



*Working Paper*

## **Roma integration and evidence-based policy making 2014**

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This is a report on the meeting on *Roma Integration & Evidence-based Policy Making* (RIEP) held at the Romanian Cultural Centre, London on 26th June 2014.

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# Roma integration and evidence-based policy making

A report prepared by Annabel Tremlett<sup>1</sup>  
2014

## Executive summary

- Racism against Roma minorities<sup>2</sup> (also referred to as ‘Romaphobia’ or ‘anti-Gypsyism’ or ‘anti-Traveller prejudice’) is a problem in UK society, with the media frequently re-producing racialised, damaging representations. Racism in all areas of life, from individual to community, institutional and media sources, needs to be continually and robustly addressed.
- The notion of ‘evidence-based’ needs to be critically applied to policy and practice, always thinking about what ‘evidence’ means, to whom and why.
- Roma/Gypsy/Traveller people need to be involved in the process of collecting ‘evidence’, avoiding tokenistic gestures (Arnstein’s ‘ladder of participation’ – i.e. levels of citizen participation - can be a helpful tool).
- When referring to ‘the Roma’ in practice or policy-making, close reference to the lived realities of people should be made to avoid broad generalisations that can result in ineffective practices.
- The discourse on and experiences of Roma communities and notions of ethnicity and race relations are markedly different across nation-states and contexts. Therefore practice and policy-making processes needs to always endeavour to understand and refer to these contexts.
- Substantial migration of Roma people from Central and Eastern Europe to the UK is a relatively new phenomenon and we need to learn more about it. We cannot simply parachute in practices or policies or discourses from other countries or the EU, as the UK migrant experience will be different. Nevertheless, we can draw on existing UK good practice with working with Traveller communities as well as other migrants and disadvantaged communities; as well as learning from bad practice; and look to international examples for inspiration.
- Academics, activists, practitioners and policy-makers have not always collaborated effectively on issues relating to Roma communities. We need to break this pattern and work together to ensure social justice in a changing society.

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<sup>1</sup> This report is based on the discussions of the meeting, attended by 24 delegates (listed at end). A draft of report was sent to delegates on 14/07/14 for comments that have been incorporated, although the final version has been edited and is the responsibility of the author. A list of delegates can be found at the end of the report.

<sup>2</sup> This meeting was focused on discussing recent ‘Roma’ migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the UK. However, it is understood that such labelling can be contentious and misrepresentative (see ‘note on labelling’ in the next section). Through focusing on recent migrants from Central and Eastern European migrants we did not want to exclude discussions on other groups that can be associated with ‘Roma’, such as UK born/based Travellers, Romani or Gypsy people. The report attempts to distinguish between such groups, but also recognises the inadequacy of labelling and the problems with ascription. See further sections for specific discussions.

## **Overview of meeting**

The aim of the meeting was to create a focused dialogue between researchers and professionals from different knowledge areas to progress an understanding of effective evidence-based practice and policy-making.

The attendees came from a wide range of backgrounds (some also mixed) that helped to fulfil this aim, including: social workers, education practitioners, activists from Roma-focused organisations, academics from a variety of disciplines, two MEPs and staff from the Romanian Cultural Centre. The day was split into two parts – in the first part we heard three presentations (Dr. Annabel Tremlett, Dr. Jon Fox and Violeta Vajda & Nicu Dumitru) on the challenges of researching with/on Roma minorities and related themes. We then heard some research results from a fourth speaker, Dr. Viktor Leggio, from the on-going research project 'MIGROM' being carried out at the University of Manchester, which is focused on the migration of Roma minorities into various countries in Europe.

The second part of the day was then spent discussing the main issues that arose from the talks, including:

- on-going challenges with ascription;
- the positives and negatives of UK models of research and practice with Central and Eastern European Roma migrants to the UK and Travellers/Romani people in the UK;
- what counts as 'evidence' in policy-making and how does this compare to how academic researchers/practitioners see 'evidence'.

The discussions arising with all delegates proved very stimulating and interesting. This report attempts to capture these discussions, recognising the debates as influx, often contested and as yet unresolved. This report aims to provide some content for deliberation and discussion for future research, practice and policy-making partnerships.

### **A note on labelling**

The labelling of people as 'Roma', 'Traveller', 'Gypsy' and so on is still frequently contentious, politicised and can misrepresent diverse people and communities. This meeting was focused on people who have recently migrated to the UK from post-EU accession countries and can fall under such a label as 'Roma', but it was recognised in the discussions that ascription is frequently politically motivated and does not consistently relate to how people view themselves and their ethnic or community identities. In this report 'Roma' is used as a broad umbrella that is favoured by European institutions for any groups associated with Roma, Gypsy or Traveller and so on. However, 'Roma' or 'Rom' can also be used as an ethnonym to denote a group of people with a particular 'Rom' ethnic identity, which includes speaking a particular Romani language (for further discussion on the politics of Roma identity, ethnicity and labelling see Matras 2013, Tremlett 2014 and Stewart 2013).

## Summary of main talks

### *The challenges of researching Roma minorities and evidence-based practice.*

The day began with three academics discussing the challenges of researching Roma minorities.

First, Dr. Annabel Tremlett talked about the cross-cutting diversities she found in her empirical research that shows how hard it can be to create policies aimed at Roma minorities. Evidence-based practice and policy-making can assume a certain 'rationality' of ethnic groups, when at the local level there can be many influences and context-specific issues that can't always be easily identifiable along ethnic-group lines. An example was given of the self-representation of a young woman in Hungary who was a participant in Tremlett's research that showed how ethnicity was an important element, but not the only component, in the way someone may talk about their identities and experiences. Tremlett discussed the pros and cons of 'super-diversity' as an approach that is gaining currency in the UK, saying that it could be a way of bringing together academics from different disciplines, practitioners and policy-planners committed to understanding the empirical reality of people's lives. At the same time, there needs to be careful critical application to the situation of Roma minorities to ensure that the positives gained from political voices on ethnic lines are not lost; that racism and inequality/poverty are still tackled; and the historical/context specificity are taken into account.

In the second presentation, Dr. Jon Fox then highlighted the problems the media, policymakers and academics face when simply identifying the Roma. These practices of identification seldom rely on how the Roma see themselves, but rather draw on popular (and mostly negative) stereotypes about who the Roma are. Fox gave some examples on how negative insinuations of Roma ethnicity can be inferred through language used in newspaper articles – noting also that visual images can also be used as a further means of racialisation. He also looked at an example from immigration control document used in Prague in 2002 that attempted to identify 'Roma' minorities. Any hard evidence to back up the claims of these documents was not found, and Fox's examples highlighted the problems of talking about Roma minorities in a non-evidenced based way. Fox asserted that academics have been a part of the reproduction of Roma stereotypes by always focusing on marginalisation, and not also researching 'upwards' (e.g. Roma people as doctors, lawyers, waiters)– so we actually only get one image of Roma minorities as poor and disenfranchised. This causes the conflation of ethnic identity with social location and the two become linked in an inextricable way. Classification can be a poor predictor for how Roma people feel about themselves and their everyday lives, and we need to listen more to what people say about their lives (and how).

Violeta Vajda & Nicu Dumitru gave a joint third presentation, discussing then the importance of participatory approaches in research, indicating that research benefits from a long, deep understanding of people's everyday lives and their self-representations. Vajda started by explaining the main tenets of participatory research: it's not just about getting answers to specific questions, but involves long and involved research with local people which can be used to take their own

interests further. Research participants need to own the research – both what it is and what it is going to be. Vajda drew particularly from the project ‘Participate2015’ (<http://www.participate2015.org>) from the Institute of Development Studies (UK). Nicu Dumitru then took us through his local campaigning in Romania to create change on topic-specific issues, including: Roma students being refused entry to pubs and clubs; and housing issues in one particular town. Dumitru argued that local campaigns, using multi-media platforms and creating documentary-style reports can really help push quickly for social change.

### ***Research carried out in initial stages of the ‘MigRom’ Project based in Manchester***

Dr. Viktor Leggio then presented the most recent research on Roma migration to Manchester as a part of the ‘MigRom’ project<sup>3</sup>. Whilst the project still has three more years to go, there have been some significant initial findings. Leggio reported that social change in recently arrived migrant communities has been internally driven, showing that there was less a need to impose projects on these people, but instead to assist in the requests for support as articulated by Roma people themselves. Examples include: learning English; understanding and assistance with bureaucratic processes (e.g. getting a National Insurance number or translating previous work references into English).

In local areas, there were also major issues that were said to be directly related to Roma minorities (for example waste disposal; crime; noise). However, when Leggio and the team had done further research, they could not find any evidence that these issues had risen in the areas that Roma people had settled in – these were issues that were in existence before they came, and therefore could not be blamed on new migrant communities.

Furthermore, there have been examples of practitioners being too quick to blame ‘Roma culture’ on perceived issues. In one example children found ‘without parents’ quickly became ‘safe-guarding’ issue blamed on the lack of parenting skills in Roma culture. However, Leggio and his team found that whilst children were not always in the care of their parents, they were being cared for by other relatives and the examples they saw did not amount to a problem with ‘safeguarding’. Leggio pointed out that practitioners and researchers need to build an understanding of the cultures of new migrants as well as having a good understanding of the existing contexts into which migrants arrive, before attributing certain pathological behaviours to them that may not exist.

### **Summary of group discussion**

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<sup>3</sup> The MigRom Project looks at the immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe. For more information see their website: <http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/migrom/index.html> [accessed 04/11/14].

## 1. On-going challenges with ascription

### *Super-diversity?*

- Some qualms were raised about 'super-diversity': although it is a new term, super-diversity has 'been around forever' – we know that 'identity is endlessly differentiating' – so what does super-diversity add?
- But if the concept may have 'been around forever', then why are public discourses still so deeply ethnicised and negative when it comes to Roma minorities? This is why we need to remind ourselves as researchers/practitioners/policy-makers of all the different influences people live out in their everyday lives.
- We always need to keep in mind what any assessment or analysis is about, and who is it aimed at, how and why?
- One delegate commented that he was tired of being told 'what I am' and 'what I should or shouldn't be doing'. Academic research should reflect very carefully on the audacity of labelling and articulating an identity, and should always come back to empirical references of how people live their everyday lives.

### *Is ethnic group ascription always important for practice/policy-makers?*

- So what does specifying an ethnic-group add to practice or policy making? There was a discussion as to whether a dedicated response was needed for Roma communities when needs and contexts are so diverse.
- A policy or practice based on an ethnic group can imply an ethnic problem. Ethnic and social issues can be conflated too easily. Sometimes it might be the case that a policy with a clear outcome for a particular group is needed – we don't want to be 'colour-blind' by pretending that certain problems do not exist. But any policy or practice based on an ethnic group needs to be done with absolute care – otherwise ethnicity can be used as an easy route, an 'ethnic fix' that appeases the electorate and appears to solve a problem, but in practice has two main outcomes: (1) The real problem is never solved, as more often than not it goes beyond an ethnic group and is a more complex issue; (2) Society then acts as though it was only a problem with 'them' (the particular ethnic group), ignoring wider issues and missing points of inequality, along with increasing the stigma on a particular group.
- A delegate pointed out that people may not want to publicly declare themselves as 'Roma' because they are referring to intimate, family networks, and are not referring to the wider politicised discourse. Another delegate pointed out that at the same time, there can be a huge pressure on Roma minorities to assimilate, and this may be damaging to communities, to feelings of confidence, acceptance or inclusion, and self-perceptions.
- It was suggested that when used in the political arena, broad labels such as 'Roma' should be focused on anti-racist actions, rather than trying to pin down ethnic characteristics. But there was a discussion as to whether it was possible to write anything about 'the Roma' in the current climate without mirroring or slipping into racist talk.

- There needs to be careful application of any ethnic label, particularly in discriminatory environments where 'Roma', 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller' are frequently used in negative/racist ways. Services or organisations are especially important in these environments, as they can often act as a link between institutions and communities. Nonetheless, such services also need to be open to scrutiny/evaluation (e.g. the Roma Support Group activities frequently go through evaluations).

## **2. What counts as 'evidence' in policy-making and how does this compare to how academic researchers/practitioners see 'evidence'.**

### ***Is 'evidence-based' at all possible?***

There was a discussion about whether 'evidence-based policy making' is just illusory. There can be a pre-conceived idea about 'evidence' as 'scientific' – that is, imbued with a certain value that is then not critiqued. In social work, for example, the notion of evidence-based practice has been criticised for: (i) not recognising the value of the local intuitive experience of professionals who have been working with families or in a particular area for many years; or (ii) not including the voices of service users other than in tokenistic ways.

Some delegates have been asked to be experts on Roma or Traveller people in policy, immigration and social care cases. Most delegates expressed discomfort at this role and said that frequently they felt a lack of communication with other professionals during these processes that could be frustrating and worrying. However, there were examples of positive outcomes for the people involved, so it could be worthwhile. This is an area in which we as academics are requested to give 'evidence', but there is not much wider knowledge on the processes or what constitutes as 'evidence' in these cases. This is an important area for future research.

### ***Changing UK society requires changes in practice:***

- In the practice context, we are in a particular moment of a changing welfare system and new types of migration and communities. Some delegates have worked for a long time in the UK with established groups of UK born or based Gypsies and Travellers, but now there is a rise in the number of Roma people as migrants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and they have links to different communities and groups. We are at a moment of change, and we are not sure how it will progress.
- In order to create policy, there does need to be some political consensus. But with CEE migration there is no political consensus. CEE migration has become a political hot topic with both voters and politicians, and is frequently sensationalised and demonised in media reports. This is making it really hard to work at a local level.

### ***European level discussions can affect UK policy & practice:***

- Policy at an EU level could have a potential effect on UK policy and approaches to practice. The EU approach has been to focus on ‘Roma’ as situated poor minorities in CEE region – but does this make sense in the UK context? Should we just be focusing on migrants? Some delegates argued that strategies should focus on citizens, and new migrants should be dealt with as new migrants as migration becomes their overwhelming feature.
- At the same time, we cannot ignore the EU context, where an ethnic strategy is trying to become an overarching policy. In reality, policy needs to be adaptable at grassroots level and to take individual needs into account. The European Commission has tried to address this by having a framework and then saying it’s up to member states to implement. But of course member states have different ways of reacting to this implementation. We are a long way from reaching a consensus at the EU level, and in Britain we need to continue with our own debates. There could be pressure to describe the situation of Roma minorities as an EU-level problem. This would not be useful for the good debate we are having here today.
- Whilst there might be problems with the speed of change from EU and EC actions, it is recognised that pre-accession policies did help to de-naturalise discrimination against Roma minorities. This has been a really important shift, and it needs to continue.

### ***The notion of ‘evidence’ should not be restricted***

- For any policy, you need to understand what sort of evidence is required to achieve the best understanding for that particular area (e.g. qualitative, close-up stories; or broader more quantitative survey work, or a mixture). But there is also a need to look more broadly at the general picture of research, so as not to duplicate areas or problems noted elsewhere.
- The notion of ‘evidence’ should not be restricted – the third sector, public-sector practitioners, activists, voices of ordinary people can all provide viable evidence.
- Whilst quantitative evidence is often preferred by policy makers, this isn’t always the case as narrative evidence is also appreciated, and is particularly important when dealing with children and families.
- There is no epistemological ‘magic bullet’ that can determine the scientific basis of an assertion or argument.

### ***Problems & opportunities with the policy-making process:***

- There is always a timing problem with policy (quick) versus research (slow).
- When specifically commissioned, research aims and objectives can get blurred and it becomes political. Policy can also be made under one government, then changed with the next – the research can be left behind and ignored.
- Good policy development should include an integration of social, economic migration issues along with particular problems faced by particular groups, if necessary.



- Policy is only as good as the evidence upon which it is based. Academics can send reports in, but these need to be carefully written in a concise and accessible way, with the 'evidence' part clearly defined for that particular policy. The European Commission staff read very widely – even more than MEPs – so they do challenge some of the assumptions we might have of policy-makers.
- Any 'evidence' needs a well-defined presentation and needs to show clearly the two or three core tasks that the commission/policy-makers can undertake.

### **3. Research & practice with CEE Roma migrants to the UK, and UK-based Travellers and Romani people: The opportunities and challenges of UK models.**

#### ***Good practices in UK***

- There was a recognition that the UK has good practices when working with Roma/Travellers, and that these can be drawn upon:
  - The UK has a social care practice model that focuses on the needs of the child. The strength of the approach is that it is individualised, addressing the specific child. No two children will have exactly the same needs, and this can help us get away from any ethnicised model.
  - The Traveller Education Service has been based on building good, local connections with families.
  - There is an increasing demand for training, and services such as hospitals, schools, police are realising that they need to know about certain communities from Roma, Traveller and Gypsy backgrounds to improve their provision. The Roma Support Group is providing a lot of this training and it doesn't need to be 'bogged down with ethnicity'. So, for example, resources in which Roma children are protagonists can be produced and used in all classrooms. These can provide role models or stories that can make Roma children feel part of the literature, while also being interesting to all the pupils. At the same time, these resources need to make sure that they are not always telling the same story about the same group – e.g. always associating Roma with poverty; or the Congolese with war.

#### ***Current issues in UK practice***

- There was a discussion about the role of not-for-profit organisations and Roma communities. Non-Roma organisations were criticised by some for using 'Roma' to gain funding and then not working effectively with local communities, lacking specific knowledge. On the other hand, other delegates had good examples of working with local communities from non-Roma and Roma organisations. There was acknowledgement of the evaluation and independent reviews that are frequently required of such organisations.
- Two delegates said that in their practice in the UK, there was an issue in schools when children are willing to tell them they are from a Roma or

Traveller background, but won't say this in a school context. So how far is it necessary for schools to know whether children are from a Roma or Traveller background? It was pointed out that this is context specific: so if, for example, if a Traveller family who intends to travel but leaves without notifying the school, they get caught up in the 'Children Missing Education' statutory guidance and can set off a whole raft of interventions that a simple communication with the school could have resolved. In these cases it does help to know which families are from a Traveller background so that schools can initiate discussions before any misunderstandings take place. This is where Traveller Education services play such an important role, but this service has been cut. At the same time, the label 'Traveller' or 'Roma' can be used to bring institutionalised responses that are inappropriate. The idea that 'they are under-performing because of their background' can make practitioners overlook specific issues that could be apply to anyone in the population - dyslexia or other learning issues can be under-diagnosed; poverty can play a huge role; there might be abuse or bullying; new migrants might need extra support with e.g. language or bureaucratic help; housing issues may affect school performance...and so on (linking back to the discussion points around ascription and policy approaches).

## List of delegates

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