

Human rights are key to the MDGs: Roma

by Salil Shetty

Since they arrived in Italy in 2004, María Dumitru and Marius Alexandru, Roma of Romanian origin in their late 20s, have been forcibly evicted together with their three small children from camps five times, without ever having been offered any kind of alternative accommodation. The last time they were forcibly evicted from an unauthorized camp near Via Centocelle in Rome in November 2009.

They are now living in a dismissed factory nearby with other families. “We came to Italy six years ago to earn some money but we still do not have any,” says María. “We first went to Ponticelli camp, in Naples, but after a while the police evicted us. They told me that if they saw me again in that area, they would take my kids away from me and put them in an orphanage.”

They had similar experiences in Caivano (Naples) and in a camp near via Cristoforo Colombo (Rome). “The police destroyed everything,” says Marius. In the early months of 2008 his family settled in Via Centocelle camp and in April the same year they were evicted, although they came back immediately.

Before their latest eviction, María talked about their life: “I am a bit ashamed because my husband scavenges for iron and copper in the rubbish to sell, and earns a little bit of money. So we can buy food. It is only thanks to him that we have something to eat ... We have to pay for the school as well; when the teacher tells us to buy exercise books, pens... we end up paying something like €5.”

Finally, María talks about the future. “We had children early, but I do not want my children to do the same. I want them to go to school and be able to find a job. I would like them all to have a better life than the one I had.”

The future of María, Marius and their children remains uncertain. In the last two weeks, the mayor of Rome announced a new plan to evict all the small unauthorized Roma settlements of the Italian capital. The plan has already started to be implemented. According to reports, the only alternative to homelessness offered by the authorities is emergency temporary accommodation for women and children.

Forced evictions, be it in Rome, Milan, Paris or Bucharest are leaving families homeless and vulnerable to yet more human rights violations and abuses, disrupting the education of children and cutting in the bud attempts at integration.

Like the other members of the United Nations, the Italian as well as all European governments committed to provide adequate housing as one of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000. The MDGs represent an unprecedented promise to address global poverty, adopting eight targets addressing a range of issues from extreme poverty and health to education and living standards to be met by 2015.

But, a decade on, the fate of the MDGs is in doubt. The UN has issued a clear warning that many of the MDGs will not be met in time unless efforts are radically ramped up. Even by the most conservative estimates, more than a billion people are being left behind.

Amnesty International's work over the years has shown how discrimination and exclusion can often cause or exacerbate many of the problems the MDGs seek to address. In rich countries as well as developing ones, vulnerable people on the fringes of society are frequently subjected to violations of their right to adequate housing, health, water, sanitation, and education, among others. They are often left out of consultations about things that will affect them, or ignored when they try to make their voices heard. As Amnesty has also shown, equality and inclusion are essential for making things better.

Ten years on, it is worthwhile to reflect upon where we are and where we need to go to meet the MDG goals. The architects of the MDGs established the original targets as a starting point for progress. They always intended that states should set their own individual targets, adapted to their national contexts but within the MDG framework. This was left for states to do so voluntarily. Unfortunately, most countries have chosen not to act.

Some countries have adopted targets above the MDG level. For example, Latin American and the Caribbean countries have expanded their commitments on education to include secondary education. In Africa and South Asia, Kenya, South Africa and Sri Lanka adopted targets stronger than the MDGs for access to water and sanitation. Peru has taken steps towards addressing health barriers for poorer women and Nepal has explored improving maternal health care.

These countries have shown that it is possible to adapt the MDGs to address some of their most pressing needs and to bolster the rights of some of their most vulnerable people. The rest of the world should be working to do the same.

We have an opportunity to ensure that the political momentum around the MDGs can be used as a catalyst to bring about the far deeper and longer-term change that is necessary for people living in poverty.

But this can only be achieved if world leaders make a commitment at this month's MDG Summit to uphold the human rights of those who need the greatest support. Discrimination against women and exclusion of the marginalized must be addressed in all MDG efforts, if they are to be effective.

To achieve this, all governments should make an honest assessment of their progress on the MDGs. They should work to end discrimination and promote equality and participation, ensuring that progress towards the MDGs is inclusive, aimed at ending discrimination, guaranteeing gender equality and prioritizing the most disadvantaged groups.

Finally, they should remember that the Millennium Declaration – from which the MDGs are drawn – promised to strive for the protection and promotion of *all* human rights, civil, cultural, economic, social and political rights, for *all*.

As the members of the United Nations gather this month to reflect upon the progress made on the MDGs, little has changed for the Roma living in camps in Rome, Milan, Paris or Bucharest. Living in neglected settlements, Romani communities are often evicted without adequate notice or prior consultation and without being offered any alternative accommodation. It is up to us to help change that.

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