

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 58

Creation of new occupational patterns for cultural minorities: The Gypsy Case

This is the final Briefing Paper of the project that started in October 2001

Context of the Research

High unemployment rates, low skilled and precarious jobs are usually found to be above the European average among the Romà. An Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) report on the situation of Romà (2000) estimated that unemployment rates reached up to 100% in some European areas. Additionally, Romaní jobs such as travelling sales are reaching a crisis point within the current economy, endangering the survival of many Romaní families. This project arises as a response to this situation. Because labour inclusion is directly related to social participation and active citizenship, the Romaní labour situation has become an urgent issue to address in the construction of a socially cohesive European society.

The project is based on the idea that the Romà culture contains different features related to the professional skills and abilities that are nowadays demanded by the information societies' economies. For instance, there is an increasing demand of highly specialised professionals who are able to adapt to the constantly changing context and to offer quick responses. The Romà have traditionally developed the ability to be flexible, to adapt to different contexts, and are used to taking rapid decisions at the workplace. This opens up new employment opportunities for the Romà that need to be further explored.

The project aims to identify the reasons why Romà are excluded from work and ways of overcoming the problem. It analyses the skills that Romà have developed as a social group and identifies how these skills can contribute to the enrichment of the labour market and social cohesion. The project has addressed these issues across the whole of Europe.

Key Conclusions

These conclusions have been developed by involving the Romani people in the project from the beginning.

1. The transition from the industrial to the Knowledge Society has not taken into account the Romani experience. The Romani have had a very different experience of this transition compared to the rest of society.
2. Unfortunately, during a time of economic and employment growth, at the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, there were no better opportunities for their inclusion into the formal labour market.
3. During the 1973 crisis this access to the labour market was limited to travelling sales, scrap metal and cardboard dealers. However, from 1995 to the present, these jobs have been in decline and some young people have obtained precarious jobs in the industry and construction sectors.
4. Romani have developed specific skills and competencies in their traditional jobs that include teamwork and co-operative organisation; flexibility to adapt to changes; intercultural competencies; dynamic jobs and activities and self-learning. In addition, specific forms of work organization have also been identified as being common among the Romani, for example, family based business with essential solidarity bounds. Some of the skills developed by the Romani coincide with new emerging occupational profiles.
5. However, barriers have been identified as being the reason why this connection between abilities and labour market demands is not co-ordinated.
6. At the workplace, racism is manifested through very different practices and decision-making processes based on a series of "internal non-written rules." For example, systematic practices that put Romani workers in positions where they have fewer opportunities to develop new skills or later have access to new positions.
7. The generalised lack of knowledge about the Romani community reinforces existing prejudices and stereotypes determining their selection and promotion processes. Some of these stereotypes can be characterised as:
 - The identification of the Romani culture with marginalisation.
 - The assumption that family duties are incompatible with job responsibilities.
 - Lack of work habits.
 - Mistrust in their capacity and willingness to properly participate in society and training.

8. These stereotypes deeply affect the experiences of Romani workers in many ways, for instance, a fear of revealing their identity, low self-esteem, and a constant tension when demonstrating their abilities that break with the prejudices held of them.
9. Romani women experience a three-folded exclusion because they are women, Romà and non-educated. Romani women are excluded due to the prevalence of certain negative stereotypes. For example, there exists an ethnocentric stereotypical vision that defines Romani women as submissive, bowing to the family and to chauvinistic values that impede them accessing education for fear of losing the Romani identity.
10. Many political efforts tend to only satisfy immediate needs without seeking long-term solutions to the causes of the problems.
11. In the Knowledge Society, access to the labour market largely depends on academic qualifications. The low levels of schooling predominantly found among the Romà represent a serious barrier for their inclusion. This fact has been identified, to a greater degree, as a cause of school segregation, leading to low expectation itineraries for Romani children in European schools.
12. Romani culture includes traditions and values of great worth that can be useful for social cohesion and co-existence: solidarity, inclusiveness, and dialogic conflict resolution processes.
13. Romani associations play a key role in the recognition of Romà, denouncing discriminatory practices and situations, and have become advocates for the compliance of antidiscriminatory legislation and basic human rights.
14. The equality of differences principle helps to overcome the tension between equality and difference. The Romani people participating in the project claim their right to have their life style and culture to be respected, but, at the same time, that they receive an equal treatment and access to the same opportunities like the rest of society.

Key Recommendations

A number different ways for overcoming labour exclusion of the Romà have been identified:

Labour market

1. There is a need to encourage economic “solidarity networks” as an effective way of reducing exclusion from labour market. Emerging forms of economic organisation coincide with certain principles of organisation and development by Romani family

businesses and the economical activities of Romà. Policies need to consider that traditional jobs have their basis in family interactions. This characteristic should be taken into account when planning their inclusion in the current labour market.

2. There should be the promotion and financing of Romaní companies that create new pathways into the labour market. This should include actions that support the creation of franchises and self-employment based on the recognition of their existing cooperative and practical abilities.
3. It is not sufficient to encourage access to non-qualified positions that are emerging in the current knowledge society. It does not promote the increase and widening of the expectations of the Romà. There is also a need to find ways of providing access to the emerging qualified professional jobs.
4. Consideration should be given to the regulation of current jobs in order to improve labour conditions and overcome precarious situations. These measures should also consider possibilities of regulating informal economic activities as a first step for a major labour inclusion.
5. There is a need to offer support systems for the promotion of business initiatives like legal or bank services that will increase the opportunities of creating new regular family businesses or other type of self-employment for all.

Policy development

6. Ethnic minorities need to be involved in the development of those policies that are aimed at addressing their group problems in order to provide effective responses.
7. Romà live spread out across Europe. The responsibility of their well-being is shared by different governments. In order to really address their needs, it is necessary to develop specific international policies. A first step towards this transnational approach should be the official recognition of the Romà people in the different territories.
8. The Romà are particularly affected by problems related to employment, training, health and housing. Given the interrelated nature of all these problems, policies need to take a holistic and integrated approach.
9. There is a need to implement policies that recognise previously acquired skills providing accreditation of prior knowledge and access to higher education.
10. There should be the encouragement of the implementation of affirmative actions in the fields of education and the labour market as these policies have proved to be effective in guaranteeing the presence of those disadvantaged groups in different institutions. This benefits not only the targeted group, but also the entire society.

11. Any policy should take into account that Romaní culture already calls for educational provision that respects equality of differences; that is successful for all; and in which the community participates.
12. Therefore, the following components should be included in any educational policy that focuses on the Romà people:
 - Acquisition of basic instrumental skills.
 - Recognition of the Romaní culture in the educational curriculum and in all areas of the educational system;
 - Intercultural education;
 - Equal participation and inclusion of all the people involved in the educational process,
 - Opening the school to the community
 - Encourage high expectations and educational success instead of a deficits approach
 - The presence of Romaní teachers.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: "Workaló. The creation of new occupational patterns for cultural minorities: the gypsy case". (Final report November 2004).

The project web site at <http://www.neskes.net/workalo/indexan.htm>

Partner details

Key Publications

Alexiu, T. M., "The gypsy community excluded from the knowledge society " *Revista de Stiinte ale Educatiei (Journal of Educational Sciences)*, no. 1 (6), Editura Universitatii de Vest, 2002, pp. 117-122.

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