

EUROPEAN ROMA GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS (ERGO) NETWORK

Research Thematic Focus 2023

Roma access to quality and affordable housing in Türkiye

Zero Discrimination Association was founded in Istanbul in 2009 by a group of activists and volunteers to improve the lives of disadvantaged groups, especially Roma and communities sharing similar disadvantages. Embracing a rights-based approach the association strives to strengthen social cohesion and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups. It also advocates for their rights. In cooperation with other civil society organizations ZDA carries out activities to improve dialogue between public institutions, Roma CSOs, and Roma communities to prevent rights violations and discrimination experienced by disadvantaged groups, especially Roma and communities living like Roma. ZDA operates in 34 localities in Türkiye to support Roma groups and other disadvantaged communities to access and use their fundamental rights.

✓ ***Where do most Roma in your country live?***

The Roma community in Türkiye, is not concentrated in a specific region but is dispersed throughout the country. However, there are some cities and regions where Roma communities are more prominent or have historical roots. In general terms Roms live in the western parts, Loms live in the northeastern parts, Doms live in the southeastern parts and Abdals live in the central and southeastern parts of Türkiye. Most live in urban areas during the year. However, during spring and summer, some in the south and southeastern parts migrate to other parts of Türkiye to engage in seasonal agricultural work. The housing situation of Roma is not uniform. Some live in the houses they own and some rent their houses. There are some who do not have title deeds or land registries. Many have built homes on the lands owned by the governments, however by paying a fee called “ecrimisil” (compensation for unauthorized use) to the government they make their housing semi-official. Those houses on government land are connected to the grid and water network like others.

✓ ***Roma homelessness***

There is no apparent Roma homelessness in Türkiye. Those who cannot afford housing cohabit with their immediate families and share the costs. Parents living with their married adult children and with their families are common. There are instances that three or four nuclear families live in the same house. In Edirne, for example, building a room adjacent to the house for the newlywed family members are common practice.

✓ ***Living conditions of the Roma***

The situation regarding access to utilities, housing conditions, and living conditions for the Roma community in Türkiye varies widely depending on their specific location, socio-economic status, and the level of municipality support and intervention. There are few who live in building projects implemented by the government. While the housing standards are adequate, the living space was not designed taking into account the practices of Roma. Very few live in good houses at the standards of middle-income households in Türkiye.

The majority live in substandard housing with issues such as overcrowding, mold, damp walls, leaking roofs, no window sills, and darkness. Nearly all are connected to the water network and electricity grid. However, as they face problems in paying the utility bills, sometimes they encounter problems such as cutting electricity. It is important to note that some houses do not have kitchens or toilets inside the house. Some have water in the courtyard of the house, others' toilets are built in a separate shack in the gardens of the houses. A limited number of municipalities and local authorities have been proactive in solving the housing problems of the Roma. There are some good examples of urban renewal in situ or house renovations and retrofitting. However, these initiatives unfortunately do not represent general tendency.

✓ ***Segregation and informal settlements***

Most of the Roma live in urban areas. Roma live in neighborhoods where their relatives, kins, and friends live. Roma in general live in neighborhoods where inhabitants are predominantly Roma. Many of the neighborhoods are not 100% Roma. Roma share their neighborhoods with other groups sharing similar disadvantages, especially with no/little-education and no/little-assets groups. The infrastructure in these neighborhoods and the municipality services are somewhat poorer compared to the neighbourhoods where middle-income groups reside.

✓ ***Affordability of housing***

Lately, housing prices have gone up so much in Türkiye. Both low and middle-income groups. Roma, who mostly depend on precarious work for their livelihoods find it hard to meet housing costs and pay utility bills. Increasing the number of cohabitating families in the household has been one of the coping mechanisms lately. Furthermore, faced with increasing housing costs, some families have been discussing returning to old ways and camping in tents. Energy poverty is prevalent and they depend on coal distributions of the government to heat their houses in the winter.

✓ ***Forced evictions***

There have been instances of forced evictions for those who do not have a deed or occupy land of the government/municipality or others. Before evictions all are given notice, however providing alternative housing has been problematic at times. Providing alternative housing mostly depends on the practices of local authorities in situ. Recently these evictions have been individual practice. However, in the near past whole neighbourhoods had been displaced in the name of urban renewal and were forced to relocate.

✓ ***Housing market – what can be done?***

Social housing in Türkiye is quite limited. Nearly, non-existent. There are housing construction projects implemented by the government for low-income groups. There have been some initiatives for the construction of building projects covering Roma neighborhoods.

Urban renewal has emerged as a prominent policy focus in recent times. In the recent past, there were examples of displacement of neighborhoods. A famous example is Sulukule in Istanbul. Presently, the neighborhoods inhabited by the Roma community have garnered increased attention due to the evolving urban landscape, making them attractive and valuable locations. This heightened desirability brings forth the looming challenge of gentrification.

Nevertheless, there are municipalities that are discussing a more inclusive approach to urban renewal, wherein communities residing in areas undergoing transformation are to remain in their existing locations. This 'urban renewal in situ' principle promotes social inclusivity and continuity.

It is imperative that all municipalities consider and embrace this principle of 'urban renewal in situ' to ensure equitable urban development and safeguard the integrity of communities affected by renewal efforts.

It is crucial to acknowledge that numerous Roma neighborhoods have been affected and damaged by earthquakes, particularly in regions such as Adiyaman and Hatay. Roma affected by the recent earthquakes find it impossible to repair the damages to their houses even in the cases where degrees of damages were classified as low. The process of reconstruction is currently underway, and there are ongoing discussions about the possibility of relocating entire cities to safer areas. In the event of such a relocation, it is imperative to ensure that the unique locational positions of Roma neighborhoods are preserved and considered.

If the decision is made to reconstruct these communities in their existing locations, it is of utmost importance that the reconstruction efforts prioritize improving and enhancing the safety and quality of life for Roma residents. This should be done by taking into account the specific characteristics and needs of the Roma population.

In any scenario, whether reconstruction occurs on the same site or in a different location, it is essential to engage with the Roma community, seek their input, and tailor the reconstruction plans to create safer and more sustainable living environments that respect and reflect their cultural and social context.

✓ ***Conclusion and recommendations***

Implementation of Housing Improvement Programs:

- Establish and fund housing improvement programs that provide financial assistance and resources for the renovation and repair of Roma households' living spaces.
- Promote community engagement in the design and implementation of these programs to ensure they meet the specific needs of the Roma population.

In-Situ Urban Renewal:

- Encourage in-situ urban renewal approaches that allow Roma communities to remain in their existing neighborhoods while improving housing conditions and infrastructure.
- Provide technical and financial support to municipalities adopting this approach and share best practices.

Affordable Housing Initiatives:

- Develop affordable housing initiatives that target low-income Roma households, providing them with access to safe, decent, and affordable housing.
- Offer subsidies, or low-interest loans to make housing more affordable for Roma families.

- Encourage active involvement of the Roma community in shaping and executing affordable housing programs to make certain that these initiatives align closely with their unique requirements and aspirations.

Access to Clean Water and Electricity:

- Implement assistance programs that provide subsidies or direct financial aid to low-income Roma households to help cover the costs of clean water and electricity bills.
- Improve infrastructure in Roma neighborhoods to ensure reliable access to these essential utilities.

Education and Training:

- Offer vocational training and education programs that empower Roma individuals with construction and maintenance skills, enabling them to contribute to housing improvements in their communities.
- Collaborate with NGOs and vocational institutions to provide relevant training.

Cultural Competency Training:

- Provide cultural competency training to housing professionals and policymakers to ensure that housing initiatives are culturally sensitive and inclusive of Roma traditions and lifestyles.

Rebuilding and Renovation Funds:

- Implement financial support schemes for the Roma with low income and low education levels to repair their houses to achieve appropriate living conditions.