



EUROPEAN ROMA GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS (ERGO) NETWORK

Ending Roma¹ Poverty in Europe

The **European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network** is a coalition of national and local Roma and pro-Roma civil society organisations, working across Europe to combat antigypsyism and to promote social inclusion, human rights, and equality for Roma communities. We build the capacity of grassroots Roma organisations, empower Roma communities, and advocate for inclusive and participatory policy-making at national and EU levels.

This position paper is our contribution to the ongoing debate at national and European level regarding **combatting Roma poverty and social exclusion in Europe**, as well as a submission to the European Commission's forthcoming first-ever **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy (APS)**. The paper outlines how anti-poverty policy efforts must explicitly and robustly address the specific challenges faced by Roma, in order to deliver on their potential to be transformative instruments.

¹ The umbrella term "Roma" encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.), in accordance with terminology used by the [European Commission](#).



Setting the scene – Roma poverty in Europe

Poverty remains overwhelmingly prevalent among Roma across Europe. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), **three out of four Roma (70 %) are at risk of poverty**, compared to an EU average of 16%. In seven EU Member States, more than 88% of Roma live below national poverty thresholds, a figure over 95% in countries like Ireland or Italy. More than 17% of Roma live in **households without tap water**, and 83% in accommodation that does not have enough rooms for the people living in it (over crowdedness).

Around **77% of Roma children** live in households at risk of poverty, and 40% of Roma children live in households with **severe material deprivation**. Just 53% of Roma children attend early childhood education, and only 32% of Roma aged 20–24 have completed at least upper secondary education. **Youth exclusion** is particularly acute, with 47% of Roma aged 16–24 not in employment, education, or training (NEET), compared to 9% in the general population.

Only 53% of working-age Roma are in **paid employment**, with the participation of Roma women as low as around 20% in some countries. **Health disparities** are severe: life expectancy among Roma is estimated to be 7–8 years shorter than the national average in many EU countries, and every one in four Roma (26%) is not covered by national health insurance. Every third Roma (31%) reports experiencing **antigypsyism** in daily interactions

These figures paint a stark picture of **structural, ongoing, inter-generational exclusion**. Despite some progress in the EU and National Roma frameworks, the reality for many Roma remains one of **chronic poverty, marginalisation, and limited access to basic rights** and services. Moreover, the poverty experienced by many Roma in Europe is **not only widespread but also deep**, as their living standards and material deprivation reflect conditions that meet the definition of **absolute poverty** (lack of access to food, shelter, and basic services).

An Anti-Poverty Strategy rooted in fundamental rights

Poverty is not merely an economic inconvenience or a barrier to growth, it is a systemic injustice which stems from an **economic model that prioritises accumulation over redistribution**. By focusing on economic growth indicators such as GDP and labour productivity, this model ignores structural inequality and sacrifices social justice for efficiency and competitiveness.

This paradigm has historically relied on, and perpetuated, forms of social hierarchy and exclusion, including **racism, classism, and gender inequality**, to legitimise disparities. In the case of the Roma, **antigypsyism has long served as a tool to justify systemic exclusion**, positioning them as "outsiders", undeserving of equal access. These discriminatory narratives are not inevitable side-effects, instead they are woven into the logic of a development approach that needs scapegoats and stratification to secure cheap labour, and to maintain exclusive control over power and resources.

Poverty is, therefore, **not the result of individual failure** or temporary crisis, but the product of sustained policy choices that reinforce structural inequalities not by accident, but by design. For the Roma, structural and intersectional discrimination, particularly **antigypsyism, is a direct driver of Roma (and other) poverty**, resulting in:

- Limited take-up of social protection entitlements
- Exclusion from adequate housing and basic infrastructure
- Barriers to accessing quality healthcare
- Segregated and substandard education
- Discrimination in the labour market
- Lack of access to digital, social, and public services
- Limited civic and political participation
- Curtailed access to rights and justice.

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy must establish **concrete synergies with the Union of Equality** and its thematic strategies for key vulnerable groups, chiefly among them the **EU Roma Strategic Framework** and the **EU Anti-Racism Action Plan**. This is critical to ensure anti-poverty efforts are rooted in racial justice, intersectionality, and fundamental rights.

The EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Participation, and Inclusion already contains a **Roma poverty reduction target**, of “cutting poverty among Roma by at least 50% by 2030”. This target must be **fully embedded into the EU and national Anti-Poverty Strategies**, with clear monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and a feeding in – feeding out dynamics. The Strategy should support **improved data collection, disaggregated by ethnicity**, gender, age, disability, and other grounds, which is essential to inform targeted policymaking and monitor progress effectively.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy must, furthermore, include a strong **acknowledgement of the role of racism (antigypsyism)** and intersectional discrimination in generating and perpetuating the poverty of Roma and other racialised communities and vulnerable groups, as well as feature **specific, concrete actions to address it**, as part of broader poverty prevention and reduction strategies. Any anti-poverty policy effort must go beyond mitigation and **commit to tackling the root causes of poverty**, particularly those embedded in structural racism and wilfully perpetuated economic inequality.

Elements of combatting Roma poverty

To effectively address Roma poverty, and poverty in general, policy responses should take inspiration from the principle of **Active Inclusion**, as outlined in the European Commission's 2008 Recommendation. This approach calls for a comprehensive strategy, combining **adequate income support, inclusive labour markets, and access to quality services**. There is no silver bullet solution to Roma poverty, and tackling it requires more than isolated interventions. Fragmented efforts – e.g., focusing on employment without addressing housing, or improving education while ignoring systemic discrimination – will fail. A successful Anti-Poverty Strategy must adopt a **wrap-around model of support**, addressing the interlinked barriers Roma face. We list below the main elements of such an approach, which must all be **underpinned by strong anti-discrimination safeguards** and the **active involvement of Roma communities**.

Social Protection

Benefits currently provided to many Roma are **insufficient to ensure a dignified standard of living**, as their amounts are often outdated and not aligned with factors such as inflation, purchasing power, or national poverty lines. To effectively reduce poverty, these benefits must be **increased and grounded in a rights-based approach** that prioritizes inclusion, rather than the use of punitive policies with harsh conditionalities and sanctions, which deter people from accessing needed aid, and fail to address the root causes of poverty.

The application processes for minimum income schemes are often **complex, bureaucratic, and costly**, creating significant barriers for marginalized groups like the Roma. Public Employment Services, which play a key role in distributing social benefits, also need urgent investment in **sufficient staff and the necessary training** to support vulnerable applicants. **Roma mediators** can also assist public services to better serve Roma claimants and improve take-up.

Stigma and antigypsyism further marginalize Roma benefit recipients, reinforcing harmful stereotypes that blame individuals for their poverty and discourage solidarity. Combating these prejudices requires a shift in societal attitudes and policies toward mutual support and inclusion. Stronger EU action, such as a **Framework Directive for Adequate Minimum Income**, could provide the necessary impetus for Member States to reform social protection systems.

Housing

Roma communities face disproportionately **poor living conditions**, with many residing in **informal settlements or segregated areas** that lack basic service infrastructure and are often exposed to environmental hazards. Most Roma houses are built from poor-quality materials that do not provide proper insulation, protection from weather, or safety, and are plagued by the lack of utilities and over-crowdedness. These **substandard housing situations** frequently do not meet the United Nations' definition of adequate housing, effectively rendering a significant portion of the Roma population **homeless**, according to FEANTSA's [*ETHOS*](#) criteria.

The **high cost of housing and utilities** further restrict Roma access to quality and secure accommodation. Another deterrent are bureaucratic requirements of ID papers or proof of fixed addresses. **Antigypsyism and discrimination** are rampant, from landlords, neighbours, sellers, banks, and local authorities, and it often manifests as **forced evictions** without proper notice or the provision of decent alternative housing.

Good quality, affordable housing is a key component of anti-poverty strategies, as it provides stability, security, and a foundation for improving other areas of life, such as health and education. **Social housing**, if expanded and anchored in a **rights-based, housing-first approach**, can play a crucial role in reducing Roma housing and energy poverty. Conversely, relying on market solutions for housing and energy needs **will not reach vulnerable consumers** like the Roma.

Healthcare

Good health is a fundamental human right and a critical enabler of escaping poverty – but for Roma communities, **poor health is a symptom and a driver of systemic exclusion**. Social determinants – such as substandard housing, exposure to environmental hazards, poor nutrition, unsafe working conditions, and chronic material deprivation – severely impact Roma health outcomes and their ability to access much-needed healthcare services. Tackling Roma poverty must include investments in **improving the Roma state of health** and their access to care.

Barriers to healthcare also directly reinforce poverty: **high out-of-pocket costs**, long-term care fees, and patchy health insurance coverage deter many Roma from seeking care, especially specialist services. **Ensuring universal health coverage** and making healthcare and long-term-care free or affordable at the point of use are essential anti-poverty interventions.

Additionally, **healthcare infrastructure in rural and remote Roma communities** is often insufficient, with shortages of facilities and qualified medical staff. Investments are needed to expand healthcare services closer to where Roma people live. Last but not least, Roma in Europe face **widespread antigypsyism within health systems**, which further erodes trust in public institutions, and requires solid anti-bias training for staff and strong anti-discrimination laws.

Education

Education must be understood as **far more than skills for the labour market**, as a foundation for personal development, critical thinking, active citizenship, and social participation. It is also a **powerful tool to break the cycle of Roma poverty**, which for many begins at birth, as access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) remains limited. In the absence of equal access to inclusive, quality mainstream education, this cycle is reproduced across generations.

At the moment, the educational system itself **exacerbates, rather than alleviates, poverty and exclusion**, through damaging practices such as segregated schooling, the disproportionate placement of Roma children in special-needs education, and a lack of language and learning support, leading to unequal educational outcomes. Schools also frequently penalise Roma students for conditions tied to poverty – such as inadequate housing, digital exclusion, or the need to support family income. These practices deprive **Roma of the skills, qualifications, and confidence** needed to access decent employment and to meaningfully contribute to society.

If education is to truly serve as a ladder out of poverty, it must feature **in-build support to overcome financial and non-financial barriers** for vulnerable learners, go beyond abolishing discriminatory practices towards **actively promoting diversity**, as well as include second-chance education opportunities and **flexible lifelong learning options** for Roma adults. Investing in **upskilling and professional training remains important**, especially in the context of the green and digital transitions, but cannot be the starting point, nor the only focus.

Employment

Employment alone cannot solve Roma poverty, but access to quality, secure, and dignified jobs **can be a powerful lever in a broader anti-poverty toolbox** that recognises not everyone can or should be expected to work. At the moment, a majority of Roma are **not in paid work**, and those who are often face precarious and exploitative conditions. Structural barriers include pervasive antigypsyism in hiring practices, discriminatory workplace cultures, and limited access to education and training. Many Roma workers are **pushed into the informal economy**, rely on traditional crafts, or are compelled to seek work abroad.

Urgent and significant investment is needed in **integrated, personalised, supportive pathways approaches** for the Roma who are able to work, so that they can access **quality, sustainable employment**. This cannot be an *employment-first* approach and must offer adequate income support, as well as enabling services such as childcare and long-term care for dependents, access to decent housing, social support and debt counselling, and relevant skills training among others. **Public Employment Services must be better equipped**, with adequate resources, staffing, and anti-bias training to support Roma jobseekers effectively.

Upcoming EU and national **definitions of job quality** must include fair pay (including the elimination of the ethnic pay gap), contractual security, employment rights, good working conditions, trade union representation, and access to training and progression. **Tackling discrimination in employment** must go beyond symbolic gestures, instead it should entail stronger anti-discrimination laws, robust enforcement, employer training, and broad public awareness campaigns. **Social economy models and Roma social entrepreneurship** also offer promising avenues for sustainable, dignified employment – and must be adequately supported.

Cross-cutting considerations and implementation

Effective approaches to tackling poverty are those that are integrated and grounded in a **rights-based framework**, following comprehensive, **lifecycle, integrated interventions** such as those outlined in the EU's 2008 Active Inclusion Recommendation. Success comes from **community-led, person-centred strategies** that recognize individuals as rights-holders, not passive recipients of aid. These strategies are most impactful when they include **targeted measures for structurally excluded groups**, such as Europe's Roma, and when they actively incorporate broad anti-discrimination actions, including efforts to **combat antigypsyism**.

In contrast, policies will fail to produce meaningful change if they only frame poverty as an issue of economic efficiency rather than **redistributive justice**, overlooking its deeply rooted social and structural dimensions. Generic, **one-size-fits-all approaches will miss the mark** by ignoring the specific barriers faced by marginalized groups, including racialised communities such as the Roma. Equally ineffective are measures that dismiss or deny the role of **racism and antigypsyism as fundamental drivers of poverty**, thereby perpetuating exclusion.

We highlight the importance of **integrating Distributional Impact Assessments** into anti-poverty policy-making as a powerful tool to identify how different initiatives impact diverse groups (including ethnic minorities such as the Roma) and to address persistent gaps in social cohesion. Such impact assessments must also account for **systemic discrimination as a barrier to rights, resources, and services**, especially for already deeply impoverished Roma communities, where experiences of daily antigypsyism and classism remain widespread. To make real progress, Member States must invest in social infrastructure through **progressive taxation and embrace a redistributive approach** that reduces social and income polarisation.

Anti-poverty policies, including the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and its national equivalents, must go beyond consultation and ensure the creation of **structured and well-resourced partnerships with Roma civil society organisations**, particularly at the national and local levels where policies have direct impact. These partnerships contribute invaluable lived experience, cultural insight, and grassroots knowledge to help **design, deliver, and monitor policies**, making them not only more effective, but also more just and sustainable.

Moreover, **involving Roma individuals with direct experience of poverty** ensures that policies reflect real needs, barriers, and opportunities as seen from the ground. Without their input, anti-poverty measures risk being **out of touch, top-down, or even harmful in practice**. To achieve this, governments should institutionalise mechanisms for **participatory policymaking and co-decision-making processes**, backed by adequate funding and capacity-building, recognising that equal participation cannot happen without addressing power imbalances and ensuring Roma voices are heard on equal footing.

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy must include **ambitious targets with clear and monitorable indicators**, further disaggregated by key population groups, including **specific sub-targets for Roma**, in line with and reinforcing the **existing Roma poverty-reduction goal** in the EU Roma Strategic Framework. Member States must adopt corresponding **national anti-poverty targets** that translate EU-level objectives into measurable national commitments. These should be accompanied by **national anti-poverty platforms** - inclusive, multi-stakeholder bodies that involve beneficiaries, including Roma, and their civil society representatives.

Moreover, the Strategy must be fully embedded in the **revised European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** and integrated into the governance processes of the **European Semester** and the **Social Convergence Framework**, and through the issuance of **Country-Specific Recommendations**. This is essential to ensure that anti-poverty measures drive progress across all relevant policy areas. To enable effective implementation, there must also be **dedicated, ringfenced funding** within the structure of the **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)**.

Recommendations

1. **Acknowledge and address the structural nature of poverty**, especially the role of systemic racism, antigypsyism, and economic injustice in perpetuating deprivation cycles.
2. **Promote inclusive, rights-based, lifecycle, and person-centred approaches** to poverty reduction, that value beneficiaries as rights-holders, not passive recipients of aid.
3. **Embed the Roma poverty-reduction target of the EU Roma Strategic Framework**, namely cutting Roma poverty by at least 50% by 2030, into the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.
4. **Mainstream anti-racism and antigypsyism prevention** across all actions of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, recognising intersectional discrimination as a key driver of poverty.
5. **Ensure systematic collection of disaggregated data**, particularly by ethnicity, gender, age, and disability, in full respect of data protection principles, to inform targeted, rights-based policymaking and track disparities effectively.
6. **Ensure equal, effective, and supportive access for Roma** to adequate social protection, quality housing, education, healthcare and long-term care, employment, as well as basic, social, and digital services, as key pillars of sustainable poverty reduction.
7. **Integrate Distributional Impact Assessments (DIAs)** into all stages of the policy cycle to ensure anti-poverty measures address inequality, identify who benefits or is left behind, and mitigate the impact of structural and intersectional discrimination.
8. **Support Roma-led initiatives and social economy projects** as part of poverty prevention strategies, fostering empowerment, resilience, and community development.
9. **Embed the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy in the European Semester**, ensuring it drives coordinated policy progress, with **ringfenced funding in the next Multiannual Financial Framework** (MFF) for effective implementation.
10. **Guarantee meaningful, well-resourced participation of Roma civil society organisations** and individuals with lived experience of poverty in all stages of the Anti-Poverty Strategy (design, implementation, monitoring) at national and EU level.

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