

Assimilation or Integration? The effects of STEP IN within a broader context of social integration

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Introduction

Looking back at the implementation of the STEP IN project over the last two years, I would like to share with you my own critical comments on the contextual embedding of the project activities, their follow-up, and sustainability.

In particular I will comment on the embedding of the project within the broader challenge of social integration of Roma youth into the European society, and ask your attention to two related issues:

- (a) the problem of keeping track of the long-term effects of the project, and
- (b) the challenge of keeping effects of the project in line with the objectives of social integration rather than assimilation.

Both problems/challenges can be met by giving the Roma more *ownership* in project activities and their follow-up.

Keeping track of long-term effects

The project of STEP IN, in consequence of which this conference has been organized, is about the use of education as an instrument to achieve (better) social integration of young Roma.

The core of the project was the commitment of 14 organizations in 6 European countries to design and implement an extra-curricular educational package for young Roma in order to increase their school attendance and career prospects.

In this stage of the project the focus was mainly on finding, testing and comparing experimental and innovative methods.

Whether these methods will be successful, can only be demonstrated in the future. Time will show, but I have my doubts that we will recognize future successes as the immediate results of the project. Education is an investment in the future, which stretches far beyond the time boundaries of a project. However, methodologies to measure the long-term effects on the lives of the pupils are seldom envisaged when an education project starts.

I am afraid, this is also the case in most of the experiments of the STEP IN project.

The most obvious reason for this methodological flaw, is an economic one. There are simply not enough funds to keep track of the future whereabouts of the individual pupils, once the actual project has ended.

Another reason has to do with causality within a long-term time frame. Once a pupil has left the project, he or she will be influenced by many more factors than the educational factors of the project: marriage, career, friends, health, etc.

The fact that we cannot measure the long-term effects remain unsatisfactory, because in the end, the basic assumption of the STEP IN project, shared by all participants of this endeavour, cannot be tested:

“All partners believed that education was one of the best ways to overcome isolation and the best-proven tool to integrate young Roma into the local community. Education should be seen as a tool to give the Roma access to the same chances as their peers, to develop mutual trust and to encourage them to become active and responsible citizens.”¹

According to this assumption the STEP IN project will have positive effects on the broader issue of

¹ PROJECT STEP IN: Studying Training and Educational Paths for the Integration of Young Roma. Monza - Brussels 2006 (forthcoming), pp.6-7

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social integration of (young) Roma into European Society. It would be a pity, if we could not make these long-term effects more visible in the coming years, not only for the sake of the STEP IN project only, but also to gain lessons learned for future, similar projects.

Of course, one solution would be a follow-up of the project, in which methodologies of keeping track of the careers of pupils are envisaged.

As a researcher, I certainly would recommend such a follow-up, according to the researcher's canon: *the result of every research or experiment is also that more research and experiments are needed.*

But I am also aware of the many obstacles continuous researching and experimenting have to face, such as funding, organizational capacity, etc.

Another, and in my view more feasible suggestion would be, to try to invite local Roma organizations to keep track of the long-term effects of the project activities. In some of the local experiments, such as in the Netherlands, this is about to happen during the last phase of the local project.

Members of the target group (Roma youth) are stimulated to organize themselves in order to keep track of the effects of the local project.

Not only can this be a more practical solution to solve the methodological problem of the follow-up of the project, but it will also put the *ownership* of the basic assumption of the project in the hands of the Roma themselves.

To achieve true sustainability of the project's effects, it is more important that the Roma youth themselves believe in the importance of education as an instrument of social integration.

By stimulating the Roma youth to organize themselves in self organizations, we may also achieve another, very important milestone in trying to overcome isolation and to integrate young Roma into the local community.

Their organization will become part of civil society, and in the social arena they will become more actors instead of factors in the planning of their own future.

Keeping the effects in line with social integration

All efforts to reach sustainable social integration of minority groups, indigenous people, or groups like the Roma, will ultimately fail if we do not recognize the people's rights to decide themselves to what extent they should integrate into larger societal units such as local communities, nation-states, the European Union.

This statement sounds self-evident, but in practice it is not.

On the operational level, many projects for Roma turn out to be part of strategies of assimilation, rather than social integration.

Assimilation refers to a process by which one cultural group is absorbed by another. The terminology could also mean complete disappearance into the mainstream without being recognized, i.e. complete cultural loss or *cultural genocide*. Assimilation as the state of being assimilated; when people of different backgrounds come to see themselves as part of a larger national family relationship, does occur. Even so does assimilation as the social process of absorbing one cultural group into harmony with another.

However, these situations are rare, and often the end of a generation long process, such as the Romanization of Western Europe.

Within a short historical timeframe, assimilation is almost always painfully induced upon minority groups by dominant societies.

In history, this kind of assimilation has many names, such as "Westernization", "Americanization", "Russification", etc.

The history of the Roma is full of examples of this kind of violent assimilation.²

The term integration, on the other hand, pertains to a social domain; it does and should refer to individuals of different background who opt to interact. Integration should be the bringing of people of

² See, for example, the "Timeline of Romani History" in The Patrin Web Journal (<http://geocities.com/Paris/5121/timeline.htm>)

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different racial or ethnic groups into unrestricted and equal association, as in society or an organization.

In the domain of public education it should be the opposite of segregation.

Education can easily be used (suggested to be used) as an instrument to enforce assimilation. Within the European Union we have had recent examples of this, such as the statements made by the EU Commission's Ambassador to Slovakia during an interview on Dutch television on May 1 2004. The ambassador was advocating the forced separation of children from their parents in order for them to be "educated" according to the "system of values of the dominant society" to whose wealth they should later contribute in a more productive way.

The European Roma Information Office (ERIO), based in Brussels, which was one of the first Roma organizations to react, indicated, that this was not a new idea. Policies of forced assimilation via the separation of Romani children from their parents were practiced by Empress Maria-Theresa from Austria and practiced in Switzerland until the beginning of the 970s. In the same way as the suggestion made by the EU ambassador these policies aimed to eradicate Romani culture and identity.³

Education projects for Roma always will touch the very sensitive issue of Roma identity and self-determination.

After many centuries of forced assimilation, one cannot blame the Roma, that they have become very suspicious with regard to the educational systems from the dominant societies.

Roma should be convinced that education projects are not part of forced assimilation strategies, but of processes of social integration of which they themselves have *ownership*.

This *ownership* should be given to them as early as possible in the projects, preferably in the phase of planning and preparation.

Since many Roma are not yet sufficiently organized to participate in such a way, education projects should never be started as isolated enterprises, but always be accompanied by projects of organizational and institutional capacity building.

The most ideal situation would be if these projects also could be combined with other supporting projects during and after the education activities, such as job preparing, income generating projects, micro credit projects, etc.

Such "constellations" of mutually supporting projects may enhance active integration instead of passive integration among the Roma themselves.

Active integration will have more sustainable results.

The concept of active integration has been perfectly formulated in another minority context:

"Passive integration only requires adaptation to changes; while active integration seeks to influence changes.

Passive integration reflects acceptance of changes and the consequential impacts; while active integration endeavours to modify the course of changes in order to maximize subsequent benefits and minimize ensuing disadvantages.

Which path we take depends significantly on our identity-definition, i.e. which old and new qualities we, (in this case young Roma), select to keep or abandon".⁴

Moreover, enabling Roma to integrate actively, will also enable them to integrate with the respect which has been denied to Roma during so many centuries.

Leiden, 18 October 2006

³ <http://www.erionet.org>

⁴ Assimilation versus integration and the Vietnamese Youth's Identity. Duong Thanh Loi. Speech for the Youth Workshop 1998. Lien Hôi Ngudi Việt Canada - Youth Involvement and Community Development (www.vietfedertion.ca/hoi_ThaoTM98/Vps/DtLoi_Eng.html)