Ekumenska
Humanitarna
Organizacija

Diakonie
Württemberg

**AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE
CONFERENCE**

**Poverty & Educational
Deprivation of Roma
Children – Challenges during
COVID19 pandemic before
and after 2022**

**22-23 September 2022,
Novi Sad, Serbia**

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Day 1

"POVERTY & EDUCATIONAL
DEPRIVATION OF ROMA CHILDREN -
CHALLENGES DURING COVID19
PANDEMIC BEFORE AND AFTER 2022"

- Despite multiple challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on all levels and in all social strata, the efforts to include Roma children into the educational system have not decreased. On the contrary: there have been apparent steps forward in this segment of education and civil society engagement advocating for the welfare of socially vulnerable groups, including the Roma community, most particularly its children and youth;

- The key features of such efforts under the new, pandemic-induced circumstances, are creativity and innovation resulting from the need to overcome additional challenges, such as the following:

  o Adapting to the new reality of school attendance (e- and distance learning);

  o Inability to access and/or use e-learning opportunities due to:

    - Lack of (access to) e-learning equipment;

    - Lack of knowledge (among pupils, students and parents) and expertise (among teachers) pertaining to using e-learning technologies and tools;

    - Lack of resources to provide (for) e-learning equipment and assistance in learning how to use it within the regular / state school system;

- - Living in substandard settlements with no electricity;
- - Socio-culturally conditioned limiting circumstances, such as discrimination and segregation, wrongly perceived as exclusive to the Roma community and uncritically attributed to it (such as early drop-out, child marriages and child labor, etc.);
- o Necessity for new, innovative and accessible e-learning programs for all school-attending children and youth;
- • The COVID-19 pandemic has, once again, highlighted the extent of social deprivation of Roma children and youth in all fields pertaining to Roma welfare[1]. There is a lack of safe spaces to tackle challenging - even taboo - issues such as child marriage, children living and/or working in the street or the 'invisible citizens' phenomenon;
- • Despite the existing policies, mechanisms and programs aimed at empowerment of the Roma community, their implementation is inadequate (partial, slow or non-existent). Care must be taken that, once it does take place, it does not create additional detrimental effects on account of public perception or welfare of the Roma community (e.g. resentment of other socially vulnerable groups or the majority due to 'assisting only Roma' as they often perceive Roma programs);
- • There is a variety of target groups (potentially) participating in programs aimed at increased inclusion of Roma children and youth in education and advancement of their position within it, facilitating also completion of their education (i.e. preventing drop-out) and creating an anti-discriminatory social environment for it:

1 Most notably access to education, welfare / social services, healthcare, housing and, prospectively, the labor market.

- o *Children and youth* (Roma, socially vulnerable non-Roma, majority);
- o *Parents* (Roma, socially vulnerable non-Roma, majority);
- o *Education system employees* (teachers, psychologists and pedagogues, non-teaching staff);
- o *Employees in the institutions* (most notably in the public administration, possibly also the judiciary);
- o *Wider community* (the media and the general public);
- • It is important to share experience in this field among practitioners and experts, especially about the examples of good practice that may be spread into other local and wider communities.

Day 2

- • Roma children and youth programs are a powerful tool for their social inclusion and integration, especially in education. By their very nature, they are also an empowerment tool for and within Roma communities themselves;
- • With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, such programs have also raised the issue of the so-called political will to set aside resources in a way that would provide for an efficient, effective, non-discriminatory and sustainable implementation of the existing Roma-related policies, as well as the aforementioned programs;
- • The key challenges to successful implementation of programs fostering social empowerment and education of Roma children are the following:

- o *Policy implementation* - Institutions at the middle and national level are perceived as rigid, which impacts sustainability of Roma programs implemented locally and supported by the local institutions / authorities as well;[2]
- o *Inter-sectoral coordination* - Esp. at the local level due to lack of effectiveness in specific situations;
- o *Lack of expertise in institutions* - Employees in them, esp. public servants, are not sensitive to social vulnerability and/or Roma issues;
- o *A trend of 'discrimination normalization'* - Due to prevalence of prejudices and stereotypes towards the Roma community, there are two types of this trend:
  - - The 'non-Roma' consider that it 'normal' to perceive and treat the

2 See also conclusions of day 1, point No. 4.

Roma in a way that contributes to their disadvantaged social position;

- Auto-discrimination - Under such treatment by the 'non-Roma, members of the Roma community, esp. children, start perceiving themselves as less valuable, ever underachieving human beings incapable of ever rising above their social vulnerability;

- Due to diversities within the Roma community itself, it is important to have an individual approach to Roma children and youth education instead of treating them as all belonging to a single, monolith socially vulnerable group. Moreover, social exclusion should be perceived as an indicator of a 'poorly functioning society', not individual poverty as a welfare indicator of its individual citizens;

- Due to the special nature of Roma culture, diversified in itself, yet which the Roma perceive and resort to as a 'safe space' from discrimination, it is important to work with the parents of Roma children and youth, explaining that education is the most reasonable and accessible way for their children and families to rise above social vulnerability long-term;

- Bearing all the aforementioned in mind, there is a need for all the relevant social actors in the field of Roma education and welfare to act upon the following:

  o Acknowledge the special place and power culture has within Roma communities;

  o Acknowledge that more and more Roma students enroll and finish university-level education;

  o Demand accountability from institutions with a mandate to deal with social vulnerability issues, including Roma issues, based on grassroots achievements (most notably those of CSOs);

  o Acknowledge the existence of a number of innovative initiatives that first targeted the Roma community and its children and youth that could be useful to other socially vulnerable groups in
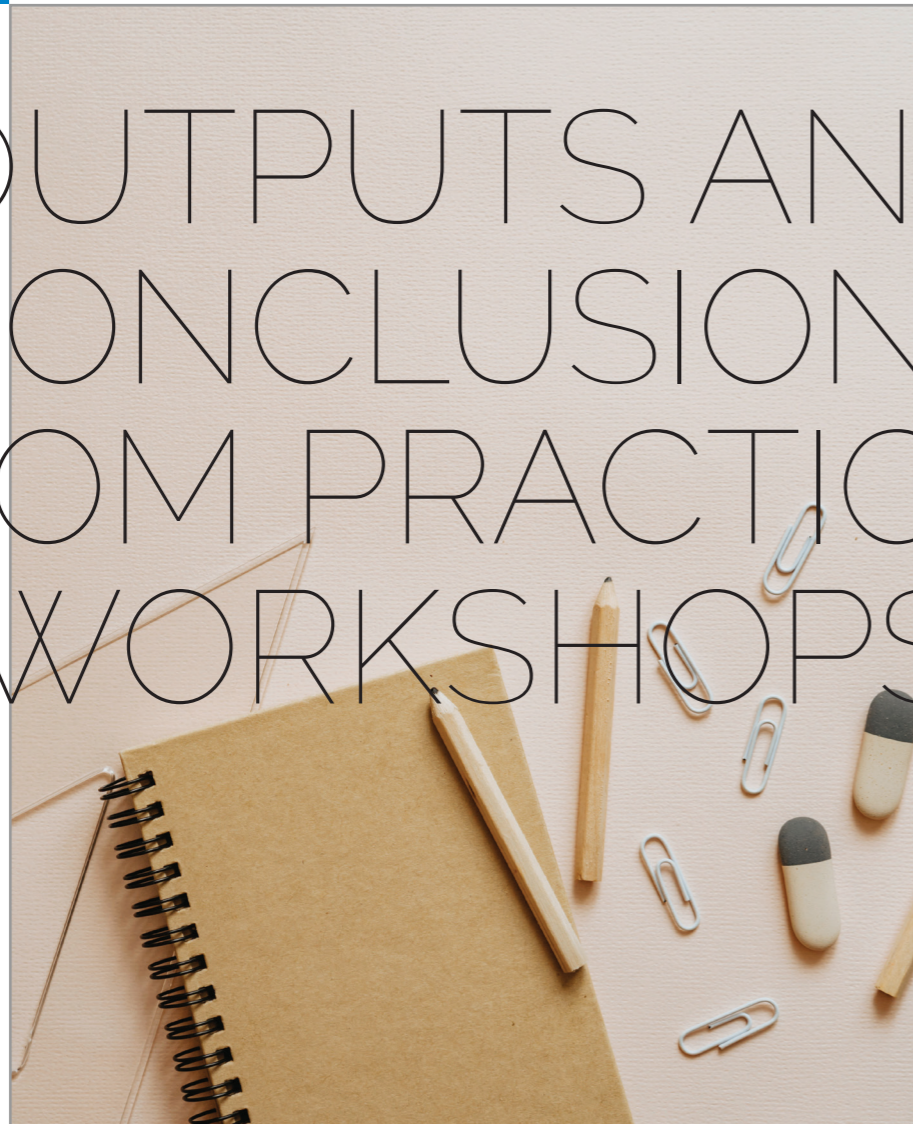

a way that sets examples and/or creates role models for sustainable future action;

o Create more forward-looking, preventative (rather than *post festum*) inter-sectoral activities, esp. in healthcare, education and welfare (e.g. re. reproductive health, juvenile pregnancy, child marriages, etc.);

o Provide more effective ways of access to information (about human and citizens' rights, the existing support services, opportunities, etc.);

o Use CSOs as mediators, not substitutes of either institutions (in the role of service-providers, making the institutions even less active and/or accountable) or the members of the Roma (by doing things instead of them and thus 'infantilizing' them, discouraging them from being proactive in claiming their rights, making them even more dependent on 'external' assistance, undermining their self-confidence, etc.).

OUTPUTS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM PRACTICAL WORKSHOPS

SOCIALLY DEPRIVED CHILDREN: PROACTIVE RESPONSE

1st GROUP - OPPORTUNITIES:

- **Peer to peer support** – help by writing the homework, answering questions, that the child would be too shy to ask; help by learning, get them prepared for lessons; building a relationship and friendships among the peer group
- **Intersectoral cooperation** – exchanging the data, information, practices and programmes dedicated to Roma children and their active support with their educational needs. This means cooperation among all actors in local communities (public / private/ civil sectors).
- **Memorandum of cooperation** – among several organisations and institutions there can be a memorandum to cooperate in order to improve the children's education to wary programmes and activities.
- **Active development to education** = it is necessary to revision the curriculum and techniques and apply new methods and themes in order to motivate students and bring a new dynamic into education
- **Volunteer approach**– one on one work with children, help with homework, learning for school, building up trust for children; for volunteers – promoting altruistic values, investing , their capacities and knowledge into community development,
- More support for Roma children in educating process through **scholarship programme** on local and national level
- understanding of the importance of education by both parents and children via conducting **research studies and Monitoring and observation activities**
- **Incentives** (material, food)
- The **''second chance'' programs, vocational training and prequalification education** of parents in order to ensure functional literacy and labor market access.
- **Affirmative measures for Roma children and students** in order to motivate their educational path with ensuring travel to school and to home
- **a network of local resources** for supporting Roma children (NGOs, institutions, other local actors)
- prevent Roma in passive position (**peer to peer approach and active involvement** of beneficiaries **for and with Roma**)
- **EU programmes and measures** for active prevention discrimination and Antigypsysm (Europe for Citizens, Erasmus plus programme, etc.)
- **Advocacy and media campaigns and actions in local communities that focus on:**
    o   providing antidiscriminatory training for all
    o   use different capacities from school – outdoor classroom concept
    o   tutoring/ teaching in native language
    o   toy library
- **Network of learning centers** – spaces in local communities where tutors and volunteers providing additional educational support to Roma children and monitoring their progress in school.
- **summer support programme** (camps and summer schools, etc.) that are organized by institutions and civil society organizations in local communities
- Promoting **Roma role models** in local communities in order to motivate Roma children to reach their aspirations and continue their education.

2ND GROUP - CHALLENGES OF DEPRIVED CHILDREN : PROACTIVE RESPONSE

- **Lack of information – transition from preschool to school** - The fact is, that many parents do not know what documents are needed when their children enroll in the first grade of elementary school.
- **Not educated parents** - Parents who did not go to school themselves and do not see the importance of education, and that's why they don't send their children to school.
- **Lack of professional help** – it is related to institutions that should help socially vulnerable groups more and continuously.
- **Different starting positions of Roma children** – Not everyone has the same starting position in life. It is often said that the best way out of poverty is education, but the fact that Roma children do not have the same starting positions cannot be ignored. It is not the same when a child leaves an unhygienic Roma settlement, where there is no electricity, water or asphalt, and thus goes to school.
- **Invisible youth** – In the Roma community, there is no attention to the needs of young people and young people are often not recognized, and the period of youth is somehow neglected. The elderly do not know what the needs of the young are.
- **Prejudices, racism, discrimination and Gypsyism** - Anti-Roma prejudice, discrimination and crimes must be tackled by a combination of legal responses, training of public authorities, legal professionals and law enforcement bodies, capacity-building of civil society, as well as educational and awareness-raising initiatives.
- **lack of communication between institutions and CSO**
- **Lack of time to work** - Some parents do not have time to work and study with their children, i.e. To help them in that, because they have to provide the necessities of life for survival. Interventions might be:
    - to support and supervisees of parents and capacity building their competencies for bigger support of their kids
    - to work with individuals (parents and kids) parallel.
- **Roma mimicry** - Many Roma during the previous and current population censuses do not declare that they are Roma or say that they are of some other nationality due to great stigma, social pressure and eventual preventive reasons related to avoiding public discrimination.
- **Poverty and Discrimination -** Roma children living in extreme poverty are often subjected to a life of family alienation, abuse, child labor, illiteracy, long-term unemployment and homelessness.
- **Children work** and children in street situations - These children have had their most basic rights violated, making them extremely exposed to a variety of events that might harm their life, survival, and growth. These can include child labor exploitation, child trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation, drug trafficking, drug misuse, participation in criminal activities and drop out from school system.
- **Lack of personal documentation** – mnogi Romi I danas nemaju lična dokumenta The Roma minority is at particular risk for statelessness because they move frequently, they often have a careless attitude towards documents, and they do not have enough education to understand bureaucratic procedures.
- **Illegal settlements** – Many Roma still live in illegal settlements, which makes it difficult to have adequate infrastructure and basic necessities for life (electricity, water, asphalt, etc.)

II DAY OF PRACTICAL WORKSHOP -

INTERSECTORAL APPROACH TO CHILDREN FROM MULTIPLY DEPRIVED SOCIAL GROUPS

1st GROUP - Local intersectoral cooperation

- **Initiating activities to establish a multi-sectoral and intersectoral cooperation** institutions towards the implementation of inclusive practice in education

- Local intersectoral cooperation should focus on programmes and activities related to **Roma education, family empowering and child protection**

- Local intersectoral cooperation should refer on c**onnections among different systems and stakeholders** in local community (education, health, social field)

- It is necessary to **improve accessing services** to Roma, especially for Roma children in order to continue their personal and social development

- **Modeling community** for access to different services for children and family

- **Outsourcing services** in different sector in order to better response on beneficiaries needs and stranger support.

- Mapping and promote examples of good practice in the country and the region in the field of Roma education through intersectoral approach

- **Motivating of local administration** for the **mass inclusion of Roma children in early childhood development** programs

2ND GROUP - WELFARE / SOCIAL SERVICES AND PROTECTION

- Access to services
- Policy/ legislation and Advocacy

Barriers for Intersectoral approach to Roma children

- **Lack of information** - Institutions are not interested in Roma as a vulnerable group (they should be on paper but are not in reality). Many Roma do not know exactly what each institution is competent and responsible for, its field of action and how it could help them.
- **Lack of implementation of legislation** - the institutions do not enforce laws, which we can see on the example of child marriage.
- **Misunderstanding** - Misunderstanding due to not understanding the language or due to not understanding of the terms with which the authorities are addressing them.
- **Long procedures** for achieving their social and educational rights
- **Language barriers** - there is no systematical cherishing Roma language and culture in the schools and that is limitations for children who are not able to speak dominant languages in local communities.
- **Discrimination and anti-Gypsyism** as barriers for Roma inclusion and access to education
- **Roma voices not loud enough** -Roma are not loud enough and persistent in what they want to achieve, on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is the institutions that (sometimes) stifle those voices (discrimination).
- **Poor access to institutions** - due to the aforementioned discrimination, misunderstanding of the institutions due to the language barrier or its carelessness. In that case, users lose both self-confidence and motivation for further contact and cooperation with the institutions.
- Prejudice and stereotypes
- **Ignoring responsibility (child marriages)**- Institutions distance themselves from their responsibility under the pretext that child marriages are a tradition among Roma.
- **Roma children in schools for children with disabilities** - children of Roma nationality are sent to these schools only because they do not understand the language in which they are taught, not because they need to attend a school for children with disabilities..
- **Quality education – instead of access!** - This is when schools give parents a certificate that the child attends classes only so that the parent receives social assistance and child allowance, regardless of the fact that the child does not actually come to school regularly, which automatically raises the question of the quality of the child's education.

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