



# Civil society monitoring report on implementation of the national Roma integration strategy in Belgium

*Assessing progress  
in key policy areas  
of the strategy*

**Prepared by:**

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on implementation  
of the national Roma integration strategy  
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTIRIS	Regional Employment Centre of Brussels
CIRE	Coordination and Initiatives for Refugees and Foreigners
CMGVR	Roma and Travellers Mediation Centre
CNE	National Employees Headquarters ( <i>Centrale Nationale des Employés</i> )
COCOF	Flemish Community Commission
COCOM	Communitarian Community Commission (Flemish-French speaking in Brussels)
CSC	Confederation of Christian Syndicates
ECSR	European Committee of Social Rights
EMA	Emergency Medical Assistance
ESF	European Social Fund
FGTB	General Belgian Work Federation
FHI	Flemish Housing Inspectorate
FOREM	Regional Employment Agency for Wallonia, the Walloon Office for Professional Training and Employment
GDRC	General Delegate for the Rights of the Child
NSRI	National Roma Integration Strategy
PCSA	Public Centre for Social Action
SWO	Social Welfare Offices (previously PCSA)
UNIA	Equal Opportunity Body
VDAB	Flemish Service for Employment and Vocational Training ( <i>Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding</i> )
VGC	Flemish Community Commission
VMSW	Flemish Agency for Social Housing



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The present document presents a civil society monitoring report of the Belgian strategy for Roma inclusion, focused on four central themes: housing, employment, healthcare and education. While the need for an integrated approach is also generally acknowledged in Belgian politics, it is clear that two policy approaches coexist: mainstreamed and targeted. In Wallonia (French speaking Belgium), the inclusion of minorities generally takes place in wider policies and measures connected to socio-economic poverty and exclusion. Integration policies are presented as inclusive, and hence built on the idea that “a poor person is a poor person”. Flanders, on the other hand, has developed separate policies and action plans targeting the Roma and Traveller minorities specifically.

### Employment

Overall, the Belgian NSRI on employment indicates a focus on Roma more than on Travellers: the measures developed or supported under the NSRI target Roma from Eastern and Central European countries. Back in 2012, the national NSRI focused on the training of social workers within Social Welfare Offices (SWO), but they only took place sparsely. However, more trainings have been organised by grassroots organisations such as CMGVR and Foyer. When it comes to the Roma employment in itself, grassroots organisations in all three regions of Belgium have launched projects focused on socio-professional integration, with different degrees of success. The NSRI also recommended that SWOs employ intercultural mediators. It seems that only the SWOs of Charleroi, Anderlecht and Brussels hired mediators of Roma background. In Flanders, specific projects of Roma mediation are developed in the cities of Sint-Niklaas, Ghent and Antwerp, but Roma background is not a requisite for mediators. The Foyer and the CMGVR also employ several Roma mediators. The socio-professional inclusion project “*Brugcoach*” in the *GroepIntro Vormingcentrum* is highlighted as good practice, although its continuation is currently uncertain.

Although it was planned in the anti-discrimination law (of 10 May 2007), Belgium still has not adopted any royal decree establishing positive measures to improve minorities’ access to the labour market. Some specific measures/projects have been set up for Romanian and Bulgarian newcomers. There is currently no specific initiative to raise awareness on the issue of antigypsyism in the work place and in the labour market.

### Housing and essential public services

The housing situation of Roma and Travellers, though characterised by distinct issues, remains significantly problematic. The current state of play indicates that there is no real in-depth reflection on the sources of housing fragility for these populations.

In case of Roma, there is an increasing number of families living in homelessness, leading to more and more unauthorized building occupations and to the recent developments of slums. Back in 2012, the Belgian NSRI was planning on providing “support for the temporary occupation of dilapidated buildings”. However, no specific measures have been developed in that regard. Quite the opposite, Belgium has adopted in October 2017 a new law against squats. The existing initiatives and measures to tackle homelessness are generally conceived for single adults (and not for families with children), which makes them unsuited for most Roma in need. For example, most night shelters do not take in children, or the housing reinsertion system “Housing First” targets individual adults. However, it must be noted that following a call for proposals in Brussels (2016), some SWOs have launched projects of reintegration through housing for Roma, inspired by the approach of Housing First, but adapted for families. Some Flemish cities have launched similar projects. For instance, the project *Instapwonen* in Ghent (2016), which is expected to grow bigger in upcoming years. These projects have shown positive results. Finally, since past experiences had shown high occurrences of slumlords exploiting Roma families,

the NSRI planned on an increased control of the phenomenon. This control took place, but it is difficult to quantify whether Roma specifically benefitted from, since no specific measure supports their access to housing.

As for the Travellers, the main problem is the critical shortage of sites, both for residential and temporary stay. This scarcity comes along with repeated cases of unpermitted encampments, generating tensions with local populations and often leading to evictions. There is still no sufficient nor compulsory measures organising Travellers' temporary stay. In all three regions, the lack of binding measures is the main obstacle to significant change in Travellers' housing and living conditions.

## Impact of health care policies on Roma

The Roma population in Belgium still suffers from poor medical conditions (linked to precarious living conditions, infectious diseases, malnutrition, poor dental health and other problems) and a very deficient access to healthcare. Still today, extreme poverty and social exclusion are likely the main explanatory factors. These issues amplify significantly for those in situation of homelessness and for those without a legal status in Belgium.

It must be noted that the right to Emergency Medical Assistance (EMA) is the only form of social help opened to foreigners in "illegal stay", or to EU citizens without a medical insurance. Still, in March 2018, the Belgian government reformed the regulations of the EMA, which became a lot stricter, and thus further restrict access to healthcare for these vulnerable groups.

As mentioned in the NSRI, the Federal Public Service for Health runs a programme in which intercultural mediators who act on behalf of minorities are employed in a number of hospitals. While this programme improves communication and linguistic barriers, it must be noted that none of about a hundred intercultural mediators currently employed in the health sector is of Roma background.

## Education

The schooling of Roma and Traveller children in Belgium is still a route filled with pitfalls. Amongst the main obstacles to a better school attendance is the deep poverty many Roma families live in, which is sometimes paired with situations of homelessness. When it comes to Travellers, it appears that the main reason for low schooling participation is that there is currently no education system adapted to a mobile lifestyle.

In Brussels, the Foyer leads actions targeting schooling. The SNIR supported their project "Roma children", which has been in place for 12 years and aims for the improvement school attendance and parental involvement, as well as for the information of teachers on the situation and culture of the Roma community. In Flanders, the NSRI mentioned additional funds for schools with a significant number of Travellers, in order for them to develop more tailor-made approaches to education. There does not seem to be details available on the use of these funds. It can be noted that in Ghent, Traveller children can attend language classes on-site several days a week. This positive local initiative could become organized in a more structural manner in the years to come. For Wallonia, the NSRI planned on the deployment of Roma mediators. However, only one Roma mediator has been hired since, in Charleroi. At the grassroots level, the CMGVR has developed two projects focusing on school support: one on-site with Travellers, and one in schools with Roma children.

According to UNIA (2017) school education is the sector marked by the starkest increase of discrimination files (all groups combined). A recent study led by UNIA (2018) revealed the existence of very segregation school structures. When it comes to Roma specifically, field experiences show that many face school discrimination, notably with enrolment denials explained by their so-called "learning lag" or out of fear of "attracting too many disadvantaged children". Fortunately, field actors also notice that some schools organize

solidarity solutions for disadvantaged children, and that mediation work has repeatedly proven useful. However, these supportive actions remain random, short-term and not sustainable.

## INTRODUCTION

Back in 2012, on request of the European Commission, Belgium presented its national strategy for Roma inclusion (NSRI). Moving towards 2020, the time has come to evaluate the efficiency of this NSRI, in terms of its objectives and of their implementation. The present report is the evaluation made by the Belgian civil society and is based on data collected and analysed by the CMGVR (Mediation Centre for Travellers and Roma).

The monitoring project of the Belgian NSRI for Roma inclusion takes place over a period of two years. The first Roma Civil Monitoring report was dedicated to three main themes: governance, the fight against discriminations and the fight against antigypsyism. The present document constitutes the second report of policy monitoring, and examines four themes that are central in the national NSRI for Roma inclusion: housing, employment, health and education. All four themes investigated – as well as those the previous report focused on – are closely interrelated, and have a direct effect on one's life conditions, opportunities, and chances for inclusion. It is unsurprising, knowing that most subjects related to social cohesion are deeply connected and have an influence on one another. Consequentially, and to the best of their abilities, the authors of this report attempt to address the topic themes with a transversal perspective.

To elaborate this report, the authors started from the commitments of the Belgian NSRI themselves and used them as baseline and references for their analysis. The methodology for this report takes a qualitative approach, and combined an analysis of existing documentation (studies, reports, laws, court cases, websites of services and institutions concerned) to data collection amongst the main stakeholders involved in Roma and Travellers' inclusion (in the civil society, as well as amongst institutions and authorities at the federal, regional and local level).<sup>1</sup> Based on the priority issues of this second monitoring report, the authors established separate questionnaires for each identified stakeholder, in accordance with their area of expertise and geographical zone. The questions were open and the interlocutors were free to respond by mail, phone, or in a face-to-face interview. Finally, the authors proceeded to data analysis and to the writing of the report.

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<sup>1</sup> In the frame of the production of the present monitoring report, the authors have contacted or used the information available on the following institutions, services and people:

- The Federal Public Services and Ministries to: Education, Employment, Housing, Health and Social Integration.
- Civil society organisations, integration institutions and services: UNIA (Equal Opportunity Body), The Roma and Travellers service of the FOYER, the CMGV (Roma and Travellers Mediation Center), the VZW Integratie-Inburgering In-Gent VZW, the General Delegate for Child Rights, The Cell against Social Exclusion of the Prevention Service of Molenbeek, the VormingCentrum GroepIntro, the regional employment services (FOREM, ACTIRIS, VDAB), the main social welfare offices (SWO), the centres for intercultural action, the Belgian unions, the social housing funds, the regional integration centres, the main hospitals and medical homes (and their intercultural mediation departments), the reception services for newcomers.
- Representatives of the Roma community and of the Travellers community.  
It should be noted that not all actors contacted responded to the questions. In the case of stakeholders who did not provide contribution, the authors used and analysed the information available online.

## EMPLOYMENT

Although it was planned in the anti-discrimination law (of 10 of May 2007), Belgium still has not adopted any royal decree establishing positive measures to improve minorities' access to the labour market. In Belgium, the main obstacles identified by field organizations and unions for migrant minorities in general, and for Roma in particular, were: stereotypes and discriminations, lack of adequate training in connection with employment, linguistic barriers, literacy challenges, problems linked to the recognition of diplomas and qualifications, low mobility to get to the workplace, low levels of formal schooling. Adding to those factors were the vicious circle employment – housing – schooling – poverty, the difficulty of those whose causes for immigration are not motivated by work or economic reasons (notably asylum seekers) and administrative procedures.

Compared to other minorities, these barriers and disincentives to employment are particularly burdensome for Roma. The reason for that is that centuries of stigmatization and socio-economic exclusion are factors increasing tenfold the intensity of the obstacles identified, adding them up to one another and inscribing them in vicious circles.

rates are low amongst Travellers too, and they face increasing difficulties in exercising their professions. As recalled by field actors in Gent, the Belgian regulations make it increasingly difficult for Travelling independents to formally register as self-employed and/or to meet all administrative requirements. For instance, the law stipulates that all self-employed people must have a business management diploma. Many Belgian Travellers cannot attend such training, and as a result, they are forced to continue working without the self-employed status.

Back in 2012, the Belgian NSRI accurately summed up the employment situation as follow: "Clearly, only a very limited number of Roma in Belgium are employed under a standard contract of employment, although this type of contract is a prerequisite for access to social assistance. Many Roma are self-employed, working in both official and unofficial occupations. These self-employment activities often do not allow them to generate an adequate income (newspaper deliveries, scrap metal collection etc.)"

It must be noted that when it comes to employment, the commitments of the Belgian NSRI only seem to target Roma from Eastern and Central European countries, and not Travellers: indeed, the NSRI plans on addressing linguistic barriers, as well as on developing migrant programmes and specific measures for Romanian and Bulgarian newcomers. (see infra for details of the actions proposed).

### Improving access to labour market and effectiveness of employment services

#### *Social workers*

At the federal level, the NSRI evoked an objective of socio-professional activation of Roma through the training of social workers within Social Welfare Offices (SWO, also known as "public social assistance centers"). These trainings were expected to be financed by the European Social Fund (ESF).

In Charleroi, one of the biggest **Walloon** cities, two social workers from the local SWO organised a conference for future social workers in their school (IPSMA) providing key information on intercultural mediation work with Roma people. Additionally, although not funded by the ESF, trainings took place in a few others of the main Walloon cities, such as Namur and Liège. They were organized by the CMGVR (Travellers and Roma Mediation

Center<sup>2</sup>) and targeted social workers in order to help them improve their communication, understanding and support of Roma beneficiaries.

It can also be noted that the CMGV promotes Roma inclusion in the labour market through a direct accompaniment of Roma job-seekers. This service offer of socio-professional orientation and training is supported by partnership agreements with the local services of the FOREM in four of the biggest Walloon cities, which send weekly selections of all job offers available. These job offers are then sorted out and selected based on the profiles and skills of the Roma job seekers. The CMGVR also offers guidance in writing resumes and cover letters for job applications, as well as in seeking proper vocational training, informing on work rights, insurances and unions.

In February 2018, the social workers of SWO of **Brussels** received a training about the Roma community. It lasted six half-days and addressed topics such as specific information on Roma community in Brussels, access to healthcare, working with Roma youth and other topics. According to the interlocutor at the social office, the SWO of Brussels attempts to support Roma's professional integration by providing specific social follow-up, adapted to the needs, living conditions and family situations of the beneficiaries.

The Foyer<sup>3</sup> organizes frequent trainings for first-line workers with Roma (social workers, school personnel, nurse teams, police). The ambition is to improve understanding and communication between Roma families and Belgian services and institutions.

Concerning the objective of socio-professional activation of Roma in itself, the ESF financed individual coaching and orientation in their access to training and to qualified work for 60 persons of Roma origin. The ESF project *Begeleiding Roma* (2015-2017) was based on a collaboration between the Flemish Community Commission and the Foyer, and was organized in partnership with the regional employment centres. This first project was then followed by *Roma@Work* (2018-2019), in which 90 participants shall be supported in their socio-professional integration. Overall over the past three years, 124 people were accompanied by the Foyer: 21 found a job, approximately one tenth received further professional training, a quarter enrolled in Flemish language classes and another quarter has followed other classes (French, social orientation...).

In **Flanders**, following a call for proposals in 2016 for projects focusing on the professional inclusion of Roma, seven short-term projects (one-year duration) were selected and funded by the ESF.<sup>4</sup> All of them offered orientation and guidance activities aiming to reduce the gap between Roma and the labour market. These projects took place in Kuregem (*Ik ben Roma en ik werk*), Gent (*Arbeidsteam Intra-Europese Migratie II*), Brussels (*ESF Roma project II*), Antwerpen (*Amalia II*), Mortsel (*Roma II Project*), Sint-Niklaas (*Romajongeren – werken met en aan toekomstdromen*).

### ***Intercultural mediators***

In line with the objective of training social workers in order to improve Roma's socio-professional activation, the NSRI also recommended that Social Welfare Offices employ intercultural mediators. This recommendation inscribed in the European perception of

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<sup>2</sup> The CMGVR, the Roma and Travellers Mediation Center, is active since 2001 and works with both the Roma and the Traveller communities with an approach based on mediation work (at the local, regional, national and European level). Mediation work takes place between Roma/Travellers and the public services, institutions and authorities at stake. The Belgian strategy endorses the activities of the CMGVR as good practices.

<sup>3</sup> In Brussels, the Foyer is the main organization working with Roma and Travellers. Active since 2003, this service is a contact point for and about Roma and Travellers, and functions more specifically with Roma mediators and stewards. The Belgian strategy programmes further support of the Foyer and its activities, notably in the Education and Housing chapters.

<sup>4</sup> More information available at: <https://www.esf-vlaanderen.be/nl/oproepen/begeleiding-roma-ii>

mediation as good practice<sup>5</sup> and as an effective mean to facilitate contact and to ensure the development of a relationship of trust with the local Roma communities. However, outside of the SWOs of Charleroi<sup>6</sup> (Wallonia), Anderlecht (Brussels), and of Brussels, the authors of this report do not know of other SWOs Offices currently employing mediators of Roma origin. In Brussels, the regional integration centre Foyer employs several mediators of Roma belonging.

In Flanders, the Flemish Action Plan for MOE-migrants (2012) planned on specific projects of Roma mediation in the cities of Sint-Niklaas, Ghent, Antwerp (and Brussels via the Flemish Community Commission with the Foyer). However, in the three Flemish cities, according to the evaluation report of the neighbourhood steward project,<sup>7</sup> Roma background is not a requisite, although stewards must speak languages spoken by the Roma. In order to evaluate these mediation projects in Flanders, the Forum of Minorities organized a questionnaire for Roma NGOs and one of its conclusions was the need for more mediators of Roma origin.<sup>8</sup>

### *Support of self-employment of workers from Central and Eastern Europe*

Upon accession to the EU in 2007, Romanian and Bulgarian workers were met with a seven-year "transition period" (until 1 January 2014), during which specific measures restricted their access to the Belgian labour market. In the NSRI, the channeling of Bulgarian and Romanian citizens without work permits toward labour shortage professions was expected to be insured by the VDAB (Flemish Regional Employment Center) in consultation with social partners, local authorities, SWO and NGOs. Unfortunately, the authors of this report have not been provided with additional information on this project, nor its implementation and impact on the Roma community.

Back at the time of the development of the NSRI, **Flanders** was working on an entrepreneurship project for foreigners in the frame of which migrants from Eastern and Central European countries were supposed to benefit from a specific attention. Few years before the NSRI, the Ministry of the Flemish Community identified entrepreneurship as an efficient way to achieve civic integration and reduce risks of long term unemployment. At that time, citizens of new accession countries (including Romania and Bulgaria) already had the right to self-employment without restriction.<sup>9</sup> This is why the Flemish Action Plan for MOE-Migrants of 2012 established an integrated trajectory to entrepreneurship for foreigners. Under this plan, migrants receive information about the regulations of entrepreneurship and are invited to follow a "route to entrepreneurship". Unfortunately, the authors of this report have not been provided with additional information on this project nor on its impact on the Roma community.

For the Region of **Brussels**, the NSRI made mention of a two-year pilot project "From immigrant to Self-Employment",<sup>10</sup> launched by the Flemish Community Commission. Its goal was to lead Bulgarian and Romanian newcomers towards independent activities. The

<sup>5</sup> CM/REC(2012)9, Recommendation on mediation as an effective tool for promoting respect for human rights and social inclusion of Roma.

<sup>6</sup> In Charleroi, a Roma mediator has been hired for three years (2015-2018) in the frame of a partnership project between the local public social assistance center and two schools, in order to address problems of early school leaving. The ESF fund has not been renewed.

<sup>7</sup> Agentschap Binnenlandbestuur, (2016). Evaluatierapport projecten Buurtstewards. Available at : [http://www.stedenbeleid.vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Buurtstewards\\_evaluatierapport\\_2016.pdf](http://www.stedenbeleid.vlaanderen.be/sites/default/files/atoms/files/Buurtstewards_evaluatierapport_2016.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> According to the 2016 evaluation report of the neighbourhood stewards project.

<sup>9</sup> As stated in the Vlaamse Actieplan MOE-Migranten of 2012 "In 2009, 75,592 entrepreneurs started a business in Flanders (...) In recent years, there has been especially high numbers of Polish, Romanians and Bulgarians with an independent status". (p.24)

<sup>10</sup> "Van immigrant tot middenstand" in Flemish.



project started in 2012, in partnership with a Romanian NGO *Arthis*. The underlying idea was to stimulate and regulate the employment of newcomers through the development of regulated entrepreneurship, and through the acquisition of the legal status of self-employment. In the frame of the project, many information sessions were organised, including one in which the system of micro-credit was presented. These info sessions were still ongoing in 2017,<sup>11</sup> with presentations on subjects such as the legal status of self-employed, the functions of regional employment centres, social security, insurances, unemployment, existing assistance for companies and entrepreneurs, novelties at consular services, etc.

### **Professional (re-)training**

For **Flanders**, the Belgian NSRI stated its support for the *VormingCentrum GroepINTRO* (Molenbeek).<sup>12</sup> In place since 2008, this project is organised in partnership with the VDAB, ACTIRIS and the Foyer. The ambition of the *VormingsCentrum GroepINTRO* is to help bringing the youth closer to the labour market through vocational training and to bring more diversity and equality in employment. Please, see chapter Education, section "Support of secondary and higher education particularly for professions with high labour demand" for more details about this initiative.

For **Wallonia**, the NSRI was planning on expanding the "cross-sectoral platform for employment". The objective was to allow for an exchange of information between actors in direct contact with Roma and employment/training actors, as well as to take measures in order to diminish the obstacles to Roma's socio-professional insertion. The NSRI also aimed for collecting information, through the FOREM and related services, on the problems met by Roma in their access to work, as well as on potential solutions. The idea was that the information collected by the FOREM would then be communicated to other actors (social housing, social welfare offices, etc.) in order to improve Roma's access to training and employment. If needed – and if the budget allowed for it – specific training courses for Roma could then have been developed.

However, none of such information sharing on Roma's needs seems to have taken place, because of the impossibility and illegality of the collection of ethnic data. The interlocutor in the FOREM indicated that following consultation with their services (departments: migrants, equal opportunities/diversity, and vulnerable groups) as well as with the regional government (DGO5 – Social Action), all they could tell was that "*it is currently impossible for Belgian authorities (regional and community) to provide information on Roma's specific situation in terms of employment, profession, access to education and to professional training*". This response was also given by the DGO5 to the International Labour Organization.

### **Fight against discrimination in employment and antigypsyism at workplace**

EUROSTAT survey from 2015 has shown that only 57 per cent of the population would be at ease working with a Roma person.<sup>13</sup> This information alone illustrates the widespread antigypsyism in Belgian society.

UNIA, the Belgian Equal Opportunity body, reported a global increase (all categories of people combined) of 71.3 per cent in files concerning discrimination in employment over

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<sup>11</sup> See the event section at: <http://www.arthis.com>

<sup>12</sup> Although the Belgian strategy actually mentions the *VormingCentrum* in its Education section, the authors placed it in the employment chapter out of consistency concerns for this report.

<sup>13</sup> Special EU Barometer 437. Discrimination in the EU in 2015.



the past five years.<sup>14</sup> In 2017, all categories of people combined, UNIA opened 572 new files in the category of employment. The racial criteria appeared to be the most common discrimination basis in employment. Discrimination in employment occurs both in the hiring process and at the workplace. Interlocutors in UNIA presented this discrimination as “endemic”: even when employed, the risks of harassment in the workplace remain high in every sector. They also attracted attention to the fact that discrimination sometimes occurs in the first phase of the process, namely in the job announcements themselves: some job ads require a specific mother tongue, which practically implies a requirement of nationality.

For what concerns Roma and Travellers in particular, interlocutors at UNIA confirmed very low discrimination reporting in the field of employment: just one in 2015, five in 2015 and three in 2013 (and nothing over the past two years).

UNIA is currently pushing for the use of strategies such as “testing” and “mystery shopping” in order to uncover employers’ discriminatory behaviours with foreigners and minority groups. However, there are currently no specific initiative to sensitise employers and/or the wider public to the issue of antigypsyism in the work place and in the labour market, except for specific actions led by the civil society.

In 2013, 2015 and 2017, UNIA and the Ministry of Employment, published socio-economic monitoring reports on the Belgian labour market, focusing on the impact of people’s origin or migratory journey on their work opportunities. The main finding is that the “origin” factor remains a determining factor to explain inequalities in the labour market in Belgium. While employment rates grow bigger with higher education levels, a high level of education does not suffice to erase inequalities between workers from Belgium and workers of foreign origin. That means that in spite of equal qualification, one’s origin still determines success on the labour market.

The public sector appeared to be a non-negligible source of employment for foreigners – an information backed up by the Belgian unions. However, these jobs are not allocated identically. As summed up by the FGVB union, foreigners are mostly represented in lower-skilled/lower category types of jobs and remain a minority in statutory works. There is still a lot to be done for foreign minorities when it comes to opportunities of professional ascension.

A phenomenon of “ethno-stratification” has been identified: one’s origin strongly determines the market niche one ends up in. People of foreign origin are overrepresented in the most precarious and lowest-paid jobs.

It should also be noted that, unsurprisingly, the gap between Belgian and foreign people widens when gender and age are added to the equation. While the inequality gap between men and women reduced between 2008 and 2014, it varies significantly depending on women’s origin and family composition (more difficulties with children). There are currently no quota rules in employment. It can easily be assumed that Roma women are simultaneously confronted to the effects of two discriminated identities, which further impedes their chances to exist on the labour market.

To tackle the problems of discrimination, several measures aimed at professional inclusion of disadvantaged people have been adopted in Belgium:

- “Article 60”: this is a special employment contract in which a beneficiary of the social integration income benefits from a professional insertion measure. SWO can hire beneficiaries and make them available to companies, associations or public structures. In turn, the beneficiaries grow professional experience and, at the end

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<sup>14</sup> UNIA, (2017). Monitoring socio-économique 2017: marché du travail et origine. Available at : [https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties\\_docs/1215\\_UNIA\\_Monitoring\\_2017\\_-\\_FR-Anysurfer.pdf](https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/1215_UNIA_Monitoring_2017_-_FR-Anysurfer.pdf)

of the contract, become entitled to unemployment benefits. The fact that these workers costs less to employers showed efficient to initiate insertion in the professional world. However, it also makes further employment difficult once the "article 60 contract" is over and the SWO no longer covers part of the employment costs.

- "Madrane Ordinance": in the Region of Brussels Capital, the Madrane Ordinance is meant to incite local administrations to hire job seekers coming from neighbourhoods with high unemployment rates. This ordinance does not target minorities specifically but it functions as a way to support workers on the basis of the neighbourhood they come from, which has high chances to coincide with multicultural neighbourhoods and/or people at the highest risk of reproducing poverty.
- Awaiting a royal decree: last year, the Ministry of Employment started working on a royal decree project that has been submitted to the National Employees Headquarters for comments. According to the CSC and the FGTB unions, such royal decree could be an interesting tool to target groups that are particularly underrepresented in employment.

## HOUSING AND ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICES

Similarly to all other themes investigated under this research, the subject of housing for Roma illustrates that social cohesion must be understood as a transversal sector. In Belgium, fieldworkers repeatedly drew attention to the fact that access to housing has directly connected to people's chances for inclusion and ability to find a place in society. However, the current state of things regarding housing options, for Roma and for Travellers, reveals that there is no real in-depth understanding of the sources of housing fragility for both populations, and little political willingness to solve them.

### Homelessness and shantytowns

Many Roma families leave their home countries to flee economic deprivation and social exclusion.<sup>15</sup> While some find ways to get by and fully integrate into the wider Belgian society, a great deal of these families stay stuck in deep poverty and unstable housing conditions. As a result, more and more Roma in Belgium are pushed to live on the streets, joining the ranks of the ever-more visible minority of homeless people. It should be noted that up until recently, efforts from the Belgian civil society had managed to avoid the emergence of shantytowns such as those existing in France, along the highways. However, over the past few years, several of the main cities have witnessed the development of slums inhabited mostly by Roma families. In Brussels for example, in 2016, a shanty town developed over a few months, gathering almost 50 people. A year later, a similar situation emerged in another neighbourhood, with about 20 families.

In the face of the growing phenomenon of homelessness, it quickly became obvious that the existing initiatives and measures (from emergency shelters to projects of reinsertion through housing) are inadequate for Roma. The main reason for it is the familial dimension of their homelessness: this characteristic makes their situation – and the needs attached to it – very different to that of other people living on the streets.

Because they are built on a former representation of the homeless population in Belgium, social and housing services dedicated to this issue are conceived for individuals, not for families – and even less so for families with children. As a result, all existing infrastructures become obsolete when it comes to Roma, because of the familial, collective scope of their deprivation. This observation even holds for the most basic housing support, namely emergency shelters. The great majority of emergency shelters, also called “night centres”, are not mandated to accommodate children. A few family foster houses exist, usually run by local associations, but there are only a few per region and they do not benefit from subsidies from the Walloon Housing Code. Moreover, there are many conditions that are likely to exclude Roma, such as that of residing legally on Belgian land (many homeless families are issued orders to leave the territory). As recalled by the SWO of Brussels, this observation also applies to social housing: many are simply inaccessible to Roma because of the size of most families.

It is difficult to provide estimations on the number of Roma families in situation of homelessness. A recent report of the CIRE (*Coopération et Initiatives pour les Réfugiés et Etrangers*) estimates that about 300 Roma people are concerned in Brussels, while this phenomenon was nearly inexistent a few years ago.<sup>16</sup> Field workers in other major cities (Namur, Charleroi, Ghent, Antwerp) also notice the emergence of these situations in growing numbers. Undeniably, the number of homeless Roma families is increasing and in

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<sup>15</sup> Fieldworkers also noted that many of the families who came to Belgium in recent years are of Romanian and Slovakian origin, and actually arrived from France in order to flee the shantytowns and the perpetual expulsions that are happening since 2010.

<sup>16</sup> CIRE, (2016). “Les familles migrantes dites roms en errance à Bruxelles: des citoyens européens de seconde zone?”.

most cases, local authorities fail to provide alternative accommodation. This absence of political reaction leaves these families in extremely worrisome living conditions: they are forced to live in situations of permanent wandering, a phenomenon that coincides not only with the apparition of shanty towns as mentioned above, but also with a growing number of squats and illegal building occupations.

### **Squatting**

On this topic, given the well-known and widespread reality of unoccupied buildings in Brussels, the NSRI planned on providing “support for the temporary occupation of dilapidated buildings” with the development of supervisory measures, allowing for precarious occupation of abandoned buildings. The NSRI called for “an integrated, multi-disciplinary approach which combines the powers of different levels of authority”.<sup>17</sup>

However, it seems that no specific measures or programmes have been developed with an objective of promoting the temporary use of unoccupied building. On the contrary, as mentioned in the previous RCM report, Belgium has adopted in October 2017 a new law against squats. This decision from the Belgian government followed the heavy media coverage of an illegal house occupation by Roma families in Ghent. It is now used mostly in order to evict Roma families.

The civil society reacted just about unanimously: with the penalisation of squatters,<sup>18</sup> the focus is placed on the criminalization of the poor rather than on the search for alternative accommodation solutions. Following the adoption of the law, about 30 civil society organizations (including the Belgian League of Human Rights) lodged an application for annulment to the Constitutional Court.<sup>19</sup>

### **Reintegration through housing**

In Belgium, the project “Housing first” is a programme of reinsertion through housing, which started in 2013 and is built on the idea that housing is a prerequisite to a durable social reinsertion. While this project has proven efficient with homeless people<sup>20</sup>, no Roma people or family have benefitted from it so far. In all likelihood, the main reason is that the project is tailored for only one person, not for a family/group.

However, following a call for proposals launched by the COCOM (Common Community Commission) 2016 in the Region of Brussels, some public Social Welfare Offices have launched projects of reinsertion through housing, inspired by the values of Housing First, but adapted to families. (Ixelles, Forest, Molenbeek). In these projects, an intersectional approach allows for wider accompaniment in education, health and administrative support and has brought positive results for the families selected. The subsidies provided by the Region of Brussels will likely be renewed in following years.

Some Flemish cities have launched similar projects. For instance, *Instapwonen* in Ghent (2016): this small-scale project accommodates and guides three families of Slovak and Bulgarian origin, under conditions of active involvement and financial participation (a third

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<sup>17</sup> Note: back in 2012, the NSRI illustrated its argument in favor of the occupation of abandoned buildings with the example of the Gesu Church, which was inhabited at the time by more than 200 people (many of which were Roma). Still, the occupants got forcefully evicted on decision of the mayor by more than 200 police officers in November 2013, with insufficient alternatives for accommodation.

<sup>18</sup> With this law, the illegal occupation of any real estate property comes with a risk up to a month in prison, and this punishment extends up to a year if they refuse to leave the building. Evictions procedures are also accelerated under this law, they are less costly for owners, and the deadlines for evictions are shortened.

<sup>19</sup> Read more on <http://www.rbdh-bbrow.be/spip.php?article1884> (Brussels Collective for Housing Rights), <http://febul.be/index.php/membres/8-content-febul/35-news1> (Brussels Federation of Tenants Unions) and on <https://squatbelgium.noblogs.org/>

<sup>20</sup> After 2 years of the pilot project Housing First Belgium, 93% of the beneficiaries had maintained their housing situation. Read more: <https://www.mi-is.be/fr/themes/logement/sans-abris/housing-first-belgium>

of the rent if they have an income). The aim is to provide an opportunity to stabilise all areas of life in anticipation of permanent housing. The families can stay in the boarding house for a maximum of 18 months. According to the interlocutor at the VMSW (Flemish Agency for Social Housing), in 2018, this project is expected to be expanded to 40 homes. These homes are vacant houses, buildings owned by the city of Gent, by the Social Welfare Office and by Social Housing Agencies, but also by educational institutions.<sup>21</sup> Under this expanded capacity, the project is no longer reserved exclusively for Roma.

In 2018, a call for proposals was launched in the Region of Brussels Capital concerning the installation of modular, light and innovating housing to combat homelessness on the territory of Brussels Capital.<sup>22</sup>

### Specific housing-related problems of Travellers

All community representatives and field actors seem to concur: the main problem faced by Travellers in Belgium is the critical shortage of fields, both for residential<sup>23</sup> and temporary stay. This scarcity comes along with repeated cases of unpermitted encampments, generating tensions with local populations and often leading to expulsions. These repeated evictions further widen the gap with the sedentary society as they feed into the perception of Travellers as an unwanted community, whose presence in the neighbourhood can only be illegal. Today, in 2018, the Belgian civil society can unfortunately testify that evictions of Traveller families still happen all year round, even during the winter period and during the night.

It must be remembered that already in 2012, following the complaint of the International Federation for Human Rights,<sup>24</sup> the Social and Economic Committee said that Belgium was in violation of the European Social Charter, notably because of its significant lack of available sites for Travelers and its handling of evictions. Clearly, these problems were thus well-known back at the time the national NSRI was produced. Yet in 2015, three years later, the Council of Europe (CoE) Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muiznieks had no choice but to notice “a recent increase in evictions”, “a persisting and substantial lack of temporary and permanent encampment sites” and that “little progress appears to have been achieved since the 2012 Decision of the European Committee of Social Rights”.<sup>25</sup>

As summed up by the Belgian Human Right League in its September 2015 report to the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, the lack of sites has severe consequences: “the majority of these families are forced to live in deep poverty, under constant threat of eviction, with negative repercussions on their access to employment, education for their children, and health”.<sup>26</sup>

Concerning the acquisition of private sites for residential stay, the Belgian Human Rights League, made an assessment which still holds to this day: “In every region of the country, we observe no improvement in the fate of families who attempt to install their caravan on

<sup>21</sup> For instance, the University of Ghent will house a large family in former classrooms, and Hogent (High School) will provide 13 rooms in a former student house to recognized refugees.

<sup>22</sup> <https://logement.brussels/actualites/appel-a-projets-installation-de-logements-modulaires-legers-et-innovants-en-region-de-bruxelles-capitale>

<sup>23</sup> An increasing number of Belgian Travellers wish to have their own residential field they can go back to when in need to settle or when no transit site is available. However, this is hardly possible for them owing to the current lack of sites, and the obstacles they face in buying private sites and in obtaining building permits.

<sup>24</sup> IFHR vs Belgium, 62/2010

<sup>25</sup> CommDH(2016)1, p.30

<sup>26</sup> Ringelheim, J., (2015). La situation des Gens du voyage en Belgique : Analyse de la Ligue des droits de l’homme présentée au Commissaire aux droits de l’homme du Conseil de l’Europe.

private sites that they bought or rent: they generally keep being refused the urban permit they need. Their occupation without permit is sometimes tolerated but remains precarious: these families can be expelled at any moment".<sup>27</sup>

In the Brussels Region, the NSRI evoked its desire to find sites for Travellers through the support given by the Flemish Community to the Foyer in its efforts to "advise local and regional authorities on the adoption of adequate policies on sites for Travellers".

However, although the regional Ministry to Housing has established a cadastre of sites which could be dedicated to Travellers, no field has been designated yet. In Brussels, there has long been no subsidies allocated to field acquisition and equipment other than a support from the French Community (mentioned below). As a result, only one transit site was opened in recent years. It closed after one year and is only occupied occasionally. The complete absence of transit site for Travellers leaves Brussels, the European capital, in violation of the European Social Charter.

It must be said that in 2017, the Region of Brussels Capital offered the possibility for its municipalities, through a call for proposals with a budget of 1.5 million EUR, to request funds for acquisition, planning and management of fields for Travellers. However, none of the 19 municipalities have applied for these funds. Subsequently, the 2018 call for proposals no longer includes the possibility of financial support for field acquisition and infrastructure planning.

For Flanders, the NSRI referred the fact that public authorities (municipalities, provinces, PSAC, social housing companies, etc.) were financially supported in the acquisition and equipment of sites for Travellers (residential and transit).

These subsidies used to cover up to 90 per cent of the costs, but since 2016 there is an additional incentive with a coverage of 100 per cent. Currently, there are 30 public residential sites in Flanders (490 places). Still, it is far from enough compared to the needs. In a recent article from 2016, N. Bernard and Y. Moons report estimations of 500 to 1,000 families still awaiting to be allocated a site.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Flemish field workers report that while many municipalities used to implement a "policy of tolerance" towards unauthorized occupation, they became much stricter since the municipal elections of 2012. More and more Travellers got expelled from their permanent location and forced to constantly move around without alternatives. Reportedly, between 2012 and 2014, about 40 Belgian Traveller have been forced to abandon their private land.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, at this time, only two of the five sites dedicated to Travellers' temporary stay are open, in Ghent and Asse. The fields of Huizingen, Kortrijk and Antwerp recently closed. Field workers from Ghent referred to estimations made by the Foyer (Brussels) that only 17.5 per cent of the need for transit sites are currently covered.

For Wallonia, the NSRI presented the reform of the Walloon Housing Charter as a way to "develop alternative forms of accommodations", including Travellers sites, particularly in Permanent Living (HP) zones. The reform also included "assistance with equipping and establishing sites that can accommodate mobile forms of accommodations used by Travellers", which allow for the creation of both residential and transit sites.

In 2009, the Walloon Region launched a voluntary-based project for local authorities willing to organize Travellers' temporary stay. Today, 11 municipalities<sup>30</sup> have signed a

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<sup>27</sup> *Idem*, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard, N., Moons, N., (2016). Discussion note issued from the National Roma Contact Point meeting on housing.

<sup>29</sup> *Commissariaat Kinderrechten – Commissie Wonen*, Poverty Policy and Equal Opportunities, 2014

<sup>30</sup> Ath, Amay, Bastogne, Charleroi, Hotton, Mons, Namur, Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve, Sambreville, Verviers, Wasseiges.



convention with the Walloon Government, designed for providing Travellers with temporary sites. In this process, the CMGVR plays a role of counselling and mediation between stakeholders, including Travellers and local populations.

This project in itself constitutes a positive improvement, particularly because it allows for a stronger anchoring and visibility of the organisation of temporary stay in Wallonia. Nonetheless, there are clear weaknesses still to this day. The CMGVR reports significant disparities in terms of available infrastructure, and thus in the possibilities to effectively organize temporary stay. Another problem lies in the fact that hosting calendars are very patchy. (It is the case particularly during winter time: no field is accessible, which pushes families on the roads during the coldest period). Here again, the number of fields allocated is clearly insufficient to meet the needs: as highlighted by the Belgian Human Rights League, the great majority of the 262 Walloon municipalities categorically refuse the requests from families wishing to stay temporarily on their territory and stand firm against any quest for negotiated solution.<sup>31</sup>

### Access to secure and affordable housing

Outside of the situation of homelessness, the most critical problems in terms of housing conditions for Roma stem from the occupation of substandard and unsafe housing, and from situations of overcrowding. As evoked in the NSRI, Roma are particularly targeted by slumlords taking advantage of their vulnerabilities on the housing market (low resources, absence of legal status).

The NSRI planned on an increased control by the Flemish Housing Inspectorate (FHI) of the slumlord phenomenon in regions with a high concentration of migrants from Eastern and Central Europe.

This objective is also part of the Flemish Action Plan for MOE-Migrants (2012) and has since been formulated by the Flemish minister as a priority for the Flemish Housing Inspectorate. However, the interlocutor at the VMSW (Flemish Agency for Social Housing) informed us that this priority was temporary and has now expired.

The following chart by the FHI presents the number of interventions on homes the poor state of which posed a threat to Roma residents:

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
5	5	0	0	1	0

As highlighted by the interlocutor at the VMSM, it is very likely that these figures underestimate reality, particularly given matters of ethnic identification. Nonetheless, it can be said that most Roma in Belgium have Bulgarian, Slovak or Romanian nationality, and that all three nationalities rank quite high in the FHI's overview of the tenants living in houses that were inspected in the past years.

The annual report of the FHI also shows an increase of Court Decisions requiring the restauration of homes, which constitutes in itself an improvement of the housing market in Flanders. However, it might be challenging for disadvantaged families to continue living in a home if the restoration of the property involves a rent increase.

<sup>31</sup> Ringelheim, J., (2015). La situation des Gens du voyage en Belgique: Analyse de la Ligue des droits de l'homme présentée au Commissaire aux droits de l'homme du Conseil de l'Europe.

## Effectiveness of housing benefits and social assistance to maintain housing

At the federal level, the NSRI had planned for a better communication with the Roma community concerning the fact that Social Welfare Offices can assist their beneficiaries with the constitution of security deposits, in order to avoid potential payment issues.

While SWOs can indeed provide such support, it seems this possibility has not been the subject of a specific information campaign. However, it is to be noted that the SWO of Brussels recently created a unit of two social workers and one housing referent, trained and specialized in the accompaniment of Roma and Traveller, which reportedly allowed for a better access to housing for Roma people and families.

For Flanders, the NSRI stated that the “global housing policy” should allow Roma to have equal access than every other group to “appropriate, good-quality accommodation in a pleasant living environment at an affordable price and with security of tenure”.

However, as detailed in the discrimination section and throughout this housing chapter, there is still a long way to go to achieve equality (both in the private and in the public housing sectors). In theory, Roma should have the same chances than any other candidate in the social housing market. However as recalled by the interlocutor at the VMSW, the basic conditions for access in the social housing market automatically exclude a great part of the Roma community, notably the conditions in terms of legal status<sup>32</sup>. The VMSW contacted 4 Flemish social housing agencies working in regions where there are a lot of Roma (Antwerp, Gent, Waasland): they all responded that they have very few Roma among their tenants. Moreover, in Flanders, access to social housing now comes with a requirement of basic language skills (since November 2017).

It should be noted however that some Flemish cities – such as Ghent and Sint-Niklaas – have developed their own strategies to promote the inclusion of migrants. According to the 2015 report of Nils Muiznieks, CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, “Strategies developed in Ghent in particular have often been referred to as promising practices, as a considerable share of the Roma migrating from other EU member states have managed to find housing and employment and to integrate in the city. The strategy provides for efforts in the provision of information, better coordination between the local administration and NGOs and relies on the work of mediators, who are widely reported to play an important role in facilitating the integration of Roma” (p.28).

## Fight against residential segregation, discrimination and other forms of antigypsyism in housing

In its 2017 report, UNIA reported an increase of 48.1 per cent in the number of discrimination files in the sector of housing over the past five years (all categories of people combined). In 2017, 36.1 per cent of the files had to do with “racial grounds”.

In this context it is worth of mentioning that the City of Ghent was the first European city to launch situation testing in order to assess the global state of discrimination in housing (2015). Following this experience, the Regional Housing Ministry in Brussels started similar tests in Brussels (2016-2017). Ethnic origin and level of income turned out to be the most important sources of discrimination.

When it comes to Roma and Travellers specifically, one can only notice that the programmes and institutions connected to housing do not take into account the widespread they discriminations, which often lead families to situations of homelessness or of high housing insecurity. This lack of attention to discrimination in housing reveals a

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<sup>32</sup> People can not obtain a social housing loan if they are not allowed in in Belgium longer than three months; are involved in an ongoing procedure for status; only have a tourist visa or a Schengen visa.



lack of in-depth reading and assessment of the situations of poverty and exclusion in Belgium.

For Roma, discrimination in housing takes different form: evictions all year round, registration denials,<sup>33</sup> de facto indirect discrimination because of the family dimension, difficulty of finding housing once identified as Roma, facing hostility from neighbours once identified as "Roma". In the private rental market, no specific figures for Roma are known, but for instance the *Groote Woononderzoek 2013* (Housing Investigation in the Flemish Market) showed that 36 per cent of landlords do not want tenants with a SWO rental guarantee and 22 per cent do not want to rent their property to people of foreign origin.<sup>34</sup>

When it comes to Travellers, civil society organisations deplore first and foremost that the lack of fields hinders the right to adequate housing for Travellers, which, in turn, has direct repercussions on other fundamental rights. For itinerant families, the ability to travel and settle freely is directly connected to the right to education and to work, to healthcare, to a family life and to live in dignity. For the families living in caravans residentially, these rights are equally threatened by the instability of their housing conditions: many feel like they can be expelled any day, due to the legal uncertainty surrounding mobile homes, as well as to the difficulty of obtaining urban permits.<sup>35</sup> Travellers are subjected to evictions all year round, pushing entire families on the road without alternative solutions (even during the winter time).

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<sup>33</sup> As reported by the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muiznieks in 2015: "Roma, particularly those living in substandard housing, are often denied enrolment on municipal registers, in contravention of Belgian law. Registration denials can lead to withdrawals of residence permits and deprive the persons affected of access to a range of essential services" (CommDH(2016)1, p.28)

<sup>34</sup> Winters S., Ceulemans W., Heylen K., Pannecoucke I., Vanderstraeten L., Van den Broeck K., De Decker P., Ryckewaert M. & Verbeeck G. (2015), *Wonen in Vlaanderen anno 2013. De bevindingen uit het Grote Woononderzoek 2013 gebundeld*, Steunpunt Wonen, Leuven.

<sup>35</sup> In Flanders, the VZW Integratie-Inburgering confirms: "The applications for a planning permission are very difficult". (2016, p 24)

## IMPACT OF HEALTH CARE POLICIES ON ROMA

In 2014, the EC's Roma Health Report stated that in Europe, Roma systematically suffer from worse medical conditions than the rest of the population: their life expectancy is on average 10-15 years lower, child mortality comes in higher rates and chronic and infectious disease are more frequent.<sup>36</sup> The Roma health report stated that "the Brussels municipal social services estimate that Roma have a life expectancy of 55 years and that Roma health is poor, even when compared to refugees and undocumented migrants; and suggests this to be linked to housing conditions". Indeed, many Roma families are compelled to live in overcrowded, substandard and unsafe housing, which puts them at sanitary risk. Additionally, a 2016 survey led by the City of Ghent identified barriers faced by Roma in access to health care: financial constraints, mobility issues, linguistic knowledge and complexity of the health care system.

A 2012 Social Thematic Study on the Situation of Roma in Belgium summarised: "In addition to unfamiliarity with the symptoms of various diseases, the lack of access to preventive measures such as vaccination and nutritious food, decent housing conditions, healthy lifestyle, and monitoring of the health status are identified by various studies as the reasons why the health status and life expectancy of the Roma population in Belgium is well below the average life expectancy of the majority population".<sup>37</sup> In 2013, a study by *Médecins du Monde Belgium* reported that only 13 per cent of Roma children received necessary vaccines and that 26 per cent of the Roma women interviewed had experienced refusals to provide health care.<sup>38</sup>

These observations correspond to present information and experiences from the ground. Field actors and organizations repeatedly draw attention to the fact that Roma in Belgium suffer from globally poor medical conditions and a deficient access to healthcare. While these issues are widespread amongst the Roma community, they are amplified significantly for those in situation of homelessness and for those without a legal status in Belgium.

People residing in Belgium without authorization have restricted access to health care, which is limited to Emergency Medical Assistance (EMA). The right to EMA is the only form of social help opened to foreigners in "illegal stay", or for EU citizens without a medical insurance,<sup>39</sup> and is closely linked to the right to human dignity provided that access to health care is a fundamental right. Still, in March 2018, the Belgian government reformed the regulations of the EMA and installed a procedure for controlling whether the health care provided truly meets the criteria of EMA.<sup>40</sup> Concretely, this procedure results in increased controls for doctors, coming with high fines for those who perform "non-urgent" medical services under an EMA cover.<sup>41</sup> The result of this recent reform is that it further restricts access to health care for categories of population that are already

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<sup>36</sup> European Commission (2014). Roma Health Report: Health status of the Roma population.

<sup>37</sup> De Hert, P, Van Caeneghem, J., (2012) Belgium: Social thematic study, The situation of Roma. FRANET.

<sup>38</sup> Médecins du Monde Belgique, (2013). Rapport annuel 2012: Etat des lieux de l'accès aux soins en Belgique. Available at: [https://www.issuu.com/mdm-dvdw/docs/mdm\\_rapport\\_annuel\\_2012\\_fr\\_final\\_3](https://www.issuu.com/mdm-dvdw/docs/mdm_rapport_annuel_2012_fr_final_3)

<sup>39</sup> However, the right to EMA for EU citizens is only available after 3 months of residence, and must be regularly renewed with the local SWO.

<sup>40</sup> Law on Emergency Medical Assistance, 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1964.

<sup>41</sup> For this reason, a collective of 80 doctors and medical experts, together with the organization Médecins du Monde, spoke out against this law, also because the reform is based on a restrictive understanding of what EMA is supposed to cover: "The correct definition of the EMA is based on the Royal Decree of the 12th of December 1996. It indicates that the EMA – contrarily to what its name suggests – is not limited to emergency care, but should cover ALL preventive and curative medical care".

vulnerable. They include a great number of Roma (EU Roma citizens ordered to leave the country, stateless Roma, Roma from extra-European states without permit).

### Ensuring equal access to public health care services

As mentioned in the NSRI, the **Federal** Public Service for Health runs a programme in which intercultural mediators acting on behalf of minorities are employed in hospitals.<sup>42</sup>

Before anything, it should be noted that the system of intercultural mediation in the health care sector was in place before the production of the NSRI.<sup>43</sup> The initial project of intercultural mediation in hospitals was launched in 1997, and is still in place today. In the health care sector, the function of intercultural mediators is to facilitate the dialogue with patients, appease tensions, and provides key information for a more efficient patient care. Most importantly, they allow for a more individualised access to healthcare, in the language of the patient. Globally speaking, it seems that the implication of mediators improves accessibility and quality of health care for vulnerable groups, including Roma. However, it is relevant to note that none of about a hundred intercultural mediators currently employed in the health sector is of Roma belonging. Yet, hiring Roma mediators could have a positive impact on communication, on Roma's trust in medical institutions, and could improve the understanding of specific barriers to healthcare amongst medical staff.

Intercultural mediation is also deployed through videoconferencing in hospitals and in primary healthcare facilities. If no one is available for face-to-face translation or videoconference, healthcare services usually call upon social interpretation services. Intercultural mediators in the health sector occasionally receive training. In 2016, the SPP Social Integration and the SPF Public Health organized a ROMED training for intercultural mediators working with Roma, in order to reinforce their competences and improve the quality of the interpretation services. Another colloquium on intercultural mediation for Roma took place in Sevilla (2016), in the frame of the project *Equi-Health*.

As for the **Flanders**, back in the time the NSRI was produced, a pilot project aiming to provide adapted daily health care to Roma patients was established in Sint-Niklaas, with the support of the Flemish government. The authors have not found additional information on this project. However, the evaluation of the Belgian NSRI done by the European Commission in 2014 makes mention of "Specific action in the city of Sint-Niklaas, targeting Roma".<sup>44</sup>

A noteworthy initiative is *Local networking initiative In-Gent*, that aims at countering the obstacles to Travellers' access to health services, by working on the Travellers' transit site in Ghent and cooperating with the local community health centre to orient and to make appointments for those in need of medical assistance. They also regularly call on a

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<sup>42</sup> In Wallonia, about 30 intercultural mediators are employed in a dozen of hospitals and medical houses (notably in Charleroi, Gilly, La Louvière, Tournai, Liège, Verviers and Namur). Translation is usually possible in Romanian and in Turkish. In the CHR of Liège and the CHC of Verviers, mediation is also available in more Western European languages (Bosniak, Serbo-croat, Macedonian, ...) In Brussels, there are also about 30 intercultural mediators, employed in 13 hospitals and clinics of the capital. Translation is available mostly in Turkish and Arabic, but also in some places in Polish, Romanian, Albanian and Turkish. In Flanders, about 40 intercultural mediators work in the health sector. Intercultural mediation is available in more than 15 hospitals and medical centres, but rarely in Western European languages. (except for Gent, where Bulgarian language is available, and Antwerp, which has service offering in Serbian/Croatian/Bosniak).

<sup>43</sup> The initial project of intercultural mediation in hospitals was launched in 1997 on the initiative of the Federal Public Service for Public Health.

<sup>44</sup> EC assessment of Belgium's national strategy, 2014. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2014.pdf>

vaccination team that comes to the site on request and vaccinates children.<sup>45</sup> Currently, the prevention staff of the local community health centre is reflecting on ways to reach out to Travellers and provide them with informative and promotional health activities. They come to the halting site three times a year.

The Belgian NSRI does not set specific health care objective for **Wallonia**.

### Fight against discrimination and antigypsyism in health care

On several occasions, field actors have reported prejudice and stereotypes amongst some health care providers. They observed that the existence of such stereotypes hinders access to healthcare for Roma and Travellers, and sometimes even results in flagrant denial of service. Yet, there is no specific measure in place against antigypsyism or anti-Roma discrimination in healthcare. Information and sensitisation activities are thus left to the initiative of field organizations. For instance, in Wallonia (Liège), the CMGVR has organized a training focused on the Roma community for the nurses of the Regional Hospital Center.

### Addressing needs of the most vulnerable groups

A few projects are developed in Belgium with a view to ensure access to basic health care services to the most vulnerable groups of population, notably homeless people, but also foreigners in poor living conditions, people without a legal status and others. The main initiatives available for uninsured vulnerable groups are *Médecins du Monde*, *Hermes*, *Médihalte*, *Athena*, and others.

In Brussels, the association "Street Nurses" exists since 2005 and accompanies the most disadvantaged/homeless people to access basic health care services. In some cities, similar offers of healthcare and housing reinsertion efforts are dispensed by municipality services called "*Relais Sociaux*". There are seven of them in Wallonia: Charleroi, La Louvière, Liège, Mons, Namur, Tournai et Verviers.

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<sup>45</sup> In Flanders, the Birth and Childhood Agency (ONE Kind & Gezin) includes a unit that goes on the fields where Travellers groups stay and offer vaccination to young children

## EDUCATION

In Belgium, the competences in terms of education are the responsibility of Communities (French, Flemish and German) since 1988. The Flemish Community covers Flemish-speaking schools, and the French Community covers the French-speaking school system in the Federation Wallonia-Brussels. Education is compulsory from 6 until 18. However, compulsory education does not equal the duty to attend school (parents may choose home schooling for their children). The constitution guarantees a freedom of school choice for the parents. Parents and children must have access to a school of their choice within reasonable distance of their residence. Schools have wide autonomy.

The schooling of Roma children in Belgium is still a route filled with pitfalls. Field actors note high rates of absenteeism, early school drop-out and educational segregation.<sup>46</sup> Compared to Travellers, the school education of Roma seems to be further impeded by the linguistic barriers and by deeper cultural stigmas within the school staff. Amongst the main obstacles to school attendance is the deep poverty many Roma families live in, which is sometimes paired with situations of homelessness. For families living in the streets, the living conditions and divergent priorities coming with permanent wandering make it even harder to insure regular school attendance.<sup>47</sup>

According to a 2017 research led by UNIA,<sup>48</sup> preschool participation is low amongst Roma: over the 15 pre-school children surveyed, only 6 were going to school. According to this research, Roma children usually do not attend school before age 4, and many do not enrol before the start of compulsory schooling. When it comes to primary and secondary school, the numbers remain alarming: amongst the 63 school-aged children surveyed, 41 were going to school. The research also confirmed patterns of high percentage of Roma children sent to special education. In the sample surveyed in Flanders, there were more Roma in special schools (22) than in regular education (15).<sup>49</sup>

There is little information available on the schooling of Traveller children in Belgium, be it in terms of attendance or educational level. In the 2017 research mentioned above, UNIA gathered information on the education of Travellers children on residential fields. Although these numbers are not generalizable to the entire community, it can be noted that amongst the 28 children of pre-school age (2.5-5 years old) surveyed, 22 were going to school (no information on the regularity of attendance). UNIA found that participation to preschool education amongst Travellers remains a challenge, and that the levels of school enrolment amongst children of legal school age (6-18 years old) are still very low, particularly for those who live an itinerant life.

One of the main reasons for this low schooling participation is that there is currently no education system adapted to a mobile lifestyle. For people working on the ground, it is obvious that parents are facing an impossible choice for their children: they must either enrol them in a school (which hinders the possibility of travelling and thus threatens the economic survival of their family) or inscribe them to correspondence courses (which come with challenges of supervision, follow-up, and is attached to significant material investments: computer, printer, scanner, Wi-Fi). Besides, as recalled by the General

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<sup>46</sup> Suggested read on that matter: Hemelsoet, E., (2016). Whose problem is it anyway? Realising the right to education for Roma children in Ghent, Belgium. *Romani Studies* 5, Vol 25(1).

<sup>47</sup> The General Delegate for the Rights of the Child (GDRC) notes a periodical increase of school drop-outs amongst Roma when comes the end of winter. This period coincides with the end of "winter plans" and hence, with an increased number of homeless families. For these families newly deprived of a shelter, it gets a lot more difficult to ensure their children's presence in school.

<sup>48</sup> UNIA, (2017), *Participation à l'enseignement des enfants des Gens du Voyage de Belgique*.

<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that these samples are not generalizable to the rest of the Roma community, and that the knowledge on school participation is still very incomplete as of today.

Delegate for the Rights of the Child, the system of school enrolment is in itself unsuited to the mobile reality of Travellers – not to say in clear opposition with it. School enrolments are based on a geographical criterion: the neighbourhood and place of residence is what determines which schools one can go to, and children need a derogation to change school. This lack of flexibility constitutes an additional obstacle in Travellers' access to school.

For families living in residential fields too, considerable obstacles to schooling remain. These obstacles mostly having to do with residential uncertainty: more often than not, they reside on site without a building permit, their presence is solely tolerated and they are at permanent risk of eviction. Such situations directly impact school participation.

## Improving quality of education until the end of compulsory schooling

The Belgium educational system, includes several tools for supporting diversity in schools:

- *Mix Decree*: in the French Community, the *Mix Decree* exists since 2008 aims for reducing social segregation amongst schools. This decree does not target specific groups. It is based on a range of parameters that must be considered when a child enrolls in first year secondary school. The first criterion has to do with the social background of pupils. Similarly, the Flemish Community has a Decree for Equalitarian Education. According to UNIA (2017), these *Mix Decrees* recently helped decreasing the number of children oriented towards special schools.<sup>50</sup>
- In Belgium, the *Pact for Educational Excellence* is coming into existence and intends – amongst other things - to reduce the phenomenon of “early school tracking” with the elaboration of a common study programme for all students up until the age of 15. Another ambition is to allocate additional means to combat repetition and early drop-out, as well as to reduce inequalities in language proficiency. However, the Education Diversity Barometer recently published by UNIA (2018) reveals that for now, secondary education in Belgium remains characterized by a system of early tracking, and an unequal status given to the different forms of education, which crystallizes inequalities between students.
- The system of *Differentiated Framing* (“*Encadrement Différencié*”) developed under the Pact for Educational Excellence aims for ensuring equality of opportunities and social emancipation in education. Under this system, extra funds are allocated to schools that welcome many children from disadvantaged backgrounds due to social, economic, cultural or pedagogical reasons. It concerns 25 per cent of the students in middle and secondary schools. Reportedly, the allocated budget has not evolved and currently does not suffice to cover all needs.<sup>51</sup>
- The *DASPA project*: since 2012, a programme called *DASPA* (*Dispositif d'accueil et de scolarisation des primos arrivants*) is in place in the French Community, and targets the schooling of newcomers. Under this programme, some schools organise “adapted classes” for children who cannot immediately integrate general schools, notably because of the language barrier. So far, DASPA classes are available to children newcomers for a period of 18 months, which is sometimes insufficient for children (notably those struggling with the language and those who have never been schooled before). The DASPA project is expected to be reformed with a new decree that would adapt it to ground realities (amongst other things, access to DASPA classes would be based on a skill test rather than on a specific limited date of arrival or learning duration). It must be noted the creation of these DASPA classes depend on the demand and the capabilities of the school. In 2015-2016,

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<sup>50</sup> UNIA, (2017), Participation à l'enseignement des enfants des Gens du Voyage de Belgique.

<sup>51</sup> <https://pro.guidesocial.be/articles/actualites/plus-de-moyens-pour-l-encadrement-differencie.html>



there were 32 DASPA schools for basic education levels and 37 DASPA schools for secondary education. Following the "migration crisis" in 2015, new DASPA opened.

As for the school education in **Brussels**, the NSRI supports the Foyer in its efforts to "increase cooperation between schools (and support services) and Roma families". To this day, the Roma and Travellers service of the Foyer still benefits from this support in their actions targeting the schooling of Roma children. A multi-year convention funds the maintenance of a Support Centre, which functions as a contact point for social actors, schools and local authorities and for the target groups.

The NSRI also stated the will to continue deploying and implicating mediators with a view to "strengthen the relationship between Roma families and schools in order to raise levels of attendance". At this time, the Foyer employs several Roma mediators (of Romanian and Bulgarian origin).

Additionally, in the NSRI, the Brussels Capital Region and the Truancy Prevention Programme supported the pilot project "Roma children", a mediation programme for Roma families in schools that have a large number of children from ethnic backgrounds. This project has been in place for 12 years and is implemented by the Foyer, in collaboration with municipalities of the Brussels Capital Region. Its ambition is to enhance school attendance and parental involvement, and concurrently, to inform teachers on the situation and culture of the Roma community. The Foyer attests positive results from this mediation work: reduction of absenteeism, faster reconnection to school after absenteeism, and about 90 school registrations per year. When it comes to parental implication (another objective of the NSRI for Flanders), the Foyer describes a facilitation of contact and communication between families and schools, a growing presence in parent meetings. The sensitisation work done with school staffs and social and public actors reportedly led to more attention to diversity and more openness to Roma families. In their interventions, mediators keep an ear to the other difficulties faced by Roma families. The idea is to improve the general living conditions in order to ease the way to school (networking and partnerships with other social services and public institutions).

For **Flanders**, the NSRI mentioned that "the Flemish Community provides additional funding (grants) for schools with a significant number of Travellers". This is meant to allow for an approach to education that is more tailor-made. This system of special subsidies existed prior to the NSRI (since 2006). It led to the delivery of certificates attesting the belonging to the Traveller community, a practice criticized by some in the civil society but which is still in place in spite of the concerns raised. There does not seem to be details available on the use of the allocated money.

The NSRI also indicated that "The Flemish Community will focus on getting children into education, through reception desks (*onthaalbureaus*). Specific actions under the education action plan 'Truancy Prevention in Schools' were expected to monitor the attendance of these children and young people and check that challenging behaviour has been reduced."

According to a policy note for the period 2009-2014, published by the VZW *Integratie-Inburgering*, the Flemish government recognizes and subsidizes 8 reception desks. In addition to the 3 desks in Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent, each Flemish province has one reception desk. These reception desks are, in addition to the main offices, locally embedded in localities. Altogether, the reception desks count more than 40 locations.

In Flanders, the integration policy with regard to all minor foreign-language newcomers is based on the principle that integration takes place for the most part through education. The primary role of reception desks, when it comes to minors, is thus to lead them to school. The reception desks also accompany parents of school-aged children in their integration path and support their involvement in school education.

### **Example of local initiative: Ghent**

In Flanders, the transit site of Ghent (opened since 2011) offers educational support to Traveller children. One of the collaborators working on the site has teaching experiences and gives language classes every week to the children. A classroom has been installed onsite, and can take in a dozen children to help them to get more familiar with reading, writing and calculations. The emphasis is placed on developing a strong pedagogical base and reinforcing children's self-esteem. This local initiative stemmed from ground needs observed by the fieldworkers. It could however become organized in a more structural manner in years to come (project currently under revision).

Apart from learning classes, many activities are organized for the Travellers staying on the site. Amongst other things, the follow up and orientation on social, administrative and medical demands, as well as regular organization of leisure activities onsite. For instance, sport tournaments, neighbours celebration days, creative activities.

For the French-speaking Community, the NSRI planned on the deployment of Roma mediators, whose function would be to act as a link between schools and families with Roma children. However, it appears that only one Roma mediator has been hired since, in Charleroi: a Roma mediator had been hired for three years (2015-2018) in the frame of a partnership project between the local SWO and two schools, in order to address problems of early school leaving. Her main mission was to identify obstacles to schooling, and to find resources to tackle them within a network of partners. This project ended in June 2018. Over three years, the project has reportedly shown limited results. According to project manager, improving schooling participation is a longer termed process. They remain convinced that intercultural mediation is the most effective way to tackle early school drop-out.

In order to cope with learning difficulties in the French Community, the NSRI was planning on ensuring the link between schools and homework classes, AMO (help in an open environment) etc., by supporting "joint projects involving stakeholders who can help to ensure a successful educational outcome for children, primarily Roma children, with learning difficulties".

In Wallonia, the CMGVR has developed two projects focused on school support:

- *Mobile animations with Travellers children*: ever since 2004, the CMGVR has insured a regular presence on the field with Travellers groups in the frame of a "mobile school support" project. The aim surely is not to replace school itself, but to provide complementary support to Traveller families and children in their learning process (with a focus on reading, writing and calculation).<sup>52</sup> The families who are interested in organizing these classes on-site call upon the educational team of the CMGVR, which then come on site with a mobile home with a capacity of up to ten children.
- *School support with Roma children*: for years, the CMGVR has developed a project addressed to Roma families willing to learn French, which a requisite for their integration in Belgium. The project is based on the acknowledgement that improving French language skills is a key tool to develop all other competences. These French language reinforcement sessions are organized mostly within school buildings, but always outside class hours.<sup>53</sup>

To tackle parental literacy, the NSRI also supported building bridges between schools, social support centres and the not-for-profit association "*Lire et Écrire*" (Read and Write) in the French Community. This NGO has been recognised as a movement of Permanent

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<sup>52</sup> This project has been the subject of a reportage, available at: <http://cmgv.be/ressources/reportages/168-apprendre-et-voyager> (2009, RTBF)

<sup>53</sup> This project was also the subject of a detailed reportage, in the magazine "Appren-tissages" (2017)



Education since 2007. It is composed of eight regional centres in Wallonia, six literacy centres in Brussels, and three coordination centres (one for Wallonia, one for Brussels and one for the Federation Wallonia-Brussels). *Lire et Ecrire* has three central objectives:

- The sensitisation of the public opinion and the public authorities to the persistence of illiteracy and the urgent need to combat its causes.
- The promotion of the effective right to quality literacy for any adult who wishes to learn
- The development of literacy in a perspective of empowerment, participation, and social change towards greater equality.

### Support of secondary and higher education particularly for professions with high labour market demand

In Flanders, there is one notable initiative aimed at connecting the demand in the labour market and the secondary education: *VormingCentrum GroepINTRO* (Molenbeek). The educational process is organised in alternation, with a combination of school time and apprenticeship in a workplace. Pupils receive general and professional trainings, combined with individual accompaniment. They receive intensive support in Flemish (and French). In the *Vormingscentrum GroepINTRO*, vocational training is apprehended with a specific pedagogy, based on the idea of "role models". It is in that framework that Roma mediators are employed as bridge figures in the Centrum, with regards to the high percentage of Roma young amongst pupils (about 80 per cent). At this time, one Roma mediator is employed at the *Vormingscentrum GroepINTRO* and his bridging role with the Roma youth is supported by Roma mediators from the Foyer.

The project *BrugCoach*, which allows for the employment of this Roma mediator, has brought positive and encouraging results. The activities developed under this project have two main objectives: improving the image and the visibility of young Roma,<sup>54</sup> and coaching them for their future in the Brussels labour market. Close attention is given to gender equality and the emancipation of both boys and girls. In 2017-2018, 42 young people were part of this bridging project (15 girls, 27 boys). The *Vormingscentrum GroepINTRO* has contacted former pupils for follow-up, and it resulted that 35 per cent of boys and 25 per cent of girls got into work or professional training or were actively looking for a job.<sup>55</sup>

However, the *BrugCoach* project is about to end by the time of development of this report (30 November 2018). So far, there is no structural solution to finance its follow-up. Under the upcoming Flemish educational decree, the orientation towards and enrolment in the *Vormingscentrum GroepINTRO* will only be possible through schools (namely for pupils who are already enrolled in the Flemish education system) and for a limited time (although longer periods are usually needed for these youngsters). This change will automatically exclude many Roma, since they were mostly oriented towards the *Vormingscentrum GroepINTRO* by mediators, often 'under the radar' and thus, not enrolled in the French or the Flemish education system.

### Fight against discrimination and antigypsyism in education

In Belgium according to UNIA (2017), school education is the sector marked by the starkest increase of discrimination files, with a growth of 125 per cent over the past five years (all groups combined). In 2017, 32.4 per cent of the files concerned secondary education, 23.6 per cent primary education and 23.6 per cent higher education. The files

<sup>54</sup> Outside of the coaching, other activities are planned, such as sessions with former pupils and role models, exchange of good practices, participation to public events, promotional movies, success stories and testimonies shared on social media...

<sup>55</sup> 46 per cent of boys and 29 per cent of girls were unreachable at the moment of contact.

based on racial criteria have been increasing and represented 20.7 per cent of all education-related cases in 2017. Over the past five years, there has only been seven reported cases of discrimination against Roma or Travellers in the education sector, which is likely due to the well-known phenomenon of underreporting.

Well aware that school education is practically a requisite for the promotion of social insertion, UNIA has launched a study in 2018 on equal opportunities in Belgian schools, led by three universities (KU Leuven, UGent and ULB – one per Region). The study meant to answer questions on what diversity policies and practices schools apply, on the functioning of the school orientation process, on the education path of foreign pupils, and of those who have a low socio-economic status or disability. The report revealed the existence of segregation school structures: students with a migration background appeared more likely to repeat a year, are less represented in high ranked education structures, are more likely to leave school without obtaining a diploma and are less inclined to pursue higher education. In identifying the causes, the analysis pinpoints an interplay of challenges and indicators mostly linked to migration backgrounds and/or socio-economic backgrounds. It concludes: *"It would therefore appear that focusing at the start of the school career on a high-quality care and remedial learning system could make a significant difference for these target groups"*.

In the Flemish Community, the research evokes the *"poor position of the Flemish education system with regards to social equity"*. The study showed that some schools are marked by high degrees of segregation (notably when it comes to students with a functional disability, with a migration background or from families with a poorer socio-economic background) which it connects with the current enrolment policies, funding of education and lack of school infrastructure. Concerning the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, the research showed similar segregation processes affecting the education paths of students from poorer social backgrounds, of foreign origins as well as those with disabilities. According to the study, the most decisive causes are related to the organization and structures of the education system in the French Community, which is presented as a competitive marketplace.

Field experiences reveal that Roma face school discrimination, notably with schools refusing to enrol them because of their "learning lag" or out of fear of "attracting too many disadvantaged children". The CoE Commissioner for Human Rights backed this up as he reported *"frequent enrolment denials of Roma children, notably in the Brussels region, on grounds that the schools cannot cater for the needs of these disadvantaged children"*.<sup>56</sup>

For the CMGV, this statement was illustrated again in 2018, with a case in which the school management refused to enrol Roma siblings on the ground that *"the school was not prepared to take in this many Roma children"* and that *"enrolling them all could open the floodgates for other Roma families"*. Such statements would be deemed unacceptable if they targeted children of any other origin, however this example reveals that when it comes to Roma, even textbook examples of discrimination still hardly raise an eyebrow. School discrimination cases are particularly ironic since a widespread criticism/representation of the Roma community is that they reject the school system.

Fortunately, field actors notice that some schools organize solidarity solutions for disadvantaged children, allowing them for instance to eat for free at the canteen. Mediation work has repeatedly proven useful for finding agreements with schools. However, these types of supportive actions remain short-term, not sustainable, and quite aleatory since they solely depend on the sensitivity and on the dynamism of the school staff and direction.

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<sup>56</sup> Muiznieks, Nils. "Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Following his visit to Belgium from 14 to 18 September 2015." Council of Europe. Accessed February 27. <https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=2879548&SecMode=1&DocId=2349344&Usage=2>.

To tackle the early development of stereotypes amongst children, the CMGVR edits pedagogical sheets explaining the daily realities of the Travellers community and unravelling preconceived notions. These sheets are destined to teachers, communal agents, students and actors of the sociocultural sector.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Employment

**To the Belgian Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue and to the relevant public institutions/authorities (at the regional and local level) and services (Regional Employment Centres):**

- *To Promote the employment of Roma and Travellers mediators:* Despite the incentives of the Belgian NSRI, Roma and Travellers mediators are still hired in insufficient numbers. The employment of more mediators (in social welfare offices and regional integration centres for instance) would constitute an improvement both in terms of employment and in terms of community inclusion and empowerment.
- *To promote the sensitisation and employers and professionals of the employment sector:* The persistence of obstacles (including direct discrimination) standing in the way of Roma and Travellers' access to the labour market reveals a need for the sensitisation and the training of professionals of the employment sector (starting with employers and with regional employment centres). This mission of information and training should be elaborated in close cooperation with civil society organizations and support further networking between actors of the socio-professional insertion sector.
- *To improve access to vocational trainings and work experience:* Effective measures for a better access of Roma and Travellers to the labour market and to employment opportunities include support for vocational and professional training (be it included in the general framework or adapted to their singularities). We recommend that employment authorities and services pay closer attention to insuring equal access to vocational and professional training for Roma and Travellers, as well as to their orientation towards labour shortage jobs and support for self-employment and entrepreneurship.
- *The enforcement of the anti-discrimination law in the field of employment.*

### Housing and essential public services

**To the three Regional governments – Ministries for Social Action:**

- *To issue a Decree on temporary stay:* At the moment, there is no existing legislation providing compulsory organization the temporary stay of Travelers in Belgian regions. A decree making it compulsory for Provinces to create more sites, and laying out the basics for a proper organization of the temporary stay of Travellers (access to water, electricity, and garbage collection) would significantly improve the life conditions of Travellers as well as the relationships between Travelers and local populations. In Wallonia, we support the Ministry for Social Action to keep the bill elaborated by the former government in the political agenda.
- *To formally recognise the mobile housing as a legal home:* Caravans are recognized as housing in Flanders and in Brussels, but not in Wallonia. In any case, housing regulations have not been adjusted to mobile housing. Travellers are often denied recognition of their caravans for not fitting technical housing standards. With the consultation of community representatives, regional authorities should define in their Housing and urban planning Codes the criteria caravans must fulfil, to get permission for permanent stay. This is an absolute necessity to make the existence of Travellers and their way of life legal.
- *To make a moratorium on evictions:* Forced evictions are traumatizing, particularly for children. In winter, the even lesser amount of fields available for temporary stay (they close for winter) pushes entire families on the road during

the coldest months of the year. There needs to be a moratorium forbidding the eviction of caravans installed on public land during winter.

- *To develop accommodation alternatives that are suitable for families:* The multiplication of situations of homelessness amongst Roma families and the emergence of tiny shantytowns urgently call for adapted measures of insertion through housing that are suitable for families, such as those initiated in Brussels under a recent call for proposal by the Region. Structural subsidies could also be allocated to organizations working on reinsertion through housing. Additionally, it is crucial that all (urgent or long-term) accommodation initiatives are adapted to the realities and needs of the Roma community, which are entirely distinct of the Travellers'. On a more global note: there is need to rethink the whole shelter housing reinsertion system in order to include solutions to homelessness that are adapted to a family dimension.

## Health care

### **To the Federal Public Service for Public Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment:**

- *To support training and employment of Roma mediators in the health care sector:* Amongst about a hundred intercultural mediators currently employed under the intercultural mediation programme ran by the FPS for Health in Belgian hospitals and health care facilities, none is of Roma belonging. We strongly believe that the training and hiring of Roma mediators would be highly beneficial to improve communication around medical issues and to tackle reported problems of mistrust towards medical institutions.
- *To support information of the Roma community about health access:* When it comes to healthcare, one of the main challenges appeared to be the lack of information of the Roma community. Beyond the fact that this issue constitutes an additional argument for the hiring of Roma mediators in health care facilities, it also calls for the organization of a broader, more structural information of the Roma community on the Belgian health system and procedures, as well as on the service offering at their disposal. This mission of information diffusion could be allocated to civil society organizations, in partnerships with experts from the health care sector.

## Education

### **To the Federation Wallonia-Brussels, to COCOF, to the VGC and to the COCOM:**

- *To adapt the school system to the mobile reality of Travellers:* Reports from the ground show a gap between Travellers' mobile lifestyle and the school system. This cultural and educational gap has to be addressed by the authorities in order to reach out to Travellers children. We recommend promoting more flexibility in the enrolment system and the development of a pedagogical offer adapted to the different degree of mobility and residence of Travellers. To reach these objectives, we recommend working in an integrated manner, in partnership with relevant stakeholders from the school system, and Travellers community representatives. We also recommend relying on mediators and supporting schools to develop good relations with Travellers parents.
- *To support the access of Roma children to school education:* Since financial problems are often the main obstacle to school education, Roma children in situation of homelessness or deep poverty should be supported in a way that ensures actual free education (including meals, school materials...).

- *To sensitise of school personnel:* This monitoring report has shown the need to support the information of school staff and management on Roma realities, discrimination and prejudice. Sensitising and training of directors, teachers and school personnel is a first step to reverse the segregation patterns observed, and to inspire new ways of envisioning and managing diversity at school.

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