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Policy Paper – Cyprus

PART I: Existing Policies & Practices on Roma Children and Youth Participation

1.1 – Access to Education, Housing, Employment, Health

The Council of Europe estimates that approximately 1250 Roma live in Cyprus (0.16% of the population). This small number forms the basis for a National Roma Integration Strategy that does not state policies targeting Roma but rather an integrated set of measures within existing structures to support vulnerable groups. For that reason the Policy Measures of Cyprus for the Social Inclusion of Roma do not consider necessary the implementation of separate monitoring mechanisms. Access to Education, employment, healthcare, housing & essential services, are the areas outlined for social inclusion of Roma.

Primary and Secondary education is compulsory and free. The Cypriot government has implemented Zones of Educational Priority (ZEP), the majority of which have high attendance of foreign students and Turkish Cypriot students (among which, Gurbeties are included), to provide further support to schools with greater number of students at risk of social exclusion. Roma students in these schools benefit from bilingual support staff that facilitates communication between students and teachers, and between parents and the school; Educational Psychology Services and support from the Social Welfare Services; free meals; extra-curricular intercultural activities and events; educational seminars for parents/legal guardians.

The National Roma Integration Strategy encourages the participation of Roma parents in school context through the cooperation with school staff in designing actions that address specific needs of their children. No specific reference on this matter is made in relation to the participation of Roma children.

As full-right Cypriot citizens, Gurbeties have, in principle, equal access to the labour market. In reality, though, the low proficiency in Greek language and the low level of education strongly limit access to employment. The government, does provides free educational language programme for non-greek speaking adults. Still, Gurbeties live in extreme poverty, with very limited access to housing and employment.



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At the turn of the 21st century, with a partial lift of the ban restricting freedom of movement in the country, many Gurbeties, who had moved north after the military events of 1974, returned to the south gathering in specifically allocated settlements with appalling housing conditions¹. The majority of Gurbeties live in abandoned Turkish-Cypriot houses in the Limassol district; the government created two housing projects, small prefabricated units in isolated locations with limited access to transport and sanitation.

Access to public health services is provided free of charge to the most vulnerable families on the ground of income, employment and residential status. Any legal resident of Cyprus is entitled to apply for social welfare benefit that aims at protecting and ensuring a dignified standard of living to all, including child protection. The language barrier, however, is an obstacle to accessing health services.

The District Administration Office is the direct contact in relation to different issues such as identity documents, housing, education, and has recruited a translator. The Bi-Communal Multi-functional Centre operated by the Limassol Municipality provides free social and support services.

Roma Gurbeties of Cyprus are not recognised as a minority group by the 1960s Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus, which recognises three minority groups on the grounds of religious faith. With the majority being Turkish language speakers (more specifically, speaking the Turkish dialect *Gurbetcha*) and Muslims, Gurbeties were considered to be part of the Turkish community. As a group, Gurbeties lack political representation and economical power², there are no civil organisations exclusively advocating for the rights of Roma, nor NGO's led by Roma in Cyprus and no discrimination claims by Roma³.

1.2 Formal Participation Structures

Cyprus does not have an encompassing youth policy but laws that address youth-related issues⁴ the main legal instrument being the [No. 33\(I\) of 1994: Youth Board Law](#), which has established the Youth Board of Cyprus, a semi-governmental organisation funded by the State, with representatives of youth organisations from each political party in the House of Representatives. The Youth Board aims at enhancing participation and solutions for issues concerning youth.

¹ European Network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination, Country report Non-discrimination, Cyprus 2015

² "The Cypriot Roma and the Failure of Education: Anti-Discrimination and Multiculturalism as a Post-accession Challenge" By Nicos Trimikliniotis and Corina Demetriou, Chapter in Nicholas Coureas and Andrekos Varnava (eds.) *The Minorities of Cyprus: Development Patterns and the Identity of the Internal-Exclusion*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009

³ European Network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination, Country report Non-discrimination, Cyprus 2015

⁴ youthpolicy.org <http://www.youthpolicy.org/factsheets/country/cyprus/>



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The Cyprus Youth Council (CYC)⁵ brings together Non-Governmental Youth Organisations (NGYOs) in Cyprus and is a member of the European Youth Forum (EYF), aiming at promoting dialogue and cooperation between youth. CYC is a platform for participation in European projects; the main stakeholder in the European programme Structure Dialogue, which promotes political participation of youth; and supports NGO's through lobbying on youth related issues near policy makers. As part of the Structured Dialogue, the CYC lodged the Youth Ambassadors (currently made of 15 members, the group has no Roma or Turkish-Cypriot representative).

The European Youth Parliament (EYP)⁶ Cyprus National Committee is an elected body made up of seven alumni members. All EYP Cyprus registered members are entitled to vote and stand for election.

The Municipal and Community Youth Councils aim at empowering youth initiative at local level, promoting events and activities in different areas (sports, culture, awareness-raising). These are advisory bodies on youth affairs for their Municipalities and have representatives of local youth NGOs.

Secondary schools have Pupil Councils, made of elected students who represent the school student community and elect the Regional Pupil Councils from which the Pancyprian Coordinative Pupils Committee is elected. Similarly, Universities have elected University Student Unions.

On a yearly basis, representatives of Secondary School Students, take part of the Children's Parliament at the House of Parliament, and under the guidance of the President of Parliament discuss issues they that concern them. Theirs is an advisory role and all session outcomes are sent to the appropriate authorities according to the subjects.

At the community level, Youth Clubs are voluntary organisations that aim at promoting participation in the cultural and social life of the community. These community clubs form Regional Committees, which are members of the Cyprus Youth Clubs Organisation.

1.3 – Other projects

The University of Cyprus is a partner of the EU funded project *Schools as Learning Communities in Europe: Successful Educational Actions for all (SEAS4ALL)*⁸ and currently collaborates with the Primary School of Agios Antonios. The project's activities aim to increase Educational success, social inclusion, contribute to reducing absenteeism and early school leaving and increase school performance through a number of strategies that enhance, among other aspects, social cohesion, coexistence, and the participation of the community in the educational activities.

⁵ The Cyprus Youth Council <http://cyc.org.cy/en/>

⁶ European Youth Parliament Cyprus <http://eypcyprus.com/site/>

⁷ Council of Europe Information Sheet, Participation of Young People, Cyprus, 2001

⁸ Erasmus + : 2015-1-ES01-KA201-016327



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1.4 – Allocated funds

During the 2007 – 2013 period, Cyprus allocated 11.4% (€13 million) of its total European Social Fund (ESF) budget towards integrating disadvantaged people, including the Roma. The sectoral investments, from which Roma population can benefit, include the provision of programmes for eliminating early school leaving, creativity and psychosocial support services to students, and counselling and training programmes. For the 2014-2020 period, Cyprus will receive €422 million from the ESF and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), of this amount, at least 30.7% will be spent on the ESF, with at least 20% of that going towards the promotion of social inclusion and combating poverty⁹.

1.5 – Consultancy Group on Roma Youth Participation (CGRYP)

Through the EU funded project *PEER: Participation, Experiences and Empowerment of Roma Youth*, "Hope For Children" UNCRRC Policy Centre initiated the CGRYP with the aim of bringing together stakeholders from different professional backgrounds, as well as Roma youth representatives to discuss issues related to the right of children and young people to participate in all matters concerning them, focusing on the current situation, and on ways in which participation can be supported and enhanced. The first meeting was organised in collaboration with the Agios Antonios Primary School in Limassol and had the participation of the school's principle and the language support expert; a researcher from the University of Cyprus working in the *Schools as Learning Communities in Europe: Successful Educational Actions for all* (SEAS4ALL); the language support expert at the Agios Antonios Gymnasium; two Roma youth representatives; and a researcher from "Hope For Children" UNCRRC Policy Centre. The group will continue to meet in preparation of the national conference of the PEER project in Cyprus and continue after the end of the project as long as there is a need and interest from potential participants.

PART 2: PEER participatory work findings

In Cyprus, PEER has been working with two groups in the Limassol district. The number of participants in each group was, on average, 8 children per session. Both groups include girls and boys, those in Group PEER_Cy_2¹⁰ being of primary school age, while in Group PEER_Cy_2 children were between 13 and 15 years-old. With Group PEER_Cy_2, PEER work took place at the children's community, outside their houses; with Group PEER_Cy_1, the group met at the Gymnasium in a classroom.

2.1 – Group PEER_Cy_2

The main issues raised by the children were Safety and Play. In relation to Safety, the conditions of the community and households were the major

⁹ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_cyprus_strategy_en.pdf

¹⁰ Locations have not been disclosed to respect the groups' anonymity.



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concerns. When Roma families moved south from the occupied north, they settled in empty properties in the Turkish quarters of Limassol and Paphos; the government of Cyprus then relocated the families to prefabricated houses in remote, desolated areas¹¹, where "Hope For Children" UNCRC Policy Centre has been implementing PEER activities. While, in principle, the government addressed the housing needs of these families, in reality the appalling conditions mean that the settlements are, indeed, a health hazard.

Children live in one-bedroom shelters with no insulation (a particularly pressing problem given the high temperatures reached in Cyprus), and play among running sewage waste, garbage, snakes. Further, the location promotes social and economic segregation, with limited access to transportation, employment, services (such as healthcare, recreational and cultural activities, grocery shops, none of these exist in the community or in a walking distance from it). The children that participated in the PEER activities have mentioned basic needs as priorities: a clean house and community, a garden, a playground, a football court. In sum, a safe, clean, fun environment to live with their peers and family.

2.2 – Group PEER_Cy_1

Equally, safety emerged as the first priority for the children who participated in this group: a) safety in the household; b) safety in the community park. The children reside in old houses in that, though somewhat rehabilitated by the government, lack the adequate conditions and maintenance. Children live in over-populated households in poor conservation state (children being hurt inside their houses in accidents such as falling cupboards and falling bits of wall; having no water to shower) where they are not safe and lack the quietness for studying and rest. In relation to the community park, children referred to the lack of cleanliness (particularly dog excrements), and the presence of grownups of whom they are afraid and in whom they do not trust.

Most children have low expectations in relation to education and employment. Attending higher education was rarely mentioned, and aspirational jobs were often those perceived as requiring low qualifications (hairstylist, mechanic, footballer).

2.3 – Consultation Group on Roma Youth Participation (CGRYP)

At the CGRYP the issues that emerged as those most pressing affecting Roma youth and children were education, housing, employment, integration. The lack of interest of local and central authorities in establishing a dialogue with the community towards sustainable solutions to the existing problems was referred to as the main obstacle. There is a great need for governmental measures to move beyond a form of social welfare that promotes State dependency though granting benefits that discourage integration in the labour market,

¹¹ Reframing the discourse on Roma integration: Moving from welfare dependency and ethnic targeting to social inclusion and integration in the labour market. Peer Review on "Supporting the Labour Market Integration of the Roma Community in the Czech Republic" Czech Republic, 25 – 26 November 2010 , A paper submitted by Zelia Gregoriou in consortium with GHK Consulting Ltd and CERGE-EI. Date: 30/11/2010



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demotivating to education, consequently diminishing access to employment and perpetuating a cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

Limited expectations related to access to employment and education seem to be at the root of a persistence lack of motivation to act for change. This was evident in the sessions developed with Group PEER_Cy_1, but also in the CGRYP discussions where it was mentioned that, despite the opportunities offered to adults to learn Greek and to participate in school activities, very few were actually motivated to take part. Children are affected by this, some attending as little as 25% of the school year due to lack of parental interest.

Cultural identity or rather its undermining was another emergent issue. Interestingly, not as a perceived problem in the sense that Roma would like to have their culture acknowledged and celebrated, but as something that Roma are willing to compromise as a way to achieve social integration. The Roma participants in the CGRYP emphasised that they do not see themselves as Roma but as "Turkish speaking Cypriots" thus reproducing official discourses used to justify the inexistence of policies targeting Gurbeties in Cyprus. Similarly, children taking part in the PEER activities, though familiar with Roma music, dances, flag, hymn, did not openly identify themselves as Roma.

PART 3: Recommendations

In line with the findings, Housing, Education, Recreational activities, Roma identity, Participation in decision making are subjects in which the state is at risk of not keeping up to the recommendations of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), and should be urgently addressed.

Limited access to Housing:

Article 3 (1) of the UNCRC states that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Similarly, Article 27, recognizes the right of every child to an adequate standard of living urging states to provide assistance and support programmes with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing. This has not been the case when accommodating Gurbetie families in the Group PEER_Cy_2 settlement where living conditions are clearly a health hazard to all.

Inclusive housing rehabilitation programmes are needed, which go beyond passive assistencialism and create a space for dialogue with Roma families (adults and children alike), enabling authorities to be fully informed about the needs of children thus facilitating the promotion and support of actions that involve the community in the improvement of the living conditions of their children.

Limited access to Education:

Though education is free, attendance rates among Roma students are low and few children seem to continue beyond the compulsory level. Article 28 1(e) of the UNCRC urges States Parties to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. Parental motivation and attitudes towards education are crucial to the child's performance.



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If motivation is low and expectations as to what children can achieve through education are limited, truancy and drop-out rates will remain high. Sustainable national and international programmes, such as SEAS4ALL, that place an emphasis in including the community in the process towards educational success are needed.

The link between motivation to education and expectations in relation to the labour market is clear. Thus, further actions to increase parents' employability through vocational and educational training targeting adults enabling them to develop and certify knowledge and skills are equally essential.

Limited access to recreational, cultural, sports activities:

Article 31 of the UNCRC recognizes the child's right to rest, leisure, play, recreational, cultural and artistic activities and encourages States parties to promote children's participation and to provide equal opportunities of access. Gurbeti children living in remote, isolated communities, with inappropriate housing/community conditions for rest and play cannot fully enjoy these rights. Communities should be planned not as mere dormitories but as inclusive spaces that contribute to the healthy physical and psychological development of its children.

Empowerment of Roma identity:

Inter-cultural approach is a principle enshrined in the EC common basic principles on Roma inclusion¹² which places an emphasis on inter-cultural learning and skills of the Roma themselves as well as on combating prejudices and stereotypes among the majority populations. The EU Framework for Roma Integration equally stresses the need for protecting fundamental rights combating discrimination and segregation as being essential for improving the situation of marginalized communities including Roma¹³.

The small percentage of Roma population in the overall population of Cyprus cannot serve as an argument to support the inexistence of policies that nurture the culture of minority groups. Flagging inclusive social policies from which all citizens of Cyprus can benefit seems to be a cover for a lack of commitment to work closely and understand the particular needs of Roma communities. Inclusive educational programmes that promote the integration of Roma children must not be devoid of activities that disseminate a positive image of the Roma culture and traditions in school context, in the community, in the wider society. Regarding the issue of anti-discrimination, the EC recommends the implementation of awareness-raising campaigns to promote Roma integration¹⁴

¹² EC (2009) *The 10 common basic principles on Roma inclusion*

¹³ EPSCO Council conclusions on an EU Framework for Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 , <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?l=EN&f=ST%2010658%202011%20INIT>

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_country_factsheets_2014/cyprus_en.pdf



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Participation in decision making:

Finally, though a number of formal mechanisms exist to support and engage children and young people in decision making in matters affecting their lives, no evidence was found of Roma children and youth's access and information about those. It is thus recommend an implementation of systematic monitoring of Roma access and participation in such mechanisms and the implementation of activities that support their effective participation in accordance to Article 12 of the UNCRC that urges States Parties to assure every child's right to express his/her own views freely and being given due weight.

"Hope For Children" UNCRC Policy Center,
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PEER

Participation, Experiences and
Empowerment for Roma Youth

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