



Consultation meeting with cities, regions and other stakeholders

**25 September 2012, Council of Europe,
Palais de l'Europe, Room 2**

Opening remarks by Mr Jeroen SCHOKKENBROEK, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma issues

Dear mayors, elected officials and other representatives of cities and regions, representatives of International Organisations, NGOs and Roma Organisations,

Let me begin by thanking you all for your participation in this consultation meeting organised in the framework of the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion.

The Secretary General of the Council of Europe for Roma Issues fully supports the Congress of local and regional authorities in this initiative to bring Cities and Regions together with other international and non-governmental organisations to share views and receive comments and suggestions on the priorities of the Alliance and on possible cooperation.

Improving the living conditions of Roma, giving them real and equal access to human rights, is a main priority of the Council of Europe and municipalities are on the front line in efforts to identify concrete solutions to improve the social inclusion of Roma.



The challenges faced by local and regional authorities should not be underestimated.

Overcoming decades, even centuries of marginalisation and exclusion is not an easy task. There are no quick fixes.

Roma are facing hostile acts and actions preventing their access to basic human rights.

Many Roma children are not enjoying the same rights as other children and are subjected to discrimination and segregation on ethnic grounds.

Here is one recent example of local challenges. On 17 September about 50 residents in the northern Croatian village of Gornji Hrascan staged a protest preventing 44 Roma children from attending pre-school classes. Thanks to efforts of the prefect and local authorities, the Roma children were eventually able to enter the school the next day.

Many of the problems related to Roma in situation of poverty are shared to some extent with many 'non-Roma' although prejudices and negative stereotypes can fuel widespread discrimination. On the same day of the protest which took place in Croatia a meeting convened in the Greek village of Anthili by the authorities to discuss the influx of families into Anthili after the closing of a Roma camp just north of Lamia descended into violence.



There is a vast potential for action to increase the capacity of the local authorities and a space for effective actions to radically improve the deprived situation of Roma on our continent.

Such action needs to take as its starting point the real needs and problems of the municipalities.

As the earlier examples show, many mayors can be confronted with public hostility when putting in place policies for Roma. Handling anti-Roma sentiment requires strong diversity management skills. These skills can be developed and reinforced through mutual learning and training activities.

Likewise, there still much to be done to ensure that Roma communities and organisations are given their full voice in designing, implementing and monitoring integration measures targeting them.

In the prevailing social and economic circumstances, intervention for the benefit of Roma is often viewed with suspicion by public opinion, not understood as being beneficial to society as a whole.

Access to health and social services and decent living conditions are a right of every citizen, including the Roma, and promoting specific actions for this vulnerable population can in no way be considered a privilege. Public opinion needs to develop, also through awareness-raising work such as the Council of Europe's campaign 'Dosta', a romani word



meaning 'Enough', to bring non-Roma closer to Roma citizens by breaking down the barriers caused by prejudices and stereotypes.

Just as it is at the local and regional levels where the elected officials and administrations are confronted on a daily basis with the real challenges, it is also at these levels that we see concrete results of good practice and policy measures that work.

The commitment of local and regional authorities is essential. Notwithstanding the importance of effective national policies or the role of other stakeholders, local authorities have a fundamental role to play in getting the Roma out of the margins and into mainstream society.

To achieve Roma inclusion, it is indispensable to build confidence between local authorities and the socially excluded groups.

The Council of Europe has already mobilised action at local levels through the joint CoE-EU Roma Mediators training Programme – ROMED – strengthening the effectiveness of Roma mediators in their role of facilitators between Roma communities and public institutions such as schools, health services, employment agencies. Mediators are also a very pragmatic tool to help ensure that basic public services are delivered to Roma communities and the municipalities should strongly support their work. The activities of the Alliance will build on our experience with the mediators scheme.



In many cases mayors are willing to improve the situation of Roma, but lack expertise and funds. Yet many examples of good practice for the inclusion of Roma communities exist not only at European, national, regional but also at the local level and the Alliance will give participants the opportunity to share their experience and benefit from mutual exchanges. Also, through the European Database of policies and good practices, which is already on line, cities and regions will have an additional tool for accessing examples of useful policy measures from across Europe.

Together with the questionnaire results, our meeting today will help the Congress and the CoE to choose some priority actions to be carried out for the months ahead. It will also feed into the drawing up of an activity programme for next year. I would therefore invite you to be as concrete as possible about your own needs and priorities, and make proposals on how the Alliance could support your municipality, your region, in addressing your challenges.

I should like to end with a word of thanks to those cities and regions that have participated in the core group to assist us in developing the Alliance concept. That group's work comes to an end here since we will now move into practical action. My thanks also go to our colleagues in the European Commission for their constructive interest in cooperating with CoE in this endeavour.



I am confident that with the commitment and support of you all, this meeting will prove to be an important step towards defining the actions to be carried out in the framework of the Alliance.

Thank you for your attention.