

## **Community briefing on the Roma community in Polígono Sur:**

### **Improving the right to, and quality of, housing**

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#### **Bio**

I am interested in this area of research as a Spaniard myself. While I have no direct relation to the Roma community, I have witnessed the extent to which discriminatory attitudes in Spain have impacted access to, and quality of, housing and, as such, feel a duty to understand the persistence of this phenomenon.

#### **Abstract**

The Roma community throughout Europe has faced extensive persecution and racism. As a result, the housing crisis experienced in Spain has been felt particularly acutely in the largely Roma neighbourhood of Polígono Sur. This is evidenced by inadequate housing conditions, insecure tenure, and high rates of gang-related crime. Previous policy attempts to solve this crisis have centred on forced resettlement and have taken a fragmented sectoral approach, further perpetuating an impression of Roma dependence on the state and driving inequality. I propose a more participatory, incremental, asset-based approach, which centres the strengths and needs of the community, rather than its deficiencies. Alternative mechanisms are needed to ensure the dignity and housing rights of the community are protected, and I posit mutual aid networks, community land trusts, and collaboration with existing movements as the most immediate and effective ways of enacting this change. These measures are already noted within the community at an informal level, indicating the potential for them to be scaled up to great effect. Crucially, any measures taken should reflect the strengths of the Roma community, and should centre their participation and insight.

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## Understanding this Report

The purpose of this report is to propose some measures that you, the Roma community in Polígono Sur, can take yourselves to improve housing. This report is aimed at the self-defined Gitano community but is equally applicable to the challenges faced by more recent Roma migrants in Seville who face similar socioeconomic challenges. Hereafter I will use the term Roma when referring to both groups, unless specifying one group, in which case I will distinguish using the term Gitano to refer to the settled Spanish community, and Roma to refer to more recent migrants to Spain (Mazzini and Piemontese 2016).

The report will set out a broad overview of three suggestions which may help to improve the right to housing, and the quality of housing itself. These suggestions are in no way comprehensive, and it is important to be clear that they are not prescriptive either. Rather, they serve to spark conversations around new directions the community can take. I aim to give a brief overview of the strengths and limitations of each measure.

I have also listed some sources at the end of this document which may be beneficial in further explaining some of the ideas raised in this briefing and in providing frameworks on how to implement them.

## Context of Challenges

It is crucial to be clear that the housing challenges facing the community have come about largely as a result of institutional discrimination and neglect, and not through any fault of the community itself (Piemontese 2016) (Miranda *et al.* 2019). The distribution of housing, which has been largely segregated, placed Gitano families in marginal urban areas and has hindered social integration and cohesion with the wider Spanish population. There is also strong evidence that shows the community receives fewer benefits from the state than the average Spanish citizen, which contradicts damaging media portrayals of the Roma community as dependant on state aid (Laparra and Macías 2009) (Trehan 2009). In fact, the community is incredibly resilient and has persevered in the face of very difficult circumstances.

The Roma political response to these issues has been hindered by the spatial dispersion of communities and low levels of political participation, which are in great part the product of these wider contextual factors (Bancroft 2001). On top of this, the Spanish political system only recognises political entities if they are tied to a particular region, which has meant that Roma resistance has been fragmented from one autonomous region to another. Of the associations Gitanos are members of, most tend to be ethnic-based, and there is little participation in non-Roma organisations (Laparra and Macías 2009).

However, Gitano and Roma political involvement seems to be shifting. El Consejo del Pueblo Gitano - created in 2006 - was the first step towards political representation and since then, other platforms have emerged which unite the Roma movement. For example, Plataforma Khetane

provides a platform which represents Roma NGOs and organisations under a common cause, uniting the fight for antigitanismo (anti-gypsyism) and Roma rights. The Fundación Secretariado Gitano suggests that collaboration between Roma and non-Roma actors is the way forward. This reflects a trend of increased community organisation, which bodes well for the future, as development will depend on collective action within the community (Lagunas Arias 2010).

## Note on the impact of Covid-19 on the community

It is also necessary to take this moment to note the disproportionate impact that Covid-19 has had on the Roma community. Flea-markets and outdoor vending are of great economic importance to the community, and these have been severely impacted, which has had a knock-on effect in amplifying inequality, making it all the more necessary to act now (Laparra and Macías 2009). This urgency is also heightened by the increased stigmatization of the Roma community by sensationalist media outlets and the far-right during this time of crisis and by the withdrawal of state support - patterns that were also noticed following the 2008 financial crash, and which are likely to persist if action is not taken. However, while this crisis has impacted people severely, it also presents opportunities for change and innovation (Maestri 2014).

## Approach

The measures set out in the following report all take an Asset-Based approach, which evolved from the Asset Based Community Development framework. This means that instead of looking for the problems in the community, you look instead for the strengths, and at the way these strengths can

be used to meet the specific challenges facing the community (Harrison *et al.* 2019). This can help to reduce the falsely held preconception of the Roma community as dependant on the state, by illustrating their strengths instead of their deficiencies (Piemontese 2016).

It is also vital that the community identifies what these challenges are. As the ones with lived experience of the place, you are the people best placed to understand what will work and what will not (Oprea 2004). I have tried to apply this principle throughout my report by integrating findings from research conducted with, rather than about, the Roma community in Polígono Sur (Miranda *et al.* 2019).

I have also tried to apply this in the measures I have suggested. All of the steps identified in this report play on strengths identified about the Roma community in the literature I have been able to access. This is in no way comprehensive, and it is ultimately up to the Roma community to identify what these strengths are, and how to use them. Hopefully, this document can serve to integrate academic debates and on the ground conversations about potential routes of action.

Based on my reading, the most pressing challenges around housing were insecure tenure and inadequate buildings (Miranda *et al.* 2019). In response to this, I have set out three measures, which address these issues on different scales. The measures I have set out include Community Land Trusts, Mutual Aid Networks and alignment with other groups in similar socioeconomic positions. While these may sound like quite abstract ideas, they are based on the principle of meeting the community's most basic needs first. I will elaborate on how they can help in coordinating meaningful development and securing improved land rights.

## Challenge 1 - Housing Tenure Explained

Housing tenure refers to the legal status and financial arrangement that someone has to live in a property. This matters because without secure tenure, people can be evicted from their homes (Dittmar and Kelbaugh 2018). This is a trend which is increasingly being noted among members of the Roma community in every autonomous region in Spain. A civil society monitoring report on the national Roma integration strategy in Spain indicates that loss of home ownership comes as a result of informal transfer of property (e.g., between family members). This is attributed to inflated housing costs and to families being given their current homes as endorsement for previous homes, not given proper tenure by the state, and finally being evicted (Plataforma Khetane *et al.* 2018).

This is particularly important for the Roma community since there is a history of land buy-outs and relocations associated with insecure tenure that many will remember. The most memorable might be the relocation from Triana to Polígono Sur (Miranda *et al.* 2019), which happened in the 1960's and involved the forced resettlement of the Roma community on the basis that the land they lived on was flood-prone and not fit for habitation. Conversations about the demolition of 'poor quality housing' have re-surfaced, and these have been used in the past to justify forced resettlement (Manzo 2011). This is evidently a problem as it disrupts crucial social and economic networks – moving people away from jobs, friends and family, and recreation (Dittmar and Kelbaugh 2018). It is also crucial to recognise that, while it may be framed as helping the Roma community, the actual beneficiaries are large investors and councils seeking to make money through large investment projects, rather than those living in inadequate housing. Gentrification does not get rid of the problems faced by working class and marginalised communities, it simply

relocates these problems out of central locations, further isolating these groups and perpetuating inequality (Harvey 2003). It is far more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable to improve housing which has already been built, than it is to demolish and replace it with more expensive, homogenous property (Dittmar and Kelbaugh 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that the community has a right to stay put, which is where Community Land Trusts can help (Flint 2012).

### Option 1 – Community Land Trusts Explained

Community Land Trusts emerged as part of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's and 60's in response to rising housing prices which disproportionately impacted Black Americans. They aim to help those marginalised by socioeconomic hardship live more affordable and dignified lives (Pialucha and Audrain 2020). While they were originally founded in rural areas, most CLTs today emerged post-1990's and exist in urban locations.

CLTs function by buying land through a blanket mortgage, which is managed by a non-profit corporation and is often subsidised by low interest on government loans. Each member of the CLT owns a share of the non-profit corporation that owns the land and are entitled to sell this on, if they so wish (Brady et al. 2018). This means that instead of fighting individually for land rights, the community is able to pool together and make tenure accessible to everyone who wants it. This, in turn, reduces the rate of foreclosure and eviction, which are acute concerns in Polígono Sur and all the more so following the financial damage inflicted by Covid-19 (Piemontese 2016).

There are many easily accessible handbooks on CLT implementation which can inform and guide community discussions. While implementation is ultimately dependant on individual state housing



regulations, they largely follow a similar process which involves: engaging the community and key supporting actors, establishing a purpose (e.g. maintaining affordability, or developing the community), contacting advisors with regards to law and financing, securing support from authorities for the CLT, creating and formalising the legalities, organising a small administrative team, and coming up with a development plan for the area. For further information, please refer to the handbook attached at the end of this document.

The University of Cordoba has set up ‘El Laboratorio Jurídico sobre Desahucios’ (The Legal Laboratory on Evictions) which aims to research issues around dispossession and eviction. They have collaborated with trained legal professionals to look into the way CLTs can be legally established in Spain and have presented a new legal framework to the Andalusian Assembly. There has been a lot of interest in CLTs throughout Europe, and Spain is set to follow the example of other countries in adopting these laws (Pialucha and Audrain 2020). Therefore, it could be very beneficial for the community to establish links with the working group, in order to secure legal advice and guidance on the process of setting up a land trust. As none currently exist in Andalusia, this could be an excellent opportunity for the University to pilot the scheme, and there is likely to be interest on the part of the working group. There is also the option of trialling this with a single building, or small plot, to establish its efficacy before implementing it more widely, given the number of unoccupied properties in the area (Miranda *et al.* 2019).

### CLT Strengths

CLTs promote urban cohesion and diversification of neighbourhoods by making housing more affordable (Ring 2019). They also promote permanence of residents by maintaining costs at a low

and stable level, therefore reducing the risk of eviction and relocation. As such, they are more socially and economically sustainable than other options. The same can be said for environmental sustainability, as demolition and construction can be greatly reduced. CLTs are also recommended for their ability to protect wealth for future generations by reducing the impact of market pressures on property value (Brady, Baiocchi and Carson 2018). Finally, they are hailed for promoting democratic decision-making which places the community's needs centre stage and gives all members a platform to voice their concerns (Pialucha and Audrain 2020).

### CLT Limitations

CLTs are time-consuming to set up and require outside assistance in the way of legal and financial advisors. They also require an initial investment and substantial community support, given their voluntary nature, and this cannot be guaranteed (Brady, Baiocchi and Carson 2018). Further inquiry will be necessary to establish whether these exist at sufficient levels within the community. The implementation of CLTs in Spain also depends on legislative change at this point. Although the forecast for this looks promising, and collaboration with the University of Cordoba may speed this process up, it is not guaranteed. Finally, the same democratic principles which make it such a promising solution have implications for the day-to-day management of CLTs. These include a collective responsibility to maintain property and the potential for conflict in decision-making.

### Challenge 2 – Improving Quality of Housing

Another one of the challenges set out by the community was inadequate housing. This included poor sewage and sanitation infrastructure, abandoned and deteriorating buildings, lack of access

to water in some of the higher-level flats, and poor access to buildings for elderly and disabled members of the community (Miranda *et al.* 2019). While the local council has begun to take a micro-level approach to improving housing (Laparra and Macías 2009)– which refers to small, incremental repairs rather than big renovation schemes – the roll out of these measures has been slow and has been further impacted by Covid-19 and economic pressures following the pandemic. Therefore, there is a very real need within the community for small-scale, short-term interventions to improve housing quality (Trehan 2009). At the moment, these interventions are not being realised at a fast enough rate, and there is a real danger that further deterioration of properties will increase the likelihood of relocation and demolition.

## Option 2 - Expanding Mutual Aid Networks

Mutual Aid Networks are based on the idea of identifying skills, services and goods that are available in the community and matching them with the people who need them (Dittmar and Kelbaugh 2018). This reflects the Asset Based approach set out earlier in this report. These networks tend to emerge in times of crisis, but as Professor Philip Alston - United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights - reported in the Winter of 2020, prior to the pandemic, the community in Polígono Sur already faces crisis conditions with regards to housing. Therefore, seeking to expand and develop networks that are doing crucial work at this very moment is a measure that is both realistic in scope and justified.

Mutual Aid Networks have appeared increasingly throughout the pandemic but were already understood to be a feature of the Roma community (Piemontese 2016). While confused by some as charity, in practice, Mutual Aid Networks are organised more along lines of solidarity. This is significant because solidarity is a great strength among the Roma community, and is something

which can be easily mobilised (Lagunas Arias 2010). Once networks have been identified, there is potential for them to become more organised, to find other groups doing similar work nearby, and to extend their capacity for skill sharing and resource matching (provisionaluniversity 2013). While this may be one of the fastest and most affordable ways of enacting change, it is worth noting that some of the challenges – such as improving sewage infrastructure – are beyond the realms of what the community can do for itself. Repairs on a smaller scale, such as the building of ramps for wheelchair accessibility, or fixing water pressure, may be an appropriate place to start mobilising change. It is also important to bear in mind that the Mutual Aid Networks are not supposed to replace council repairs but are meant to complement them in order to improve the living conditions of the residents of Polígono Sur sooner, rather than later (Alston 2020).

### Mutual Aid Network Strengths

Mutual aid networks emerge organically to meet people's needs and already exist in the community. They can be organised using fairly accessible materials. Many of those which emerged over the pandemic began as spreadsheets using data collated from social media. These informal channels can be identified by the community and used to gauge interest and collect information. Informality itself can be classed as an asset in that it reduces bureaucracy and allows change to happen at a far faster pace. Therefore, the focus of expanding mutual aid networks should be on building capacity, rather than on formalising for the sake of assimilating with state aid (Talen 2019). The philosophy of neighbourly support also complements the largely Evangelical Christian background of this community, while the self-help angle reflects existing mechanisms and strengths in this community, such as innovation, creativity and a do-it-yourself initiative (Danenberg and Haas 2018).

### Mutual Aid Network Limitations

The voluntary nature of mutual aid groups means that there may be challenges in the way of staffing and capacity to carry out work (Weissmann 1960). However, it may be beneficial to unemployed members of the community to gain experience and learn trades through such networks. Skill sharing workshops, organised through these networks, could help educate individuals on various topics, from practical labour to measures to take when faced with eviction (Martinez 2019).

There are also limitations in the way of technical expertise and funding (Weissmann 1960). However, these networks have the potential to bring people together in order to organise and further explore the resources that exist within the community, which is a valuable starting point.

### Option 3 – Collaboration with Existing Movements

The final suggestion in this report relates to collaboration with other groups in similar socioeconomic positions. Spanish civil society has been at the forefront of the global movement for housing equity following the 2008 financial crash, which left many homeless and in precarious conditions. The Indignados Anti-Eviction Assembly emerged as a grass-roots response to a lack of social security and aimed to empower people to resist eviction (Ramos 2013). Their actions include passive resistance, physically impeding eviction, negotiation with banks and collective occupation of buildings (Piemontese 2016). Their primary form of organising is through workshops, which help educate and equip citizens on their options. They justify their actions through politicisation, indicating that the state has neglected them and left them with no other options but to resist. The movement is fundamentally illegal, but it forms a comprehensive and collective social security network across the country (Piemontese 2016).

### Collaboration Limitations

While this movement is in theory open to everyone, there have been limiting factors which have made it more difficult for the Roma community to become involved. The institutional discrimination against the community has left them with relatively fewer financial resources to offer the movement than other groups (Piemontese 2016). Negative attitudes towards the community and language barriers also limit involvement. Stigmatization of the Roma community also tends to worsen during times of austerity, which has been noted in attitudes within the Indignados movement (Maestri 2014).

### Collaboration Strengths

However, there is huge potential for new solidarities to be formed, especially when collaboration is focused on socio-economic position in society, rather than ethnicity (Maestri 2014). A focus on housing is also evidenced to unite people more effectively than a focus on broader human rights. The measures used by the Indignados movement reflect social security measures already used by the Roma community in the face of state neglect, such as squatting and occupation of buildings (Trehan 2009). Therefore, cooperating and aligning efforts with the movement may help to legitimize these measures in the eyes of the state. It may also be very beneficial in reverting ideas of personal shame and responsibility by highlighting the role that the state and damaging housing policies have had in contributing to the rise in homelessness and dispossession among the community, which in turn should help shift negative perceptions of the community at a broader scale (Piemontese 2016).

## Concluding Remarks

While the measures set out above are in no way comprehensive, I hope that they serve to further discussions around potential ways forward. A combination of small-scale, incremental measures, fostered by Mutual Aid Networks, alongside broader political and organisational changes in the way the land is managed, have the potential to address the crisis in both an immediate and a long-term sense, ensuring a continued right to housing and to staying put, while also improving the condition of housing. However, it is once again crucial to note that the housing crisis in Polígono Sur is a highly complex situation best understood by members of the community, and the measures undertaken should ultimately be settled on by you.

While implementation of these measures is not covered in this report, the attached sources should help provide documents that expand on the proposals set out here, give more practical guidance on enacting these changes, and provide links to the organisations mentioned above.

## Further reading for the Community

Asset Based Community Development:

<https://www.nurturedevelopment.org/asset-based-community-development/>

Community Land Trust Handbooks:

<http://www.communitylandtrusts.org.uk/what-is-a-clt/clt-handbook>

<https://www.nweurope.eu/projects/project-search/shicc-sustainable-housing-for-inclusive-and-cohesive-cities/resources/financial-guide-tools-to-boost-clt-and-ofs-financing-in-europe/>

Fundación Secretariado Gitano:

<https://www.gitanos.org/>

El Laboratorio Jurídico sobre Desahucios (University of Cordoba):

<http://www.uco.es/laboratoriojuridico/proyecto/>

Plataforma Khetane:

<https://plataformakhetane.org>



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