



Civil society monitoring report
on implementation
of the national Roma integration strategy
in the Netherlands

*Identifying blind spots
in Roma inclusion policy*

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Although the Roma Civil Monitor pilot project, as part of which the report was prepared, is coordinated by CEU, the report represents the findings of the author and it does not necessarily reflect the views of CEU. CEU cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	Civil society organisation
EC	European Commission
ECRI	European Commission against Racism and Intolerance
EU	European Union
EUFW	European Union framework for National Roma Integration Strategies
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRCP	National Roma Contact Point
NRIS	National Roma Integration Strategy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The current set of general policy measures in the Netherlands (NRIS)¹ missed the opportunity to initiate and foster an effective inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Travellers communities. The mainstream policies were not tackling the specific challenges these communities face in the field of education, housing or employment. Certain groups were excluded from the NRIS and there was no real consultation with the Roma, Sinti and Travelers civil society. A commitment from the authorities to address antigypsyism is missing as well.

All this being taken into account, the respective concerned communities consider that the future strategy/set of policy measures have to start with a good base: include all groups and their challenges, address multiple discriminations and specific challenges facing women and youth, and actively involve and empower Roma, Sinti and Travelers civil society.

Diversity within Roma, Sinti and Travelers communities

Not all groups living in the Netherlands,² that go under the collective term "Roma"³ were part of the NRIS's target group. Travellers (*reizigers*) and Yenish were not included. In the NRIS, the government seems to see Roma and Sinti as primarily a migrant group, rather than long established citizens.

More than that, Roma and Sinti are viewed as a homogenous group, and other aspects of their diversity were not addressed by the NRIS. Treating Roma and Sinti as one homogenous group, while failing to acknowledge Travellers under the umbrella Roma term but also to differentiate between recent arrivals, long established citizens, those at risk of statelessness, etc. has implications on the wellbeing and dignity of the target group and these blind spots have fallen short in terms of policy.

An inclusion/integration policy should not start by stigmatising and defining the target group as problematic. In the course of the monitoring, the respective groups have articulated again and again the desire that the next strategy should include all the groups and their challenges, should support the preservation, visibility and promotion of their cultural identities, as a priority.

Women and youth participation

Women and youth did not make the subject of the current NRIS, although the monitoring reports on NRIS, issued by the government, acknowledge the high unemployment among this segment, low rate of youth in higher education or training.

There is a need for mentoring, financial support for the youth who want to continue higher education and incentives for the companies who want to employ Roma, Sinti and Travelers

¹ The Netherlands does not have a National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS), but a set of general policy measure, which it will be referred in this document as NRIS:
https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/netherlands_national_strategy_en.pdf

² In the Netherlands, Roma and Sinti are considered one ethnic group, and the vast majority of them live in houses and apartments. There are also *Woonwagenbewoners* (caravan dwellers) which are calling themselves also *Reizigers* (Travellers). They are living on caravan sites, along few Roma and Sinti families. The Dutch authorities consider the *Woonwagenbewoners* as being Dutch people who like to live a nomadic lifestyle. They are not considered as an ethnic group and not included in the NRIS. Recently, their culture was included in the National Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

³ The term "Roma" is used here, as well as by a number of international organisations and representatives of Roma groups in Europe, to refer to a number of different groups (such as Roma, Sinti, Kale, Gypsies, Romanichels, Boyash, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom) and also includes Travellers, without denying the specificities and varieties of lifestyles and situations of these groups.

youth and women. School mediators and community mediators should be employed from the communities, as they have a greater understanding of the culture and language and have the trust of the other communities' members.

Civil society, empowerment and participation

Roma, Sinti and Travellers communities were not consulted when the current NRIS was issued by the authorities in 2011. Further on, the involvement and consultation with the target group regarding the implementation of the NRIS was limited and deficient.

The Roma, Sinti and Travellers civil society organisations are more and more active in addressing the challenges their communities are facing regarding housing (i.e. for caravan dwellers), preserving culture and identity, education and employment, fighting antigypsyism and other forms of discrimination, etc. They are also confronting with lack of financing and support from the authorities, lack of or limited capacity to engage more effectively as watchdog but also in community and programme work.

The empowerment of the Roma, Sinti and Travellers civil society and their active involvement in the policies cycle that are of their direct concern, could lead to a more inclusive society. Supporting their activism and fight against antigypsyism, allowing representation and participation at national and local level are the means of effective empowerment. Local action plans developed together with the communities will help build trust, capacity and cohesion.

INTRODUCTION

The Roma population in the Netherlands is assumed to be 40,000 (CoE, 2011). Although it is a very small, around 0.24 per cent of the overall Netherlands population, it is very diverse from many points of view, starting with the various subgroups, religions, countries of origin, cultural and historical background, etc. A more detailed account of the diversity of Roma in the Netherlands can be found in the previous Roma Civil Monitor reports.⁴ What is very important to underline is that, in the Netherlands, Roma, Sinti and Travellers are often lumped together under one denominator – Roma, while there are large differences between and within these groups.

The Roma, Sinti and Travellers cultures and histories are quasi-unknown to the Dutch society. The information comes mostly through the media outlets and it is only about criminal behaviour, music and more recently, some information about Dutch Roma and Sinti experience during the WWII. Very few people in the mainstream society know and use the names of Roma, Sinti or *Woonwagenbewoners* (caravan dwellers). In colloquial Dutch language, they are referred to as “*zigeuners*” or “*asociaal*”. Although the general background of Roma and Sinti is recognised by policymakers, each subgroup claims that they have their own specificities, different cultures and traditions. Therefore, each subgroup wants to be acknowledged individually, be actively involved and that the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) reflects solutions to their specific challenges.

The “EU framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020”⁵ has created the premises for the Netherlands to develop a policy framework to foster the social inclusion and address the challenges of its Roma, Sinti and Travellers communities. The Netherlands opted for a set of general policy measures on housing, education, health and employment, to which it has added two other topics, namely combating socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour and exploitation of Roma children.⁶

Due to the fact that the Netherlands has a “no specific policy aimed at a specific group” approach, the existence of NRIS can be considered a strong point, as it could mean that more attention is paid to Roma communities. For example, there were several projects targeting Roma and Sinti or having them as potential beneficiaries; a more regular stock taking of the situation of these communities, occasioned by the periodical monitoring exercises, as part of the EU Framework.

The main weaknesses of the NRIS are: no contribution and consultation of the target group in drafting the NRIS; the general policies measures do not cover specific challenges of the communities in education, health, housing and employment; the Travellers are missing from the target group; the lack of coordination of the all related initiatives of various institutions, by the NRCP and therefore uncertain accountability; the lack of addressing antigypsyism.

In view of the above and a post-2020 new NRIS, this report aims to identify what the Roma, Sinti and Travellers consider is missing in the current strategy and what it is fundamental to be included in the next one, as a solid base. These topics include:

⁴ The first annual cycle of the Roma Civil Monitor was focused on the horizontal precondition of the Roma inclusion – governance, fight against antigypsyism and anti-discrimination. The second cycle concerned the four key policy fields – education, employment, healthcare and housing. All reports are available at: <https://cps.ceu.edu/roma-civil-monitor-reports>

⁵ EU framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/roma-and-eu/roma-integration-eu-countries_en#nationalromaintegrationstrategies

⁶ Netherlands national strategy https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/netherlands_national_strategy_en.pdf

- the acknowledgment of the diversity of and within the communities and their challenges,
- the participation of youth and women, and
- the participation and empowerment of the civil society.

The selection was done following discussions with community members and leaders, considering recurrent issues raised during meetings between community representatives and national or local authorities or various national and international institutions, etc.

This report is part of a larger [Roma Civil Monitor](#) exercise that has taken place during 2017-2020 period. The previous Roma Civil Monitor reports have assessed the progress of the implementation of the NRIS in the Netherlands on the four key policy areas: housing, education, health and employment, as well as the structural and horizontal preconditions of the strategy like addressing anti-discrimination and antigypsyism, and governance and policy framework. For all these reports, the direct input from the communities' members and representatives was paramount regarding their perspective on the progress of the NRIS implementation, but also in terms of recommendations for its improvement.

The main part of the data for this report was collected from the community's members via 23 semi-structured interviews (14 women, 9 men, age 17-67, from various cities in the Netherlands), a focus group and several meetings between community's members and various institutions representatives, etc. Other sources included existing data from various national and international institutions' reports, media, social media and participatory observation.

The contributions of Roma, Sinti and Travelers civil society representatives consisted of accounts of their challenges, but also solutions from their perspective, specific topics of interest where various opinions were expressed and debated. This has been done through individual interviews or common meetings. The approach turned out to be successful suggesting that if this type of interaction between CSO representatives could be organised regularly, involving other stakeholders as well, then it could create a framework for exchanging ideas, sharing solutions and learning about each other. This is one of the main contributions that Roma Civil Monitor can have to the community, if continued in the future.

Ms Michelle Mila van Burik, advocacy coordinator from NGO *Roma Utrecht*, and Mr Orhan Galjus, CEO *Radio Patrin*, were involved in selecting the topics of this report, and have contributed with information, suggestions and comments to the final version of the report.

DIVERSITY WITHIN THE ROMA, SINTI AND TRAVELLERS COMMUNITIES

Definition of the problem

The NRIS in the Netherlands does not reflect the diversity of its Roma, Sinti and Travellers communities, their challenges and their contributions/solutions. Although the document mentions that “there was contact with the Dutch Sinti and Roma Institute (*Nederlands Instituut Sinti en Roma*, NISR) and the Roma community”, according to the Roma civil society members, the NRIS was drafted without their input.

Accordingly, its tone and content reflect the biased perception of the public authorities, and of a large part of the society in general, on these communities, on what they represent and what their needs are. As a consequence, this biased perception in itself skewed the whole notion of integration, from the beginning. The lack of participatory consultative process led to a prejudiced and poor policy, as discussed in previous [Roma Civil Monitor reports](#). By not recognising and not having the diversity of the groups represented, the problems faced by these groups are not seen and addressed.

Background and cause of the problem

The Roma communities in the Netherlands are relatively small and very diverse. Each group is sensitive regarding their own identity, name, cultural and historical background and care to be distinctively perceived by the mainstream society. The NRIS failed to take into consideration that these different groups may have their own specificities and have different needs. Any mapping should include the moment they arrived in the Netherlands, the stage of their inclusion and integration in the Dutch society.

The Roma communities are diverse and fragmented. However, the expectation of the authorities is to discuss with one representation, with a unified and uniform voice. Dutch authorities do not have special policies for ethnic groups, and the NRIS reflects that principle (NRIS is a set of general policy measures), with the exception of two elements: combating socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour and exploitation of Roma children. By including these two elements, the authorities chose the negative lens such as socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour and project them over Roma communities. This perspective affects the communities inside, leads to cohesion erosion, but also outside, influencing negatively the public perception within mainstream society, enforcing stereotypes and prejudices. More details about the initiatives, projects and activities that were developed under the combating socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour and exploitation of Roma children provisions can be seen in the previous Roma Civil Monitor reports. Irrespective of which of the groups were targeted by this provisions, the community’s perspectives were that these two components of an “inclusion strategy” damage majority’s perceptions of all the targeted communities. They all felt labelled and stigmatised; this contributed to more tensions between and within groups, and more distrust in institutions and authorities.

There is, for very rational, historically rooted reasons, a generalised distrust in the institutions. Hence, one of the objectives of the NRIS should be to come to terms with that mistrust. Building trust with the Roma communities is the obligation of the State and its institutions, after years of neglect and repressive measures.

The different communities face different challenges, due to various factors, including: lifestyle, internal dynamics and norms, prejudices and stereotypes, discrimination in the access of public services, antigypsyism, marginalisation, lack of support by authorities and service providers, lack of knowledge about Roma histories and cultures by the mainstream society. Altogether, they make existing problems more acute, which end up being perceived as specific to the group or attributed to it.

For example, the high drop-out and low representation of Roma students in secondary and tertiary education is explained by the authorities as a lack of appreciation of the education by the parents, a cultural aspect, while community members accuse stigmatisation, bullying, lack of support from the authorities, etc.

Similarly, the high unemployment is perceived by the authorities as lack of interest, and again as a cultural aspect, while community members mention discrimination, stigmatisation, lack of opportunities, lack of access to finance for entrepreneurs, etc.

For the *Woonwagenbewoners* (caravan dwellers),⁷ their own lifestyle, their own identity is challenged by the so-called extinction policy targeting caravan sites. Their needs are different from those of the Roma and Sinti living in houses or apartments. This could be illustrated by the following quote: *"We want to be able to preserve our culture and traditions and living in a caravan is a central element for us, for our identity. Our family life, social and economic life is revolving around the caravan site and the possibility to live in caravans. The extinction of the caravan site policy is a form of assimilation and we will fight it for our future."* (interview, community member) Moreover, the caravan dwellers were not even included in the NRIS target group, therefore not consulted about it. The National Ombudsman in the research "Caravan Dwellers Looking for a Place. An Investigation into the Reliability of the Government for Caravan Dwellers" from 2017, mentions that *"with this choice, the Dutch government deviates without a motivation, from the EU frame"*,⁸ referring to the decision of the Dutch government to include only Roma and Sinti in the NRIS target group, but not the caravan dwellers.

Despite the fact that the protection of rights is better in the Netherlands than in most other European countries, Roma still find themselves at risk of stateless, after living for 40 years on the territory, facing major discrimination. This is intangible evidence that mainstreaming alone is not enough. To address this issue, carefully targeted policies that accommodate the diversity within the Roma community need to be developed and implemented to ensure that discrimination is not perpetuated from generation to generation. The government has to take proactive measures to ensure that no child is stateless or at risk of statelessness, even if the number is small, because this status affects the access to labour market and social public services.

The following interview extract exemplify this: *"We are living here for more than 40 years and we are still seen as migrants. I know many Roma who are stateless here and their children inherited the status, limiting their opportunities to develop like any other child. We are discriminated on the labour market. Media in general reports about us only in negative situations and the mainstream society is inform mostly by what media provides and in vast majority of the cases are negative information or stereotypes."* (interview community member)

Many people feel scattered, and in a relatively small country like the Netherlands with good transport and infrastructure, a common place, a cultural centre could help community building. Roma feel like they have been fragmented, there is a lack of community feeling, of belonging and the fear of losing identity. Many interviewees expressed the desire for a common *"space where we can present and promote our culture, like a cultural centre, where members of the community young and old can meet, share and celebrate our*

⁷ In the Netherlands, Roma and Sinti are considered one ethnic group, and the vast majority of them live in houses and apartments. There are also *Woonwagenbewoners* (caravan dwellers) which are calling themselves also *Reizigers* (Travellers). They are living on caravan sites, along few Roma and Sinti families. The Dutch authorities consider the *Woonwagenbewoners* as being Dutch people who like to live a nomadic lifestyle. They are not considered as an ethnic group and not included in the NRIS. Recently, their culture was included in the National Inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

⁸ WOONWAGENBEWONER ZOEKT STANDPLAATS. Een onderzoek naar de betrouwbaarheid van de overheid voor woonwagenbewoners, 2017

cultures and identities. Children need to learn in the history classes about what happen to us during the WWII, and in the history in general." (interview community member)

Roma cultures and histories are almost unknown to the mainstream society and are very little present in the public sphere and discourse. There are rich Roma, Sinti and Travelers histories, arts and cultures that need to be harvested. There is a need for substantial counter narratives to address the limited knowledge among mainstream society about Roma, Sinti and Travellers and challenge existing antigypsyism.

The main message coming from majority of Roma civil society organisations was that there is a need for an inventory of problems people are facing at local and regional level, i.e. where the implementation of the NRIS is supposed to take place. The next step is that authorities together with the Roma civil society check if there are mainstream policy measures in place that could effectively address the problems Roma face and look at the causes for which solutions are not implemented, while considering targeted measures. The causes can be lack of information on behave of Roma, lack of awareness, lack of data, lack of commitment and support, lack of trust in institutions and authorities, discrimination, lack of communication, antigypsyism, etc. A particular attention should be paid by national institutions and local authorities to fighting discrimination and antigypsyism effectively.

Policy answer to the problem

NRIS in the Netherlands is a set of general policy measures with the exception of two targeted provisions regarding combating socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour and exploitation of Roma children. These two provisions should rather be under the remit of law enforcement agencies without any ethnic reference than in a social inclusion policy for a specific group, to avoid discrimination and further stigmatisation of the group.

One main problem with the NRIS is that it is too general, and it does not focus on actual policy measures or initiatives. It does not have any action plan attached, which could detail the way it will be implemented, no resources allocated, except for ad-hoc targeted measures. Ethnic disaggregated data cannot be collected and there are no indicators. There is no system of monitoring in place and no official and regular dialogue with the Roma civil society. Ironically, the NRIS stipulates that the Roma communities play a crucial role especially at local level, but there are no details about the ways through which they can be involved.

The NRIS document mentions that it is "*a general policy for migrants, including Roma*". Treating Roma under the category of migrants, while an ethnic group comprising under its umbrella term many other distinct groups which may be or not ethnically related to each other, defeats the purpose of a national effort for inclusion. The NRIS fails to acknowledge all different Roma groups living in Netherlands, and also to distinguish between their status, as recent arrivals, long established citizens, stateless, etc. These have negative implications on the affirmation and respect of the identity of these groups, but also on their access to rights and services, according to their specific needs. The application of mainstream policies for specific groups is inadequate and inefficient; it is failing to answer the problems faced by Roma, including the structural and systemic discrimination, lack of equal opportunities and exclusion. A more targeted and better monitored application of existing policies and resources available for the inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Travellers, but also for combating discrimination, antigypsyism and racism in general, could constitute a starting point for the Roma inclusion strategy in the Netherlands.

The future inclusion policies must take into consideration the realities of these communities, their diversity, and even if there is going to be an integrated set of mainstream policies, there are warrants that need to be included in order to ensure that their specific challenges, needs and solutions are being adequately addressed, such as specific targets and indicators, impact assessments, monitoring and evaluation guidelines and consultation and participation platforms and mechanisms. This can lead to an increased efficiency of the policy and empower the communities.

WOMEN AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Definition of the problem

Roma, Sinti and Travellers women and youth (17-30 years old) face multiple challenges of social and economic nature, but also discrimination, antigypsyism and difficulties in preserving their culture challenges that are not addressed by the NRIS. Both categories are overrepresented in unemployment and underrepresented in secondary and tertiary education. There is a lack of data and research about Roma youth and women, intersectionality or LGBTIQA, with the exception of some limited socio-economic information. If Roma women are very active at community level, NGOs, young Roma register a weak participation and self-representation. It is unknown to what degree Roma youth are benefiting from and are actively participating in mainstream youth organisations, youth strategies debates or national youth council. There is a social stigma attached to Roma youth, so many young Roma do not self-identify as such publicly.

Background and cause of the problem

The Roma, Sinti and Travellers communities are considered closed, isolated and poorly integrated communities in the Netherlands. One of the measures adopted by the authorities was to divide and spread them in many cities (i.e. Roma arriving in the Netherlands end of 1970s) or create sites with 2-3 caravans surrounded by houses (*woonwagenbewoners* – or caravan dwellers).

“Except my family, I do not know any other Roma. I never had Roma colleagues in school, I have just one friend far in the North. I know there are others, but I never interact with any, nor with Sinti or woonwagenbewoners.” (interview, young community member)

The authorities’ intention was to increase interaction between the Roma, Sinti and Travellers and the mainstream society and consequently achieve more integration. After a few decades, the integration plans have not only failed, but have also led to the fragmentation of these communities. This also affects and makes it more difficult for them to preserve and promote their culture, language and identity, in general. In this respect, Roma women and youth are considered to play one of the most important roles in preserving and promoting identity and culture, as women are traditionally in charge of their children’s education and of passing the traditions and values (without minimising the roles of the men) onto the next generation, while children and youth are the future, carrying with them the Roma identity and culture.

Except for *Woonwagenbewoners*, the communities are quite spread. There are very few occasions (mostly music festivals or family events) to meet and socialise. The majority of Roma NGOs have no office and there is no cultural centre; therefore, NGOs depend mostly on the availability of the community centre or other public spaces.

In the case of Roma, Sinti and Travellers women and youth, which are considered to be the most marginalised, the challenges are even bigger. There are no policy initiatives developed regarding economic activities that can improve the status of Roma, Sinti and Travellers women and youth, despite the fact that monitoring reports were acknowledging the high rate of unemployment within this segment. There are very limited and hard accessible resources, especially funds for self-employment and entrepreneurship for Roma, Sinti and Travellers in general and for women especially.

Most of the Roma, Sinti and Travellers NGOs are led or managed by women. This shows their great potential, but unfortunately, they are confronting with the lack of funds to create and develop their ideas to help their communities. The applications of the only Roma women organisation *Romane Sheja* and the Roma youth organisation *Romane Shave*, recently created, were rejected in 2019 from receiving grants from the government’s fund for Roma and Sinti participation and emancipation. The reasons

indicated in the rejection decisions were: their description was “not clear enough”; the results after one year of activities “were not sufficient” and that the funding requested was too high. Although the organisations submitted an appeal, the process was lengthy and discouraging for newly formed NGOs. In 2020, the women organisation received a favourable answer to their appeal, and although the funds requested initially were reduced, the applications were accepted. All the appeal process was done with external volunteer help, otherwise the organisations would not have had the capacity and resources to go through the difficult and bureaucratic process on their own. There is without a doubt a great need for capacity building for project management and project writing at the NGO level.

There is no financial support for projects or activities providing women and youth spaces, where they can meet and share, discuss and learn about their history, culture, language or their current challenges. Access to labour market opportunities that can accommodate what Roma women consider cultural specificities, like working in family, certain trades/professions performed in specific conditions, was signalled by the interviewees as restricted by today’s social and economic context.

“I want to keep my culture and my identity, but I also want to be able to enjoy the opportunities that others from the mainstream society benefit. This should not be a choice. It is not for the mainstream society, why should it be for an ethnic group?” (interviewee, young woman community member)

The Dutch NRIS sole reference to the youth is linked to criminal behaviour and child exploitation. While these are important and serious topics to tackle, and all community members condemn these practices, they can be addressed without stigmatising and labelling Roma communities; such a controversial project using stigmatising labels was “Tackling multi-issue among families with a Roma background”.⁹ On the other side, there should be also research on the causes of these problems and their relation to antigypsyism and how they can be prevented, with the direct involvement of the communities in addressing the issues. Promotion of role models, support for youth and their families in tackling sensitive issues, cooperation and less top-down approach could help solving these serious issues that are not only specific to Roma, Sinti and Travellers community at all. People currently working voluntarily in mediating between families and authorities were unfortunately compromised in front of the communities because of authorities’ lack of understanding of the culture, and top-down and repressive approach. There is a need for training the mediators, but the authorities must be willing to understand the culture and get rid of their prejudices and negative perceptions of these groups, were the suggestions of the interviewees.

Addressing antigypsyism, bullying and stigmatisation of Roma, Sinti and Travellers children and youth in schools and outside schools should be done by the authorities in direct cooperation with the communities.

“We are stigmatised in school! As soon as the colleagues find out where you live, or what your name is, or if you say that you are Rom, one can notice a change in behaviour. Also, from the teachers. And this can affect you and your performance in school.” (interview community member)

Policy answer to the problem

NRIS does not mention Roma women in its content and the only policy reference to the youth is in relation to child exploitation and juvenile criminality. There are no recent studies regarding the situation of Roma women and youth, their challenges, needs and opportunities. There is a need for data collection to support adequate policy measures for

⁹ Project: *Tackling multi-issue among families with a Roma background*, available at: <https://hetccv.nl/onderwerpen/multiprobleemgezinnen-met-een-roma-achtergrond/>

this segment of the Roma communities. It is not clear if young Roma and Roma women are involved at any level in public consultations on topics of direct concern.

Although many Roma NGOs are run by women, there is a need for organisational capacity building, including on project writing and implementation. One interesting aspect is that although most of the Roma NGOs have women either as active members or as directors, the activities with special focus on women are almost completely absent. With the exception of a newly created *Romani Sheja* in Utrecht, there are no Roma women organisations in the Netherlands. There is no cooperation between Roma NGOs, or Roma and non-Roma NGOs on projects or activities targeting women.

Young Roma, on the other hand, are almost invisible at NGO level, and less active at community and mainstream society in general. One of the explanations is the low interest in Roma youth issues, the low number and weak networking, poor connection and communication among young Roma from different parts of the Netherlands. The Roma NGOs activities for the youth are focusing mainly on education.

The economic and social projects/programmes that can improve Roma, Sinti and Travellers life can be initiated by local or national authorities directly targeting these communities, via the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. Small grants or microfinancing would be of great support for self-employed or small entrepreneurs.

NGOs or representatives of Roma communities can network with other communities in a similar situation, work together on women and youth topics, taking advantage of the mainstream organisations' expertise and experience. There is a need for active engagement on the side of the communities at local, national and European level, where the interests of women and youth are promoted. But in the same time, even for networking, there must be supported to overcome stereotyping, discrimination and antigypsyism.

In terms of continuing with the education and the access to the labour market, the monitoring encountered situations when youth were dropping-out of school because of the lack of financial support, or the need to work to support financially their family. The lack of access to internships which could open hiring opportunities were mentioned frequently in the interviews. The lack of role models from the community, or the lack of their visibility and a support network came across in the research as factors that affect youth life socially and professionally.

For youth, there must be mentoring programmes in place, financial support where needed for continuing education, support in finding internships and jobs; incentives for companies that hire youth from these communities. School mediators from the communities would have a bigger impact, as at the moment there is lack of trust between communities' members and authorities. Community mediators coming from the community could help solving serious situations outside schools, as they understand the Roma culture, language, mentality and have the trust of the community. Previous Roma Civil Monitoring reports signalled the lack of mediators and the necessity of these positions for the community, with people coming from the community. The local authorities had in plan to introduce school mediators starting with 2020, but there is no clear evidence about progress in this respect.

CIVIL SOCIETY, EMPOWERMENT, PARTICIPATION

Definition of the problem

Roma, Sinti and Travellers' civil society organisations face hurdles in preserving their cultures and identities and also in fighting discrimination and antigypsyism. Civil and political participation and the empowerment of these communities are characterised by a very low financial and political investment as well as a lack of commitment and consistency by local and national authorities. This resulted in underrepresentation, lack of or low participation in the political and public life, which further led to increased marginalisation, isolation, discrimination and antigypsyism.

Background and cause of the problem

The topics of civil society, empowerment and participation were discussed in the [first RCM report on the Netherlands](#). Since then, the situation has not improved much. There is a large number of Roma, Sinti and Travelers smaller organisations, associations and foundations, as well as activists who are fighting for the rights and interests of their communities in the Netherlands. There is not a clear account about their number and who is active in what field, as the vast majority do not have an office, many do not have an (updated) website and are not active on social media, and the cooperation and networking among Roma NGOs is limited. Moreover, there is no umbrella organisation or national network to date. Some of their major obstacles are the lack of financial resources and the lack of operational capacity, knowledge and skills to be effectively involved in lobbying or project and programme management and implementation. So far, the main source of financing is a state subsidised fund for projects and activities for the participation and emancipation of the Sinti and Roma in the Netherlands, within the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. Many of the applicant organisations to this fund have accused lack of transparency in the administration of the fund, in the absence of public annual activities reports, release of the list of projects that are granted annually and of public information regarding the rest of the funds available. Despite these concerns, the ministry has not addressed any of them. A Roma and Sinti advisory board makes a first evaluation of the applications and there are allegations against the members of the Board of nepotism and conflict of interest.¹⁰

The entire application process is bureaucratic and cumbersome, and the lack of capacity in writing applications is affecting many Roma NGOs. There is consultancy available for NGOs via an organisation¹¹ paid by the Ministry, and many of the Roma NGOs applicants make use of its services. Apart from the support in writing the applications, this is an opportunity for the NGOs to learn and gain experience in project writing.

As the subsidy fund is a limited one, presumably will be exhausted by 2025, the Roma NGOs, who are relying heavily on this fund, should consider looking for other sources. Funds from local and national authorities to NGOs should be also accessed to increase their social capital, expertise and experience, for capacity building, in order to provide services needed for their communities.

European funds for advocacy and capacity building of the small NGOs as those representing the interests of Roma, Sinti and Travelers are hardly accessible and more bureaucratic. Most of them do not know about or do not have access to available technical assistance services by the government or companies offering such services for free.

Many organisations do not have an office, they are continuously underfinanced, using personal time and funds to support different activities for the benefit of their communities,

¹⁰ These allegations come in the context of family relations between members of the Board and the NGOs which projects were approved and financed by this Fund. Or due to the fact that members of the Board were in project team of a project financed by this Fund.

¹¹ Stichting Pelita <https://www.pelita.nl/projecten/beleidskader-participatie-emancipatie-voor-de-sinti-roma.html>

or covering own costs for attending the meetings with public authorities in the interest of the community. Most of the projects run by the NGOs are in the social sphere. The advocacy activities are most of the time not financed, therefore done voluntarily. Many activists are doing the work of the social workers and community or school mediators, as most of the community members do not trust those hired by the local authorities. In general, the expectations of the authorities are that the NGOs and the activists volunteer their time and support for the benefit of the community, but in fact they are providing services for which local authorities have budgets and employees.

At the level of policy making, currently, there is no formal nor official dialogue at the national level between representatives of the communities and the NRCP. Until 2017, there was a core group of Roma representatives consulting with the government, which was dissolved in the meantime. Many NGOs have requested, in the last couple of years, establishment of a National Roma Platform, but the request was rejected by the NRCP as being too costly and inefficient. There have been a few persons who were constantly involved in various advisory committees or consultations, for several years, but recently the community's members have raised suspicions regarding tokenism, their connection with and activity in the community, etc. An additional shortcoming is also the low representation of women and youth. There is a need for more diverse voices in the leadership. Representation of Roma should reflect its diversity.

At national level, there is a lack of coordination between various initiatives run by different ministries and institutions regarding Roma, Sinti and Travellers. This indicates lack of capacity at the level at NRCP (one person, part time position), ambiguity regarding responsibility and accountability and the absence of a concrete action plan regarding the implementation of NRIS. The lack of communication with the communities also affects the trust relation with the authorities.

The fragmentation of the communities and possible latent competition between different organisations and leaders, contributed to reducing the chances of cooperation between all the communities as well as with institutions and authorities. There is no initiative on behalf of NRCP or other authorities to initiate a trust building dialogue.

Regarding politics, there is an increased interest among community members in political participation, either in running for positions at the local administration or even a seat in the Parliament.¹² However, according to one of the interviewees, *"even if all members of our community with voting right would vote, our candidate will not have enough votes for a seat in Parliament"*. (interviewee community member) More so, there seem to be also talks with mainstream political parties in order to get their support for the communities' causes and interests.

Policy answer to the problem

As mentioned previously in this report, the NRIS was written without any input from Roma, Sinti and Travelers. The government missed the opportunities to actively involve the target group in the process of implementation and monitoring of the NRIS. The impact of the lack of action of the government is a weak Roma participation and capacity building.

Moreover, the failure of the government to publicly communicate the NRIS with the target group, by submitting it to any deliberation or discussion, is visible though the limited knowledge about the existence and content of the NRIS by the target group. The lack of participatory consultative process led to prejudiced and poor policy, as discussed in previous Roma Civil Monitoring reports.

To date, there has been no action plan developed and implemented by the authorities, regarding the capacity building of the NGOs which could impacted the financial sustainability of the NGOs, more projects, more participation and empowerment.

¹² Different community leaders/members consider running for a Parliament seat as independent or as member of a mainstream party. Several community members have expressed the opinion that more accessible and more useful for the communities would be positions in the local administration.

The NRCP failed to set up a national framework under which representatives of all groups could participate and contribute. Suggestions from community representatives include the need for a national platform, an advisory board or any other set-up, which is inclusive, with representative from all the groups, having the legitimacy and trust of their community in supporting their interest. These representatives should be involved in the process of drafting the new policies for Roma, Sinti and Travelers.¹³ *"We understand that the National contact point cannot solve our problems, but we need a place of interaction between us, with the authorities, to learn about each other, to share experiences and solutions, to support each other. We have to be part of the solution. The NRIS needs to reflect our reality, our real situation,"* said one of the interviewees.

In terms of support from the local authorities, responsible for the implementation of the NRIS in full cooperation with the Roma communities and NGOs (according to the NRIS), very little has been done in employing communities' members, offering an office space or any other space for activities, creating partnerships, etc. This resulted in less Roma participation, less activities and projects, less community development and empowerment.

The diversity of Roma communities should be reflected in its leadership. Roma youth and women, migrant, stateless, LGBTQIA should be more visible and have an active role at community level as well as in the partnership with the authorities. Their voice should lead the discussion in connection with policy measures that regards them directly and they should receive support from the authorities, mainstream society and NGOs, as well as from the Roma communities.

¹³ Interviews with the communities' members

RECOMMENDATIONS

Diversity within the Roma, Sinti and Travelers communities

1. The NRCP should acknowledge and include in the next inclusion strategy all the groups according to the EU Framework regarding the Roma as a collective name, and the demographic situation in the Netherlands.
2. To ensure support for the communities (NGOs or individual initiatives) for the preservation and promotion of Roma, Sinti and Travellers cultures and identities in public space, locally by the Diversity department within local administration, or nationally by institutions such as *Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed* [The Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage].
3. The NRCP and local authorities should ensure conditions for active involvement of all groups in all the phases of the policy cycle, from problem identification to monitoring and evaluation at national and local level, through official partnerships and agreements with Roma NGOs.
4. Data collection and development of indicators on the effectiveness of the general policy measures in reaching out the Roma should be ensured by the government. NRCP in cooperation with local authorities and Roma NGOs should develop indicators and collect disaggregated data.
5. NRIS should be accompanied by an action plan with a specific provision on combating antigypsyism with the direct involvement of the Roma, Sinti and Travellers, of national and local institutions and authorities.
6. Government and local authorities should support a broader base and a more representative leadership to ensure that those who represent Roma reflect the diversity of the various groups.

Women and youth participation

To the central Government and local authorities:

7. Support research and data collection on Roma women and youth and identify clear targets, especially the age group of young Roma.
8. Support access to small grants and microfinance for women and youth for economic, social, political or leisure activities by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. Also, informing and supporting Roma women and youth to join existing mainstream programmes and initiatives.
9. To provide financial support and mentoring for Roma youth who want to continue higher education but are lacking the financial means; support for internships and jobs for youth; support vocational training and capacity building for women and youth and for women and youth organisations.
10. To ensure support for Roma women and youth activities, networking and partnership, especially in addressing antigypsyism, bullying, systemic discrimination and in political participation.

Civil society, empowerment, participation

11. NRCP must set up an official national platform for regular meetings regarding the situation of the implementation of the inclusion strategy/plan where representatives of all groups, women and youth as well, should be invited to contribute. A communication channel with all other NGOs who are not part of the platform should be established, so that they can remain updated and engaged on the matters of interest regarding the inclusion strategy.
12. Local authorities must develop together with Roma, Sinti and Traveller community members, local action plans. Funds should be allocated to employ and train

community members in developing and implementing the local action plans. Also, they must appoint and employ a contact person from the community to ensure effective communication and facilitate support.

13. Local authorities with significant numbers of Roma, Sinti and/or Travellers should employ community mediators from the respective communities, people that know the communities and have their trust. In case there are projects targeting the communities, a project assistant should be selected and employed from the community. Local authorities should support the NGOs with office space, especially if those NGOs are doing social work or mediation for the communities.
14. There is a need for capacity building at the level of NGOs in terms of project management, writing project applications, monitoring and evaluations. There are NGOs which managed to create alliances with more experienced organisations and experts and are gaining experience and receiving the support for their activities. This can be a model to follow.
15. The Roma NGOs should network and develop partnerships on topics of common interest, with mainstream organisations that have the experience and capacity, as a way to build up theirs and gain experience.
16. Local, national and European funds for advocacy and capacity building of small Roma NGOs should be made more easily accessible through less bureaucratic procedures and softer eligibility criteria.

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