

**Luca Bravi, Maria José Casa-Nova,
Maria Alfredo Moreira,
Maria Teresa Tagliaventi (Eds.)**

Leaving a Trace

**Action-research with Roma
and non-Roma young people
between history, memory and present**

Itinerari e dialoghi di Storia dell'educazione



Itinerari e dialoghi di storie dell'educazione

Collana diretta da Gianfranco Bandini, Tiziana Pironi, Gabriella Seveso

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and non-Roma young people
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The volume *Leaving a Trace. Action-research with Roma and non-Roma young people between history, memory and present* is a publication produced within the Project “Transformative Roma Art and Culture for European Remembrance” (TRACER), funded by Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme of the European Commission.

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The TRACER project

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- University of Bologna – Department of Education “Giovanni Maria Bertin”, Italy.
- University of Florence – Department of Education, Languages, Interculture, Literatures and Psychology, Italy.
- C.A.T. – Social Cooperative, Florence, Italy
- Chi Rom e...chi no – Association, Naples, Italy.
- Opengroup – Social Cooperative, Bologna, Italy.
- Stowarzyszenie Romow w Polsce – Association, Oświęcim, Poland.
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Index

Stories, memories and lives. Building a multicultural Public History of Education in an action-research project by <i>Luca Bravi</i> and <i>Maria Teresa Tagliaventi</i>	pag. 7
--	--------

FIRST PART Memory and history for inclusion in the educational context

1. Historical memory, identity and minorities. An action-research project with Roma and Sinti young people by <i>Maria Teresa Tagliaventi</i>	» 15
2. Looking back at history to understand the present by <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 30
3. Breaking the prejudice through places of Memory by <i>Silvia Bencini</i> and <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 38
4. Representation of Roma persecution in school curriculum development in Europe by <i>Ivana Bolognesi</i> , <i>Maria Alfredo Moreira</i> and <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 65

SECOND PART Transforming the present through history and memory

5. Transforming and training through action-research on the history of Sinti and Roma by <i>Maria José Casa-Nova</i> and <i>Daniela Silva</i>	» 85
6. Knowing the history in the educational context by <i>Luca Bravi</i>	» 100

7. Visiting history. “Crossing” the camp of Auschwitz by <i>Silvia Bencini</i>	pag.	111
8. Reporting the history and transforming the present by <i>Emma Ferulano</i>	»	121
9. Presenting the history. Building memory through art by <i>Inês Aydin</i> and <i>Liliana Moreira</i>	»	131
10. Leaving a trace in the present by <i>Maria José Casa-Nova</i> , <i>Maria Alfredo Moreira</i> and <i>Maria Teresa Tagliaventi</i>	»	145
Authors’ biographies	»	153
Groups of young leaders involved in the TRACER project	»	156

1. Historical memory, identity and minorities. An action-research project with Roma and Sinti young people

*by Maria Teresa Tagliaventi**

1. Through TRACER...

TRACER¹, Transformative Roma Art and Culture for European Remembrance, is an international project funded under the European Commission's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. The name is an acronym that evokes the main components of the project but is also significative of its purpose, which is to leave a trace.

The aim of the project is to involve groups of Roma and non-Roma youths and teenagers, mainly in Italy, Portugal and Poland, in the construction of a shared memory of the Sinti and Roma holocaust in Europe during World War II and to promote a shared reflection, in a diversified public, on the history and origin of racial discrimination through different types of artistic performance (graffiti, music, theatre, video, etc.). The project is complex, involving various consequential steps and ethical and methodological choices, which will be analyzed below. In TRACER, the process becomes as important as the actions, and outputs also relate to a personal change of the people involved. The ingredients of the project are history and memory, education, young people (mainly Roma and Sinti young people), action research, workshops and social art, as a way of remembering and denouncing.

The project contributes to the promotion of Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union by supporting related

* Department of Education “Giovanna Maria Bertin”, University of Bologna.

¹ <https://tracerproject.eu/node> (Last access: September 2024).

social policies and national strategies through innovative actions focused on the participative construction of the memory of the holocaust of Sinti and Roma minorities in Europe. In parallel, the initiative aims to support both the enactment of the EU Roma Framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020-2030 and the adoption of the Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion, so as to provide a framework for the successful design and implementation of actions for fostering the inclusion of Roma populations in the life of local communities.

2. Memory and identity

In 1985, Francesco De Gregori, an Italian singer-songwriter, launched a song with an emblematic title and contents: «La storia siamo noi» («We Are the History»). With the phrase «History does not stop at a door», the author emphasises how history is unstoppable, constituting a force that cannot be closed or contained, and that continues to live beyond physical and symbolic barriers. The song is also an appeal to responsibility, memory and civic awareness, and for this reason its contents recall the ingredients of TRACER. De Gregori emphasises how “no one should feel excluded”, reiterating that history is not just a narrative of a few (especially the powerful, the majority groups, the dominant ones), but belongs to everyone, since everyone, through their actions, every day, consciously or unconsciously, contributes to writing history. The concept is not to be taken for granted. Indeed, the historical documentation we have today is affected by the dominant political power during the course of events and also by the power relationships in place at the time of studying history.

What we call history is hardly ever a disinterested effort to narrate events, but it is a narrative based on conscious choices so that later generations can read past events with a specific point of view.

The construction of knowledge therefore is not neutral, but political, based on values. Often the official, better-known history is flanked by a silent, sometimes unwritten history of men, women and children who do not belong to the majority groups and who have not had the power to narrate their own story and that of the community they belong

to, except within their own community. This history not only remains hidden, but also risks succumbing before a more shared collective narrative, because it is the majority culture that defines and uses the tools of meaning-making.

In recent years, historical documentation has also been opened up to different and multiple sources in an attempt to capture, albeit in a fragmented and sporadic manner, the other and minority views. This sometimes allows distorted narratives to be corrected, sometimes to fill historical gaps, other times to broaden views of the same event. History, however, has not only the function of storytelling but also that of supporting collective memory. Remembering, for any individual, means “re-actualising the memory of a social group to which he or she belongs or has belonged in the past”², and constructing, over time, a group identity that is the result of a temporal construction in which the dimensions of the past, present and future are combined³. In our historical period, which is essentially focused on the present, the past helps to read the everyday experienced reality and to give a new orientation to future perspectives. This is even more important if the past concerns minority communities, such as those of Roma and Sinti, whose history is the fruit of a denied narrative, since it is based on relations of hostility, exclusion, marginalisation and ghettoisation from majority societies and cultures. The history of the Roma and Sinti communities shows, more than any other history of minorities, the paradoxes of the links with the societies with which these communities relate. One of these paradoxes is the habit of describing minority history as another history, often disconnected from the narrative of the majority culture⁴. History, on the other hand, if it is inclusive, sustains and reweaves social ties, reconstructs and puts together a collective memory that is a collection of memories, events and narratives shared by the various communities that experienced that event. It also offers the possibility of reconstructing an identity based on the narrative of the community of belonging and the narratives of the majority communities. So, the history of the Roma community, which the TRACER

² Jedlowski, *Introduzione*, 26.

³ Halbwachs, *La memoria collettiva*.

⁴ Bravi, *Percorsi storico educativi*.

project deals with, cannot be distinguished from European history and the history of other European peoples.

3. Which history?

The TRACER project investigated a precise historical period, characterised by the mass violence that generated the Holocaust during World War II. The reasons behind this choice are several. The holocaust, the terrible event that saw the systematic persecution and extermination by the Nazis of millions of people, including Jews, Roma and Sinti, political dissidents and the disabled, is still an event that is difficult to understand. As Bauman⁵ emphasises, it was not the result of a momentary madness, but was conceived and enacted within a rational modern society, in the advanced stage of development of a civilisation.

That is why it is a problem of this society and this culture, and it is a problem for everyone. Dealing with the subject of the Holocaust means reasoning about the way institutions and members of contemporary society act, in which “evil”, according to Arendt⁶, takes the ordinary form of everyday life.

The Shoah and the Porrajmos (genocide of the Roma people) were made possible by a network of complicity and *omertà* that covered much of Europe. There were millions of German, Italian, French, Dutch, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, etc., citizens who actively contributed to the process of isolation, identification and segregation of Jews, Roma, Sinti, homosexuals, political opponents and millions of other citizens. Through their indifference, unconditionally accepted that, step by step, racial laws were ratified, ending up considering them right and fair.

According to Bauman⁷, the holocaust did not result from «an infraction of order but from an impeccable, perfect and unchallengeable domination of order» in which one group, fighting for the acquisition of power, prestige and wealth (using Weber's thought...), used a

⁵ Bauman, *Modernità e Olocausto*.

⁶ Arendt, *La banalità del male. Eichmann a Gerusalemme*.

⁷ Bauman, *Modernità e Olocausto*, 211.

powerful educational and communication system to rationalise racism, and define those who are “different” as pathological, dangerous and worthy of elimination.

The racial doctrine formulated by the Nazi ideology advocated the stigmatisation of “foreign races”, considered genetically subordinate, and marginalised specific groups as “inferior” by genetic heritage within that same race⁸.

And also fitting into this idea of the “different” as being “pathological” is the history of the Roma and Sinti people, who have always embodied the symbol of diversity and for this reason have been subject to a process of stigmatisation. The Roma and Sinti people suffered discrimination long before the Nazi persecutions of the last century.

According to Bravi⁹, the history of the Roma people is a history of institutionalised segregation, as it is based on laws in Europe that have always attempted to limit the freedom of movement of this people and to lead them, through assimilationist policies and educational systems created ad hoc, to be socialised into majority societies. One of the reasons why the Roma were interned in concentration camps is their asociality.

According to Taguieff¹⁰, the idea that certain categories of human beings are not civilisable, i.e. are unable to recognise the founding values of a society, is a historical embodiment of the tendency towards “barbarianisation”. This is the highest degree of distancing and exclusion: the barbarian is not only different, inferior, but also dangerous as he is uncivilised.

The Nazi regime, as it was structured before and during World War II, finished long ago, but its heritage is not dead.

What took place in the concentration camps was the result of a process on which indifference, intolerance, hatred, prejudice and discrimination acted, all of which are still very much present in our society, evident even in the never exhausted anti-gypsyism.

For this reason, with the TRACER project, tackling the topic of Porrajmos, i.e. the genocide of the Roma and Sinti people, adds a piece to the knowledge and memory of those events, but not only. This

⁸ Bortone and Pistecchia, *Tre passi per attraversare Auschwitz*.

⁹ Bravi, *Tra inclusione ed esclusione*.

¹⁰ Taguieff, *Il razzismo*.

project becomes a tool for analysing the cultural process that led to the concentration camps and for decoding current discrimination, particularly that affecting certain minorities. In Italy, the most evident discriminations are linked to the presence of Roma camps, real ghettos where Roma and Sinti populations reside, made institutional since the war in the former Yugoslavia.

The persecution of Roma is one of the most neglected chapters in the history of the Nazi regime. It was recognised very late in all European countries, so this caused a delay in acknowledging these communities as part of European history, resulting in serious damage. The damage affects both the Roma community, which is not always aware of the history that binds it to Europe, and the non-Roma communities, who wrongly consider Roma as foreigners and therefore as people who cannot have the same rights as all citizens of the states in which they live.

The history of the Roma people is often not included in school curricula, and the Roma Holocaust, also known as the Porrajmos, is a topic that receives little attention. Consequently, many Roma young people are unaware of this tragic chapter in history. Even the Roma community is not aware of what happened during World War II, and non-Roma people also lack knowledge of the Porrajmos.

Reconstructing this moment in history means retrieving part of unknown events about the persecution of these populations in Europe and to transpose a population, which is still subject to prejudice and to policies of marginalisation, to the centre of European History.

4. Roma and Sinti communities and history

The Roma is the largest minority in the European Union (between 12 and 15 million people) and the status of transnational people makes it difficult to understand and appreciate the history of the communities in the various countries of which they are citizens. Roma are among the people who are most vulnerable to human rights violations in the European Union (EU). The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) has consistently demonstrated this using robust statistical data since

2008. As evidenced in various research¹¹, despite efforts at the national, European and international level to improve the social and economic integration of Roma in the European Union (EU), many still face deep poverty, profound social exclusion and discrimination. This often means limited access to quality education, jobs and services, low-income levels, sub-standard housing conditions, poor health and lower life expectancy. These problems often present insurmountable barriers to exercising the fundamental rights guaranteed in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The scourge of anti-Gypsyism has proven to be a formidable barrier to efforts to improve the life chances and living standards for Roma, with many facing discrimination, harassment and hate crimes because of their ethnic origin.

TRACER worked mainly with Roma and Sinti communities living in Italy, Poland and Portugal. The young Roma and Sinti who participated in the project are representatives of different groups, living conditions, cultures, histories and school levels. Their reality is extremely heterogeneous and varied and the greater or lesser inclusion status of the different communities also depends on the social policies implemented in the different countries of residence.

The Roma community in Poland is one of the oldest in the European area. According to the 2011 census¹², there were 12,560 people who registered Roma as their primary identification, and 17,049 registering Roma as either their primary or secondary nationality. The actual figure is thought to be considerably larger, perhaps reaching as high as 50,000 and even more because of the Roma refugees who have left the Ukrainian territory due to the current war situation. The National and Ethnic Minority and Regional Language Law approved in 2005 defines Roma as a minority ethnic community in Poland. The Polish Roma community suffered the Nazi genocide very violently. The invasion of Poland (1939) not only marked the beginning of World War II, but also the policy of racial extermination aimed at Jews and Roma. For this reason, the Polish communities were among the most affected. Auschwitz I (1940) immediately registered Roma people

¹¹ FRA 2018, 2021, 2022: <https://fra.europa.eu/it/themes/roma> (Last access: August 2024).

¹² National Census of Population and Housing 2011 <https://stat.gov.pl/en/national-census/national-census-of-population-and-housing-2011/> (Last access: August 2024).

among its prisoners, but, above all, the construction of Auschwitz-Birkenau (1942) marked the fate of the physical elimination of the Polish Roma.

Roma currently living in Italy are characterised by the heterogeneity of groups, dialects and specific linguistic varieties and cultures. According to the Council of Europe's data and the main Italian Roma associations, about 170-180,000 RGT people are actually living in Italy. A majority of them (about 60 %) are Italian citizens. Of the foreigners, 50% come from the former Yugoslavia and the rest from Romania, with smaller presences from Bulgaria and Poland. Not being recognised in Italy as an ethnic minority, the Roma community has different rights according to their nationality status: as Italian citizens, citizens of EU member states, non-EU citizens and stateless persons and refugees.

Italy is a nation where two stories of the Roma communities come together. In Prato and Bologna, two of the cities where the project was implemented, there are mainly Italian citizens (Sinti) who have been in the area since the 15th century. The community of Bologna and Prato preserves the memory of a racial persecution which began in 1920 and continued until the deportations to the Nazi concentration camps between 1943 and 1945. In Naples, the Roma communities arrived in Italy in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 2000s. They are mainly Roma from the territories of Eastern Europe. In their history there is the deportation to the concentration camps in Croatia controlled by the Italian and Croatian fascists. One important symbolic element is the Jasenovac camp where thousands of Roma were killed.

As regards Portugal, Roma have been part of Portuguese society since the end of the 15th century. The first written document in which Roma people are mentioned dates from the beginning of the 16th century. The way in which the document refers to Roma people evidences a knowledge of their culture that clearly points to a permanence in Portuguese society.

They were recognised as Portuguese citizens by the Constitutional Charter of 1826.

According to data collected by the Observatory of Roma Communities, there are about 37,000 people, although this number is below the existing population, as the data were collected from estimates carried out by each municipality in the country between 2014 and 2016.

They are mostly sedentary, with some roaming in the south of the country.

Portugal did not participate directly in World War II, as it maintained a position of neutrality, but hosted thousands of refugees, mainly Jews. The subject of the genocide of the Roma people is unknown to most young Roma.

5. A participatory action research: goals and actions

It is the choice of methodology that distinguishes TRACER from other projects. TRACER is action research and as such promotes a process that combines research (in this case historical) and action; in other words, it brings together knowledge and planning for change.

According to Besozzi and Colombo¹³, the aim of action research is «to promote an action of change on/for the subjects involved, subjected to a judgement of validity by the group itself: in practice, it is a matter of leading the participants, through a series of stimulations and self-reflections, to change something in their own definition of the situation, to increase their own competences regarding the topic examined, to mature a new phase of growth».

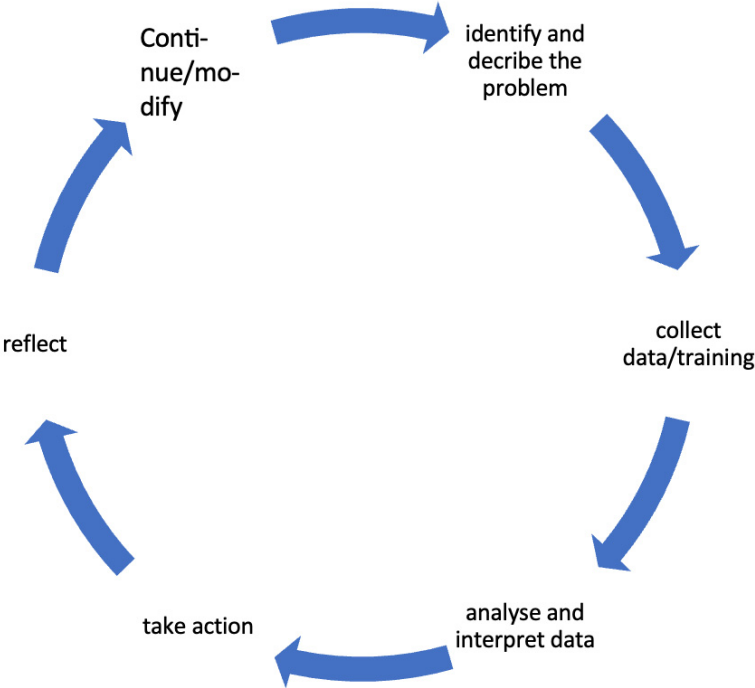
The key actors of this process in TRACER are Roma and non-Roma youths and adolescents (mostly Roma and Sinti) from Bologna/Modena, Florence/Prato and Naples (Italy), Figueira da Foz and Braga (Portugal), Oświęcim and Kraków (Poland). They were involved through a sequence of actions in a process of co-construction of knowledge and implementation of change.

The target of the project is also the subject of the research. The knowledge produced collectively by young people and adolescents deconstructs the role of “specialist”, normally assigned to the scientist, and is shared with other peers, younger students, teachers and a diversified public. A fundamental principle of action research is the promotion of autonomy and empowerment of social actors. This principle becomes more important when the protagonists are young people who live in situations of marginalisation and who, due to stereotypes and

¹³ Besozzi and Colombo, *Metodologia della ricerca sociale nei contesti socioeducativi*, 112.

prejudices, do not have the opportunity to be considered social actors by the majority society. The Roma communities are still marked by the choice of being invisible from the outside, in order not to be recognised as Roma, as a result of the prejudices they suffer daily.

Action research is based on a structured process involving investigation (in this case historical), action (training or activity), reflexivity, and (trans)formation in a continuous cycle that reproduces itself.



Pic. 1. The action research cycle

Like any action research, the objectives of the project are several. The project aims to:

- mobilise groups of Roma and non-Roma young adults/ adolescents (male and female) to collect information and narratives in Italy, Portugal and Poland about the Holocaust and the Roma genocide;
- reconstruct history of the Holocaust through multiple sources, giving space to unpublished narratives such as those belonging to the Roma and Sinti communities;
- make young people (Roma and non-Roma) aware of a history that links the Roma communities to Europe and re-evaluate Roma membership in the EU;
- increase young people's awareness of peace and universal human rights;
- activate teenagers (Roma and non-Roma) to be trainers/representatives through the construction of an artistic event on genocide aimed at a broad audience (graffiti, music, theatre, film/documentary, etc.);
- produce knowledge through training and educational workshops on genocide in schools with Roma preadolescents students and multi-ethnic classes;
- disseminate knowledge about the Porrajmos and promote reflection on the construction of prejudice and discrimination.

The TRACER action research process was developed through a series of consequential and fundamental actions that show the complexity of the project:

- the *establishment of groups of young people and adolescents*, both Roma and non-Roma, male and female, who act as leader groups. The members of the leader groups are the main actors of the project. After being trained in the action research methodology, they promote the various actions, involving other targets in the process of knowledge creation and change. The decision to set up groups of Roma and non-Roma young people was a challenge aimed at promoting mutual knowledge, breaking down each other's prejudices and demonstrating that European History must be founded on a common ground made up of values that are shared by different populations;

- *the search for memories and the collection of informal historical documentation*, the unifying element of the project, present at various stages. History is a tool for inclusion because doing historical research means building a listening space capable of enhancing cultural specificities. An important part of the historical research was the interviews with elderly members of the Roma community (grandparents, relatives, significant leaders) or with important expert witnesses on the subject of genocide. The former had the task of highlighting unpublished accounts of the war, points of view, and collecting an oral memory in danger of being lost. The history of the Roma and Sinti peoples has often been constructed indirectly, not on the testimonies of the members of the communities, but on the documentation of their deeds and presence over time;
- the *training* provided to different subjects during the action research process: training for the leader groups on both the methodology of action research and historical documentation, on Holocaust, History and Remembrance and preparation for the visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau; training for teachers, also carried out through the active participation of the leader groups, on the Holocaust, history and teaching methodologies aimed at designing workshops for students in schools of various levels; training for secondary school students promoted by the leader groups and also aimed at involving boys and girls in the creation of an artistic performance. The training was always accompanied by moments of collective reflection;
- the visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum for leader groups from different cities and countries and the workshops in situ on discrimination and construction of prejudice.

Auschwitz and Birkenau offer a detailed historical context, providing testimonies, documents and artefacts illustrating the horror of persecution and genocide. The young people visited the specific and most important exhibition on the Roma genocide in Europe set up in Block 13 of Auschwitz I that contains the names of the 23,000 Roma and Sinti killed in the extermination camp, some of whom were possibly relatives of young Roma, and in Birkenau, the “Gypsy sub-camp” (*Zigeunerlager*). The joint visit also allowed the young people to feel part of a common international project, the building of networks of sociability between young people from

different countries and backgrounds, and the awareness of belonging to a common European history. The workshops following the visit had the goal of allowing the participants to share their reflections, making Roma and non-Roma aware of the processes that lead to social exclusion, dehumanisation and normalisation of brutal behaviour and violence towards others;

- the *educational workshops* with students in schools of different levels on the history and culture of the Roma communities. Some of the educational workshops gave rise to interesting teaching materials;
- *performance and artistic events*, a tool chosen to disseminate a message on history, genocide, racism and prejudice throughout the territory. The leader group together with teenagers and students became part of the artistic narrative. The various artistic expressions used by the young people (murals, video clips, theatrical performances, a book) aimed to communicate social messages to stimulate reflection and promote greater collective awareness against discrimination. They also represented Roma community identities and strengths. Through its evocative and symbolic power, art succeeds in involving and reaching a wider audience and permanence over time;
- the *multiple dissemination* of the project's outputs through conferences, meetings, whether formal or informal, in public places or in camps, within the Roma communities.

6. The sustainability of a project

Due to its object and the minority group stakeholders involved, the TRACER project could not have been implemented without close cooperation between the academia and the civil society.

This project was possible thanks to an exceptional partnership:

- Public institutional partners in charge of higher education (Academies): universities of Bologna and of Florence in Italy; University of Minho in Portugal;
- the High Commissioner for Migrations, a public institution directly dependent on the Presidency of the Ministers Council of Portugal,

which works for the integration of immigrants and ethnic groups, and, in particular, the Roma communities (now transformed into an agency: AIMA);

- two social cooperatives of the third sector (OpenGroup and CAT in Italy) that have been working for years on the integration of the Roma population in educational projects in cooperation with the municipalities of Bologna and Florence (Prato), especially in Italian Roma settlements;
- two Roma associations (Stowarzyszenie Romów W Polsce in Poland and Ribaltambição Associação para a Igualdade de Género nas Comunidades Ciganas in Portugal) working on the rights of Roma people;
- an association, “Chi rom e...chi no” (Italy), working to support the active participation of Roma people through the constitution of committees open to Roma and non-Roma people, making alliances with national and international organisations advocating for inclusive policies which overcome the “camp approach”/nomadic settlements.

The construction of the partnership is also not neutral but political. The active participation of the Roma population is one of the cardinal principles invoked by the European Union. The new ten-year plan for Equality, Inclusion and Participation 2020-2030 of the EU Commission contains a specific recommendation from the EU Council on the inclusion of Roma¹⁴ and identifies participation as one of the seven key elements on which to take action over the next decade.

Achieving equity and inclusion calls for the involvement and partnership of Roma communities, in all sectors. Roma communities need to be involved from the design to the implementation of projects aimed at them because for a long time, in all societies, they have been subjected to policies and actions without being considered actors able to define their needs, decide what action to take and activate themselves to solve problems.

The presence in the project of Roma associations and NGOs that have been working for years in the implementation of the rights of the

¹⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1813 (Last access: August 2024).

Roma population made it possible to actively involve the Roma and Sinti community from the very beginning. Through constant dialogue, a synergy was created between the academia and the civil society, which ensured that all partners were able to expand their knowledge and points of view. The sustainability of the project beyond its closure is ensured precisely by the active participation of members of the Roma community and the debate that has been created within the communities themselves or in schools.

The strength of TRACER lies in the fact that it was immediately configured as a combination of discovery, knowledge, creation and civic engagement.

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