

Sosiaali- ja terveysministeri Liisa Hyssälän puheenvuoro tilaisuuden päätösosiossa 9.4.2010

Distinguished Chairperson, Dear Colleagues, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Spanish Minister for Health and Social Policies, Doña Trinidad Jimenez Garcia-Herrera for the invitation to attend this Roma Summit here in the beautiful Córdoba. Finland sets great store by the efforts the Spanish Presidency, along with earlier Presidencies, have undertaken in bringing Roma issues on the European political agenda.

Roma questions concern us all, although there are great variations in the living conditions and status of Roma across the Member States. We all have room for improvement.

The EU Member States have the primary responsibility for their citizens, including Roma citizens. Most of the decision-making concerning the living conditions of Roma, such as housing, healthcare and education, takes place at the local level. Accordingly, any defects should be addressed at that level. The Roma are also a European minority, and improvements in the status of Roma require also European cooperation and European measures.

Around 10,000–12,000 Roma live in Finland. They have a strong Roma identity, but they also consider themselves as Finnish and take part in building the Finnish society. The Finnish Roma have the same rights and obligations as everyone else. They have, therefore, equal access to social protection and public services. Moreover, the Finnish Constitution has a provision on safeguarding the Roma language and culture. While the rights of the Finnish Roma are secured by law, the Roma do, however, still experience discrimination in the everyday life. Some of them are even at risk of social exclusion.

Finland has undertaken consistent efforts to improve the status of Roma already for over 50 years. In 1956 an Advisory Board on Romani Affairs was established under the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. The advisory board is an organ for cooperation between ministries, Roma organisations, and other key interest groups. The advisory board has contributed to the relatively high level of living and housing conditions and school attendance among the Roma in today's Finland. Similar cooperation structures between the Roma and the authorities exist in Finland also at regional and local levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this point I would like to take the opportunity and describe some of the more successful practices in Finland. The Finnish policy has for a long time relied on the principle of mainstreaming. Accordingly, the Roma children attend the same schools as all the other children and the Roma population uses the same health and social services as everyone else. There are no separate Roma neighbourhoods; instead, the Roma live integrated.

There are cases, however, where the local authorities have reason to complement the regular services with special measures targeted at the Roma. For example, we have good experience of having assistants with Roma background in daycare centres and schools. These assistants build bridges between the Roma and the daycare centre or school by supplying information on the Roma culture. There also seems to be need for career counsellors with Roma background who could help young Roma to find their own path from school to working life.

In December 2009, we launched our first National Policy on Roma in Finland. The goal is to promote the participation and equality of Roma in all areas of life by means of mainstreaming and,

where necessary, by creating complementing, but not excluding, special measures for the Roma population.

The National Policy on Roma is a comprehensive, extensive and concrete action plan that aims at creating permanent and sustainable improvements in the status of Roma. The action plan includes around 150 measures that are implemented by various ministries. The action plan priorities include measures targeting Roma children and young people. Encouraging Roma to take part in education and increasing the general level of education among the Roma opens doors to the labour market and to the society at large.

On the basis of the National Policy on Roma, the Finnish Government plans to adopt in a resolution in 2010 that defines the Roma policy as well as to launch four to five key measures before the next Parliamentary elections in 2011.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that our Roma policies can benefit from a common European strategic framework that complements and reinforces national action plans and measures in the Member States. All of us would benefit from exchanging good practices and from improving implementation systematically and according to plans. We in Finland are prepared to share our expertise and experience with others and, more importantly, we are eager to learn from experience and good practices elsewhere.

We should, however, proceed towards a European Roma strategy step by step. The first step is to reinforce the Roma Platform by active participation of Member State governments, the Commission, Roma organisations and other key interest groups. I would like to once more highlight the responsibility of the Member States in improving the equality and participation of the Roma. Recent reports from the Fundamental Rights Agency indicate that discrimination against Roma is still widespread all across Europe. Amnesty International Europe has recently launched a campaign to eradicate human rights violations and racism against Roma in Europe.

I find that the EU Member States should take political leadership and work actively to eradicate discrimination and racism against the Roma. I believe that a strong and efficient Roma Platform is a good start. However, we need to give the Platform a clear mandate that all Member States fully support. I think that this is the way forward. Joint discussions help us to find out how to proceed next.

Mr Chairperson,

I would like to conclude by highlighting that Finland is prepared to promote the equality and participation of Roma both in our own country and the European level. I would like to thank the Spanish Presidency for organising the Summit and for its commitment to the development of the Roma Platform and the EU financial instruments. I hope that also forthcoming European Union Presidencies keep Roma issues on the agenda – Córdoba needs a follow-up!