



Policy measures in the Netherlands for the social inclusion of Roma

1. Introduction

In the European Council of 24 June 2011, the EU member states agreed that by the end of 2011 each member state would draft a national strategy or a set of general policy measures to foster social inclusion of Roma. A preference was expressed for measures focusing on the themes of education, employment, health and housing.

In line with the basic principles of the government's policy document on integration, social cohesion and citizenship published on 16 June 2011, this paper describes the general policy that is relevant to improving the position of Roma in the Netherlands. In addition to the themes set by the European Council, the Dutch government would like to highlight two other subjects, namely combating socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour and exploitation of Roma children. In preparing this document, there was contact with the Dutch Sinti and Roma Institute (*Nederlands Instituut Sinti en Roma*, NISR) and the Roma community.

2. Roma in the Netherlands

Since each member state takes specific national circumstances into account in its measures to improve the integration of Roma, a brief description of the size of the Roma population in the Netherlands and its characteristics is provided below. There are no exact figures for the size of the Roma community in the Netherlands. Estimates vary from a few thousand¹ to forty thousand,² which means that no more than 0.24 per cent of the Dutch population is of Roma origin. Themes that are crucial to improving the position of Roma in the Netherlands are persistent absence from school, disadvantage in education and unemployment. Municipal data and estimates show that a large number of Roma children do not attend school regularly, if at all. Children are often absent from school for long periods due to all kinds of circumstances within families and temporary stays abroad. Many children leave school after completing their primary education. This is due in part to the fact that Roma girls tend to marry young, and marriages are sometimes arranged. Because they marry young, these girls often bear children at an early age too. Some parents believe it is not necessary to send their children to school to learn to read and write. Relatively few Roma young people have any qualifications, and this is reflected in a low rate of participation in the regular labour market. Municipalities report problems with crime and socially unacceptable behaviour, such as begging, shoplifting, pickpocketing and domestic nuisance.

According to the National Roma Platform, members of the Roma community experience discrimination and stigmatisation, and would like to see more attention given to the problem of statelessness.

¹ Netherlands Institute for Social Research, *Jaarrapport Integratie 2009*

² Council of Europe

3. Role of central government

Central government acknowledges that there are problems related to the Roma community and has chosen to deal with them by means of general policy. The aforementioned policy document on integration sets out a number of basic principles that apply to groups of a particular ethnic and/or cultural background, including Roma. The first principle is that integration is not the responsibility of the government but rather of those who decide to settle in the Netherlands. The second is that a person's future is more important than their origin. People need to have the will and the means to integrate into society. General labour market, education and housing policies should enable everyone to build a life for themselves. The Netherlands has no specific policy aimed at groups such as Roma. Instead, all policy should be equally effective for all groups in society. The NISR has indicated that general policy should include specially tailored measures to provide the solutions to the problems it is meant to deal with. As its policy document on integration sets out, the government endeavours to ensure that generic institutions are accessible to and effective for ethnic/cultural groups, including Roma.

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Primary responsibility for dealing with the problems of the local Roma population lies with municipalities. Central government acknowledges the urgency and severity of these problems. Municipalities are encouraged to make effective use of existing measures and the tools available to deal with problems within certain segments of local Roma communities. The Roma community itself also has a crucial role to play, and emphasizes the importance of contact at local level. It is important to note in this respect that standard instruments are used to deal with socially unacceptable and criminal behaviour. A program is being launched to fight crime in general and the exploitation of Roma children by members of the Roma community. It will also target the new influx of Roma from other EU countries. This approach relies on close cooperation between the relevant institutions and organisations, including municipal authorities, police, central government, the Public Prosecution Service, Youth Care and the Child Protection Board. It is important to note that the policy underpinning the program does not target Roma specifically, but is aimed at combating crime. One of the potential effects of this approach is the protection of the rights of Roma children, such as the right to education.

The reason for this program is the need to improve the prospects of children growing up in multi-problem families and help them participate in Dutch society. The essential principle is that improved prospects and opportunities for those who wish to take advantage of them are combined with law enforcement where necessary. The same principle applies in fact to everyone. Rights and obligations apply to everyone equally, Dutch and non-Dutch, young and old.

The aim is to stop and prevent exploitation of Roma children using an approach in which municipalities, police, central government and other relevant organisations work closely together. Criminal activity will be tackled comprehensively by means of law enforcement, discouragement and putting up barriers.

This problem has an international dimension, too. As a supplement to national policy, the Netherlands would like to work more closely with other EU member states, and see more cooperation among them, which is why the Netherlands has included this issue in this document.

Assistance is available to Roma who encounter discrimination. The Municipal Anti-Discrimination Services Act makes it easy for anyone to report (suspected) discrimination or request advice and assistance locally. In the Netherlands the law

protects everyone from discrimination. Article 1 of the Constitution bans discrimination. The government opposes all forms of discrimination, be it on the grounds of ethnic origin, religion, belief, sex, sexual orientation or any other grounds. Discrimination is at odds with the concept of citizenship: it is a barrier to engagement in society and stops people participating and investing in the community. To combat discrimination citizens need to report incidents of (suspected) discrimination to a municipal anti-discrimination service or file a criminal complaint with the police.

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Central government funds a platform for municipalities that are home to Roma who were admitted to the Netherlands in 1978 through an amnesty scheme. This platform was established in 2009. Its objectives include promoting intermunicipal cooperation and coordination and sharing knowledge, experience and problems. Public authorities and other parties require knowledge and expertise on Roma in the Netherlands. The NISR promotes cooperation between public authorities, the Roma community and various Roma organisations. The institute was established with central government funds made available to compensate for the lack of postwar reparations for Sinti and Roma.

4. Applying general policy to the four themes

Below is a description of the policy measures in the area of education, employment, health and housing that benefit vulnerable groups in society, including Roma. These are mainly standard measures within the framework of general policy.

Education

Children are required to attend school from the age of five. Municipalities are responsible for enforcing the law and employ school attendance officers to ensure compliance with this requirement. Parents bear primary responsibility for complying with the Compulsory Education Act. When children, Roma or otherwise, are persistently absent the school attendance officer takes action – if necessary legal – to ensure they go to school. As a last resort, the attendance officer can impose a fine or even a custodial sentence on the parents if the children fail to go to school. To increase school attendance among Roma children, the previous government made €0.6 million available to the Platform for Roma Municipalities of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) for the year 2010. These municipalities used the funds to finance projects aimed at encouraging Roma children, and girls in particular, to attend school. The VNG is sharing the knowledge and experience gained from these projects with other municipalities facing similar issues. As a result, there is a basis for effectively combating persistent absence among Roma children.

A compensatory policy is in place for disadvantaged primary school pupils. Municipalities receive €260 million in government funds for this purpose every year. They are required to use these funds to finance preschool education, bridging classes and summer school, and have the option of organising other activities aimed at improving children's language skills. Bridging classes provide extra tuition for pupils whose language skills fall short. Summer school programs offered during school holidays are also aimed at improving pupils' Dutch language skills. Over the course of the next few years, an additional €100 million will be invested in preschool education, bridging classes and summer schools. Approximately €400 million a year is available for children whose parents have a low level of education. In general, schools use these funds to pay for extra

teaching staff, which enables them to reduce class sizes so that disadvantaged pupils can be given more attention.

Secondary schools receive extra funds for staff if over the course of two or more years a certain percentage of their pupils come from neighbourhoods identified as having multiple poverty-related problems. Schools can use these funds to reduce dropout rates and provide more intensive guidance to individual pupils in order to help them improve their academic performance.

In the Netherlands, parents are free to choose their children's school. No distinction is made on the basis of ethnicity. There are no schools attended solely by Roma children.

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Employment

The Netherlands employs various measures to help people find jobs. It is of great importance to the Dutch government to ensure that no one is excluded from employment, including Roma.

To foster participation in employment, jobseekers are offered individualized assistance. This entails applying measures that take into account the competences and skills of jobseekers and the obstacles they face. An assessment is made to determine which instruments and procedures can be used to help the individual find appropriate paid work as quickly as possible. This approach applies equally to all jobseekers, including Roma. Municipalities and the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV) have access to a wide range of instruments and facilities to help people find jobs, such as wage subsidies, job coaching, workstation adaptations, training and guidance.

Personal responsibility is a vital element of the social security system. Benefit claimants are expected to work actively on their return to the labour market. It is especially important to remove any barriers keeping people from returning to work after a period of unemployment or incapacity for work. To this end, the government is preparing a work resumption bill. If you can work, you must work. This applies to everyone, regardless of age, ethnic origin or gender. One of the bill's provisions allows municipalities to require social assistance claimants to complete a Dutch language course. Poor language skills should not be a barrier to employment. Under the Work and Social Assistance Act (*Wet Werk en Bijstand*, WWB) anyone who behaves or dresses in a way that limits their chances of getting a job runs the risk of their benefit being reduced or revoked or their application for benefit denied.

In addition, migrants from other EU countries who do not have permanent residence rights in the Netherlands are subject to the government measures described by the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment in his letters of 14 April 2011 and 18 November 2011 to the House of Representatives. The principal rule is that EU citizens, like everyone else, must have means of support if they wish to stay in the Netherlands longer than three months. EU citizens who do not (or no longer) meet the conditions for residence must return to their country of origin.

Health care

Every citizen is entitled to high-quality care and support delivered quickly, safely and respectfully. Health insurance companies, healthcare providers, citizens, companies and government share responsibility for this. The responsibility for public health lies primarily with government, and it is usually municipal authorities that are called upon to act first. In the current system there is scope for taking the diversity of the population into account, when relevant. This means that it is

possible to take the needs of specific groups, including the Roma community, into consideration. Personal responsibility remains the guiding principle.

The Healthcare Insurance Act (*Zorgverzekeringswet*) is for people who require curative care. All legal residents and everyone who pays salaries tax in the Netherlands is entitled to health care and required to take out health insurance. People who have health insurance are fully or partially covered for the costs of necessary medical care. The ban on risk selection ensures that nobody, including members of the Roma community, is excluded from insurance cover for health or financial reasons. People who do not have health insurance must pay their medical costs themselves. In the Netherlands, it is a generally accepted principle that healthcare providers have a professional responsibility to provide necessary medical care regardless of how the costs of care will be paid.

People who require long-term care due to illness or disability are covered by the Exceptional Medical Expenses Act (*Algemene Wet Bijzondere Ziektekosten*, AWBZ). All legal residents and everyone who pays salaries tax in the Netherlands is automatically insured under this Act. All legal residents and everyone who pays salary tax etc.

The Social Support Act (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*, WMO) ensures that people who require assistance in their daily lives receive the help they need from the municipal authorities so that they can participate in society and live independently.

There are various forms of support for young people and families. Nearly every municipality has a Youth and Family Centre (CJG). The CJG provides young people and parents with information, advice and support aimed at ensuring that children grow up healthy and safe. Youth Care Offices provide parents and children with guidance and ensure that they receive appropriate assistance when there are parenting and behavioural problems.

The Advice and Reporting Centres for Child Abuse and Neglect investigate cases in which a child is in a situation that is a threat to his or her development, and refer serious cases to the Child Protection Board, which then conducts its own investigation and, if necessary, applies for a child protection order. Coaching is available for families that have multiple problems. Under the direction of the municipal authorities, the agencies concerned make agreements about coordinating assistance to families. In its Coalition Agreement the government announced its intention to overhaul the youth care system, with responsibilities being transferred in phases to the municipalities. This will put them in a better position to pursue comprehensive policies and strengthen the cohesion at local level between policy and support for children and families in the various domains.

Housing

Everyone who resides legally in the Netherlands and due to a low income is eligible for social housing, has access to the social housing market, including Roma. Housing associations are explicitly charged with the task of providing housing for weak groups and have a large supply of subsidized rented housing for that purpose. In so far as municipalities work with housing regulations to ensure housing is allocated fairly, the systems in use in the Netherlands allocate housing without regard for the ethnic background of potential tenants. The criteria usually applied to determine the order of allocation are years of residence, years of registration and age (in the case of starters). Occasionally no criteria at all are applied, and housing is allocated by lottery. Research shows that these systems are non-discriminatory, and therefore ensure access to the social housing market.

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Roma have the same opportunities to find appropriate rented housing as anyone else. The majority of Roma in the Netherlands live in houses. A small number – an estimated 500 individuals – live in caravans by choice.³

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5. Conclusion

The government believes that this description of existing measures with respect to education, employment, health and housing and, additionally, of measures concerning law enforcement, crime and exploitation of children provides a clear picture of how general policy for migrants, including Roma, is applied in the Netherlands.

Since Roma are not registered as such in the municipal personal records database it is not possible to report on the size of the population or specific statistics concerning education, employment, health or housing. Municipalities have an idea, based on observations, of the number of Roma within their territory. Central government authorities will continue to monitor developments in the areas of education, employment, housing, health care, crime, discrimination and statelessness by maintaining a dialogue with municipalities and the Roma community.

³ Netherlands Institute for Social Research, *Jaarrapport Integratie 2009*