

## **GUDRUN BIFFL, AUSTRIAN INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH**

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Workshop 2: Vocational Training Programmes and Labour Market Activities

### **Introductory Lecture**

#### **Abstract**

Roma and their position in the society and the economy are increasingly getting attention as they are not well equipped with skills necessary for socio-economic mobility in the postindustrial societies. Therefore, access to and promotion of good initial education and further education has to move into the forefront of education and labour market policy if one wants to actively pursue socio-economic integration of the Roma.

In order to be effective, endeavours to raise the educational attainment level of the Roma, one has to envisage a concerted action of socio-economic institutions, civic society and the institutionalised will of the Roma themselves on local, national and supranational level. This is necessary in order to build trust and commitment on the part of the actors involved.

A complex institutional commitment is to serve various objectives:

First, one has to ensure the active participation and will of the Roma community, to promote further education. This implies that there has to be an active partner on the side of the Roma to pursue a dialogue with the local, national and even international level to raise the awareness level and also initiate a dialogue. This implies that the Roma themselves have to get organised in order to speak on behalf of the Roma as a group. The heterogeneity of interests within the Roma is difficult to bridge and has so far not allowed effective lobbying on the part of the whole Roma community. But maybe if the focus is on education alone, a consensus can be reached. NGOs can have an important role in helping the Roma to achieve better political representation and participation, as could be shown in some regions in Austria, with the effect of the integration of the Roma into the normal initial school system.

Second, attention has to be given to the characteristics of the NGO that is working with/for the Roma. Not any NGO is able to cooperate successfully with the political institutions and the Roma. In order to be effective, the NGO has to rely on political and social consensus, or be able to build it. The organisation has to be on equal terms with policy-makers, and be recognized as legitimate voice of the *polis*. There seem to be two viable options:

- a) the organisation is well-established, strong and rooted in the area of activity. It is perceived as catering to the interests of the whole community, and not just to those of the marginalised group it is targeting;
- b) smaller, less well-established organisations and single activists create networks, they work together and build a strong identity. In this way they are able to act at different levels, and to lobby effectively.

Third, there have to be initiatives within majority society that focus on the role of the Roma. This is an essential component of higher acceptance and a higher level of political commitment on the side of the institutions. The attitude of the politicians is a reflection of the dominating sentiments and perceptions in the majority population. Changes at this level can be achieved only in the medium and long term.

Education represents arguably the most promising channel for improvement, but also actions aimed at greater visibility and public presence of the Roma within majority society, as well as sensitisation campaigns, can play a role in this sense.

In Austria today, various education and training institutions as well as the Labour Market Service have taken recourse to the expertise of NGOs to promote skills recognition of Roma and to develop bridges into employment. A major platform around which a variety of activities are being coordinated is the InterCulturExpress ([www.interculturexpress.at](http://www.interculturexpress.at)). This is a network of specialised NGOs, who contribute their diverse know-how to combat skills shortages which go beyond recognition of formal skills. In so doing they do not only open up employment opportunities for Roma but actively promote mutual understanding.

**Guadrin Biffel ([guadrin.biffel@wifo.ac.at](mailto:guadrin.biffel@wifo.ac.at))**

Guadrin Biffel has been on the staff of the Austrian Institute of Economic Research since 1975 and is currently head of labour market, education and migration research. She has published widely in these areas. She is a consultant on migration to the OECD (SOPEMI correspondent) since the late 1970s and a peer reviewer of EU employment and education policy. She is a member of the steering committee of the National Contact Point in Austria. She is Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Economics and Business Administration in Vienna; she lectures in international economics and social policy.