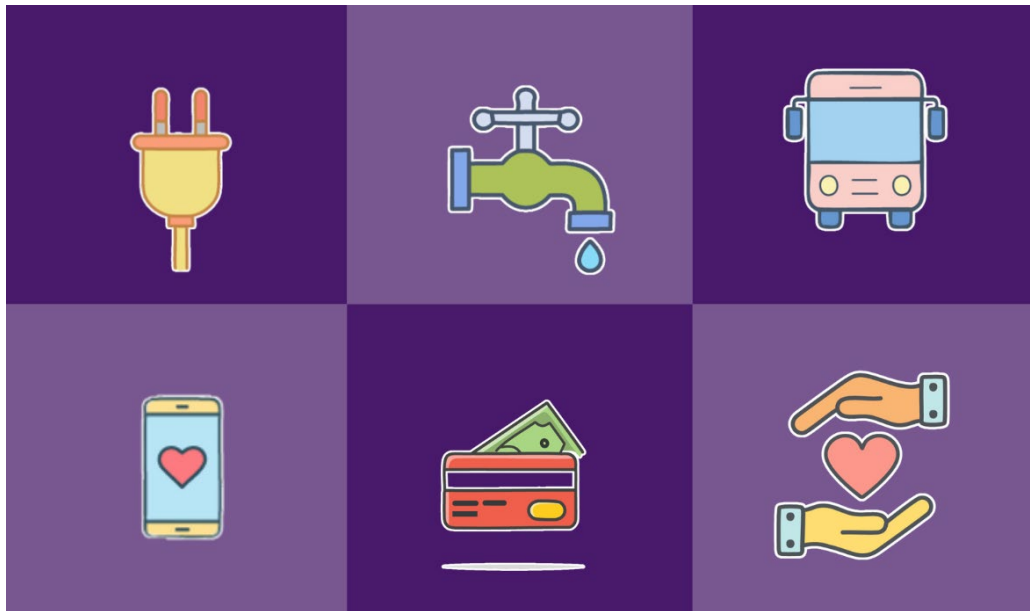




EUROPEAN ROMA GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS (ERGO) NETWORK

Roma¹ access to quality, affordable, and inclusive essential and social services in Europe



The Roma are Europe's largest minority ethnic group, with 12 million people living in Europe and roughly 6 million in the European Union. According to the Fundamental Rights Agency, over 80% of the latter experience poverty and social exclusion (with rates as high as 98% in some countries), while only 43% are in paid employment, and 25% experience antigypsyism on a daily basis. Against this backdrop, the Roma face multiple obstacles in accessing good quality, affordable essential and social services, despite being among the key groups most needing this support, in order to unlock equal opportunities for themselves and their families.

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](#).



On 18 June 2023, the European Commission published a comprehensive and long-awaited [report on access to services](#), aimed at supporting the delivery of Principle 20 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), which refers to access to *essential services* such as **water, sanitation, energy, banking services, and digital communications**. The Mission Letter to Executive Vice-President Roxana Mînzatu lists a call for her to “lead the work on the first-ever EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, aimed at helping people to access the essential protections and services they need and addressing the root causes of poverty.” (our underlining).

In the interpretation of the European Commission, this work will also cover access to **social services**, understood as a **range of services providing personal care and support to people**, such as, inter alia, social work, counselling, coaching, mentoring, psychological support, rehabilitation and other general enabling services, including early childhood education and care, healthcare, long-term care, education and training, and housing.

This policy paper aims to review the afore-mentioned European Commission report from a Roma inclusion perspective, as well as to **formulate policy recommendations in what concerns access to both essential and social services** for one of Europe’s most vulnerable communities. It is also part of advocacy in the framework of our efforts to ensure that the upcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy does not leave the Roma behind. We have consistently advocated for **more and better access to services, including digital services, for the Roma**, as a fundamental pre-requisite to thrive, achieve equality, and participate in society and in the labour market.

ERGO Network warmly welcomes the European Commission report on access to essential services as comprehensive, thorough analysis of the barriers that remain to accessing these services. We particularly appreciate **a keen focus on the Roma and their specific plight**, which is echoed fairly consistently throughout the different sections of the text. While they are not named under every section, **all the main findings of the report are valid for Roma users**: affordability, lack of skills, and insufficient infrastructure, as detailed below.

While **access to services across the EU is not as smooth as it could be** for most users, it is very positive that the report repeatedly acknowledges that it is **further complicated for vulnerable ones, such as the Roma**. For example, the text quotes data from the Fundamental Rights Agency, showing that **one out of five Roma (20%) lives in a household that has no tap water** inside the dwelling, while only 1.5% of the EU population lives without basic sanitary facilities such as a bath, shower, or flushing toilet. FRA data also shows, though the report does not include this, that **46% of Roma have no indoor toilet**, shower or bathroom, and one in ten Roma live in housing without electricity.

In this context, we appreciate the **explicit mention of the EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion, and Participation** (and associated Council Recommendation), and its EU-level target of at least 95% of Roma having access to tap water by 2030. However, this is the only reference to the Strategic Framework, which is a tremendous **missed opportunity to have built fruitful synergies** with other key provisions and targets of the document, related to **the fight against Roma poverty** and objectives to **improve Roma health and housing**, for instance.

The report quotes some **positive practices from the Member States** level to facilitate access to drinking water and to sanitation for people experiencing poverty and vulnerability, including the Roma, relying also on the European Commission's 2023 assessment report of the National Roma Strategic Frameworks. These include **provision of public toilets or showers**, or of **drinking water and sanitation at halting sites** for Travellers in France, or an ERDF co-funded project in Slovakia to ensure drinking water in marginalised Roma communities. However welcome, these **punctual initiatives do not solve structural barriers** to access.

The report correctly identifies **affordability as a significant barrier for the Roma** to benefit from a wide range of essential and social services, including basic utilities, as they experience very high rates of monetary poverty and extremely limited disposable income, if any at all. **Energy poverty is particularly rampant**, given recent spikes in international fuel prices as well as the fact that most Roma housing is profoundly inadequate to withstand the cold, requiring constant heating.

As noted, access to water and sanitation is also impacted by poverty and an inability to pay for provision – and this is **the same for digital services** in what concerns the ability to undertake a subscription or to purchase the necessary equipment. In addition to the price of services themselves, the report stresses that lack of funds is also apparent in **associated costs, such as those for travel** to where the services are, for example to access banking, internet, postal, or social services – including employment services or social protection or social security offices.

The report also accurately describes another key obstacle that the Roma face in accessing essential services, which is the **lack of existing services in remote, rural, and isolated areas**, including the segregated and informal communities where many Roma live. This means **absence of infrastructure** to connect to utilities or of network coverage, as well as non-existing social, financial, cultural, or other essential and support services. Although not quoted in the text, the Fundamental Rights Agency found every fourth Roma and Traveller in five countries surveyed does not have a bank account, a percentage much higher than in the general population.

As there are **no proximity services where they live**, and these are often located at a significant distance from Roma communities, residents are forced to undertake **expensive, lengthy journeys** to the nearest service provider. However, as pointed out in the report, **transport is in itself a key service** that vulnerable users such as the Roma struggle to benefit from. Inability to afford transport costs was already covered above. In addition, **transport links with Roma settlements**, particularly informal ones, are often poor or non-existent. The report also spells out that mothers with children **do not feel safe on long journeys**, and older people and people with disabilities may find available options **physically inaccessible**.

In a world that is increasingly moving to the online space, the **digital divide** sees most Roma left **behind** on the losing side, as correctly indicated by the report. This reality is underpinned by the **inability to afford equipment and infrastructure**, as well as the **segregated and informal living conditions of most Roma**, both discussed above. To these findings of the text, which we endorse, we would add **low level of digital literacy among Roma**, also informed by the factors above.

An important barrier to using services – unfortunately not mentioned in the report – is the fact that, in some countries, **a significant number of Roma lack identity papers**. This is partly due to, as well as results in, a **lack of a legal address**. Without the **legalisation of Roma settlements** and the **formalisation of tenure rights** for the Roma, connecting the dwellings to utilities is not possible. A **fixed address is often a pre-requisite for identity papers**, which are in turn required in order to subscribe any service provision contract with any provider. Undocumented Roma are invisible in what concerns their entitlements to essential as well as social services.

However, **the most glaring oversight** of the European Commission report on access to essential services is its **failure to mention intersectional discrimination and stigma** as powerful deterrents from benefitting from these services for vulnerable communities. There is a **generalised negative perception of people experiencing poverty** across all European countries, which is then doubled if we are talking about communities who also experience other kinds of **discriminatory attitudes such as racism – including antigypsyism** –, sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, among other. These attitudes range from **disrespectful language and behaviour** by service providers and other service users (including slurs), to **substandard provision**, or even flat-out **denial of services**.

Unfortunately, the **report only superficially mentions discrimination** three times, of which two concern the Roma directly. There is one sentence about being “possibly exposed to discrimination”, in the case of Roma and the people experiencing homelessness, which **impacts affordability** of services. Another sentence names **discrimination as a contributing factor** to accessibility barriers. Finally, a footnote about discrimination and antigypsyism acknowledges that they can **perpetuate Roma poverty and vulnerability**.

However, **discrimination is not mainstreamed throughout the report**, despite it impacting access to all six essential services covered, nor is it highlighted a key dimension for future policy intervention aimed at improving access to services for vulnerable users. **Racism is not referred to at all**, nor other specific types of discrimination, while **antigypsyism is mentioned once** in a footnote (as above). While this is welcome, it is **highly insufficient** to achieve change.

In what concerns **Roma access to social services**, the ERGO Network positioning builds on its research reports on Roma access to [health](#), [housing](#), [employment](#), and [minimum income](#), as well as on its policy papers on the [Child Guarantee](#), the [EU Care Strategy](#), [mental health](#), [social economy](#), and [access to digital education](#), among others. The **key messages** derived from these thematic analyses are **common across the different areas**, and they also **mirror the above-mentioned barriers** that the Roma face when trying to access essential services.

They can be summarised as follows:

- **Affordability.** Given the deep state of monetary poverty and material deprivation that most Roma live in, the cost of services (essential and other) is prohibitive.
- **Poor service coverage.** There is very limited availability of infrastructure and services in the remote, isolated areas where Roma live, often in segregated and informal settlements.
- **Antigypsyism.** The Roma continue to experience deeply-rooted antigypsyism from service providers and other service users, which deters many from seeking the support they need.
- **Untrained staff.** Non-Roma staff in service provision is ill-equipped to deal with the complex disadvantages and specific cultural background of the Roma.
- **Lack of identity papers.** Being undocumented and/or lacking a fixed address or legal residence makes it impossible for any Roma to engage with service providers.
- **Complex administration.** People experiencing poverty and disadvantage, some not knowing how to read or write, cannot comply with the needed bureaucracy for services.

In its analyses, the **European Commission accurately captures most of these challenges**, particularly those relating to affordability and availability in remote areas, as well as difficulty in navigating administrative procedures and accessing the right information. However, we feel that **antigypsyism and intersectional discrimination are not adequately taken up** in policy proposals meant to improve access to services for the most disadvantaged communities, such as the Roma. **Targeted measures** – such as hiring more Roma in service provision, hiring Roma mediators, providing much-needed anti-bias training for service providers – need to go hand in hand with **broader measures** aimed at combatting discrimination and racism in society at large.

Access to essential and social services is a **fundamental component and pre-requisite** for lifting people out of poverty and combatting material deprivation, as well as for raising work intensity. This should follow a **rights-based approach**, as people are entitled to dignified living conditions, as well as to a fulfilling life which includes participation in all aspects of society. Services should not be there simply to assist people into employment, but to **respond to fundamental human needs**. Access to adequate utilities is an integrant part of the concept of **quality housing**, while a wide array of other support services delivers on people's **social, cultural, and economic rights**.

Public service provision remains the last bastion against **the rapidly progressing commodification** of the common good, where the increased privatisation of services means that users can only purchase what they can afford on the free market – or go without. Such an approach runs **contrary to commitments to solidarity, social inclusion, and equality** for all, as for-profit service providers only operate commercially with a view to minimise gain, rather than improve lives. Only **the state has the necessary scope, resources, and administrative capacity** to implement large-scale, quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive service provision programmes that would **reach the most disadvantaged areas and the most disadvantaged users**.

The **digitalisation of services** has the potential to bring about undeniable opportunities for better and more targeted service delivery, addressing both affordability and accessibility. However, it also deepens pre-existing inequalities by excluding digitally unsavvy users, so **it should never be the only channel of provision**. For older users, users with a disability, or those lacking digital skills **analogue services should always be available** alongside digital options. Service providers should also pro-actively offer support for these users to navigate digital and bureaucratic difficulties – this responsibility cannot simply be externalised to vulnerable users to solve on their own.

Importantly, particularly in what concerns social services but not only, digital devices **will never be able to replace human interaction**. In a world where alienation and isolation are on the rise, service provision must remain **first and foremost a supportive act**. The human dimension is **essential for building trust** and providing a person-centred, tailored, considered solutions.

There are some **key opportunities to capitalise** on this subject in the next mandate of the European Commission, chiefly the new Action Plan of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, but also significant initiatives such as the first-ever **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, the Affordable Housing Plan**, and **other policy efforts** meant to support access to quality employment (including health and safety), digitalisation, long-term care, child poverty (and the Child Guarantee), initiatives pertaining to the development of **education**, skills, and lifelong learning, but also policy proposals concerning the **just transition**. The revision of the **Multi-Annual Financial Framework** is another opportunity to review support for quality, affordable, accessible, and inclusive service provision.

Last but not least, we hope to see **full synergies between the Union of Equality** and its composing strategies, including the EU Strategic Framework for Roma Equality, Inclusion, and Participation, **and key mainstream processes such as the European Semester** and the initiatives it monitors.

The design, implementation, and monitoring of policy interventions must be carried out with the **full involvement of those concerned**, from the grassroots to the European level. Efforts must be put in place (local, bottom-up participatory strategies; consultation protocols; adequate funding and capacity building) to **bring together Roma beneficiaries and service providers**, as well as their civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders.

We hope that European Commission efforts to improve access to essential and social services for all, particularly vulnerable users such as the Roma, will heed these calls for **the need to combat intersectional discrimination, including antigypsyism**, and to promote their **participation in the shaping of policies** that affect them. If the Roma are to reap the benefits of these initiatives, including in the framework of the upcoming EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, they must be **explicitly named and prioritised**, lest they are overlooked once again by mainstream policy interventions. ERGO Network and its members stand ready to support these efforts at national and EU level.

For ERGO Network's engagement with access to social and essential services, please contact

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