

Report from the second regional roundtable on housing of Roma

Tirana, Albania
26-27 February 2014

The purpose of this regional roundtable was to promote exchange of experience between NGOs and governments in the Western Balkans in the field of housing of Roma. The project “Best Practices on Roma Integration” (BPRI) also used this opportunity to launch the *Regional Report on Legalization and Upgrading of Roma Settlements and Access to Social Housing*.

Regional Report on Legalization and Upgrading of Roma Settlements and Access to Social Housing – presented by Alonso Ayala, Report Co-ordinator, Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS)

The main purpose of the report is: “to highlight the necessary policy reforms and strategies for solving the housing situation of disadvantaged Roma from the perspective of legalization, settlement upgrading and social housing”. This has been achieved through the assessment of the legal, institutional framework and conditions of housing, and documentation of good learning practice cases throughout the Western Balkan’s Region. In general, good learning practices are those that:

1. Consider the wider land and housing context
2. Support Roma mainstreaming in legalization, settlement upgrading and social housing
3. Develop targeted approaches for Roma population, where needed
4. Understand housing is more than shelter alone
5. Emphasize community organization
6. Strive towards an end to dependency.

Specific Principles for Legalization, Settlement Upgrading and Social Housing

Legalization	Settlement Upgrading	Social Housing
Accessibility Affordability	Data collection Consultation on project outcomes Regularization Legalization of land and buildings Settlement planning Socio-economic integration	Availability Affordability Accessibility Quality

Recommendations:

At the national level:

- Local governments and NGOs need to assist Roma families with awareness raising and registration for legalization and social housing.
- There is a need to adopt physical plans that include (upgraded, legalized and serviced) Roma settlements.

At the community level:

- Roma families themselves need to play a critical role in the upgrading of their own settlements and in the organization of their communities.
- Roma community leaders and their NGO partners need to raise awareness about the costs (in the form of taxes and service charges) and benefits (in the form of legal status and citizenship) that accompany greater integration.

The report is available at: http://www.bpri-odihr.org/single-news/items/Housing_report.html?file=tl_files/new/Housing%20Report/ENG.pdf.

Regional perspective on the housing of Roma using the human rights based approach – Jan Jařab, Regional Representative for Europe, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

OHCHR organized a colloquium on Roma segregation in housing in co-operation with the Government of Spain. The colloquium was held on 15-16 January 2014 in Madrid and the full report was shared with participants of the roundtable in Tirana. The main part of the colloquium was organized under the Chatham House Rule, thus guaranteeing anonymity in order to stimulate open discussion.

It was noted that in some countries the majority of Roma do not even qualify for social housing since they do not have a stable income, which is often one of the preconditions for access to social housing. There are even situations where large social housing projects exist in the immediate proximity of a shantytown whose inhabitants have no access to that housing, and little or no access to the social services provided there.

Authorities (national as well as local) often tend to look the other way rather than address the situation in the worst shantytowns and slums – for a number of reasons, but above all because the challenges there are so intractable as to appear hopeless, with very remote chances of being successfully resolved. This then tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The human rights based approach should be applied in design, implementation and evaluation of housing programmes. Lessons learned should be drawn from past programmes to ensure that the same mistakes are not repeated. The regional report published by BPRI supports this approach by highlighting good learning practices.

Working Groups:

- **Legalisation** – moderated by Paul Rabe, IHS Legalization Expert, and Erol Ademov, Officer for Minority Communities at the municipality of Stip

Participants highlighted that Roma are often not able to afford legalization costs, so low-interest credit is useful for covering the geodesy survey fees. Since some Roma mahallas pre-date the countries they are located in, and taking into consideration the challenges of the house-by-house legalization approach, it may be appropriate to introduce a *lex specialis* (special law) for resolving the status of these settlements. Funds from the legalization process should be used for improving the infrastructure. Legalization also encourages economic activity as people are able to use property as collateral and capital.

- **Participation of Roma in planning processes** – moderated by Vladimir Macura, Association for Upgrading of Roma Settlements, Serbia

The working group on participation dedicated their contribution to Nicolae Gheorghe, a Roma activist and former OSCE ODIHR Senior Advisor on Roma and Sinti, (Head of the Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues), who passed away recently. They emphasized that there is the variety of available mechanisms for participation – the final result is what defines their value. For newly built settlements and housing projects, there are very good standards for construction, but they should always be adjusted to the family's and community's needs. Participation of Roma should be ensured not only through a public debate of the draft plan at the municipality, but also doing the drafting process itself. Location of the settlement or new housing should be the subject of thorough negotiations to ensure that Roma are not

segregated on the outskirts of town, where they have few economic and social inclusion opportunities.

- **Social Housing** – moderated by Nora Teller, Sociologist, Metropolitan Research Institute (Budapest), and Idaver Memedov, Officer on Roma and Sinti Issues, OSCE/ODIHR.

All the countries in the Western Balkans region have a relatively small stock of social housing available and the instrument has limitations (economic etc.), so governments should explore different alternatives as per the needs of the Roma. Governments can use rent subsidies and provide funds for upgrading of existing dwellings, in addition to providing/renting out apartments to beneficiaries.

It is useful to mix tenants of different paying ability and to design income generating activities for those less well off. Design of buildings should respond to the beneficiaries' needs and it is important to follow the comprehensive approach (i.e. take into consideration education, civil registration, employment, healthcare and other aspects, not just housing).

Governments should enable beneficiaries to participate in making choices – for many of them, this is a decision of a life-time. In many cases, Roma are unable to access social housing programmes because of lack of documents or stable income, so laws and regulations need to be adjusted.

Report on Legalization of Roma Settlements in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Hajro Poskovic, Legal Advisor, OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina

The report analysed the legalization status of Roma communities in Lukavac, Kakanj, Jajce, Jablanica, Mostar, Prijedor, Bijeljina and Brcko. This is the first report of this kind in Bosnia and Herzegovina and it will be officially launched on 8 April. Taking into account the scope of the required documentation for legalization, as well as the related costs, the report presents four groups of illegally constructed housing units:

1. Housing units constructed on land owned by the housing unit occupant,
2. Housing units constructed on land owned by ancestors of the housing unit occupant (probate proceedings not carried out),
3. Roma settlements and housing units on publicly owned land,
4. Legalization of housing units which do not meet the technical construction requirements.

After examining the cantonal decisions on legalization and other regulations, the report provided specific recommendations to each assessed municipality. Among others, one of the general recommendations includes special legalization fees for socially vulnerable categories, such as the Roma. The full report is available on the [BPRI website](#).

Assessment of the Capacities of the State to Deal with the Negative Effects of the Legalization Process in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – by Aleksandar Lazovski, BPRI National Project Officer, OSCE/ ODIHR

The report assessed the capacities of the state to deal with families who may become homeless as a result of the legalization process. Macedonian Roma communities mostly live in urban areas, with 43% in the capital city, and it is estimated that about 70% of the Roma population has no ownership documents for their dwelling. Several studies confirm that Roma mainly live in areas that have unresolved property issues, outside of urban planning zones and without basic infrastructure. The Law on Legalization enabled the owners of all housing objects constructed without permission before 3 March 2011 to submit a request for legalization.

The general perception is that the municipal authorities were not prepared for this process and the pace has been different in every municipality. The Roma representation in the municipal administration or council varies from one municipality to another. Having Roma employees in the municipal administration (such as the case in Stip and Prilep) can facilitate the communication between the Roma citizens and the administration. This is especially important due to the complex nature of the legalization process. Alleged corruption at the municipal level was also identified as an obstacle. The report will be available on the BPRI website shortly.

Council of Europe's work on the Alliance of Cities and Regions, ROMACT/ROMED – Marius JITEA, ROMACT/ROMED Programme Adviser

The key values integral to the Council of Europe's work are democracy, human rights and rule of law. In recent years, activities have shifted from the level of either governmental cooperation mechanisms or measures for strengthening civil society to an integrated community based approach where, local stakeholders with citizenry community(-ies) development plans are thought and putted in place together.

Since adoption of Strasbourg Declaration from 2010 Council of Europe fostered its work on strengthening democratic mechanisms in its 47 member states. As a result, four mechanisms were developed:

1. DOSTA campaign aiming to raise awareness about Roma among non-Roma. More information and toolkits for fighting stereotypes are available at: http://www.coe.int/t/dg3/romatravellers/dosta_en.asp.
2. ROMED programme (2011-2013) developed a mechanism which trained over 1,000 Roma as health, school and community mediators. ROMED2 is limited to fewer countries and will focus on empowering communities. More information is available at: <http://romed.coe-romact.org/>.
3. Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma Inclusion – a political mechanism bringing together (vice)-mayors and elected councillors to promote Roma living standards. A total of 121 cities have joined to date from 27 different countries. Cities and municipalities from the Western Balkans are also invited to join. More information is available at: <http://www.roma-alliance.org/>.
4. ROMACT programme is focusing on local administration in five countries (40 local self-governments in total but expanding). By March 2015, the aim is for these local self-governments to adopt Local Action Plans for Roma Inclusion. More details are available at: <http://coe-romact.org/>.

Status of Roma settlements in Albania – by Aida Seseri, Directory of Urban Services and Housing, Ministry of Urban Development and Tourism, Albania

The legal framework does not exclude Roma and offers opportunities for legalization of dwellings. However, due to challenges in this field, the government introduced several projects which promoted legalization:

1. In co-operation with the Council of Europe Development Bank, the Quereri project promoted social housing.
2. The government also provided zero-interest housing loans.
3. Most recently a new Housing Fund has been established and the government dedicated 30 million LEK (over 210,000 EUR) from the public budget.

Criteria for allocation of social housing include the family size, social and economic criteria. Identity documents are crucial for accessing services, together with proof of income. Small grants are one approach which can be used for improving existing housing (to complement the construction of new social housing units, which is often more costly). The new Housing Fund will focus on this approach.

Dweller-Driven Upgrading of Roma Settlements – by Leo Meyer, HEKS-EPER, Switzerland, and Sladjana Jovanovic, NGO EHO, Serbia

Roma dwellers have capacities to improve their housing conditions by their own work:

- But: It needs guidance and a structured process, with clear participation, roles, rights and obligations of participants



Municipalities can be convinced to improve housing condition in Roma settlements

- But: They need a promising, manageable and financially affordable approach. Win – Win Situation

Governments must be motivated to do more:

- But: They need success stories, showing tangible results, lobbying and advocacy

EHO focused on dweller-driven upgrading of Roma settlements in legalized settlements or those in the process of legalization. Each settlement elected a council of six or so representatives for negotiations about the works. Based on the funding available (EUR 2,000 – 3,600 per family), the Roma families themselves prioritized the interventions that were most important for improving their quality of life (i.e. replacing the roof, adding rooms, building a bathroom, etc). They contributed labour and recycled materials which decreased construction costs, while donor funding was used to provide technicians for electricity, plumbing and other trades. Based on this experience, three main models developed:

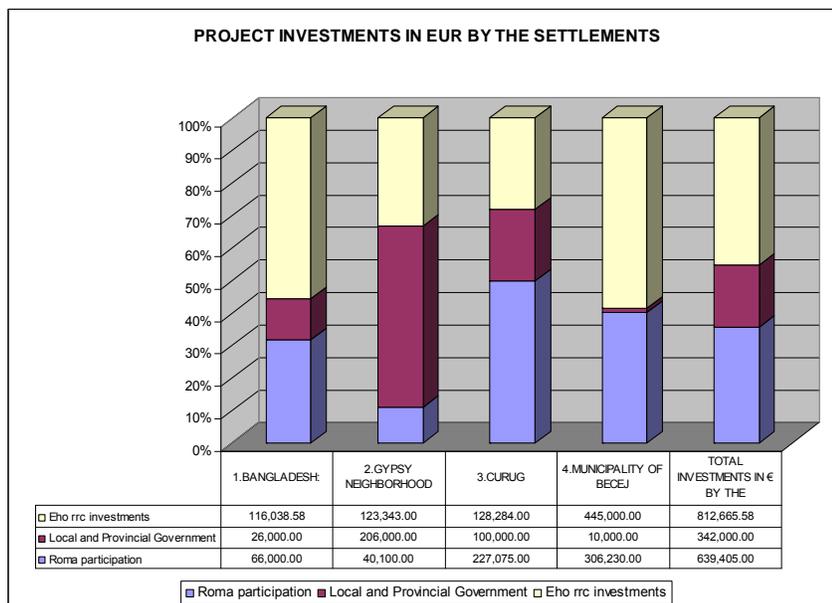


- 1) Ensuring the minimum hygienic standard by building a bathroom and fixing up the house (EUR 2,000 per house)
- 2) Reconstruction of unsafe houses (EUR 2,800 per house)
- 3) Construction of mini-houses in cases where the original house cannot be repaired (EUR 3,600 per house) – only 20-30 m² but it is designed so that it can be expanded to meet the family's needs

To date, 408 septic tanks and 540 bathrooms were constructed, 18 houses were reconstructed and 9 new mini-houses were built using recycled material. This improved living conditions for 628 families and over 2,900 Roma women and men participated in the projects.

The value of the materials and labour provided by Roma represents up to a half of funding invested in some settlements (marked in blue in the graph).

In addition to the construction works, the project also provided on-the-job training for different trades, promoted entrepreneurship and the education of children, and other initiatives.



Results of the BPRI small grants programme – by Milena Isakovic, BPRI Regional Co-ordinator, OSCE/ODIHR

The small grants programme implemented by BPRI supported local projects in 19 Roma settlements in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo* and Montenegro. The available funding (EUR 5,000 plus a 10% municipal contribution) was used mostly to improve infrastructure (expand sewage and water systems, introduce public lighting, asphalt the roads, etc), though three projects focused on education and one project helped improve access to municipal services. The projects supported the implementation of local action plans for Roma inclusion where they existed. More information about all the projects is available in the [regional brochure](#).

Mainstreaming of Roma issues in the new Law on Social Housing – Maja Remikovic, Ministry of Tourism and Sustainable Development, Government of Montenegro

In 2013, the average price of m² in Montenegro was EUR 1,200 while the average salary was EUR 480. Consequently, many people are unable to afford housing at the open market prices and a Law on Social Housing was passed in July 2013 to provide support for the most vulnerable population. The Law envisions measures to be provided by the public and private sector, including a variety of funding mechanisms, organization and legal forms. Different models include:

- Purchasing or constructing social housing for rental
- Leasing land for construction of social housing
- Allocating land for construction of new or re-construction of older social housing units
- Awarding subsidies for social housing
- Providing long-term credit to private companies, physical and legal persons, housing co-operatives for securing social housing units
- Supporting public-private partnership for social housing development.

There is a lack of funding so priorities will be defined through national and local programmes for social housing. Possible beneficiaries include citizens of Montenegro, but also foreign nationals and people without citizenship whose status is regulated by Law. More specifically, target groups include single parents, people with disabilities and their families, elderly persons, youth coming out of orphanages or similar institutions, Roma and Egyptians, (internally) displaced persons and victims of domestic violence.

Local action planning for housing in eight pilot municipalities – by Merita Dalipi, Head of Housing Unit at the Directory for Housing and Construction, Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning, Kosovo

BPRI is supporting the development of eight Local Action Plans for Implementation of the Governmental Strategy for Social Housing. The objective of this activity is to create possibilities for sustainable housing in eight project municipalities¹ for the families or individuals that are not in such economic situation to look for housing for rent on the market, with a special focus on the needs of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. The procedures for this are based on the Law for Financing of Housing for People in Need and the administrative instructions provided by the Ministry of Environment and Spatial Planning.

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/99 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

¹ Gracanica/Graçanice, Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje, Rahovec/Orahovac, Ferizaj/Urosevac, Gjakove/Djakovica, Peje/Pec, Kline/Klina, and Prizren.

Field visits

Municipality of Lezha



The city of Lezha is the administrative center of the Lezha district in the north-western part of the country. As estimated by Roma NGOs and municipal authorities, about 397 Roma and Egyptian families live in Lezha, out of 8,186 families in total (29,532 inhabitants). Roma and Egyptians compose approximately 5% of the population. Roma in Lezha mainly live in two settlements: Lagja "Beselidhja" and Lagja "Skenderbej". The municipality has recently developed and adopted the Roma Local Action Plan (2013-2015) and appointed a Roma Local Expert who is dealing with the issues of Roma and Egyptian communities. The municipality also implemented

several infrastructural projects that improve living conditions for Roma, Egyptians and the majority population. This includes the asphaltting of roads within the settlement, construction of stairs that connect it with the town centre and improve access to the healthcare centre, and reconstruction of the bridge that connects the settlement to the school and main national road. The municipality is also applying for the Housing Fund established by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Urbanism that will provide support for upgrading houses for Roma and Egyptians and new construction if needed.

Municipality of Lushnje



As estimated by Roma NGOs, Roma and Egyptians in Lushnje compose 2.78% of the entire population of the city. The Roma population of Lushnje is mainly concentrated in Saver neighborhood where they were first settled in 1965. Roma in Saver are mostly engaged in agricultural activities. There is a Roma elected municipal council representative, which is the local government decision making body. In April 2013, Lushnje municipality adopted the Roma Local Action Plan (2013-2015). They also used small grant funding from the BPRI to reconstruct the sewage system. The municipality will also use the Housing Fund established by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Urbanism to make other improvements.

Best photo of a small grant project

BPRI printed several photos of local projects funded through the small grants programme. The participants voted for the photo and the project they liked best. The third prize went to the sewage reconstruction project in the municipality of Lushnje in Albania. The second prize went to the education project from Tivat, Montenegro. The first prize went to the Office for Roma Inclusion in the municipality of Bijelo Polje.