

# **Access to Land and Housing Aspects of the Greek Roma**

**Chryssy POTSIU, Efi DIMOPOULOU, Greece**

**Key words:** Roma, Informal settlements, Housing, Land tenure, Property rights, Access to land

## **SUMMARY**

This paper presents the findings of a recent focused research made by the authors at the National Technical University of Athens on the land tenure and housing aspects of Roma in Greece and their access to affordable housing, land, and legal rights on land, and the relevant legislation through the years of recent history. The methodology followed for this research included internet research, literature research provided by the relevant Greek institutes, on-site visits and interviews with Roma representatives and the Greek local authorities to identify both good practice and remaining problems in the municipalities of Attica, the greater Athens region.

First a brief investigation of the current situation of the Roma within Europe is given; an attempt to classify the typology of the Roma's land tenure is made, and the policies adopted by the UN and the European Union in order to improve the legality of land tenure and infrastructure of Roma settlements are reviewed. Then, the situation of the Greek Roma's land tenure and housing aspects are thoroughly investigated, together with their current problems and the relevant Greek legislation and adopted policies. The Roma's spatial distribution in Greece is identified and presented, together with relevant statistics. The problems of Roma related to their access to land and ownership rights are investigated together with their treatment in case of compulsory purchase, or when registering in the Hellenic Cadastre.

The typology of the Greek Roma housing is given together with relevant statistics about their housing conditions. A case study is focused on two municipalities of western Attica, the greater Athens region, for a more in-depth investigation of the housing aspects, the land tenure and the neighborhood regeneration progress. Some thoughts and proposals for major land reforms needed to be done by the Greek government in order to rescue the poor Roma from the heavy impacts of the economic crisis are given.

# **Access to Land and Housing Aspects of the Greek Roma**

**Chryssy POTSIU, Efi DIMOPOULOU, Greece**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Roma came to Europe from India. They gradually appeared through the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans since the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Roma are often perceived as carefree nomads with no significant worries, freedom loving and easy going, living in tents and informal settlements and dancing around fires every night. However, in most cases this very romantic picture of Roma life is far from reality. According to the brief statistics given by the Council of Europe only 20% of the European Roma population today is still nomadic mainly in Western Europe. In the previous centuries nomadism was not always a free choice but a result of persecution and continuous expulsion (e.g. in Wallachia and Moldavia Roma lived in slavery for centuries up to 1855; massive criminal measures against Roma were taken in Spain in 1749; the same happened in Austro-Hungarian Empire during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in Italy in 1926, in Romania in 1942, in Germany in 1930s and 1940s) (Hammarberg, 2011). Access to land and finding a home has always been a common theme in the Roma tales.

The Roma people have struggled for recognition, reparations and a better life in the post-War era. The problem has again increased in the post-Communist Europe, and it is briefly elaborated in chapter 2; UN and European Union reactions to that and their proposed policies are presented in chapter 3. The Greek municipalities with Roma and other poor population have made efforts to improve their situation in the past. However, recently that the social services are deteriorating in Greece due to the economic crisis there is a risk that the Roma, but also other low-income Greek population, will be seriously affected; this is directly related with their weak legal rights on land and real estate property. The authors have initiated a research to identify the current housing situation of the Greek Roma, and their access to land and legal rights on land, in chapter 4, and to identify remaining problems and any examples of good practice through a focused case study, in chapter 5.

## **2. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF ROMA WITHIN EUROPE**

During communism those Roma who had preferred to maintain a nomadic way of life were settled by force, e.g., Roma were forced to move in small apartments in Yugoslavia during socialism but this measure has failed (Potsiou, 2008). After the political change in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe many Roma have fallen victims to new eviction measures. Recently, there has been an increasing intolerance and violence against Roma settlements in Europe. Some examples are e.g., the Neo-Nazi's attempt to attack Roma in the Czech city of Litvinov in 2008; the French campaign against Roma from Romania and Bulgaria in 2010 and the expulsions of 300 informal Roma settlements' inhabitants; the murders of Roma in Hungary in 2008; and the reported police violence against Roma in Eastern Slovakia in 2009 (Hammarberg, 2011). In many European countries Roma are still denied the basic human rights in terms of housing but also education, employment, and health standards.

In many European countries Roma also lack the right of citizenship. Thousands have no administrative existence. They have never obtained birth certificates, partially due to their culture, and thus they are not administratively recognized by the state. For this reason there are no exact numbers for the size of Roma population in Europe. It is estimated to be 10-12 million; this number makes Roma the largest European minority. About 70% of Roma live in central and eastern Europe and in the ex-Soviet countries. Approximately 400,000-1,000,000 live in Hungary, Serbia, FY Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovakia and Turkey. Spain is the country with the largest Roma population in the western Europe (about 630,000), France has about 310,000, Italy about 130,000, Greece about 350,000 and Germany about 70,000 (Alexandridis, 2008). Figure 1 shows Roma settlements in FYROM, Montenegro, Slovakia, Spain and Greece.



**Figure 1.** Roma in FYROM, Montenegro, Slovakia (top) and Spain, Greece (bottom)

Political developments in Europe during recent decades have increased the housing problem and the difficulties of Roma in accessing land for housing. For example the break-out of former Yugoslavia and former Czechoslovakia has caused enormous difficulties to people who were regarded by the new successor states as belonging somewhere else even though they had been long-term residents there (e.g. the case of the early Czech republic's citizenship law which rendered stateless thousands of Roma people with the intention to force them to move to Slovakia; this problem was partially solved in 1999. The same situation occurred in Slovenia and the problem has started to be addressed only since 2010; the Kosovo conflict has led to a large displacement of Roma to other Balkan countries Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Montenegro, FY Republic of Macedonia, even Italy, Greece and elsewhere. Some European states now spend considerable funds to enable the return of the Roma to their countries of

origin. During 2009, more than 420 forcible returns took place in Pristina. As reported, the majority of returnees came from Germany, Austria, Sweden and Switzerland (Hammarberg, 2011). However, as Hammarberg points out, it would be much better if these funds were made available to the Roma in order to improve their standards of living in these countries, as it is difficult especially for the children to change languages, schools and homes.

Poor education levels are a major obstacle for Roma preventing access to the labor market. And those who cannot get a job, cannot improve their housing and this affects their health and their children's health and education; thus the vicious cycle persists across the generations. Many Roma live in substandard housing, in places with insecure land tenure, lack of legal property rights, in slums without running water, indoor toilets, electricity and heating, close to landfills or in isolated settlements without utilities (postal address, medical centers, schools, transportation network, fresh water and swage systems, etc) (Alexandridis, 2008).

According to the findings of the research, the following typology of land tenure can be still noted in the various European countries:

- Roma who legally own the house and the land, or the apartment they live in
- Roma who live on plots of land that belong to private individuals
- Roma who legally own plots of land but are not allowed either to build their houses (or they have build illegally without a permit), or to park their caravan and be connected to the public facilities networks
- Roma squatting on municipal or state owned land
- Roma squatting on private land (usually rural land) causing problems to the land owners
- Roma squatting on state or private land that present special health considerations (e.g., industrial areas, landfills, etc)
- Roma who still ascribe to a nomadic lifestyle.

### **3. EUROPEAN POLICIES**

Improving the legality in terms of land tenure and the infrastructure of Roma settlements is one of the top goals of today's European Council policies, the UN and the High Level Commission for the Legal Empowerment of the Poor (HLCLEP). Both the UN-Economic Commission for Europe and the HLCLEP investigate tools to include the poor in the formal land sector and they especially focus on the formalization of legal rights on land inspired by the theories of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto (De Soto, 1989, 2000). The outcome of formalization should be to make the informal activities part of the growing formal sector that provides decent jobs, access to markets, social protection and security, and gives access to the international trade system. Member states should establish a legal framework that conforms to the international human rights standards, to ensure effective protection against unlawful forced and collective evictions and to control strictly the circumstances in which legal evictions may be carried out. In the case of legal evictions Roma must be provided with appropriate alternative accommodation. In recent last years there have been reports about forced evictions of Roma who have illegally occupied land in Albania, Bulgaria, France, Greece, Serbia, Turkey and the UK, for the purpose of urban regeneration projects or

for new constructions; most of those evictions are not accompanied by alternative accommodation.

Recent reports published by the Commission for Human Rights, the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency, and the European Commission show that in Europe the groups that are particularly vulnerable to racism include Roma, Sinti, Travellers, Gypsies, members of African, Jewish and Muslim communities, migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers, other national, ethnic or religious minorities, and indigenous people. Discrimination based on ethnic origin is seen by 62 % of respondents to be the most widespread form of discrimination in the European Union.

Respect for equality in diversity is a central premise for building democratic and inclusive societies. In recent years there has been a variety of literature and declarations “against racism and discrimination” published by relevant organizations like the Council of Europe, the European Roma and Travellers Forum, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights. All of these reports appear to have been directly or indirectly inspired by Article 11 (1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and particularly the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights’ General Comments 4 and 7. *“Notwithstanding the type of tenure, all persons should possess a degree of security of tenure which guarantees legal protection against forced eviction, harassment and other threats. States parties should consequently take immediate measures aimed at conferring legal security of tenure upon those persons and households currently lacking such protection, in genuine consultation with affected persons and groups”*. There are a number of such publications e.g., the “Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living”; the “Decision No 566 Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma/Sinti within the OSCE Area”, Recommendation Rec (2004) 14 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on the movement and encampment of Travellers in Europe and the Recommendation Rec (2005)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on improving the housing conditions of Roma and Travellers in Europe; the “Framework Convention on National Minorities”; the “European Social Charter”; the relevant jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights; the “Charter of Rights for the Roma”; and the “Joint statement of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and the Council of Europe”, 2009 Durban declaration.

Governments and stakeholders are also encouraged to place human rights in the centre of their policy formulation and its implementation in the housing sector. According to the UN/CESCR statement, *“adequate housing”* should have sustainable access to natural and common resources, clean drinking water, energy for cooking, heating and lighting, sanitation and washing facilities, food storage facilities, refuse disposal, site drainage and emergency services. Moreover, adequate housing should be made affordable and habitable, that is properly located in safe distance from polluted areas and protected from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, as well as from hazards and diseases. Adequate housing must also ensure the physical safety of the residents and their accessibility to employment opportunities, health care services, schools, childcare services and other social facilities

(UN/CESCR, 1991). However, in most cases, Roma cannot afford to buy a house and most often are not eligible for a mortgage.

According to the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA, 2009), there is little data on home ownership among Roma, but the existing information shows that it varies greatly among EU Member States. In addition, according to the European Union documents, the socio-economic situation of Roma and their access to property rights on land and adequate housing in Europe is still under-researched. There is not much information available about the states' responses and the policies adopted by the various countries and the conditions of affordable housing of the Roma, and the possibilities of access to land and legal rights on land. In general domestic courts and authorities tend to ignore EU declarations while the international courts assign a particular importance to them.

Different social policies have been applied without significant results. For example in France the state has offered access to social housing; as an additional measure the French state decided that school education should be a pre-requisite in order Roma to be offered access to social housing; recently the municipalities of France have expanded their Urban Plans to include and upgrade Roma settlements and to provide special planning zones where the Roma can station their caravans. Another positive example of improving Roma housing is the Spanish Housing Program for Social Integration (HPSI), which promoted home-ownership through state-subsidies in preference to the provision of rented social housing. It is estimated that half of the Roma home-owners acquired their home property through this policy (FSG, 2008). Other good practice cases are the examples of the municipalities of Gorica in Sarajevo, of Kraljevo in Serbia and in Gjilan in Kosovo where Roma were included in social housing programs funded by foreign agencies (Alexandridis, 2008).

#### **4. THE GREEK ROMA SETTLEMENTS: ACCESS TO LAND, LEGAL RIGHTS ON LAND AND HOUSING ASPECTS**

The history of Roma in Greece goes back to the 15th century. They came to Greek territories with the help of the Sultan that was ruling Greece at that time as a missionary core. A great number of Roma moved to Greece during the 1922 population exchange between Greece and Turkey. Greek Roma are mainly Orthodox Christians who speak the Romani language in addition to Greek. The Greek Roma are not considered to be a minority; they are Greek citizen enjoying equal rights. They are usually occupied in "roving trade" selling antiques, outdoor furniture, bedcovers, flowers, vegetables and fruits, or they are musicians. In the past they repaired furniture, did iron constructions, etc, but due to the industrialization period, urbanization and the changes in the Greek economy and society of the 1960's, such professions are now scarce. The Roma who live in North-Eastern Greece, in the region of Western Thrace (close to Turkey), are Muslims members of a recognized minority in Greece (by the Treaty of Lausanne July 24, 1923, that settled the Anatolian and East Thracian regions in the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire); they speak a different Roma dialect. This case is not included in this study.

In recent years, due to the political changes in the region, there are also a number of Roma who migrated to Greece from the greater Balkan region (Albania and the countries of Former Yugoslavia), who are not accustomed to urban living; however they tend to join the Greek Roma communities creating slums and intercommunity problems. These Roma are still at the first steps of their urbanization process and due to the social and national differences are difficult to integrate into the Greek Roma society. It is worth mentioning that in many cases the Greek Roma community discourage the newcomers to settle permanently in their area as they create environmental damage and increased criminality (Potsiou, 2010; Aktypis 2010). Personal interviews with the local authorities and the Roma representatives carried out for this research confirm this fact. Roma in Greece live scattered throughout the whole territory of the country, many own land and/or apartments in the planned urban areas. But a large concentration is located in the unplanned peri-urban areas of the bigger cities, mainly in Athens and Thessaloniki. Roma of the latter category still live within the industrial zones or in areas where housing is not permitted. Such areas lack of basic services. Other poor and marginalised minorities are accumulated in the same areas, as well, creating internal problems in the Roma neighbourhoods.

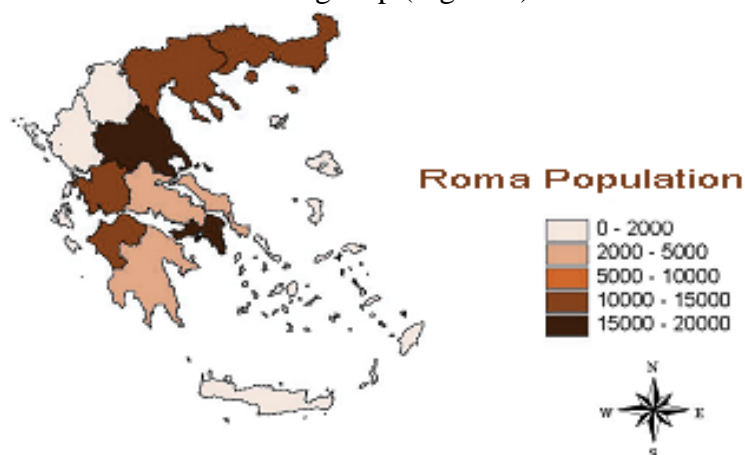
The research has identified that the Greek Roma are faced with a triple social problem:

- (a) the conflict with the main body of the Greek society as their legal job abilities are mainly restricted to roving trade,
- (b) there is an inner-neighbourhood conflict with the other poor and marginalised minorities, and
- (c) there is conflict with the Roma newcomers.

Roma largely maintain their customs and traditions. However, in Greece a significant number of Greek Roma have finally adopted an urban way of living. Despite that fact, there are still slum settlements in some areas.

#### 4.1 Greek Roma spatial distribution

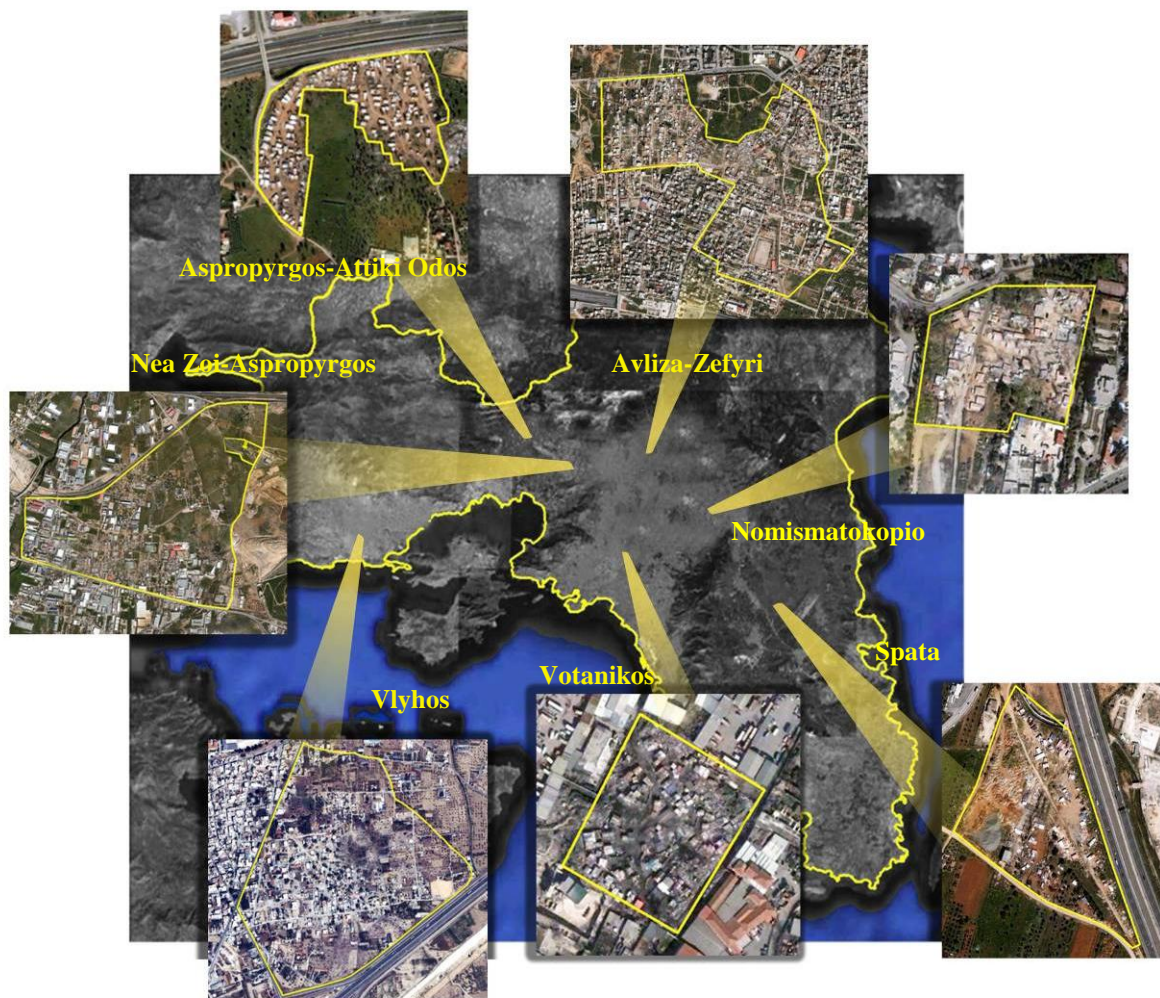
The regional distribution of Roma settlements throughout Greece, as resulted by the surveys of 1999 and 2008, is shown in the following map (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Regional Distribution of Greek Roma Population



Particularly for the region of Attica, where a large population of 19,700 established and wandering Roma are observed, the main residential areas, following research and an on-site visit, are displayed in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Spatial Distribution of main Roma settlements in Attica region

The settlement of *Spata*, a town very close to the Athens International Airport, comprises makeshift shells located 5kms away from the urban web, with around 400 inhabitants. The settlement lacks of basic infrastructure, such as electricity supply, running water or sewer system, and there is no public transport to and from the settlement. The same type of residences is found in *Nomismatiokopio*, a settlement dating from the late 1970s' by arbitrary land-seizure of Roma population, accounting today more than 200 people. In the settlement of *Votanikos*, over 500 Roma immigrants from Balkan countries, mainly Albania, and some Greek-Roma as well, live under substandard conditions, lacking electricity, running water and sewerage in an area designated as industrial zone and highly degraded. A redevelopment plan has been decided for that area which require the relocation of the Roma families to another site before the project's implementation and the Roma were evicted; it was mentioned that



they were offered money for that. In the greater area of *Zefyri* in the northwest part of Attica 10 kilometres away from Athens, approximately 3,500 Roma live in mixed settlements consisting of both houses and makeshift constructs for almost 45 years, in relative harmony with the rest of the community; more information about the regeneration history of this Roma community is presented in chapter 5.2. In the Roma camp of *Nea Zoi* at *Aspropyrgos* -a town 30 km from Athens, shells are scattered between industrial buildings and undeveloped parcels south of Attiki Odos (major road network), sometimes forming small residential cores. The types of shells range from one-storey houses, shoddy construction, and shacks or tents, located right at the foot of landfills. To the west of *Nea Zoi*, in an area outside the city plan, a relatively new Roma settlement in *Aspropyrgos* comprising of tents and shacks accommodates 700-800 people under the worst conditions, since there is no electricity nor running water, and hygiene, constituting together with *Spata* settlement the most degraded camps. Finally, *Vlyhos* settlement, will be presented in more details in chapter 5.1.

## 4.2 Legislative and Social Aspects and Policies Adopted

In 1955 the Hellenic state, by the Legislative Decree (3370/55), allowed Greek nationality to those Roma living in Greek territory. This legislative framework was amended in 1978 and 1979 and finally was replaced by the Code about the Greek Nationality (Law 3284/2004) in 2004. Although the Greek legislative framework does not include discrimination among citizens of the Hellenic state, in recent years due to European programs a more thorough research has been initiated in the Roma communities. Since 1996, the “Frame of National Policy for the Greek Roma” has been implemented. By Law 3304 of 2005 Greece has harmonised its legislation in terms of equal treatment of citizen, regardless of their nationality, religion or other customs, disability, age, or origin of birth.

According to Greece’s Constitution (Paragraph 4 of Article 21), the State is obliged to secure accommodation for everybody, guaranteeing an acceptable standard of living for all individuals and their families. This is in accord with Article 11(1) of the United Nations, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which furthermore obliges states to show improvement over time of individuals’ living conditions (Rougheri, 2000).

However, in terms of production and provision of social housing in Greece there is a general gap in legislation. Critical institutional and legal aspects, like the technical infrastructure and the procedure of the production of social housing, its planning and location, the qualification criteria, as well as a number of other legal rights like tenure, ownership, transfer and inheritance of social housing, have not been included in the Greek legislation.

The research has identified that a significant step of progress was the Ministerial Decision (GG 412/B/29.03.2000) of the Ministry of National Economy that defines the criteria and prerequisites for provision of individual housing loans to the Greek Roma, in the year 2000. These housing loans could be used for purchase or construction of new housing, the completion of existing housing or the purchase of land and construction of housing. Approximately 9,000 housing loans (for first residence) of 60,000 Euros each were offered to

the Greek Roma, exclusively through national funds and with the guarantee of the Greek state. The duration of these loans is 22 years; the borrowers were subsidized by the Greek state for 80% of the interest and the banks were 100% secured both for the capital and the interest. This project is considered to be an example of good practice as it is an innovative tool and the borrowers are free to choose the location and type of real estate they prefer and are expected to be capable of good management of the capital.

The National Commission for Human Rights (2009) however has criticized the loan program for being costly and vulnerable to maladministration and financial mismanagement (Pavlou et al., 2009). The major remaining problem, aside from the inability of some Roma to repay their loans, is their questionable ability to maintain this real estate in good condition. Micro-financing policy has also been implemented for the period 2007-2013.

A research at the statistics of 2000, of the relevant Ministry, shows that about 5.5% of the Roma are not registered in the registry office, 10% do not have an identity card or any other certificate, 25% do not have a voting booklet, and 50% are not registered in the municipality records. Their integration into the urban network is directly related to their registration in the registry municipal offices. The state is able to reach them and integrate them into the economy and the society only if they have a valid address. The “housing-loans” project was a good motive for the registration of the Roma in the registry municipal offices.

By Law 2413 of 1996 for Multicultural Education special emphasis has been placed on the education of the Roma. Special units have been established for all levels of education for additional support of those students who have difficulty because Greek language is not their natural language. Roma students are deliberately scattered in several different state schools in order to avoid the “extreme concentration” of Roma students in a single school with the risk of lowering the standards. Teachers of state schools have gone through special training and 2,500 travelling Roma students were provided with special student cards for state schools. According to the Ministry of Education the percentage of students who drop out was decreased from 75% in 1997 to 24% in 2010. Professional education programmes have also been implemented for the Roma communities.

Employment of Roma is directly related to their educational level. Only 40% of the Greek Roma is employed; their activity is mainly in the informal market, unregistered and untaxed. The remaining 60% are unemployed, pensioners, or housewives. About 77% of Roma have no health insurance. However, they are accepted at the state hospitals and they receive the same medical treatment that all poor and/or illegal immigrants receive in Greece, which in fact is a major economic burden for the state. In addition special medical units have been established in many Roma neighbourhoods.

In autumn 2008, Greece has integrated into the criminal law “racism” as a motive for crime. However, in September 2009 the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) declared that the Greek legislation still does not recognize racism as a crime of special significance. Since then NGOs and Roma representatives do participate in the Action Plan for the National Strategy Framework and to Observatory Institutes.

### 4.3 Greek Roma Access to Land and Property Rights

In Greece, Roma usually build makeshift accommodation without permission on public or privately owned land. This unsettled land ownership situation, is the major reason for their housing problems. In fact, many Greek land owners tolerate the occupation of their land by the Roma but they are not ready to completely accept long-lasting settlement of the Roma by water and electricity adduction or the construction of sewage systems; also, in order to avoid any rights to be granted to the Roma through “adverse possession” by virtue of a prolonged, unchallenged situation, they are trying to obtain eviction orders from the courts (Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights/Council of Europe, 2002).

According to Public Enterprise of City Planning and Housing (DEPOS) report (1999), almost half the Roma population of Greece have settled, principally on the outskirts of Athens. Even today, most Roma live on the outskirts of Greek cities in degraded areas, and are repeatedly relocated, forced by land use changes, compulsory land expropriation projects for infrastructure construction, and land values’ increase. This physical segregation is in fact in accordance with the official state policy locating the encampments of wandering nomads outside and far away from the urban plan. Many issues arise when Roma want to become owners of legal houses, such as lack of planning and building permission, deficient identity documents, ownership on non-buildable land plots, unawareness of their rights and the legal provisions, difficulties when dealing with the “market”.

Under these circumstances, the most Greek Roma – including those who have settled on their own land – chooses makeshift types of dwelling outside the city plan. Such areas which usually lack of basic infrastructure are then developed in an unauthorized way. Interviews made with the surveying private office CHOROMETRIA have identified that even when Roma own the land legally they have difficulties to take compensation in cases of compulsory purchase of land for big projects as they lack of building permits.

According to the most recent national survey, the privately owned land on which Roma live represents 45% of the cases, while in another 21% the land plot has been conceded by the municipality or the prefecture, and 11% has been conceded by relatives. The percentage of housing structures owned by its Roma occupiers is reportedly fairly high, although ownership is often not documented by legal title (66% of cases) Rentals are rarely reported (1.2% of the total) (EU 2009).

An interview with KTIMATOLOGIO SA, the agency responsible for the compilation of the Hellenic Cadastre has identified that no special policy has been adopted to solve these problems (Potsiou, 2010). According to the law, only those who have legal titles on the plot they are accepted to register. However, it was agreed that some flexibility in the deadlines for submitting their documents will be tolerated by the agency, as many of them lack of all necessary documents.

### 4.4 Housing Aspects and Statistics

In 1999, DEPOS published a research on housing patterns of the Greek Roma, based on data collected between 1996 and 1999. According to that study, the Roma living in unregulated encampments accounted to 63,000, while another 10,570 were reported as nomadic/itinerants, although these numbers seem to be lower than the actual data (DEPOS, 1999).

This study categorized the Greek Roma housing facilities into: “*genuine*” settlements where all living quarters are makeshift (48.6% of the total), *mixed settlements* containing both makeshift dwellings and permanent houses (18.8%), “*neighbourhoods*” which are part of a city or a village (22.5%) and houses in the *urban tissue* (10.1%).

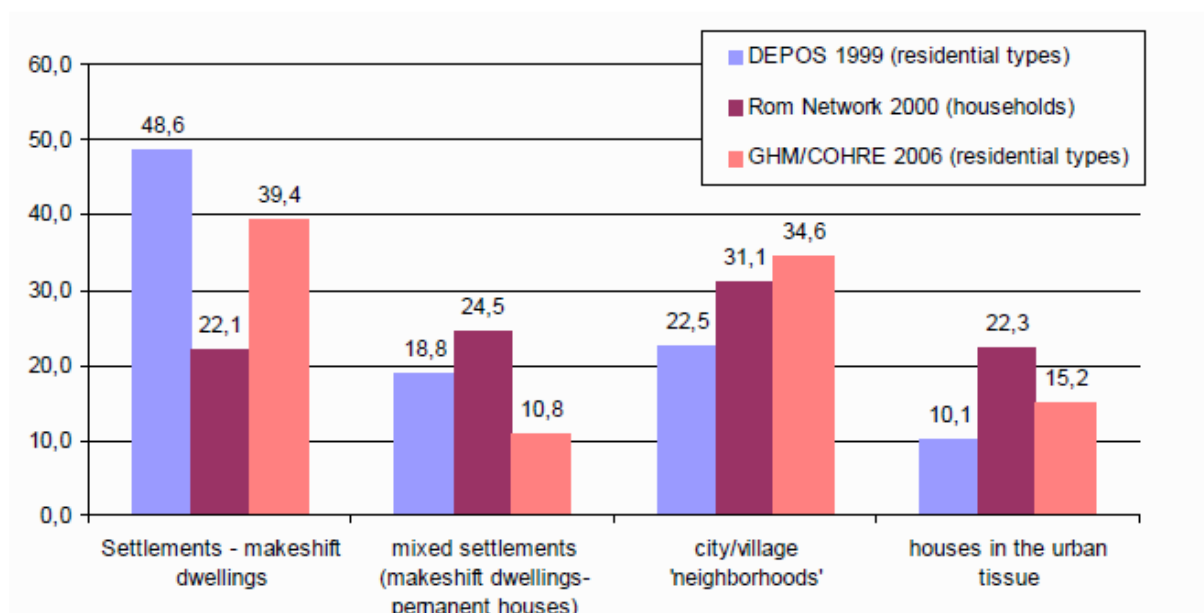


**Figure 5.** Residential types of Greek Roma; from left to right: genuine settlement in Votanikos (*source: Aleksandridis*), mixed settlement in Aspropyrgos (*source: EPSE NGO*) and neighborhood in Messologgi (*source: etolikomep.blogspot.com*)

A later report conducted by the Pan-Hellenic Intermunicipal Network (2000) for the support of the Greek Roma, was commissioned by the Greek Ministry of Labour and Social Security (within the framework of the ‘Employment’ Community initiative – ‘Integra’), in order to study the non-settlement types of residences, with special focus on housing problems of the Roma community.

Six years later, the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), in their report on housing rights (2006) revealed no significant changes concerning the degrading living conditions of Roma population over time; Roma people continued to live in conditions which were far below to the minimum standards for adequate housing, as stated by the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN/CESCR, 1991) and later confirmed by the UN Conference on Human Settlements, thus constituting a framework linking human settlements’ development to the process of realizing human rights and housing policies (UNCHS, 2001).

The residential types of the Greek Roma population as recorded by the three main surveys conducted between 1999 and 2006, is illustrated in the following chart (Figure 6).



**Figure 6.** Evolution of residential types of Greek Roma between 1999-2006 (*source: Pavlou et al./HLHR/i-RED, 2009*)

In 2009, another study commissioned by the Interior Ministry, General Directorate for Development Programmes was conducted by the NGO Oikokinonia and the consultants' company Eurodiastasi, in order to investigate and update the data on the current situation of housing condition and patterns of Roma in Greece. The findings of that report were discussed during a 'Peer Review' meeting held in Greece in May 2009 (Guy, 2009) and are further presented in more detail.

#### 4.5 Housing Conditions of the Greek Roma

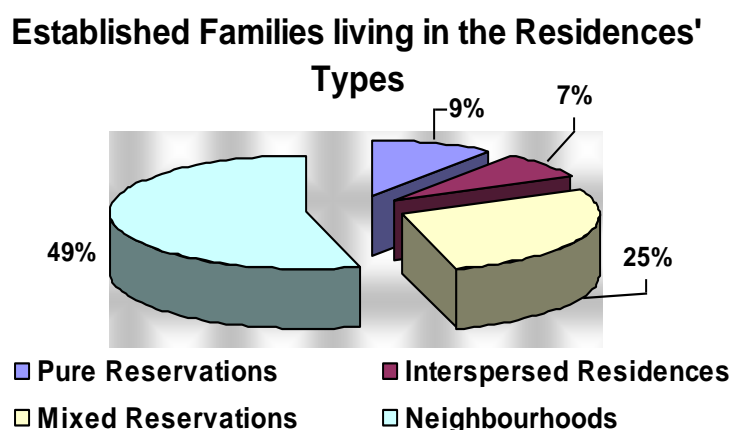
The authors of DEPOS study used a rating system in order to assess the Roma settlements, assigning numerical values to factors such as: distance from other settlements, accessibility and connection to electricity (1 point), unsuitability of the area for habitation (2 points), ownership status (1.5 points), while access to running water was not rated on this scale, as considered a fundamental necessity. According to their findings, more than half of the "genuine" settlements and some of the mixed and neighbourhoods were located in areas unsuitable for habitation, under permanent threat of floods or next to garbage dumps, often without water access, electricity connection or sewage facilities (DEPOS, 1999 and ERRC, 2003).

The same situation is also illustrated in the recent report -on the basis of the national research of 2008. According to this study, a variety of residence types has been recorded, ranging from conventional to makeshift constructions. The same diversity meets in residences' quality, as well as in the extent of houses' incorporation into the urban area, the permanence and other characteristics of the residential site (European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2009).



This survey recorded 8 types of Roma settlements in Greece: *pure settlements* with makeshift shells at permanent sites or at sites that move within a broader region, *mixed settlements* consisting of both houses and makeshift constructs, *neighbourhoods* with houses for permanent use in deteriorated districts, *conventional residences* or apartments within the urban web, *prefab hamlets* ceded by the Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning & the Environment within the framework of the Integrated Action Plan, *organised construction* (at Sofades, constructed by the Workers' Housing Organisation) and *mixed prefab reservations* with both small prefabricated houses and makeshift constructions.

Neighbourhoods contain almost half of the established families (49%) and 60% of seasonal families, while mixed reservations contain approximately 25% of established families, pure reservations at a permanent site contain 9% of the estimated number of established families and 6% of the seasonal ones. Interspersed residences throughout the urban web are estimated to contain approximately 7% of established families, while each of the remaining types contains less than 1% of the estimated number of established families (European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2009). The disparity of this distribution is related to the wide range of sizes of residential districts and is presented in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Distribution of established families living in the various residential types of the Greek Roma settlements.

The greatest concentrations of established Roma families are in greater areas of major urban centres or rural regions that present employment opportunities. The neighbourhoods within the urban web that are exclusively or mainly populated by Roma populations are the most frequently recorded type of residence, representing 28% of the total, while pure settlements in permanent sites account 20% of the total, mixed settlements 23% and residences dispersed through the urban web account for 14.5% of residences recorded (European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2009).

The main conclusion of the national research is that 43% of Greek Roma faces a direct or indirect lack of housing, as they live on sites that are unsuitable for residential use or are too remote from the urban web. Furthermore, 50% of them live in prefab hamlets, shanties, cabins

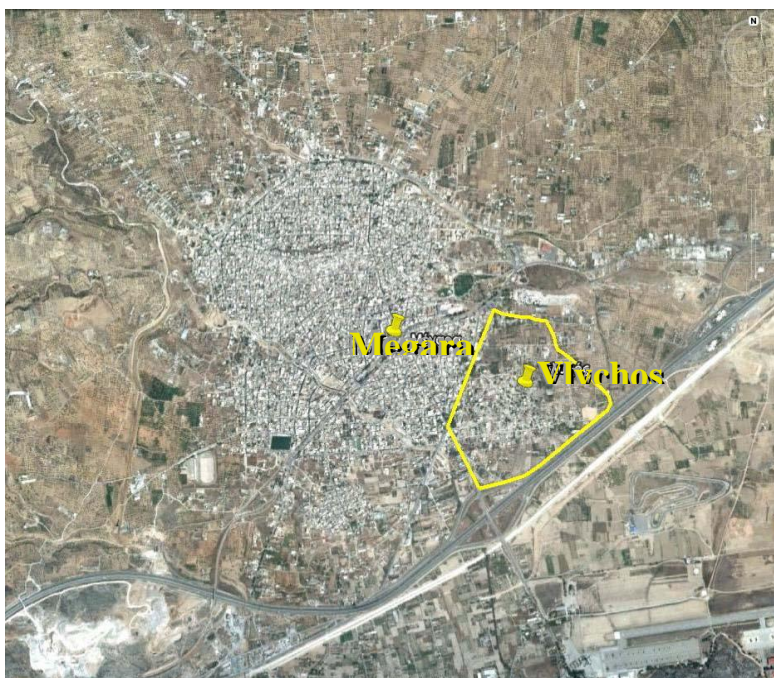
and generally congested makeshift accommodation, deprived of basic technical and social infrastructures and essential facilities with lacking infrastructure and basic sanitation.

## 5. CASE STUDIES

Western Athens was a poor, low income area during the 1960s. Roma settlements were located in the greater region of western Athens, in the municipalities of Agia Varvara (which has a very successful Roma community), Megara, Ano Liosia, Menidi, Zefyri and Aharnon. The latter two municipalities have the greater concentration of Greek Roma population in Athens, about 6,000 inhabitants. The on-site research is focused on the settlements in Megara and Zefyri.

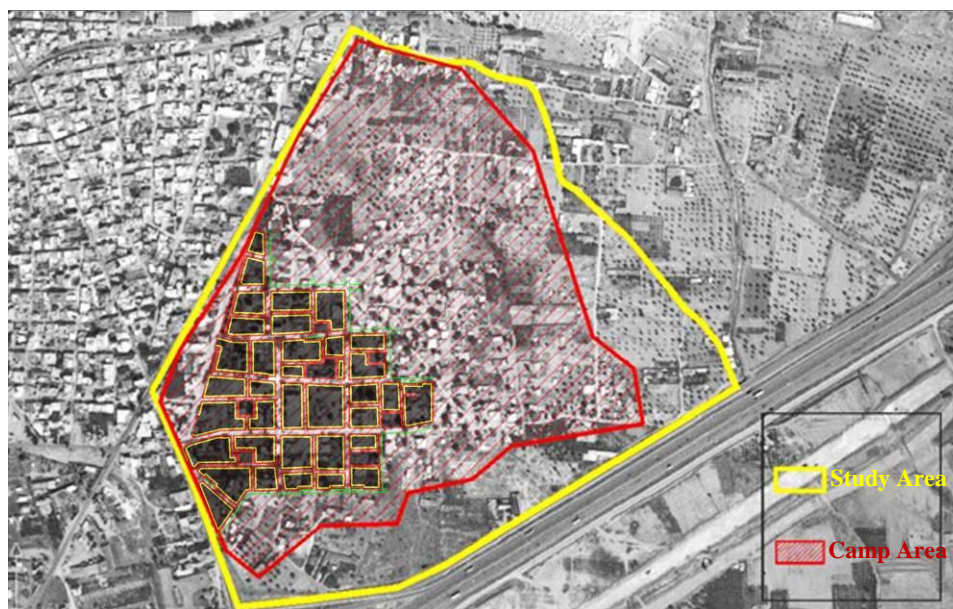
### 5.1 Experiences from the Municipality of Megara – Vlychos Settlement

Since the purpose of this paper is to study the existing housing conditions of the Roma minority in the region of Greece and the problems that arise relating to their access to land and housing, an in-depth analysis was attempted to the housing conditions of “Vlychos” Roma settlement in the municipality of Megara. The Municipality of Megara is located 42 Km WNW of Athens in the SW part of Attica Prefecture with a population of 28,195 inhabitants (national census of 2001). The study area of Vlychos is located on the SE edge of the urban tissue of Megara, occupying 54 hectares of land, partially included into the new town plan of the Municipality of Megara. Vlychos settlement and its relative position to the wider city area of Megara are shown in Figure 8.



**Figure 8.** Vlychos Settlement (*source: GoogleEarth*)

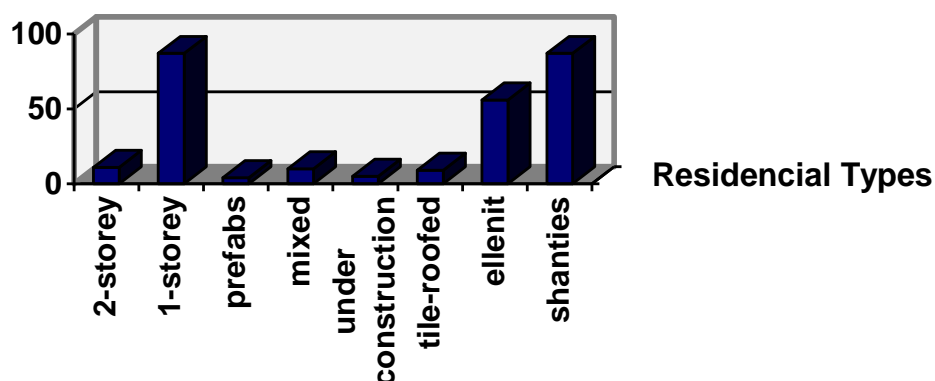
The area was formerly rural with small-sized land parcels (300 sq.m.) owned by residents of Megara. The establishment of Roma population started in the early 1960s' and nowadays the settlement is almost entirely inhabited by Roma (92%). The first settlers acquired their properties by preliminary contracts, or –in most cases- they illegally seized their land parcels. Over the years, the number of Roma increased, leading to the degradation of the area and to the abandonment of parcels from their original land owners. The State, in an effort to upgrade the area, incorporated it into the new city plan in 1991 (Figure 9), but due to lack of legal documents on the part of Roma, the declaration of ownership did not complete. So far, the area has not been yet included into the Hellenic Cadastre Project.



**Figure 9.** Aerial photo of the study area (*source: Hellenic Mapping and Cadastral Organization –HEMCO, 2001*), overlapped by the city plan (*source: Municipality of Megara*)

### 3.1.1 Residential Type and Land Use of Vlyhos Settlement

The residential type of Vlyhos settlement is mixed consisting of: 11 two-storey houses (4%), 87 one-storey houses (32%), 4 prefabs (1%), 5 homes served by auxiliary spaces and extensions in the form of "shacks" (2%), 5 mixed structures of low quality (2%), 5 houses under construction (2%) and 9 houses with tiled roofs (3%), while the remaining 53% concerns either houses made of tin and asbestos-cement -a material which is classified as carcinogenic, or shanties (Figure 10). From the 306 registered houses, 258 were inhabited by Roma people while 36 by non Roma.



**Figure 10.** Housing Types of Vlyhos Roma Settlement

The mainly land use of the area is residential (86%), while 8% of the constructions are used for storing and trading engine spare parts, cars and machinery components. For the remaining 6%, no data were provided by the Municipality's records.

#### 5.1.2 Access to Public Utilities and Infrastructure

The Municipality of Megara indicates that the Roma settlement of Vlyhos lacks basic facilities and public utilities. More precisely, from the 266 Roma shells, only 129 are connected to the power grid while 30% of them are illegally drawing electricity from a nearby. The same with the access to running water, since half of the Roma shells have no water supply and part of the rest are probably unofficially connected. Concerning the sewage facilities, the study area is not connected to the municipal system and therefore the settlement lacks this service; 136 out of 266 shells have no toilet or other sanitary facilities.

#### 5.1.3 Property Situation

As mentioned above, the area is not yet included in the Hellenic Cadastre. Furthermore, since there are no official figures related to the land ownership situation of Roma, our research was in fact based on declarations provided by the Vlyhos settlement's Roma inhabitants. According to their respond data, the study area can be divided into the following land-ownership types: *purchased land*, by a legal transaction deed, land acquired by a *preliminary contract*, when Roma cannot proceed to a legal transaction (usually due to lacking identification or other documents), *concessed or rent land*, when the legal owner (who is always a private individual, since there are no municipal properties in the area) allows the Roma to be settled in his land, *illegally seized*, or finally cases where there are no data on the land property situation.

The following table (Table 1) presents the information collected by the Municipality from the Roma population of Vlyhos, concerning their land-ownership situation. The information contained refers to properties inside or outside the city plan.



**Table 1.** Land Property Situation of Vlyhos Settlement (Source: Megara Municipality)

	Inside the City Plan		Outside the City Plan		Total	
<b>Purchased-Land</b>	65%	145	34%	33	56%	178
<b>Preliminary Contract</b>	9%	19	19%	18	12%	37
<b>Concessed/Rent Land</b>	9%	19	15%	14	10%	33
<b>Seized Land</b>	3%	6	25%	24	9%	30
<b>No Answer</b>	15%	34	7%	7	13%	41
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>223</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>319</b>

Finally, regarding the inclusion of Vlyhos Roma population into the loan programme, which constitutes the major state policy, 345 applications were submitted, but since 50% of them could not provide evidence of their municipal status, some 67 loans are so far approved, thus demonstrating their deficiency in accessing the government's housing policy. Even purchased land is often not legally entitled to be improved by a housing loan, or it is not included in the city plan. Therefore Roma create temporary constructions and shacks violating the building rules and are consequently blocked from any state assistant.

## 5.2 Experiences from Regeneration of Roma Settlements in Zefyri Municipality

Zefyri is one of the municipalities of western Athens in Greece, with the greatest percentage of Roma population. The following findings are derived from interviews with local authorities, citizens, and Roma representatives. The target was to identify examples of good practice in terms of Roma integration into the urban network and to investigate the acquired experience from the Roma settlements' integration into a city plan. The findings, in terms of time schedules and policies applied, are summarized in the following.

In the municipality of Zefyri ([www.zefyri.net](http://www.zefyri.net)) the Roma population is approximately 3,500 inhabitants (1/3 of the total population of the municipality and about 1/10 of the estimated total Roma population in Greece). The municipality of Zefyri was rapidly urbanized, informally, in the 1960s. Roma in Zefyri had occupied private or public land (such as public areas, stream roots, or vineyards, olive groves, and other privately owned rural parcels) with the result of a growth of slums. Frequently Roma were evicted from such areas by the police, but they always resettled themselves in other similar areas. Following the military government in Greece, the municipality initiated an urban regeneration project in 1975 using local planners (who were close to the problem and could better communicate with the Roma). The new urban plan was ratified by 1977, and became a law of the state. Since then the municipality has worked in close cooperation with the Roma community. The full implementation of the plan and the infrastructure improvements were completed by 1995. However, several fundamental improvements had been accomplished much earlier e.g., ~85% of Zefyri municipality had an operating sewerage system since 1986.



Land owners hesitated to claim their land back from the Roma as they feared revenge reactions. The state also became tolerant. Instead of been evicted, Roma were offered low interest housing loans guaranteed by the Greek state, and were enabled and directed to buy the land they had occupied to build proper housing. In the meantime those Roma, who were not evicted from illegal occupation of privately owned land by the land owners and the police since 1974, had managed to obtain ownership rights through court decisions by application of the “adverse possession” principle. The latter happened only in the cases of squatting on private land, as the principle of “adverse possession” cannot be applied in Greece for state owned land.

It should be mentioned that cases of malpractice were identified mainly due to the fact that Roma do not register their marriages in the municipality records. For example more than one member from a family might have applied for a housing loan and instead of using the money for housing purposes they purchased expensive cars. Women often applied for social care and state funding as they claimed to be “single mothers”. In other municipalities in western Athens, where similar policies have been applied, the situation is worse. Roma were simply willing to sell their new houses and return to the tents. They preferred to live in tents and use the money for other non-housing purposes.

Today, the majority of Roma in Zefyri, and some other municipalities also in Athens, live in self-owned modern, one or two-story houses of good construction; however many have adjusted the architecture to their own specific customs. E.g., the toilet is usually built outside of the house, in the yard. They have an address and an identity card, they pay utility bills, taxes, and they join the army, as all other Greek citizens do. However, they still receive only lower levels of education, even though education in Greece is provided without cost even at the university level.

The unfortunate situation is currently created by the newcomers in Zefyri municipality, who are temporary settlers living in tents in the areas planned for common use (e.g., public squares, parks, etc), and get illegal connections to fresh water and electricity networks. As mentioned above the Greek Roma community does not encourage this situation and slum occupations are evicted by the police.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS-PROPOSALS**

Despite the long state efforts, many Roma communities in Greece still face several problems including child labour, low school attendance, and drug trafficking. Similar situation is identified in many other European countries. Roma prefer to live close to nature, so the policy of resettling them in tall social housing buildings has fewer chances to succeed, unless it is accompanied by strict enforcement measures. Another major issue that must be solved in such cases is the difficulty in maintenance of social housing buildings.

The Greek state until recently has preferred the “home-ownership through state-subsidies” tool; however all statistics show that most of the Greek Roma population still live in

substandard conditions and most of them are poor and low-income citizen. The phenomenon has increased by the arrival of a number of newcomers Roma from the greater Balkan region as a result of the recent political reforms. These are not considered to be Greek Roma and moreover they are not welcome in the Greek Roma neighbourhoods; the distinction between these two communities is not easy administratively as most of the Greek Roma have not cared to acquire all necessary documents in time.

The major problem of the Greek Roma is their weak land tenure; the majority of them lack of legal titles on land, while those that they do have legal titles on land they have made illegal constructions. In addition, those who were offered the home-ownership loans are not qualified enough to cope with their responsibilities as house owners and borrowers. The extra-legal housing of the Greek Roma, in combination with their loose habits to register and acquire identity cards and other documents, and the state's inefficiency, make it difficult for the Roma to participate to the formal market and their informal houses cannot be taxed, registered in the Hellenic Cadastre, transferred or mortgaged, and obviously cannot be improved. New tools and major reforms need to be invented by the Greek state in order to solve the housing problem of the poor Roma efficiently. Strengthening weak land tenure and adopting affordable planning regulations and procedures are the only solutions to the problem.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to EURODIASTASI-OIKOKOINONIA, the local authorities of Megara and Zefyri, CHOROMETRIA<sup>®</sup>, and to individual experts, Papavassilis George, ex-vice Mayor of Megara, Sounti Spyridon, and the following surveying engineers John Aktypis, Konstantinos Papaxristos, ex-Mayor of Zefyri, Christina Klonari, director of KTIMATOLOGIO SA, G. Dimitriou, Anna Karagiannaki, and Nikos Zaxarias, for providing information and sharing experience with the authors.

## REFERENCES

- Aktypis, I., 2010. Research on the housing conditions of the Roma minority in Greece. Application in the municipality of Megara, *Diploma Thesis*, NTU of Athens.
- Alexandridis, T., 2008. "Minorities and their access to land-The case of Roma", UNECE WPLA Workshop on Legal Empowerment of the Poor in the ECE region, Bergen.
- DEPOS, 1999. Action Plan Study in order to face the direct housing problems of the Greek Roma, Athens (in Greek).
- De Soto, H, 1989. *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*. Harpercollins, 1989. ISBN 0-06-016020-9
- De Soto, H, 2000. *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*. Basic Books, 2000. ISBN 0-465-01614-6
- EUROPEAN ROMA RIGHTS CENTER (ERRC), 2003. Letter from the Secretariat of the European Social Charter. Directorate General of Human Rights. DG II. Council of Europe against Greece, Budapest.
- ERRC, Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), 2003. *Cleaning Operations: Excluding Roma in Greece. Country Report Series, No. 12*, 20 p.

- European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, 2009. The Greek Roma issue Spatial and social exclusion and integration policies. *Host Country Report. Peer Review Integrated Programme for the Social Inclusion of Roma*, Greece, <http://www.peer-review-social-inclusion.eu/peer-reviews/2009>
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2009. Housing conditions of Roma and Travellers in the European Union, *Comparative report*, p. 111, Austria, <http://fra.europa.eu>.
- Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), 2008. Mapa sobre vivienda y comunidad gitana en España, <http://www.gitanos.org/publicaciones/mapavivienda>
- Greek Ministry of Employment and Social Protection, 2009. Current situation of the Roma in Greece, Assessment of Actions and Preparation of an Action Plan for the 4th Programming Period, , Athens.
- Greek Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2008. Recording of the existing situation of the Roma population in Greece, *Evaluation of Actions implemented and development of Action Plan for the 4th EU Programming Period*, General Secretariat for the management of European Funds, European Union.
- GHM/COHRE, 2006. Greece: Continuing widespread violation of Roma housing rights, p.25, [http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/greece\\_roma\\_report\\_october\\_2006%20GHM%20%2B%20COHRE.doc](http://www.cohre.org/store/attachments/greece_roma_report_october_2006%20GHM%20%2B%20COHRE.doc)
- Guy, W., 2009. Integrated Programme for the Social Inclusion of Greek Roma, Discussion Paper, Peer Review, Greece, Vienna: ÖSB Consortium.
- Hammarberg, T, 2011. Human Rights in Europe: No Grounds for Complacency. Council of Europe, 2011. ISBN 978-92-871-6916-7
- NCHR, 2009. Report and recommendations on issues concerning the situation and the rights of Roma in Greece, [http://www.nchr.gr/media/gnwmateuseis\\_eeda/roma/Apofasi\\_EEDA\\_Tsigganoi\\_2009\\_FINAL.doc](http://www.nchr.gr/media/gnwmateuseis_eeda/roma/Apofasi_EEDA_Tsigganoi_2009_FINAL.doc)
- Council of Europe, 2002. Report by Mr Alvaro Gil-Robles on his visit to the Hellenic Republic, CommDH, 2-5 June 2002, p. 15, Strasbourg, <https://wcd.coe.int/wcd/com.instranet.InstraServlet>
- Pavlou, M., Hormovitis, D., Prokopi, I., Lykovardi, K., 2009. Housing Conditions of Roma and Travellers. In: M. Pavlou (ed), *Thematic Study, Greek RAXEN National Focal Point*, produced jointly by HLHR-KEMO and i-RED, Greece.
- Potsiou, C., 2009. “Study on Illegally Built Objects and Illegal Development”, Agency for Real Estate Cadastre, Skopje, FY Republic of Macedonia
- Potsiou, C., 2010. “Informal Urban Development in Europe. Experiences from Albania and Greece”, Full Version, FIG, UN HABITAT, GLTN, Technical Chamber of Greece, p.116
- Rougheri, C., 2000. Expel first: housing policy for Roma in Greece in Dimitrina Petrova and Claude Cahn (eds), *Focus: Roma in Greece*, Budapest. European Roma Rights Center – ERRC, pp. 28-32.
- UN/CESCR, 1991. The right to adequate housing -Sixth session, General Comment 4, *U.N. Doc. E/1992/23, annex III at 114* (1991), reprinted in *Compilation of General Comments and General Recommendations Adopted by Human Rights Treaty Bodies*, U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.6 at 18 (2003).

UNCHS, 2001. The Right to Adequate Shelter in International Instruments. *Urban Millennium. Reviewing and Appraising Progress Five Years after Habitat II*, New York.

[http://www.coe.int/T/DG3/RomaTravellers/dosta\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/DG3/RomaTravellers/dosta_en.asp)

[http://www.euromanet.eu/upload/41/30/Recording\\_of\\_the\\_existing\\_situation\\_of\\_the\\_Roma\\_Population\\_in\\_Greece.pdf](http://www.euromanet.eu/upload/41/30/Recording_of_the_existing_situation_of_the_Roma_Population_in_Greece.pdf)

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

### **Chryssy Potsiou**

Dr Surveyor Engineer, Ass. Professor, School of Rural & Surveying Engineering, National Technical University of Athens, in the field of Cadastre and Spatial Information Management. FIG Commission 3 chair (2007-2010). FIG Vice President (2011-2014). Elected bureau member of the UN ECE Working Party for Land Administration (2001-2013), member of the management board of KTIMATOLOGIO SA; elected bureau member of HellasGIs and the Hellenic Photogrammetric and Remote Sensing Society. Author of about 100 scientific papers.

### **Efi Dimopoulou**

Dr Surveyor Engineer, Ass. Professor, School of Rural & Surveying Engineering, National Technical University of Athens, in the field of Cadastre and Spatial Information Management. Member of ACTIM (Agence pour la Cooperation Technique Industrielle et Economique), correspondent member of FIG, visiting Assistant Professor at the School of Architecture of the University of Patras; elected bureau member of HellasGIs (1999+) ; participated to several scientific committees of HEMCO, and several research projects and training courses. Author of more than 45 scientific papers.

## **CONTACTS**

Ass. Professor Dr Chryssy POTSIU  
School of Rural & Surveying Engineering, National Technical University of Athens  
9 Iroon Polytechniou St.  
Athens  
GREECE  
Tel. +302107722688  
Fax +302107722677  
Email: chryssyp@survey.ntua.gr

Ass. Professor Dr Efi DIMOPOULOU  
School of Rural & Surveying Engineering, National Technical University of Athens  
9 Iroon Polytechniou St.  
Athens  
GREECE  
Tel. +30210-7722679  
Fax +302107722677  
Email : efi@survey.ntua.gr