

TOMORROW WILL BE A BETTER DAY...

Participation of Roma young people in the
neighbourhood and youth policy in Flanders

2014

Research report

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Research

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The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

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Roma young people in the neighbourhood and policy in Flanders

Summary

This exploratory research makes a limited analysis of how Roma children and young people participate in neighbourhood and policy in Flanders. These are the research questions:

- How do Roma children and young people help shape their social environment (neighbourhood, city/municipality, country) from the existing structures?
- What are the success factors and pitfalls of leisure time initiatives that reach Roma children and young people?
- How do Roma children and young people experience this situation themselves?

The policy recommendations are based on desk research and input from different sources: local authorities, organizations that reach Roma and some Roma young people. They deal with three aspects:

- How do Roma children and young people spend their leisure time and how do they feel about leisure time activities, whether organized or not?
- What are the success factors and pitfalls of leisure time initiatives that reach Roma children and young people?
- What kind of framework is needed to make these initiatives successful?

Roma children and young people are first of all just children and young people, with just as much mutual diversity as between other young people. Local authorities and private initiatives can broaden the living environment of young people, provide opportunities that result in successful experiences and thus strengthen these young people to develop a more solid future and make fully conscious choices. Trust and respect are crucial. You gain trust by investing in a dialogue with children and young people, and with their parents. The offered leisure time activities must be easily accessible, both financially and practically. Once there is a good relationship of trust with a family, this will go round quickly and it will be easier to reach other Roma.

Mentors say working with Roma is done in an emancipatory manner, adopting an unprejudiced, receptive attitude and showing a lot of patience. A good mentor is able to anticipate difficulties and is flexible. Mediators who speak the language make the work a lot easier. Mentors ask for the opportunity to exchange experiences with colleagues from outside the organization and the mandate for life-broad working.

In order to have the organization that reaches Roma function well, a broad network is required in addition to a positive attitude to be able to strengthen the target group in a life-broad manner. A precondition here is that the organizations in this network have the necessary knowledge of Roma. Strengthening the number of professionals would make a lot more possible. There is a need for space for a demand-led and customized neighbourhood-oriented offer.

Local authorities need knowledge and information regarding the target group. It's not easy to reach Roma children and young people through actions or initiatives: only one in four indicates being able to reach them. They generally reach only a small group. Local authorities can bridge the gap by being present in their living environment, by investing in outreaching, demand-led work. As for the leisure time activities themselves, the offer should be accessible, flexible and gender-conscious. In order to succeed, there must be a strong focus on communication.

The central government should provide a policy context which allows for and encourages life-broad working. This policy also needs to be an investment in professionalisation of youth workers and second-line policy workers. It must be based on talks with and experiences in practice of experts by experience. It is highly important to focus on quality instead of on quantity. Experts ask to diffuse the knowledge regarding Roma in society or encourage and facilitate this dissemination of information and to strengthen the monitors of Roma. The government should pay attention to the creation of a positive image, informing organizations and raising awareness by the public.

Table of contents

Roma young people in the neighbourhood and policy in Flanders	1
Summary.....	1
Introduction.....	5
Research framework: Roma Youth Action Plan and the youth policy of the Council of Europe.....	7
Research questions and approach.....	11
Research questions.....	11
Research method	11
Definition of concepts and field: 'Roma' and 'participation'.....	13
Who are the 'Roma'?	13
The target group in figures.....	15
Participation and citizenship defined.....	16
Local youth and integration policy, including Roma?.....	19
Profile of respondents	19
Where children and young people live.....	22
Initiatives for Roma children and young people.....	23
Some characteristics of reported initiatives.....	23
Communication with and information about the target group	25
Needs of the local authorities	25
Conclusion	26
What does the youth sector have to say?	29
Formal and informal practices in Flanders.....	29
Roma children and young people as participants.....	30
The mentor	36
The organization	39
The policy.....	40
Needs analysis among some Roma children and young people.....	43
Young is just young	44
Security and trust	45
Friends and family	45
Adulthood.....	45

Working context.....	47
Europe	47
Federal state of Belgium.....	48
Flanders	49
(Local) youth policy in Belgium and Flanders.....	50
Policy recommendations	53
Bibliography.....	57
Enclosures.....	58
Questionnaire for local authorities.....	59
Questions asked in the focus groups	63

Introduction

Roma children and young people are an often neglected group in the youth policy sector. Youth policy seems to succeed letting them slip through the nets. Fortunately, this does not happen always and not everywhere. Some local authorities, a handful of organizations and a few individuals here and there do their best every day to reach, support and connect this target group.

In the present report, we try to learn from them. Our primary ambition is to conduct an (exploratory) field mapping of existing initiatives aimed at Roma children and young people. A limited analysis of these initiatives and activities should allow us to draw lessons for the future and formulate ambitions. We provide them in the form of recommendations. However, we hope to learn the most important lesson from the Roma children and young people themselves. They have the final say in the present report and give us a 'reality check' before we communicate our conclusions to the world from our comfortable office chairs.

In the present report, you will read about three stages which together form the exploratory research. Firstly, we listen to what local authorities have to say. This input is considered for the second stage during which we map private (non-public) initiatives. In both cases, the public as well as the private initiatives, we search for characteristics, success factors and difficulties. Although in the research these two stages take place shortly after one another, they are naturally closely interconnected in reality. The first forms indeed the policy context of the second.

Finally, we visit a certain number of organizations that work with Roma young people in order to let these youngsters have the final say. Our ambition is definitely not to provide a complete overview that covers the whole target group. For that, the group of Roma is too diverse, too large, and the research too limited. We do, however, want to share a certain number of opinions and check how they feel about objectives and initiatives. Naturally, the best touchstone is the Roma children's and young people's own social environment.

At the end of the present report, we will provide a short description of the relating working context.

Research framework: Roma Youth Action Plan and the youth policy of the Council of Europe

The youth policy of the Council of Europe aims at “providing young people with equal opportunities and experience which enable them to develop knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part in all aspects of society”. The Council of Europe’s youth sector’s approach to youth policy aims to support young people’s participation as a citizen and their complex transition to autonomy. Youth policy, in the Council of Europe’s youth sector’s approach, combines a multi-dimensional concern with ensuring young people’s well-being, providing them with relevant learning opportunities, increasing the probability of their successful integration into society and transition to autonomy, and enabling them to participate in decision-making and civil society. Human rights, citizenship and intercultural learning are central to the work of the youth sector of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe implements its youth policy through intergovernmental co-operation with its Member States, and through the programme of the European Youth Centres in Strasbourg and Budapest, as well as through the support offered to youth organizations’ projects by the European Youth Foundation.

The youth policy of the Council of Europe supports both the fight against discrimination affecting Roma young people and the participation of Roma youth in all areas of the programme of the Youth Department. These are essential dimensions for making sure that the aims of the youth policy of the Council of Europe – *providing young people with equal opportunities and experience which enable them to play a full part in all aspects of society* – effectively apply also to Roma young people.

The youth sector of the Council of Europe initiated activities with Roma young people in 1995, with a training course at the European Youth Centre in Strasbourg within the framework of the All Different – All Equal European youth campaign against racism, antisemitism, xenophobia and intolerance. In the years that followed, various other activities were carried out to strengthen the capacity of Roma youth organizations and Roma youth leaders in Europe. These have included:

- Study sessions with Roma European youth networks covering human rights education, youth mobilisation, the management of Roma youth organizations, and intercultural dialogue;
- Activities where the concerns of Roma young people were particularly relevant, such as young migrants, young women, violence in everyday life or gender equality;
- Training courses for youth leaders and youth workers, such as the series of long-term training courses on Participation and Citizenship of minority youth, and the Enter! project on access to social rights for young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods (2010-2012);
- Support to local pilot projects by the European Youth Foundation.

In September 2011, as a follow-up to the Strasbourg Declaration¹, the Youth Department invited 60 Roma youth leaders to a conference in Strasbourg to discuss thematic fields, priorities and activities to be included in a 'Roma youth action plan'. The Conference was organized in close co-operation with European Roma youth networks and other stakeholders and was a response to the realisation that the concerns of young Roma were insufficiently addressed in policies concerning Roma. The participants at the conference exchanged experiences and built on previous results for a common identification of current challenges for Roma young people and priorities for European youth work and youth policy.

The Roma Youth Action Plan is a response of the Council of Europe to the challenges faced by Roma young people in Europe, particularly in relation to their empowerment, participation in policy and decision-making processes and structures at European level, and the realities of discrimination, particularly antigypsyism, with which they are confronted.

The Council of Europe Youth Department is coordinating the implementation of the Action Plan in accordance with the principles of youth participation and agency of young people in youth policy, of which the co-management system of the Council of Europe youth sector is the key stone. The Youth Department will ensure Roma youth organizations and the various Council of Europe sectors working on Roma and youth policy issues are involved in the definition and coordination of the Action Plan and its activities.

An Informal Contact Group on Roma Youth (ICG) was set up following the Conference in September 2011. FERYP – Forum of European Roma Young People, ternYpe – International Roma Youth Network, the Open Society Foundations, the European Roma Rights Centre, the Roma Education Fund, the European Youth Forum and other relevant stakeholders are part of the informal group together with different sectors from the Council of Europe. The role of the ICG is to promote communication and coordination among the various partners and stakeholders, as well as ownership of the Action Plan by Roma young people and the Roma civil society. The Joint Council on Youth, as the co-management body of the Youth Department, is responsible for including the Action Plan in the Youth Department's programme and for its evaluation. Members of the Advisory Council on Youth and of the European Steering Committee on Youth take part in the ICG's meetings.

The Action Plan includes activities of the Youth Department and of other sectors of the Council of Europe as well as activities proposed by other partners, both intergovernmental and non-governmental, cooperating with the Council of Europe and interested in securing maximum impact of their activities by creating synergies while avoiding duplication. The activities are complementary to other national and European initiatives which play a fundamental role in addressing and overcoming the structural forms of discrimination and social exclusion affecting Roma across Europe.

¹ In October 2010, the Council of Europe High Level Meeting on Roma resulted in the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma (CM(2010)133 final), which has become a guiding document for all the activities that the Council of Europe undertakes regarding Roma people. The High Level meeting agreed to a pan-European effort to respond to the needs of the estimated 12 million Roma living in Europe. This is based on the principles of non-discrimination, citizenship, women and children's rights; social inclusion including education, housing and healthcare; empowerment and better access to justice.

The Action Plan will be reviewed and updated regularly and potentially expand.

The Action Plan has been prepared and developed within the framework of the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma and of the youth policy of the Council of Europe. It takes into account the challenges of gaining personal autonomy, which are common to all young people, by promoting equality of opportunities for young people so they may develop “knowledge, skills and competencies to play a full part in all aspects of society”.² It also addresses the specific challenges and hurdles faced by Roma young people, starting with the fact they are denied “the right to be young”.

The overall objectives of the Action Plan are to improve the participation of Roma youth in European youth and Roma policies, and to initiate pilot programmes and initiatives to combat discrimination against young Roma.

The Action Plan sets out to:

- Support the creation of an environment where Roma youth can grow up free from discrimination and confident about their future perspectives, while appreciating their plural cultural backgrounds and affiliations as young people, as Roma, as citizens of their countries, and as active Europeans;
- Change prejudices and stereotypical attitudes against Roma;
- Support and develop the participation and autonomy of Roma youth at European, national, and local levels;
- Defend the human rights of Roma by empowering young Roma through human rights education.
- Promote real equal opportunities for Roma young people in all aspects of life, notably education, employment, health, and housing;
- Combat the segregation of Roma schools and settlements;
- Support an integrated approach to all Roma youth-related policies;
- Value and promote Roma identity, culture, and language.

The guiding principles of the Roma Youth Action plan are:

- Direct, constant and consistent involvement of Roma youth and Roma youth organizations in the implementation of the Plan with other partners;
- Creating synergies among initiatives in order to respond to the need for systemic changes in structural forms of discrimination;
- Adopting human-rights based approaches to the challenges faced by young Roma, including a concern for gender equality;
- Mainstreaming Roma issues in youth policy and mainstreaming youth issues in Roma-related policies;
- Encouraging change and action at the local and national level.

² *Agenda 2020 on the youth policy of the Council of Europe.*

The Roma Youth Action Plan is articulated around six themes, including specific activities under each theme which will be mentored and evaluated constantly.

1. Strengthening Roma youth identity

Supporting the creation in Europe of an environment where Roma young people can grow up free from discrimination and confident about their identity and future perspectives while appreciating their history, plural cultural backgrounds, and affiliations as young people, as Roma, as citizens of their countries, and as active Europeans.

2. Addressing multiple discrimination and recognising plural identities

This specific objective is to empower groups that experience multiple discriminations, including from within Roma communities, such as young women, gay and lesbian Roma, migrants and religious or linguistic groups.

3. Building a stronger Roma youth movement

With this objective the Roma Youth Action Plan will facilitate and enable Roma youth alliances within and outside Roma communities, mobilise Roma youth and stake their position in their communities and in European society at large.

4. Increasing the capacity of Roma youth organizations to participate in policy making

Supporting active Roma youth participation in decision-making processes in order to mainstream Roma issues in youth policies, and youth issues in Roma policies and programmes.

5. Human rights and human rights education

Raising awareness of the human rights situation of young Roma; promoting a culture of human rights.

6. Discrimination and antigypsyism

Promoting systemic changes to structural forms of discrimination and combating antigypsyism through enforcing existing anti-discrimination norms and promoting human rights education.

Research questions and approach

Research questions

The present report outlines the results of an exploratory research during which we collect information and make a limited analysis of existing participation opportunities for Roma children and young people in Flanders. The report facilitates exchange: initiated, in Flanders, at a seminar organized on the 28th of November 2014 and, internationally, by the Council of Europe through the Roma Youth Action Plan.

The central research questions in the present report are:

- How do Roma children and young people help shape their social environment (neighbourhood, city/municipality, country) from within the existing structures?
- What are the success factors and pitfalls of (leisure time) initiatives that reach Roma children and young people?
- How do Roma children and young people experience this situation themselves?

The first two research questions are descriptive, exploratory, questions 'mapping' the field of initiatives aimed at the participation of Roma children and young people. These initiatives can be either public or private. Their purpose is to strengthen or facilitate the voices of Roma children and young people. The research thus zooms in on the extent to which their needs are taken into consideration within an organized framework and how these signs are picked up by municipal or urban policy, either directly through the children and young people themselves or indirectly through organizations defending their interests.

In addition, the second research question gives an insight into the quality of these initiatives. The quality is measured by the extent to which the target group is reached and the formulated objectives are realised. Several factors are distinguished that increase or reduce this quality.

Finally, the third research question assesses the experience by and the (subjective) needs of the Roma children and young people themselves. In a demand-driven policy, it is after all their social environment which constitutes the starting point.

Research method

We applied different research methods which together provide the best possible complementary answer to our research questions. The different stages of the research were mentored by an advisory group of experts who reflected on the process and content. All the members of the advisory group represent some Roma in Flanders or are experienced in working with this target group. We use their expertise to reflect on the research results.

- This advisory group was composed of representatives from:
 - The Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for Youth and Adults – Division for Youth;
 - Integration centre de8 Antwerp;
 - Jint vzw;
 - Foyer Brussels;
 - Opre Roma Ghent (self-organization³);
 - The Expertise Centre for Migration-Integration;
 - The City of Sint-Niklaas;
 - The City of Tienen ;
 - Demos vzw;
 - The non-profit organization Flemish Minorities Forum;
 - The Agency for Local and Provincial Government - Integration Team;
 - The Flemish Department of Foreign Affairs.

- The field mapping and analysis is carried out on the basis of:
 - A web survey that was sent to local authorities, and more specifically to all local youth and integration services, in mid-October 2013.

We opted for an online questionnaire to collect information as broadly as possible. Since it is a field mapping, we try to obtain the most comprehensive picture. The municipalities and cities that are known for their Roma-targeted actions are interesting in this context. However, information about how the target group, success stories and difficulties are experienced in all the cities and municipalities provides valuable input as well.

48 unique communities participated in the survey. Of the 20 communities with the largest Roma population in Flanders, 80% participated.

 - In the course of January 2014, a survey was carried out among civil society organizations through focus groups. These organizations may be self-organizations, as well as organizations for socially vulnerable children and young people, or other types of youth work. We obtain a non-exhaustive overview of the organizations through the survey of local authorities and the use of in-house knowledge and the network of the working group members. Nine organizations participated at the focus groups.

- The needs of Roma children and young people are mapped on the basis of interviews, which were organized both ‘one-to-one’ and ‘one-to-many’. Selecting the interviewees, we respected the Flemish definition: the decree⁴ defines children and youngsters by the ages 0 to 30. This age group is the subject of this research.

³ ‘Self-organization’ is an often used concept in Flanders. Self-organisations are formal or informal organisations organized by and for one specific minority group.

⁴ Decree of the 6th of July 2012 about supporting and stimulating local youth policy and the determination of provincial youth policy

Definition of concepts and field: 'Roma' and 'participation'

In the present chapter, we clarify the key concepts: Roma and participation. Both concepts are so complex and comprehensive that they need to be properly defined for purposes of a clear orientation of the research questions and a good understanding of the report.

Who are the 'Roma'?

Roma is an ethnicity, not a nationality. As a result, the Roma are a highly diverse target group which is difficult to define. We follow the definition used by the Flemish government. In essence, Roma children and young people are children and young people of Roma origin immigrating from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). However, even this description requires greater nuance. Not all newcomers from Central and Eastern Europe are Roma and not all Roma originate from Central and Eastern Europe. Even giving percentages seems a hopeless task. On the one hand, because not all Roma indicate that they are of Roma origin. On the other hand, because the Roma have been in Europe for decades and many of the stereotypes and prejudices that are traditionally attributed to Roma no longer apply. For instance, the majority of the Roma in Europe are not nomadic and it is estimated that half of them do not speak Romani, whereas this common language is often still regarded as a binding feature (Hemelseoet, 2013).

We can't emphasize too much the diversity between Roma. There is not one clear definition of who Roma are. They have different countries of origin, with a different background of in- or exclusion. You have to take this background into account when working with Roma in Flanders.

What this group does have in common is centuries of exclusion and discrimination and, as a result of that, an often deep-seated distrust of 'gadjos' (non-Roma) and institutions. The history of exclusion, racism and discrimination is as old as the presence of Roma in Europe itself. It is the reason why Roma's expectations are based on great distrust and reticence (Hemelseoet, 2013).

This also seems to be confirmed in the recent Flemish City Monitor (FCM) researches carried out in Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp by the JOP (Youth Research Platform). There is a consensus among all respondents of the FCM that the social distance towards the Roma (gypsies) is the greatest. Roma are the least preferred among all presented nationalities/ethnic groups for building contacts with (Vettenburg et al 2011) (Bradt et al 2013).

In addition, Roma often, though not always (!), live in very precarious socio-economic circumstances: uncertain residence status, poor housing, great poverty... This may lead to social vulnerability, which definitely plays a vital role in the approach to children and young people.

For more detailed and accessible information about the cultural background of Roma, please refer to the publications of the Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS) at the University of Antwerp by Elias Hemelsoet (University of Ghent) and Toon Machiels (Vroem vzw).

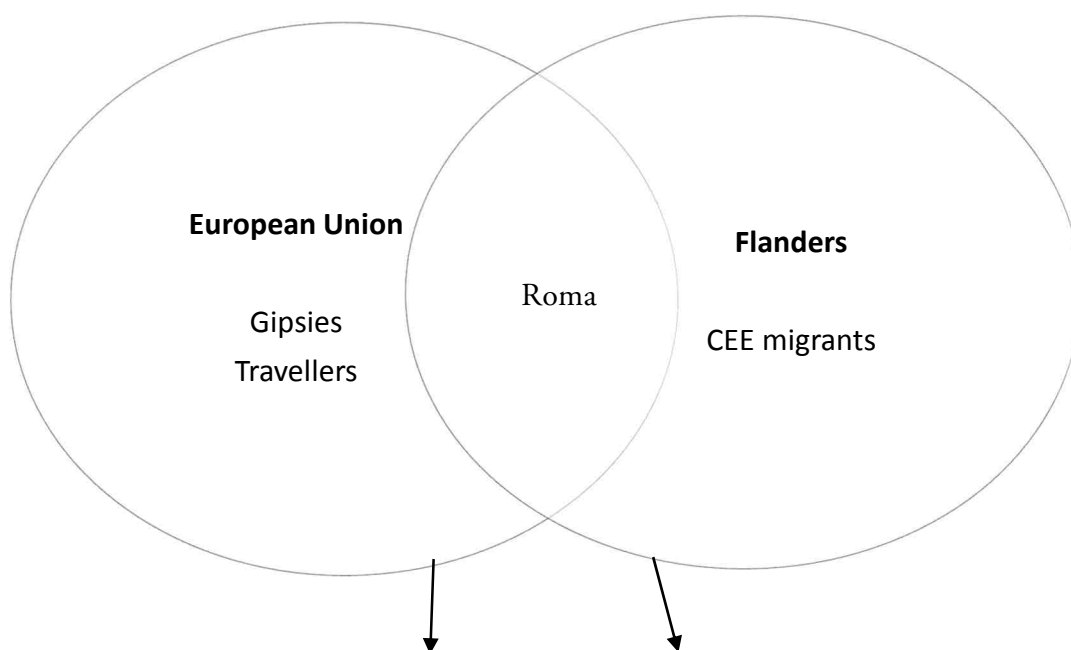
According to the Council of Europe, numbering around 12 million, the Roma are the largest minority group in Europe⁵. In Flanders, we only use the designation 'Roma' for people who came to live here in the late 20th/early 21st centuries, after the fall of the Berlin wall. Their number totals around 10 to 12,000 thousand people.

Roma are not Travellers. 'Travellers' is a collective term for anyone who traditionally lives in a caravan, or whose parents used to do so. Three groups of caravan dwellers can be distinguished: Roms, Voyageurs and Manouches. (Expertise Centre for Migration-Integration, 2013)

Even for some experts these groups may overlap to larger or shorter extents.

In this respect, the Flemish definition differs from the European.

In a diagram this is represented as follows:



European Union conducts one single policy targeted on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma

Flanders has a policy for Travellers as well as a CEE⁶ policy that focuses on Roma

⁵ http://www.coe.int/t/commissioner/source/prems/prems79611_GBR_CouvHumanRightsOfRoma_WEB.pdf

⁶ CEE migrants are people immigrating from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Hemelseoet aptly summarises the discussion on the definition of the target group: “*if we want to regard Roma as fellow citizens, we should also approach them from that perspective. This implies that we consider them from the angle of citizenship rather than ethnicity or culture.*” (Hemelseoet, 2011)

The target group in figures

The 2012 Flemish Action Plan on CEE (Roma) Migrants contains the following specific figures for minors. Please note that this does not necessarily concern Roma minors, but minors who migrated from Central and Eastern Europe, part of whom are probably of Roma origin. Furthermore, there are no specific numbers available that cover our target group, Roma children and youngsters in the age of 0 to 30. Following numbers are just an indication.

Table 1 – Inflow of CEE minors in the Flemish Region

	2009	2010	30/06/2011
Inflow of CEE minors	3,742	6,178	2,174
Share of CEE minors with respect to the Total inflow of minors	26.9%	32.8%	33.4%

(CEE report, p 197)

In terms of spread in Flanders, there is a Roma concentration in seven cities and municipalities. The CEE report gives the following overview:

Table 2 – Estimated Roma concentrations in Flemish cities

	Inflow CEE migrants 2010	Share of CEE inflow compared to total inflow	Estimated number of Roma in 2010
Antwerp	3,600	36%	4,000
Ghent	1,935	60%	5,500
Sint-Niklaas	234	40%	800
Heusden-zolder	148	59%	75
Diest	73	63%	230 to 250
Tienen	67	39%	
Temse	58	60%	400
Brussels-Capital Region			6,500 to 7,000

(CEE report, p 17)

Participation and citizenship defined

Considering Roma children and young people from the angle of citizenship implies first of all that we regard them as fully fledged citizens. Both in literature and in practice, citizenship is interpreted in very different ways. Citizenship with a social dimension mainly focuses on the fact of being able and allowed to be part of existing practices and structures. A political dimension of citizenship is about being reckoned with, being able to influence the society in which one lives. (Lawy and Biesta, 2006). Naturally, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive and are both relevant in this research.

By participating in existing organizations and initiatives you learn how to make your voice heard in society.

In its 'Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education' (2010), the Council of Europe describes it as *"(...) knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviour, to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law."*

'Empowerment' to citizenship can take place both in a formal and an informal context, with responsibilities and initiative lying with various stakeholders: policy makers, education, civil servants, NGOs, youth organizations... Participation in structures and organizations can be a way of growing into citizenship.

The Council of Europe mainly translates citizenship here from a status to be achieved, from skills, values and standards to be learned. People are trained in citizenship. Apart from that, citizenship can also be seen as a practice: daily experiences and qualities of the environment in which you grow up. In this case it is about creating environments and situations in which children and young people receive recognition and are taken into account.

Both are relevant in this context. The question is which structures and practices Roma children and young people participate in to gain (citizenship) experience which will allow them to grow and develop themselves?

Participation is a key to citizenship. Participating in a community can be done actively by 'being involved' in something and passively by 'taking part' in something. 'Taking part' refers to participation in activities (as user or audience) or to membership in an association or the use of a service. 'Being involved' implies influencing the decision-making process and therefore co-ownership of the offer.

In this context we touch upon some fields of tension which we carry with us throughout the process and report, whether we like it or not.

Firstly, literature and practice constantly face the discussion whether or not a target group-oriented approach is advisable. Some people deliberately choose an individual approach, because there are

characteristic differences compared to other vulnerable groups, such as the centuries-old profound distrust, which require a separate approach (Vroem vzw). Others favour a non-exclusive orientation of initiatives and measures, because adopting a different approach to Roma would imply that Roma themselves are the problem, which would only increase segregation (Hemelseoet).

A second field of tension has to do with the commission to carry out the present study. Since Roma children and young people already form the subject of research and policy in several areas of education, it was explicitly decided not to focus the present study on education. The question remains, however, whether the broad education field can be left out in the search for methods of empowerment. In fact, a first limited study of the literature shows that a lot of practices and experiences indeed occur in a broad school context.

For the third field of tension, we revert to the concepts of 'being involved' and 'taking part'. Practice shows that, especially among difficult-to-reach groups, 'being involved' from a strong top-down movement can too easily be mistaken for a reason to 'take part'. An example: perhaps some youngsters just want to play football, without being involved immediately in the organization of the football game or even in policy processes. Therefore, 'taking part' should be the result of a bottom-up instead of a top-down movement.

Local youth and integration policy, including Roma?

In the first exploratory section of the present report, we look for policy measures and government initiatives aimed at enhancing the participation and involvement of Roma children and young people. For this purpose, we carried out an online survey among all local authorities through youth and integration services. The survey inquires after existing measures and initiatives and tries to find characteristics of these initiatives: their policy framework, the underlying vision, co-operation with other organizations, if any, etc. The full questionnaire is enclosed.

Profile of respondents

Municipalities

An online questionnaire was sent to all youth and integration services in mid-October 2013, followed by a reminder in early November and targeted telephone calls to the 20 municipalities which, according to the Flanders CEE Action Plan, have the largest inflow of CEE minors in Flanders.

The questionnaire was completed by 58 respondents. The respondents originate from 48 unique municipalities, or 15.6% of the total number of Flemish municipalities, and from the Brussels-Capital Region. The response rate was thus rather low. A limited survey leaves us to suspect that in the opinion of a lot of youth services, the theme of Roma children and young people 'does not really concern them'. Consequently, youth officers are not inclined to fill out the questionnaire. The response rate increases substantially when only those municipalities are considered that are known to have Roma children and young people on their territory.

Roma families are usually concentrated in certain areas. However, given their great mobility, the scope of the survey was extended.

The CEE report lists the top 20 of municipalities with the largest inflow of CEE migrants in 2010 (CEE report, p 18). Again, these migrants are not by definition Roma!

Table 3 – Inflow of CEE migrants in Flemish cities and municipalities

	Inflow of CEE migrants in 2010	Share of CEE inflow compared to the total inflow
Antwerp	3,600	36%
Ghent	1,935	60%
Leuven	462	29%
Sint-Niklaas	234	40
Bruges	213	29%
Genk	174	46%
Turnhout	170	32%
Ostend	170	32%
Kortrijk	159	32%
Mechelen	153	19%
Heusden-zolder	148	59%
Aalst	140	33%
Roeselare	139	46%
Hasselt	125	27%
Sint-Truiden	124	23%
Maasmechelen	123	36%
Lokeren	106	62%
Vilvoorde	104	34%
Zeel	102	79%
Zaventem	99	28%

(CEE report, p 19 *Source: KBI*)

Because we want to learn especially from existing experiences, these twenty cities and municipalities were reminded of the questionnaire by phone and urged to complete it. If we measure the response rate with respect to these 20 cities and municipalities, we obtain a whole different picture. 80% of these municipalities and cities with a (relatively large) inflow of CEE migrants, and therefore potentially Roma, completed the questionnaire.

Of all the represented municipalities, 12.5% (N=6) are small municipalities (< 10,000 inhabitants). This is an underrepresentation compared to the share of small municipalities in Flanders (27.6%).

37.5% (N=18) of the municipalities in the questionnaire have a population between 10,000 and 20,000 inhabitants. Again, we record a small underrepresentation compared to this category of municipalities in Flanders (43.2%).

Conversely, larger cities and municipalities and central cities are overrepresented in the questionnaire. The share of cities and municipalities with a population between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants is 29.2% (N=14) compared to 25% in Flanders. 10 of the 13 central cities also completed the questionnaire.

Table 4 – Share of the respondents compared to all Flemish municipalities

Population	Number (N)	Share compared to all respondents	Share compared to all Flemish municipalities
<10,000	6	12.5%	27.6%
10,000-20,000	18	37.5%	43.2%
20,000 – 50,000	14	29.2%	25%

The provincial spread of cities and municipalities in the questionnaire is relatively balanced. Antwerp is overrepresented (31.25% (N=15) compared to 22.7%), West Flanders is rather underrepresented (14.58% (N=7) compared to 20.8%). The other provinces are more or less proportionally represented in the survey (Flemish Brabant 18.75% (N=9) compared to 21.1%; Limburg 14.58% (N=7) compared to 14.3%; East Flanders 20.83% (N=10) compared to 21.1%).

Place of work

Almost 70% of the respondents work for the youth service. If we add the respondents who indicate 'Other' but are directly linked to the youth service, almost three-quarters of the respondents are employed in the youth policy area.

Table 5 – Profile of the respondents (officers)

For which service do you work?	Percentage	Number
Youth service	69.0%	40
Integration service	12.1%	7
Welfare service	5.2%	3
Other service (please clarify)	13.8%	8
<i>Answered questions</i>		58

Other respondents indicate that they work for the integration service, welfare service, complementary education policy, civic integration, education or social welfare office.

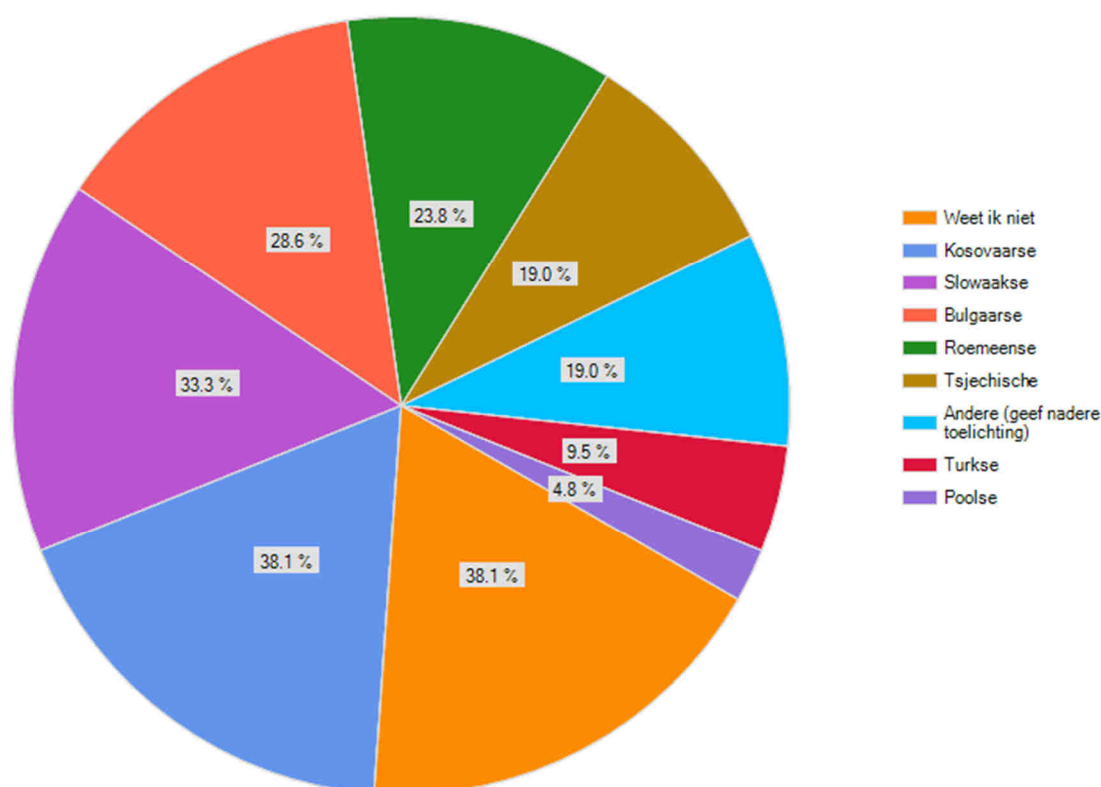
Where children and young people live

Just under half of the respondents report that they know about the presence of Roma children and young people in their city or municipality. 20% say that this is not the case and more than one third of the respondents do not have any clue as to whether any children or young people with a Roma background are living in their city or municipality.

Of the 15 respondents from the 20 cities and municipalities with the largest inflow of CEE migrants (see earlier), 53.3% answer that Roma children and young people are living in their municipality. 19.9% believe there are no Roma minors, and 19.9% indicate not having any idea.

The present Roma children and young people mainly come from Kosovo⁷, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania. A striking element is that two thirds of the respondents did not answer this question and that 38% of those who did answer do not have the faintest idea of the nationality of the children and young people with a Roma background.

Figure 1 – Nationality of Roma children and youngsters in your city or municipality



⁷ Throughout this text, all reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999) and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

In the 'Other' category the following is mentioned: Belgian (Roms), Belgian - they have been here for a long time (since the eighties), especially Roms, former Yugoslavia. This once again shows how complex it is to define the target group.

Initiatives for Roma children and young people

In the second part of the questionnaire we inquired after existing initiatives for Roma children and young people. 15 municipalities, or just over 1 in 4 of the respondents, organize activities or initiatives for Roma children and young people. 23 initiatives were mentioned, organized by nine cities or municipalities. The six other cities or municipalities did not specify any actions. First of all, it is striking that few target group-oriented activities are organized. Most initiatives are aimed at all children and young people or at a broad target group of socially vulnerable children and young people. Not a single municipality organizes only target group-oriented activities. Whenever respondents indicate that initiatives are in place which are solely aimed at Roma children and young people, there are always other initiatives for a broader target group as well, in which Roma participate.

One third of the 23 reported initiatives have to do with leisure time or guidance towards leisure facilities. Examples include 'community-oriented entertainment in vulnerable neighbourhoods on Wednesday afternoons', 'leisure project for Roma children and young people', 'dance project' and 'drop-in centre for teenage activities'.

Another third is aimed at language promotion, such as a 'reading-out-loud project', 'language promotion', 'language summer school in the park', 'language wizards'.

A final third of the activities are linked to education or the broader guidance of Roma families. Examples include 'information about school choice and school life', 'training for schools', and 'guidance at home'.

The majority of the examples have, as a minimum, the underlying objective to allow Roma children and young people to participate in their neighbourhood activities or in the municipal/urban policy. This is achieved through the organization of easily accessible activities, by increasing the involvement at school and in city facilities, by offering children and young people the best possible opportunities for development, etc.

To go back to the definition of concepts, a lot of municipalities aim at 'being involved' (actively giving shape) through 'taking part' (passive participation in the offer).

Some characteristics of reported initiatives

In the questionnaire we looked for a number of characteristics which are met by activities in which Roma children and young people participate as well. Once again, this involves 23 reported activities organized by nine cities or municipalities. The characteristics provide an indication of the organizational form of the offer that is reported in the questionnaire.

Number of participants

Almost half of the specified actions reach a small group of less than five Roma children or young people. 30% reach 5 to 15 children and young people. None of them reach more than 25 Roma children and young people.

Table 6 – Participants of the reported initiatives

Number of participants	%
<5	47.8%
5-15	30.4%
15-25	21.7%
>25	0

Duration and financing

The majority of the actions are provided on a structural basis (60.9%). Only 39% are organized through projects. However, even for the projects a budget has been earmarked in some cases. For almost 70% of the actions, whether structural or project-based, a fixed budget has been committed. Naturally, this means that 30% of the actions do not have any financial security.

Embedding and co-operation

82.6% of the reported actions are organized in co-operation with other services or organizations. This means that although there is a large degree of cross-fertilisation for the organization, the respondents indicated only one policy area under which the actions come (several answers were possible). Almost 40% of the initiatives fall within the scope of the policy area 'youth', 30% within 'integration', and 21% is classified under 'welfare'.

What is striking is that Roma children and young people themselves are involved in the development and/or implementation of actions in only two cities or municipalities.

Three of the nine municipalities indicate not having a supported (written) vision. The vision of the other six municipalities focuses on easily accessible participation in facilities, guidance and maximisation of participation opportunities.

"We work for all children with specific attention to the vulnerable; we use the strength of youth and youth work as a basis. We are active in all areas that have an impact on children and young people."
City A

Success factors and pitfalls

Finally, we inquired after reported success factors and pitfalls which, according to the respondents, make it either easier or more difficult to reach Roma children and young people.

The success factors...:

- Firstly pertain to organizational aspects: free participation, no enrolment, familiar location, co-operation;
- Secondly, the reported success factors have to do with communication and relevance for the target group. This concerns home visits, building a relationship with the parents, familiar faces providing guidance, open attitude;
- Finally, a number of suggestions are made as to the nature of the actions themselves. These actions should be customised to the rhythm of the participants and be aimed at their talents and well-being.

"We must continue to believe and to invest in the talents of these youngsters. We should not just regard them as a burden or as difficult children." City B

The difficulties which are experienced...:

- Are on the one hand structural (poverty, housing, language,...);
- And on the other hand have to do with the nature of the unadjusted offer and the difficult communication with the target group.

Communication with and information about the target group

Two cities or municipalities focus on communication with Roma children and young people. 32 respondents indicate that no knowledge is available about the social environment of Roma children and young people and that they have no known contact persons that can provide this knowledge. Those who indicate that they can call on the services of contact persons to acquire a better insight into the social environment of these youngsters mainly refer to integration services, diversity services⁸ or Roma mediators and stewards.

Finally, only four cities make efforts to inform all the inhabitants in the city/municipality about the Roma culture and raise their awareness in this context. The aforementioned respondents all originate from central cities.

Needs of the local authorities

The last question inquired after what respondents need to set up more initiatives or actions for Roma children and young people. The reactions can be subdivided into three categories.

The largest group of respondents mainly requires knowledge and information. They need data about the number of Roma children and young people in their municipality and knowledge about their social environment and living conditions. For this, the Roma community itself is taken into consideration as well.

⁸ These are local services working on integration and/or diversity policy on local level.

"Knowing that there are Roma children and young people in our city, where they are, which services/organizations they are in contact with and what needs they have." City C

A second category concerns respondents that know about the Roma children and young people in their municipality/city, but require additional resources and opportunities to set up actions: structural resources, personnel time, political and administrative vision, a network, etc.

Finally, a last category of respondents indicate that they currently do not have any specific needs, because in their opinion hardly any or no Roma children and young people live in their municipality/city.

"The local integration and youth policy is working on an accessible leisure time offer for everyone. A network of leisure partners and organizations from the social work field (integration, welcome office, anti-poverty organizations,..) is in place. Within this network initiatives are taken to make sure that barriers to participation in the leisure time offer are eliminated as much as possible (financial, cultural, informative,...). These barriers differ by target group. Therefore, different initiatives are taken depending on the target group. If it would turn out one day that additional initiatives are needed for the target group of Roma young people, then this will be directed from the network. However, this is currently not the case." City D

Conclusion

This questionnaire for local authorities teaches us almost more about what is *not* available than about what *is*. 15% is a very low response rate. For other questionnaires that are sent by the same sender to a similar target group, the response rate is usually between 70% and 80%. A careful conclusion might be that the theme of Roma children and young people is far from the everyday working reality of the youth services.

However, when we calculate the response rate of the 20 cities and municipalities in Flanders that are reported to have the largest inflow of CEE migrants according to the CEE report, the response rate amounts to 80%.

The same conclusion can be drawn on the basis of the replies from the respondents who actually completed the questionnaire: only one in four indicates being able to reach Roma children and young people through actions or initiatives. Only nine (almost one in six) actually illustrate this by listing the actions.

The reported initiatives are more often organized structurally than on the basis of projects. In addition, they are practically always the result of co-operation between different services or between services and organizations. Also, a small group of Roma children and young people is generally reached.

Of the existing initiatives, we can draw the following success factors and pitfalls:

- Free participation, no enrolment, a familiar location and co-operation are organizational preconditions;
- In order to succeed, there must be a strong focus on communication with and involvement of the target group. This concerns home visits, building a relationship with the parents, familiar faces providing guidance, an open attitude;
- These actions should be customised to the rhythm of the participants and be aimed at their talents and well-being.

The difficulties are on the one hand structural (poverty, housing, language,...) and the difficulties in communicating with the target group and have on the other hand to do with the unadjusted nature of the offer.

We do, however, notice a great openness among the majority of respondents in terms of knowledge and information about the (social environment) of the target group that is the subject of this questionnaire.

What does the youth sector have to say?

During the next stage of this research, we try to obtain an insight into the existing (private) organizations and NGOs that reach Roma children and young people, whether they are aimed at target groups or not.

We use existing information and available sources to acquire an overview of these organizations. The used sources are:

- Organizations that were reported by the respondents of local authorities (see earlier);
- A list of self-organizations of Roma compiled by the Vlaams Minderhedenforum (Flemish Minorities Forum);
- The research regarding youth work with socially vulnerable children and young people (2013) carried out by the KATHO Hogeschool and Ghent University on the authority of the Flemish Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for young people and Adults, Youth Division;
- VVJ's own contacts.

Formal and informal practices in Flanders

Great interest in the exchange of information and ideas

Giving an exhaustive enumeration of all the organizations that reach Roma children and young people is virtually impossible because of the quick and often moving of Roma. Starting from a qualitative approach, we attempt to gain insight into the activities and experiences of a certain number of organizations that work with Roma.

We opted to use the method of focus groups to obtain as much information as possible from these organizations and institutions. The great added value of focus groups is that not only the information of one single participant is collected, but that mainly the interaction between the participants leads to valuable insights and discussions. This interaction compels each participant to refine and substantiate their position and make it concrete.

All organizations from the list were contacted. It was very difficult to reach the self-organizations and they showed little interest in contributing to this stage of the research. The other organizations for the most part responded enthusiastically. It turned out that there was great interest, and maybe even need, for exchanging information and ideas about working with this target group. A busy agenda was usually the reason why organizations did not participate in the focus group in the end.

Please find the questions asked in the focus groups enclosed.

Characteristics of the practices that participated in the focus groups

Nine organizations or institutions participated in the focus groups: Groep INTRO vzw, Jong vzw, Education Centre Foyer, T-Impact vzw (part of Foyer), neighbourhood steward in the city of Sint-Niklaas (community department), team of neighbourhood stewards in the city of Ghent (integration service), KRAS youth work - KRAS Noord, Antwerp integration centre de8. Apart from these organizations, a certain number of individual youngsters took part as well. Two were a member of Foyer and from her commitment within the Saint Egidius Community Lena is building a relationship based on mutual trust with Roma families.

Each of the organizations has a professional framework, supplemented with volunteers. The organizations or institutions are financed both structurally and on a project-basis.

Each of the organizations or institutions has an inclusive offer which is aimed at all children and young people who are interested in or have a need for the offer. Roma children and young people of all ages (5 – 30 years) are part of the target group that is reached. Their share varies from 2% to 90% of the target group reached.

Structure of the focus groups

The focus group was subdivided into four themes. Most attention was devoted to Roma children and young people as participants. After that, the role and needs of mentors⁹ and the organization were discussed. Finally, the policy was briefly focused on. The focus group was repeated twice (in Antwerp and in Ghent). It is striking that the two conversations confirmed and completed each other on all points.

Roma children and young people as participants

In a nutshell

- Trust and respect are crucial. You gain trust by investing in a dialogue with children and young people, and with their parents. Just like other parents, they want to make sure that their child turns out all right;
- The offer must be easily accessible, both financially and practically;
- Once there is a good relationship of trust with a family, this will go round quickly and it will be easier to reach other Roma.

Why do Roma children and young people participate in activities?

The participants indicate that Roma children and young people are first of all 'just' children and youngsters. They want to experiment, be recognized for who they are, feel respected and connected.

⁹ The term 'mentors' is used to indicate people that organize activities for children or youngsters in a formal context and guide children and youngsters in these settings.

Everyone agreed that they reach Roma because their offer is easily accessible. Children or young people do not have to enrol, participation is (as good as) free and there is hardly any structure in the offer. As a result, they feel welcome and the threshold to 'drop by' is relatively low.

"A low threshold is highly important! They can come and go as they please. Our offer is community-oriented and a membership card only costs 2 euros a year. And actually, they don't even have to purchase one, since this is simply intended as some kind of registration for our activities." (youth worker, Jong vzw)

There must be an atmosphere of trust within the group. Children and young people feel respected for who they are. They are not judged when they do something wrong, but are given new opportunities. Trust must be built from the very first contact and seems to be the key word for reaching and 'holding' them. It is better to build a relationship of trust not just with children and young people, but also with the parents and the rest of the family.

"It is almost like hanging out with friends. You get a great deal in return and you can actually count on getting something in return. The first welcome and initial experience are important. If there is a relationship of trust, a lot of opportunities are presenting themselves. They have confidence in your work and respect it.

If there is a conflict, we talk about it. And it works. At home as well they communicate with each other when there is a conflict. For instance, when someone at a wedding party has lost their mobile, the party is stopped and the problem is directly dealt with and solved. The same goes for spitting on the stairs, for instance. It is explained why they should not do this and the problem is solved." (Young person, Foyer)

It pays to invest in a dialogue with the parents. Do not approach them 'pointing the finger', but try to adopt an open attitude and treat them as equals. Communicate about what goes well and what does not and how well their children are doing.

This also immediately explains how Roma are reached: Adopting an outreaching approach is essential. As soon as you have built a relationship with one family, the reputation of the offer will go round within the Roma community by word of mouth.

As a result, Roma children and young people participate together with their siblings or other family members. Children come along with the young people because the latter often have to babysit their younger siblings. Hence, it is essential to use an intergenerational approach instead of strict age boundaries. Although it must be said that youngsters do not really like it when there are too many young children around. That is why the participants in the focus group advise to provide a separate offer for young people at the same time and place as soon as the activities are of a sufficiently large scale.

In terms of the offer itself, the participants indicate that it should be as diverse and broad as possible. Many Roma children and young people have little experience with the organized offer and mainly want to be able 'to have a taste'. It gives them a chance to escape their sometimes poor living conditions at home and the discrimination they are faced with elsewhere. At the same time they can 'acquire status' by learning something new or playing a sport. By discovering what they are good at, their self-confidence grows and organizations can adopt an emancipatory work method.

"It gives them the chance to 'escape' home. At home there is sometimes no electricity/running water. Meeting people is important as well. Nephews and nieces and friends are happy that they can come to Habbekrats (for instance), because the alternative is hanging out in the streets and sometimes committing petty crimes. It promotes a feeling of self-esteem. Here, they are children and youngsters, not Roma." (neighbourhood steward, Ghent)

"When we see that they have a talent for mentoring young people, we refer them to entertainment courses." (youth worker, Groep Intro)

Until the age of 12 there is no difference in participation between boys and girls. From the age of 12 onwards there is. In some Roma communities, a relevant number of girls stop coming because they get married, have children and do the housekeeping. One way of getting access to the women community is to work with female mediators or mentors.

"When they turn 15, they are regarded as adults by their community. They get married and have children. We often see three sides: uncertainty in the work field (rules), peer pressure at school (image, girls who are married must wear long skirts), at home they adopt a much more adult role (going to the hospital, having to pay related costs). These conflicting roles are sometimes impossible to combine." (youth worker, Foyer)

Through which communication channels do you reach (Roma) children and young people?

If you want to reach Roma, you have to invest a great deal of time in personal contacts. If you want to make an offer known, you should ring their doorbell to talk about it. Just like other parents, Roma parents want to know for sure that their children are in good hands. If you win the parents' trust, you will win the children's trust as well. Word of mouth advertising works best, whereas printed advertising does not because not all Roma adults are literate. Most young people, on the other hand, are.

"Through neighbourhood activities you become a familiar face and they get to know the available offer. They will pass it on by word of mouth. Therefore, trust and familiarity are crucial." (youth worker, Jong vzw)

"The information gets around the community. They pass it on and it all goes very quickly." (youth worker, KRAS vzw)

If they are enthusiastic, you call them once or several times before the activity takes place to remind them of it, otherwise they will turn their attention to other matters. It is easier to convince them when they already know who you are and you present them with an activity when they do not expect it. That is why some youth workers drive around in a small van to collect the children and young people.

Initially, it takes a lot of time to get to know each other. These efforts pay off because the children and young people more readily attend the activities and you have to spend less time announcing them.

"You become a familiar face. You have to do a lot of house calls to present projects. We have made our activities known fairly intensively. Once a start was made, they did not really need much convincing. You also gain trust via the children." (neighbourhood steward, Sint-Niklaas)

An organization has to be receptive towards the parents. In order to reach children, this is a 'must'. Family still matters to teenagers and young people, but the peer group is becoming increasingly important. They see the organization as a space for experimenting. They are afraid that if the relationship between the activities and their parents is too close, you will hand on information, and subsequently breach the trust that has been built between themselves and the mentors.

Take into account the language barrier, or the situation in which the children and young people speak French or Dutch, but the parents do not. This changes the relationship from the age of 12 to 13, since the children are often directly communicated with from that age onwards.

Reasons for no longer or not reaching Roma?

The experience of the focus group participants is that Roma are often not reached because there is a lack of mutual trust. In addition, news about bad experiences travels fast within the community.

A relationship of trust is or experiences are largely determined by the attitude of the mentors. There must be a certain degree of equality and mutual respect. Sometimes, Roma have different customs than other participants or mentors, but you must approach them with the sufficient openness. It does not help to point the finger. You must learn to understand and accept their own values.

To that end, mentors should have great empathy and a lot of patience when dealing with the children and young people. You must give them a new chance, again and again, and each time accept how things are going.

As second reason reported by the participants is that the emphasis should be on the process rather than on the result. The children and young people themselves help shape the process and set the pace. For instance, a music workshop should start by explaining how the instrument is to be played in the hope that in the end everyone will be able to play a simple tune. It is better to let the children and young people experiment and discover, and to explain to them afterwards, at their pace, what the instrument can do and how it can be played.

"You should not try and provide too much structure. As organizer, you should not pitch your expectations too high. Start with an explanation of half an hour about the didgeridoo does not work. Do not explain, but allow them to let off steam immediately. Give them something that suits their needs."
(neighbourhood steward, Sint-Niklaas)

Family is very important. Even when young people marry and go and live far away, they stay in close contact with their parents and siblings. This great (family and community) pride may also cause tensions between participants.

Tensions may arise between families. These may be owing to differences in esteem, origin, the time of arrival in the neighbourhood, the image of the family or of family members in terms of committed crimes or poverty. Children and young people take these tensions with them to the activities.

Tensions may also arise from racism between various groups with a different migration background, both by and towards Roma.

"Sometimes, there are conflicts with Moroccans, for instance. They say that girls with long skirts are 'des gitans', which is an insult. There is no respect at school either. Roma respect girls and women and therefore have difficulty in coping with other people's racism." (young person, Foyer)

These tensions may cause them to abandon activities.

"The image and esteem of the families is very important. It can also chase away other families. If the family which enjoys high esteem agrees, you will also attract other young people. We also work together with the Roma service: Roma who act as mediators themselves between the Brussels and Roma communities. This is a family that is held in very high esteem. They can convey trust." (youth worker, Foyer)

Fourthly, Roma families are not very attached to a specific location and move regularly to another neighbourhood, municipality or sometimes even to another country. For this reason:

- Your activities must be very flexible. It is best to reach Roma at the closest possible level, i.e. the neighbourhood or street level. A mobile offer allows you to quickly move your activities to other neighbourhoods;

- Projects are best organized in the very short term, since it is difficult to ask for a long-term commitment.

Just like with other children and young people it is best to start with exclusive activities if you want to reach the families living in the most precarious circumstances. Although this is not a general rule, some activities are both successful and inclusive. The most important is for children and young people to recognize themselves in the activities.

In other words, just like all other children and young people, Roma look especially for places where they feel good, where they recognize themselves in the offer, in the culture of the activities and in other participants. Openness, a limited structure and easy access are key words.

What do Roma children and young people need?

In fact, just like other children and young people, Roma look to pass their leisure time in a fun and exciting way. This may be an organized offer with a large variety of activities that has a simple structure and is very easily accessible. The larger the offer, the better and it is best compiled together with them, on the basis of their own interests. This offer gives them room to experiment, to learn to play, to learn skills that will make it easier for them to find their way on the labour market. Successful experiences are essential in this context.

*"Our basic line of approach is a demand-led offer. It is not us who decide to organize a theatre project. We want to be easily accessible through the drop-in centre or do outreach work in the street."
(youth worker, Jong vzw)*

*"It is important to have self-esteem, to have the feeling that you are good at something. At home, the child is just one of the siblings; birthdays are not celebrated. This is what we are trying to do now. When a child is good at circus things or wants to play the piano, we try to develop these talents. Currently, they acquire status by doing mischief. Status can also be acquired in other ways! There is however also a direct need for financial aid, because hiring an instrument is expensive, for instance."
(neighbourhood steward, Ghent)*

*"You must offer a whole array of activities from an early age onwards. Young people do not have a proper understanding of what leisure time is, they do not really do very much. Offer them instruments so that they can experiment."
(youth worker, Foyer)*

This is preferably done in a room or location which is freely accessible, which they can organize the way they want to, and where they can find materials they can experiment with without first having to receive a detailed explanation... Other Roma should preferably also be involved, because then they will not pull out so quickly. Such a room or location can be guided by a mentor.

Easily accessible initiatives are initiatives which do not cost much or are even free of charge, and where they feel at home,... see also under 'why do they participate in your activities'. There is a need for initiatives, both for young children and teenagers, and even for young parents who already got to know the offer when they were children themselves. If there are a lot of participants, a separate offer for young people is required, other than that for the children who often come along because the older children are responsible for them.

"Easy access is a great advantages for KRAS. They come with the whole family. They can also start with the whole family in a small group. We do not charge any money for activities. First, we let them relax and do not immediately ask for their names, registration... You can see that the relationship with the family is very important. As a mentor you must also help solve other issues. Trust is very important." (youth worker, KRAS vzw)

Initiatives should allow them to train themselves in something in their own way. This can be sports, music, care,... In this way they can acquire status by being good at something. It is also important that in this way they become more than just 'one of the' siblings at home, where they often lack positive confirmation.

To organize something themselves, Roma young people need support. As a mediator or mentor you can ask other organizations, for instance, to make their infrastructure available in a cheap and simple manner.

In order to give Roma a better place in society, they require a positive image, both generally in the media and in the neighbourhood itself.

"For decades there has been mistrust towards the Roma. That is why a relationship of trust is what matters the most. Roma do not feel discriminated against at Foyer. Once they are in the outside world, however, they do." (youth worker, Foyer)

The mentor

In a nutshell

- Working with Roma is done in an emancipatory manner, adopting an unprejudiced, receptive, attitude en showing a lot of patience. A positive line of approach within the organization contributes to this;
- The ability to anticipate difficulties and flexibility are important skills when you work with Roma;
- The opportunity to exchange experiences with colleagues from outside the organization is an added value;
- Mediators who speak the language make the work a lot easier.

Attitudes and skills of mentors

The participants in the focus group were asked what attitudes and skills mentors should have for mentoring (Roma) children and young people. The reported skills are to a large extent in line with the attitudes that are deemed necessary for mentoring other (socially vulnerable) children and young people.

Again, the relationship of trust is of central importance. This requires an unprejudiced, receptive attitude. Being 'genuine' in their contacts and leaving a lot of room for the social environment and culture of the children and young people. Having empathy without condoning everything.

"They must see you as their mentor and as a human being. It is OK to talk about personal stuff sometimes." (youth worker, Foyer)

"Physical contact helps as well: shaking hands, fist bumps, giving a pat on the back. You show that you are equal. When you have to register them, for instance, just go and sit in the seat/at the table with some coffee. You must create an informal situation (not just two people sitting at the table and filling out forms)." (youth worker, Foyer)

The participants also give the following tips:

- Set boundaries and establish clear rules and agreements. You should preferably set the rules together with them and explain in detail what you mean;
- Consider the person separately from the behaviour. It is essential to show patience, to provide new opportunities, again and again, and to give positive confirmation;
- Humour may help to make it easier to discuss certain matters. It helps to approach matters in a playful manner;
- Anticipate: explain everything from A to Z to avoid problems. Do not assume that the children and young people know how to travel by tram, for instance;
- Empower them; allow the children and young people to learn from experiences. Encourage them to think;
- Be sufficiently flexible to adjust your programme, whenever necessary;
- Learn to let go.

"It is important to consider the child and person separately from their behaviour. There are young people for instance who do all kinds of mischief. It would be hard for me to continue to work with them if I were to think of that all of the time. I would be too prejudiced." (neighbourhood steward, Ghent)

"You can of course apply rules; actually, you should. It is mainly about how you present them. It 'is the same for everyone'; you need to explain the consequences." (neighbourhood steward, Sint-Niklaas)

"It is about setting priorities. Arriving 10 minutes late is not all that bad." (neighbourhood steward, Ghent)

Success stories, big or small, give mentors energy. The best moments are when you feel the gratitude of the children and young people. And this happens often, because Roma generally have great respect for their family and for people who help or guide them. Moreover, they are often used to communicate when there are problems. The young people are very flexible and therefore fun to work with.

As always, less pleasant are those moments when conflicts arise. The participants in the focus group indicate that it is often difficult to make agreements and that absences can be frustrating.

"You can call them to account in terms of social skills, but you must mainly also check to what extent they learn things at home, like arriving in time, for instance. Children have to go through a learning process. As a mentor you can assume that role through positive confirmation and by giving the child the opportunity to grow." (neighbourhood steward, Ghent)

Involving the parents is difficult. It does not always work during home visits either. Moreover, these visits are very time-consuming for the mentors.

What do you need as a mentor?

When asked about what mentor of Roma children and young people need, they mainly mention good support, both within and outside the organization.

Within the organization a positive attitude in coordination is crucial. The coordinators must stimulate and support the mentors and allow them to air their grievances to one another and to encourage each other to celebrate (small) successes.

It is important that mentors are given a lot of time to gain the trust of the Roma, among other things by paying home visits or complying with other requests for help: accompany them to the doctor, to the temporary work agency,... Managers should teach new employees not to have too high expectations in order to avoid disappointment. They should make clear that small steps are important.

All mentors consider it very valuable to exchange experiences with colleagues from outside the organization. A broad network of organizations and welfare workers is essential to be able to provide the Roma with good support and to satisfy their various requests for help. Mediators who master the language are a great added value for mentors.

"We often have to defend the children and young people, as they are quickly judged by other services. Sometimes, this is very hard to deal with. We put matters in their context and are consequently often labelled as being 'pro Roma'. It is difficult to stay neutral. Even within the social sector." (neighbourhood steward, Ghent)

"We need more partners. In a large number of the cases we refer they tell us: 'we do not know what to do, you are the experts'. Sometimes this is caused by fear of the target group or insufficient knowledge. As a result, these cases end up with us again." (neighbourhood steward, Ghent)

At the policy level, organizations indicate that more flexibility is required in the recognition and subsidisation requirements. It is difficult for youth welfare organizations, for instance, to receive official permission to accompany someone to the doctor. Their core activity is to offer group-oriented activities and not individual guidance. For Roma, an unclear situation occurs when the person they trust offers too little guidance and support. Co-operation with existing neighbourhood mediators and other organizations can provide solutions.

"Roma mediators who have contacts and speak the language are really indispensable to us." (youth worker, Foyer)

The organization

In a nutshell

- In order to have the organization that reaches Roma function well, a broad network is required in addition to a positive attitude to be able to strengthen the target group in a life-broad manner. A precondition here is that the organizations in this network have the necessary knowledge of Roma;
- Strengthening the number of professionals would make a lot more possible;
- There is a need for space for a demand-led and customized neighbourhood-oriented offer;

Network

The organizations present maintain contacts with youth welfare organizations or welfare services which are not necessarily aimed at Roma. Sometimes, agreements are made as to who will help which families and how. A broad network is needed in order to be able to respond to the various needs.

What does the organization require?

Organizations that work with Roma remark that it is very time-consuming to teach the target group how to behave in our society. A general complaint is that more personnel would be welcome.

Increased knowledge of the target group within the organizations of their network would be embraced as well, since these organizations often end up with them again, mostly for fear of the unknown. Sometimes, there is also a lack of willingness to invest in time and expertise. The organizations themselves do not always know who is doing what exactly.

The organizations in the focus group often have a demand-led and customized neighbourhood-oriented offer. The participants indicate that this transcends the discussion of working inclusively or exclusively. The focus is not just on one specific target group, but starts bottom-up from the needs and requirements of (a part of) a particular neighbourhood.

The policy

In a nutshell

- Policy must be based on dialogue with and experiences of experts in the field;
- The focus on quality instead of on quantity is highly important. This quality lies in raising the awareness of parents and in doing outreach work;
- The policy now needs to diffuse the knowledge regarding Roma in society or to encourage and facilitate this dissemination of information;
- Strengthen the mentors of Roma.

What points of interest with respect to policy do the participants in the focus groups give?

Generally, it is a good thing to talk to people who are experienced in working with Roma families and the Roma themselves. However, something should actually also be done with this research.

Outreaching work should be of central importance, for instance through mobile offices or home-delivered services. Sometimes even neighbourhoods are still too large-scale. Let trainee(s) do a work placement within organizations working with Roma children and young people as part of their school education. Give police officers more information about diversity.

Society knows too little about Roma. As a result, there is much discrimination. Roma are confronted with this in their neighbourhood, on the labour market, in their contacts with various organizations and in healthcare. More knowledge about the Roma should result in a greater percentage of Roma children and young people entering mainstream education and the labour market. In addition, this could also lead to a better health for Roma.

By making the parents stronger, you also work on the self-esteem of the children and young people. Making the parents stronger is done by helping them and informing them. (Continuous) awareness-raising is important as well, for instance of the importance of participation of preschoolers in education, housing and employment. Info sessions organized directly after school or during lunch break have the most effect.

If the government wants to measure the effects of its Roma policy, it is advised to **focus on quality** and to examine the actual impact of measures and initiatives. If you focus on quantity, you get poor

results. A different focus is also possible in the fields of education and work. Here, more emphasis should be placed on motivation, rather than on knowledge of the Dutch language.

In order to strengthen the mentors of Roma, visits to the home country are very instructive, and so is intervision with colleagues from other organizations.

As a final conclusion we state that the participants in the focus group consider it very important that people working in the field and the Roma themselves are listened to.

Needs analysis among some Roma children and young people

In order to gain insight into the perception of Roma children and young people themselves, we went into the field in the course of May and June 2014. We reached young people through the organizations that took part in the focus groups.

However, this may produce the risk of a 'cream effect' of the participants in the research: We reach young people who are already known by the organizations and therefore, have already shown minimal participation. That is why we were very willing to accept Lena's offer, a volunteer of the Saint Egidius community who, on her own initiative, sought and came into contact with a Rom community in Antwerp. Rom are not part of the 'Roma' target group as defined by Flanders, but fall within the definition of the Council of Europe.

A first finding is that it is not at all obvious to reach Roma young people. They come and go at irregular times, move regularly and agreements are not always respected.

Finally, we had seven interesting encounters with the sisters Francesca (12) and Molly (15), with Julie (11) and Peggy (15), with Sidonia (17), with Zdeno (16), with Sorin (17), with Sorinel (16) and in the Roma Cultural Centre with about 20 men between the ages of 17 and 30.

We probed using a certain number of questions drawn up beforehand, but mainly let them shape the conversation. We encouraged them to tell us about the things that interest them, how they perceive their environment, what their dreams are about, what stops them to do things.

Some of the questions we had lined up included:

- Regarding the living environment of Roma young people: What does their day look like? When do you decide (not) to do something? And why?
- Regarding their participation in leisure time activities: What do they do in their leisure time? Why? What if you could freely decide? Why do some things not work?
- Regarding participation in the community: What do you trust, feel involved in?
- Inclusion or discrimination: Do you feel excluded or bullied because you are a Roma?
- Participation in local policy: do you know the municipality, and what it could mean to you? Do you find your way to the local authorities through formal or informal channels? How could the municipality be able to get into contact with you, know how they feel?
- Which other things do they find important, what goes on in their minds, what else do they want to say with regard to (leisure) time, community, exclusion...

In a certain number of conclusions, we summarize these talks. The full conversations have been enclosed.

In a nutshell

- Young is just young, so look beyond their ethnic background. Key skills from social and youth work such as a broad outlook regarding young people, respect for what you see and the recognition of diversity are also important when you work with Roma;
- Roma young people need trust and security to feel good somewhere and, as a result of this, to keep participating in activities;
- They spend most of their time with friends and family. They often do so in the streets or in a drop-in centre;
- Roma young people are for the most part early adults. They want to find a good job so that they can provide for their family.

Young is just young

The young people with whom we talked are first of all just young people who have just as many mutually diverse dreams, preferences and interests as other young people.

This conclusion was most explicitly expressed in the reaction of a certain number of young people in Antwerp North who preferred not to participate because they found that the focus on Roma was slightly racist. After all, they are just young people, much more than Roma, and they did not see the use of approaching them as a separate target group.

Of course, the cultural and social environment of the young people and earlier experiences codetermine who they are. In that way, they are indeed Roma but also Muslim or Christian, white or coloured, interested in football or not, in love, married or single, member of a large or small family, and so on.

Working with Roma young people therefore involves first of all that you should look beyond their ethnic background. A broad outlook on young people, having respect for what you see and recognizing diversity are key skills in social and youth work, and this applies to Roma young people as well. When you look at the ethnicity component, a certain number of relevant questions can be asked on the basis of our talks:

Where do they come from?

Some Roma have been heavily discriminated against in their country of origin and are therefore very suspicious about official bodies, both with respect to authorities and with respect to schools for instance. Roma who were well off in their country of origin have fewer difficulties to be approached as Roma.

How long have they been in Belgium?

Newcomers often experience more opposition than those who have been here longer. Evidently, they have more difficulties to make their way. They will more often find support among the rest of the local Roma community and will evidently let themselves be guided by their own experiences.

Which religion do they profess?

Not only their origin has an influence on how the Roma hold a certain view of life, religion plays an important part as well. Some communities go to pentecostal churches, others are Muslim. Religion has its influence on which values people adhere to, for instance with respect to the role of women and the importance of religious education.

What language do they speak?

Children and young people who have been here for some time usually speak sufficient Dutch. Because of this, they often serve as interpreter for their family who speaks French or the language of their country of origin. Not all Roma speak Romany. Children who are not proficient in Dutch or not enough, have difficulties to join in with the larger society.

Security and trust

The young people look for recognizable, safe and familiar places to feel good. They all found these aspects in the activities where we talked to them. They describe the activities as their 'family'.

Most of them do not feel discriminated against. On the other hand, some of them admitted that the activities provide security and that they encounter racism in the outside world from time to time. The question remains however whether these young people can freely discuss such sensitive matters with someone (the researcher) they do not or hardly know. Even the presence of the mentor does not necessarily provide sufficient emotional security.

Friends and family

Leisure time is first and foremost spent with family and friends. During the holidays or weekends, they visit family in the whole of Europe. In the evening and during weekends, they hang around with friends. They talk, go shopping, meet at the skate park or play soccer in the square. Besides the street, the drop-in centre is the ideal place to meet. You can come and go whenever you want, you can take part in some activities. Some young people said that a stricter (weekly) commitment would not be their cup of tea.

Other young people would consider becoming a member of a (sporting) club, but do not know how they can join.

Adulthood

Roma young people mainly grow to maturity faster. From the age of 16, the young people we interviewed uttered the wish that they wanted a job so that they could provide for themselves for instance,

or that they wanted to get married and start their own family. Evidently, this has consequences for their leisure time and the choices they make.

Working context¹⁰

During recent years, increased policy attention has been given to Roma. At the European, federal and Flemish levels policy ambitions are being formalized into action plans. The result of these policy efforts remain to be seen. A brief outline of the current efforts provides an insight into the context of the present research and for whom the following (policy) recommendations are intended.

Europe

Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 – 2015

The first foundations for a European Roma policy were laid in 2005. Especially Eastern European countries committed themselves to improve the socio-economic position and social inclusion of Roma. In 2013 these countries were: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Spain.

EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (2011)

In this Roma action plan the Member States are made accountable. It instructs the Member States to draw up a Roma action plan themselves. Their integration policy should be aimed at Roma. The objective is to ensure that Roma are not discriminated against and that the vicious cycle of poverty moving from one generation to the next is broken through investing in education for Roma children, improving the access to employment, to housing and to healthcare.

To strengthen these national strategies, the European Union adopted the first ever EU legal instrument for Roma inclusion in December 2013. All 28 European Union Member States committed to implementing a set of recommendations to improve the economic and social integration of the Roma communities. The recommendations focus on four areas: access to education, employment, healthcare and housing.

European Platform for Roma Inclusion

This platform mentors the European policy. It brings together governments, the EU, international organizations and Roma civil society representatives. The European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion is extremely important for the exchange of knowledge and experiences in this field. The platform coordinates three projects, which makes it possible to pursue an integrated approach with respect to Roma inclusion.

These three projects are:

1. Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion (ROMACT);
2. Mediation for Roma (ROMED) (see below);

¹⁰On the basis of: <http://www.kruispuntmi.belthema/bijzondere-groepen/roma/romabeleid> en *Dienst Roma & Woonwagenbewoners in samenwerking met het Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie (2012) overzicht van goede praktijken/innoverende projecten op* http://www.foyer.be/IMG/pdf/good_practices_2012.pdf

3. European Network of Mayors Making the Most of EU Funds for Roma Inclusion (MERI).

The aim is to work together on a policy for the inclusion and integration of Roma. The platform is designed to promote co-operation and facilitate the exchange of experiences.

Roma Youth Action Plan

The Council of Europe drew up a Roma Youth Action Plan in co-operation with Roma organizations and the Member States. The Roma Youth Action Plan is an answer by the Council of Europe to the challenges that the Roma young people experience in Europe. Different courses are taken: The focus lies on empowerment, participation in policy and decision-making processes and the reality of discrimination, in particular antigypsyism, with which they are confronted. The Roma Youth Action Plan has also been translated to the local level. Member States have committed themselves to develop initiatives for children and young people with a Roma background. The present research is in line with this objective.

Federal state of Belgium

A first action of the Belgian Roma Plan was the establishment of a National Roma Council on 5 May 2012. This Council advises policy makers on how to enhance the participation of Roma and caravan dwellers in Belgian policy and to guarantee their equal treatment.

In line with the European Union (EU Roma Integration Strategy and the Ten Common Basic Principles on Roma Inclusion) a National Roma Integration Strategy was also drawn up in 2012. The objective is to improve the socio-economic integration of Roma communities living on Belgian territory, liaising closely with the Roma. To that end, an integrated approach is adopted, both between the policy areas and between the levels of competence in Belgium.

Following Europe's example, the priority themes highlighted in the strategy are education, employment, housing and healthcare. These themes are complemented with 'access to public services' and 'negative image'.

Children and young people are mainly discussed in this strategy in connection with education. No other specific attention is devoted to the participation and empowerment of this target group.

The establishment of a 'Helpdesk' for Social Welfare Offices (OCMW's) within the administration of the Public Planning Service for Social Integration should help local authorities in carrying out their duties. "The Helpdesk will provide information, will ensure the exchange of good practices and will make contact with other partners. This shall be done in an effort to provide the best possible service to Social Welfare Offices, cities and municipalities to allow them to improve the help that they offer to the (difficulty accessible) Roma community." (National Strategy p 33)

The ROMED programme aims to give additional training to Roma mediators in order to improve their skills and to enhance the quality of their services. The mediation programme is intended to help facilitate better access to services for Roma families and their children.

Flanders

The objectives of the Flemish Citizenship and Integration Policy are:

1. To realise proportional participation through:
 1. the strengthening of specific target groups through empowerment and participation;
 2. the provision of access to all organizations, facilities and information in all areas of life.
2. To enhance social cohesion through:
 1. the promotion of mutual openness and respect between people;
 2. the promotion of intercultural contacts.

These objectives are realised, among other things, through the establishment of a Flemish CEE (Central and Eastern European Migration) Working Group. Policy actions for CEE migrants, including Roma, were explicitly entered in the CEE (Roma) Action Plan in 2012.

"The purpose of the CEE action plan is to steer the new influx of CEE migrants, including Roma, in the right direction through an inclusive approach. The key principle in this is that the direct support of the local authorities and services involved must be of central importance. In this respect it is essential to equally introduce potential measures in the different regions, cities and municipalities, in order to avoid pull-factor or waterbed effects." (<http://www.integratiebeleid.be/actieplan-moe-roma-migranten-2012-2015>)

With the 'neighbourhood steward' project, the Flemish Community makes a concrete contribution to the Flemish CEE (Central and Eastern European migrants including Roma) action plan. In the cities with the largest populations of Roma, neighbourhood stewards are used in those neighbourhoods where coexistence is under the most pressure. They act as mediators in society and their task is mainly preventive. To this end, they enter into dialogue with residents and look for harmonisation with existing social initiatives, the city and police services. The neighbourhood stewards project is a concrete tool which is to allow cities to adopt an integrated approach to the Roma issue.

In the Flemish CEE (Roma) policy, local authorities are considered to be best able to detect and control coexistence problems (Government of Flanders, 2012a). Although actions are taken at the level of the Communities and Regions, the policy regarding CEE migrants in Flanders is mainly entrusted to the local level.

Local authorities and other bodies and facilities receive an answer to their questions relating to CEE. Contact points are in place for each policy area, as well as a central contact point within the Expertise Centre for Migration-Integration.

In the Flemish Youth Policy Plan 2010-2014, Roma young people are included in the definition of the group of socially vulnerable children and young people. The Flemish Youth Policy Plan refers to them as *"young people who are at greater risk of being at a disadvantage or excluded in different spheres of life due to their origin, home situation, physical or mental condition or their status. This includes children and young people with mental or physical impairment, children and young people of a different ethnic/cultural background, children and young people living in deprivation/poverty, unaccompanied foreign minors, Roma children, minor newcomers."*

The objectives for socially vulnerable children and young people involve the dissemination of information, adapted leisure-time activities, education and well-being, development opportunities for young children, competency development, etc. It is unclear whether there has been made a deliberate choice not to name Roma separately, but to mention them in a list with vulnerable groups. An interview with the Agency for Socio-Cultural Work for Youth and Adults – Division for Youth¹¹ - revealed the intention to continue to devote attention to Roma children and young people, but at the same time not to formulate any specific actions for this specific target group. In the course of 2014, a new youth policy plan will be drafted for the coming term of office. There is great openness to place special focus on Roma children and young people in this upcoming youth policy plan, where this is meaningful, on the basis of the results of the present exploratory research.

(Local) youth policy in Belgium and Flanders

In Flanders, we have a very strong tradition of youth work. Its quantity and diversity is unique in Europe. The concept consists of activities organized by youth, for youth, even when the government organizes this. The goal of these activities is to offer qualitative leisure time activities and to empower children and youngsters. That's the main reason why youth work is an important focus in local youth policy in Flanders. And it's in the mean time the reason why we focus on what Roma children and young people do in their leisure time.

The roots

The roots of youth policy however, lay in the period after World War II. Then, the National Service for Youth started initiatives to support the already existing youth work. The first *local* youth councils emerged in the sixties. In the early seventies, Flanders got cultural autonomy. This resulted in large local investments in the cultural en sports sector. In that time, the local youth councils urged the local governments to invest in a youth officer, not only in officers for culture and sports. What started with 10 municipalities having a youth officer, ended up in the 21st century with almost 100% of the municipalities having a youth officer or even a youth service with multiple officers and volunteers.

Basic missions of the local youth service

Today, we distinguish four basic missions of the local youth service:

1. To ensure a good, continuously and lasting interaction with and participation of children and young people;
2. The local youth service as the junction of youth policy and other policy sectors and categories;
3. Providing a good, well substantiated and balanced offer of leisure activities for children and young people;
4. To ensure a positive climate for citizen's initiatives and private organizations.

¹¹ Interview with Trees De Bruyckere on 17 February 2014

A local strategic policy plan

The main instrument to realize these missions is the strategic policy plan of the local government. Local governments plan for six years what they want to do in the different sectors (e.g. education, culture, public space, social policy,...) for different categories of citizens (e.g. elderly people, migrants, persons with a handicap, socially vulnerable and disadvantaged people, youth,...).

Governmental layers

Local governments are controlled by the federal state for matters that apply to the entire country, like property tax, justice, driving licenses, identity cards,... The Flemish community (stands beside the French and the German community) controls certain aspects of personal matters like youth, education, child care, entrepreneurship, energy,... The last governmental layer above the local governments, are the provinces. They have a role in matters that are too small for the federal or Flemish government, and too big for the local governments. They coordinate a lot of supra-municipal organizations and support the local governments financially and on content.

Policy recommendations

In this limited research, we asked ourselves if and how Roma children and young people participate in neighbourhood and policy. As a handle for this, we formulated the following research questions:

- How do Roma children and young people help shape their social environment (neighbourhood, city/municipality, country) from the existing structures?
- What are the success factors and pitfalls of (leisure) initiatives that reach Roma children and young people?
- How do Roma children and young people experience this situation themselves?

The policy recommendations are based on desk research and input from different sources: local authorities, organizations that reach Roma and some Roma young people. They deal with three aspects:

- How do Roma children and young people spend their leisure time and how do they feel about leisure-time activities, whether organized or not?
- What are the success factors and pitfalls of (leisure-time) initiatives that reach Roma children and young people?
- What kind of framework is needed to make these initiatives successful?

1. Approach Roma children and young people first of all as children and young people

Roma children and young people are first of all just children and young people, with just as much mutual diversity as between other young people. They have their own interests, preferences, dreams and needs. Of course they are socialized within a certain social and cultural context, just like all other children and young people. But there is no such thing as the Roma context. Much depends on the country of origin, the time they spend in Belgium, the embedding they find, the opportunities they receive,... Many of them grow up in an environment which makes them (very) vulnerable. Giving respect and trust as a (youth) worker can make the difference for these young people. Approach them as individuals, not as Roma!

2. Local authorities take Roma into account as a target group and recognise them

Roma young people and their families are often a very vulnerable group. Without paying specific attention to them, there's a great probability that they will keep slipping through the net. Local authorities – especially youth services – with a vast Roma population on their territory, have to invest in learning to see, getting to know and recognizing this target group.

3. Flemish and federal legislation pay specific attention to the environment and needs of Roma youth

In recent years, there is a growing attention for Roma, with a focus on housing, education, health and labor. In order to make a broad support of Roma possible, we would like to stimulate these policy domains to a greater openness for the youth policy domain. Vice versa we ask the Flemish youth policy to take these recommendations into account while writing the new Flemish youth and children's rights policy plan.

4. Strengthen children and young people in a leisure time atmosphere

Roma young people are in essence normal young people who want to be able to do their thing: hang around or play football in the neighbourhood, make music, have fun where, when and how they want. When you ask them how they feel about the way they spend their leisure time, they will say it is pretty much OK. They rarely show interest to make contact with other young people, whether they have a different nationality or not. And the question is whether this is only characteristic of Roma young people.

Most Roma barely know what local authorities are, let alone that they know what all those services do. Applying for an identity card and driving licence will work, but there is no more contact than that. This includes that there is no contact with services that offer leisure-time activities.

Just like with other young people, local authorities and private initiatives can broaden the living environment of young people, provide opportunities and result in successful experiences and thus strengthen these young people to develop a more solid future and make fully conscious choices.

5. Invest in outreach, demand-led work

Many Roma children and young people are not acquainted with the existing offer or do not find their way. Do not wait until these children and young people step up to your offer, but invest in outreach work. Bridge the gap by being present in their living environment. Hang around in the neighbourhood with them, try to get in touch with them actively but respect the children's and young people's own pace. Through informal contacts, you get to know the culture and habits of the children and young people and step by step, you build up a relationship based on mutual trust. Because of the close family ties, contact with one single Roma young person will open doors to other Roma. Furthermore, many Roma with whom we spoke said that outsiders are always welcome to pay a visit or just chat.

Bridging persons and neighbourhood stewards can help in this context. Examine whether there are people within the community who want to function as bridging persons between Roma, organizations and the local authorities. Successful bridging persons become role models for children and young people from the Roma community.

The local and Flemish policy can work in a facilitating manner to encourage outreach.

6. Choose an accessible, flexible offer

Accessible working begins with showing respect and investing in a relationship based on mutual trust. Work at the young people's pace without a specific result in mind. This should not be a target group-specific offer. Free participation, no enrolment, a familiar location and co-operation are however organizational preconditions. A drop-in centre that is freely accessible responds to this.

In order to succeed, there must be a strong focus on communication with and involvement of the target group. This concerns home visits, building a relationship with the parents, familiar faces providing guidance, an open attitude.

These actions should be customised to the rhythm of the participants and be aimed at their talents and well-being.

For local authorities, it is a challenge to work this way and not to know where the efforts are going. Local authorities have a tradition of planning, executing, measuring, evaluating and adjusting. However, working with indicators in this context is particularly difficult. It requires adapted competencies to link the local Roma policy to the correct strategic objectives, action plans and executors.

7. Provide a policy context which allows for and encourages life-broad working

In a relationship based on mutual trust, other (care) needs are exposed. Today, youth workers do not always have the opportunity to respond to this, because of a relatively strict policy framework. Roma do not always have sufficient knowledge of the structures and bodies to find their way to all facilities independently. In addition, it is often unclear to them why a youth (care) worker they know and trust cannot help them with other matters. A policy context which allows for life-broad working provides space to respond to these needs: go with them to the doctor, take a first step to the social Welfare Office, etc.

In order to realise this policy context, local services of different policy domains as well need to collaborate in their aim to support the Roma community.

8. Provide gender-conscious (leisure) activities

Among Roma, gender roles are more rigidly defined from puberty. From a young age, girls often have to do their part in housekeeping, they get married and have children. Boys want to make money so that they can provide for themselves and, not uncommonly, for their wife and child.

This means that from the age of sixteen to eighteen, the living environment of many Roma young people looks completely different. However, they often strongly want to escape to a place where they can be young, where they can relax and meet friends. Providing gender-conscious (leisure) activities responds to this and has an eye for the different needs: it takes into account that young people work, have to care for a baby, suddenly cannot be present because there is a problem in the family,...

9. Invest in professionalisation of youth workers and second-line policy workers through networks and the sharing of expertise

Youth and policy workers who work with Roma children and young people today very much need to exchange and share expertise. This can be done for instance by means of a regular consultation where there is space for intervision and the sharing of expertise. This consultation can serve as an 'experience centre' to share expertise and experiences with others as well.

Organizations that reach Roma like to tell about their methods. People who have travelled to the countries of origin indicate that this was a very instructive experience. Consequently, it is useful to focus on consultation between organizations that reach Roma on the one hand and local authorities that (want to) draw up a Roma policy and organizations that do not have experience with Roma yet on the other hand. Good knowledge of the target group is the basis for an effective policy and a customized offer.

10. Pay attention to the creation of a positive image and inform

There are Roma who want to show the outside world who they are. This is often the case among Roma communities who have been in Flanders for a longer period of time and who feel the need to go public, to break the isolation. In this context, the local authorities can take on the role of facilitator. It is important that the responsibility remains with the group.

Such projects can alleviate the typical 'us-them' thinking which often defines the basic frame of mind. This way of thinking has been described by the researchers in the research report regarding Roma from Kosovo in the Waasland (Decoodt and De Reu 2009): "According to the service providers, Roma make too few efforts to integrate, are a group that is very difficult to reach and follow the general rules only rarely. Roma on the other hand rather consciously maintain their distance to the Western civilization and consider Roma who integrate to be defectors." To create opportunities for Roma to integrate in society, it is important to work on a positive image of Roma.

In order to be able to do so, local authorities need knowledge and information regarding the target group. A basis can be provided by the organizations and individuals that have experience with Roma. If you really want to get to know the target group, the only possibility is to enter into a dialogue with them and to choose an intensive approach to get to know and support them. From this knowledge, more focus can be put on information and raising awareness of others.

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Enclosures

Questionnaire for local authorities

Questions asked in the focus groups

Questionnaire for local authorities

Title: Roma children and young people as policy partners!

Disseminated to

- Youth services;
- Integration services;
- Social Welfare Offices.

Introduction

The non-profit organization 'Vereniging Vlaamse Jeugddiensten' (VVJ - Association of Flemish Youth Services), in co-operation with a lot of partners, conducts a field mapping of existing policy initiatives for Roma children and young people. The focus is put on initiatives or measures that stimulate the participation of Roma children and young people in their neighbourhood, city or municipality.

Conducting a field mapping means that we want to get an idea which is as complete as possible of everything that is in place or not in cities and municipalities throughout Flanders. Therefore, your contribution is always useful, even when nothing is being organized in your city or municipality at the moment! Maybe you have no knowledge of it yourself, but you know colleagues of other services who work on this? Then please forward this e-mail to them.

Roma... who are we talking about? By 'Roma children and young people', we refer to all children and young people from Central or Eastern Europe (CEE countries) of Roma origin. Roma is not about nationality but about ethnicity. In the Flemish Action Plan on CEE (Roma) Migrants 2012, we read that in 2010 almost 33% of all minor newcomers in the Flemish Region come from the CEE countries. Exact figures regarding the share of Roma children and young people in this group are not available for the moment. But it is certain that this will be a considerable number!

What do we ask of you? In order to get the best possible idea of the youth policy initiatives that intend to promote the participation of Roma children and young people, we would like to ask you to complete this questionnaire by 15 November 2013 or to forward it to relevant colleagues.

More information? Nathalie Van Ceulebroeck – Vereniging Vlaamse Jeugddiensten

Questions

5. Postal code: ...
6. I work for:
→ Youth service / integration service / welfare service / other: ...
7. Are there Roma children and young people in your city/municipality? (1 option)

→ Yes (go to 4) / no / I do not know

8. What is the nationality of the Roma children and young people in your city/municipality? (several options)

→ Polish / Russian / Bulgarian / Kosovar / Romanian / Turkish / Other: ...

9. Are there initiatives or measures that also reach Roma children and young people (for instance aimed at socially vulnerable children and young people, families, complementary education, ...)?

→ Yes / no / I do not know

10. Is the objective of these initiatives to:

→ have Roma children and young people participate in their neighbourhood: yes/no

→ have Roma children and young people participate in their city/municipality: yes/no

→ Other:

11. Are there target group-oriented initiatives or measures for Roma children and young people?

→ Yes / no / I do not know

12. Is the objective of these initiatives to:

→ have Roma children and young people participate in their neighbourhood: yes/no

→ have Roma children and young people participate in their city/municipality: yes/no

→ Other:

13. Some characteristics of the existing initiatives/measures:

Actions	How many Roma children and young people	Co-operation with other services/organizations	What is the duration of initiatives/measures?	Are there earmarked resources for the initiatives or measures for Roma?	Under which policy areas do the initiatives fall? (several options)
(description action)	→ 0-5 → 5-15 → 15-25 → >25	→ Yes, viz → No	→ Structurally → Project-based (... months)	→ Yes → No	→ Youth → Welfare → Integration → Other: ...

14. Which success factors would you like to mention (max 3)?

15. Which problems did you encounter (max 3)?

16. Could you summarize the vision behind those initiatives in 3 lines?
17. Is there a contact point in the municipality regarding Roma?
→ Yes / no
18. Is there any knowledge available regarding the living environment of Roma children and young people? Or are there contact persons who can provide this type of knowledge?
→ Yes / no
19. Are there initiatives to inform all inhabitants in the city/municipality and to raise awareness regarding the Roma culture?
→ Yes / no
20. Are Roma children and young people involved in the drawing up and execution of initiatives and / or measures?
→ Yes / no
21. What would you need to undertake more and better initiatives with respect to the group of Roma children and young people?
22. Do you know organizations on your territory that reach Roma children and young people?
1. If so, which ones? (name organization, type of organization, e-mail, phone) / no

Questions asked in the focus groups

What is typical of these practices in terms of: Content-related objective of the organization?

- Organizational characteristics (administrative): professional/volunteers; financing; spread of activities...
- How many Roma children and young people do you reach?
- Do they visit occasionally or on a structural basis?
- What does your offer of activities look like? What works?
- Co-operations?

Roma children and young people as participants

- Why do children and young people participate in your activities?
- What are, in your opinion, the reasons why Roma young people are not reached? And what are the possible solutions, according to you?
- Are there any differences between working with Roma children and young people and working with non-Roma children and young people? Which?
- Are there tensions between the different groups of participants?
- What is the percentage by gender of the participating Roma children and young people?
- What do Roma children and young people need?

You as a mentor

- What skills do you need to work with Roma children and young people?
- When do you really like working with Roma children and young people? And when not?
- What do you need?

The organization

- Does your organization work together with other organizations?
- Through which communication channels do you reach (Roma) children and young people?
- What does the organization need?

The policy

- Do you know any policy initiatives for Roma children and young people that are being taken at the local, Flemish, federal or European level?
- A number of examples: what works and what does not? Why?