

Training Programmes Conducted within the Framework of the ERRC/hCa/EDROM Roma Rights Project in Turkey

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ONE of the key targets of the project entitled “Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey” carried out by the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC), the Helsinki Yurttaşlar Derneği (Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly- hCa) and the Association for Research Development & Solidarity on Roma Culture – Edirne (EDROM) was to enhance the capabilities of Romani organisations in Turkey. In relation to this aim, the second target was propelling civil society organisations working in the field of human rights to become more interested in the issues faced by Romani society in Turkey.

For these purposes, during 2006-2007, a series of training sessions were conducted for activists working in Romani organisations and human rights NGOs based in and around the cities populated densely by Roma. The training sessions were devised according to the three diverse titles:

- Capacity building and capability development trainings for more effectively undertaking campaigns and litigation aiming to further Roma rights;
- Human rights trainings for Romani activists working to developing Romani communities’ rights; and
- Advocacy trainings for human rights NGOs, focused on informing them about the situation of Roma in Turkey, discrimination against Roma and the international as well as local Roma rights movement.

Capacity building training for Romani organisations was intended for Romani activists who are members of NGOs or initiatives at the stage of founding. These training sessions aimed to tutor the target group on civil society litigation mechanisms and methods so that they are equipped with the necessary skills to work out organised and effective rights struggle campaigns or projects. The 2-day long training programme was implemented in July 2006 in Edirne, in October 2006 in Istanbul and in November 2006 in Mersin. As planned, these meetings were attended by already active Romani organisations and initiatives that are in the process of formalising their status, based in the aforementioned cities and their neighbouring areas. In total, 45 Romani activists were trained in these sessions.

Edirne was chosen as the training sessions’ initiation place because this city is the base of the project partner EDROM. Moreover, Edirne has a sizeable Romani population and the first Romani organisations in Turkey started off there. The Romani activists taking part in the Istanbul training session mostly belonged to organisations and initiatives that specifically concentrated on urban renovation projects and housing problems. The Romani activists participating in the Mersin leg of the training sessions were members of the recently founded organisations and it was impressive that they were able to establish strong relations with local public authorities despite their short history in the field.

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The participants to the training sessions of the project, “Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey” were mostly Romani activists from civic initiatives that were founded in the last couple of years. The majority of them emphasised that the concept of strategic planning was highly useful for their work, as they believed it could enhance their organisational capacities.

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The training sessions sought to answer the following questions:

- What is civil society, and what do civil society organisations do?
- How does a civil society organisation define its targets and define its work scope? What is the importance of strategic planning?
- What are the legal rights provided by the Civil Society Organisations’ Legislation and what are the new amendments made to it? What is the necessary know-how, administrative and fiscal skills to make a civil society organisation run smoothly?
- How do civil society organisations make their voices heard, and how should they establish relations with the press and television?

When the training programme was being arranged, the needs of the Romani activists who were just at the point of getting organised or those who were already actively working in the field of human rights but lacked a strategic plan were taken into account. It was assumed that the majority of the participants, even the activists rather established in the field, did not possess adequate knowledge about the Civil Society Organisations’ Legislation that was significantly amended as a consequence of the European Union accession process, in addition to lacking skills about how to approach the media. These expectations proved to be true. During discussion sessions at the training sessions, issues such as civil society organisations’ administration, relations between the members of organisations and their organs, internal democracy, working

with volunteers, and organising data banks and archives were debated.

The human rights training sessions for the Roma rights organisations provided guidance to their members about the fundamental human rights concepts and mechanisms, discussing the frequent human rights abuses that Roma face, as well as both informing and encouraging the Romani activists to utilise legal channels effectively. The 2-day meetings took place in June 2006 in Edirne, November 2006 in Istanbul and January 2007 in Izmir. In total, 52 Romani activists took part in the programmes.

The main themes of the human rights training sessions included:

- Legal status of Roma in Turkey and laws aiming to prevent discrimination;
- History and key concepts of human rights;
- Frequent problems faced by Roma; abuses and discriminatory practices; and
- Ways to follow up human rights abuses.

The Romani participants contributed to the debate sessions by discussing their own experiences concerning human rights abuses and sharing their reactions to these particular cases.

Advocacy trainings for human rights NGOs were designed with the aim of getting the general human rights community familiar with the citizenship rights of Roma and establishing the role of Romani organisations' as an indispensable component of Turkey's civil society movement. A fundamental reason behind the conceptualisation of this training was the general lack of awareness amongst the human rights community in Turkey regarding the human rights abuses plaguing Roma. Furthermore, just as the Romani associations did not attempt to be involved in partnerships with other human rights organisations, human rights NGOs did not know much, if anything, about the initiatives of Roma.

The advocacy trainings were held in March 2007 in Ankara, May 2007 in Mersin and Izmir, and in June 2007 in Istanbul. In total, 62 activists

from human rights organisations and Romani NGOs took part in the programme. The training sessions concentrated on the following issues:

- The contemporary situation of Roma in Turkey;
- The development of Romani organisations in Turkey, issues concerning their activities and the problems they come across; and
- Romani organisations in Europe and international experiences.

During the final phase of the training programme, debate focused on possible co-operation possibilities between the mainstream human rights organisations and their Romani counterparts, alongside the discussion of tangible advocacy ideas to work on.

How were the Training Sessions Devised?

In the process of designating those who would take part in the training sessions, the project team primarily took into account the suggestions of Romani activist Erdinç Çekiç, leader of the Romani Associations' Federation, EDROM, and the EDROM team. It should be mentioned that several of the Romani federations that were formed in Turkey in the last couple of years and their leaders are especially influential over Romani organisations around the country. In the early stages of the project, the backing of one of the federation leaders was especially important to prompt Romani activists to actually take part in a training session. As the majority of the Romani activists were not used to formal meetings, the sessions were planned to be flexible in schedule and content. Instead of a strictly lecturing programme, an interactive course plan permitting participants to express their thoughts in a sincere manner was preferred. It was observed that, in the first stages of the project, the participants were very suspicious about non-Romani people, including the project managers. As a consequence, the training instructors were cautious about refraining from developing a hegemonic relationship with the trainees, but opted for an equal partnership.

Evaluation...What Changed?

The development of Roma rights as a component of the human rights struggle in Turkey is very recent. However, as Turkey's human rights organisations began picking up an initial interest in the issues of Roma, an increasing number of national and international donors started supporting projects concerning Roma rights. The sudden attention that Roma began to receive caused the majority of the Romani participants to believe that the national and international NGOs earned money "using" Roma. They also perceived the media to be a part of the "game". Nonetheless, at the end of the training sessions the Romani participants admitted that such programmes helped them to reach out to the larger human rights society and this was a positive development in their eyes, according to their evaluation forms.

Poverty related matters are the most crucial problem of the Romani organisations. A majority of them retained the idea that their initiatives would receive financial help as a result of the project. Consequentially, it had to be explained that the project aimed to tutor them "how to fish, rather than providing them with the fish".

The Romani participants affirmed that although they are organising fast, they were not well-informed about the Civil Society Organisations' Legislation and the international framework of human rights. Additionally, they pointed out that they did not act according to a strategic plan as they knew little about what the law offered them as an advocacy tool. The participants complained that, in addition to the inadequate and sometimes even erroneous guidance of the District Civil Society Organisations' Directorate, scarce knowledge of the legislation resulted in serious troubles. Likewise, they mentioned that they had heard about the vision-mission-strategic planning concepts included in the trainings, were impressed by the examples given as to how these concepts can actually be put into practice, and that they would be using them in their work.

The most acute problem observed in the organisational scheme of the Romani civil

society initiatives was their attempt to be active in too many diversified issues. As a result of their eagerness to become involved all the issues they came across, the Romani organisations become desperately short of resources. They eventually end up exhausted without having achieved much. Because Roma in Turkey face a wide array of human rights abuses, the enthusiasm to get rid of as many problems as quickly as possible was the major underlying reason behind their adoption of this approach to activism.

On the whole, Romani activists affirmed that they learned a lot from the training sessions concentrating on strategic planning, the Civil Society Organisations' Legislation and other related legislation. The meetings tailored for Romani activists were also useful for them in gaining practical skills on how formal meetings and training sessions are run, so that they could replicate similar activities in the future.

The human rights trainings were highly valuable because they enabled a paradigm shift in the approach of the Romani activists towards the legal system. By and large, the Romani participants believed that law is futile in tackling discrimination and viewed all sorts of state or formal authority as untrustworthy. Until recently, Roma in Turkey did not even try to prosecute discriminatory acts or eschewing of their rights in instances like expropriations. They lacked the financial resources and the legal knowledge or technical support. Above all, they lacked hope in these processes even if they secured consulting legal support.

Therefore, the trainers tried to replace the distrust of the Romani activists of the law with a newfound trust in litigation through providing concrete examples of how they could seek legal remedies. The trainings seem to have reached their target as there are now a number of cases pending before the local courts in Turkey, filed by the Romani activists who attended the sessions. For example, İzmir Çağdaş Romanlar Derneği (İzmir Contemporary Romani Association) began legal action against a famous Turkish movie star for the following negative remarks, "They made the gypsy the king and first thing, he butchered his father". The same association applied to the local prosecutor in a case

of denial of access to public accommodation after they were reportedly not admitted to a restaurant because of their ethnic background.

Lastly, the advocacy trainings were important occasions for presenting the budding Roma rights movement in Turkey to the general human rights circles in the country and promoting co-operation possibilities. It is crucial to note that even the human rights activists themselves retained some prejudices against Roma. Even in cases where there was no apparent prejudice, there was a disinterest and ignorance of Romani matters.

Overall, the project team has observed that the project entitled “Promoting Roma Rights in Turkey” in general, and the training sessions in particular, helped both Romani and non-Romani activists to develop their knowledge and skills regarding civil society ethics, communicating with diverse cultures, tolerating opposing viewpoints, empathising with ‘others’, generating individual opinions different from the official state rhetoric that espouses nationalist tones, and adopting a democratic manner of approaching fundamental concepts like the rule of law and human rights.