

# Local engagement for Roma inclusion

## Locality study Mantua (Italy), 2016

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# Contents

- 1. Executive summary ..... 3
- 2. Description of the local context..... 3
  - LERI in Mantua..... 5
  - The results of the participatory needs assessment..... 6
- 3. PAR methodology employed ..... 9
  - Housing..... 13
  - Labour ..... 13
  - Education ..... 14
- 4. The local interventions - goals, partners, process and results ..... 15
- 5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned ..... 21
- 6. Conclusions and recommendations..... 23
- 7. Additional information ..... 24
  - Acknowledgements ..... 24

## 1. Executive summary

The LERI research in Mantua aimed at monitoring the public policies on social inclusion of the Sinti and Roma and at fostering the dialogue between the Sinti and Roma community and local stakeholders, with support of the Municipality of Mantua. It was a two-phase process. The first phase centred on a participatory needs assessment. The second phase centred on the implementation of a local intervention.

The participatory needs assessment focused on four main areas related to social inclusion: housing, labour, education, and anti-discrimination. It involved different local stakeholders, and was characterised by the promotion of the dialogue between the Sinti community and some of the main local stakeholders. At the end of this phase a 'consensus building' conference was held in order to facilitate the process of developing common points of view concerning the social inclusion of the Sinti and Roma.

During the local intervention, the Sinti and Roma community and the local NGO, Sugar Drom, (representing the interests of the Sinti) created the Institute for Sinti Culture: a new public space that will promote awareness of the rights of the Sinti and Roma, and that will foster a positive dialogue between the Sinti and Roma community and the citizens of Mantua at large.

**Keywords/Tags:** Sinti, Institute for Sinti Culture, inclusion, combating discrimination, participatory action research

## 2. Description of the local context

Mantua is one of 12 provinces of Lombardy and has a population of 48,000. It is one of the wealthiest cities in Italy and a well-known tourist area. Its economy is primarily concerned with the processing and shipping of agricultural products.

Three hundred Italian Sinti live in Mantua, which, given the relatively small size of the town, means that the area has one of the highest concentrations of Sinti inhabitants of all Italian municipalities (0.6 %<sup>1</sup>). The Sinti population is very homogenous and stable because of the lack of internal and external migration. They have been present in the city since the end of World War II, but most of them were fairground Travellers, who settled in Mantua in the early 1970s. The Sinti are generally perceived as living only in the camp located in Via Learco Guerra, a municipal-run camp located on the outskirts of the city. However, those living in the camp actually represent only two thirds of the total Sinti and Roma population in Mantua. Others live in houses, while a few Sinti families live on privately owned agricultural lands that they have purchased, placing mobile houses or building permanent structures on the land. As a consequence, these families are facing eviction and expropriation according to the law, which forbids placing any kind of permanent or semi-permanent structure on agricultural plots.

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<sup>1</sup> Value estimated by the authors and based on statistical data on general population provided by ISTAT ([www.demo.istat.it](http://www.demo.istat.it)).

This issue was one of the main threats to the implementation of the LERI research in Mantua. During Mayor Sodano's term, which ran from 2010 to 2015, the administration of the Municipality rapidly started procedures for eviction and expropriation. It later tried and failed to amend the local urban planning tool to provide Sinti with plots they could legally own and live on, and also resisted in the trial when they could have avoided direct confrontation. The entire issue is still under judicial debate because the administrative court of Lombardy has not yet pronounced its final verdict. Given this background of legal confrontation between some Sinti families and the Municipality, it is perhaps unsurprising that the plot issue became a symbolic barrier that prevented LERI from working easily on the issue of housing, which remains one of the most sensitive areas.

At local level, the inclusion of the Sinti population is a very sensitive political issue. During the Sodano administration, this issue was prominent in the political negotiations between the two allies of the right-wing local administration (Lega Nord and Forza Italia). Lega Nord asked the Mayor (of Forza Italia) to cease any direct or indirect funding to the Sinti community in order to provide political support to the local administration. These political tensions have made the process of engaging the local and regional municipality in the project difficult and sometimes contradictory. In 2015 a new mayor was elected, with the support of a centre-left wing coalition. After these changes, the local administration formally engaged in the LERI research and stated a willingness to tackle Roma issues, providing a new window of opportunity in Mantua. The new local head of Social Services and Welfare openly expressed a willingness to have a clear picture of the existing situation in order to plan future local policies in collaboration with the Mayor. Moreover the Mayor, the Municipal Section of Housing and the Municipal Section for Welfare met the local Sinti representative (Sucar Drom) during a fruitful meeting on 3 November 2015.

On 7 March 2016, the Municipality of Mantua approved Guidelines for the administrative term 2015–2020. Guideline no. 13 relates to 'Democracy and rights' and is dedicated to the strategic objective of delivering 'Projects for the social inclusion of members of the Roma and Sinti linguistic minority, and closure of the Via Learco Guerra Area'. The Guidelines explicitly quote the LERI research and the Italian National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Travellers – implementing the European Commission Communication 173/2011, which was approved by the Italian government on 28 February 2012. The Guidelines also state a commitment of the administration, aimed at

*"the definition of projects, shared and also carried out in a supra-municipal territorial dimension, implemented through the methodology of cultural mediation, in order to protect minority language rights of the Sinti and Roma minority and to overcome the ghetto logic and welfare mentality of the so-called Gypsy camp."*

The new local government used the Guidelines as a starting point to define the process for closing the camp, explicitly using the term 'gradual' and identifying three key assets that could support the process (i.e. housing solutions, schooling, and vocational training), accompanied by interventions and cultural initiatives to counter the prejudice against Roma and Sinti.

The new local government also provided two early signals for a shift in local policies. In February 2016 the management of the camp was assigned to ASTER, an in-house company of the Municipality, with two main priorities: undertaking a census of those living in the camp and refurbishing the camp (focusing first of all on the electrical system, the water system and the waste management system). Then, in April 2016, the Municipality decided to allocate €95,000 for interventions in the camp including: refurbishment of the electrical system and the sewer system, by reconnecting the camp to the public water main. The decision of the Municipality was based on an assessment made by ASTER and ensured that the camp was reinstated on the main stage of political debate.

However, representatives of Lega Nord and other right-wing parties protested against this allocation, stating that the decision to assign resources for refurbishment contradicted the commitment of the Mayor to close the camp. One representative of a right-wing civic list was also reported in the local media as saying that financing the camp was a way to bankroll a criminal community, while a former member of Lega Nord said that it was a shame to finance the camp when for many years no one in the camp had paid their bills. Forza Nuova, a far-right neo-fascist group and promoter of many public activities based on hate-speech against minorities, even called for a mobilisation against Sinti settlements.

## LERI in Mantua

The LERI research in Mantua had two main objectives:

- monitoring the implementation of public policies aiming at fostering the social inclusion of Roma and Sinti, with a focus on the policies regarding housing, labour, education, and anti-discrimination;
- improving the dialogue between the local government, the Sinti and Roma community and their representatives in the NGO Sugar Drom.

The LERI research was developed in a two-phase process:

- **Participatory needs assessment:** During this first phase all the relevant local stakeholders were engaged in order to define the main issues, resources and constraints on the four identified areas of interest for the research. During the process different participatory methods were used in order to facilitate the emergence and development of different points of view of the various stakeholders and to facilitate the development of common ground for common actions. The participatory methods adopted are described later.
- **Local intervention:** During the second phase of the process a local intervention plan was defined in a participatory way and implemented by the main local actors: the Sinti and Roma community, the local NGO Sugar Drom,<sup>2</sup> and the Municipality of Mantua.

In the first months of the participatory needs assessment phase the main local actors were identified as: the Municipality of Mantua and the Province of Mantua

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<sup>2</sup> The NGO Sugar Drom is formed by Sinti and Roma people living in the Province of Mantua and by non-Sinti and Roma people. Its mission is to promote the rights of the Sinti and Roma. For more information: [www.sucardrom.eu](http://www.sucardrom.eu)

as institutional stakeholders, the Sinti community and the local NGO Sugar Drom. During the process the Province of Mantua gradually disappeared as a key actor, as it only had a minor influence on the main issues affecting the Sinti families, due to its limited authority on the labour policies, and the general loss of prestige after the constitutional reform that transformed the provinces into non-elective associations of municipalities.

## **The results of the participatory needs assessment**

Within the local context, the LERI project identified four core areas for the inclusion of the Roma and Sinti in Mantua: education, housing, labour, and anti-discrimination). The areas and the identified issues were confirmed through the participatory needs assessment process run in the first steps of the project.

### Education

Among the Sinti population, there is still a low rate of transition to further and higher education (after compulsory education) and relatively few people with a high level of education. Education is a very important aspect, but it is unlikely to produce any change over the short to medium term. Despite aiming to promote the integration of Roma and Sinti, schools have denied their cultures and values for decades, to promote assimilation (i.e. by eradicating their language and cultural traits). Roma and Sinti pupils are often still perceived as foreigners, and the most recent government documents and processes still fail to address the variety of problems faced by Roma and Sinti (that are included alongside the Travellers in national strategies). While multiculturalism in schools has helped to produce a more culturally sensitive environment, the positive results for Roma and Sinti pupils aged between 3 and 5 years is quickly offset by the number of drop-outs for older pupils, from as early as elementary school.

*"Why should I go to the school? No one I know ever found a job thanks to the education. Even those that among us studied more are still looking for a job."<sup>3</sup>*

At the national level, it is clear that the lack of funding to provide pupils with a friendly environment at school, the lack of teacher training on Roma and Sinti issues, the lack of cultural mediators and the lack of use of the Sinti language at school are all threats to the inclusion of Sinti children in education and their levels of attainment.

In Mantua, Sugar Drom is currently the only NGO actively working on school activities. While the other civil society organisations organise homework clubs they are not tackling the key issues regarding the education of the Sinti. Even among the main actors of the education system, there has been no public debate on the importance of schooling, nor any review of recent practice relating to the education of Sinti children. Furthermore, a long history of discrimination and failures has resulted in a lack of trust among the Sinti families in schools as a key actor for the social inclusion of their children. As a result, many of the Sinti families have unconvinced views about school attendance.

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<sup>3</sup> Focus group with Sinti youngster

## Housing

As stated above, many Sinti families are still living in the segregated area of the municipal camp, while others are living in precarious residence solutions, including those who chose to live on their own private but agricultural land and risk eviction.

The Sinti are generally considered to live only in the Campo Sosta Attrezzato of Via Learco Guerra. However, people living in this municipal camp represent only two thirds of the total Sinti population in Mantua. Others live in formal settlements (houses), while a few have purchased their own plot of land (on one of four different agricultural fields). Although legitimately acquired, the latter, however, are now in breach of land-use laws, which restrict the use of agricultural land for housing.

[Showing three pictures: a camp, a mobile house and an apartment]

*"You know, the first picture represents our present. But no one you will talk to will tell you that it is good to live like this. Flats are too small and expensive for us. The mobile house on an agricultural plot is the best solution. We can live on our own."<sup>4</sup>*

The situation is quite complex. The national law (Italy, Decreto del Presidente della Repubblica, Testo unico delle disposizioni legislative e regolamentari in materia edilizia, n.380/2001 and Regional Law n. 12/2005) regulating this restriction came into force after a status quo had been reached, whereby the use of the land for housing had been tolerated for the past 10 years. Then, however, in 2013, a major police operation (backed by the public prosecutor) took place and the owners were accused of illegal building (lottizzazione abusiva). The judicial proceeding was ongoing in 2016 as no final decision had been reached.

The situation is made more complex because the local government has little room to manoeuvre. After a lengthy political debate (in December 2012) about the possibility of using agricultural land to accommodate the Sinti, an amendment to the regional law, backed by the Mayor, was neither supported by the right-wing majority nor by the leftist minority in the council, thereby limiting the potential for change. Overall, the level of spatial segregation is very high (as the four areas of land are in very remote areas), while political tensions on the issue have increased following the onset of the expropriation procedures. However, the new administration still lacks political support for changing the existing legislation on use of agricultural land.

Furthermore, the housing issues need to be just as thoroughly considered at national level. The limited impact of the Italian housing policies (with insufficient funds and a lack of strategic planning) has created a saturated public market (with relatively few available flats for the target population). A lack of policies to support low-income families in the private housing sector highlights the need for changes to national policies.

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<sup>4</sup> Focus group on housing with Sinti men

Public policies, however, are needed because the Sinti families cannot address their housing problems on their own. The cost of renting or purchasing a private house (or land approved for housing) in Mantua is too high for Sinti families.

### Labour

Among the Sinti population in Mantua, access to employment is still limited and typically revolves around marginal and insecure sectors, such as the collection of scrap metal. Moreover, labour is by far the most important issue in the current general economic climate, but is very hard to tackle because of the lack of a wider partnership at the local level that includes the key actors.

The focus on scrap-metal collection/dealing as a way to generate income remains a problematic solution to the labour issues that the Sinti population in Mantua face. This activity falls under waste regulation, governed by national and regional laws, which is very stringent and provides limited options for self-entrepreneurship. The municipality has no authority on the issue. The Sinti involved in this business also face the daily threat of fines and the requisition of their trucks, due to difficulties in finding administrative and organisational solutions to make scrap-metal collection compatible with the relevant waste regulations.

The need for informal connections in order to find a job in Italy is also very high, and the resulting impact of segregated social capital is pervasive for the Sinti. Moreover, the Italian labour market is typically a dual market where highly skilled employees can develop a career and earn higher wages than in low-skilled jobs. In the latter sub-market, where Sinti are more likely to find a job, the importance of personal connections and acquaintances is even more important than in the former.

Moreover, many of the Sinti men and women lack the skills and experience that are demanded in the local labour market. The low level of education and training among many of the Sinti adults is a real barrier to their chances of gaining employment.

*"We can't find any job that is different from what we usually do. We are good at cleaning houses, but we can't work as secretaries. We have limited chances. For every job, they ask for expertise and references, but no one of us has something like this."<sup>5</sup>*

The failure of the work experience grant programmes provides additional evidence that many Sinti men and women face discrimination when looking for a job, and fail to find a job because they are part of a stigmatised group. The Sinti report common experiences that whenever they are identified as Sinti (e.g. possibly only by the address on their identity card) they are then rejected by potential employers. This can mean no calls for interviews or selection, or the non-renewal of a short-term position.

*"Even those with education hardly find a job. For us, without an education, it's even harder. Moreover, when we apply for a job, if on the application we write*

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<sup>5</sup> Focus group with Sinti women on labour

*that we live in Via Learco Guerra it's like to write that we are Sinti. They immediately burn our application.*"<sup>6</sup>

### Discrimination

The lack of cultural recognition and promotion of the Sinti as an acknowledged minority also remains a threat to their social inclusion. There is an on-going discussion about the recognition of Sinti and Roma as a minority group in Italy. This would be an important and symbolic development for the Sinti and Roma, but it is also about the recognition of additional rights (i.e. to use their own language in administrative issues, to have additional funding for the promotion of their culture, and to be granted equal treatment as students). It is important to highlight that the lack of cultural promotion reinforces stereotypes among the wider Italian population of Roma/Sinti as people with little worth.

The Sinti also suffer from discrimination and hate-speech, and there are high levels of 'Romaphobia' (or antigypsyism) in Italian society. This, combined with a general lack of trust, does not allow the Sinti to disclose their identity freely nor to voice their culture in public.

Mantua is also characterised by the low levels of attention devoted to Roma and Sinti by cultural producers (e.g. musicians, writers, directors) or event promoters (e.g. Festivalletteratura, Mantova Jazz Festival). However, the Institute for Sinti Culture (Istituto di Cultura Sinta), set up as part of the LERI research, could become a key actor in promoting Sinti culture, mainstreaming Sinti issues and fighting discrimination.

## 3. PAR methodology employed

The adopted PAR methodology was chosen in order to guarantee the engagement of different stakeholders and ensure the quality of the research process. Emphasising the importance of the participatory process was used as a means of fostering trust among the local actors. A three-wave process was designed to facilitate the emergence and development of different points of view of various stakeholders (first and second waves), and to facilitate the development of common ground for common actions (third wave).

The first wave of research (from October to December 2014) involved a survey of local stakeholders, using a questionnaire influenced by the Delphi method.<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire was based on a SWOT analysis and focused on the dimensions (housing, education, labour, health, culture and non-discrimination) identified by the LERI research. The SWOT analysis aimed to collect information on the main strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in the local context regarding the inclusion of the Sinti and Roma people, as perceived by the stakeholders.

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<sup>6</sup> Focus group on labour with Sinti men

<sup>7</sup> The Delphi method is a structured method which relies on a panel of experts. The experts answer questionnaires in two or more rounds. After each round, a facilitator provides a summary of the experts' answers from the previous round. Experts are encouraged to revise their earlier answers in light of the replies of other members of their panel.

The first wave was managed by the project's PAR expert, while a local field expert provided important contributions in identifying and contacting the relevant stakeholders.

The Delphi questionnaire was sent to 52 different stakeholders: those mapped in the first phase of the project by the LERI field expert and some other relevant local actors (including media, local groups and committees). Communications with stakeholders stressed the role of the FRA as a neutral and expert third party, and the commitment of local public bodies (i.e. the Municipality of Mantua and the Province of Mantua) to the project in order to encourage participation in the survey. An initial letter was sent to stakeholders by the Municipal Section for Welfare, presenting the results of the needs assessment and asking for their support. Another three different requests were sent by the researchers to each stakeholder, always with an individual communication.

However, despite these measures, the survey still achieved a low response rate. Only nine completed questionnaires were returned (a response rate of 17%), while seven people refused to participate (overall response rate was 20%). The remaining 36 addressees, many of whom were professionals of public institutions and local NGOs, did not respond.

Such a low rate of response is considered to be indicative of the level of engagement of local stakeholders in the process and of their level of trust.

A Delphi questionnaire is an effective tool for creating a scenario that values different points of view of different stakeholders, but it only works if the stakeholders recognise the importance of the process and their responsibility to respond. Many of the stakeholders did not recognise these factors – not even in the office of the Municipal Section for Welfare, which wrote the letter of support.

In the second wave of research (from February to May 2015), five focus groups with Sinti families were planned and conducted, each focusing on one of the five dimensions (housing, labour, education, health, culture) identified by the project. Two focus groups involved Sinti women, two involved Sinti men and one involved youngsters. The focus groups were intended to obtain relevant information on the experiences, evaluations and the proposals of the Sinti regarding their social inclusion.

The focus groups were managed and conducted by the PAR expert, who was assisted by social researchers with expertise on PAR methods and on Roma and Sinti issues. All of the focus groups involved collaboration with Sucar Drom. The association's involvement has been a huge benefit to the project because they were able to guarantee the Sinti families' commitment and participation in each session, including the participation of people living under different conditions (i.e. people living in the camp or in agricultural plots or apartments, and people working in the formal economy or informal economy or unemployed).

All of the focus groups were conducted in the municipal camp community space, except for the group with youngsters which was conducted on a patio in front of a mobile house inside the camp.

The focus groups did not use a rigid methodological approach, but through guided discussion, in order to better facilitate the emergence of participants'

points of view. In any case, it would have been impossible to have a rigid methodological approach as people came and went during the focus groups, a lot of women and men wanted to attend, and many of the women had their children with them. Adopting a conversational approach enabled the researchers to have an in-depth discussion, promoting a pleasant climate.

The Sinti families' participation in the process has been useful for two main reasons. Their participation enabled the researchers to collect their points of view on the five dimensions of the integration process. It also provided symbolic value by treating them as local actors with a public voice, in front of all the other local stakeholders.

Due to the conclusions of the first and the second waves, the primary objective of the third wave of research – the consensus building conference (held in September 2015) – was to rebuild a climate of confidence and engagement among local actors, identify common ground for common future actions. A scenario-building methodology was used to avoid a rigid framing of the well-known problems regarding the Sinti's living conditions. In a scenario-building<sup>8</sup> approach, the negotiation process is not centred on the definition of the problems, but on the desirable future objectives in this present case with respect to: housing, labour, education, health and culture and non-discrimination.

The conference on consensus building was managed and conducted by the PAR expert, assisted by social researchers with expertise on PAR methods and on Roma and Sinti issues. The participants were invited to the event through a letter sent from the Municipality of Mantua and Sucar Drom, in order to emphasise the commitment of these two main actors to the process.

The planned work phases for the consensus building conference were:

1. welcome and cooperative atmosphere building;
2. construction of a map of trust;
3. tables of discussion;
4. sharing the results and discussion on the results;
5. scenario-building approach (in working groups);
6. sharing the results and closing.

The organisation of the day was changed in response to two problems that emerged once the conference began. With the exception of one local association and Sucar Drom, no other local stakeholders focused on cultural issues. When organising the conference, it was agreed that the selected themes should each involve the participation of people who had experience, skills and the power of acting or of influencing that specific theme. Given the lack of local actors with experience of cultural issues, it was decided not to have a specific table for cultural issues, but instead spread the cultural theme across the three other themes/tables (i.e. housing, labour and education).

Another issue was that many people confirmed their participation for the morning only. It was therefore decided not to focus the afternoon sessions on identifying

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<sup>8</sup> Durance P. and Godet M. (2010), 'Scenario building: Uses and abuses', *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, Vol. 77, No. 9, Pp. 1488–1492.

possible action plans, in order to avoid a lack of legitimacy. Instead the afternoon session was used to think about other local actors who should be involved in the process.

To welcome the participants and to create a cooperative atmosphere the organisers used an activity based on the cards of the card game DIXIT. The participants had to choose a single card (each card had a very evocative picture on it) and use it to present herself or himself to the unknown other in a face-to-face five-minute meeting.

After this step, the participants were asked to define the conditions that were required for them to be able to trust the process of the event in particular and the LERI research in general; using their answers, a shared map of trust was created.

**Picture 1. Map of trust from Consensus Conference September 2015**



Source: LERI Field expert, 2015

The issues on the map related to desires and objectives, a pragmatic approach and an approach focused on values, and the quality of the relations between individuals and between institutions. Many of the elements of the map were goal-oriented and asked for shared and common responsibilities in order to achieve shared objectives.

The personal introduction and the map of trust were considered effective in helping to create a cooperative climate in advance of the three table discussions.

The table discussions used an approach based on the World Café model and were run by experienced facilitators. Each table was centred on a specific theme where the participants were invited to develop a desirable future on this theme.

At the end of the last round and in a plenary session, an overall summary of each table was provided by the facilitators, and validated by the participants. The results from the three table discussions are summarised below.

## Housing

It was suggested that the main priority for housing was to develop a multi-dimensional strategy that could guarantee the closing down of the municipal camp, but also respect the needs of the Sinti families. Participants also suggested that policies and housing solutions should be compatible with the protection of inter-generational and social ties.

At the end of the consensus building conference, the participants agreed on the following proposals, intended to be useful as solutions to the Sinti's main issues:

- to recognise living in a camp as a status considered an emergency condition that prioritises those on the social housing waiting list;
- to support those who are interested in social housing;
- to solve the situation relating to agricultural plots of land, so that owners have the right to live on their own property;
- to test micro-credit, soft loans and institutional guarantors to provide easy access to credit for Sinti families;
- to establish smaller housing areas, as an alternative to the camps (so-called micro-areas);
- to provide places and opportunities for Sinti families to socialise;
- to involve all the relevant municipalities in a debate with the Sinti about real alternatives to the camp.

## Labour

At the end of the discussion, two different types of rhetoric, that should be harmonised in order to address labour-related problems, were identified by the participants. The Sinti often considered their exclusion from the local labour market as a problem of discrimination. On the other hand, the local stakeholders focused on labour policies suggesting that the exclusion of the Sinti was a problem of skills and employability.

Nevertheless, at the end of the conference day, the participants agreed on the following proposals.

- Local NGOs and public bodies should strengthen their relations with employers, focusing on a better understanding of the needs, strategies and way of thinking of the Sinti. They should also prevent and address any kind of prejudice and discrimination against the Sinti.
- Local NGOs and public bodies should act as a guarantor to support greater confidence and greater integration of Sinti workers in the local labour market and in their professional work and entrepreneurial careers. This role should follow an empowerment approach that can effectively help those who are looking for a job.

- Institutions should develop a system of rules and procedures governing the functioning of certain sectors of particular interest to the Sinti families in Mantua, such as scrap metal collection and waste disposal.
- Families and schools should promote the continuation and improvement of education, schooling and vocational training.
- Families and single people should build and strengthen social relationships beyond the Sinti community of Mantua, because each of these relationships and connections may also be useful for obtaining and maintaining a job.
- The local community needs to promote trust and positivity. In particular, it is crucial to convey confidence, particularly to the younger generations, accepting that the present and future are likely to be difficult for everyone, but trusting that relevant parties can work together to find paths to greater prosperity.

## Education

The table discussion on education also identified two different types of rhetoric that should be harmonised in order to address education-related issues. On the one hand, the Sinti often think about education as being ineffective in terms of their employability; they don't see that completing education leads to getting a job. On the other hand, the local stakeholders focused on education policies, suggesting that low rates of school attendance and attainment among Sinti pupils was a cultural problem.

At the end of the conference day, the participants agreed on the following proposals:

- to increase children's participation in extracurricular activities within mixed groups (i.e. Sinti families share this need with several Mantuan families);
- to strengthen adults' schooling and vocational training;
- to create a system able to analyse the needs of the local labour market and provide relevant, ad hoc training courses;
- to enhance the role of mediators, while ensuring that they do not become the only intermediaries in the relationships between schools and families;
- to systematically analyse the relationship between the living environment (territory) and the consequences for schooling;
- to offer new opportunities for training and exchanges of experience among teachers.

To sum up, the entire participatory needs assessment phase was intended as a process able to foster the participation of local stakeholders, over and beyond the local municipality and Sincar Drom, in an effort to promote social inclusion of the Sinti. Many of the issues identified during the three waves of research could only be effectively tackled in a multi-stakeholder approach, due to their multidimensional quality.

The implementation of the needs assessment phase (i.e. the three waves of research: collection of the points of view, awareness of the points of view of other stakeholders, negotiation of common grounds for common actions) was based on the commitment of different local actors. Undoubtedly, not all the local actors mapped in the first phase of the LERI shared the process or were

engaged, but at least some of the relevant stakeholders participated in the conference.

In the months following the conference many important things happened.

First of all, the municipality commissioned the refurbishment and better management of the municipal camp, through an in-house company (ASTER), aimed at fostering a direct relation with the Sinti families, taking over the mediation role of Sucar Drom. The refurbishment of the camp and the direct relation between the municipality and the Sinti families can be considered as a legacy of the climate also created during the conference.

Secondly, Sucar Drom worked towards creating an Institute for Sinti Culture during the local intervention phase of LERI, fostering the participation of the Sinti community during all the phases of the process. Neither of the two strategies, however, was able to promote the participation and the commitment of other local stakeholders.

It is important to bear in mind that a true participatory approach was only taken during the needs assessment activities, and not in the overall process, the latter being mostly centred on the triangulation between the Municipality, the local Sinti community and Sucar Drom, with limited involvement of the LERI field expert. This resulted from the fact that the field expert that worked in Mantua in 2016 does not live in Mantua and could not act as a local facilitator of a participatory process, and rather took a more active role in the earlier phases of the research. As such, the facilitation of the remaining processes was gradually taken over by other local stakeholders during the implementation of the interventions.

At the end of the LERI research, a final participatory session took place with the aim to evaluate the impact of LERI on fostering the social inclusion of the Sinti population, with particular attention on the impact of the local intervention realised by Sucar Drom.

The final evaluation session was conducted by individual interviews with the main local stakeholders and the Sinti families. The interviews were based on a SWOT analysis and were aimed at identifying the lessons learned from the project. The findings of the interviews were presented in a participatory and multi-stakeholder workshop to receive feedback from the relevant parties.

## 4. The local interventions - goals, partners, process and results

During the entire participatory needs assessment process under LERI, the local Sinti camp has been defined as a place of segregation and ghettoization. However, in the meantime, some processes have taken place, through intercultural mediation and the support of local institutions, to help the Sinti families achieve independence outside of the camp. Nevertheless, the camp is still a reference point and a meeting place for the whole community. The Municipality of Mantua is looking for ways to promote long-term solutions that will enable Sinti families to leave the camp and find private accommodation (either through social housing, on the private market or on owned plots). In

Mantua, 20 Sinti families are already living outside the camp, on private land or in flats, while between 25 and 30 families are still living in the camp area of Via Learco Guerra. The local government is planning a 'gradual' process that could lead to the closure of the camp. While this is a desirable step, it is clear that the Sinti community will need a focal point where they can gather and express their cultural identity. For this reason, local stakeholders proposed to create a 'cultural space' where it would be possible to plan targeted activities with the Sinti community and organise events for the wider population in order to spread accurate and up-to-date knowledge about the Sinti culture and people.

Currently, Mantua has no public space that can act as a point of reference for the Sinti, nor any place where Sinti and non-Sinti people can gather and share their cultures.

In this regard a public space is not intended as part of the solution of the housing issues identified during the participatory needs assessment. Rather, acknowledging that coping with the housing issues is far from the current means of the local actors involved in the LERI research, creating a public point of reference for the Sinti is intended as a way to anticipate the future need for cohesion among the community, connected with the closure of the camp.

Moreover, a considerable part of the wider population continues to hold negative views towards the Sinti in Mantua, who are still commonly perceived through stereotypes and only rarely receive any positive coverage in the national and local media. The Sinti have expressed two concerns: becoming even more stigmatised as a result of increased invisibility; and being assimilated by the majority culture.

During the needs assessment phase, the other main issues identified while discussing cultural issues were related to: school, housing and work opportunities. Indeed, the need for anti-discrimination measures and the promotion of the social representation of the Sinti have been at the centre of all discussions. Many have highlighted the importance of changes through face-to-face interactions in order to combat stereotypes, rather than through changes at a more abstract level. For instance, the Sinti have quoted the importance of daily interaction with non-Sinti to help eliminate reciprocal prejudices, or working together or playing football in the same team as a way to build stronger social ties.

Despite the presence of associations that promote intercultural dialogue (i.e. *Sucar Drom*, *Articolo 3*, and the Intercultural Centre of the Province of Mantua), the Sinti continue to face difficulties in finding the appropriate equilibrium between the need to preserve their cultural aspects and self-identity, and the need to increase mediation between different individuals, groups and society at large.

For all of these reasons, the proposal to support the creation of an Institute for Sinti Culture (ISC) was considered particularly important to allow local stakeholders to start a process aimed at tackling cultural issues, while also producing positive outcomes in the short run. The opening of the institute was a key milestone, and particularly symbolic in the year 2016, the year in which Mantua was designated the Italian cultural capital.

*"For us this centre is extremely important, firstly because it is in the city. For our Sinti community, coming here with our kids, to study our language in a dedicated place that we did not have in the past, coming here in the city and leaving our camp is really important, for informing people about our culture and language. It allows us to show people who we are, and we are no longer forced to hide away all the time."<sup>9</sup>*

The idea of an ISC has been the focus of local debate since 2010 when the camp closure was imminent. The idea of refurbishing the premises of the San Martino Church was proposed by Sucar Drom in 2012, to provide the association with a new location that was more appropriate to meet emerging needs. The plans were never implemented because of a lack of funds, although an agreement was reached with the Diocese, and a feasibility study was carried out about the intervention.

Therefore the possibility of setting up an ISC as a cultural association through the LERI research was seen as a way to create a strategic synergy with Sucar Drom as the advocacy association. The two institutions, although formally distinct, have a large overlapping membership. The co-working space would help to support policy synergy where partners with different goals and perspective can work together to trigger original and innovative solutions to existing problems.

The first phase of the intervention project focused on the refurbishment of the rooms identified for use as the ISC. These rooms are located in the San Martino parish centre, provided by the Diocese. The Sinti community has been involved in defining the specific needs that the institute has to address in order to design the project in terms of the number of rooms, role of the courtyard, purpose of each room, etc. The Sinti also cooperated with local artisans in the process, by painting the walls and decorating the rooms of the institute.

This first phase was completed on 17 September 2016 with the first public event held in the institute that was open to the citizens of Mantua to publicise the institute's new location. The Municipality of Mantua, the Prefecture of Mantua, and the Diocese of Mantua, through their representatives, took part to the inauguration of the institute, pledging their commitment for future activities.

The second phase of the intervention involved the Municipality of Mantua and the Province of Mantua working together to plan the first events that took place in the ISC in September 2016. Their presence and support will be crucial in the future to strengthen the process of trust-building among the local stakeholders.

The events included hosting the Porrajmos Museum, an exhibition designed by Sucar Drom to promote a wider understanding of the suffering endured by the Roma and Sinti population in Italy during the 1930–1945 fascist period. The exhibition had already been showcased in different temporary locations, including in Mantua in 2013 (under the project 'Respect: Increasing Roma People's Participation and Citizenship Rights: Campaigns and Tools') and other cities such as Venice, Turin and Cremona.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with a Sinti man, member of Sucar Drom

A cycle of six events from the Living Library were planned, but still require funding. The Living Library is a project that aims to “improve oral language skills” (Living Library, 2015). It considers each person as a possible “living book”, able to tell a story. This tool, already used by some Sinti youth in 2014, aims to support the following goals:

- supporting the citizen’s ability to face a variety of life experiences;
- Sinti engagement via understanding that they have stories of their own to tell;
- promoting the use of the Italian language and improving the oral skills of the Sinti;
- increasing Sinti vocabulary usage.

The ISC provide a common space where issues of Sinti identity can be tackled through a series of meetings and events, targeting both the Sinti and non-Sinti populations.

*"In the institute cultural projects will take place, such as book presentations, exhibitions and also training. There will also be activities specially dedicated to Sinti and Roma culture in Mantua, like, for example, Sinti and Roma music courses for Sinti and Roma children, or courses on the languages of the Sinti and Roma. There will also be meetings between young Sinti and Roma people and elderly people, so that an historical knowledge can be handed down from generation to generation."*<sup>10</sup>

Sucar Drom was the key stakeholder, managing the project and monitoring the correct implementation of the planned actions. Moreover, Sucar Drom is recognised by the Sinti population as their own association, able to represent their interests vis-à-vis local institutions. Almost all of the Sinti families living in Mantua have a member associated to the NGO, and even those who disagree with the positions expressed by the majority of the members underline that Sucar Drom represents the whole of the community and their interests.

The Municipality of Mantua and the Province of Mantua supported Sucar Drom and the Sinti families in planning the official opening of the institute. Moreover, the Municipality played an important role at the end of the LERI research, and it was suggested that the local government could finance the events that took place in the institute during the ‘Mantua 2016 Italian Capital of Culture’ project.

*"The ISC could definitively be a means and an opportunity to promote and enhance interaction between cultures in a year like 2016 which is a special year for Mantua that has been chosen as the Italian capital of culture. We believe that the institute could open new horizons so that our city could really become a place where cultures interact and get to know each other, which would definitively lead to a better dialogue and greater mutual understanding and respect."*<sup>11</sup>

Local stakeholders, in particular the Municipality, have also asked the LERI research to support the relevant actors in adopting a participatory methodology to discuss and evaluate the ongoing processes and projects relating to the

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with a member of Sucar Drom

<sup>11</sup> Interview with the Municipal Section for Welfare

establishment of the institute. For this reason, LERI scheduled meetings with Sinti families to offer a common space to discuss the local implemented policies and the activities carried out during the research, in order to evaluate the impact of the research and to assess future developments of the local policies.

As mentioned above, the Diocese currently runs the building in which the ISC has been established, namely the San Martino parish centre. San Martino is therefore not fully autonomous but is a church and a centre run by Santa Maria della Carità, which is itself part of the new Sant' Anselmo parish.

Sucar Drom was the key partner in the management of the funds allocated by the LERI research for the local intervention. The association has built a solid relationship with the representatives of the San Martino Church and has outlined the conditions to be fulfilled when using the building. It is also a key stakeholder in the project, monitoring the refurbishment of the institute, and played a fundamental role in supporting and involving Sinti families in the process of developing the institute. Finally, Sucar Drom, which has promoted many cultural events in recent years, planned the official event for the opening of the ISC.

The support of the Municipality of Mantua during the second phase was also crucial. Supporting the creation of the institute helped to establish a climate of mutual trust with the Sinti community, while the Municipality played an important role at the end of the project.. Therefore, its participation in the project marked the beginning of the future relations between the ISC and the Municipality.

The Sinti population has been actively engaged in refurbishing the institute, in order to allow them to build 'their' centre, and deciding on the type of interventions that are needed to get it ready. Furthermore, in the second phase, the Sinti supported Sucar Drom in planning the opening event.

The feasibility of the intervention is ensured by the will of local stakeholders to tackle the identified issues and the fact that Sucar Drom strongly supports the intervention. Over the past decade the issue of a proper place for the ISC has surfaced among the Sinti actors at different stages, and has also been in the focus during a European project by the Province of Mantua.

The greatest future challenges are likely to relate to the running of the ISC. One threat relates to the potential confusion between the activities of Sucar Drom and the institute, while another relates to the cultural skills required to run the ISC. As regards the first threat, so far the ISC has worked in parallel with Sucar Drom as their members are also members of Sucar Drom. The main line of distinction between the two organisations relates to the aims of their activities. Whenever the Sinti community wants to pursue cultural activities it deploys the institute's name, otherwise it uses Sucar Drom's name. This links directly to the institute's lack of paid personnel. Given the voluntary nature of the ISC, it only employs volunteers or Sucar Drom's paid staff. Even though the community has been involved in the refurbishment of the building, there is a general lack of engagement of Sinti as volunteers, which could translate into a possible lack of activism of the Sinti in the ISC. Even if more funding is available for the institute in the future, the opportunities for recruiting Sinti as paid personnel are likely to be limited, given their lack of skills in written production and their low

educational level. It will be interesting to evaluate whether the institute will be playing a role in promoting a higher educational level or if its existence will be threatened by the lack of education among the Sinti.

A participatory evaluation session was conducted on completion of the local action in order to evaluate its effectiveness and the obtained results. The session adopted a multi-stakeholder approach and particular attention was given to the participation of the Sinti families. The session was held on 20 October in two rounds: a bilateral meeting between the Municipality of Mantua and Sucar Drom as the main stakeholders of the local process, and an evaluation workshop participated by the Municipality of Mantua, Sucar Drom, ASTER and the Sinti families involved during the LERI PAR phase (more than 20 Sinti people took part to the workshop).

During the bilateral meeting representatives of Sucar Drom and the Municipal Minister for Social Services and Welfare discussed the main results of the LERI research and the local intervention. They agreed that the LERI research has been really important and effective because for the first time in many years, the Sinti community met the local authorities and the public officials to take part in the decision process regarding their personal situation.

*"For the first time a large number of Sinti families has been involved with the local government to talk about their own condition. Until now we were used to meeting the local authorities or the public officials only for specific issues, mainly regarding the management of the camp. In the project we talked about our overall condition."*<sup>12</sup>

They also agreed that during the LERI implementation the main issues regarding the Sinti families (housing, labour, education, participation and anti-discrimination) were seen in a holistic approach. As a result of this holistic approach, the municipality as a whole was engaged in the process. Maybe with contradictory outcomes, but for the first time the traditional mandate of social services to manage Sinti issues was called into question, calling the municipality to action. The participatory approach was valued as really crucial because it facilitated the negotiation of point of views, often interpreted through the lens of mutual stereotypes.

*"The project helped the Municipality to meet every single family, promoting our understanding of every single situation. I think that we learned a lot about many different issues regarding the Sinti families living in Mantua, trying to overpass a more traditional approach based on the cultural mediation."*<sup>13</sup>

Such a direct approach between the municipality and the Sinti families is interpreted by Sucar Drom as a potential risk to manage: the risk of not being recognised by the municipality as the direct representative of the Sinti community.

At the end of the bilateral meeting, the municipality and Sucar Drom shared some reciprocal commitments:

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<sup>12</sup> Representative of Sucar Drom

<sup>13</sup> Municipal Minister for Social Services and Welfare

- to foster reciprocal acknowledgement and engagement;
- to confirm the negotiation process, planning periodic meetings and involving the Sinti community at large;
- to engage the municipality as a whole, facilitating the engagement of the different municipal ministers in charge with the different issues regarding the Sinti families' social integration;
- to promote as a partnership future projects aiming to foster Sinti families' social integration.

During the participatory workshop, attended by the Municipality of Mantua, Sugar Drom, ASTER and the Sinti families involved during the PAR phase, more critical voices emerged.

Sinti women and men agreed with the positive results reported during the previous bilateral meeting between the municipality and Sugar Drom, appreciating the refurbishment of the camp and the opening of the institute.

*"The refurbishment of the camp is a great thing that happened. Now we are in charge to respect the results and to collaborate with ASTER."*<sup>14</sup>

*"Thanks to the institute our children will have a place to study and we will have a place to show who we really are to all the Mantuan citizens."*<sup>15</sup>

But the institute and the refurbishment of the camp are results that still do not take on the most critical issues of the Sinti families' condition.

*"For me and my family the life is always the same. We still live in the camp, we still don't have any work, we are still marginalised."*<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the workshop, the General Director of the Municipal Ministry of Social Services committed to meet the Sinti families again in January to share progress of the municipality's action on the process to close the camp, the housing solutions on the agricultural plots, and future working opportunities.

## 5. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

The LERI research found that social inclusion has many different, yet interrelated dimensions and therefore required a multi-level approach. The main areas identified during the research (i.e. education, housing, labour and anti-discrimination) are also directly linked to other dimensions, including family ties and political representation.

The different dimensions call for different levels of governance, including policymaking, planning and funding. The LERI research worked at a local level, but many of the challenges for the inclusion of the Sinti are relevant on a national or regional governmental level, for example legal restrictions on housing, or labour issues. Furthermore, multi-level issues require multi-stakeholder approaches. Today, those committed to Roma and Sinti inclusion are

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<sup>14</sup> Sinti woman living in the camp

<sup>15</sup> Sinti man living in the camp

<sup>16</sup> Young Sinti woman living in the Camp

often only the Sinti, by themselves and with their association, as they confront the public administration (in Mantua, the Municipality and the Province) with the need to take action. To summarise, the situation in Mantua is that those who are committed and engaged do not have the power to affect change, and find it difficult to engage those who do have the power to deliver the necessary changes. In a multi-stakeholder approach, this claustrophobic dichotomy should be overcome, by promoting the commitment of all the key actors. Some good examples of this situation can be given. Housing is a very sensitive area of policies and interventions, especially because the large majority of the Sinti families still live in the camp, generally recognised as the worst place to live. Closing the camp and promoting different housing conditions is recognised as the only way to solve the problem, but closing down the camp and promoting different housing conditions imply the need for:

- a regional law on public housing that guarantees that living in a camp is considered as one of the conditions to be eligible for an apartment;
- a regional or national plan for public housing able to cope with the actual shortage of apartments;
- a national law on the residential zoning of the agricultural plots;
- more Sinti families whose incomes could guarantee their access to the private housing market.

Not one of these aspects can be dealt with by the main stakeholders of the LERI research in the short term and with their actual resources from the economic, the political, and the social acceptance points of view. The most important examples of progress that happened in Mantua during the period when the LERI research took place and regarding the camp are not connected with its closure, but with its management: the assignment to ASTER, an in-house company of the municipality, to the management of the camp; and the decision to fund the refurbishment of the electrical system and the sewer system by reconnecting the camp to the public water main. It is therefore no coincidence that the partners of the LERI research decided to implement an intervention linked to cultural issues and focus on Sucar Drom as the main stakeholder. The opening of the ISC was a relatively easy outcome to gain, but it is also a critical outcome.

The institute will be able – at least all the stakeholders hope it will – to confront the stigmatisation and the discrimination suffered by the Sinti, promoting more positive relationships between Sinti and non-Sinti people. However, the institute is not designed as a means to deal directly with all the other areas identified during the needs assessment: housing, labour or education. Its indirect effects will possibly be seen in the medium or in the long term. From this point of view, the institute cannot be considered as the most effective intervention to address the identified needs, but as the most realistic intervention that the Sinti community and Sucar Drom were able to identify and to implement under the LERI research framework.

The local intervention has, to date, been based almost exclusively on a mandate assigned to Sucar Drom, which contradicts the expected multi-stakeholder approach. The majority of the local stakeholders who took part in the participatory process were not deeply involved in the local intervention process. The greatest challenge that the institute faces is finding a way to engage other stakeholders. This is also critical because the effectiveness of cultural

acknowledgement is only indirectly associated with other levels of effectiveness in social inclusion. In the longer term, it will be interesting to evaluate whether the ISC was able to address the other social inclusion issues, such as education, housing and labour.

The shortage of local stakeholders engaged and involved in the LERI research (during the local intervention phase) could represent a serious threat to the future sustainability and impacts for future Sinti social inclusion. The shortage of local stakeholders and the low level of engagement of stakeholders (at least other than the Sinti community, the NGO Sucar Drom and the Municipality of Mantua) has been the main weakness since the needs assessment phase of the project. As described before, few of the identified local actors completed the Delphi questionnaire or participated in the consensus building conference.

While the LERI research could provide a means of compensating for this lack of stakeholder engagement, it would probably be even more effective to gain the consensus and commitment from a wider range of stakeholders.

In Mantua, the Sinti issues are strongly exploited by the political polemics. Since the centre-left coalition won control of the municipality, the right-wing opposition has used the Sinti issues as an instrument of political confrontation and a means to gain public approval. It will be important in the next months to evaluate whether the aggressively racist and stigmatising campaigns promoted by the right-wing parties have had an impact on public opinion. It will also be important to evaluate the effectiveness of the institute in creating an intercultural dialogue between the Mantuan society at large and the Sinti minority, based on mutual respect and acknowledgement.

## 6. Conclusions and recommendations

The LERI research in Mantua has light and shadow. As clearly emerged during the final evaluation session some important results were obtained:

- the process, based on participation and negotiation in a multi-stakeholder approach, improved mutual acknowledgement and understanding among, at least, the three main local actors: the local Sinti community, Sucar Drom and the Municipality of Mantua;
- the refurbishment of the municipal camp, funded by the financial resources of the municipality, restored minimal levels of dignity for the families living in the camp;
- local authorities are now more aware of the needs of every Sinti family living in Mantua in different housing conditions and under different levels of social inclusion;
- the opening of the ISC, financed and supported by the LERI local research, is an opportunity to foster the social integration of the Sinti community and to promote the education of the Sinti children;
- the Municipality of Mantua expressed its own commitment to the process through a political act: Guideline no. 13 for the administrative term 2015–2020 related to democracy and rights and is dedicated to the strategic objective of delivering 'Projects for the social inclusion of members of the Roma and Sinti linguistic minority, and closure of the Viale Learco Guerra Area'.

But some crucial weaknesses of the process should be tackled in the future:

- the process in Mantua involved mainly three actors (the Sinti families, Sucar Drom, the Municipality of Mantua), but some of the challenges for the social inclusion of the Sinti community were far beyond their power to tackle them;
- the commitment of the Municipality should be strengthened, through an effective involvement of the Municipal ministers, other than the one devoted to social services and welfare;
- to improve the process, effective results should be obtained in the main critical areas: housing (first of all the regulation of the housing solutions on agricultural plots), labour and education.

Our final recommendations aim to strengthen the positive results and to address the weaknesses:

- the participatory approach should also be used in the future, strengthening the reciprocal commitment among the main local actors: the Sinti community, Sucar Drom and the Municipality of Mantua;
- the Sinti community should be involved in the decisions regarding their situation, both directly and through Sucar Drom;
- to be more effective, interventions and solutions should be designed through an approach centred on individual and family conditions and resources;
- more local actors should be involved in the process in order to guarantee the effectiveness of a multidimensional approach to social inclusion;
- interventions and solutions should be able to combine an approach centred on rights with a pragmatic approach, because a step-by-step approach could strengthen mutual trust and collaboration.

## 7. Additional information

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