

Guidelines for  
diaconal organisations  
on Roma participation

**Eurodiaconia** 

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## GUIDELINES FOR DIACONAL ORGANISATIONS ON ROMA PARTICIPATION

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The aim of this document is to provide guiding principles for diaconal (or other) organisations who are developing or re-evaluating existing projects with Roma communities. The document is intended to be a flexible resource, proposing some starting points for reflection on how to ensure participation and empowerment of Roma communities and individuals. It is based on the conviction that top-down approaches have a limited effect and that projects aimed at Roma inclusion should actively involve Roma at all stages. Only a participatory approach will allow Roma to take co-ownership of the project or service, and to be empowered by the process.

This document is based on discussions held by Eurodiaconia members at the 2014 Roma Network meeting in Novi Sad, Serbia. It provides guidelines which come directly from representatives of diaconal and church-related organisations working with Roma communities; during the meeting, participants discussed how their respective organisations worked with Roma in the design, implementation and evaluation of their services/projects. On this basis, they explored which methods work, or don't work, to ensure Roma involvement and co-ownership of projects.

This document should be regularly updated and reviewed. It complements Eurodiaconia's position paper on *Social Inclusion of Roma*, which promotes user involvement and empowerment, and should be read in the light of that document.

### Why promote user participation and empowerment?

Diaconal organisations believe that all people are made in the image of God and that each individual is equipped with unique skills, ideas and competences, which should be nourished and which can enrich the lives of others. They provide services which allow users to develop these skills and they aim at empowering individuals to fulfil their potential. This empowerment is a continuous process rather than a one-off event; it is driven by Christian values and societal needs.

Services should take into account the wishes of service users and involve them in decision-making processes, in order to allow them to gain co-ownership over the process of service delivery. This is not only a precondition of empowerment; it can also have a positive impact on service quality, as it allows a better understanding of the users' wishes, capabilities and needs. Services can be adapted to the specific requirements of individuals, which also boosts user satisfaction. Experience shows that empowerment is effective in the prevention of institutionalisation and service dependency by fostering autonomy and inspiring progress.

Our members agree that users should be offered the opportunity, as well as any necessary support, to participate in the provision of services if they so wish – however, they should not be obliged to do so. In addition, users should be free to choose whether they would like to use a service or not. In case a user's choice might entail certain risks, or if expectations may not be met, dialogue is essential to ensure the user's opinions are taken into account.



## What works?

### Establishing goals and expectations

- ✓ Start from the *needs of Roma* – not the needs of the organisation. The first step is to enable Roma to identify their individual goals and explore ways of achieving them, supporting them throughout the process. Service providers must not force Roma to adjust to their expectations.
- ✓ Identify concrete end results and step-by-step achievable goals: i.e. new toilet installation/ tenancy of flat/ education certificate/ increased access to state provision
- ✓ Involve Roma from the planning stages and not only during the implementation phase. Establish short, medium and long-term goals and perspectives.
- ✓ Disseminate clear and accessible information about the project or service to ensure participants are aware of its aims and underlying expectations.

### Involvement in the implementation

- ✓ Employ Roma as volunteers and staff members in projects and services where possible.
- ✓ Support parents in modelling positive behaviour in the education of their children.
- ✓ Try to involve Roma in the running of projects and service centres to create co-ownership.

### Relationship building

- ✓ Engage Roma mediators/role models, especially for children and youth work, to maintain connections between Roma and non-Roma communities.
- ✓ Train mainstream practitioners in social and health services to work with Roma.
- ✓ Take an intercultural approach to ensure positive personal connections. All staff should be made aware of cultural norms (i.e. separate showers for men and women).
- ✓ Educate all members of staff and volunteers on why Roma involvement is important, and how it could be put into practice.
- ✓ Involve parents and other family members when working with children, to encourage them to provide further support.
- ✓ Reach out particularly to women (mothers), as they tend to have a strong influence on how the family is managed.
- ✓ Establish genuine partnerships, rather than making users passive receivers of services – where this pattern exists, it needs to be broken.
- ✓ Encourage staff in learning the Romani language when possible.
- ✓ Promote critical self-reflection on the side of the service providers.



## Taking a holistic approach

- ✓ Approach individuals in a holistic way, which means looking beyond mere material or physical needs and taking into account spiritual needs. Support services for spiritual matters can greatly reinforce personal development, and in turn support the empowerment process of Roma.
- ✓ Help Roma responsibly and avoid victimisation by not providing hand-outs: i.e., assist Roma to enter the regular social system.
- ✓ Provide role models and share success stories of former service users/ beneficiaries from the Roma community. Personal testimonies can inspire hope, and should be followed up with step-by-step support.
- ✓ Invest resources into intercultural relation-building and intercultural communication activities.
- ✓ Explore questions of culture, empowerment and identity together in a diaconal framework.

## External participation and representation

- ✓ Empower Roma to be ambassadors for their culture in local, regional and national fora, and in their engagement with the media.
- ✓ Ensure that Roma who are working at the highest political level maintain contact with grassroots-level Roma initiatives and communities.
- ✓ Encourage more Roma activists to operate at a national level to make the voice of Roma communities heard.
- ✓ Enable churches and church-related organisations to represent and discuss Roma issues in political fora.

## Other useful links and resources

- [Eurodiaconia policy paper: 'Social Inclusion of Roma'](#) (2014)
- [Eurodiaconia briefing: 'Social inclusion of Roma'](#) (2014)
- Eurodiaconia user participation and empowerment toolkit in [English](#) , [French](#) , [German](#) and [Serbian](#) (2010)
- [Community of the Future: Challenges and New Approaches to Community Based Social Work and Diaconia from the CABLE Approach](#) (Editors Jouko Porkka and Marja Pentikäinen)
- [Participation toolkit](#) (FEANTSA), the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (October 2007)
- ["Get a different result...get people participating!"](#) Participation toolkit for organisations who provide services for people experiencing inequality, exclusion and homelessness (FEANTSA, October 2013)



- [Roma People's Participation in Civil Democracy Processes: +Respect Participatory Working Groups, Training and Information Sessions, Thematic Seminars](#) (ERIO 2011)
- [Mainstreaming empowerment of Roma grassroots women](#) (ERGO Network)
- European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) <http://www.errc.org>