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# Adequate for whom? Reflections on the right to adequate housing from fieldwork on Roma inclusion in Italy

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## Abstract

The definition of 'adequate housing', a term widely used in the protection of the related right and the development of housing policies, has never been fully questioned, despite the acknowledged importance of shelter for the well-being of the individual beyond its physical function. This article analyses the weaknesses of the current definition of this term through the findings of reflexive fieldwork conducted in Italy with Roma targeted by inclusion policies in the housing sector. Departing from the analysis of the impact of anti-gypsyism in the Italian policy context, the interviews highlight how policies constructed around ideas of adequacy focused solely on the physical structure of the dwelling contribute to the neglect of the variety of social, cultural, economic and emotional factors that affect housing choices, leading to the failure of initiatives aimed at providing adequate housing solutions.

## Keywords

anti-gypsyism, cultural adequacy, nomad camps, segregation, social and economic rights

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## Introduction

In this article, I present an analysis of the concept of 'adequate housing', as conceptualised in the international documents for the protection of human rights and used in the development of policies, through qualitative fieldwork conducted in Italy on the housing inclusion of Roma. The term 'Roma' identifies a series of minority groups living all over Europe, whose common origins and culture are contested (McGarry, 2014; Surdu and Kovats, 2015), but who experience a common and specific kind of racism – anti-gypsyism. This manifests in various forms, from their representation in academic and public discourses as a homogeneous and defined group with specific cultural characteristics (Rövid, 2011; Tremlett, 2009) to everyday practices of discrimination and hate (Cortés Gomez and End, 2019; Kende et al., 2021; McGarry, 2017). Anti-gypsyism is also evident in the statistics that highlight the gap between Roma and non-Roma in terms of access to services, employment rate, level of education and life expectancy (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016). In this context, academic scholars and policy-makers, instead of shedding light on the structural barriers to equality and inclusion, have long focused on the supposed social and cultural characteristics that would prevent Roma from achieving the standards of the 'modern world'. In doing so, they have reproduced a series of stereotypes that contribute to the marginalisation of this group, constantly associated with 'poverty', 'social issues' and 'deviance' (Brooks et al., 2022; McGarry, 2014; Marushiakova and Popov, 2015).

In Italy, numerous studies highlight how anti-Roma prejudices are particularly rooted and accepted within public and media discourses (Marinero and Sigona, 2011; Piasere et al., 2014; Picker and Roccheggiani, 2013; Sigona, 2011). According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Centre (2014), among European countries, Italy is the one with the highest share of the population expressing a negative opinion of this group (85%). Here, one of the main drivers of anti-gypsyism and, at the same time, its most visible manifestation is the association between Roma and nomadism. This prejudice was at the base of the creation, from the 1970s onwards, of the nomad camps – a sort of halting sites, usually located at the outskirts of urban areas, where nomad Roma were supposed to stay for a limited (but undefined) period before continuing with their 'wandering'. While presented as a policy aimed at responding to a specific cultural need, nomad camps were most likely developed to keep Roma out of the city centres. Furthermore, the stereotype associating Roma with nomadism led local authorities to place in these structures those who migrated to Italy from former Yugoslavia and Romania, although they had never practised nomadism, thus turning nomad camps from temporary

halting sites to permanent ghettos (Sigona and Monasta, 2006; Tavani, 2012).

All authors cited above agree in considering nomad camps as one of the main barriers to inclusion<sup>1</sup> of Roma, not only because of their location, the reduced access to services and the generally poor infrastructures – shelters mostly consist of caravans or makeshift barracks – but especially because of their stigmatisation: nomad camps are indeed associated with dirtiness, deviancy and criminality, reproducing what Sibley (1995) calls a 'geography of exclusion' that prevents its inhabitant from succeeding at school, finding a job and, finally, exiting the camp (Hepworth, 2012; Piasere, 1991). For this reason, Italian national institutions, following the adoption by the European Commission of a *European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies*, launched a *National Roma Integration Strategy* (2012) which, although not containing any specific obligation for local authorities, highlights the necessity of replacing nomad camps with adequate alternatives. But what can be considered an adequate housing solution?

The analysis of this issue gives the opportunity to question a quite widespread and unchallenged normative and policy concept: 'housing adequacy'. Although this term first appeared in 1966 within Art. 11 (Right to Adequate Housing) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), its meaning was clarified only in 1991 by General Comment no. 4 to the ICESCR, which lists a series of housing adequacy standards: legal security of tenure; availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructures; affordability; habitability; accessibility; location; cultural adequacy (International Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, 1991). This document is not legally binding, but it is largely considered the most authoritative source in the interpretation of this right and has become quite influential in the development of other international legal documents (Hohmann, 2013). These standards, indeed, are recalled and reinterpreted also at the European level within the European Social Charter, and the term 'housing adequacy' has entered policy discourses on the protection of the Right to Housing (Directorate-General for Internal Policies European Parliament, 2013; Eurofound, 2016; European Commission, 2013).

In this context, housing adequacy standards are translated into a series of measurable parameters. One example is the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS)<sup>2</sup> that lists a series of parameters for assessing 'housing adequacy' with the aim of informing policy recommendations at the EU level: lack of indoor flushing toilet, lack of bath or shower, rent or mortgage arrears, utility arrears, damp or leaks, rot, inability to keep adequately warm, lack of space to sit outside, shortage of space. These parameters are used in the analysis of the housing conditions of Roma (Eurofound, 2012; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016) and, consequently, inform the policy recommendations on their inclusion in the housing sector within the

*National Strategies for Roma Integration*. However, can housing adequacy be properly assessed with a series of physical and measurable parameters? Is a shelter respecting these parameters a better fit for everyone? If not, what are the factors determining differences in conceiving 'housing adequacy'?

I aim to investigate these questions with a qualitative empirical study conducted with Roma living in areas where the local authorities have implemented initiatives aimed at providing the inhabitants of the nomad camps with an 'adequate housing solution'. My objective is to challenge the 'rationality' of the adequacy standards with a series of qualitative interviews meant to highlight the social, cultural and economic implications of housing and its emotional significance. Indeed, despite the numerous works that underline the relationship between shelter, the identity of a person, the social environment, the economic opportunities, etc. (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Brun, 2015; Cancellieri, 2017; Cieraad, 1999) and the weaknesses of the Right to Housing (Craven, 1998; Hohmann, 2013; Leckie, 2001), none, so far, has fully questioned the concept of 'housing adequacy' and its use in law and policy. Before presenting some of the results of the fieldwork, the next section describes the context in which I conducted the empirical work, while the second section introduces some methodological notes.

## Presentation of the context

According to the estimates of the Council of Europe (2012), in Italy there are about 150,000 Roma, representing 0.25% of the population. Here, Romani communities can be divided into three macro-groups: the Sinti, living in Northern Italy since the Middle Ages, Roma who arrived from Yugoslavia in the '90s and Romani migrants from Romania from the early 2000s (Sigona and Monasta, 2006). The majority of Roma present in Italy are Italian citizens (Sinti and second-generation citizens with migrant background), while Romanian Roma are EU citizens and only a small minority is undocumented. Moreover, only one-third of the Romani population in Italy lives in nomad camps (Associazione 21 Luglio Onlus, 2021; Sigona, 2002), and the effective conditions of these structures vary considerably: not all are located in isolated areas, and some of them have been transformed into fully equipped spaces through the investments of the inhabitants. Nevertheless, the presence throughout the whole Italian territory of what some have defined as 'shanty towns' (Associazione 21 Luglio Onlus, 2021), where Romani individuals live isolated from the rest of society, lacking basic infrastructures and services, continues to reproduce a stereotype that affects all those identified as Roma: their association with the wretched nomad camp.

Nowadays, along with the camps created by local institutions and identified as 'authorised', there is an increasing number of what media and authorities name 'unauthorised camps' – informal settlements, usually located on public lands occupied with no authorisation, where impoverished groups (mostly Roma) live in self-built barracks with no public service. The rise of these informal settlements is partially due to the arrival of new groups of Romani migrants from Eastern Europe, but also to the use of forced evictions against Roma as a means of political propaganda. Public authorities, indeed, tend more and more to respond to the anti-gypsyist protests against nomad camps and their inhabitants with the periodic dismantlement of these structures and forced evictions. However, the lack of housing alternatives obliges evicted Roma to find refuge in informal self-built encampments, unless other authorised camps are built. In both cases, though, the new accommodation remains exposed to the risk of new evictions. For this reason, Roma living in camps often experience multiple evictions which increase the precariousness of their living conditions and the number of informal settlements in the most neglected areas of Italian towns.

It is in this context that a number of municipalities have been developing and implementing initiatives aimed at breaking this vicious cycle by providing Roma living in camps with alternative housing solutions. I here analyse three initiatives implemented in the municipalities of Pisa, Messina and Trento-Rovereto, as they have often been presented as innovative examples of policy aimed at the definitive closure of nomad camps, but have all adopted different strategies to achieve the same goal. They, therefore, offer an ideal case to analyse what it means to provide an 'alternative adequate accommodation' to individuals belonging to racialised and excluded groups.

The case of Pisa concerns a project implemented between 2002 and 2010 with the aim of providing a housing solution to all Roma living in local nomad camps (both 'authorised' and 'unauthorised'), amounting to about 500 individuals. The identified solutions were numerous: apartments found on the housing market, whose rent was initially covered by the project; inclusion in the waiting lists for public housing;<sup>3</sup> reconversion of public buildings into housing units; and self-construction of a Romani village. The initial enthusiasm for the project was unfortunately followed by a series of issues that affected the outcomes. Most of the families relocated into the housing market were evicted again, mostly because they could not pay the rent once the municipality cut off financial support; others abandoned the flats because these did not respond to their housing needs. The only lasting result was the 'Romani village', criticised for reproducing a segregating environment.

In Messina, the municipality had implemented a project in 2011 intending to close the local 'authorised' nomad camp, occupying a central area near the city's harbour and housing about 70 individuals. The solution identified

was the reconversion of public buildings into housing units through the method of self-building and the direct participation of the beneficiaries. Nevertheless, years after the relocation, many beneficiaries still complained about the degrading conditions of the solutions provided and the fact that they had not been given a rental contract yet. The case of Trento and Rovereto consistently differs from the other two: here, in 2009, the local authorities approved the first law for the creation of micro-areas, small pieces of land where local Roma could live autonomously with their extended family. Apparently, this law was the product of an explicit request from the local Sinti population, who aimed to abandon the degrading and stigmatising solution of the camps, but refused to live in apartments as they were used to a life 'in the open air'. However, the law has never been implemented and, according to the interviewees, this was mostly due to the lack of the necessary political will.

## Methodological notes

With the objective of questioning the 'rationality' of the adequacy standards and the use of quantitative data in the assessment of housing adequacy, the fieldwork, conducted between the end of 2016 and November 2017, aimed to bring the subjectivity of the individual and the emotional side of housing to the centre of the question, by also challenging the main assumptions regarding 'Roma' and listening to their stories and opinions. These aims presented a series of methodological risks that needed to be tackled. The first consisted in the risk of reproducing the idea that Roma are a homogeneous and defined group/minority by considering all Roma as the target of the study. However, considering only a Romani sub-group (e.g. Roma from ex-Yugoslavia or local Sinti) might have still applied a form of essentialising simplification. For this reason, rather than applying an 'ethnic' lens in the definition of the target group, I decided to consider all Roma and Sinti as targets of a specific set of policies (*The Italian Roma Integration Strategy*). The second risk concerned the reproduction of the stereotypes affecting the members of this group: this work intended to dismantle at least part of them, but it also risked reproducing others. Prejudices and stereotypes affecting Roma are often the product of generalisations that interpret the characteristics of a group of individuals exclusively in cultural or social terms and use them to explain the behaviour of all those identified as part of the macro-group 'Roma' (Tremlett, 2009). Consequently, this study did not aim to achieve a 'representative' picture of the housing situation of the group considered, but rather to challenge possible generalisations, looking for a variety of different perspectives and stories.



In addition to this, it was necessary to consider the impact of my position as the researcher who conducted the study. As other scholars have noted (Fremlova, 2018; Lambrev, 2017; Silverman, 2018), non-Romani researchers must take carefully into account their position – in terms of relations of power, subjectivity and prejudices – in researching Roma, especially in consideration of the fact that this group has long been excluded from knowledge production and objectified by academic scholarship (Bogdán et al., 2015; Mirga-Kruszelnicka, 2015). To address this issue, the study adopted a reflexive approach to fieldwork (Attia and Edge, 2017; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) by conducting the interviews as a conversation where the interviewee could shape the talk and by relying as much as possible on the transcripts for their analysis. The presentation of the interviews is always contextualised and organised to highlight the subjectivity of all the parties involved in the study – including mine.

It must be mentioned that my previous experience as a social worker in nomad camps in the city of Turin played a role in the research work. I was indeed familiar with some of the practices that were reproduced in these segregated contexts, especially in relations with outsiders. For instance, I remembered well the fact that when journalists or researchers came to the camp, they were always welcomed by the same persons, who would lead them to interview only a restricted number of friends. In this way, the outcome was largely influenced by the hierarchies that governed the relations between families, leaving marginal voices unheard. Aware of this, I looked for different contact persons who would lead me to different people, especially when the interviews were conducted in segregated buildings. At the same time, though, the impact on the results of the fieldwork of the relation of power existing between a non-Romani researcher, as I was, and the Romani interviewees needed to be acknowledged: while this relation could have favoured the availability of the interviewees, used to relating with and responding to external non-Romani workers, the mutual distrust existing between Roma and non-Roma could have affected their responses.

However, as other reflexive scholars argue (Attia and Edge, 2017; Fremlova, 2018), there are a variety of dimensions that might affect the results of the fieldwork. In my case, the fact of being a woman might have favoured the creation of a relation of trust with female interviewees, while my position as a middle-class, highly educated scholar might have created diffidence. In addition, my experience working in nomad camps has probably contributed to ensuring minimum conditions of trust, as well as my working-class family background, while my origin from another Northern Italian town might have differently influenced the relation, although not necessarily in a negative way, because of the Italian North-South divide. In addition to this, it was necessary to take into account the impact of the prejudices that, despite the years spent

working and reflecting on these issues, I was probably not able to fully deconstruct, living in a society deeply marked by anti-gypsyism. For these reasons, and in order to reduce the impact of possible over-interpretation, I decided to leave as much space as possible to the transcriptions in the analysis and presentation of the interviews.

During the study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 40 Romani individuals living in the three areas considered (16 in Pisa, 13 in Messina, 11 in Trento-Rovereto).<sup>4</sup> The fieldwork did not consider only those who benefited from the projects implemented by the municipalities, but also those who found an alternative accommodation autonomously or kept living in nomad camps. The interviewees were selected and reached thanks to a variety of different contact persons: mostly policymakers, activists and social workers that were contacted for this study. I asked them to put me in contact with potential interviewees, especially when they mentioned cases that, according to them, were either 'peculiar' because different from the others, or 'significant' because representative of a certain issue. Furthermore, the support of the Romani interviewees was also functional in reaching other individuals and families, especially when they were not particularly known by the local administrators or activists.

After being reached by the contact person, who explained to them the goal and modality of the study, and agreeing to conduct the interview, a meeting was arranged, usually within the dwelling of the interviewee or in a public place (coffee shop). Each interview followed a model prepared to tackle some main points: the satisfaction of the interviewee with their current accommodation and, when applicable, with the project; their idea of home and their housing wishes; their level of 'inclusion' within the broader society and their relationship with the Romani identity. All interviews have been recorded, and each interviewee has been informed regarding the aim and content of the study and asked for consent to conduct, record and use the interview for research purposes. In order to ensure anonymity, I used fake names to refer to the interviewees and omitted any information that may have revealed their identity. All interviews have been fully transcribed and translated from Italian to English. In the following section, I present some extracts of the interviews that I consider particularly relevant because they highlight the variety of different housing needs that emerged in this study and their broad social, economic and emotional implications.

## Results of the interviews

The first aspect that emerged immediately at the beginning of the fieldwork and that was then confirmed in the rest of the study was the strong variety of housing needs and wishes. Although I was expecting to encounter a certain

level of diversity in the answers of the interviewees, I assumed that it would be possible to interpret them according to a series of factors, such as age, social background, gender, level of inclusion, etc. The results of the research confuted this assumption. The first site where such diversity emerged was the Romani village constructed in Pisa to host 17 families that lived in a local nomad camp. Although the village consisted of a series of townhouses whose physical quality was surely improved compared to the camp, it still represented a segregated solution. It was, indeed, located in an isolated rural area, badly connected to Pisa and inhabited only by Roma. For these reasons, all the persons interviewed there (10 persons) were not completely satisfied with the solution provided but rather aspired to something else.

Significant, in this sense, are the interviews conducted with Caterina and Marta, two women from different families, but with similar backgrounds: they were both about 40 years old, born and raised in Kosovo, and they migrated at the end of the '90 s to Italy where they always lived in nomad camps before receiving accommodation in the Romani village. They were not completely satisfied with this solution, but their housing aspirations diverged. In this regard, Caterina said:

I always had an idea ... I also always told people within the municipality, to the social workers: I want a dwelling in Pisa or outside of Pisa, I wanted to stay in the city, I wanted to meet people

*But in a flat?*

A flat, yes, like everyone, a bit ... like everyone, right? Also us. Instead here, when people will hear where we are, they will be afraid ...

Caterina, therefore, strongly desired a flat in the city, to escape the stigmatisation of the 'Romani village' and to feel part of the host society. This appeared to me as a call for 'normality'. Different was the answer of Marta:

Yes, I prefer to go out from the camp, to have a dwelling, to have the residence,<sup>5</sup> to find a job. To live like all other people, also us.

*Namely, would you also like an apartment away from the family?*

No, I cannot make it in an apartment, I tell you the truth, because now we are twelve people. I have six children, a daughter-in-law and nephews. I would have preferred a country house, also abandoned, that I could repair little by little, you know ... old houses, I would have been happier.

Although Marta also wanted to escape the stigmatisation of the Romani village and to engage in a process of inclusion, she would have preferred an accommodation that allowed her to live with her extended family. Her account reflected somehow a certain stereotyped idea of the 'way of life of Roma', living in extended families, isolated from the others. This aspect emerged often during the analysis of the project in Pisa, as some social workers claimed that some Romani families even abandoned the flat that was provided to them because it did not respond to their need for living in larger spaces that could host larger families. This characteristic was usually associated with individuals more attached to a certain idea of 'Romani culture' and less 'integrated'. However, Marta confuted this assumption, stating that she aimed to live a life as all others, included in Italian society.

Similar findings emerged, especially in Trento and Rovereto, where nomad camps were inhabited only by those Sinti families who did not accept to abandon this solution for a flat in public housing. The interviews with those still living in camps, indeed, confirmed that the majority desired to abandon the stigmatised and segregating solution of the nomad camp, but, at the same time, aimed for solutions, like the micro-area, allowing them to continue living with their extended family and with a space outside. Here, the solution of the flat was perceived as an imposition of the majority. Because of the lack of alternatives, Sinti had only two choices: to continue living in nomad camps or to accept a flat in public housing.<sup>6</sup> One of the interviewees, a Sinti man about 35 years old living in the nomad camp of Trento and working for the social services, explained this situation well:

For instance, now my brother goes to live in a flat because he knows that the micro-areas are not possible in the short term. It is because of this that today we choose the publicly-owned flats. It is like obliging a person from Trento, not Sinti, to move to a nomad camp. The same thing. We have grown up in the camps, and it is not possible to oblige us to live in the flats.

Regarding the reasons that moved some Sinti families to reject the flats, interesting was the account of Anna, a Sinti woman of about 60 years:

*What memories do you have of the life in caravan travelling? Is it a pleasant memory?*

Yes, yes, pleasant, because I always lived in the caravan, I mean, I never moved from the caravan to the flat, I always lived in the caravan, so it is not that I had to make an effort ... I am born, raised and have lived in the caravan! So, I don't see the difference, because that was my life. And now let's see, even if they give me a flat for rent, I would not stay there. I cannot, I really cannot stay there. [...]

*And what are the reasons that, according to you, prevent you from staying in a flat? What don't you like about a flat?*

I don't take it well, I mean, I don't know, I don't take it well, the flat! Because it is closed, I always have been in the open air, I like being like those little birds, outside in the air. In the flat you have to stay 24 h a day. No no no no, let's not talk at all of a flat, that also at my age, it is not that I settle in immediately, eh! If I had fewer years, maybe, but at this age ... no, rather, it would make me anxious, because I always lived outside, that in a moment, to be closed in a flat it would look to me like being in a prison. No ... there are the comforts, but also here I have everything, but I live in the camp. Nevertheless, I have all my services as if I was living in a flat, yes yes ... I don't see the difference.

Two other reasons for preferring a dwelling in a camp or micro-area that emerged during other interviews were the necessity for a space to meet with the extended family during celebrations and the difficulties in integrating into a social environment marked by deeply rooted anti-gypsyism. For instance, a young Sinti activist and musician, Lorenzo, who had lived in an apartment but went back to the camp after a while, complained that the protests that followed his relocation to the flat prevented him from feeling safe and welcome. It is indeed unfortunately common that relocations of Romani families to non-Romani neighbourhoods and buildings trigger the protests of the non-Romani inhabitants that see Roma as a 'problem' (Claps and Vitale, 2010; Piasere et al., 2014).

Nevertheless, not all Sinti interviewed rejected the solution of the flat to continue living 'in the open air'. For instance, Teresa, a 40 years Sinti woman who lived all her life in a caravan without a fixed abode before relocating to a flat with the help of a local organisation, firmly rejected the possibility of living in a different solution again. Indeed, she did not have good memories of her childhood growing up in a caravan and affirmed that, as an adult, she always aimed to live in a flat. This was because of the material comforts, but also because of the stability and security represented by a fixed abode. Her account, together with those of others who expressed similar opinions, highlighted how the role of cultural and social habits in defining housing needs is not as decisive as personal experiences. For this reason, the development of housing policies around supposed cultural differences might result in the imposition of housing solutions that do not meet the actual needs and aspirations of all the members of the concerned group.

Another important aspect that emerged in the fieldwork was the importance, but also the complexity and ambivalence, of the relationship between housing and social inclusion. Generally, indeed, the place of living crucially affects all other aspects of the life of the individual, such as the possibility to find a source of income, the sense of belonging in the broader community,

progress in education and the possibility of improving social status. Where Roma are concerned, much attention is paid to the issue of urban segregation, meant as the presence of Roma-only neighbourhoods, which are considered by EU strategy as one of the main obstacles to their inclusion (European Commission, 2012, 2016; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2009). Nevertheless, the history, quality and location within the urban structure of Roma-only neighbourhoods and structures vary considerably.

The fieldwork highlighted the consequences of imposed isolation and segregation, but, at the same time, the variety of factors that affects the results of relocation initiatives. Regarding the firsts, particularly significant are the findings of the interviews conducted in the Romani village of Pisa. Here, the isolation from the city and the fact of living in a Roma-only village prevented its inhabitants from feeling a part of the rest of society. Indeed, the interviewees gave me the impression of living in a sort of limbo between the memories of the past in their country of origin and the disillusioned dreams for a future outside of the camp/village. While feeling alienated from the rest of Italian society, they did not really seem to consider the camp/village as their home. In this context, particularly impressive was the account recorded from two teenagers, Chiara and Daniela, who had always lived in the camp or village in Pisa: although they regularly attended local schools, spoke perfect Italian, behaved as many other Italian teenagers and never visited their country of origin, they still did not feel to be Italian. In their case, the only place recognised as a 'home' was the Romani village, which they defined as a 'bubble': a place separated from the rest of a society belonging to non-Roma.

These findings would support the assumption that nomad camps and other Roma-only structures themselves represent the main obstacle to inclusion. Nevertheless, the fieldwork conducted in Messina highlighted how the association between social inclusion and the place of living may be more complex than it might appear at first, and that the dismantling of nomad camps does not always lead to an improvement of the inclusion of their inhabitants. Here, the local nomad camp, closed in 2012 with the relocation of the families to desegregated settings, was located in a central area of the urban setting, close to the city's harbour. As confirmed also by all the interviewees who lived there, the degrading material conditions of the infrastructures surely required an intervention.

However, not all the people I talked to, including representatives from civil society organisations, agreed on the fact that the relocation improved the inclusion of the inhabitants. This because of two main reasons: first, the camp was located in a central area of the city, and it was therefore well known by the rest of the population, with the children living in the camp regularly attending local schools, while the new accommodations were located in poor areas at the outskirts of the city, with higher levels of

criminality and deviancy; second, within the camp, most of Romani families earned a living with a series of activities strictly connected to the context of the camp – scrap material collection, small internal businesses, etc. These activities could not be carried out in the new locations, and this often resulted in a deterioration of economic security.

The case of Messina also showed how, beyond the social and economic implications of the relocation, the emotional attachment to the place of living must not be forgotten. Here, this emotional attachment to the camp in which people lived for many years emerged explicitly: although they recognised the bad quality of the infrastructures, they also had good memories of their life there. Significant, in this sense, is what an 18-year-old boy who grew up in the camp before being moved into a flat said:

*Do you have good memories of the camp or do you prefer to live here?*

But it is normal, I grew up there, I am born there. Mostly now that I go there to see how it is all well-adjusted, I think: ‘instead of giving us a flat, they could do something back there, not to take what was ours’. But in the end, I am happy because, most of all, if I have to invite a friend home now I can, without having that fear that if I had brought him inside a shack before, to think: wait a moment, maybe he will criticise me ...

The failure to take into account all aspects that affect the well-being of the individual within a dwelling might hinder the sustainability of the projects and increase the level of insecurity. As emerged during the fieldwork in Pisa, the great majority of Romani families that have been relocated into flats found on the housing market have then been evicted again or voluntarily returned to living in self-made shelters in nomad camps because the provided housing solutions did not meet their needs. These cases, therefore, showed how the failure to consider all aspects connected with relocation may worsen the initial situation of precarity, instead of improving it. On the one side, it obliges those who go through another eviction to start from zero, increasing their housing insecurity. On the other side, it reinforces the idea that the failure of inclusion strategies addressing Roma is due to their ‘incapacity and unwillingness to integrate’, informing, in turn, those stereotypes that prevent their meaningful involvement in decision-making (Marushiakova and Popov, 2015; Piasere et al., 2014).

Furthermore, housing insecurity proved to be a factor of strong distress for all those who went through one or more evictions, because this experience had an impact on their life in the long term as well. Namely, it left a sense of insecurity that hindered the possibility for them to feel at home in other accommodations and, therefore, to invest in them. This consequence was particularly evident in the account of Emma, a middle-aged Romani woman in Pisa who,

after going through a series of evictions, was supported by a local organisation in finding an apartment for herself and her children on the housing market. When interviewed, although she had a regular rental contract and was financially supported by the social services, she evidently feared going through a new eviction. The distress that housing insecurity provoked in her was expressed immediately, at the beginning of the interview, when I asked about her childhood accommodation in North Macedonia: instead of talking about it, she started complaining about her life in Italy moving from one camp to another, as a consequence of the evictions.

*Where did you live in Macedonia?*

Ah, that I don't even know

*Ah, don't you remember?*

No, I don't remember, but you know how it is .... My goodness. I was in Brigattiera [former nomad camp in Pisa area] before. No, first I was in Coltano [another nomad camp]. From Coltano they sent me to Brigattiera. From Brigattiera I was going to Coltano. They are playing with people. And then when they came for the evictions, they threw me out. There weren't the permissions. [...]

*And now how do you feel in this flat?*

Well. The children calmed down compared to the camp, where they were as crazy. They did not behave well the children, when I came here, they did not behave well, they were noisy, and all the people were putting papers on my door. Now they calmed down. And after, because I have a contract for one year, I don't want that they put me once again there in the camp. Because now I have calmed down the children, and again they become messy.

Furthermore, when I asked what her ideal accommodation would be and how she would improve the current one, she answered that for her 'a roof was enough'. I received a similar answer when I interviewed Vincenzo, a Romani man who was living in a caravan without a stable abode, always in Pisa, after being evicted for improper use of the land that he owned. After spending some years in a caravan, with the constant fear of intervention by the police, his only dream was 'a roof over the head', as he could not imagine anything better.

The importance of housing security emerged also in Messina during the interviews with those who received accommodation through the project. Indeed, although the project closed many years before my fieldwork, the



families still did not have a rental contract for the apartments that they had received. This fact clearly exposed them to the risk of a new eviction and prevented them from feeling secure in their new accommodation. In this regard, Francesco and Grazia said:

*Do you feel this as your own flat?*

Grazia: We still don't know if this is my flat [she laughs].

Francesco: The flat is ours if I buy it, then I can say that it is mine 100%, but like this ... because we don't have any paper, any documents. If you have in hand the papers you can say yes, but if you don't have the papers, you cannot say yes. Yes, I fixed it up, because if you stay one month or one year, at least you live as God intended, but I still cannot say that it is mine.

## Conclusions

The fieldwork here presented showed the importance of housing for the inclusion and well-being of the individual and it, therefore, stressed the importance of the Right to Housing. Nevertheless, it also highlighted the variety of aspects that influence housing needs and the many implications that have to be taken into account when implementing housing policies. The dwelling is not only a physical solution but also a fundamental unit in building social, economic and emotional well-being. Is the definition of 'adequate housing' able to recognise and support it, in all its different shades? Understanding housing adequacy merely as a list of physical standards fails to recognise the variety of factors that may affect the subjective understanding of housing adequacy and its broad implications for relations with the rest of society. Consequently, the relocation of groups of individuals in solutions that better conform to adequacy standards does not always result in an improvement of their quality of life. Moreover, the neglect of the subjective understanding of housing adequacy prevents the possibility of recognising specific housing needs that, while not included in the list of adequacy parameters, might be crucial for the well-being of some.

The most evident example, here, is the case of those Sinti in Trento who requested solutions that better conformed to their habit of living with open spaces. Although this request might be interpreted as a matter related to the standard of 'cultural adequacy', this interpretation risks bounding all members of a group to a supposed 'cultural specificity', failing to recognise all other factors that affect individual housing needs. In addition, interpreting

housing diversity exclusively through the lenses of 'culture' might dangerously mingle with racist practices and structures. In this regard, it is important to highlight that the above-mentioned weaknesses of the concept of housing adequacy are, in this context, exacerbated by anti-gypsyism. Nomad camps, indeed, while presented as a solution that responded to a cultural need – nomadism – were mostly created to segregate Roma within controlled spaces. At the same time, the search for alternative solutions continued to be hindered by the prejudice that Roma cannot be fully included in processes of decision-making, leading to top-down policies that failed to listen to the individual needs of the members of this group.

Taking this into consideration, though, it appears necessary to open a reflection on a revision of the way the right to adequate housing is conceived and protected, especially when racialised and silenced groups such as Roma are concerned. The risk, here outlined, is that the current definition and use of 'housing adequacy' might foster processes of forced relocations and marginalisation that do not consider the broader context and individual needs, instead of enforcing the protection of this right for the most marginalised sections of our societies.

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### **Notes**

1. The term 'inclusion' is here understood as a process that ensures the individual the possibility to become an active, equal and autonomous participant in social, political and economic life. It is, therefore, meant to support intercultural exchange with a process of social justice ensuring the autonomy of the individual in choosing and carrying out their idea of a good life.
2. Available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/european-quality-of-life-surveys>
3. Public housing is one of the main structural measures implemented in Italy to fight housing poverty, and it is accessible to all residents (Italians or foreigners) with low income. However, the reduced number of places available, racism and bureaucratic difficulties hinder access for Roma.
4. The fieldwork research has been conducted in the framework of a PhD in Politics, Human Rights and Sustainability at Sant'Anna School for Advanced Studies supervised by Professor Barbara Henry, who did not require the approval of the Ethical Committee. The PhD thesis has been successfully defended in 2019.

5. When interviewed, Marta was not regularly residing within the Romani village.
6. While in other Italian areas the access to public housing is very limited, the Autonomous Province of Trento – located in a wealthy region – ensures the availability of a higher number of places, favouring access to all those who meet the requirements (e.g. residence in the region, low income).

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