TÍTULO: RECIENTES ACCIONES SOLIDARIAS ANTE LA ACTUAL DESTRUCCIÓN DE EMPLEO

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Resumen: Autores como Touraine o Erik Olin Wright han señalado que las desigualdades económicas y sociales están promoviendo reacciones solidarias que persiguen mejorar la sociedad. Esta idea es la base del RTD “SOLIDUS. Solidarity in European Societies: Empowerment, Social Justice and Citizenship” (2015-2018), financiado por el programa Horizon 2020 de la Comisión Europea, cuyo objetivo es aportar evidencias de acciones solidarias desarrolladas durante el actual momento de crisis en Europa. Más específicamente se espera que de estas acciones se deriven nuevas estrategias no sólo para superar las tendencias de desaceleración y recesión económicas, sino también para reducir las desigualdades sociales, fortalecer la cohesión social y aumentar el bienestar.

La investigación se ha llevado a cabo mediante la metodología comunicativa, que ha sido destacada por la Comisión Europea como una de las metodologías más adecuadas para investigar y hallar alternativas a las situaciones de pobreza y desigualdad social. En esta comunicación presentamos una acción solidaria de éxito en España centrada en el ámbito del empleo que, según la investigación, contribuyen a la superación de situaciones estructurales de pobreza. El caso presentado muestra como mujeres gitanas, que están en una doble y triple posición estructural de exclusión, consiguen gracias a sus lazos y relaciones de solidaridad y apoyo mutuo sentar una base sobre la que superar su situación de exclusión. Esta iniciativa, promovida por la asociación gitana “Drom Kotar Mestipen” consiste en formación gratuita a mujeres gitanas para trabajar como monitores de tiempo libre de niños y jóvenes en diferente tipo de escuelas. De esta manera la asociación contribuye a fortalecer las vidas de muchas mujeres que están en riesgo de exclusión social a partir de mejorar sus oportunidades de acceder al mercado laboral y, en consecuencia, de seguir siendo motor de transformación de sus comunidades.
Indirectamente también contribuye al empoderamiento de muchos estudiantes que consideran estas mujeres como modelos de comportamiento y referencia. En resumen, presentamos aquí evidencias de una acción solidaria de éxito llevada a cabo a través de procesos dialógicos inclusivos encaminadas a mejorar el empleo y la empleabilidad.

**ABSTRACT:** Touraine or authors like Erik Olin Wright pointed out that economic and social inequalities are promoting solidarity reactions that seek to improve society. This idea is the basis of RTD "SOLIDUS. Solidarity in European Societies: Empowerment, Social Justice and Citizenship "(2015-2018), funded by the Horizon 2020 program of the European Commission, which aims to provide evidence of successful solidarity actions carried out during the current time of crisis in Europe. More specifically it is expected that these actions deriving new strategies to overcome not only the trends of economic slowdown and recession, but also to reduce social inequalities, strengthen social cohesion and increase welfare. The research was carried out by the communicative methodology, which has been highlighted by the European Commission as one of the most appropriate action to investigate and find alternatives to situations of poverty and social inequality methodologies. In this paper we present one successful solidarity action in Spain focused in the field of employment, according to research, which contribute to overcome structural poverty. The case presented show as Roma women, who are in a double and triple structural positions of exclusion, achieved to provide a basis on which to overcome their exclusion thanks to their ties and relations of solidarity and mutual support. This initiative, promoted by the Roma association "Drom Kotar Mestipen" consists of free training to Roma women to work as monitors of free time children and youth in different types of schools. In this way the association contributes to strengthening the lives of many women who are at risk of social exclusion from improving their opportunities to enter the labor market and therefore remain transformation engine of their communities. Indirectly also it contributes to the empowerment of many students who considered these women as role models and reference. In summary, here are evidence of a successful solidarity action carried out through inclusive dialogic processes aimed at improving employment and employability.
Keywords: solidarity, successful action, Roma, women, employment

Introduction

The current crisis has indirectly contributed to questioning the efficiency of financial markets and democratic institutions at European and national levels. Recent data from the Eurobarometer (July 2013) shows a continuous decrease in the trust levels that citizens from the European Union have on national governments and parliaments. This situation is jeopardizing the European project while at the same time a lively public debate about the meaning of European identity is taking place across Europe. Several social scientists have argued that the social and economic inequalities in the new global order are contributing to civil social reactions, based on solidarity, aiming to achieve a better society for all (Touraine, 2007; Wright, 2010).

This paper is focused on the SOLIDUS project which aims to analyzing in depth the acts of solidarity which are being developed across Europe, the extent to which they respond to dialogic and inclusive processes, the related outcomes and the policy developments. The project starts from previous findings on successful actions which are combating the crisis – by creating employment or improving access to health – through acts of solidarity. These acts are thus contributing to construct more inclusive and prosperous societies, by influencing at the macro-level (social inequalities) and micro-level (psychological wellbeing).

In this regard, this research will identify common elements among these acts in order to examine their transferability to different contexts. To cover this objective, effects of these actions in five social areas will be studied in depth: housing, education, employment, engagement and health.
Fall in employment in Spain

In this section we present some of the developments within the SOLIDUS project which is addressed to contextualize the research about the spatial dimension of solidarity in Spain. It summarises some of the key features of the Spanish national context and reviews policies in the employment area, one of those covered within the SOLIDUS project, at three spatial scales: national, regional and local.

Solidarity responses range from the institutional to the communal and inter-personal level, and operate on the basis of principles of both redistribution and recognition.

The employment rate in Spain increased steadily from the nineties up to right before the economic crisis (OIT, 2014). However, the creation of employment was excessively concentrated in the construction sector, which explains the devastating effects of the 2008 financial crisis. In fact, the 60% of the destroyed employment after the crisis was located in this sector. As a result, the fall in employment was much more severe than in other European countries, being in spite of a slight improvement in the last years (2013 and 2014). Spain is the EU-28 second country with the highest unemployment rate (21.6%) and youth unemployment rate (24.5%). Only Greece shows worse figures with 25% and 26.5% respectively (EUROSTAT, 2015b). Spain continues to be 12.3 (August 2015) and 14.3% (December 2014) points above the EU-28 average with regard to the general and youth unemployment respectively (EUROSTAT, 2015b). Besides, as per OECD data, the average unemployment rate in Spain so far 2015 (22.5%) almost trebles the average of the 34 member countries of the OECD (8 %) (Stats, 2015).

On the other hand, great disparities are noticeable among regions. As per the most recent data (third term 2015) of the National Institute of Statistics (INE), there are Spanish regions that have a much higher average rate of general unemployment (21.2%) showing differences of over 7 points as in the case of Extremadura (28.5%) and even over 10 points as in the case of Andalusia (32%), the Autonomous Community in Spain with highest unemployment rate. Other unemployment rates are well below the Spanish average figure as in Navarra (13.6%), La Rioja (13.6%) and the Basque Country (13.8%) that are over 8 points below the average Spanish figure and over 16 points below to that of Andalusia (See Figure 1).
These differences are even higher if we look at the youth unemployment rate reaching a difference over 26 points between the best and the worst regions.\textsuperscript{1} The same happens with the unemployment rate of those people over 55 years old, where the gap is over 18 points.\textsuperscript{2}

**Figure 1. “Unemployment rates by regions (%)” (2015)**

Source: Own elaboration by INE data (2015d)

Finally, if we consider the long term unemployment rate, territorial differences appear again. The most severe long term unemployment rates are in Ceuta (22%), Melilla (21.8%), Andalusia (19.4%) and Canary Islands (18.9%), that are at least 6 points above the national average (12.9%). On the contrary, communities such as Navarra (7%), Aragon (8%) and the Basque Country (8%) concentrate the lowest long term unemployment levels in the country, together with the Balearic Islands (6.2%). The

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\textsuperscript{1} The Community with a lower youth unemployment rate is Cantabria with 33.68%, whereas Extremadura is the worst with 59.45%. It should be noticed that in Ceuta the rate is over 90%. The INE warns that in this case there could be important methodological errors, so therefore this figure should be carefully treated.

\textsuperscript{2} The communities with lower long term unemployment rates are Aragon with 7.69% and the Basque Country with 8.02%, whereas the worst ones are Ceuta with 29.81%, Andalusia with 26.82% and the Canary Islands with 26.77%.
difference between the regions with lowest and highest long term unemployment rates is over 15.5 points.

In accordance with the Employment Law in force, the central government is responsible through the Ministry of Employment and Social Services “to maintain the working market unity across Spain taking into account the specific and diverse characteristics of the different areas and fostering the correction of the unbalance both social and territorial”.

For that goal, the MESS has three coordination instruments of the national employment system whose main function is carrying out employment measures that, to a certain extent, help to overcome these social inequalities.

The first instrument is the State Employment Public Service [Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal (SEPE)] that aims to create, develop and promote employment policies in Spain. Specifically, the main functions of this organism are: planning and fostering employment policies in line with people’s needs and with firms interested in offering employment; managing unemployment grants; analysing at national scale the situation of the labour market putting forward certain measures to improve it (MESS, 2015a). The second instrument is the Employment Spanish Strategy [Estrategia Española de Empleo], the first tool oriented to the coordination of the Employment National System [Sistema Nacional de Empleo]. This strategy aims at mediating in the labour market and in the design/management of active policies (MESS, 2014). The third instrument is the Annual Plan of Employment Policies [Plan Anual de Política de Empleo], whose 5 main goals lie on the improvement of the youth employment; favouring of employment in other groups particularly hit by unemployment (as those over 45 years that are long term unemployed); professional training quality improvement; reinforcement of the relation between active and passive employment policies; and fostering of entrepreneurship as an inseparable part of activation and recuperation of employment (MESS, 2015b).

In the regional field, control and ruling of labour market are performed by the autonomous Employment Public Services [Servicios Públicos de Empleo (SPE)]. Specific activities in these Services are those of labour market control through the management of professional training and employment of state subsidies, control of workshops and trade houses and management of active employment policies about tailor suit itineraries for those
demanding employment; authorisation and control of employment agencies; and management of the EURES net (MESS, 2015a).

We can differentiate three types of active employment measures: labour mediation, training and employment incentives.

Labour mediation is defined by those actions aiming to put in contact employment offers with people demanding for a job. Labour mediation aims to give workers a suitable employment to their characteristics and to provide employers with the most suitable workers to their requirements and needs. Besides, as per the Employment Law, mediation agents authorised to perform said activities are the employment public services, employment agencies and those other services that legally are determined for the workers abroad. However, the employment public service quota in terms of labour mediation is virtually non-existing and the lack of staff to take care of the number of unemployed registered applicants in our country makes it impossible to carry out tailor suit itineraries to help them out to labour insertion or the supervision of the activating commitment (Cueto & Suárez, 2015).

Regarding training, its management depends practically in full of the Communities and the registered cooperating centres (SEPEs in each region). On their part, the Communities performed and still perform the training through training centres linked to social agents (unions and business organisations), city halls, foundations and all classes of associations. As a matter of fact, the not legalised training for employment constitutes one of the three pillars of the professional education, together with legal professional training and university teaching. We may highlight 3 basic training types: demand training (training actions of companies and individual training permits), supply training (training actions fostered by public administrations, social agents or social and private cooperating entities that are subsidised by the autonomous SEPE) and the training addressed to unemployed workers (it is about training actions whose aim is that people attain a professional qualification by matching teaching and learning processes in the company and in the training centre), a measure which is being launched at present (de la Rica, 2015).

Finally, as a third policy on active employment promotion, we find supporting programs to entrepreneurs that are one of the measures most fostered in recent years. One of the most significant programs is the capitalisation of the grants or “single total payment” consisting of receiving the full amount of the grant (the dole) at once, in order to start an
activity as self-employed. It was launched in 1985 staying under several changes along these years. Besides, several measures have been issued trying to foster self-employment. Amongst them one of the most relevant is the “flat rate” that offers remarkable discounts and bonuses in the contribution rate to the Social Security. Therefore it shares the same principles of those incentives to stimulate employment (Cueto & Suárez, 2015).

In Spain, like in many other European countries there are other measures that are not looking for encouraging or getting employment, but for decreasing the negative impact suffered by unemployed people. The Unemployment Protection Spanish System aims to meet this goal through two types of social grants: the contributively (unemployment insurance) and the relief aid (it is an unemployment grant). Firstly, the unemployment insurance, commonly known as the dole, gives a monthly grant that is calculated in relation to the length of time that the employee has paid to the Social Security before losing the job as well as the wage perceived along that period of time. Secondly, the unemployment subsidy helps those people that have no access to the unemployment insurance, either because their unemployment insurance grant has been exhausted or because they do not have accrued the right to perceive such benefit due to not meeting the minimum contributory period to the social security (Arranz & García-Serrano, 2014).

In this frame, we would like to focus on the attention on the situation of vulnerable groups, and specially women, who are facing huge inequalities in the labour market. In what is referred to the situation of the Roma in the labour market, information about unemployment rates reflects a serious problem of social exclusion of this community. Given that knowledge is now not only considered a tool, but a value in itself, the problem is worsened by the exclusion of access circuits to education and training. Therefore, measures against unemployment or for the overcoming of economic inequalities affecting these vulnerable groups cannot be established without bearing in mind that the key element in society is education.

Many of the measures or actions which are contributing to overcome the situation of exclusion of the Roma people in education or in the labour market are not designed neither implemented by public policies but by organizations and associations from the civil society. In this paper we focus on the attention in one of these measures analysed by the
SOLIDUS project as a successful solidarity action, with impact in the creation of employment for these women and in transforming their lives.

**Roma discrimination**

Roma people have suffered a long history of discrimination, which is still prevalent in European societies today (European Commission 2004). The international academic literature contains several analyses of the discrimination that Roma people face (Barany 1994; Bhopal 2004); various authors describe the conflicts Roma women face, focusing on the effect of taboos within their own community and on the stereotypes promoted by the non-Roma population (Okely 1996).

These stereotypes can also emerge in education and in the labour market and may have an impact on the way Roma girls and women define their identities and build up their life trajectories. In this regard, various scholars have explored how education either promotes or hinders the development of women’s gender-related and cultural identities in different cultural groups (Ahmad 2001; Gaganakis 2006; Levinson and Sparkes 2006). Levinson and Sparkes (2006), for example, show how young Roma women who continue to attend school in England engage in a process of reassessing the validity in their own lives of the value systems they learn in schools and in the family context.

Roma women do not always find conditions in education that enable them to strengthen their Roma identities and overcome the inequalities many of them live with (Sordé 2006). School and labour market discrimination, a lack of awareness of Roma cultural reality, and the absence of female academic role models all have a deep impact on Roma girls throughout their lives. Indeed, Roma women’s experience of discrimination also in the labour market is profoundly influenced by the gender dimension (Fernandez et al. 2004). This is partly due to a tendency towards segregation and to the existence of stereotypes about Roma girls and women, two signs of the institutionalised discrimination they face (De Botton et al. 2005).

In the following section we focus on the attention in one successful action promoted by the Drom Kotar Mestipen association analysed in the SOLIDUS project which is contributing to promote employment among Roma women. This Roma association of
women is an example of how solidarity among women can contribute to overcome inequalities that Roma women are facing in the labour market.

**Research methodology**

This paper is framed in the RTD SOLIDUS project. Information is collected from a metanalysis of previous researches which have been analysed with the aim to analyse a successful action based on solidarity which are contributing to improve the labour conditions of women belonging to a minority group. Data from Roma women is analysed from qualitative data collected in two research phases carried out to analyse inequalities affecting Roma women in Spain\(^3\) (Aubert 2008). In both cases, the methodological approach allowed Roma women to participate actively in the whole research process, monitoring the work and the results obtained. This critical communicative methodology (Flecha 2004; Gómez et al. 2006) ensured that the voices of Roma women were considered significant not just as a source of information, but also as a key factor in all stages of the research process (from the design of the research project to the interpretation of findings).

This communicative approach assumes that members of the target communities will participate alongside the researchers, for example by creating specific bodies such as the advisory councils made up of Roma women. In this case they monitored the entire study, in order to achieve the research objective, contrast researchers’ views and contribute to analyse the way Roma women and girls overcome the barriers they face in various social and educational spheres. The methodology also allows researchers and Roma women to interpret the data collected and prepare their conclusions together, taking into account both the scientific knowledge contributed by the researchers and the women’s interpretations and experiences.

Specifically, the data supporting the main arguments of this paper were obtained from 40 communicative daily-life stories, 5 communicative discussion groups and 15 in-depth

interviews with Roma women. All the quotes included in this paper are from the subjects.

A case: one successful action promoted by the Drom Kotar Mestipen

The Training Course for Supervisors of School Canteens, organized by Drom Kotar Mestipen started in 2004. It provides a clear example of an educational service created by a Roma women’s association in Spain. The Association of Roma Women Drom Kotar Mestipen is a non-profit organization created during the last months of 1999. The Association brings together Roma and non-Roma women with diverse characteristics (age, academic levels, professions, etc.) who fight for equality and work together to reach a common goal. The main aim is the promotion of Roma women and the community while encouraging them to not renounce their identity. It is a national organization, carrying its activities mainly at a regional level. The Drom Kotar Mestipen was created to overcome the triple exclusion suffered by Roma women: for being women (gender discrimination) belonging to an ethnic minority group (ethnic exclusion) that have been deprived of adequate access to the education (academic filter). It works with the promotion of social, political and economic opportunities for the Roma women, Roma identity and Roma adult education⁴.

The design of this training programme is based mainly on direct dialogue with Roma women, and it seeks to increase the numbers of Roma working in school contexts by training them to work as assistants at lunchtimes and break times or as canteen supervisors. Each course consists of 305 training hours including both practical and theoretical sessions; on completing the course, participants are awarded an official qualification by the regional authorities. When Roma women experience environments that are managed in ways that support equality of difference (cultural differences are celebrated and the participants can experience them from a position of equality), they begin to demand the same advantages in other spaces. Many of the participants expressed their appreciation of contexts where others listen to their voices with respect, and where they can contribute without giving up their identity (De Botton et al. 2005). Berta (32 years old) explains this idea in her own words:

⁴ http://dromkotar.org/en/?page_id=497
Being a Roma woman is something you feel very deeply. You have customs and ways of thinking (...) as a non-Roma woman, you are neither better nor worse, you are different. But Roma women are changing, the world is changing and we want to change with the world. And we want to work and we want to have our independence but,...yes, it is very important, not to give up on being Roma women and to hold onto our customs and our laws (...) (RMGNP32).

Roma women are well aware of the way ethnicity intersects with gender in shaping the prejudice that places them in a situation of greater vulnerability. Elena (aged 42) reflects on the discrimination suffered by Roma women in educational contexts and in the labour market:

Yes, we [Roma women] do not do as well with education, and I will tell you why: because we know we are wasting our time. At least, we think, for example, that in the same conditions, between you and me, they [employers] are going to choose you before choosing me (...) and I'm a Roma woman and they will choose you before choosing me. We know this. I am sure! (RMGNP42)

It is especially important for many Roma women to seek out educational practices that allow them to overcome barriers, and they have begun to reflect on the opportunities that such initiatives may hold out.

Our analysis also reveals how this equality of difference has been achieved by involving Roma women in this training course for supervisors of school canteens. As this programme encourages the Roma women to recognise their own needs, it has an important impact on their lives. Hence, it represents a step towards greater equality between Roma and non-Roma women. This training programme has had a substantial impact by raising the profile of Roma in school environments, at the same time improving their opportunities of finding work. Nearly all of the Roma women attending this course in previous years have found work with companies managing canteen services in schools or are in the process of doing so. A key element of the course design is that it should take account of needs directly expressed by Roma women and thus should respond successfully to their expectations. As Berta affirms:

And now, for example, there are more girls who want to enrol in this training programme. (...). So, I think Roma women feel integrated, to begin with,...my niece who was doing nothing. I think that if they want to start, and later....they
are young, from here they can make a start and open up new paths. They don’t have to be blocked there, I think (RMGNP32).

By participating in this course, some Roma women have gained opportunities to be heard as equals in schools, because they are starting to perform a different role both as mothers and as professionals involved in educational processes. Indeed, many people in schools are breaking down their stereotypical images of Roma women; by participating the women contribute to their improved and positive coexistence in schools and help Roma girls to become more motivated to learn, because they have familiar role models. In addition, some Roma women greatly value these achievements because they have a real impact in their daily lives, opening up opportunities for them to work outside the family domain. Berta’s remarks are revealing:

As a school canteen assistant, or break-time assistant if you want. But I have been contracted as a school canteen assistant. I’m out of the home for about two or three hours (…) Exactly, I think that’s right, I think so. And it’s not just cleaning, it’s aspiring to something else (RMGNP32).

By taking on these jobs, Roma women are gaining autonomy and financial independence. Some are able to take on activities that were systematically denied to them in the past because of the sexism, racism and other forms of discrimination they suffer in their communities and in the wider society. As Berta goes on to say:

I am now working as a school canteen assistant, and I feel great (…) And it is not because of the money I earn, which is helpful, but because I feel I am able to have a job as well as taking care of my home. And that means a lot. Maybe Roma women don’t feel they can work and be at home (…) I want stability, to know for sure that I am going to have that money today, and to be able to manage it(…) (RMGNP32).

Some feminists (De Botton et al. 2005; hooks 1984) have highlighted the need to consider each woman and her struggle in her own context, and to be aware of the added obstacles facing some specific groups of mainly non-academic women, especially those belonging
to minority groups. While women in more privileged positions can focus their feminist action on overcoming gender inequalities such as the pay gap in some professions, other women have to overcome other, more basic obstacles. De Botton et al. (2005: 142) put this well:

When [“other women”, those without academic degrees] ask academics why they do not listen to the opinions of “housewives” and why their choice of lifestyle is not respected, the answer they receive is: “we are all housewives”. This statement ignores the added obstacles that non-academic women have to face to gain recognition and respect (De Botton et al., 2005: 142)

Though Roma women may want to continue making steps towards better social and labour conditions, the chance to participate in the labour market is an important achievement, because it has a real impact on their daily lives and on the lives of their daughters.

**Conclusions**

In this paper we have analysed one successful action of solidarity promoted by a Roma association of women which allow Roma women to seek opportunities to overcome their marginalisation in education and in the labour market. Drawing mainly on the evidence provided by Roma women in Spain, we found that in these contexts Roma women start by getting themselves heard and go on to translate their demands into practical action.

On one hand, because in this training course based on the “equality of difference”, they aim to improve the opportunities for Roma women to be included as equals in domains where important decisions are taken that affect their lives. At the same time, this condition allows Roma women to be valued precisely for their difference. In fact, Roma women refuse to be excluded from decision-making processes, but at the same time they do not want to be forced to give up any part of their gender or cultural identity as the price for their inclusion in public spaces.
On the other hand, when Roma women are presented with real opportunities for transformation, they are able to challenge existing structures and to suggest ways of reorganising practices in order to provide better responses to Roma women needs. This has encouraged Roma women to become committed, active agents in developing actions from their own perspective.

A further interesting point arises from this analysis of Roma women’s voices: their claims have recently driven a rapid process of transformation. Given the right conditions, then, Roma women are perfectly capable of deciding what changes they want to promote in their lives and communities, and how they want to implement change.
References


