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Supporting housing transition to apartments: the Henich family

SUPPORTING HOUSING TRANSITION TO APARTMENTS:

THE HENICH FAMILY

What is happening in Emilia-Romagna

In Emilia-Romagna Region, the realization of Roma and Sinti settlements dates back to the 90s, when it was considered as an improvement of the Roma and Sinti communities life conditions. The settlements were a temporary response to the high-risk situation in which the communities were living: they would have had a place to stay, an assistance from social services, a stable school for children, an appointed doctor, and so on.

Up until a few years ago, settlements in Emilia-Romagna went from temporary to definitive, but without major structural changes inside the settlements. Every settlement is followed by the municipality it belongs to, which provides social street workers and social workers who work on-field. Some settlements were adapted to new health and structural standards, but these adaptations were decided by different local public authorities, so the situation could change between a city and another.

The settlements became, year after year, places of segregation and isolation; to this day the settlements which weren't adapted and updated to law standard are becoming a risk to the population and to the municipalities, which have the charge of possible accidents.

A few years ago, Emilia-Romagna started to think about the overcome of settlements, and local authorities started to figure out new housing alternatives, aiming to differentiate these interventions according to the local context of the single community. Emilia-Romagna believes that new housing solutions can contribute to resolving situation of social exclusion and conflict.

Emilia-Romagna is following the "Italian National Strategy for the Inclusion of Roma, Sinti and Caminanti", which indicates that Roma, Sinti and Caminanti people should have access to a wide range of housing opportunities, with attention to their familial unity

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location. The National Strategy aims to overcome the stable state of emergency and of Italian settlements, but it also aims to overcome big mono-ethnic settlements which can be found in some Italian municipalities (a valid example could be the Salone Settlement, situated in Rome, hosting approximately 1000 people).

What is happening in Bologna

As far as the Bologna Municipality is concerned, the current administration is aligning with national and regional strategies and indication, and it is presently working on the overcoming of settlements. The “Bologna Local Action Plan for the social inclusion of Roma and Sinti people 2013-2014”, (LAP), realized within the European project “RomaNet” and co-financed by the European project “URBACTII, approved by the City Council, presents the main areas of intervention for the social inclusion of Roma and Sinti communities. The LAP includes 4 axis of intervention: Education, Work, Housing, Interculture and anti-discrimination.

The main objective of the Housing axis is promoting participated and differentiated paths in order to improve housing conditions, for which there are 5 actions: Creating a network for housing, Accompanying housing transitions to apartments, Regularization of irregular or abusive situations, Co-design of Micro Areas, Testing self-made construction and renovation.

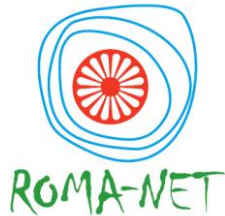
Supporting housing transition to apartments

This action is relatively new in the Italian panorama: usually Roma and Sinti families access to houses and apartments through council houses rankings, through which families can get the house/apartment like any other citizen. Once they move into the house/apartment, however, there is no support for the families, which often are struggling to understand and stay at pace with bills, regulations, and housing costs. This has been the case of many families which had to go back to live in the settlements.

The Bologna Municipality, together with some private social realities, has thus started to develop new projects enabling interested families to find accommodation in apartments. With each family an individual housing project is defined, comprising the objectives and tasks for its implementation. The housing project also takes into account the aspects related to the ability of producing income and savings in the household, that are central to ensuring costs sustainability of the transition. The housing projects are also integrated, if necessary, by an action of support, in order to replace or strengthen the network of relationships available to the household who may have diminished as a result of the transition.

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necessary mediation with the context of insertion. The housing projects are followed in their development, pointing to the autonomy of families and their progressive emancipation from the relationship with the service of reference.

In the present case study, we represent these housing projects with an example: the Henich family, currently taking part of a transition project, which has recently entered into their apartment.

The Henich family

I first met the Henich family in May 2014. My association just got the management of the house in via del Triumvirato and had assigned me to be the educator in charge of its transition project. We almost immediately thought to give it to a Roma or Sinti family. The apartment is pretty big: it has three bedrooms, a big bathroom, a kitchen and a dining room. But most importantly, it has a big garden and a parking space in which previous owners had built a garage. The outer space called for a transition project for a family living in a settlement, because it was the perfect way to transition from living in a small, overcrowded camper van, with lots of outer space. In our experience, Roma and Sinti families living in settlements use their homes as a place to sleep and eat, but most of their time is spent outside. This is also the main reason why it is so difficult for a family to think of themselves inside an apartment. When we ask if they'd like to live somewhere else, often we get the answer "yes, but not in an apartment. I would feel like in a cage".

So the outer space drew us to consider a Roma or Sinti family, and we talked to social services operating with Roma and Sinti settlements, and the Henich family was the first name on their list. They had been asking for a council house since 2010, and they were very committed to find a way to get outside the settlement, mainly because Luciano, the father, and Miledi, the mother, were raising four daughters and they were looking for their best option. Luciano told me later: "there can be no good future for the girls in the settlement."

We first met to visit the house, to see if they would see themselves living there, and they all came: Luciano (38 years old), Miledi (42), Shyla (20), Miriam (17), Sara Jay (13), and Shirley (7) were early and had to wait for me together with the educator from their settlement, my colleague Anna Maria. As soon as he saw the garden space, Luciano was thrilled: there was so much to do and so much he could have done! The garden had high grass and it was dirty with old foliage. We hadn't entered the house yet, but he started to tell me how he would soon make it better. We visited the house and everybody was excited, me included. The house was perfect for them.

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When we officially started to talk about the transition project, we were in the social worker office, and the room was full. There was me, the social worker, two educators from the settlement, our peer-operator, and the Henich, who brought their daughters along. They were sitting and standing in front of us, trying to understand what were the terms to get into their new house.

But actually, at that moment, we only had two limits: the duration of the project, 24 months starting in August, and the main objective: to have the family gain housing and working complete autonomy. We chose to define with them the terms of their contract, given some basic behavior rules common to any transition apartment.

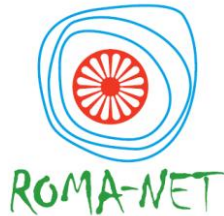
Together with the family, we wrote and signed a contract between Associazione Emiliani and them. The contract contains all their commitments for the 24 months of transitioning. The house is for free, but they have to pay the bills and they have to take care of the common areas, such as the garden and the stairs to their apartment. The younger daughters, Sara Jay and Schirley, have to improve their school attendance. But the main commitment is the training one: Luciano, Miledi and Shyla have to get their secondary school diploma, and they have to participate to training courses to better their chance to find a steady job.

Up until now, in fact, Luciano and Miledi had provided for their families through the gathering and selling of iron materials. This is a very popular work among the Sinti community, but it also is a very heavy one, and because of his job, Luciano has to go under a surgical intervention to remove his back hernia in November. Without this job, though, the family has no financial support, so the first step was to give the family the necessary tools to actively search for a job.

After we signed the contract, the family could not wait any longer. It was August and they immediately started cleaning the house, which still had no energy or gas or water, bringing some buckets full of water inside and giving the house a new fresh look. When they finally moved in, they started to adapt to what they call "living in a house". It was extremely exciting, and they would call me almost every day to tell me what they had done and what problems they had. Their pure joy only flickered when the typical problems of a newly rented house came along: delays with the energy company, a hole in the wall, issues with the gas heater and so on. Sometimes I'd get a call from an exhausted Luciano or Miledi, who for the first time in their life had to deal with what we call ordinary problems: "why did they get us a broken house?".

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When the first bill came, Luciano called me. He was extremely worried: “How do we pay the bills? Where should we go? How long before it is too late and they cut us the energy?”.

Almost immediately, I realized why so many people would go back to the settlement after being in a rented house for a while. These ordinary issues, which we give for granted, are new and huge to a family who has never been living in a house. But what really complicates the situation is that often families like the Henich don't have a steady income.

When you don't have a steady income, you just end up living day by day, and when the bills come along, you are likely not prepared. I talked about this with the Henich many times, and we went through a strategy: they are saving some money each month, and when the bills come they are ready to pay them. Another common problem, in my experience, is that women often don't have a job because of their family role. We tried to work on that, and we decided that every adult would have to do their part to support the family. Luckily enough, we found a paid stage for Shyla, the elder daughter, who will start working in bakery shop in a few days; and will also get her driving license in November, in order to help her parents to drive her younger sisters to school.

Transitioning to a house from a settlement is a process, and it is an important commitment for a family, because 24 months are a really short period of time to get a professional degree, get a steady job in a difficult economy, and really... change your life. But as time goes by, the Henichs are starting to describe their house as their home, and we feel it is a good result, being only 3 months into the project.

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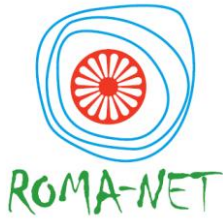
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