

Implications of COVID-19 pandemic on Roma and Travellers communities

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1 Specific implications of the general measures taken to stop the COVID-19 pandemic on Roma and Travellers' communities?

1.1 Type of measures

In **Italy**, the Decree of the President of the Italian Government of 9 March 2020¹ extended the so-called "red zone" to the entire Italian territory. The Decree also prohibited any type of gathering in public spaces or places open to the public. This Decree was immediately enforceable and expected last until 3 April 2020 (it was later prolonged until 4 May 2020). The red-zone application implied the following emergency measures: prohibition of leaving the municipality or the area to all the people at any title present in the municipality/area; prohibition of access to the municipality/area; suspension of events and initiatives of any kind, including cultural, religious and sport events; suspension of classes in all the schools of all levels; suspension of university and academic activities; closing of museums and cultural institutions; suspension of school-trips to both national and international destinations; active quarantine to people who had been in close contact with infected people; obligation for all the people arriving to Italy and proceeding from areas at risk to communicate their arrival to the Prevention Department of the local Healthcare service that is in charge of informing competent authorities for the adoption of the home active surveillance measure; closing of all shops; closing or limitation to the activities of public offices and services; possibility to introduce compulsory safeguards to rule the access to essential public services or shops selling essential goods (such as the use of face-masks, hand sanitiser etc.; the obligation to maintain a 1-metre compulsory distance between people); limitation or suspension to freight transport and transport of people (including planes, trains, ships and local public transports); suspension of working activities, with the exception of essential services.

In **Italy**, the Law Decree No. 18 of 17 March 2020² was adopted by the Government, aimed at supporting the economic system and all the people who are financially suffering due to the shortcomings of the epidemic (for

¹ Decreto Del Presidente Del Consiglio Dei Ministri 9 marzo 2020, "Ulteriori disposizioni attuative del decreto-legge 23 febbraio 2020, n. 6, recante misure urgenti in materia di contenimento e gestione dell'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19, applicabili sull'intero territorio nazionale", available at: www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/09/20A01558/sq.

² Decreto-Legge 17 marzo 2020, n. 18, "Misure di potenziamento del Servizio sanitario nazionale e di sostegno economico per famiglie, lavoratori e imprese connesse all'emergenza epidemiologica da COVID-19", available at: www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/17/20G00034/sq.

instance, those who had precarious or irregular jobs and lost them; small companies that had to stop or reduce their production).

In **Italy**, the Decree of the Italian Civil Protection No. 658 of 29 March 2020³, earmarked EUR 400,000,000.00 to Italian municipalities to finance urgent measures of food solidarity. Thanks to this Fund, Italian municipalities could provide during the emergency period store credits (*buono spesa*) in the form of food vouchers to spend in supermarkets and other food stores, to buy food and other essential goods. However, the Decree established that these resources were to be destined to the population legally residing in the municipality's territory, meaning that only the people enrolled in municipal civil registries are eligible for this welfare provision: the Decree did not go into details in the procedures' governance, leaving room to the regulatory power of municipal authorities. The impact of this legislative provision on the Roma community is specified in sub-paragraph 1.2, however it is possible to stress the imposing the legal residency as the primary criterion to benefit from store credits, would entail some of the most vulnerable social groups, such as homeless people (who have not a legal residency in the municipal territory), third-country citizens with an irregular administrative status and Roma people living in informal encampments.

1.2 Implications of measures

When the red zone was extended to the entire Italian territory on 9 March 2020, the association "21 Luglio" – one of the most representing Roma association in Italy – started a monitoring activity – carried out through phone interviews to respect the social-distancing obligation – to assess the impact of the lockdown on Roma people living in five mono-ethnic informal encampments in the city of Rome. On 19 March, the monitoring report was released⁴. As a preliminary remark, the report recalled that at the end of 2019, 6,080 Roma people were in housing emergency and accommodated in informal encampments in the city of Rome⁵; as for the 5 encampments

³ Ocdpc n.658 del 29 marzo 2020. Ulteriori interventi urgenti di protezione civile in relazione all'emergenza relativa al rischio sanitario connesso all'insorgenza di patologie derivanti da agenti virali trasmissibili, available at: www.protezionecivile.gov.it/amministrazione-trasparente/provvedimenti/dettaglio/-/asset_publisher/default/content/ocdpc-n-658-del-29-marzo-2020-ulteriori-interventi-urgenti-di-protezione-civile-in-relazione-all-emergenza-relativa-al-rischio-sanitario-connesso-all-

⁴ Associazione 21 Luglio (2020), "#IoRestonelCampo. Indagine sul primo impatto del decreto del 9 marzo 2020 in alcuni insediamenti formali della città di Roma", 19 March 2020, available at: www.21luglio.org/2018/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/indagine-io-resto-nel-campo-1.pdf.

⁵ The source of this data is the Roma Office of the municipality of Rome, Communication No. 68633 of 24 September 2019 (*Roma Capitale, Ufficio Speciale Rom, Sinti e Caminanti*,

covered by the monitoring, 2,200 Roma people were registered by municipal authorities, including 1,050 children⁶. Some of the interviewees reported the presence of a stable police checkpoint outside the encampment, monitoring the coming and going of people living in the encampment: police officers were already present before the Covid-19 emergency; however, during the emergency their activity was mainly aimed at ensuring that the interpersonal 1-metre distance was respected. Moreover, they were not provided neither with specific healthcare assistance and individual protection devices (such as facial masks or hand sanitizer) nor with adequate information concerning the emergency and the prevention measures: the interviewees reported receiving the necessary information from the media. The interviewees reported that the most severe problems they are facing concern the impact of the lockdown on their jobs: those working irregularly – such as in sidewalk sales or selling collected pieces of iron – or living of almsgiving, were the most affected ones since they could not continue their daily activities and had almost no savings to count on. Moreover, most of them have more than two children to take care of. Some of the interviewees expressed their concerns caused by the overcrowding of the encampments which does not allow a real social distancing. Others reported being worried for the condition of the older members of the community – who often rely on the assistance provided by municipal social services – whose isolation condition was worsened by the lockdown. The interviewees living in one of the encampments reported that they do not have running water and they can count on two water tanks for each container that are provided every 2-3 days by municipal authorities. Mutual solidarity among the members of the encampment is described as the key survival strategy, even if this was severely compromised, fearing that exchanging goods can increase the risk of infection. Eventually, the suspension of school activities prevents children from attending local schools and the impossibility to have access to technological devices – that are necessary for remote-teaching – are isolating Roma children from their peers and teachers. The report also stressed the impossibility for Roma people living in this condition to comply with the 14-day isolation period which is mandatory in case of infection or close contact with an infected person. A formal plea⁷ was addressed by the association to the mayor of Rome and to the Prefect of Rome, asking to adequately address this critical situation: the association “21 Luglio” has not received a reply from these authorities.

Similar concerns were expressed by the Foundation “Casa della Carità” based in Milan on 15 April⁸. According to this civil-society organisations,

Comunicazione del 24 settembre 2019, prot. N.68633, Oggetto: Stato di attuazione degli interventi di chiusura dei Campi Rom). However, the Communication is not publicly available.

⁶ Information available at page 15 of the report.

⁷ The plea – which could be signed online – is available at: www.21luglio.org/iorestoacasa-e-loro-restano-nel-campo/.

⁸ The Foundation’s statement is available at: www.casadellacarita.org/coronavirus-rom.

Roma people have been neglected by public authorities⁹ and their living conditions might further decline during the emergency phase: Roma people often live in overcrowded accommodations or informal encampments with no or scarce access to running water. During the lockdown, they are forced to stay in the encampments which often are isolated from the city. No healthcare assistance is provided on a regular basis. Children are prevented from attending schools and cannot count on the necessary technological devices to participate to remote teaching. Adults cannot continue with their ordinary – often informal – work activities, since they work as itinerant carnies, metals collectors or other irregular jobs.

The Roma NGO “Nazione Rom” issued a statement¹⁰ on 31 March 2020, reporting that the above-mentioned Law-Decree No. 17/2020 did not envisage any support measure specifically destined to Roma people who often are in a condition of social marginalisation and homeless. A formal plea was addressed by the NGO to public authorities – the Prime Minister, the Chief of the Italian Civil Protection, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health, the municipalities – by the NGO, asking them to set up a specific intervention and support unit destined to Roma people living in a situation of distress and housing emergency: more specific information on this unit is not available since it was requested by the NGO but it was never actually set up. The NGO did not report receiving any reply from the concerned public authorities. The NGO “Emergency” developed a monitoring programme in cooperation with the Municipality of Milan, aimed at assessing the implementation of the prevention measures to counter the virus propagation in reception facilities for migrants and unaccompanied migrant children, as well as in formal Roma encampments managed by municipal authorities. More than 50 facilities were monitored during the emergency¹¹.

As per the food-solidarity measure described in section 1.1, the anti-discrimination service of the Association for Legal Studies on Migration (*Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici sull’Immigrazione* – ASGI), immediately started a monitoring of the municipal regulations governing the provision of store credits. Individual municipalities were following different approach. Some municipalities decided to exclude from this emergency provision third-country citizens (with the exception of those holding a long-term EU residence permit) or any subject who is not regularly registered in the municipal civil registry. This latter exclusion criterion might affect the Roma population: its members living in informal encampments – which is a quite

⁹ This information was confirmed also by the NGO “Naga” based in Milan. Here is the NGO’s statement of 30 March 2020: <https://naga.it/2020/03/30/lemergenza-coronavirus-non-eguale-per-tutti-e-tutte/>.

¹⁰ The statement is available at: <http://nazionerom.blogspot.com/2020/03/rom-sinti-senza-fissa-dimora-e-covid-19.html>.

¹¹ Information about this project is available at: www.emergency.it/cosa-facciamo/risposta-covid/.

common situation in Italy, despite the political commitment to overcome the encampment system – are not generally registered in the civil registries. Not being registered in municipal civil registries can have a severe impact on the possibility to have access to some crucial services, such as social housing, some school services (especially non-compulsory education, such as kindergarten and other childcare services), professional training programmes, enrolment in local public job centres, bank accounts, as well as other welfare provisions established at municipal or regional level. ASGI sent a public plea to Italian municipalities¹², recommending them to eliminate any discriminatory criteria preventing the access to an urgent food-solidarity measure to the most vulnerable social groups – such as migrants, irregular migrants, homeless people and people living in informal accommodations – since these are precisely the groups most in need of this kind of support. The Ordinary Court of Rome adopted a decision on 22 April 2020¹³, establishing that the provision of store credits must be ensured also to irregular third-country citizens since the right to food is a fundamental right of any subject, regardless of his/her administrative status.

The above-mentioned statement of the Foundation “Casa della Carità” reported that the city of Milan has adopted the local regulation governing store credits, excluding potential beneficiaries who are not formally enrolled in civil registries: this decision – according to the Foundation – excludes Roma people from having access to this crucial emergency measure. In fact, on 6 May municipal authorities excluded 253 families from the list of 13,475 beneficiaries of this provision because they could not prove a regular residency in the municipal territory: they either lived in occupied apartments or had fictitious residencies (this is the case of most irregular migrants who cannot prove to live in a regular accommodation and declare fictitious addresses to police authorities)¹⁴. Despite these critical issues, the Municipality of Milan did not change the access criteria to this emergency welfare provision.

On 6 April, the National Anti-discrimination Office (*Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali a difesa delle differenze* – UNAR) of the Italian Government, addressed a letter¹⁵ to the President of the Association of Italian Municipalities, asking to eliminate all restrictions to the access to store credits for Roma people (as well as to other vulnerable social groups,

¹² Available at: www.asgi.it/discriminazioni/appello-comuni-discriminazione-aiuti-coronavirus/.

¹³ Available at: www.asgi.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Tribunale-di-Roma-decreto-inaudita-altera-parte-22-aprile-2020-est.-Albano-xxx-avv.-Fachile-c.-Comune-di-Roma.pdf.

¹⁴ Information available at: www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/a_milano_buoni_spesa_discriminatori_cancellati_dai_beneficiari_chi_vive_in_alloggi_precari_o_in_strutture_di_accoglienza.

¹⁵ The UNAR letter is available at: www.unar.it/emergenza-covid-19-lunar-scrive-allanci-no-a-ordinanze-comunali-discriminatorie-sugli-aiuti-alimentari/.

such as homeless people), because of their irregular administrative status. The UNAR president stated as follows: “in this Covid-19 emergency phase, Roma people represent a particularly fragile group that, in some overcrowded contexts with inadequate hygienic and health conditions, is facing specific difficulties in having access to the distribution of essential goods, organised by volunteers and local authorities. It is worth mentioning the situation of extreme distress of families and children who are stateless”¹⁶. The UNAR letter did not result in a reform of the municipal regulations governing this provision: however, the letter was mentioned by two court decisions that deemed the regulation of the municipality of Rome and L’Aquila discriminatory since the criteria to have access to this provision excluded potential beneficiaries who could not prove a regular residency in the municipal territory¹⁷.

On 8 June 2020, the NGO “Nazione Rom” – together with other organisations representing Roma people – organised a public demonstration in Florence stressing the critical living conditions suffered by the Roma population during the Covid-19 emergency and asking municipal authorities to include Roma people among the potential beneficiaries of the store credits (as well as of all other welfare emergency measures adopted to cope with the emergency)¹⁸. This demonstration did not result in a reform of the municipal regulation governing this provision.

1.3 Estimates of the scale of the impact

There are not official data estimating the scale of the impact. Data is often provided by civil-society organisations, especially on a local basis.

According to the NGO “Nazione Rom”, more than 40,000 Roma people living in Italy in inadequate living conditions, without running water, electricity, adequate accommodation, sufficient food, and healthcare assistance¹⁹. As reported in the above-mentioned report of the Association “21 Luglio”, at

¹⁶ The original version of this statement is as follows: “In questa fase di emergenza COVID-19, le persone appartenenti all’etnia rom sinti e caminanti rappresentano un gruppo particolarmente fragile che, in alcuni contesti caratterizzati da sovraffollamento e precarietà di condizioni igienico-sanitarie, ha riscontrato particolari difficoltà di accesso a distribuzioni di beni di prima necessità, garantite da realtà di volontariato ed enti locali. Si evidenzia in particolare la situazione di estremo disagio delle famiglie e di numerosi minori contraddistinti da criticità rispetto al proprio status giuridico (i cosiddetti apolidi)”.

¹⁷ This information is available in a UNAR press release of 23 April 2020: www.unar.it/nel-provvedimento-citato-il-parere-dellunar-buoni-spesa-escludere-gli-immigrati-e-discriminatorio-due-sentenze/.

¹⁸ Information available at the NGO’s website: <http://nazionerom.blogspot.com/2020/06/rom-sinti-caminanti-manifestazione.html>.

¹⁹ Information available at: <http://nazionerom.blogspot.com/2020/06/rom-sinti-caminanti-manifestazione.html>.

the end of 2019, 6,080 Roma people were accommodated in informal encampments in the city of Rome.

2 Specific measures to address the implications of the pandemic on Roma and Travellers

No specific measures were adopted by Italian public authorities to specifically tackle the spread of the virus among Roma people. However, some initiatives were carried out at local level, especially by civil-society organisations.

2.1 Measures to tackle the spread of the virus specifically among Roma and Travellers communities

No measures to specifically tackle the spread of the virus among Roma communities were adopted in Italy.

In Rome, some cases of infection were registered in the Roma community, such as the case of a 33-year-old Roma man living in a social-housing apartment and who often visited one of the informal encampment located in the city. He resulted positive to the test on 23 March 2020. Other members of the community he was in contact with underwent the test, resulting negative. No specific measure to prevent a further propagation of the virus was adopted by municipal authorities after this case²⁰.

On 21 April, the Head of the Security and Civil Protection department of the city of Rome intervened during the meeting of the city social policies Commission²¹, explaining that – due to the shortage of Covid-19 tests and labs – the tests are carried out on a specific basis, if a suspect case is spotted. He also confirmed that – despite the fact that informal encampments are considered a potential virus outbreak – no general testing of the members of the Roma community living in these places is envisaged. He also reported that the Roma Office of the municipality of Rome was visiting the formal encampments (not the informal ones) to provide informative leaflets on the epidemic and on prevention measures, as well as on the emergency and food-security services provided by local civil-society organisations: however, no information on these activities is available at the website of the Roma office²².

²⁰ Il Messaggero (2020), "Coronavirus Roma, rom positivi, l'allerta della Asl: verifiche a Quarticciolo e Salviati", 23 March 2020, available at: www.ilmessaggero.it/roma/news/coronavirus_roma_rom_positivi_quarticciolo_news-5126960.html.

²¹ The intervention is available at: www.difesapopolo.it/Mosaico/Rischio-covid-nei-campi-nomadi-Comune-di-Roma-tamponi-solo-a-scopo-contenitivo.

²² Available at: www.comune.roma.it/web/it/ufficio-speciale-rom-sinti-caminanti.page.

2.2 Measures to support Roma and Travelers communities in regards to medical and social assistance

No measures to report.

2.3 Measures addressing the needs of Roma children

Please focus on barriers to education related to schooling in 'online classes' format.

In May 2020, the association "21 Luglio" released a document²³, describing the strategy and all the initiatives implemented by the NGO during the lockdown period in the city of Rome. The association's strategy focused on 4 marginal city areas and immediately started a monitoring activity aimed at pointing out the specific needs of Roma people living in these areas. Most of the fields of intervention of the strategy focused on the needs of Roma children. The first goal was the reduction of food deprivation among children aged 0-3: individual interviews with the children's parents were held and 250 children in need were spotted; with the support of trained health professionals, different "baby boxes" were designed taking into account the needs of the children; the boxes were delivered to the children's mothers every week starting from 1st April; from 15 April, this intervention was extended to children of the same families older than 3 years old. The second goal was the education support to Roma children: Whatsapp groups were created by the association to provide support and practical tips to the mothers, including practical activities to do with the children during the lockdown period; an phone story-telling service²⁴ was activated, available in Italian and Romani; some internet points were set up in the encampments in order to allow the children to connect with school remote-teaching platforms; educators were deployed to support the children in the use of remote-teaching platforms, operating in close cooperation of the school teaching staff; a specific social assistance service was activated to support the families in the access to local welfare provisions.

The NGO "Aizo" provided assistance to children living in a formal encampment of Turin, in the framework of a programme financed by the municipality. Professional educators visited the encampment, providing

²³ Associazione 21 Luglio (2020), "Il lockdown: spazio di attesa o momento di opportunità?", May 2020, available at: www.21luglio.org/2018/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/il-lockdown.pdf.

²⁴ Specific information on this activity is available at: www.21luglio.org/noi-non-ci-fermiamo-fiabe-al-telefono-in-lingua-romanes-e-in-lingua-italiana/.

children with the necessary technological devices to attend on-line classes. The educators regularly visited the encampment attending the classes with the children and assisting them during the connection with the schoolteachers. Moreover, the NGO reports that these teaching moments included not only the children who were formally enrolled in local schools but also younger children who were curious to participate in these activities. This activity was carried out in close cooperation with the schoolteachers²⁵.

3 Any negative public reactions targeting Roma and Travellers or positive change in attitudes towards them

3.1 Negative public reactions

On 16 March 2020, an officer of a local police unit operating in the city of Rome resulted positive to the Covid-19 test. In a vocal message sent to his colleagues, he suggested that he got infected while working in the checkpoint located outside the "gypsy encampment"²⁶.

On 8 May, 22 cases of Covid-19 (which later on raised to more than 50) were registered in Campobasso among the members of the local Roma community: this virus outbreak – in a region with a low rate of virus propagation – was allegedly due to the participation the community members to an irregular funeral held in the city on 30 April. Some local citizens heavily criticised the Roma community on Facebook, stating that they are always reluctant to respect the rules²⁷. The president of the local Roma association "Romani in progress" released a public statement, stressing the importance of avoiding attributing the responsibilities of the epidemic to specific ethnic or social groups²⁸.

3.2 Positive change in attitudes

²⁵ Information available at: www.aizo.it/fare-leducatore-nel-campo-al-tempo-del-coronavirus/.

²⁶ Corriere della Sera (2020), "Coronavirus, vigile urbano positivo Diffidati sindaco comandante", 16 March 2020, available at: https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/20_marzo_16/coronavirus-vigile-urbano-positivo-diffidati-sindaca-comandante-9479de8e-66dc-11ea-a26c-9a66211caeee.shtml.

²⁷ Ansa (2020), "Coronavirus: polemiche per contagi in comunità Rom Campobasso", 9 May 2020, available at: www.ansa.it/molise/notizie/2020/05/09/coronaviruspolemiche-per-contagi-in-comunita-rom-campobasso_0574babe-73f7-47d3-ac37-d721a8f3a030.html.

²⁸ isNews (2020), "Coronavirus a Campobasso, la difesa: colpa dei rom? Ma noi non siamo untori", 10 May 2020, available at: www.isnews.it/politica/69008-coronavirus-a-campobasso-la-difesa-colpa-dei-rom-ma-noi-non-siamo-untori.html.

No information to report on this issue, with the exception of the fundamental activities carried out during the emergency phase by civil-society organisation that have been mentioned and described in Section 2 of this report.