

COVID-19 does not discriminate; neither should we.

States' public health and recovery response to COVID-19 should not leave the Roma behind

In times of COVID-19, solidarity between neighbours and families, among communities and across borders is of the essence, since in an interconnected world our health and support systems are only as strong as their weakest link. Roma communities show their solidarity by sewing face masks and distributing food packages.

Yet, the daunting situation the Roma themselves face, confronted with the COVID-19 outbreak, exacerbates an already critical condition of inequality, with 80% of Roma women, men and children in the European Union living below their country's at-risk-of-poverty threshold.¹

One in three Roma children in the EU has no access to running water or health care, as many Roma live in segregated and overcrowded settlements. The simplest instruction to "wash your hands" becomes meaningless without access to clean water. Poor living conditions further prevent social distancing, and affect the immunity of young and old. In the absence of a computer, internet and sometimes even electricity, Roma children find themselves excluded from distance learning. Often not benefiting from social protection, extreme poverty thus looms large for many families relying on temporary, insecure or informal employment.

States have a responsibility to ensure that the human rights of the Roma are protected in the public health and recovery response to COVID-19. Tailored measures should include the provision of water, soap and sanitizer, food and medicine to communities that lack such access, a moratorium on forced evictions, income support to those in need, affordable, equitable access to internet services, and protective equipment for those who continue to work.

Sadly, the crisis situation caused by COVID-19 also illustrates how far removed the European Union still is from its stated objective of ending Roma discrimination and exclusion. Had more progress been made on the Sustainable Development Agenda and the EU Framework for Roma Inclusion, the Roma would not find themselves in such dire straits.

A fundamental paradigm shift is needed from policies that focus on the Roma as "a problem to be solved" to policies that uphold the human rights of the Roma and tackle the prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination that are holding them back. This is where the work on a new EU Roma Framework post-2020 acquires all its significance: as an opportunity to remedy the weaknesses of the current EU Framework, to hold States to account for making tangible progress, and to embed the human rights principles of participation, transparency, non-discrimination, so that the framework delivers for the Roma, who have been left behind for too long. COVID-19 does not discriminate; neither should we.

¹ [Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey](#)