

**Statement by Ms. Raquel Rolnik, Special Rapporteur on
Adequate housing**

**Conference on Improving Access to Housing for Roma: Good Local Practices,
Funding and Legislation.
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Deputy Minister of Regional Development,

Representative of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights,

Director of the Open Society Foundation,

Friends and colleagues involved in advocating, planning, lobbying and trying to face the challenge to promote real results on the ground within the framework of the decade for Roma inclusion. It is a real honour for me to participate in this Conference organized by the Decade for Roma Inclusion (2005-2015) under the current Presidency of the Czech Republic and the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA).

In my position as Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, I have seen truly inhuman situations in different parts of the world, but one of the situations that struck me the most (and surprised me) is to see Roma settlements and neighborhoods in worse conditions than in other settlements for disadvantaged groups in Latin America, Africa or Asia, within Europe!! This comes to me as a surprise for several reasons.

First, because we are talking about countries that have been the source of most of the human rights spread up today to the world – not only in their legal regimes but also in all their policies that (at least once) believed in the idea of universality of these principles.

Second, because, being a visitor to Europe, (before assuming my mandate) Roma were highly invisible in the public sphere, not an issue discussed in the political area nor seen in the very fabric of cities and villages. It is not just a coincidence that nobody I asked could then tell me how many Roma people lived in Europe or how many among them were living in harsh conditions. – it has been very little attention for a question that exists for a very long time and it is such an important human rights issue!.

The enjoyment of the right to housing by Roma has been a focus of our attention as Special Rapporteurs since the establishment of the housing mandate in 2000. The interest of the mandate in this field responds to the large amount of information received and the concerns raised during our country visits regarding, among others, forced evictions and acts of discrimination against Roma populations in almost all the countries participating in the Decade. The situation in rural areas, with settlements often being segregated for generations, totally excluded and sometimes

lacking access to the most basic infrastructure, is just one example of the concerns brought to our attention.

Over the last years we have also become aware of a worrying trend in several European countries where the housing situation of Roma in urban areas has been deteriorating. Thus, it has been registered with concern that urban Roma, who had been living in the midst of cities, are frequently exposed to forced evictions and new forms of segregation. Urban Roma suffer discrimination in access to privately owned rental housing on the market, often following the loss of previous tenancies in publicly owned buildings, for instance due to privatization.

In 2009 and 2010 my attention increasingly focused on two critical issues: on one hand the impacts of the economic and financial crisis; and on the other hand the situation of migrant communities regarding their enjoyment of the right to adequate housing. In both I came across Roma housing issues.

Ladies and gentlemen

The financial and economic crisis, which was evidently triggered by problems in the housing sector in countries that experienced the “biggest bubble in history”, has had a secondary impact even on the housing situation in countries not directly affected by such a bubble. There were several mechanisms in which this negative effect on poorer people happened. First, the economic crisis with the subsequent loss of jobs and income affected the capacity of many families, who were already living on the limits of their financial capacity, to pay rent. In some countries, the situation has been further aggravated by austerity measures, including drastic cuts in welfare benefits and in the area of social services. For communities already severely affected before the crisis by critical challenges in those areas, for example many Roma people and communities in Europe, these developments are having very serious effects.

In my report to the Human Rights Council in 2009, I looked at elements that explain the origins of the financial crisis in the housing market and showed how fundamental flaws of current economic and housing policies result in the inability of market and financial mechanisms to provide adequate and affordable housing for all. The implementation almost of a “one model first all” policy - the market (and in particular the financial markets), should be the solution for all - has been one of the fundamental errors : to consider housing only as a commodity and an investment asset, leaving the social and other value dimensions of housing aside.

The belief that markets could regulate the production of housing as the most rational means of resource allocation as well as the growing role of investment in housing under a globally integrated financial system has led public policies towards increasing State withdrawal. The result has been a significant reduction of national budgets and available public funds for housing as well as other state funded housing programs for the poor. State withdrawal from the provision of housing had several important consequences including the reduction of public house stocks and the rise in prices of housing with a detrimental impact on the most vulnerable sections of the

population, which in this region of the world includes a wide portion of Roma communities. When credit is available and a large amount of globalized financial capital seeks investment opportunities, the price of urban land grows. This results in segregated cities with, on the one hand, specific areas of the city for use by the wealthy or middle classes, and on the other hand, those that cannot afford to live in these areas are being pushed into slums or inadequate housing, living in areas with less or no basic services and too distant from their sources of livelihood.

Evictions are synonymous for many of destruction of possessions, threat to family stability, livelihoods, and access to basic services including schooling. Affected people also face the challenge of re-establishing a stable life and dealing with frequent breakdowns in family relations as a consequence of the stress and economic challenges that are the result of homelessness. In addition to the physical and psychological trauma of eviction, households, especially women and children, and particularly those from communities with strong community linkages like Roma, lose the support systems they were used to and their relations with a community. The breaking of these social bonds and stability leads to many other problems.

Here, I must recall that the right to an adequate housing cannot be reduced to the physical quantity of a home or a shelter – is much more than that – Following to international law, housing is a condition to an adequate standard of living, which includes access to employment and sources of livelihood, to education, health and good environment and much more...

The dominant approach of housing policies directed to Roma - when they exist, - has been either to violate one of the most important elements of the right to housing – security of tenure – or to consider housing as a place for unwanted people frequently located in distant ghettos, heavily policed. On one side – the refusal to acknowledge the “right to stay” for communities that are there for decades or centuries (assuming that to unlock the land value is much more important than to respect collective rights and in the other hand promoting segregation by resettling them on unwanted areas) is a powerful machinery to promote anti-Roma sentiments and discrimination pushing a vicious circle of denial and exclusion. On the other hand, housing can be a powerful and decisive instrument to promote integration.

In this context, let me applaud the decision taken by the Council of the EU and the European Parliament in May 2010, modifying the European Regional Development Fund as regards the eligibility of housing interventions in favor of marginalized communities, including Roma.

The implementation of the housing integrated approach to promote Roma inclusion faces challenges, mainly because of the enormous existing gap between national commitments and local real policies and possibilities.

I very much hope EU Member States will make an effort and use this unique opportunity offered by the structural funds to start integrating and desegregating Roma populations by launching projects with the participation of local authorities and very important, together with Roma representatives.

The launching of the Decade back in 2005 and the identification of housing as one of its main priorities certainly represented an unprecedented political commitment by European governments to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma.

The growing commitment of the European Union to the issues concerning the Roma, as exemplified by the Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion, which were recommended by the Council of Ministers to the Member States in 2009; the process of exchange of good practices established since 2009 by the EU Platform for Roma Inclusion and the aforementioned decision on the use of the European Regional Development Fund are all extremely important initiatives to continue finding durable solutions to the challenges Roma find in the access to housing and the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing.

But they cannot just be words and reports.

The inadequate and often appalling housing conditions for hundreds of thousands of Roma around Europe remain a critical challenge to be addressed without delay. They can only be reversed through the adoption and application of a truly sound human rights based approach to this issue.

I thank you for inviting me today and I am here to offer the instruments we have developed in the mandate (www.righttoousing.org) and the mandate itself to help you on your great efforts of the Decade, for Roma Inclusion.