

Entangled Urbanization and the Roma in France – Case Study Triel sur Seine

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In the Ile de France region, the poor live in subsidized housing, on the streets and in slums. The Roma, one of the largest and poorest minorities in Europe, experience marginalization and great health inequalities through extreme poverty and poor living conditions, lack of water and sanitation, low literacy, poor access to healthcare, low life expectancy, higher rates of communicable and non-communicable disease prevalence than the European majority.

In France, the Roms, originating from Romania and Bulgaria, have been living in squats and slums for 25 years with a recent expansion since the fall of communism (the fall of communism was 28 years ago). In 2015-2016 there were 15,600 Roms living in slums and squats in France who have suffered expulsions over a number of years with very little aid for re-housing. The constant expulsions make it difficult for the Roma to find stable employment and to enroll children in school as well as provide continuous healthcare.

Slums and beggars are an eyesore for the more privileged communities. They are shocked to see such poverty and often organize to chase them away. Elected officials express outrage but say they are powerless and throw responsibility on the State and Europe.

However, local associations of concerned citizens and national NGO's such as Medecins du Monde, Secours Catholique and La ligue de Droits des Hommes have organized support for the Roma.. Many of these actors lobby for the Roma to have access to their common rights as European citizens. These include access to employment, housing, healthcare, education and administrative papers.

Other work has focused on improving slum conditions such as access to water, sanitation, waste pick-up and electricity. In the Triel sur Seine camp, where this case study takes place, elected officials as elsewhere have rejected providing this infrastructure stating that this would make the slum more permanent.

Roma people have traditionally begged through the centuries and continue to do this in France where on a good day they can make 20 euros. Often they do not receive just money but can receive food or other goods which they share amongst each other through their mutual support network.

The Rom feel that food is easily obtainable in France compared to Romania. Food banks open their doors twice a week. The Rom also rummage through garbage dumps of super-markets which supplements donations. Often food is dumped by well-meaning organizations in the middle of slums. Fresh produce such as bananas or endives are left because the Rom are not familiar with their preparation as well as not having a tradition of eating fresh fruits and vegetables, preferring meat.

Formal and Informal Work

Traditional jobs such as scrap metal recycling are still practiced by the Roma in France. Efforts by social workers in the camp have seen a number of women and men employed in low skill jobs such as masonry, construction, house cleaning or manual labor in factories. Because of literacy and language barriers and little formal schooling, the Roma are typically not employed in jobs such as rail works.

NGO's and Community Based Organisations Negotiations

Many volunteers sense that national solidarit  for the disenfranchised through public health and education was reinforced in the wake of the landslide election of Emmanuel Macron defeating extreme right wing candidate Le Pen in the May 2017 presidential election. This they feel is part of the national character that the French fought so hard for.

Several NGO's are active in the squatter settlements with Rom Europe federating many of them to lobby for access to rights. In the Triel sur Seine camp several residents who are members of various organizations such as Secours Catholique, Ligue des Droits de l'Homme work as volunteers to register children for school, organizing a school bus while other NGO's are hired by the region to look for housing, access to health cards and employment opportunities.

In addition, the regional health authority has financed a joint project by Planning Familial and myself through Saffron Health and Environment to facilitate women and adolescent girl's groups on gender, sexual and reproductive health and family planning.

Several meetings have been held with women, adolescents and childrens that have revealed the strong identity that the Rom have that at times binds them to fixed gender roles but also feelings of family and kinship.

In addition, I have also been instrumental in facilitating health and hygiene workshops with children on washing hands, vaccinations, dental hygiene, food and nutrition. Along with sports events such as skating.

The Relationship between the Privileged and the Poor

Volunteers and professionals feel that the more privileged reach out to the Rom rather than the Rom going towards the privileged except to beg.

There are mixed feelings among the volunteers and workers regarding the Roma attitudes to escape extreme poverty. One of the social workers stated

“This camp is the most spoilt by the state although the situation is bad the mentality of the people is unhealthy”

“The chief of the camp is shady”

While the volunteers feel that the Rom often do not participate enough to fight themselves for their rights and the burden is left to them.

“They don’t have the language, education or knowledge of the system to enter a political debate”

“Although some of the Rom or their children are literate, the French administrative forms, language and system are so complex that it would be impossible to maneuver through them without assistance.”

Volunteers have legally fought with authorities to register children in the local school where the slum is found. The Mayor of the city initially refused simply because they were Roma despite the fact that all children between the age of 6-16 must legally attend school and the authorities are obliged to register them. As many as 60 children have since been registered in school but regular attendance is problematic as formal schooling is not necessarily a cultural value for the Rom.

The French state also provides minimal access to health care for all those who can prove that they have been on French territory for 3 months. This makes it attractive for Romanians to come to France, however, most Roma use emergency hospital departments.

Actions to improve Living Conditions of Roma

While several actions have been undertaken to improve the living conditions of the Roma many have not been sustainable.

The Roma live in caravans that are 5th or 6th hand via the internal market of Roma across Europe. Caravans are joined together to create common living areas in the Roma camps with extra wood paneling and other potentially flammable materials including old pieces of plastic, metal and drywall that turned mold with time due to the damp cold climate of Paris.

Access to the camp is through a dirt road a kilometer long that is full of pot holes despite several attempts by NGO’s to lay gravel to make it accessible.

Water is accessed from a hydrant in a cemetery, which is more than 1 km away. Inhabitants fill jerry cans and often walk with wheelbarrows to transport them. Many attempts have been made by NGO’s to dig a well in the camp but no water source had been found. The local authorities have never provided water except during heatwaves.

The architectural association Quatorze in collaboration with Secours Catholique with financing from Fondation Abbé Pierre built dry toilets. I was very involved in mobilizing community with focus groups and meetings to identify design

features, placement, construction and maintenance of the toilets. Many indicators measured before and after the construction showed that the presence of toilets improved security, safety, privacy, comfort and cleanliness among other factors. However, after 2 years toilet blocs were in disrepair due to lack of governance, poor maintenance and vandalism by children.

Inorganic and organic waste is found littered throughout the camp with resultant massive rat infestations. Through the lobbying efforts of NGO's municipal authorities placed garbage bins at the end of the long dirt access roads that are sometimes used.. Often other citizens use these empty fields to dump construction waste to avoid tipping fees. A clean up day was organized with health education and community effort to clean waste. Secours Catholique even provided individual bins to inhabitants, however, rats gnawed through them leaving them unusable

The Roma given their traditional occupation as scrap metal dealers collect electronic waste such as computers, televisions, washing machines and batteries which lay in heaps surrounding the camp providing perfect nesting grounds for rats. However, they consider this occupation an important part of tradition and pay taxes as entrepreneurs. At times the waste is obtained from secured landfill sites which creates puts the Roma in conflict with authorities?.

A recent fire left debris of 20 caravans containing toxic waste strewn throughout the camp while children play in the dirt nearby. No effort has been made to clean this waste after the fire except to ensure the date of expulsion from the camp in July.

Access to electricity is through a series of tangled electrical wiring that runs on the ground throughout the camp and is illegally connected to the grid. A recent blackout of the neighborhood due to these precarious connections forced slum dwellers to create an association with the help of activists in order to legally access electrical boxes.

Rehousing

While the Triel sur Seine bidonville has been in existence for 8 years and activists have worked hard to secure the Roma their European rights to housing, healthcare, education, employment and legal rights, the living conditions of the slum is unacceptable.

An imminent expulsion in July 2017 has organized activists, workers and the Rom to look for solutions to their housing crisis. The regional authority has vowed that all those who have a file with social workers will be rehoused. However, those who do not have employment will not be rehoused.

The Roma whose very identity is based on their extended family units and bands are concerned if they are put into housing they will be split apart and far from their unit and support networks.

“The Roms can not live like this. It is impossible”

Coming from the same two villages it seems inconceivable that they would not live together. “(Ion, leader of the camp)

Another Roma woman whose husband has hepatitis B is concerned if she is put in temporary housing she will not have a kitchen to cook his meals and that he will die. She is also concerned that they will be sent far away from her place of work making commuting expensive and difficult.

The Roma relationship with social workers is often fraught with tension where the social worker feels that the Roma are spoilt and have been given too much help while the Roma feel that the social worker doesn't care about them.

“ Myriam gave me one minute to hear my issues, she doesn't care. They think we are dogs and can go anywhere”

While activists suggest that they will convey these concerns to authorities, they are wary that those living in temporary accommodation will be more difficult to follow.

The chief of the camp also suggested purchasing a piece of land where the Roma could place their caravans could be a solution. A Pastor of the evangelical church that many of the Rom belong to is willing to organize this.

Activists agreed that this could be a solution but warned that urban planning restrictions could prevent them from placing caravans on the land and gaining access to utilities. The sous-prefet (chief administrator for the region) supported finding land for the group but out of the 70 municipalities that were approached none were positive.

Those who experienced an expulsion in 2003 asked what if residents who could not be rehoused stayed on site on expulsion day. Activists said that they would be put in a police wagon and then let go but to be wary that those whose papers are not in order will be expelled from the country.

Living together is important for the Roma in maintaining their core values of family and kinship and mutual support networks. Moving from their rural village setting in Romania to urban centres in Western Europe makes this difficult to maintain.

Some activists maintain taking them out of their social context may be an incentive to move them out of heavy burden of traditions that relegate them to their extreme poverty while others feel that breaking their mutual support networks will make it difficult to provide follow-up.