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## **Ensure Member States include Roma in emergency pandemic measures funded through the ‘Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative.’**

Dear Commissioner Dalli,

The nine undersigned civil society organisations would like to express our appreciation of your message of social solidarity on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In particular we applaud your comments related to mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 crisis for minority groups, and noting that many Roma communities “lack basic hygiene and sanitary infrastructure, and even access to water.”

Regular hand-washing, the crucial act individuals can take to slow the spread of the virus, requires that everybody has access to clean water. Research conducted by the European Roma Rights Centre, covering six EU Member States, found that even where safe water supply and sanitation services were available to non-Roma households, systemic discrimination meant that Roma were often denied such services. On the evidence of the report, Leo Heller, UN Special Rapporteur on Safe Water & Sanitation suggested, “that some European States have been failing to meet their well-established human rights obligations.”

The EU Roma Framework regrettably failed to make any significant impact on the appalling living conditions endured by hundreds of thousands of Roma living in segregated and overcrowded settlements and camps, often located in close proximity to toxic dumps, or on remote sites without basic infrastructure. In these conditions, which weaken immune systems in young and old, the challenges for communities to access treatment, protect themselves and self-isolate are formidable.

Now that Europe has become the epicentre of the pandemic, with more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined, it is imperative that marginalised and vulnerable communities, living in precarious conditions across the continent, are not left out of national policy responses to contain the spread of this virus. While we have heard of some heartening initiatives in recent days, we are also receiving disturbing reports of extreme hardship and discriminatory measures taken against marginalised Roma communities. We echo the call from the Council of Europe that governments “remain vigilant against racist, xenophobic or stigmatising acts”.

We applaud the European Commission proposal to allow Member States (MS) to request financial assistance in their fight against COVID-19 through the “Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative”, passed in the European Parliament on Thursday 26 March. While we appreciate the EU measures to mobilize all existing budget resources to help MS, we call on the Commission to do all within its remit to ensure that in using these funds, MS explicitly identify and address the needs of the most marginalized members of society.

At a minimum, MS must commit to ensuring that every person has access to clean water. We ask the Commission to call on MS, as they draw down EU funds to respond to the crisis, to ensure that the needs and the rights of marginalized Roma communities are fully taken into account, and to guard against any additional hardships occasioned by emergency measures. Many Roma often rely on insecure and informal employment and are now facing increased financial insecurity during containment measures across Europe. We ask that it is ensured that MS include these Roma, and other racialized minorities and refugees in similar situations, in any financial alleviation measures which are implemented. Further, that MS strive to ensure that residents of segregated settlements receive reliable information, all necessary treatment, educational materials, services and support in this time of extreme and shared vulnerability. MS when implementing EU funded measures to introduce distance-learning education must ensure that Roma children in particular do not fall further behind in education. We suggest that in order to assess the specific needs of Roma, and other similar marginalised communities, MS should form crisis groups which involve local Roma civil society and Roma experts. These groups can be consulted on the funding needs for ensuring equal treatment for these communities in emergency responses which are implemented by MS using EU structural funds. In the long-term, MS should strive to upgrade ethnically segregated settlements

and neighbourhoods, for Roma and other racialized minorities, and connect them with infrastructure.

We thank you for your solidarity, and appreciate your steadfast commitment to combat antigypsyism and all forms of racism, especially in this time of unprecedented crisis.

Yours sincerely,

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