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CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

Depletion of Social Capital: Shrinking Civil Society Involvement of Roma¹

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Introduction

This article is a slight alteration of the “Roma Inclusion Policy Brief: Roma Civil Society Involvement of Roma” that was published by the UNDP. When I was asked by the European Roma Rights Centre to write an article about the political participation of Roma, I immediately thought about my policy brief, which was to examine the civil society involvement of Roma. Based on my observations, it appears that Roma civil society actors have gradually become actors in various political parties and they have also started to politicise their cause. Although there is a dissenting opinion, which states that NGOisation depoliticises the process as well as offering a co-optation for Roma activists³, I would argue that NGOisation and involvement of Roma in civil society activism is a condition of their political participation. Civil society organisations offer a space for a broadly defined political activism. I agree with those political theorists, for instance Alberto Melucci,⁴ who conceptualise the so-called “new social movements”, such as feminism, or the green and youth movements, as working outside the formal institutional channels and using new issues, tactics and even constituencies. Scott⁵ refers to the definition of the politics as an extended domain for issues

that had been considered as being outside conventional political action. Following their logic, civil society is an extension of the collective politics that influence and transform formal political participation.

The policy brief is based on the 2004 UNDP and 2011 UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma datasets, which show a rather pessimistic picture about those Roma communities that are the most marginalised. These communities lack the basic tools, knowledge, resources and even trust towards each other to represent their collective political interest.

Actors of the civil society

Within the framework of inter-governmental organisations, including the initiative of the *Decade of Roma Inclusion*, Roma and pro-Roma civic organisations (CSOs, NGOs⁶) in Central and South-east Europe have frequently called attention to the human rights violations, social exclusion, territorial segregation, and inadequate civic and political representation of Roma – particularly internationally.⁷ However, at the national level – particularly at the local grassroots level – the vast majority of marginalised Roma communities remain untouched by, and detached from, the activities of these

1 This is a slightly extended detailed version of the brief that was published by the UNDP http://issuu.com/undp_in_europe_cis/docs/cso_policy_brief.

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3 Huub van Baar, *The European Roma: Minority Representation, Memory, and the Limits of Transnational Governmentality* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2011, p. 18).

4 Alberto Melucci, “The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements”, *Social Research* 52 (1985): 789-816.

5 A. Scott, *Ideology and the New Social Movements* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

6 While distinctions are often made among different civil society entities – “civil society organisations” (CSOs), “community-based organisations” (CBOs) and “non-governmental organisations” (NGOs) – due *inter alia* to differences in scope of operation or territorial focus, in this brief the three terms are used as synonyms. They refer to non-state, non-business actors that are involved in implementing Roma-targeted interventions. Donors (non-governmental organisations in many cases) are not considered part of the “civil society community” here.

7 A. Kóczé and M. Rövid, “Pro-Roma Global Civil Society: Acting for, with or instead of Roma?”, in Mary Kaldor, Henrietta L. Moore and Sabine Selchow, eds., *Global Civil Society 2012: Ten Years of Critical Reflection* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

CSOs. As a result, in most cases they are disconnected from the NGOs that are seeking to advocate on their behalf.

Roma civil society began in the early 1990s, largely as a donor- and elite-driven project. Due to the general political climate in the 1990s, primarily international donors were channelling significant financial resources to support democracy, minority issues and human rights. Social rights and community development were in general considered to be of minor importance within Roma affairs.

The newly emerged Roma civil society focused primarily on international human rights advocacy, awareness-raising, and influencing pro-Roma policy-making, rather than on capacitating, working with, or mobilising marginalised Roma communities at the local level. Such an approach made sense 20 years ago, when awareness of Roma social and political exclusion by European politicians was low, when violations of Roma human rights violations were not generally recognised, and when coherent anti-discrimination legal and policy frameworks at European and national levels were absent. However, things have changed. Anti-discrimination legislation exists; EU funding structures and pro-Roma policy frameworks are operational. What is now required are active CSOs to monitor legal enforcement, establish relations between Roma and non-Roma communities and improve Roma community access to EU funds, in order to better implement pro-Roma policies. Moreover, CSOs are expected to create links between the macro-, mezzo- and micro-level.

The key challenges facing Roma and pro-Roma CSOs today concern on the one hand the transition from policy to implementation and on the other the legitimacy, representativeness, accountability and transparency of the donor- and elite-driven NGOs. There is a concern based on the 2004 and 2011 UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma datasets that the most disadvantaged Roma communities are disconnected from the functioning Roma and non-Roma NGOs. In the forthcoming years the Roma CSOs' most pressing task will be to connect the

most marginalised and disadvantaged communities to the mainstream social services and various funds that create an opportunity to break the generational poverty and the vicious circle of social exclusion.

Inter-governmental initiatives, global pro-Roma organisations, and the various forms of Romani civic activism that have supported this agenda in the past two decades must recognise the importance of local activism for Roma inclusion. Ample evidence (e.g., data from the 2004 and 2011 UNDP/WB/EC regional surveys and other surveys, and from other qualitative research⁸) points towards rethinking and restructuring the financial and human resources with which these CSOs function, in order to implement high impact projects. As is spelled out by many activists, Roma NGOs, with low human and financial capacities as well as inadequately targeted programmes, are incapable of initiating social change on any level. The CSOs' modes of operation – whether as watchdogs, advocacy think tanks, or community developmental organisations – need to better reflect the real needs and expectations of the communities and should also take into account the changing roles and relationships between state and civil society actors.

Multi-generational poverty and the depletion of social capital⁹

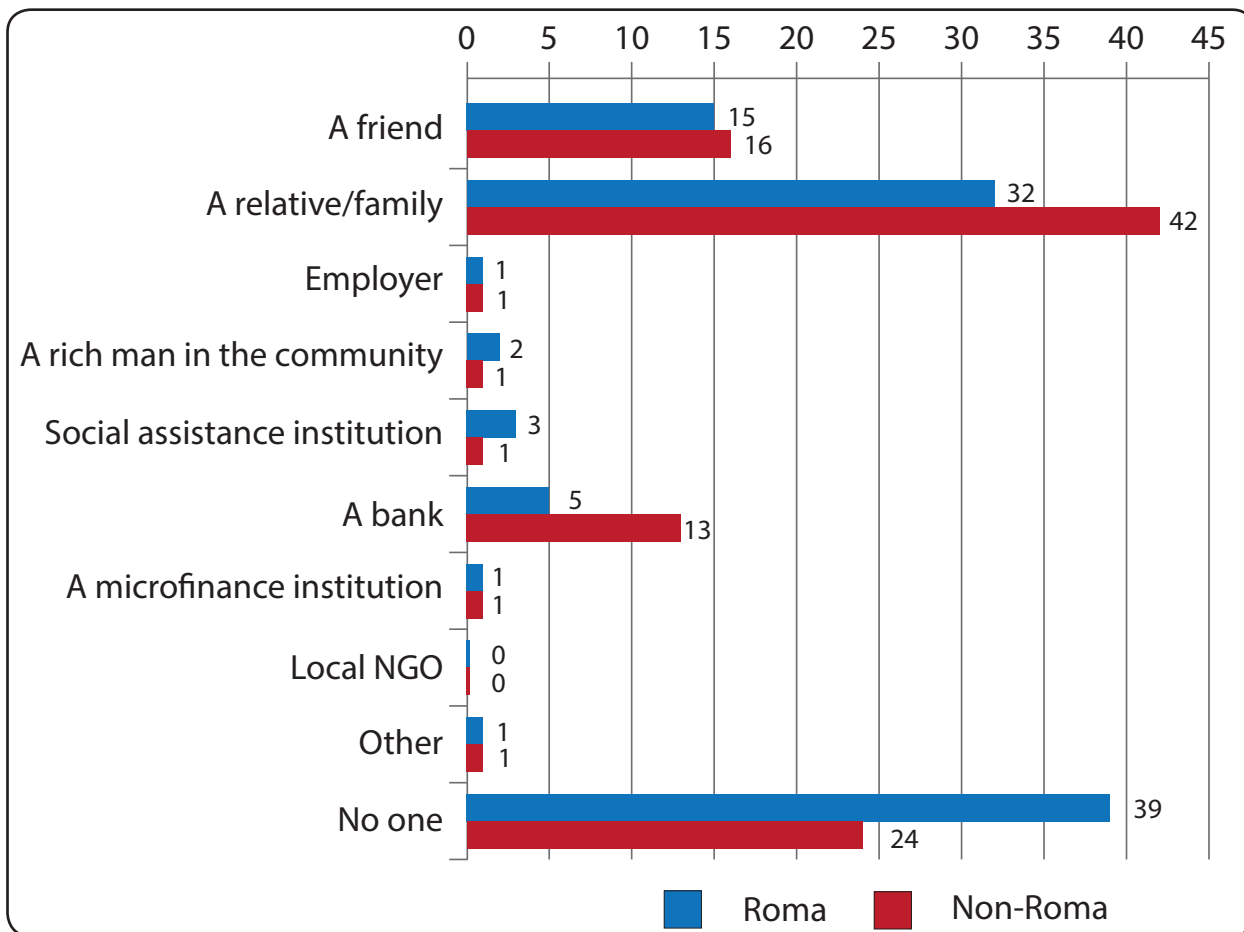
While the 2004 UNDP and 2011 UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma datasets largely focus on the status of Roma households and individuals (relative to their non-Roma neighbours), they also provide valuable information on civic and political activism.¹⁰ For example, issues about the ability of civic networks to perform “safety net” functions in emergencies were addressed through the 2011 survey question “On whom can you rely for urgently raising significant amounts of money in an emergency?” The 2011 survey results shown in Figure 1 suggest that the most disadvantaged local Roma and their non-Roma neighbours rely mostly on close, informal networks – friends, family members and relatives.

8 See, for example, Erno Kadét, Gabriella Varró (2010), *A Roma Lakosság Hozzáférése az Unió Fejlesztési Forrásokhoz Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg és Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén megyében* [Access to the EU Funds by Roma Inhabitants in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Counties], on the TASZ's webpage, available at: <http://tasz.hu/romaprogram/varro-kadet-kutatas>.

9 This paper conceptualises social capital as a social trust and relations that have a productive benefit. It includes two types of relations, by examining social networks, social and family support (informal) on the one hand and associational behaviour along with social trust (formal) on the other.

10 For a detailed description of the methodology, see A. Ivanov, J. Kling and J. Kagin, “Integrated Household Surveys among Roma Populations: One Possible Approach to Sampling Used in the UNDP-World Bank-EC Regional Roma Survey 2011”, *Roma Inclusion Working Papers* (Bratislava: UNDP, 2012).

Figure 1: Responses to the question: “On whom can you rely in an emergency situation (when you need to urgently raise a significant amount of money)?” (2011). Source: UNDP/WB/EC Roma Regional Survey, 2011.



Reliance on informal networks is understandable for marginalised groups that are victims of prejudice, and do not fully trust formal institutions. But while such coping strategies may be effective as short-run survival responses, they can reduce access to the services that are provided by formal institutions. In the longer term, they can reduce opportunities for social inclusion.

More striking results from the 2011 survey data are perhaps the following:

- The virtual absence of respondents who believed they could rely on local NGOs in an emergency, and
- The relatively large number of respondents (38%) who felt that they could not expect help from anyone.

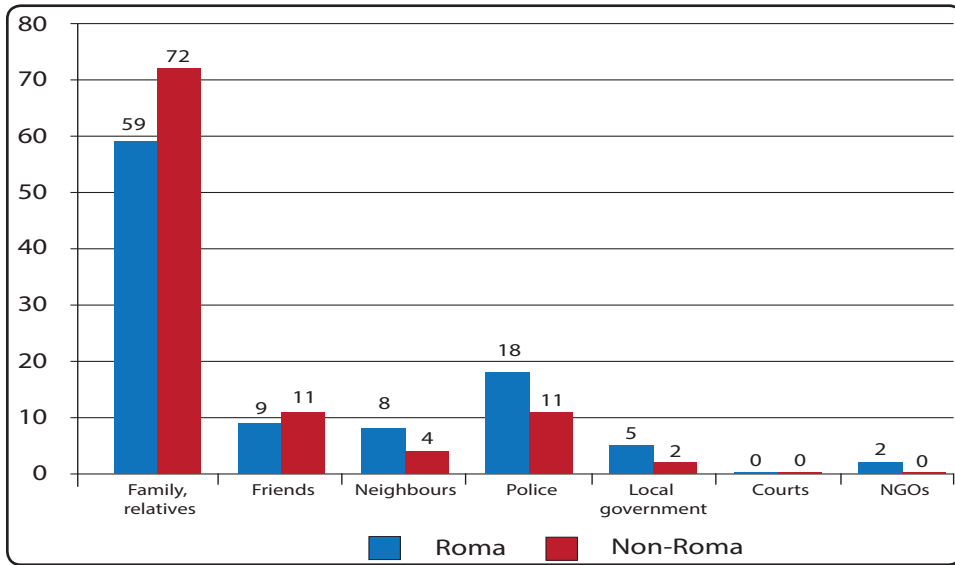
In the light of the assumed traditional strengths of family ties within Roma communities, these data also suggest that multi-generational poverty has reduced extended families’

abilities to provide financial help in emergencies (as is more common in middle-class families).

Civil society actors – missing at the local level

These results are consistent with those from the 2004 UNDP Regional Roma Survey (although the relevant question was then formulated slightly differently, “If you are in trouble, whom will you approach first?”). The 2004 data shown in Figure 2 suggest that a large majority of Roma and non-Roma respondents also turned to family members and relatives for help then (59% and 72% respectively). The second-most cited source of help was the police (18% and 11% respectively). Friends were the third-most frequently mentioned option (9% and 11% respectively). Once again, virtually none of the respondents seemed to believe that NGOs would help in the case of an emergency.

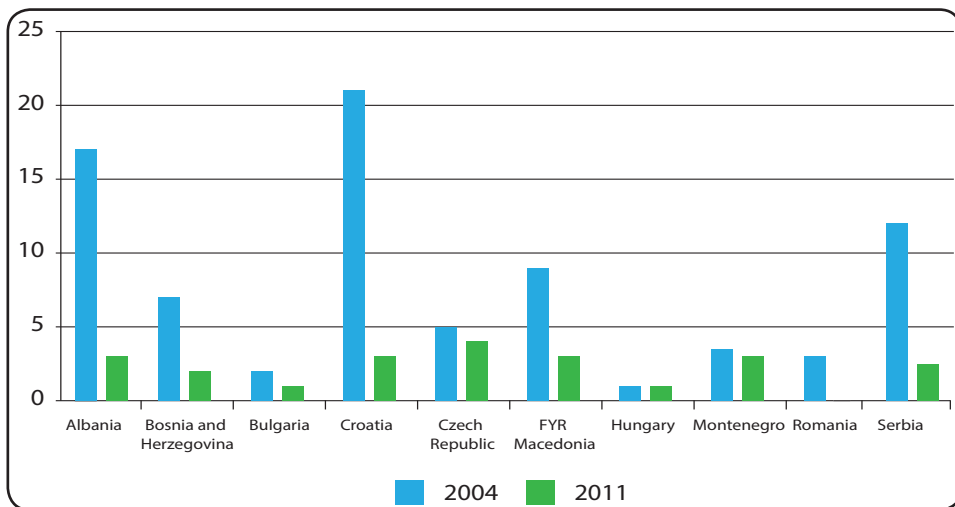
Figure 2: Responses to the question: “If you are in trouble, whom will you approach first?” Source: UNDP Roma Regional Survey, 2004.



The 2004 UNDP Regional Roma Survey also asked respondents: “Has anyone from your household ever tried to find an NGO?” Only 1.7% of Roma and 1% of non-Roma respondents answered in the affirmative. These data may reflect passivity/apathy in Roma communities, a lack of awareness of the opportunities often associated with civil activism, inadequate capacity for self-organisation, or other

factors. Whatever the reason, these results highlighted (in 2004) the paucity of effective Roma organisations at the grassroots level. This had deleterious implications for Roma (and other vulnerable) communities’ development prospects, both in terms of their abilities to lobby local governments on their behalf, and in terms of potential improvements in access to services that are often best delivered by NGOs.

Figure 3: Roma who would turn to NGOs/CSOs for money in case of emergency.¹¹ Sources: UNDP Roma Regional Survey, 2004; UNDP/WB/EC Roma Regional Survey, 2011.



¹¹ As per the EUROSTAT taxonomy, the following abbreviations are used here: AL (Albania), BA (Bosnia and Herzegovina), HR (Republic of Croatia), CZ (Czech Republic), MD (Moldova), ME (Montenegro), MK (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), RO (Romania), RS (Republic of Serbia) and SK (Slovakia).

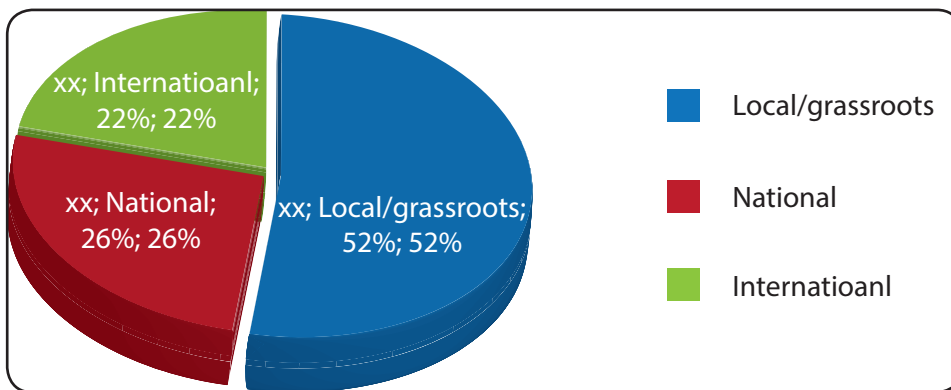
Unfortunately, recent data point to a lack of improvement since 2004. For example:

- The 2011 regional Roma dataset indicates that in the Czech Republic and Montenegro the shares of Roma survey respondents who would turn to CSOs in case of financial emergency remained at extremely low levels (Figure 3). In Croatia, Albania, Serbia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia,¹² and Bosnia and Herzegovina – where the 2004 numbers had been somewhat more favourable – these shares had dropped sharply by 2011.
- The 2011 survey asked respondents: “Can you name organisations that work to help the Roma?” The numbers of answers mentioning particular CSOs/NGOs were

working internationally (see Figure 4). By contrast, only 22% were working primarily at the local level – where strong Roma CSOs are arguably most needed.¹³

The disconnection between the CSOs/NGOs and their target beneficiaries in Roma communities suggested by these survey data can be interpreted in various ways. The CSOs that are active at the local level may have important functions that do not extend to providing financial assistance in emergency situations. Awareness of the good work done by these CSOs could be limited by the fact that few have been successful in engaging significant numbers of Roma as employees (Figure 5) – a charge that can also be levied at governments and international organisations.

Figure 4: Responses (from representatives of Roma CSOs) to the question: “Please indicate which of the following categories best describes your organisation” Source: UNDP 2012.



not statistically significant. Respondents were instead more likely to list local government institutions – suggesting that Roma communities are less likely to receive assistance from their “own” CSOs than from formal governmental structures.

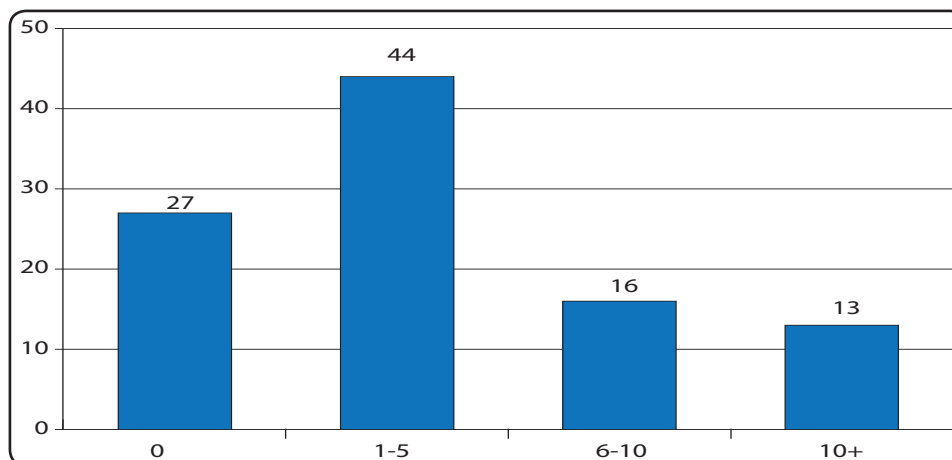
- The results of an online survey of Roma CSOs/NGOs working in Central and South-east Europe conducted in July 2012 found that more than half (52%) of these organisations were working primarily at the national level, while another quarter (26%) were

Nonetheless, these data do point towards serious gaps in civic engagement in terms of Roma inclusion. They reflect the fact that, in many cases, strong pull-factors (such as better career prospects with a government institution or a big donor) drain the grassroots capacities of civil society at the community level. Because Roma CSOs are often not present there in a meaningful way, their place is taken by non-Roma actors. While they may do good work, these actors may not necessarily contribute to building local communities’ capacities to respond to the challenges that they face.

¹² Hereafter: “Macedonia” or “MK”.

¹³ This non-representative survey was conducted by the author of this paper, with assistance from the Roma Decade secretariat, the Open Society Institute’s Roma Initiatives Office, the UNDP, and the Roma Virtual Network. Representatives of some 70 CSOs responded to the online questionnaire on which it was based; these data were supplemented by the results of 13 semi-structured interviews with Roma activists.

Figure 5: Responses (from representatives of Roma CSOs) to the question: “How many staff members in your organisation are Roma?”¹⁴ Source: UNDP 2012.



EU funds for Roma inclusion and “civic activism”

After the EU accession the majority of international donors left the region and thus EU funding became a decisive financial instrument for Roma activities. Participants in the July 2012 online survey answered an open-ended question about the contributions of EU funds to Roma civil society development. Some responded that many EU programmes are irrelevant for smaller and medium-sized CSOs working at the grassroots. Concerns about disproportionate bureaucratic burdens, constantly changing rules, and liquidity and cash flow issues (especially for smaller CSOs) were also raised. Many respondents reported that the levels of procedural expertise (in terms of familiarity with EU requirements for project design, implementation, and reporting), as well as the volume of their own financial resources needed, effectively exclude many Roma NGOs from these programmes. Calls to simplify the procedures for EU grants were often heard (a recent analysis of the impact of ESF-funded projects on Roma in Slovakia comes to a similar conclusion¹⁵), as were suggestions that governments provide technical and administrative support services – including training opportunities for Roma CSOs that are working with Roma communities at the local level.

The online survey and associated interview data also suggest two broader conclusions about EU support for Roma civil society. First, many Roma NGOs perceive EU institutions as allies (especially in financial terms) in their fight against discrimination and social exclusion. This is in contrast with national governments, which are more often seen as pursuing policies that disadvantage Roma, sometimes resorting to explicitly racist discourses.

Second, the administrative requirements associated with accessing these funds bias their allocation towards the larger, more bureaucratized and professionalised NGOs that seem most able to absorb them. As a result, these organisations often appear (nationally and internationally) as Roma policy-makers – even though the local impact of the resources that they manage is often doubtful. Thus the closer Roma NGOs get to EU decision-making and funds, the further they get from the needs and the realities of their intended beneficiaries. As a result, the voices of local (usually segregated) Roma communities are not heard. Meanwhile, grassroots organisations continue to lack the requisite “professional infrastructures”, including the well-paid and highly educated staff members who are found in the national capitals or in Brussels.¹⁶

14 The data in this figure should be interpreted as follows: 27% of the Roma CSO representatives surveyed reported that they did not have a single Roma staff member, 44% reported having one to five staff members, etc.

15 J. Hurrell, A. Ivanov, J. Grill, J. Kling and D. Škobla, “Uncertain Impact: Have the Roma in Slovakia Benefitted from the European Social Fund? Findings from an Analysis of ESF Employment and Social Inclusion Projects in the 2007–2013 Programming Period”, *Roma Inclusion Working Papers* (Bratislava: UNDP, 2012).

16 I. Rostas, “The Romani Movement in Romania: Institutionalization and (De)Mobilization”, in N. Trehan and N. Sigona, eds., *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe: Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Neo-Liberal Order* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

Conclusions and recommendations

Roma participation in civil society at the local (as well as national and international) level(s) is widely seen as crucial for the implementation of national Roma integration strategies in Central and South-east Europe. The expansion of this participation, which has been requested by the European Commission,¹⁷ can translate social inclusion principles into local realities by helping Roma NGOs, CSOs and CBOs to become more effective stakeholders in local development processes. However, the data examined here strongly suggest that, for a variety of reasons, national and international Roma advocacy and policy-making do not sufficiently benefit from grassroots activities and institutions. Without vibrant local organisations in the most disadvantaged Roma communities, national and international Roma activism will continue to be detached from the local level, and limits on its effectiveness will remain.

In order to strengthen the connections between European principles and local realities, a number of simple steps seem urgently needed:

Greater emphasis on integrating Roma programming into national development planning and EU operational programmes. This requires the design and implementation of more effective methodologies and tools to align national and European policy frameworks for Roma inclusion with local realities on the ground. The needs of Roma communities – and of the Roma stakeholders with the capacity to address them at the local level – should appear more often, and more clearly, on the radar screens of the relevant national and European institutions through inclusion of international, national and local Roma NGOs in the consultation process. For that purpose, the relevant national agencies need to ensure that principles of Roma inclusion are reflected in the national mechanisms by which EU funds are allocated. Moreover, national governments should be requested by the EU to create special grant schemes that provide small and flexible funds for community projects from the EU. These would reduce the bureaucratic and financial burdens on those projects. However, this mechanism needs to be specifically set up in each country.

Regional support facilities. The EU, in co-operation with the UNDP and other UN organisations, the OSI, the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and pro-Roma and Roma international organisations, should establish regional support facilities. Their objectives would include the provision of expertise and technical support for grassroots Roma NGOs, in order to strengthen their (and other stakeholders’) roles in the implementation and monitoring of national Roma integration strategies. These facilities could also help to strengthen the institutional role of Roma development concerns in the management of the EU structural funds. These facilities would benefit from the establishment of an international civil society steering group, which would design the methodologies needed to underpin the mobilisation of local communities on social inclusion issues, as well as local engagement in support of national Roma integration strategies.

Capacity development for local CSOs through direct institutional support. More active, capacitated grassroots CSOs are not just an instrument to facilitate Roma inclusion: their emergence should also be an important goal of support for inclusion processes. Roma programming should be assessed not just on sectoral criteria (i.e., how Roma employment or education have improved), but also in terms of whether they have developed the missing institutional capacities that grassroots CSOs need to become more effective. Until such capacities are developed, the implementation chain of Roma inclusion will remain broken. Stepped-up financial and technical support for Roma NGOs facing difficulties with cash flow, or pre-financing their activities when applying for finance from structural funds (while of course ensuring appropriate overseeing and reporting requirements), would be a simple step with huge potential.

Stronger incentives for local level engagement. At present, Roma activists face strong incentives to abandon local work and focus instead on the national and international levels. Stronger support for efforts to establish CBOs and CSOs in Roma communities, and for those organisations already working there, are needed to offset these brain-drain incentives.

¹⁷ *European Commission (2011) Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. An EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020*, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/policies/discrimination/docs/com_2011_173_en.pdf.

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