

SENATE OF THE ITALIAN REPUBLIC



Special Committee for the protection and promotion of human rights

*Conclusions of the final report of an inquiry into the condition of
Roma, Sinti and Caminanti in Italy*

CONCLUSIONS

The completion of the inquiry by the Senate Special Committee for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights gives us some scope to offer a number of observations and introduce several proposals and ideas for action into the political and institutional debate.

As has been reiterated several times, the objective of the inquiry was not to paper over the diversity of political views on this difficult question, but, rather, to provide a common knowledge base to facilitate debate in Parliament and enable a more constructive exchange of views.

Naturally, any decision to acquire knowledge is in itself a political choice, all the more so in this case. The inquiry not only sought to interrupt a vicious circle in which ignorance and prejudice mutually feed off one another, but it also made us more deeply aware of certain realities. There are social realities and conditions that are so bad they may be tolerated only if we make a conscious decision not to look at them, only if we deliberately avert our gaze from the beggar children and from the spectacle of the camps on the outskirts of many of our cities.

Deciding to remove the veil of ignorance, explore the subject and establish the facts is the necessary first step without which it is impossible to frame any policy.

Italy is in need of a national-scale project that also draws on the knowledge available locally from the many observation points to be found throughout the country. Research methods and data collection need to be standardised and analysed on a systematic basis. Information thus gathered needs to be integrated with quantitative analyses and the appropriate qualitative studies so that a reliable national databank can be built. The accomplishment of the project also requires dialogue with the subjects themselves, as well as their direct involvement and participation. As we shall see further on, this participation is not spontaneously forthcoming and necessitates effort and training. This is the first proposal.

The second proposal relates to the development of a National Plan to deal with the Roma and Sinti question. The absence of any such plan has been criticised of late by the many international bodies that have been observing our country over the years and in recent months. The lack of a national strategy is also restricting access to and impeding the utilisation of European resources that are available for the purposes of promoting integration policies.

The term "National Plan" should not be allowed to give the misleading impression that the issue is amenable to a one-size-fits-all solution. Only pragmatic, diversified and concrete responses will lead us in the right direction, and they necessarily imply localised and decentralised solutions, and the taking on of direct responsibility by local authorities. To be viable, therefore, the National Plan will have to be based on a strategy of distributed responsibility that is capable of responding to diverse demands and requirements. Distributed responsibility must not be interpreted as signifying that each local authority will be left to cope on its own, and it must not lead to the available resources being left largely unused.

One possible positive step might be the formation of a national task force at the service of local authorities, non-governmental organisations and extant bodies representing the Roma/Sinti themselves. Such a task force could help turn ideas and goodwill into projects, see to technical and administrative planning and ensure the implementation of projects. Many European countries have already gone or are currently moving in this direction.

The third proposal relates to regularisation/legalisation. The report explores the theme in some

depth and looks carefully at the various different situations that exist. The most important point to note here relates to the recognition of the Italian citizenship of children who have been born and brought up in this country. Recognition of Italian citizenship is as necessary for the Roma/Sinti as it is for the hundreds of thousands of children and young people from other immigrant groups in Italy, perhaps even more so.

The fourth proposal has to do with policies.

Here there are two issues of great cultural and, above all, symbolic significance that call out for specific legislative action. It is our duty to make reparation to this people by remembering also the Roma victims of genocide on Memorial Day on 27 January.

Secondly, an amendment needs to be made to law no. 482 of 1999 recognising minority languages in Italy so as to include the Roma minority and their language, Romani. As was recently noted, it is absurd that the recognition of the existence of a Roma minority should exist only as a negative condition, notably in the documents produced by the Ministry of the Interior whose primary functions relate to matters of security.

These are symbolic considerations, but the exceptional importance of symbols should not be underestimated.

The first practical issue that needs addressing relates to Roma camps.

With very few exceptions, no other country in Europe has an analogous state of affairs to that of Italy. The camps are characterised by inhuman and degrading conditions, to borrow from the sort of terminology used in international conventions. The situation is irreconcilable with any programme of inclusion and integration, and creates a cruel environment of exclusion, the repercussions of which are then felt in the day-to-day life of our cities. Generation after generation is condemned to dwell in these rubbish dumps, home to an entire people of whom more than 40% are children under the age of 14.

It is necessary to initiate a programme for the gradual closing down of the camps, beginning with the most degraded, and to start providing housing that is both acceptable and accepted. That is to say, the solution must be based on open discussions and the exchange of views with the parties concerned. Luckily there are many diverse examples of good practice from which we may learn.

The second practical issue to address relates to children and schooling. Of the many efforts that have been made in this respect, the project of the Sant'Egido Community stands out. They seek to create incentives to encourage parents to send their children to compulsory schooling and operate a scholarship policy based on precise and strictly enforced rules. The involvement of the families is decisive, especially in the preschool years, which are so important for the process of socialisation and for preventing the formation and hardening of cultural handicaps. In particular, careful consideration needs to be given to the idea of the direct involvement in the educational process of mothers (who, it should be remembered, are often very young themselves).

The third practical issue relates to employment. Being identified as Roma is an impediment to finding work, even for those who have followed work training programmes that might have seemed to hold out some promise. Is it possible to envisage positive actions, i.e. incentives or disincentives, that might be a way of attenuating this discrimination?

Conversely, is it possible to accord a more legal and, at the same time, a more dignified character to

activities that already contribute to the income and survival of Roma families, such as those in the Capodichino camp of Naples who collect scrap iron and sell it at \$.13 a kilo (€130 a ton), and to waste collection and materials recycling activities as part of a system of differentiated waste management? Could a new law on travelling shows, beside addressing the problems of Sinti carnival operators, help recognise and regulate the work of street artists to the benefit of the artists themselves and citizens in general?

The other issue to which we would draw attention relates to participation in society. Needless to say, this is an absolutely essential condition, a necessary prerequisite. At the same time, it is also one of the most difficult questions.

At present, the Roma/Sinti associations appear to be extremely fragmented and torn by internal disputes between groups and factions. Even so, they constitute the only possible starting point for establishing contact and finding interlocutors.

The problem is how to invest in such a way that Roma and Sinti communities acquire social operators and cultural mediators who can stitch together a network on which a reasonably consistent system of social participation can be organised. This requires resources, but expenditure here will generate considerable savings in other fields such as welfare assistance and policing.

At the same time, these resources will have been invested not only in the future of the Roma people but also in the future of our own society, the future of Italy and Europe.

A survey carried out by the Italian Red Cross organisation involving 4,927 Roma and Sinti people in the camps of Rome made the disturbing finding that a mere 2.8% of the population is aged over 60 years of age. This points to a tragically short life expectancy and is well below the standards of our country. The same survey also revealed that over 40% of the Roma and Sinti population is made up of children under 14 years of age, a statistic that also indicates how many opportunities are available, and how it is therefore possible to entertain hopes for improvement.

We are pleased with our work and we hope that it will be accepted as a contribution to the debate on this subject.

Demagoguery and oversimplification aside, we recognise that this is a difficult issue that no one in Europe has been able to resolve, and that there are no easy solutions. It is an area in which one can proceed only by trial and error, and learn from experience.

For this reason, however, it is important for the political world to behave in a responsible manner, all the more so because this is one of the most unpopular issues with which we will have to deal.