



Water infrastructure and citizenship exclusion of Roma communities in Europe

I commend Joe Brown and colleagues (April, 2023)¹ for shedding light on the effects of racism, social exclusion, and discrimination on achieving universal safe water and sanitation in high-income countries. Their example of Roma communities' access to water and sanitation in France and Italy is particularly poignant. The strong relationship between state power, citizenship, and the ownership and control of water is well established.² My ethnographic research among Roma communities in Italy³ indicates that the provision of water and sanitation infrastructures is closely linked with social exclusion from citizenship, or, in other words, with what is termed hydraulic citizenship.⁴ Hydraulic citizenship arises from state-citizen relations, which lead to the social exclusion of people who are located on the fringes of formal housing or who do not have access to water and sanitation because of gaps in infrastructure, due to poor planning and investments.

In anthropology, we know that everyday practices around water provisioning, and formal or informal housing have a crucial role in whether residents are recognised as citizens. In this regard, Roma people are among the most disadvantaged European citizens, who are more likely to be evicted or live in segregated or informal neighbourhoods. The construction of major water infrastructures often sidelines Roma communities, and the repercussions of this centralising exclusion became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. With the onset of the pandemic in Rome, Italy, for the so-called nomad camps (both informal and formal), which are inhabited by Roma people who or whose previous generations fled the war in the Balkans

in the 1990s, lockdowns entailed controlling people's movements through increased police presence, securitisation, and strict quarantine.⁵ Public health messages urged people to wash their hands and stay at home, but these rules were impossible to follow without available drinking water and adequate housing. Access to water in such emergency conditions was largely affected by previous provisions of informal housing and a scarcity of service delivery infrastructures, including in-house water, water meters, and sanitation connections.

Environmental social exclusion is rarely considered in policy approaches for inclusion of Roma communities, although water access is one of the major health determinants for Roma people, who on average live 10–15 years fewer than non-Roma people.⁶ The production of informal space is driven by a selective state tolerance and concern, which result in government authorities routinely evicting Roma communities to remote areas, usually in the outskirts of cities and close to industrial sites and landfills, and without access to basic water and sanitary resources, to make room for new infrastructure projects. Unfortunately, this geographical separation of Roma communities is mostly analysed as a structural housing issue of informality, a problem thought to be caused by Roma people themselves. Yet, the issue at stake is environmental discrimination, which is often unseen or bestowed upon people perceived as undeserving citizens. Hence, Brown and colleagues¹ analysis is accurate in pointing out how water access, or the lack of it, represents a material manifestation that is synonymous with racism and exclusion from citizenship.

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