



Summit of Mayors on Roma, 22 September 2011 Building mutual trust at the grassroots

Statement by **Mr Jeroen Schokkenbroek**, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Roma Issues

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Dear Mayors, elected officials and other representatives of cities and regions,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The organisation of this Summit is undoubtedly one of the most prominent initiatives taken by the Council of Europe in follow-up to the High Level Meeting and the Strasbourg Declaration on Roma adopted last October 2010.

The Declaration underlines the importance of ensuring "*focused, sustained and effective co-operation regarding Roma at the pan-European level between member states, regions, local authorities and European organisations, **drawing on the many examples of good practice which exist at European, national, regional and local level***".

I am confident that today's debate will lead us to a better understanding of the problems being faced by local and regional authorities and will help the authorities to further develop policies towards the integration of the Roma community in mainstream society.

Notwithstanding the importance of effective national policies or the role of other stakeholders, local authorities have a fundamental role to play in bringing Roma closer to the communities. Most problems exist at the local level and need to be resolved locally. Access to health and social services and decent living conditions are a right of every citizen, including the Roma, and promoting specific actions for this vulnerable population can in no way be considered a privilege.

In the prevailing social and economic circumstances, intervention for the benefit of Roma is often viewed with suspicion by public opinion. Policies and initiatives should be accompanied by a **strong and sustained awareness raising effort**, targeting both citizens and administrations. At the same time, there is also a clear need to mainstream the specific needs of Roma in the development of non-Roma specific policies in areas such as spatial planning, housing, employment, education and health care.

The participation of the Roma communities in the decision making process is a key factor for the successful integration of the Roma community. **The Roma need to assume responsibility for their participation in social life, including awareness and respect of their duties as citizens, as members of a society that is much wider than their own community.**

This presupposes trust in the wider community and in many situations it will require steps to empower Roma to exercise their rights and assume their responsibilities.

Imposing policies or initiatives top down is not a workable proposition. Improvements can only be made on the basis of a clear **understanding of the real needs and problems of the municipalities**, and the possibilities of sustainable policies for those improvements.

It is only by building mutual trust, through constructive dialogue, communication, participation and mediation, that substantial steps can be taken towards breaking existing barriers.

To achieve this aim, it is indispensable to build confidence, a **new social contract** between local authorities and the socially excluded groups and to reinforce the cooperation at local, regional, national and European level.

It is precisely for this reason that the Council of Europe, in partnership with the European Union, is carrying out a training programme for Roma mediators. The **European Roma Mediators Training Programme** – ROMED – is intended *"to promote real and effective intercultural mediation, by ensuring the integration of a rights-based approach, and support the work of mediators by providing tools for planning and implementation of their activities"*.

We are convinced that, through mediation, it is possible to bring the Roma community closer to society and vice versa. Mediators are also a very pragmatic tool to help ensure that basic public services are also delivered to Roma communities, in other words to help you to meet your responsibility to reach out to the population as a whole, without exception or exclusion. I therefore ask you to support the work of mediators, recognise this as a genuine profession, recruit them and provide more stable employment for them.

It is, moreover, necessary to support the empowerment of Roma communities, so as to enable them to articulate their needs, assume their share of responsibility for achieving a better life, play an equal role in defining priorities and share responsibility for the development of local societies. Our ROMED mediators programme not only facilitates the dialogue and the access of Roma to basic services, it also helps to empower them towards citizenship in the fullest sense possible.

Following the decisions by the European Union on a European Framework for national Roma integration strategies, the European Commission has asked all EU member states to develop national strategies for improving the living conditions of the Roma.

This is a good opportunity for EU member states to incorporate in their national strategies the role of mediators as a useful policy tool. The same is true for other Council of Europe member States that are engaged in a similar process.

The need to develop integrated policies/approaches for Roma inclusion should not be seen as a burden on local authorities or leaders. There are many examples across Europe of Roma-related projects at local level that have proved to be an element for economic development and growth for the entire community. In many cases mayors are willing to improve the situation of Roma, but lack funds and expertise. This Summit offers a good opportunity to share information and know-how. I hope and trust that you will also agree on the need for sustained follow-up to work together to equip yourselves – and many cities and regions not present here today – with practical ways to ensure access to experiences and practices from other parts of your country and indeed from other countries, for the benefit of your own efforts to develop effective inclusion policies.

I should add that not all good action costs money. Local authorities can and should react in a fast and determined way when they see acts of anti-gypsyism in their cities, **as evidenced in a recent case in Slovenia**. Last July a group of neo-nazis attacked a Roma NGO in Lendava.

The reaction of the authorities was quick and clear: public statements of national, regional and local authorities in the media condemning the attacks; police investigations were instigated.

The Council of Europe's **intergovernmental Ad hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues (CAHROM)** which was set up in February 2011, and the database of policies and good practices that we are setting up now, will be two additional useful tools to exchange information about policy measures local and regional level across Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am confident that, with your commitment and support, this Summit will prove to be an important milestone in improving the condition of the Roma. The participation of so many stakeholders at this meeting is a strong indication that the authorities and civil society are expecting something to happen – something which goes beyond vain speeches and hollow promises.

They are expecting a sincere and frank dialogue between Roma, non-Roma and the authorities which will allow the Roma to take their rightful place as fully-fledged citizens with equal access to all rights and services.