

Conference Roma Housing  
3 February 2011, Prague

*Check against delivery!*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Enjoyment of affordable, habitable, accessible and culturally adequate housing is a fundamental right. It is guaranteed under the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which binds all Member States of the EU, as well as the European Social Charter. The right to social and housing assistance is also recognised by Article 34 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights.

A case decided by the Romanian National Council for Combating Discrimination in 2005 typifies some of the specific problems arising in this area. A group of Roma families were housed by a municipal authority on the site of a wastewater treatment facility on the outskirts of the city. They were given metallic shacks and wooden houses with electricity and running water. Two of the children died, and it was alleged that they had been poisoned by the toxic environment. Investigations revealed that this location had been chosen because of the opposition by the local population to other proposed sites. The mayor responded to the allegations saying that he was not interested in the health of Roma children. According to him, the Roma already had 'too many children'. On the contrary, the Roma should have been grateful because their electricity and water bills were being paid for by the municipality. A finding of discrimination was made and the municipality was ordered to pay a fine.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Housing is intimately intertwined with one's quality of life. Bad quality housing affects our health. Remotely located housing affects our ability to go to work, to go to school, to go to a doctor. Segregated housing perpetuates prejudice, intolerance and fear between communities.

The consistent approach of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the European Committee of Social Rights is that the right to housing is much more than just the right to a 'roof over one's head'. This was reiterated at the inter-governmental level in 2005 by a Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe on the housing conditions of Roma and Travellers in Europe. To quote the UN Committee, it is 'the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity.' Allow me to focus on these three elements, also considered in the light of the Fundamental Rights Agency's research findings on Roma and their right to housing.

**1) Firstly, many Roma do not enjoy security.** They are frequent victims of eviction carried out on a selective basis by both public and private landlords. Sometimes these

evictions occur violently and target large numbers – especially in the case of informal settlements or camp sites. Security issues in access to housing emerge also within Romani communities, leading to one family taking advantage of another.

**2) Secondly, many Roma are denied their chance to enjoy peace.** Our research found that in the majority of Member States, Roma live in segregated communities, either alone or together with other minority groups in low quality housing. And this makes them easily identifiable targets for violent attacks as reported in Hungary, Italy, Northern Ireland and Romania.

**3) Thirdly, many Roma are often denied the ability to live in dignity.** Their accommodation is often remotely located, and not connected by public transport to vital services such as health care and education, or places of work. Often the infrastructure providing electricity, clean water, and sewage disposal is missing or only partial. And the quality of the buildings or shelter in which they live is substandard.

But ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing inevitable about this situation. The Fundamental Rights Agency conducted case studies of local and regional initiatives on Roma housing in six EU Member States, which are promising in setting examples of good practice. One of these inspiring projects called the ‘Co-existence village’, took place in Ostrava, here in the Czech Republic.

### **What did we learn from these case studies?**

Because so many aspects of our lives are tied to our housing situation, improving housing equals the opportunity to improve quality of life in general. And the opposite is true also: A lack of adequate housing is usually one part of a bigger problem of social exclusion. Just by giving someone adequate accommodation, we do not solve joblessness, or a lack of formal qualifications or training, or exclusion from education. **So a fully integrated approach is needed to create a sustainable and successful long-term solution.**

I will identify four features of a fully integrated approach to housing:

- participation
- taking steps to shift the attitude of the local community
- support for education, training and employment, and
- inclusion of the majority population as beneficiaries

A first positive feature that was identified by our research is the **participation of the target population** group not just in designing the projects, but also in the physical task of construction. My colleague Eva Sobotka will be speaking further on this later today.

A second positive feature is **taking steps to shift local attitudes**. So often we find that public opposition to Roma settlements has a decisive impact on their location. This was the case with my opening example. Again, during the construction of the

Co-existence Village in Ostrava, those who were leading the project were very active in challenging stereotypes through the media. Here the municipal authority received two petitions against the Roma moving into the area. At the start of the project, a petition was received with 700 signatures. But a second petition was presented later, after extensive coverage of the project in the media. It gathered only 30 signatures, showing an important shift in local attitudes.

A third positive feature is the provision of support for getting residents into **employment**. In some cases this included vocational training, or support in how to write a CV or develop interview skills. Several of the case studies included this component, which is important in creating self-sufficiency and in guaranteeing that families have enough resources to pay their rent and bills and so avoid eviction.

This goes hand in hand with **educational** support for children. In the Co-existence Village it was reported that because of pre-school and after school classes all of the Roma children entered the mainstream education system rather than being sent to special schools, which was the norm at the time.

A final important feature, which was present in the Co-existence Village, was that the housing project **tackled a broader social, rather than a specifically Roma, problem**. That is, Roma residents were housed in the village together with people from the majority population who were also considered to be in need. This has an important impact because it prevents resentment arising among the majority population that they are receiving less favourable treatment.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I will end by setting out two challenges.

Firstly, while the case studies we examined are to be welcomed, they tended to be isolated projects that did not form part of a national approach. An important exception to this is Hungary where national funding for urban development is conditioned on anti-segregation plans.

Secondly, these types of project tend to be extremely high in cost relative to the numbers of people that they benefit. This means that all funding options have to be explored, including from the EU level, from charitable organisations and from private sources. It also means that the benefits of a fully integrated approach have to be viewed in the long term – it must be recognised that the cost can be justified in view of the important social changes that they can make.

Ladies and gentlemen,

the Roma face serious challenges to the enjoyment of their right to housing. But the way to overcome these obstacles is clearer than it was previously. Over the next two days we will have the chance to continue building approaches to improving access to housing for Roma, and to move towards making the right to housing a reality.