



**ROMA  
COMMUNITY  
PERSPECTIVES  
ON MIGRATION  
TO THE UK**

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## SUMMARY

In recent years the UK has received a larger number of Roma migrants, of which a significant portion is from Romania. Migration and the free movement of people makes an important contribution to community cohesion, social capital, social inclusion and the UK economy (Kofman et al., 2009). Roma migration, as a subset of the broader phenomenon of migration to the UK and as an important contribution to social and economic capital in the UK, is routinely misunderstood and affected by public misconceptions and prejudices related to migration.

Roma people continue to face substantial discrimination in employment, education, housing and health, and after Brexit, an additional uncertainty over residency and legal status in the UK. The aim of the project was to explore the experiences, expectations, fears, hopes and motivations of Roma people who have had first-hand experience of both the benefits and challenges of migrating to the UK. Members from seven Roma communities in Romania participated in a series of community-led participatory reflection groups, a local itinerant cultural event, and an arts and crafts group on experiences of migration. We found that people chose the UK as a target country for migration because, compared to Romania, they felt that the UK offered better employment opportunities, a better educational system and healthcare, good social benefits and welfare support, and good quality infrastructure. When recounting migration experiences, community members emphasized the role of informal social networks that reduce the psychological and material costs involved in moving to another country. Also, due to barriers, such as a lack of English language skills, most migrants highlighted the need for assistance with paperwork necessary for employment, education, health and housing. A few people reported that after migrating to the UK they feared mistreatment by the police, discrimination by neighbours, colleagues or employers, inability to find work, and the legal changes after Brexit. Although, Roma people in the UK still experience inequality in both access to services and outcomes, most community members included in this project felt that the UK offered better opportunities and a better quality of life compared to Romania. As a result, most hoped and planned to continue to live and work in the UK post-Brexit.

We contend that reporting overwhelmingly positive experiences of migration stands in stark contrast with (predominantly) negative public perceptions in the UK around migration and migrants. Positively-valued dimensions highlighted by our participants in employment, housing, education, health may actually have the adverse consequence of reinforcing existing stereotypes against migrant groups in general, and Roma migrants, in particular. We also argue that, albeit important, a sole focus on community perspectives does not tell the full story. We highlight here what we see as some notable absences from Roma communities' discourses on migration.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Brexit, migrant Roma people face an uncertain future. Estimates by the Council of Europe (European Commission, 2018) suggest that approximately 225,000 Roma live in the United Kingdom, which amounts to 0.36% of the entire population. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012), however, claims that the figure is between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people, with a considerable portion coming from Eastern Europe, especially Romania. In the European Union, Romania has the largest Roma population of 3.3 per cent (621,573 people) (Institutul National de Statistica, 2011). Although historically, Roma from Romania have preferred to migrate to Romance language countries, such as France, Italy and Spain, in recent years, the UK has received a larger number of Roma migrants (Morris, 2016).

According to research, Roma migrants are facing substantial discrimination in employment, education, housing and health (European Commission, 2018). In addition to social and economic disadvantage, Roma people also face uncertainty over residency and legal status in the UK (Morris, 2016). This situation is even worse for people who experience overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage such as Roma women, children and young people (Tileaga & Popoviciu, 2018). For example, as Surdu and Surdu (2006) note, Roma women, children and young people experience simultaneous forms of gender, age, racial and ethnic discrimination that are also accompanied by poverty and social exclusion. Consequently, from a policy standpoint, it is not enough to implement initiatives that deal with each system of discrimination separately, but rather address the intersection and the relationship between these issues that are particular to Roma women, children and young people.

Due to language barriers, most migrants, including Roma people, face particular challenges in their access to services. Evidence shows that Roma people can be vulnerable to exploitation from others who often demand large sums of money in exchange for help in completing the documentation needed for jobs, housing or health services (Morrice, Collyer, Tip, & Brown, 2017). In addition, Roma people are usually employed in temporary jobs and with poor working conditions. Women are especially vulnerable if they migrate by themselves, and without the support of an informal network of people, they face the risk of trafficking, sexual harassment, homelessness and a lack of financial means to return to Romania (Kofman, Lukes, D'Angelo, & Montagna, 2009).

This report is the result of a collaborative and multidisciplinary one-year project entitled "Active citizenship and migration: On the benefits of involving community perspectives on Roma migration and integration post-Brexit", which was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in early 2018. The project was led by investigators in the School of Social Sciences at Loughborough University and a collaborator in the Department of Criminology at the University of Leicester, in partnership with Ruhama Foundation (Romania), an internationally renowned NGO with more than 20 years' experience of working closely with disadvantaged Roma communities and influencing policy-making on Roma issues in Romania and beyond.

Ruhama Foundation, Romania was established in 1996 with the aim of improving the quality of life of people and local communities at risk of social exclusion or marginalization, especially Roma people living in Romania. The foundation's vision is to contribute to the creation of an equitable society built on the principle of mutual respect between people. Ruhama Foundation's interventions are at the community level, through integrated models of outreach and partnerships with public authorities, private organizations and the civil society. The foundation is involved in multiple programs that contribute to changes in Romanian public social policies to insure the protection of human rights and guarantee that every person can have an independent, fulfilled and dignified life and a chance to fully participate in the social, economic political and cultural life.

The aim of the project was to explore the perspectives, experiences, expectations, fears, hopes and motivations of Roma people who have first-hand experience of both the benefits and challenges of migrating to the UK. Participants had either migrated to the UK and returned to Romania after a period of residence in the UK or were currently residing in the UK and visiting family and relatives at the time of the project.

Ruhama facilitated access to and involvement of Roma migrant communities in the north-western part of Romania. Participative reflection groups, arts-based projects, and a local cultural event were used to engage the respective communities.

The main objective of this research project was to raise awareness of existing fears, anxieties and risks associated with migration and integration in the UK, in order to promote better social inclusion, security, empowerment and well-being. Specifically, the aim of this report is to:

- Highlight key findings from the project regarding the migration challenges faced by Roma people.
- Highlight some notable absences from Roma communities' discourses on migration.
- Evaluate the role of involving community perspectives on Roma migration to the UK.

Throughout the project there was an emphasis upon person- and community-centred interactions between researchers and community members. We specifically sought to identify and explore Roma migrants' perspectives concerning migration. The values that informed our conversations with Roma migrants who took part in the project were inclusivity equality, and empowerment. These values are considered key in discourses about the human rights of Roma people in Europe (Commissioner For Human Rights, 2012). We applied these values of inclusivity, equality and empowerment in designing the community involvement activities with community members, especially Roma women, young people and children. In research governance terms, Roma women, young people and children are considered vulnerable because they experience multiple disadvantages based on age, gender, and ethnicity, in addition to the social inequalities that contribute to their marginalization (Surdu & Surdu, 2006).

During the participative reflection groups, cultural event and arts-based projects we encouraged community members to take an active part in co-organizing these activities. Research has shown that participatory activities promote inclusion and help to enhance participant and community voices (Aldridge, 2014). We started with the premise that Roma people are a heterogeneous population made up of individuals and groups with different backgrounds, experiences and goals.

In this project, we asked community leaders to share with us information about each Roma community's history, culture, religion, traditions, and group organization prior to each of our visits to communities. We also asked community leaders and members of the community to assist us in identifying community members, to help us shape the questions we were asking, and to help us understand the specific cultural and social realities of the people from each Roma community. Community leaders have stressed the importance of creating a safe place to allow people to share experiences in confidence and without fear. Together with community members we organized all activities in Roma community venues, using classrooms, community centres or the personal homes of community members.

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## **1.1. COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

45 people from seven Roma communities took part: 39 adults (aged 19-65) and six young people (aged 13-18); 28 men and 17 women. The Roma communities were: Tâmasda, Ciumeghiu, Batâr, Diosig, Tinca, Crasna and Ineu. These communities are situated in Bihor and Sălaj Counties, in the North-West of Romania. Community members were selected through Ruhama Foundation's local Roma networks and community leaders. Community members who had experienced the process of migration to the UK were invited to take part in the study. Community members were invited to attend a series of community-led participatory reflection groups, a local cultural event and the young people participated in an arts and crafts group on experiences of migration.

All activities were designed and conducted in line with the guidelines provided by Loughborough University's Code of Practice on Investigation Involving Human Participants, the Romanian law number 206/2004 concerning Good Practice in Scientific Research, Technological development, and the Romanian law no 677/2001, notification 9088 concerning the protection of people and the processing of personal data and the free circulation of personal data. Ethical approval was obtained from Loughborough University.

Participants in this project were assured anonymity, data protection, and were given informed consent forms to sign. Prior to signing the consent form, people were provided with (1) information about the activities, (2) the opportunity to ask questions and discuss any aspect of the activities in which they took part, (3) told, and subsequently, reminded that they were free to withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason and without consequence for any future participation in other activities organized by Ruhama Foundation and/or Loughborough University, (4) given assurances regarding confidentiality and anonymity of data including the choice to accept or decline to have photographs, audio and/or video recordings taken and used for research purposes and/or posted/published on social media or on other websites as part of project's promotion and dissemination objectives.

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## 2. PERSPECTIVES ON MIGRATION: MOTIVATIONS, HOPES, SUPPORT NETWORKS, FEARS, AND BARRIERS

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### 2.1. MOTIVATIONS AND HOPES

Although the future of Roma migration is uncertain in the face of Brexit, the general consensus of community members in this project was that hard-working and honest Roma people would be able to continue to travel to the UK to live and work. Community members reported the following reasons for choosing the UK as a target country for migration: (1) employment, (2) educational system and healthcare, (3) social benefits and welfare support, and (4) good quality infrastructure.

#### 2.1.1. EMPLOYMENT

Community members viewed better employment opportunities as one of the major reasons for wanting to move to the UK. For example, a Roma woman explained,

*First of all, we go for the money. I mean we were gone for one year, 11 months actually, after that we came home, bought a house, after 11 months. We brought everything we needed, stuff that we could never afford if we stayed home.*

Romania was viewed as “home” by the majority of community members, and many bought new homes or renovated older houses during summer vacations which were spent in Romania. Also, with money earned in the UK, Roma people created several NGOs in their communities and established cultural centres. However, when asked whether they would consider moving back to Romania, most participants who lived in the UK said that for the foreseeable future, they planned to remain in the UK. Reasons for this included better paid work, a higher quality of life, and generally a better future for their families. A Hungarian speaking Roma woman explained,

*It is still better there. I mean, we have money, social benefits, we can have a better future for our children. If we remain home, what can we do here? Is anyone going to offer me a job? No. I don't speak Romanian well, I don't have enough schooling, I don't have the necessary training. (...) There we have all we need. We have food, everything, money, what else can I say. We have jobs, friends, we can afford to go out to eat in a restaurant, we can go visit anything we like. That is not possible here.*

Roma people without formal qualifications said that they could find jobs in the UK easier, compared to Romania, and were offered job training after employment. A Roma man who worked in an Italian restaurant in the UK making pizza - although he had no prior experience working in the food industry - explained,

*In the UK no one asks me about my ethnicity. They only ask me what skills I have, and when I don't have any, they offer me training on the job. They see if I can handle the job, and that's that.*

Many people mentioned that, in Romania, due to ethnic discrimination, it was very difficult for Roma people without qualifications to find employment. The same community member noted,

*If I want to find a job in a restaurant in my home country, they won't hire me because I am a Gypsy with no qualifications.*

Also, community members reported that for the same type of jobs, in Romania they received less pay. People, in general, were happy about their wages from paid work in the UK. However, many Roma migrants continue to work in low paying and high-risk jobs that non-Roma people were usually unwilling to do. Such jobs include the leather tanning industry with a highly toxic work environment, car wash, waste disposal, or slaughterhouse work. One participant gave us an example of a dangerous job that Roma would nonetheless consider,

*There was one job where you had to wash cowhide. It was paid with 150 pounds for every ten hours. But you couldn't stay there long, because the smell was very dangerous. And the English didn't want to work there. So Roma people went and they worked for days and were perfectly fine! The boss would say 'how can you stand it?' And Roma people stayed there, and even ate lunch there. And the English realized that- Well, the English couldn't work there for more than three or four days, but Roma people were already there for two, three years.*

More appealing jobs, it was reported by other participants, in construction work, food industry, and hairdressing and the beauty industry, required qualifications (at times provided on the job) and were only available to Roma people who had a fair grasp of the English language.

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## **EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM AND HEALTHCARE**

Most community members reported that they were satisfied with the educational system and UK health care provision. For example, many said that, compared to Romania, Roma children were treated better and received a higher quality education in UK schools. The majority of Roma parents included in this project said that their children did not experience discrimination by teachers. A Roma woman noted: "over there, teachers are not allowed to mock us for being Roma." Another woman stated that in the UK, "teachers seem to love our children", while in Romania "they don't really like them, here, they don't even teach them that much." All of the community members included in this project, who were parents, indicated that they wished to return (some of them had returned temporarily to Romania for personal/family reasons) or remain in the UK longer (these were the participants that had already established a foothold in the UK), especially because of their children's education, but also because of better paid jobs, an improved quality of life and a positive and supportive employment environment in the UK.

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### **2.1.2. SOCIAL BENEFITS AND WELFARE SUPPORT**

The UK offers generous benefits such as health care, child benefit, housing benefit, and unemployment benefit. For example, under the National Health Service, health care in the UK is available immediately and free of charge. Child benefit is also paid immediately for each child under 19 years of age, who is enrolled in some kind of educational program, and if a claimant's individual income is less than £50,000. The amount of child benefit is £20.30 a week for the eldest, or only child, and £13.40 for each additional child. Housing benefit is available for all low income people regardless of whether they are working or unemployed. The UK offers a Jobseeker's Allowance of £71.70 a week for people actively seeking work. A community member explained that,

*I have nine children and about 3000 pounds in Child Benefit. There is no way I would have that kind of money in Romania. Besides, over there we have paid rent and enough money for food. Here, how would I feed this many children? You just can't.*



In Romania, child benefit consists of a monthly payment of up to £20 that is offered to all children younger than 18 years of age enrolled in school, with the exception of children, who for reasons other than health issues have to repeat a school year. Health care is also free, but is offered only to persons who (a) contribute payment to the health fund, (b) are enrolled in some form of education, (c) are retired (d) receive unemployment benefit and/or social assistance. However, emergency services are also offered to people who do not have medical insurance. In Romania there is no equivalent scheme for housing benefit. The unemployment benefit is a payment of £94 a month for people that have worked for at least 12 months in the last 24 months, and who earn less than £94 a month. This benefit is offered for a maximum period of one year (European Commission, 2018; Voiculescu, 2018).

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### **2.1.3. GOOD QUALITY INFRASTRUCTURE**

Participants mentioned that they were pleased with the services provided by local authorities such as environmental services and refuse collection. In Romania, one of the common complaints of Roma people living in segregated communities was that the waste collection services were less frequent compared to neighbouring non-Roma communities - leading to rubbish piling up on the streets. However, there are a significant number of neighbourhoods in the UK where local authority service provision for Gypsy Traveller communities is poor or non-existent and not based on need (Dar, Gobin, Hogarth, Lane, & Ramsay, 2013).

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## **2.2. SUPPORT NETWORKS**

Some established Roma communities in Belfast, Glasgow, Lancaster, Liverpool, London, Manchester, and Newcastle in the UK offer informal support to new migrants, such as help with the English language, food, emotional support and a place to sleep until separate, and appropriate, accommodation is found. Informal support is also provided by these communities to help Roma migrants finance their travel to the UK, find a job, and schools for their children.

The general perception among those who took part in the project was that social networks such as these make the migration process manageable by reducing the psychological as well as the material costs and the risks involved in wanting to move to another country.

A Roma man, who lived in the UK for over 15 years, stated that informal support was necessary for migrants: "It is necessary to have someone pay for your trip, to help you like 'can I stay with you for a while? Can you help me until I find a job?" Another community member noted:

*So, we left for Northern Ireland ten years ago. We started a church with 40 members. Then, we had 64 members, and kept going until we reached 500 members. And when new people came from Romania, we offered them housing, helped them with their paper work, found jobs for them; we were like intermediaries for everything. And so, a family would come, they would settle, and then they would invite another family, and look, now we have over 3000 people there in Northern Ireland, and we formed the Roma Association there.*

In exceptional cases when Roma people migrated in an area that did not have a Roma community to help, they faced poverty and homelessness. A Roma young adult shared that,

*When some people went by themselves, they told me that it was very hard. They ended up on the streets, slept outside, were forced to beg, but in time their situation improved. And then, when a group of four-five Roma people was formed, they brought others to the UK, and then others... And they helped each other.*

Community members reported that usually, when families migrate to the UK, it is the men who leave first and after a few months the rest of the family joins them. On occasion, there are unmarried women migrating alone, but they usually have family members, such as siblings or cousins already established in the UK. Without a support network in the UK, people face the risk of not being able to find work or a place to stay. The risks of homelessness and sleeping rough on the streets, without enough money to return to Romania, are especially high for women who do not have access to a supportive social network. Moreover, for women, the risk of sexual harassment also adds to their fear of migrating alone. A Roma woman whose hope of staying with a cousin did not materialize, shared her fears when she realized that she was alone and homeless in the UK,

*I thought to myself 'oh god, what am I going to do? How can I fix this? I was afraid of being raped or something. I don't know, all kinds of thoughts were going through my head. How to get home, who to talk to, if I should call my mom to ask her to send me money to return home. But I didn't call home. My parents thought that I am in a good place. (...) I didn't have a choice. I had to make some money to be able to return home. And I prayed 'Please help me god', and I didn't know what to do, so I just walked into a pub and I said 'I'm looking for job', that's all the English I knew. There was an elderly man, he looked at me and said 'yes'. (...) I didn't return home. I stayed and I made it in the UK.*

We also learned that there are some networks of intermediaries who informally help Roma people who have just arrived in the UK. These intermediaries are Romanian, mostly of Roma ethnicity, and have a good grasp of the English language. They also have a good understanding of the legal requirements needed to relocate to the UK. Because intermediaries are usually living within Roma communities in the UK, they are aware when new Roma migrants arrive in the community and usually contact them directly. At times, intermediaries can exploit the lack of English skills of most Roma migrants and charge for up to three times as much as the official costs for help in completing the paperwork needed to apply for social security support, jobs, and any other paperwork, or translation help that people might need. One participant, for example, needed a Construction Skills Certification Scheme Card in order to work. Although there are a variety of such cards available in the UK, most cost around £130, which covers the actual card, a one day training session, and an evaluation. However, he told us, "Just think that I had to pay £350 for a simple construction card, just to be able to find employment. I had to pay the man who helped me. Most of that money is his now."

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### **2.3. FEARS AND BARRIERS**

Community members reported experiencing or fearing the following about migrating to the UK: mistreatment by the police, discrimination by neighbours, colleagues or employers, the inability to find work, and legal changes after Brexit.

A few community members reported that in the first few months after moving to the UK, they feared spontaneous encounters with the police. This fear could be due to different cultural understandings of policing (Lumsden, Goode, & Black, 2018), and general anxieties relating to the possibility of ethnic discrimination by the police. For example, in Romania, there were several reports of police officers who made defamatory comments about Roma people as being "born criminals who are used to stealing" and who "do not know anything else than to commit criminal acts" (Claude & Dimitrina, 2001, pp. 49-50). Moreover, according to a Human Rights Report (2016), there are frequent cases of police mistreatment, brutality - including beatings - and routine harassment of Roma people in Romania.

In this project, a Roma man explained that after moving to the UK, he was afraid that the police might question him because he "looked Roma", but in time he realized that,

*Over there, if you are employed and have paperwork, the police doesn't care if you are Roma. Some Roma however steal, they take phones from disco places and the police come for them and take them away.*

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**INFORMAL SUPPORT OFFERED BY FAMILY, FRIENDS AND MEMBERS OF ESTABLISHED ROMA COMMUNITIES IN THE UK IS ESSENTIAL IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE MIGRATION PROCESS.**





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**MOST PEOPLE BELIEVED THAT  
AFTER BREXIT, CHANGES ARE  
LIKELY TO OCCUR THAT WILL  
AFFECT ROMA MIGRANTS.**

Most community members who took part in this project reported that the UK police do not discriminate against law-abiding Roma people, and mentioned that they personally had not encountered any problems with the police. A few people reported experiencing discrimination by colleagues, employers and/or neighbours. However, most community members suggested that the UK takes anti-discrimination legislation seriously and even if subtle forms of discrimination were at times experienced, no overt manifestations of prejudice or racism were reported. A community member explained,

*There are many English people that do not like that we are there. They just don't like it. But with the law they have, they respect it.*

Another participant said,

*Neighbours didn't feel too well when they saw us. They said 'look, the Gypsies are coming'. They were afraid, because that's how the English are, easily scared. They are quieter people compared to us.*

There were no accounts of Roma people contacting the police to report incidents of racism or discrimination from non-Roma people. In fact, most community members felt that they were generally treated politely by their neighbours, and fairly – or at least better than in Romania – in institutions and at work. Typically, people compared their UK experience with their experience in Romania.

For example, one community member explained,

*There, they accept you much better than here in Romania. Over there, employers do not mock you for being Roma, or Hungarian, or Romanian. They treat you at the same level. They treat each person like they treat their own in England. And they have patience with people. They talk very nice with people, and show them respect.*

Some people described being anxious of not being able to find work and as a result being sent back to Romania by the UK authorities. Most community members believed that after Brexit, some changes are likely to occur that will affect migrants. The general view was that people working illegally, and those migrating mostly for the sake of benefits, will probably be sent back to Romania after Brexit. A Roma man said:

*People are most afraid that they will be sent back to their country. (...) But I will tell you what the rules are, those that have jobs, that are employed, mind their own business and don't have legal problems... I think those people would not be affected.*

A Roma woman, further noted that,

*There are people that have three, four children, they go to get money, they get a lot of money, and a house, and everything. For those people, it will be over. If that's what you're going for, it will be over.*

Most of the community members who took part in this project were positive about their prospects of remaining in the UK post-Brexit, mostly due to the fact that they felt that they were employed, possessed the correct paperwork and did not face any legal problems in the past. However, there are some reports that after the UK leaves the European Union, Roma people will risk deportation if they fail to prove their residency in the UK, including evidence that they have lived in the UK for at least five years (Staff Reporter for the Independent, 2018).

Community members reported two main barriers to remaining in the UK: language barriers and the time needed for immigration documents to be processed. Firstly, being able to communicate in English is essential for social integration in the UK. All community members noted that the lack of English language skills was the biggest barrier in their early contact with public services, potential employers and other people in the UK. People were able to overcome this barrier with translation apps, help from family members, friends, informal mediators and translation services that were offered in various institutions, such as the Home Office. In time, contact with English speakers facilitated the development of English language skills.

Secondly, community members felt that it takes too long for immigration documents to be processed – a period of up to one year for the UK immigration services to complete the process. Roma from Romania have freedom of movement granted by EU Directives, as Romania is part of the EU. However, migrants from EU countries still have to register and obtain authorisation in order to work legally in the UK. During this time, informal help from social networks is necessary to reduce the costs and risks of migration, such as poverty and homelessness. This is illustrated in the following exchange between one community member participant and the research team:

*Community member: It is very hard until everything is legal, until you have all the paper work, both the social and-*

*Researcher: Until everything is legal, what kind of problems are there?*

*Community member: Well, you have no place to stay for six, seven months, up to one year so you ask for help at the church, wherever you can, you ask for help with the car, housing, you ask people to help.*

*Researcher: And for those that don't have that kind of support from others, what do they do during those six, seven months, one year?*

*Community member: I always said in church that if anyone has any problems 'if you don't have money, you don't have a house, we invite you to our office and we will help you'. And people came.*

*Researcher: And what about people that are not going to church?*

*Community member: We help them, too.*

*Researcher: And what about people that do not know about the help that is offered by the church, what other institutions exist that can help people during this period?*

*Community member: I don't know.*



PHOTO CREDIT: RUHAMA FOUNDATION

PHOTO CREDIT: RUHAMA FOUNDATION

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**YOUNG ROMA PEOPLE CREATING A POSTER ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES OF MIGRATING TO THE UK.**

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**CULTURAL CARAVAN IS A  
LOCAL CULTURAL EVENT  
IN WHICH ROMA ACTORS,  
MUSICIANS AND POETS  
USE INTERACTIVE  
METHODS TO EDUCATE  
PEOPLE AND PROMOTE  
DIALOGUE BETWEEN ROMA  
AND NON-ROMA PEOPLE.**





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## 3. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**IN THIS PROJECT WE USED THREE TYPES OF ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE PARTICIPANTS FROM ROMA COMMUNITIES: ARTS-BASED PROJECTS, A LOCAL CULTURAL EVENT AND PARTICIPATIVE REFLECTION GROUPS.**

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### 3.1. PARTICIPATORY REFLECTION GROUPS

In each Roma community, a group was formed in which people could share experiences in a confidential and safe space. Each session began with a short introduction by each of the community members, and then different topics related to the issue of migration to the UK were discussed: motivations to migrate, hopes, fears and barriers in the process of migration, specific difficulties encountered by women, children and young people and the benefits of migration.

During the participatory reflection activity the goal of the groups was to start a dialogue about a central issue, and allow people to share their various experiences. One of the major benefits of the participatory reflection groups was that it facilitated the engagement of people whose views are often missing from debates about the experiences and consequences of migration and the free movement of people in Europe. By initiating a dialogue about migration experiences, this project was able to facilitate the active citizenship of Roma migrants whose perspectives we hope will contribute the formulation of future migration policies. Also, as a result of the collaboration with some of the Romanian Roma who migrated to the UK, we gained access to a number of Roma communities that are already established in the UK. This can insure that we can continue a longer term engagement with Roma people living in the UK with the aim of engaging community members in informing future migration policies and practices.

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### 3.2. ART PROJECTS

The art project was organized around the key concept of "migration to the UK". Community engagement was facilitated by including members of the Roma community in the planning process, implementation and evaluation of arts-based projects. A non-Roma social worker and an art teacher working in the community were also involved in promoting the activity and inviting people to join in. For the location, community members suggested that we use a Roma cultural centre that was well known by community members and often used as a venue for local Roma arts and music festivals.

Six young people and six adults from Tâmasda Roma community participated in the art project activity. The children and young people interacted in three groups, creating three posters about their personal experiences of UK migration. They decided to use cut-outs from magazines and newspapers to illustrate their ideas about migrating to the UK.

The young people used the opportunity to exchange ideas between themselves and raise awareness in the community about the issues faced by young people in the process of migration.

There were two barriers to community engagement in this art project. One was a general reluctance of Roma women to get involved in the projects' activities. A likely cause could be the traditional cultural and gender norms evident in some Roma communities, where men are more likely to participate in public meetings, and women often remain at home. In order to engage women, we used activities for children and young people as a way to include women indirectly, as we noticed that mothers were likely to accompany their children. During the art project, four mothers joined in the activity, and while engaged in cutting-out images from magazines, they also began sharing with the group their experiences of migration.

A second barrier was a lack of enthusiasm for the art activity shown by the boys and young men, who preferred to talk about their experiences, rather than illustrate them in posters. The social worker and the young people suggested that in future meetings we should include sport, music and dance activities that could enhance engagement among young men from the community.

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### **3.3. LOCAL CULTURAL EVENT**

We invited Roma communities to take part in a local cultural event, known as the Cultural Caravan. Alina Serban, an award-winning film and theatre actress of Roma ethnicity - known for writing and performing roles that promote a social justice message - was invited to perform one of the autobiographical plays she wrote: "I Declare at My Own Risk – Slumdog Roma". The audience comprised over 50 Roma and non-Roma people. The event took place in the Library of the University of Oradea.

Alina acted out a series of situations and stories that depicted difficult circumstances encountered by Roma people living in a predominantly non-Roma society. Alina also shared her experience of migrating to the UK. She talked about the important role of education for social integration in Romania and the UK.

During the performance, she interacted with the audience, especially the nine Roma children that were present. Repeatedly, the boundary between the actress and viewers was erased, as she asked the audience to join in and share similar experiences. The Cultural Caravan was more than a performance act; it was also an educational method. Roma viewers were offered a platform to share experiences (including those related to migration) and the non-Roma audience was given an opportunity to learn from the shared Roma stories.

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# CONCLUSIONS

Migration and the free movement of people makes an important contribution to community cohesion, social capital, social inclusion and the UK economy. This project initiated a dialogue about migration experiences and by engaging local communities it facilitated the active involvement of Roma migrants. Although the future of Roma migration is uncertain in the face of Brexit, the general consensus of the community members who took part in this project was that Roma people who have all the necessary paper work and who are hard-working would be able to continue to travel to the UK to live and work. After moving to the UK, Roma people did not necessarily feel accepted or included in the British society. However, by comparison to their experiences in Romania, most participants suggested that in the UK, due to effective implementation of anti-discrimination legislation, they felt protected from overt forms of discrimination from neighbours, employers, colleagues and from possible abuses by the police. Most often due to language barriers, Roma migrants were at risk of exploitation from informal intermediaries, and those who did not have the support of already established Roma communities, family or friends were at greater risk of homelessness and in the case of several women, sexual harassment.

Participants were mainly positive about their experiences of migration to the UK, especially related to employment opportunities, the quality of education, treatment by neighbours, employers. Participants also extolled the virtues of the UK's social and welfare services.

However, we argue, reporting positive experiences of migration stands in stark contrast with (predominantly) negative public perceptions in the UK around migration and migrants. Positively-valued dimensions highlighted by our participants, especially around employment and the benefits system, may actually have the adverse consequence of reinforcing existing stereotypes against migrant groups in general, and Roma migrants, in particular.

Migration 'success' was associated by participants with positive perceptions of access to employment, housing, education and health, features that are usually associated with successful integration (Ager and Strang, 2008). Employment, for example, although often precarious and sometimes even dangerous, was perceived as the way to economic independence, enabling planning for the future, and fostering self-reliance. Precarious and dangerous employment does not, however, provide a facilitating framework for interactions with members of the host community or opportunities to develop language skills because the jobs that Roma migrants take are usually only taken by Roma. If, for other category of migrants, and for refugees, successful integration is a measure of converting skills and qualifications to achieving status in relation to the host community, Roma migrants position themselves as members of a group with different aspirations.

Unlike refugees, and other categories of migrants, that tend to focus predominantly on devising varied acculturation strategies in order to adapt to the culture of the host country (Phillimore, 2012), Roma migrants tend to define themselves more in contrast with their country of origin (in this case, Romania). It is not surprising that, in this comparative context where the 'home' country is valued negatively, an optimistic outlook emerges.

This optimistic and positive outlook that we have seen in our data might also be a feature of experiences of early stage of settlement. Paradoxically, an (overtly) optimistic perception of the benefits of migration, may actually leave migrants at an early stage of settlement vulnerable to subsequent 'psychosocial stress' and exploitation that might arise from individual, group, and state pressures to adjust to the host culture, as well as cross-cultural interactions with other groups within the broader (host) community.

'Integration' does not seem to feature as a key focus for Roma migrants. According to Ager and Strang (2008), both refugees and non-refugee groups tend to discuss integration "in terms of participation of people from different groups in a range of activities" (p. 180). This dimension of 'participation' seemed to be missing in the accounts we have heard. This does not mean that Roma migrants do not value participation – it may just mean that it is not yet part of an established repertoire of talking about oneself

and one's community. More work is needed to capture why, and how, perceptions of the host culture and cultural constraints change after prolonged periods of residence. A separate study might consider the acculturation strategies used by Roma people and communities specifically in the migration process.

For Roma migrants, at least for the ones we spoke with, the focus seemed to be more on building 'social bonds' (connections within the Roma community) rather than on building 'social bridges' (through interaction with members of other communities) and 'social links' (with local and government services) (cf. Ager and Strang, 2008). The emergent demographic challenges that the UK faces are captured by the contested notion of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007). State and public initiatives designed to ensure the development of cohesive communities in different parts of the UK may not immediately, and in the long term, meet the needs of Roma migrants. Although initially perceived as positive, the pressure to conform may prove to be an antagonistic factor for Roma migrant communities.

The results of this project highlighted some of the perceived benefits of and also barriers to Roma migration to the UK. Participants reported feeling empowered by being given a voice as a community and asked to talk about their experiences of migration. Although community involvement in accounting for the meaning of the migration process is seen as having positive, empowering, effects, it can also, nonetheless, limit the understanding of migration as a politicised practice, a practice underpinned by state interventions aimed at restricting access to welfare, and negative public perceptions of and attitudes towards migrants and migration in the UK. There is one key notable absence from Roma communities' accounts of migration: stories and experiences that refer to and engage with issues related to rights and responsibilities (and citizenship more broadly). More work is needed to understand the meaning of 'citizenship' for Roma migrants, as well as the meanings placed by individuals and communities on rights and responsibilities.

There is a further absence of stories from migrants themselves that make reference to negative public perceptions in the UK related to migration (e.g. public perceptions that migrants are a burden on public services, or that they are given preferential treatment when it comes to social housing). For example, perceptions of discrimination in the UK were downplayed by participants in this study. There was usually a contrast with the negative experiences of discrimination in the country of origin (Romania, in this case). However, as a recent report for the Equality and Human Rights Commission shows, considerable numbers of people in the UK (44%) express 'openly negative feelings' towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (Abrams, Swift & Houston, 2018). The same report found that the intensity of prejudice and discrimination towards Gypsies, Roma and Travellers was lower in Scotland than in England, although still at a significant level (31%). In Wales the figure was 42% of the population surveyed. Across England, Scotland and Wales openly negative feelings towards Gypsy, Roma and Travellers were consistently significantly higher than openly negative feelings expressed towards people with other protected characteristics (e.g., black people, Muslims, immigrants, LGBTQ). It is therefore important that (new) Roma migrants are made aware of, and familiarise themselves with, the UK anti-discrimination law, and understand how to recognise and report discrimination.

Participants in this study did not report feeling displaced or unsettled – these are usually characteristics attached to non-voluntary migration. Although discrimination in the country of origin was mentioned by some participants, this was not identified as the cause of, or reason for, migration. Roma migration is, instead, described by Roma communities as an opportunity to address a position of precarity (unemployment, racism, etc.) in the country of origin. The focus is firmly on the Roma individual, the family, and the community to which the person belongs. It is the community abroad (the Roma 'diaspora'), rather than the host culture, that is perceived as the key enabling factor of migration and early settlement.

More community-led work is needed to understand the role of the Roma diaspora in the migration process. Ruhama UK, a newly established community interest company, is working closely with members of the Roma diaspora, for the benefit of migrants, elderly people, and ethnic minorities living in the UK, with a special focus on people who identify as Roma. Ruhama Romania and Ruhama UK are both committed to a long-term vision of providing evidence-based approaches to responding to migration challenges through integrated models of outreach and partnerships with public authorities, private organizations and the civil society.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jo Aldridge is Professor of Social Policy and Criminology in the School of Social Sciences at Loughborough University UK. She has experience and expertise in evidence-based approaches to policy-making participatory research methods with vulnerable or marginalised groups. Her research on children and families has led to the design of evidence-based responses to policy challenges. She has contributed research evidence to government committees (including Parliamentary Select Committees), think tanks and policy makers. She has also conducted service evaluations and provided training for health and social care service providers, including GPs, social workers, and mental health professionals. You can read more about her research here: [www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/staff/jo-aldridge](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/staff/jo-aldridge)

Leontina Daragiu is Executive Director of Ruhama Foundation, Romania and Director of Ruhama UK-Community Interest Company. She has vast experience in managing and delivering the highest standards of service and impact in Roma communities. She has been initiated and managed international projects addressing a variety of projects in Roma communities. Her work helped influence public policies and legislation for Roma people in Romania. You can read more about her work here: [www.ruhama.ro/en](http://www.ruhama.ro/en)

Marian Daragiu is co-founder of the Ruhama Foundation, Romania and has been working in the field of Roma Inclusion since 1994. He is licensed in Sociology and holds a MA in Community Development and Public Administration. He graduated Harvard Kennedy School, where he studied the Leadership, Organizing and Action - Leading Change Program, focused on Roma community organizing processes. Marian is strongly committed to increasing the access of socially excluded Roma children to education starting with quality early childhood education programs.

Karen Lumsden is an independent researcher, consultant, and trainer in qualitative research methods and academic skills. She has held posts at the University of Leicester, Loughborough University, the University of Aberdeen and the University of Abertay Dundee. Her work focuses on understanding the experiences of the powerless, including migrant's experiences of hate crime in the wake of the Brexit vote, especially the reporting of online abuse and hate. She has expertise in evidence-based policing and an understanding of the variety of stakeholder responses to knowledge-transfer work and evidence-based approaches to impact. You can follow her @karenlumsden2 and read more about her research here: [www.independent.academia.edu/KarenLumsden](http://www.independent.academia.edu/KarenLumsden)

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Cristian Tileaga is a member of the Discourse and Rhetoric Group in the School of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. He is an expert in the social psychology of prejudice and moral exclusion of ethnic minority groups. He has written extensively on eastern European Roma people and the Mapuche minority in Chile. His monograph, *The Nature of Prejudice: Society, Discrimination and Moral Exclusion* (Routledge, 2015), is the first detailed, empirical study of the history, modern genesis and impact of discrimination against Roma people in the context of European freedom of movement. You can read more about his research here: [www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/staff/cristian-tileaga](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/socialsciences/staff/cristian-tileaga)

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