

Working with Roma: Participation and empowerment of local communities

Summary



The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union sets out rights that are particularly relevant to persons of Roma origin. The most important is the right to non-discrimination (Article 21).

Despite efforts at the national, European and international level to improve the social and economic integration of Roma in the European Union (EU), many still face deep poverty, profound social exclusion, and discrimination. This often means limited access to quality education, jobs and services, low income levels, sub-standard housing conditions, poor health and lower life expectancy. These problems also present often insurmountable barriers to exercising their fundamental rights guaranteed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

In recent years, the EU has increasingly engaged in efforts to improve the social inclusion of Roma and combat discrimination and anti-Gypsyism. An important turning point came in April 2011: the European Commission – determined to achieve more tangible change – introduced the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020.¹ It calls on Member States to develop specific national Roma integration strategies or integrated sets of policy measures to improve Roma inclusion in education, employment, housing and health. In December 2013, the Council issued a Recommendation on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States, calling for support of “active citizenship of Roma by promoting their social, economic, political and cultural participation in society, including at the local

level”.² The Commission assesses progress in implementing the Recommendation annually.³

The EU Fundamental Rights Agency participated in the European Commission’s Roma Task Force in 2010 and 2011, and provided survey-based statistical evidence⁴ on the situation of Roma. This evidence, however, could not explain why EU investment in Roma inclusion did not produce the expected outcomes. The agency therefore developed a multi-annual research project to identify and understand the operation of barriers to and drivers of successful investment in Roma inclusion. The project ‘Local Engagement for Roma Inclusion’ was implemented in 21 localities across 11 EU Member States, exploring how Principle No. 10 of the EU’s Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion concerning the active participation of Roma is respected and implemented in practice.⁵ The research is also needed because a deeper understanding of the drivers of and barriers to integration efforts at the local level is essential in order to develop and monitor the implementation of measures responding to national and

¹ European Commission (2011), *An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*, COM(2011) 173 final, Brussels, 5 April 2011.

² Council of the European Union (2013), Council Recommendation 378/1 of 9 December 2013 on effective Roma integration measures in the Member States, OJ 2013 C 378, p. 378/6.

³ For further details, see the Commission’s webpage on [Roma integration in EU countries](#).

⁴ FRA (2009), *EU-MIDIS - Data in focus: the Roma*, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union (Publications Office).

⁵ Council of the European Union, Council Conclusions on Inclusion of the Roma. 2947th Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council meeting, Luxembourg, 8 June 2009, *Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion – as discussed at the 1st meeting of the integrated European platform for Roma inclusion*, April 2009.

European-level policy frameworks, including the EU Framework for national Roma integration strategies, the Racial Equality Directive and EU anti-discrimination legislation.

This project facilitates local level engagement of Roma, improving their capacity to participate as more equal partners with local administrations and civil society. Its methodology entails the design, planning, implementation and monitoring of a diverse range of small scale interventions in various areas ranging from education to employment, healthcare, housing, culture, etc. These interventions were, from a research perspective, an essential tool to generate data and information. From the perspective of the Roma communities involved, these interventions were primarily an important outcome of the project, because the communities could themselves define priorities and implement actions with the support of fieldwork experts and local authorities. The development of the project's activities also contributed to drawing attention to the challenges Roma, Sinti and other Roma and Traveller groups face daily, thus raising awareness on discrimination and anti-Gypsyism. A direct result of the research process is facilitating modes of cooperation and engagement between local authorities and Roma communities, in many cases where such interactions were not established before. People learned how to express their needs and work together to find joint solutions to local level integration challenges. In this sense, even experiences of trial and error throughout the research process to achieve cooperation between local authorities, Roma and other residents are valuable experiences that shed light on the complexities and difficulties of local level inclusion efforts.

The evidence produced can assist the EU and its Member States to improve their policy responses, including the design of funding instruments, in order to facilitate the meaningful participation of Roma in actions aimed at improving their social inclusion.

The key objectives of the research were therefore to:

- identify and understand what works and what does not work for Roma inclusion measures at the local level, and the reasons why;

- generate evidence on the entire process of local-level Roma integration efforts, including how priorities are defined by communities and local authorities, how local stakeholders reach consensus, how exactly people participate and what roles they take;
- facilitate the participation of communities in inclusion efforts and explore how different methods of participation can be implemented;
- establish whether increased participation of community members in local level efforts can lead to better integration outcomes and/or better designed local level initiatives.

The main report is about understanding and exploring the process of Roma inclusion at the local level. It identifies key drivers of and barriers to Roma inclusion efforts at the local level – in other words, understanding what works for Roma inclusion, what does not work, and why. The research was developed in the context of Roma inclusion, but its logic and methodology are relevant beyond issues affecting Roma communities. Participatory approaches to local-level actions and strategy development have the potential to improve policies and projects that deal with other groups in vulnerable situations – such as persons with disabilities, children, homeless persons, migrants and refugees – as well as the general population. These practices can also help to empower citizens to claim their rights and improve their own local situation.

This summary report presents the key findings of the fieldwork and the FRA opinions stemming from them. The main report, *Working with Roma: Participation and Empowerment of local communities*, presents the detailed findings of the fieldwork. In addition, twenty-one locality studies from the eleven participating EU Member States as well as videos and other materials accompany the main report and are available on the project webpage.⁶

⁶ See FRA (2018), *Working with Roma: Participation and empowerment of local communities*, Luxembourg, Publications Office. The [project webpage](#) is available on FRA's website.



Key findings and FRA opinions

The research reveals a wealth of knowledge about social inclusion and Roma integration in practice. As many of the individual locality studies highlight, meaningful and tangible change can be achieved, local communities can be empowered and local authorities can become more responsible and effective in working to protect and promote the rights of their local citizens. Moreover, the research shows that participatory processes that empower local citizens to engage in decision-making processes can be an important tool in social inclusion processes. Understanding the complexities of social inclusion and exclusion can help to contextualise other existing data and serve as a first step towards addressing the real problems on the ground.

Promoting meaningful participation of Roma in activities that affect them

Participation is one of the European Union's "10 Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion." Participation of Roma in the design of local level projects, strategies and inclusion efforts that aim to support them is key to successfully implementing them. Modalities of participation can vary in terms of depth and intensity. For example, public authorities may invite residents to take part in organised meetings; or they may be encouraged to contribute in decision making processes; or they may be asked to participate in implementing actions. The research shows that creating a space for people to work together in meaningful ways, learning to make compromises and find common solutions can be difficult. Facilitating this therefore requires experience and skill.

Getting local people interested and involved in initiatives can be challenging. They want to know how planned actions can resolve their most pressing needs, and participation in projects may at times seem detached from their daily problems. Agreeing on specific goals and providing concrete results that yield tangible benefits for people, however small, is a way to ensure participation in projects and other inclusion activities. Addressing basic needs, such as adequate housing, access to healthcare, education, and employment can also be important before more abstract forms of community development action is taken. The research finds that to sustain engagement of local people, it is essential to build trust with Roma communities and local authorities, overcome patterns of ritualistic participation, resolve conflicts or increasing tensions,

and realise that participation cannot be imposed by force.



Lille – social workers from AFEJl participate in a meeting of the expression groups outside the homes of the Roma families. The expression groups allowed for Roma to vocalise their concerns, needs, and ideas (© FRA)

This is relevant because many municipalities and local communities are frustrated after years of limited or no progress in Roma inclusion. Few municipalities are willing or able to invest heavily in change, and communities are not always motivated to become actively involved. The research shows that focusing on successful past projects and willingness and openness of some local authorities to act on Roma inclusion are necessary preconditions for planning new activities and genuine engagement of local actors. The research also demonstrates that developing and applying methods for implementation that reflect local specificities, as well as the particular needs of individuals involved, can lead to more successful project outcomes. Accommodating the specific needs of Roma women – and thus giving them a genuine role in the projects – is particularly important. In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to Roma inclusion.

Many local community members had never been asked what they need and many had been accustomed to being passive recipients of social inclusion projects or programmes, on the receiving end as beneficiaries of initiatives designed and implemented by actors outside the community. They had mostly understood participation to be about attending a meeting, a training, a workshop, or being temporarily hired to carry out activities they had not developed themselves. Due to limited experience with more meaningful forms of participation, there is a need to support and build the capacity of

community members to claim their right to actively engage in projects concerning them and to feel empowered to express their needs. This means that national or local authorities must also involve experts who can communicate effectively with local communities.

All this points to the main lesson learned: participation must be meaningful. This means addressing issues that resonate with people's needs, and giving them a real role in defining and accomplishing the goals set out in social inclusion strategies, policies and projects. Local authorities and other actors implementing social inclusion projects or measures should ensure that they select and implement forms of participation that avoid a superficial tokenistic approach. Meaningful and deep participation also requires time to allow participants to develop their communication and other skills.

FRA opinion 1

Member States, and in particular local authorities, need to create the conditions conducive for facilitating meaningful participation of Roma in local inclusion efforts. Local authorities and any actors implementing social inclusion projects or measures should clearly present the aims and objectives, specific outputs and outcomes, as well as the boundary conditions of any social inclusion actions in order to motivate and keep local residents engaged. They should also make special efforts to ensure that participation does not become a superficial, tokenistic exercise. This means engaging with local communities and supporting them to take part in decision-making to reflect their perspectives regarding local integration strategies, action plans and projects.

FRA opinion 2

Local authorities and project implementers should consider gender aspects to determine potential obstacles to women's participation in activities and prepare strategies to overcome them. Timing and locations of meetings and activities should take into consideration the specific circumstances and the needs of their communities. Attention should also be paid to how these considerations may affect, in particular, Roma women or children, who may have more limited availability or other concerns that can have an impact on their ability to participate.

Building trust among communities to ensure success

Trust between stakeholders – or lack thereof – affects the implementation of inclusion projects. Building on existing relationships is an important element of engaging with local communities. Where communities trust individuals implementing projects, they are more likely to participate in project activities and share openly their thoughts and opinions; as a result, interventions end up leading to more concrete and meaningful results. The research shows that where local interventions fail to meet the expectations of addressing people's needs, this eventually leads to a loss of trust and ultimately to a lack of motivation to continue participating.

Building trust and identifying local 'key promoters' who have established relationships of trust with the communities is a difficult and complex process. In localities where experts enter communities as 'outsiders' unknown to the local communities, it is necessary to invest a considerable amount of time and energy into establishing and building up relationships of trust. In localities where inclusion efforts are implemented by already trusted figures and build on existing networks and relationships of trust, they are able to organise activities on shorter timelines and engage with people in deeper, more participatory ways. Delivering tangible changes that respond to the needs of the community and working on shared concerns of both Roma and non-Roma in a transparent manner is also essential for trust and participation to be sustainable.



Stara Zagora – local residents from the Lozenetz neighbourhood discuss their ideal housing and floorplan of a model house at a focus group discussion in February 2016 (©FRA)

FRA opinion 3

Member States should mobilise national resources and EU funding to support local authorities and civil society organisations working with Roma in providing concrete responses to local level needs. They should support participatory approaches when engaging with Roma and integrate participation mechanisms into local policy and strategy development. In so doing, they should build on existing networks and relationships of trust; pay attention to the role of key promoters and the time it takes to build relationships of trust with communities; and involve also non-Roma in issues of shared concern.

Communicating in transparent and accessible ways to manage expectations

Appropriate and tailored communication regarding local policies, strategies and projects is vital to managing local peoples' expectations and ensuring successful implementation of integration efforts. How the aims, methods and limitations of a project are communicated to local communities is in many cases as important as that information itself. Sometimes information that one side assumes to be clear and simple can be understood or interpreted differently by other actors. Such (mis)understandings are often attributed to how key information is communicated, both within and towards the communities.

The dynamics within localities largely determine the ways and means of communicating and the messages conveyed. Properly understanding these dynamics is crucial considering that many local community members often have limited experience and capacity to participate. Project implementers are responsible for ensuring that all information regarding communities' participation in projects, inclusion activities or in local policies and strategies is communicated to participants in an accessible and understandable way. This may entail using accessible language in the mother tongue of participants, sometimes in simple jargon-free language, and repeated often enough to ensure that everyone has an equal and full understanding of what is planned and what activities take place, how, and under which conditions. The research further reveals that communication at a personal level is

more effective than indirect group-based communication channels such as newsletters, broadcasts and leaflets when it comes to gaining and maintaining the motivation of the local communities to participate in inclusion efforts.

Measures to increase transparency in communication with respect to how actions are implemented and how decisions are taken is essential, in order to appropriately manage expectations and ensure that everyone has a shared understanding. Roles and responsibilities, and their limitations, should be carefully communicated to avoid the loss of trust following a possible failure to meet unrealistically high hopes in regards to project or policy outcomes.



Megara – the mayor visits the Roma neighbourhood during a meeting to explain the research process and mobilise people to participate; outreach activities were often carried out within the neighbourhood (©FRA)

FRA opinion 4

Local authorities and project implementers should take steps to ensure that information regarding projects and local policies is transparent and clearly communicated in an accessible and understandable way. Communication methods should be carefully chosen and executed to appropriately manage expectations and support local people's participation in projects and other inclusion efforts.

Paying attention to community relations to better design inclusion efforts

The research reveals a number of interesting trends with regard to community relations that can affect not only the choice of participation and engagement techniques, but also on the outcomes and success of local interventions. Relationships within communities among Roma, tensions between Roma and non-Roma citizens, power relations between communities and local authorities, the role and willingness of local authorities, and a number of other local-level dynamics between different actors all affect project outcomes, and the way local interventions and strategies are designed and implemented. The research experience also sheds light on the importance of key promoters, mediators and civil society organisations in facilitating local interventions.

'Key promoters' within the local communities, often due to their role or personality, have an important influence on the implementation and success of local activities. They can be key to motivating individuals to participate, to build trust in project implementers and project activities, and to boost the credibility of projects. When projects take into account such key promoters they can help to reach out to other community members and get them involved in local activities and projects.



Bologna – local Sinti and Roma discuss their views on the main challenges to social inclusion and the lack of community spokespersons and mediators (©FRA)

There are many ways of empowering people. The research tries to empower the local communities involved by first asking them what their needs are, informing them of their rights and how to claim them, and supporting them to become agents of change. When people are given an opportunity to express their views in dialogue with local authorities, it gives them a better chance to fight for their rights and has the potential to lead to greater emancipation. Local authorities learn how to listen to their citizens' needs and views, and local residents learn how to develop more realistic expectations. More importantly, the research shows that empowering people can help break the stereotypical image of Roma in perpetual victimhood and encourage them to stand as equals in claiming their share of social development and progress. In particular, focused efforts to empower Roma women and youth were in several localities an important element of the project's success.

FRA opinion 5

Member States and local authorities should support project implementers to map the local-level context, community dynamics and power relationships before projects are designed and implemented. Local authorities should identify 'key promoters' and get them on board to reach out to communities and boost the credibility of local-level inclusion efforts. Local authorities should also create the space for everyone's voice to be heard, and in particular to take focused efforts to empower Roma women and youth.

Integrating participatory approaches and flexibility into funding mechanisms and project design

The research provides valuable insights on how local inclusion actions can be better designed, implemented and monitored, as well as flagging what issues and aspects should be avoided. There are a number of lessons learned that can improve the use of resources, whether they come from local budgets, national funding allocations, the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), or other sources of financing. Participatory approaches are particularly important when implementing projects in localities where earlier initiatives failed to reach the people at local level and support Roma, and where communities have continually been met with disappointment in the past. The research finds that promoting small-scale, community-based activities, including promoting awareness raising of rights and

cultural interaction, targeting interventions both towards Roma and non-Roma citizens, as well as adopting more flexible frameworks and longer timelines, could lead to meaningful results and change the situation of Roma at the local level. Developing local-level interventions not in isolation, but within the wider context of social inclusion projects for Roma and communities in marginalised or vulnerable situations is also important to ensure longer-term, sustainable impact. Projects are more successful when they build on existing relationships of trust and solidarity that boost and reinforce the social fabric within and between communities.

The research also highlights that projects and integration actions implemented at the community level are not always given sufficiently long timeframes to accommodate processes of participation, trust building, training and capacity building of participants, monitoring and evaluation, or flexibility in terms of adjusting the focus or direction of activities. Providing more time and flexibility for participatory approaches and cyclical processes that allow for the possibility to revise and re-adjust projects can also help to achieve longer-term, meaningful results.

Current funding mechanisms also tend to focus on measurable outputs and outcomes to determine the success of projects and uphold accountability towards donors and financing mechanisms. Yet not all meaningful outcomes are measurable in quantitative indicators. Capturing the important impact of participatory processes and more subtle effects such as empowerment and changes in the social fabric of communities is difficult, and generally absent from project evaluations and assessments. The value of implementing participatory approaches risks being lost if not reflected in the formal project reporting mechanisms.

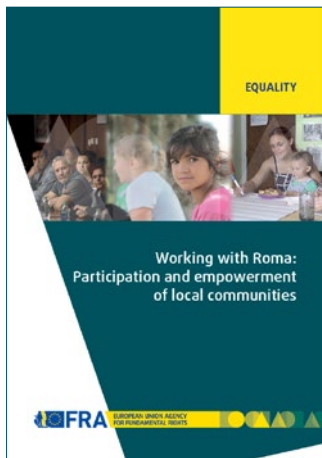


Pavlikeni – the local intervention focused on educational initiatives, including supporting participation in early childhood education (©FRA)

FRA opinion 6

Member States and local authorities should ensure a link between local-level projects and broader national, regional and local integration policies and strategies, to ensure longer-term, sustainable impact.

Member States and local authorities should ensure that projects and integration actions implemented at the community level allow for sufficiently long timeframes to accommodate for processes of participation, trust building, training and capacity building of participants, monitoring and evaluation. They should also support participatory projects that blend quantitative reporting of results with a more holistic understanding of engagement and participation. A shift from focus on expected outcomes and outputs to the process of implementation can lead to a more meaningful change in the lives of people whom such projects and activities are intended to help.



This report presents the main insights gained during the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's project on local engagement for Roma inclusion, which explores how to best involve Roma in integration efforts at the local level. Bringing together local authorities and residents, especially Roma, it investigated what aspects work, which ones do not, and why this is the case. The 21 localities in 11 Member States covered by the research involved diverse local contexts, needs and challenges. But the experiences in all of them underscored that resources need to be better used to bring actual improvements in the lives of Roma across the EU.

This report outlines the main lessons learned during the research, providing an opportunity to improve the design, implementation and monitoring of integration efforts at local level – for the benefit of all individuals still living on the margins of society, Roma and otherwise.

Further information:

For the full FRA report *Working with Roma: participation and empowerment of local communities*, see: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/empowering-roma>.

For further information on the project, including locality case studies in English and national languages, as well as videos from each participating locality, and other materials, see the project webpage: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/project/2015/local-engagement-roma-inclusion-leri-multi-annual-roma-programme>.

See also related FRA publications:

- FRA (2018), *Transition from education to employment of young Roma in nine EU Member States*, Luxembourg, Publications Office (available in EN)
- FRA (2018), *Anti-Gypsyism as a barrier to Roma inclusion*, Luxembourg, Publications Office (available in EN)
- FRA (2016), *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (EU-MIDIS II) Roma – Selected findings*, Luxembourg, Publications Office (available in 22 languages)

For an overview of FRA activities on the rights of Roma, see: <http://fra.europa.eu/en/theme/roma>.



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