000 people attacked Roma neighbourhoods and damaged workplaces and cars. To put an end to such mass human rights violations, comprehensive punitive measures against discrimination and hate crimes need

to be put in place. This will help protect not just Roma but other groups as well, and will contribute to creating an environment of pluralistic, peaceful coexistence.

Public awareness about the living conditions of Roma communities is greatly needed, supported by training to eliminate racist stereotypes about Roma in general. The approach needs to break with the popular perception of Roma solely as a colourful folkloric element. Government authorities in Turkey need to set up inclusive development mechanisms to provide solutions to human rights violations faced by Roma and other economically, socially and culturally disadvantaged groups, and introduce systems that facilitate the setting up of their own NGOs and their representation in public administrative bodies.

NGO successes: A model for replication

Despite all the work that remains to be done in terms of policy planning and the implementation of concrete initiatives, there are a number of important NGO activities that are good examples of successful local efforts paving the way forward.

One of ROMFO's most important achievements is the Study Centre set up in Mersin, an attempt to lower the absenteeism and drop-out rates of Roma children in schools which are the result of social and economic problems. The number of students attending this centre rose from 30 to 300 in one year. This undertaking should be used as a model throughout Turkey not only in the area of education but also in the fields of housing, employment and health services, and should become part of state policy.

Recommendations from NGOs

Some suggested necessary actions proposed by NGOs for improving the conditions of Roma in Turkey include the following:

- Seek and engage the opinions of Roma associations in every plan and policy the state undertakes about the future of Roma.
- Approach social and economic rights holistically in the state's activities with and about Roma (meetings, workshops, forums and other initiatives), and the right to education, housing, health and employment.
- Train teachers who work in schools attended mostly by Roma, on child psychology and cultural difference.
- Approach Roma not as a 'social case' or a community solely in need of social aid but as one with a different identity and culture.
- Keep urban development projects in situ and take into account the input of Roma during planning and implementation.
- Organize informative public meetings with Roma to educate them on the need to avoid child marriage. Initiate scholarship programmes to motivate children to attend and stay in school.

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- Restart the Preparatory Classes Programme (YSÖP). This programme was initiated by UNICEF as part of its 'Children First' project to give children outside the education system a second chance to catch up and continue their primary education. It was conducted in partnership with the Ministry of Education and proved to be quite successful for Romani children (Sulukule children being a good example) who never enrolled or who dropped out of primary school. There is a great need for and potential benefit in restarting the programme, by the Ministry if not by UNICEF.
- Open study centres in Roma neighbourhoods. Most Roma live in one-room houses and children lack private spaces for studying. The education level of Romani parents is low and they cannot help their children. Romani children are financially unable to attend private courses for entrance exams. To tackle these and other problems, study centres are needed.
- Organize non-discrimination and equality seminars and activities for teachers whose schools are mostly attended by Roma, for officials who work in public institutions and establishments and for officers of the police department.
- Provide mobile education and health services for Roma and their children who work as seasonal workers and for nomads and semi-nomads.
- Always involve Roma representatives from a particular district or city when making plans for community centres.
- Provide Roma with free access to preventive health services complemented by informative health programmes to prevent diseases and illnesses caused by their harsh living conditions. For example, Romani women can be trained in practices related to pregnancy, childbirth, and child care. Free nutrition can be provided to pregnant women so that they give birth to healthy babies. Such training programmes and preventive measures can be administered together.
- Initiate campaigns in neighbourhoods to encourage Romani women to learn to read and write.
- Increase guidance and counselling services at schools.
- Create long-term policies on social exclusion and discrimination.
- Start education programmes and projects targeting discrimination at the pre-school level.
- Ensure that gender equality for Romani women is a part of all policies.
- Make employment projects for Roma sustainable rather than temporary.

Without such steps, the disadvantaged position of Roma in Turkey will not change and no improvement will be made in their living conditions and overall well-being.

The role of UNDP

We think of the Roma community, which is one of the 73 different ethnic groups in Turkey, as an integral part of Turkish society. In a democratic society, no citizen or group should be afraid of being different, and all individuals and groups should be able to organize and defend their rights with a fair and equal chance of success. When the majority population accepts and respects the

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identity, culture and lifestyle of Roma people, and Roma are seen as equal citizens in Turkey, we believe that two of the central values and principles of UNDP, pluralism and democracy, will also be fulfilled.

UNDP's involvement in Turkey could support the Roma community to access rights and services on an equal basis with the rest of society. Programmes focused on children and youth would reduce the difficulties Roma children face in education and make equal opportunity a reality for them. Raising awareness about discrimination and marginalization of Roma in the educational system will reduce society's prejudice against them. UNDP could also help combat gender-based discrimination towards women by supporting their social and economic integration in society.

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