



Associazione Africa Insieme di Pisa
Via Battisti 51, Pisa

Roma and Sinti: The Current Situation in Pisa

We are writing this brief note to several organizations who work to protect and promote the rights of Roma and Sinti communities, to call their attention to recent developments in Pisa.

We believe that the current situation is extremely serious, all the more so considering that over the past few years, the City of Pisa had been sponsoring courageous programmes for the social integration of the Roma community.

Now, however, as we will explain below, these programmes are being dismantled, and local authorities are shifting over to the typical policies of many Italian cities: destruction of Roma camps, systematic violation of human rights, and forced removals even of EU citizens.

The Pisan experiment: housing placement for Roma, abandoning the "nomad camp" idea

As is widely known, the municipal government of Pisa, starting in 2002, had sponsored a programme called "Città Sottili", aimed at placing Roma and Sinti families in normal housing and abandoning the concept of "camps for nomads"¹.

Through this programme, municipal governments in the area around Pisa committed themselves to finding proper lodgings for the Roma families living in camps. Quite a few of these houses were located through the private market: Società della Salute (the public agency responsible for implementation of the programme) leased many of the flats, then sublet them to Roma families.

The latter were asked to pay a portion of the rent—based on their income and on what each group could actually afford—while the remainder was paid by the local authorities. The programme also provided for targeted assistance with job placement from specialized social workers; as the Roma found employment, they were to pay increasing shares of the rent, until they reached complete financial independence.

Other housing was to be built from scratch to replace the shacks in the Coltano camp (on the southern edge of the city).

Together, these initiatives were supposed to definitively retire the concept of the "nomad camp" and move towards full integration of the Roma and Sinti communities in normal housing.

Results

In terms of its concrete implementation, the "Città Sottili" programme had positive and negative aspects, in our opinion.

On the negative side, we think it is important to point out that the programme excluded all Roma families who arrived in Pisa after 2002: this meant that it left out all Roma of Romanian

¹ For the text of the "Città Sottili" programme, see SEGRETERIA TECNICA DELLA CONFERENZA DEI SINDACI DELLA ZONA PISANA, "Le città sottili": programma della città di Pisa con la comunità rom del territorio. Verso la Conferenza di Servizi. Documento di Programma - 1.0. Versione del 16 /11/02, Pisa 2002, at: <http://africainsieme.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/sottili1.pdf>

origin, who continued to undergo eviction raids, forced removal, and violations of fundamental rights and freedoms².

Nevertheless, for the Roma who were included in the programme, the results were quite positive: according to the findings of Fondazione Michelucci, in 2007 there were 77 families housed in 54 flats (a total of 310 people, almost 70% of those listed in the census of Roma conducted in 2002)³. Entire camps (such as the one in Via San Biagio) were permanently closed, while the population of others was considerably reduced.

Moreover, from 2004 to 2007, several Romanian Roma families were also placed in the Città Sottili programme and received lodging; these families included the victims of a fire that destroyed a camp in Livorno, killing four children, in August 2007.

The change in direction under the new city government

In recent months, however, there have been major changes. The new city council, elected in the spring of 2008, has backed an eviction-based strategy, and has repeatedly criticized the "Città Sottili" programme.

With regard to the Romanian Roma community, the new mayor issued an ordinance⁴ at the end of 2008 that provides for the forced dismantlement of all settlements not expressly authorized by the City (to understand the scope of this provision, one ought to keep in mind that the administration has *never* authorized *any* settlement of Romanian Roma).

In spring 2009, moreover, the City laid out a plan for "assisted voluntary repatriation", offering a sum of money (varying from 500 to 1500 euros, according to the size of the family) to Roma who agreed to go back to Romania⁵. Families who did not accept repatriation were forcibly evicted, without any alternative form of shelter being offered. Entire groups of Romanian Roma were driven away wherever they went, through repeated raids in which bulldozers were sometimes used to destroy their shacks and personal belongings.

To escape the attention of local police, many have taken refuge in increasingly isolated and inhospitable places. We know families who live and sleep hidden among the canes on the river bank, far outside of town, in places where a flood, a small fire, or—in the worst-case scenario—a racist attack could prove fatal.

But the situation is also dramatic for the Macedonian and Bosnian Roma who are beneficiaries of the "Città Sottili" programme, many of whom have been placed in housing.

Just a few days ago, the news broke that the Città Sottili programme itself will soon be closed down. The municipal government has suddenly decided to halt the programme and remove all its

² With regard to these aspects, see our association's dossier: AFRICA INSIEME, *Vite di scarto. Marginalità sociale e marginalità abitativa dei migranti a Pisa*, Pisa 2006, at:

<http://africainsieme.wordpress.com/2009/09/23/vite-di-scarto/>

³ See FONDAZIONE MICHELUCCI, *Rom e Sinti in Toscana 2007: tra superamento dei campi e nuove baraccopoli*, Florence 2008, p. 21, at <http://www.michelucci.it/node/14>. For the census of the Rom community in 2002, see SOCIETÀ DELLA SALUTE ZONA PISANA, COMUNE DI PISA, AZIENDA USL5 PISA, "Le Città Sottili". *Programma della Città di Pisa con la comunità rom del territorio 2002-2007. Sintesi del Programma*, Pisa 2007, p. 7, at: <http://africainsieme.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/sottili6.pdf>.

⁴ COMUNE DI PISA, ORDINANZA DEL SINDACO [MAYOR'S ORDINANCE] no. D-08/84 of 11/12/2008, ID code 509359, "disposizioni a tutela della sicurezza urbana e divieto di accampamento sul territorio comunale fuori dalle aree espressamente consentite", Pisa, 11 December 2008. The text can be downloaded from http://africainsieme.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/ordinanza_campi.pdf

⁵ The plan was never made public. For the information cited here, see: PISANOTIZIE, daily online newspaper covering the province of Pisa, *Rom, il Comune propone i rimpatri in Romania*, article published 3 April 2009, at: http://www.pisanotizie.it/index.php/news/news_20090403_rom_rimpatri.html

beneficiaries from their lodgings: this means that hundreds of Roma who up to now were housed in flats will face eviction.

These are people who have been living in Pisa for at least twenty years; many of them fled from war and ethnic persecution in the Balkans. Over the last two decades, they have put down roots in our area, and it is hard to imagine them returning to their countries of origin. These policies will instead – predictably – result in “camps” and unauthorized settlements springing up again on the outskirts of the city. Dozens of families who had achieved some degree of social integration over the last few years will suddenly be forced back into the marginalized condition of living in shacks.

So in the months ahead, in addition to the ongoing destruction of “unauthorized” settlements, there will be many evictions of former beneficiaries of the "Città Sottili" programme. Our association is preparing to provide legal aid for all the families affected by this turn of events. We think that all governmental and non-governmental organizations who have highlighted the “model practices” of Pisa in recent years, as an alternative to standard Italian policies towards Roma and Sinti communities, should be informed of this situation.

Associazione Africa Insieme
Pisa

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