

United Nations Children's Fund  
Central and Eastern Europe  
Commonwealth of Independent states

Palais des Nations  
CH-1211 Geneva 10  
Visitors: 5-7 ave de la Paix  
Telephone +41 22 909 5111  
Fax +41 22 909 5909  
Web site : [www.unicef.org/ceecis](http://www.unicef.org/ceecis)



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**Romani Children in South East Europe**  
**The challenge of overcoming centuries of**  
**distrust and discrimination**

The study “Romani Children in South East Europe. The challenge of overcoming centuries of distrust and discrimination” has been prepared by Petra Hoelscher, UNICEF Regional Office for CEE/CIS.

Edited by Janet Nelson.

Layout by Megumi Kato.

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ALBANIA 2004: A mother and her children in Bregu I Lumit, on the outskirts of the capital,  
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## Executive Summary

Research on the situation of Romani children in South East Europe indicates that they experience human rights abuses on a large scale. In every country, they are the ones that are the most vulnerable to poverty, deprivation, and lack of access to healthcare and education. Every new generation is at risk of being left out, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

Though the extent of the problem is unknown, a significant percentage of Roma lack personal identify documents. The impact on children can be dramatic, limiting their access to healthcare, education and social services.

The poverty rates among Roma are four times higher than for non-Romani households in the same community, pointing to structural and societal processes that continue to exclude Roma from the mainstream labour market. Segregation into substandard and sometimes isolated housing not only increases health and security risks but also impedes equal access to transport, healthcare, education, employment and other social services.

Because health and nutrition indicators are not often disaggregated by ethnicity or socio-economic background, no specific data is available on Romani children. Recent surveys would indicate, however, much higher rates of ill health among Romani children than the general population.

The school enrolment rates for Romani children are likewise much lower. To further aggravate the situation, Romani children are routinely assigned to remedial schools or segregated Romani

classes, which provide a lower-quality education. Drop-out rates are high, especially for girls.

Although Romani children benefit from a strong network of family and community ties, unemployment, deprivation, and discrimination impact on their quality. These factors can lead to higher than average levels of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, child maltreatment and neglect. Poverty also increases the risk of children being forced to beg or to work to help the family survive, or worse, living on the streets or being trafficked.

Following a high-level conference on ‘Roma in an expanding Europe’ in 2003, the governments of South East Europe developed 10-year National Action Plans (NAPs) that focus on four priority areas: housing, employment, health, and education. Bulgaria and Romania have also prepared ‘National Reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion,’ which include specific references to the Roma. And Croatia has a National Programme for Roma.

Efforts to address the issue of personal identity documents are featured in only two of these national plans – Romania and Croatia.

All of the NAPs aim at increasing the ‘employability’ of Roma through four main areas of intervention: training, creating employment opportunities, supporting self-employment and business start-ups and – to a much lesser extent – initiating system reforms. Greater efforts will nevertheless be needed to address the widespread discrimination. While some NAPs explicitly target women’s participation in the labour market, none refer at all to children’s needs, such as the provision of childcare for working parents.

All NAPs include measures to improve the living conditions and infrastructure in Romani settlements, connecting the houses to basic services as well as improving the roads. None of the Action Plans account for the needs of children, such as outdoor safety, spaces to play, access to transport, and recreational and sport facilities.

The mix of proposed health policies focuses on screening and monitoring of the health status of Roma, information and preventative measures, vaccination, improvement of access to health care - particularly for children and women - and the involvement of Roma as health mediators or health care workers.

The educational strategies seem to be the most developed and funded. All of the NAPs recognize the need to train educational staff to offer an education that is more inclusive and sensitive to the needs and cultures of all children. Governments are engaged in desegregating Roma-only schools and introducing into the mainstream system those Romani children who were wrongly placed in special education. The NAPs also plan campaigns to counter stigmatisation and discrimination. There is also a broad consensus on the importance of preschool education, with all countries aiming at increasing the participation of Romani children.

## **Recommendations for action**

### ***Improved data collection for planning and monitoring progress***

- Administrative data needs to be routinely disaggregated for age, gender, ethnicity, and locality (urban/rural). Data should additionally be collected in

dimensions of child well-being that are not currently covered.

- Existing household panel and survey data should be re-assessed for available data on children, and child-specific indicators should be strengthened in future questionnaires. New surveys in countries with large Romani populations should consider oversampling.
- The monitoring of the situation of children should cover different dimensions of their well-being and whenever possible draw on children's views and experiences.
- New research should be participatory and allow comparisons with the majority population.
- The ombudsperson system should focus on the situation of Romani children as one of the most vulnerable groups in the population.

### ***Ending discrimination***

- Because of the potential resistance from local authorities to national strategies, clearer mechanisms of accountability, and for the identification of gaps and strategies to address them, need to be established and adequate funding provided.
- Governments need to ensure that all children are registered at birth and that the status of Romani children and their parents is regularised. Barriers in the access to personal documents need to be addressed urgently.
- Mechanisms for ongoing consultations with all members of Romani communities, including children, need to be developed to ensure that due attention is given

to children's needs in the improvement of housing and the surrounding neighbourhood.

- Schools need to become agents of change and commit themselves to becoming inclusive for all children, using more flexible teaching methods and clear processes for classroom management, in which the children can participate.
- Because of the interrelationships between poverty and deprivation, low educational achievement, poor health, lack of employment and poor living conditions, sustainable improvements in the lives of Roma can only be achieved through coherent, cross-sectoral approaches, which actively involve the Romani community.

### ***Ensuring the realisation of all rights for all children***

An integrated and comprehensive set of child- and family-friendly policies and strategies are needed that:

- prioritise the reduction of child poverty and deprivation and ensure that all children's basic needs are met;
- improve the provision and accessibility of affordable childcare, in particular for children in poverty and in rural areas;
- are informed and influenced by the participation of children and their families, including from vulnerable and excluded groups of the population.

## Introduction

### The challenge: overcoming centuries of distrust and discrimination

*“There is a lot of prejudice and discrimination against Roma\* in my country. We find it hard to do things that others take for granted. It’s difficult to get your child into a good school and higher education is often an unattainable goal. There are problems with housing because no-one wants Roma in their neighbourhood.*

*We encounter problems because of who we are every day, and we want to do something about it. Our government turns a blind eye to racial crimes committed against Roma. Quite often we have problems with the police; they suspect we are all criminals...*

*We don’t want to be given preferential treatment - we just want the same opportunities as everyone else.”<sup>1</sup>*

This statement by a young Romani man describes well the situation that many Roma continue to face in South East Europe. The negative stereotypes that he perceives are real: they are clearly expressed in this statement by a local decision-maker: *“They’re used to poor living conditions and lack of hygiene. They’re not used to working hard, they*

*make their children beg and steal, and they have a tendency towards aggressive and criminal behaviour. Maybe they’re good parents – they’re cheerful enough - but they show their love for their children in ways we don’t understand.”<sup>2</sup>* The negative stereotypes which are attached to Roma (with the exception of their music !) are thus so pervasive that they influence every aspect of their lives, and result in widespread discrimination.

The challenge is thus enormous: centuries of social exclusion, discrimination and disempowerment are a legacy that is difficult to overcome. And although often accused of preferring to remain separate, the Roma clearly aspire to an equal status in society: *“Somebody should care about us, whether we are Macedonian or Roma, but we don’t trust anyone to do this.”<sup>3</sup>* Tragically, although often justified, this distrust nevertheless only serves to reinforce the processes of social exclusion from which the Roma suffer.

As a result, Romani children experience human rights abuses on a large scale. Within every country in South East Europe, they are the ones that are the most vulnerable to poverty, deprivation, and lack of access to healthcare and education. Every new generation is at risk of being left out, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

The beginnings of a transformation are nevertheless taking place. Over the past decade, the major inter-governmental institutions within Europe - the European

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\* The term Roma refers to an ethnic group which emigrated from Northwestern India into the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the Americas in the 11th century.

<sup>1</sup> Alvaro Gil-Robles, Final Report on the Human Rights Situation of the Roma, Sinti and Travellers in Europe, Council of Europe, 15 February 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Non-Roma Decision Maker, Serbia (UNICEF 2006b)

<sup>3</sup> Roma, Macedonia (Open Society Institute 2005a)

Union, the Council of Europe, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe - have all focused attention on the need for their Member States to urgently take action to combat the widespread discrimination against the Roma. However, the discourse tends to follow a very predictable pattern, either addressing Roma as a 'problem' group, or as 'victims' at the hands of the majority. In both cases, a divide is maintained between Roma and the rest of the population.

Overcoming this divide will require a change in the discourse. It will require a dialogue on equal terms between Roma and the majority society on their respective rights and obligations, in every country in which they live. Only in this way can sustainable change be brought about.

Aware of the need to improve the living conditions of their Romani populations, all of the countries in South East Europe have now developed government plans of one type or the other. Seven of the countries - along with two Central European countries - have adopted a Decade of Roma Inclusion for 2005-2015. These nine countries are: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. All but Romania have now prepared National Action Plans (NAPs).

The first section of this report provides an overview of the situation of Romani children in South East Europe, based on available data. The report then examines the various national action plans, from the point of view of their potential for ensuring the realization of Romani children's rights.

It then puts forward a number of recommendations for strengthening the effectiveness of government action, in the aim of sustainable progress for children.

## **Part 1**

### **The situation of Romani children: poverty and little access to public services**

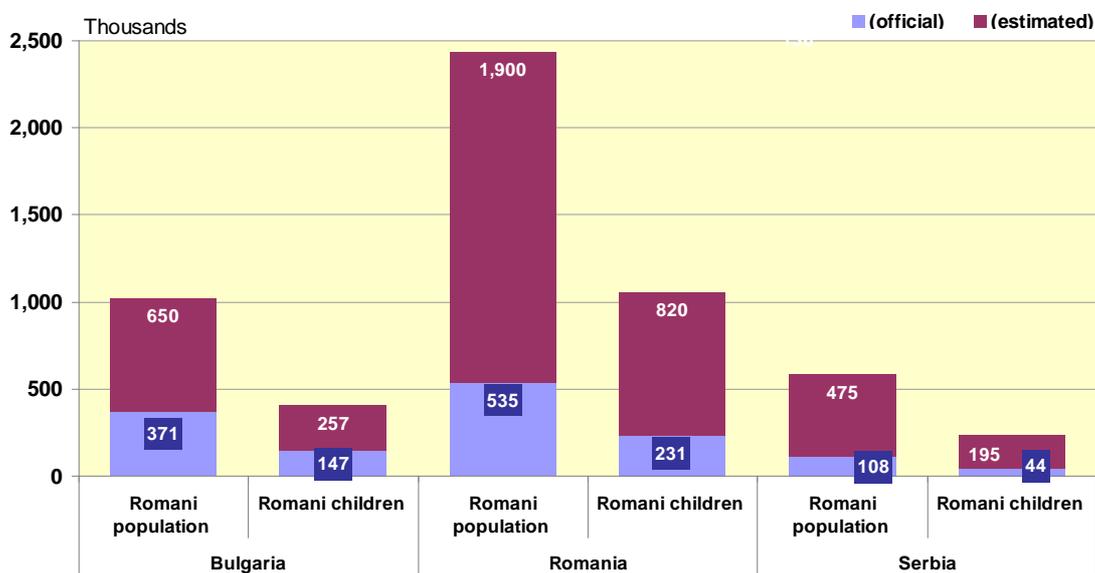
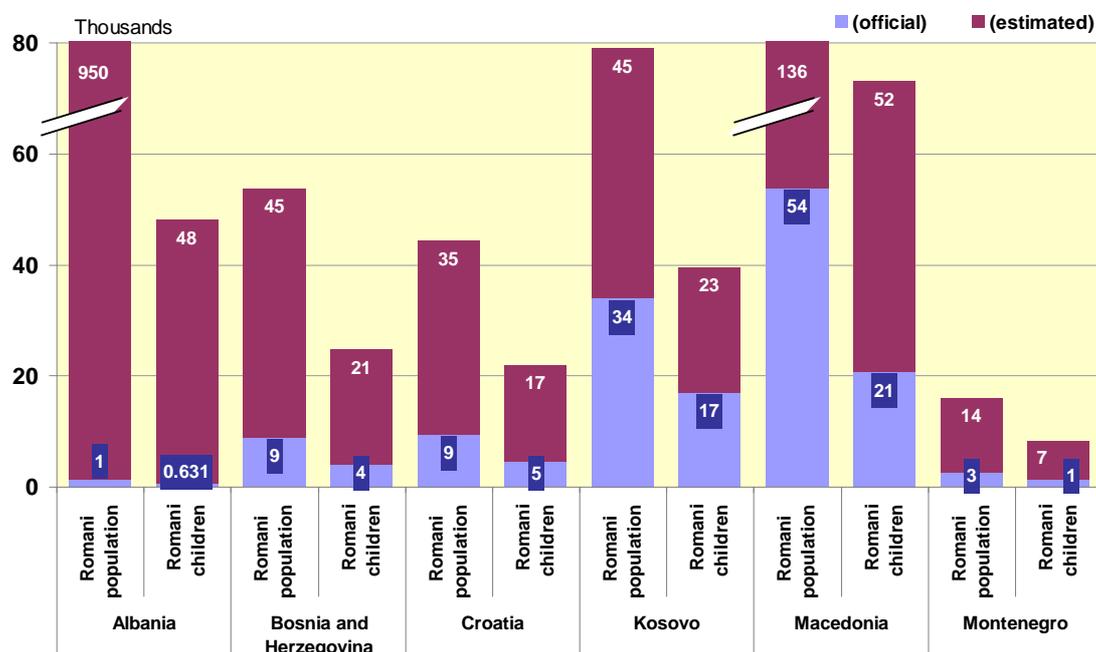
#### ***Exact size of Romani population unknown***

There is no exact data on the size of Romani populations in South East Europe. In some cases, this is because Roma are included with other groups under the general category of 'other minorities'. In other cases, Roma are substantially underrepresented in official census data, for a variety of reasons:

- they are not always registered (see below),
- some Roma do not want to identify themselves as such,
- there are differences in the definitions of 'Roma' (Albania, for example, only recognises Roma as a linguistic minority).

The following charts provide an overview of the size of the Romani population in South East Europe, based on both official census data and expert estimates. The number of children is expressed as a range, with the lower figure based on official data and the higher on estimates. The percentage of Roma that are under the age of 18 is based on the official figure.

Figure 1: Relative size of Romani populations<sup>4</sup>



Note: Romani children = Romani children under the age of 18.

Source: Open Society Institute 2006

<sup>4</sup> In all graphs and tables the UN Administered Entity of Kosovo is listed as 'Kosovo' and the FYR Macedonia is shown as 'Macedonia'.

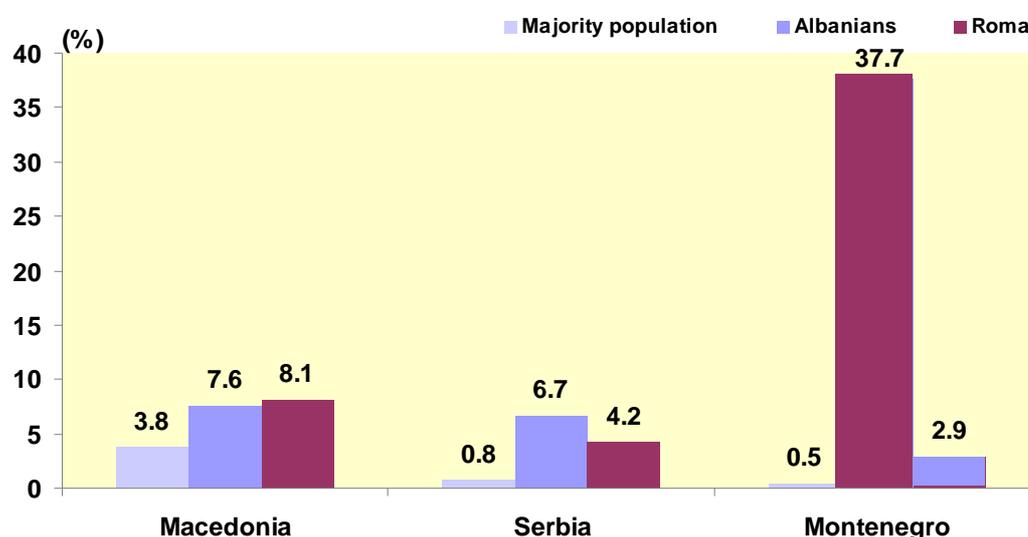
As can be seen, a large percentage of the Roma appear to be under the age of 18, making the Romani minorities much younger than the general population of the countries in which they live. No data is available on Romani fertility rates and life expectancy as compared to the majority population. However, data collected by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reveals that Romani households have more children than the majority households (1.7 vs. 0.7).<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the available census data points to a lower life expectancy: in FYR Macedonia, 10.4 per cent of the overall population are aged 65 or above, as compared to only 3.7 per cent of the Roma. Similarly, in Romania, 13.9 per cent of the overall population is over 65, but only 3.3 per cent of the Roma.

### ***For too many, invisibility for lack of identity documents***

Many Roma lack personal identity documents. Little information, however, is available on the extent of the problem. In Romania, for example, it is only an estimate that 10 per cent of Roma have no identity documents, while 2.4 per cent have no birth certificate.<sup>6</sup> MICS 2005 data shows that in FYR Macedonia and Serbia Romani along with Albanian children are the least likely to be registered at birth, while more than a third of Romani children in Montenegro had no birth registration. Other ethnic groups were comparable to the majority population and are not included in the following graph.

Figure 2: Children aged 0-59 months without birth registration



Source: MICS 2005

<sup>5</sup> UNDP 2006. This rate is based on all households – including those without children.

<sup>6</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2006

This situation is the result of a number of factors. Roma living in informal settlements often have difficulties in obtaining a residence permit and ID card. This in turn may make it impossible to register the birth of a child and obtain a birth certificate. Family displacement during the Balkan wars further increased the number of Romani children without birth certificates. As a result of their displacement, it was often difficult for parents to obtain personal documents – or even citizenship. The result is that many Romani children and young people were left unregistered.

But even if parents have identity documents, they can face other obstacles in registering their children. A study on Roma in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>7</sup> revealed that parents are required to have a medical record in order for a new baby to be registered. Impoverished Romani women who lack health insurance may not be able to access healthcare or to pay the necessary fees for a medical record, and so their children remain unregistered.

The lack of one document often makes it impossible to secure other personal documents, such as social security or health insurance numbers. The result is that many of the basic rights of citizenship remain out of reach - from access to healthcare and social security to voting rights. The lack of personal identity documents can also impede travel.<sup>8</sup>

The impact on children can be dramatic, limiting their access to healthcare, education and social services. It also means that children remain invisible – no official in the government network of services will ensure that the child benefits

from a medical check-up or attends school. The social services will not be present to identify cases of abuse and maltreatment, and intervene accordingly. And children who are trafficked or exploited cannot be traced and eventually reunited with their families.

### ***Social exclusion and discrimination, leading to higher levels of poverty and deprivation***

It is a generally recognized truth that growing up poor places children's development at risk. Research has shown that experiences of poverty in early childhood can negatively impact children's health as well as their cognitive and social development. It has also shown that the impact on young children depends not only on the depth and duration of poverty, but also on the quality of family relations and expenditure patterns within the family.<sup>9</sup> Young children experience poverty primarily as mediated through their family, whereas older children feel its impact directly - because they have fewer resources than their peers, they can be excluded from participating in many areas of child and youth culture.

Romani children have a much higher risk of growing up poor than their peers from the majority population in their country. They not only live more frequently in poverty, but also in more severe circumstances than other children. According to a recent UNDP report, poverty rates among Roma are four times higher than among non-Roma in the same community and – using equalised

<sup>7</sup> ERRC 2004

<sup>8</sup> Gil-Robles, A. 2006, European Roma Rights Centre 2004, European Commission 2004

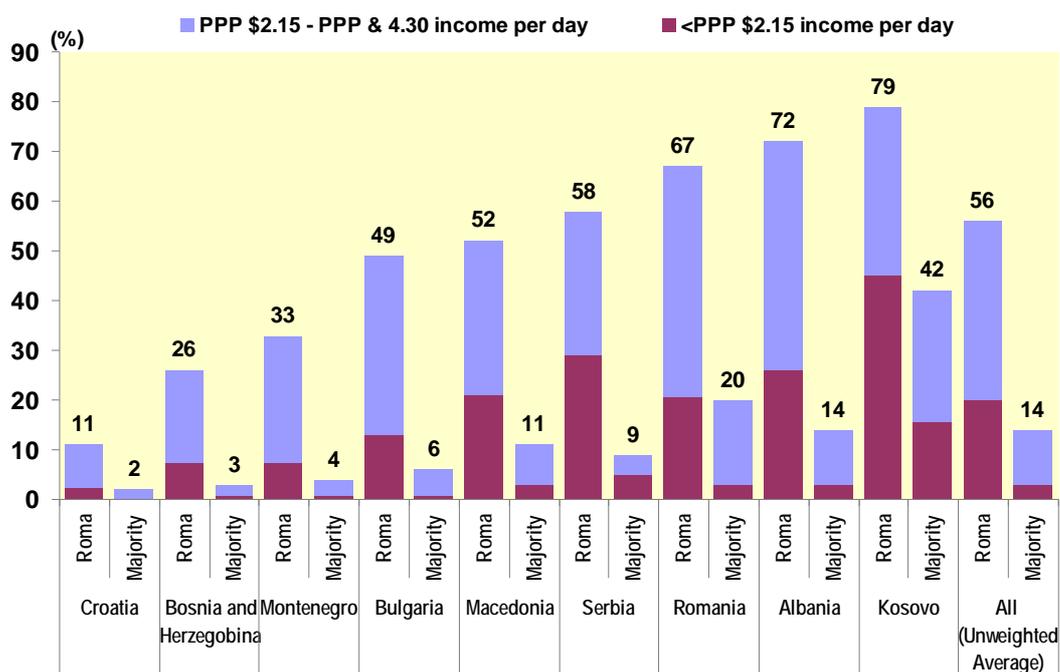
<sup>9</sup> Duncan, G. and Brooks-Gunn, J. 2000, Beresford, B., Sloper, T. and Bradshaw, J. 2005

income lines of \$ 2.15 for extreme poverty and \$4.30 for poverty – their income falls short of the poverty line by \$1.60 a day, compared to \$1.40 in the majority population.<sup>10</sup> UNDP calculates poverty rates based on equivalised household income, using the so-called new OECD scale. This equivalence scale assigns a coefficient of 1 to the first adult in the household, 0.5 to further adults and 0.3 to children. Compared to other equivalence scales this scale underestimates child poverty while giving more value to adult poverty – but no scale is based on actual needs

and expenditure patterns of households, they are all arbitrary.<sup>11</sup> Equivalence scales were introduced in OECD and EU countries where poverty is relative and poverty thresholds need to take into account economies of scale, as larger households pooling their resources and expenses have less individual income needs. In regard to absolute poverty lines of \$ 2.15 and \$ 4.30 the use of equivalence scales is problematic and likely to largely underestimate poverty: for children it assumes a poverty line of just \$0.70 and \$1.40 respectively.

Figure 3: Poverty rates for Roma

Percentage of Roma living in households with daily equalized income below PPP \$2.15 or PPP\$4.30 (with total poverty rates shown above bars)



Source: UNDP 2006

<sup>10</sup> UNDP 2006

<sup>11</sup> Bradshaw, J. 2006

In general, large families have a greater difficulty in making ends meet than small households, and social protection systems often fail to protect large families from poverty. Poverty rates are thus very high for both Romani and non-Romani families with more than two children. Nevertheless, poverty rates for Romani families with more than two children are still 30 per cent higher than for non-Romani. Further compounding this situation is the fact that Romani families tend to be larger than other families in their countries, rendering their children even more vulnerable to poverty (see Figure 4).

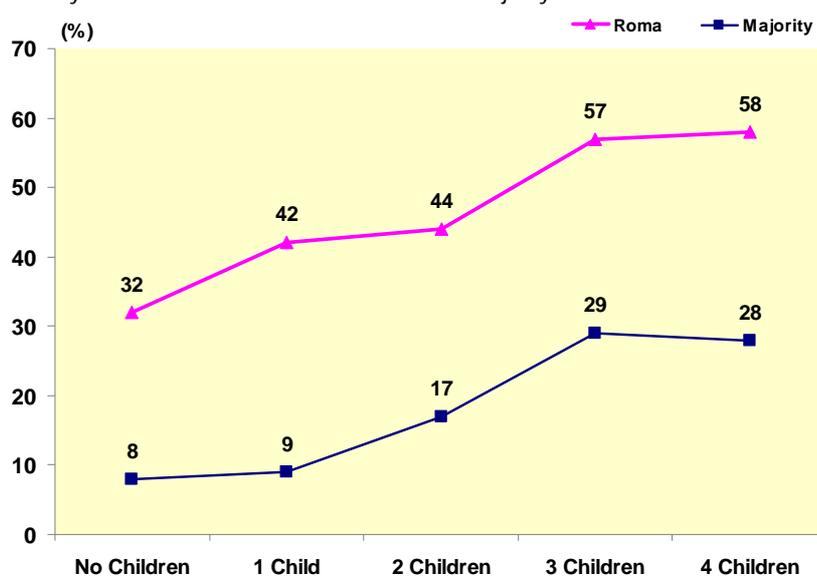
These high rates of income poverty correspond to high levels of deprivation. Only 59 per cent of Romani households own a refrigerator, 23 per cent a telephone, 31 per cent a washing machine and only 47 per cent have a bed for each household member.<sup>12</sup>

Poverty is a reflection of problems in accessing work opportunities which would enable parents to provide for their families. The high poverty rates among Roma across all countries in South East Europe point to structural and societal processes that continue to exclude Roma from the mainstream labour market. They were among the first to be laid off in the restructuring and closure of industries during the transition period in Central and South East Europe, and they then had great difficulties in finding new employment, not least because of discrimination.<sup>13</sup>

*I am a seamstress with a secondary education, but when I went to register at the employment office, they sent me to sweep streets, because I am Roma.*  
Romani focus group participant, Bulgaria

Source: Open Society Institute 2005b

Figure 4: Household size and poverty  
Poverty rates by number of children for Roma and the majority



Source: UNDP 2006

<sup>12</sup> UNDP 2006

<sup>13</sup> Ringold, D., Orenstein, M. A. and Wilkens, E.

The discrimination can be very open. Some advertisements openly state, for example, that ‘no Roma need to apply.’ Or, successful candidates might be denied a job once the employer realises that the person is a Roma.<sup>14</sup>

This ongoing discrimination and segregation have limited Roma access to healthcare and education, and have created a low-qualified workforce with few possibilities on the labour market – thus putting the next generation at risk as well.

*Most of the Roma in Prilep are poor because of unemployment, which is caused by lack of education. If I applied for a job, they would see that I haven't finished even the seventh grade of primary school, and so I'd be rejected. Those with a high school education would get the job.*

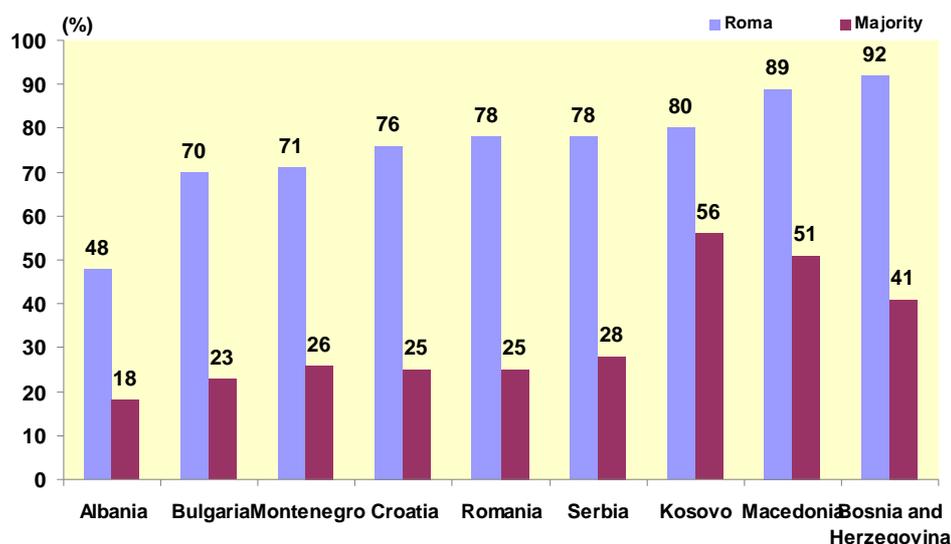
*Romani focus group participant, FYR Macedonia*

*Source: cit\_bfOpen Society Institute 2005acit\_af ref\_bf(Open Society Institute, 2005 ref\_num503)ref\_af*

Against this background it is not surprising that unemployment rates among Roma are exceptionally high. While unemployment and lack of employment opportunities are widespread in all countries of South East Europe and for all population groups, the situation is distinctively worse for Roma. In FYR Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, almost all Roma are unemployed (see Figure 5).<sup>15</sup>

This means that the main source of income for most Roma is either the informal sector or low-skilled menial work, which offer little opportunity for escaping poverty and, in some countries, limit access to social security systems, including health insurance.<sup>16</sup>

Figure 5: Subjective perception of unemployment  
Percentage of Roma and majority labour force participants who reported being unemployed



Source: UNDP 2006

<sup>14</sup> Gil-Robles, A. 2006

<sup>15</sup> UNDP 2006

<sup>16</sup> Zoon, I. and Kiers, J. 2005

### ***Inadequate housing, often in isolated or segregated areas***

Housing conditions are closely linked to families' economic situation, but also reflect population movements, discriminatory policies (segregation, forced evictions and displacement) and failure of housing policies. Poor-quality accommodation in economically rundown areas, as well as overcrowding and lack of access to heating, electricity, water and sanitation, constitute significant risk factors for the development of children. Neighbourhood poverty can affect child development quite independently of family poverty, especially in large urban areas where neighbourhood poverty is severe. In fact, the risk neighbourhood conditions pose to the development of children and young people seems to increase exponentially rather than linearly.<sup>17</sup>

Across South East Europe, housing problems are prevalent, with substantial disparities between urban and rural settlements as well as between poor and affluent households.<sup>18</sup> Roma, however, face multiple disadvantages: they are more likely to have insecure tenure and to live in overcrowded and dilapidated housing; to have less access to heating, electricity, water and sanitation; and to live in isolated, segregated settlements, often lacking basic infrastructure such as sewage and garbage removal. Segregation not only increases health and security risks but also impedes equal access to transport, healthcare, education, employment and other social services.<sup>19</sup>

Table 1: Percentage of Romani and majority households reporting housing deprivation

	Roma	Majority
No secure tenure	25	3
Dilapidated housing	25	3
No access to improved water source	22	6
No access to improved sanitation	72	22
No sewerage	55	17
No electricity	8	1

Source: UNDP 2006

In addition to the other disadvantages of living in segregated, isolated communities, the fact that it is difficult for children to access regular schools and develop and maintain friendships with non-Romani children further increases the risk that they will be excluded from the majority society as of an early age.

### ***Out-of-reach or substandard healthcare***

Rates of infant and child mortality, stunting and wasting are the basic indicators for measuring young children's health and nutrition status. They provide information on vulnerabilities as well as on the accessibility of the healthcare system. As seen in Table 2, the national

<sup>17</sup> Duncan, G. and Brooks-Gunn, J. 2000, Spencer, M. et al. 1997, Evans, P. et al. 2002

<sup>18</sup> UNICEF 2006a

<sup>19</sup> European Commission 2004, UNDP 2006, Ringold, D., Orenstein, M. A. and Wilkens, E. 2005, Gil-Robles, A. 2006

Table 2: Child health and nutrition in South East Europe

	IMR	U5MR	Stunting	Wasting
Albania	16	18	34	11
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13	15	10	6
Bulgaria	12	15	--	--
Croatia	6	7	1	1
FYR Macedonia	15	17	7	4
Romania	16	19	10	2
Serbia and Montenegro	12	15	5	4
EU average <sup>20</sup>	5.1	6.2	--	--

Source: UNICEF 2006c

levels in most of South East Europe are higher than the average for European Union (EU) countries on the whole.

Unfortunately, these indicators are not often disaggregated by ethnicity or socio-economic background, and therefore no specific data is available on Romani children. However, data from the Multi-Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) of 2005 show that disparities persist in these countries between poor and rich children, as well as between children in rural and urban settings. Romani children, as a population at very high risk of poverty and social exclusion, are thus likely to be disproportionately affected.

This hypothesis is supported by research data. The UNDP survey revealed that:

- 53 per cent of Romani households stated that a member had gone to bed hungry at least once in the

past month, compared to just 8 per cent of the majority population;

- only 74 per cent of Romani children had full immunisation coverage; 13 per cent were not fully immunised, and the immunisation status of another 13 per cent was unknown. The lack of medical records, insufficient information on the part of the parents, and parents' unawareness of the importance of vaccination emerged as main reasons.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, research by Oxfam found that 30% of Romani children suffered from diarrhoea, a rate three times higher than for children in the general population. More than 10% of Romani children had respiratory infections, four times higher than the national average. Skin diseases and asthma were likewise more common among Romani children.<sup>22</sup>

As seen in previous sections of this report, many Roma lack personal documents, including birth certificates and personal identity documents. The resulting exclusion from health insurance makes it difficult for parents to access adequate healthcare for their children. It also leads to children falling through the net of prescribed procedures such as immunisation, since they do not appear in official records.<sup>23</sup> Lack of education and information compound even further the lack of access to healthcare services.

The living conditions described in the previous section also constitute substantial physical barriers for the Roma's to access healthcare. Segregated Romani settlements tend to be isolated,

<sup>20</sup> Calculation based on Bradshaw, J., Hoelscher, P. and Richardson, D. 2006.

<sup>21</sup> UNDP 2006

<sup>22</sup> Laksic, B. and Basic, G. 2002

<sup>23</sup> European Commission 2004, European Roma Rights Centre 2004

out of the reach of public transport systems. Healthcare facilities are thus often far away, and so are de facto inaccessible for the poor. In addition, the European Roma Rights Centre has documented numerous cases in which Romani patients were either denied healthcare services, or else were given inadequate care, often as a result of open racial discrimination.<sup>24</sup>

An example is a case which appeared in a daily Croatian newspaper. It reported *“that a neighbour had called the emergency medical technicians in the neighbouring town...when 20-year-old Ms. Orsus [a Roma] went into labour, but was reportedly told that the team would not come and that Ms. Orsus should be driven to the local medical centre - after which the person on the other end of the line hung up. Mr. Orsus called the same medical centre, and after he told them he did not have a car, ... the staff mockingly told him to ‘put his wife into a wheel-barrow and wheel her to the medical centre’. Another neighbour called the medical centre in... another nearby town, and was reportedly told that they were not obliged to cover [that] settlement..., after which the neighbour called the local police and requested that they call an emergency team. By the time an ambulance finally arrived, Ms. Orsus had given birth on the floor of their house and the child was dead”*.<sup>25</sup>

In other incidents, Romani patients have received only negligent care: no attention from a physician, minimal physical contact during an examination, lack of information and informed consent before surgery, verbal abuse and degrading treatment, or a request for informal payments. In a number of countries, there

are reports of ‘Roma wards’ in hospitals with lower sanitary standards, less medical care and stricter rules regarding visitors. Although the majority population can also encounter low medical standards and requests for informal payments, Romani patients also face clear discrimination – as acknowledged by some general practitioners themselves: *“Roma do not use the regular medical services. They do not come for examinations and prophylactic check-ups. They prefer to use the emergency service because it is free of charge. That is why the emergency service does not send ambulances to the Romani neighbourhood.”*<sup>26</sup>

Romani children are thus caught in a vicious circle. When they use the regular medical services, not only are they likely to receive substandard care, but they can also have such a negative experience that they will resist going again. The result can be a tendency to delay consulting the healthcare services until a problem becomes so acute as to constitute an emergency – which in turn will reinforce the prejudices from which the Roma already suffer.

### **Systematic segregation into low-quality educational programmes**

Education is widely recognised as a key strategy for breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty, by equipping children and young people with the qualifications and skills needed for a self-sufficient and productive adult life. However, at the same time, poverty is directly linked to lower educational outcomes – and the earlier in life it is

<sup>24</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2006

<sup>25</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2006

<sup>26</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2006

experienced, the longer it lasts and the lower the family income falls, the stronger its impact.<sup>27</sup>

Childcare and preschool have great potential for supporting children's development, particularly those of poor and vulnerable groups of the population. Good quality childcare is linked to enhanced social, emotional and linguistic competences, while at the same time being the most cost-effective investment to achieve long-term outcomes for children<sup>28</sup>. Across South East Europe childcare provision has collapsed during transition. Where it is slowly recovering it is well-off urban children who benefit rather than vulnerable groups of the population (UNICEF 2006a). MICS 2005 data shows that only between 17 and 35 per cent of the majority populations in FYR Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia attend childcare, while the same is true for just 3-7 per cent of Romani children. Preschool enrolment is higher with 75 per cent or more of children of the majority population but only 50-60 per cent of Romani children.

While most children in South East Europe have access to at least basic education, there are signs that the quality of education is deteriorating, with growing disparities between rural and urban areas, and between poor and rich children. At the same time youth unemployment is among the highest in the world.<sup>29</sup> Within this already difficult situation, Romani children face additional disadvantages.

The mean net enrolment rates across South East Europe are high: 96 per cent for primary school, and 82 per cent for secondary school.<sup>30</sup> However, the rates for Romani children are much lower, as can be seen from Table 3. Where the percentages are expressed as a range, the first figure is based on official figures, and the second on estimates of the number of Roma in the respective country.

Little data is available on the enrolment of Romani students at the tertiary level, but less than 1 per cent of Roma have completed tertiary education.<sup>31</sup>

Table 3: Participation of Roma in education

	Roma enrolled in primary education (%)	Roma age 15 or above who completed primary education (%)	Roma enrolled in secondary education (%)	Roma age 15 or above who completed secondary education (%)
Albania	48.0 <sup>a</sup>	24.2 <sup>a</sup>	12 <sup>b</sup>	4.3 <sup>a</sup>
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50.0 <sup>a</sup>	32.6 <sup>a</sup>	2.0 <sup>a</sup>	9.6 <sup>a</sup>
Bulgaria	47.7 <sup>a</sup>	46.2 <sup>a</sup>	12 <sup>b</sup>	7.2 <sup>a</sup>
Croatia	81.7-22.1 <sup>a</sup>	25.2 <sup>a</sup>	19.2-5.2 <sup>a</sup>	6.2 <sup>a</sup>
Macedonia	72.3-28.8 <sup>a</sup>	50.8 <sup>a</sup>	12.3-4.9 <sup>a</sup>	11.6 <sup>a</sup>
Montenegro	168.3-32.4 <sup>a</sup>	19.8 <sup>a</sup>	n.a.	3.7 <sup>a</sup>
Romania	63.1-17.8 <sup>a</sup>	31.7 <sup>a</sup>	17 <sup>b</sup>	9.6 <sup>a</sup>
Serbia	87.8-20.0 <sup>a</sup>	36.1 <sup>a</sup>	n.a.	9.0 <sup>a</sup>

Source: a) Open Society Institute 2006, b) UNDP 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Peters, H. and Mullis, N. 1997, McLanahan, S. 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Duncan, G. and Brooks-Gunn, J. 2000, Kamerman, S. et al. 2003, Esping-Andersen, G. 2007

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, R., Petric, M. and Sprout, R. 2005, World Bank 2006

<sup>30</sup> Calculation based on SOWC and UIS data, cf. Richardson, D., Hoelscher, P. and Bradshaw, J. 2007

<sup>31</sup> Open Society Institute 2006

### ***Segregation of Romani children into lower-quality schools or classes***

The low rate of participation of Roma in the education system goes hand-in-hand with the widespread assignment of Romani children to remedial schools, segregated Romani schools or Romani classes in regular schools, which provide a lower-quality education and prevent children from interacting with their peers from other ethnic groups. In the academic year 2000/2001, 70 per cent of Roma in Bulgaria, for example, attended schools in which the student body was almost entirely Romani, and 80-90 per cent of students in special education schools were Romani. A report by the European Commission points out that a Romani child is more than 27 times as likely than a non-Romani child to be sent to a remedial special school.<sup>32</sup>

The reasons behind these educational disparities between Romani children and the majority population are complex. The longstanding segregation of Roma into separate settlements and a neighbourhood-based school system have led to the establishment of substandard schools in or near Romani settlements that are almost exclusively attended by Romani children. Other schools became de facto Romani schools because families from the majority population have moved away or send their children to alternative schools. Segregated schools are generally in poor condition and offer fewer learning opportunities, they have fewer and less-qualified teachers, and may use a substandard curriculum, resulting in children leaving school without basic literacy skills.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from these systematic processes of social exclusion and discrimination, there are other factors which make it difficult for Romani children to succeed in school. Severe poverty, deprivation, and the low education level of many Romani parents may create a less stimulating home environment for children, leaving them with a disadvantage when they enter school. Access to preschool education has deteriorated for all children in the region but Romani children are the most likely to miss out.<sup>34</sup> Cultural and language differences may lead to a different skill profile compared to children from the majority population, which increases the risk of Romani children failing in a school system that does not embrace diversity and does not offer individualised support to children. Children who do not conform to the system risk becoming excluded.<sup>35</sup>

There are thus many converging factors that lead to the high numbers of Romani children who find themselves in special schools.

### ***Placement in remedial schools, a failure of both the education and the social protection systems***

Research by the European Roma Rights Centre demonstrates that the placement of a child in special schools largely has little relation to the child's abilities, and that in many cases it occurs without the parents' informed consent.

<sup>32</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2005, European Commission 2004

<sup>33</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2005, European Commission 2004, Gil-Robles, A. 2006

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF 2006a, Amnesty International 2006

<sup>35</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2005, Gil-Robles, A. 2006

Parents discover only too late the consequences that this decision will have on the child for the rest of his or her life.

*For a long time, I didn't know what remedial special school was, and what my son would lose and miss out on if he attended such a school instead of a normal primary school. Nobody told me in detail. When my son graduated from remedial special school, he wanted to go on studying in Gardonyi Secondary School in Eger. He applied but he was not accepted, since he didn't speak any foreign language, and he had received a much lower-quality education in remedial school. My son cried, saying: 'Mum, they spoiled my life with this remedy'. That was definitely when I understood what remedial school in fact means.*

*Romani mother, Hungary*

*Source: cit\_bfEuropean Roma Rights Centre 2005cit\_af\_ref\_bf(European Roma Rights Centre, 2005 ref\_num464)ref\_af*

Some parents are nevertheless in favour of their children's participation in special schools or segregated education. Special schools tend to offer meals and provide the children with books and other school materials. In some countries, parents may also receive disability allowances if their children attend special schools. Parents' acceptance of their children's enrolment in special schools thus seems to be a direct response to poverty – an indication of the failure of both the education and the social protection systems. Segregated schools offer an additional advantage: the children are free from discrimination by teachers and from bullying by other children – again pointing to system failures rather than to children's abilities.<sup>36</sup>

*All of my children attend remedial special school, but I don't mind it. They like it; they feel good there, because they are with their friends and relatives. There are only a few non-Romani students in the school, so nobody says to them, "you are dirty Gypsies!"*

*Romani mother, Hungary*

*Source: cit\_bfEuropean Roma Rights Centre 2005cit\_af\_ref\_bf(European Roma Rights Centre, 2005 ref\_num464)ref\_af*

In countries where efforts are being made to better integrate Romani children into the school system, some first results are showing signs of success. Research in Bulgaria, for example, showed that Romani children studied better in mixed classes with a Romani teaching assistant than in segregated classes. The study compared the levels of school adaptation of Roma and majority children in both homogeneous and mixed classes, looking into factors such as 'self-efficacy', 'attitudes towards school', 'behavioural engagement', 'cognitive engagement', 'self-esteem' and 'relationship with peers'. In all dimensions, Romani children in mixed classes had better outcomes than those in segregated classes. The Bulgarian children stated that they liked school and felt comfortable in the classes.<sup>37</sup>

### **High drop-out rates, especially among girls**

The low levels of enrolment are also due to the large number of Romani children who drop out of school. Focus group discussions with Romani adults as well as with children point to poverty, social exclusion and the lack of future job

<sup>36</sup> UNICEF 2006b

<sup>37</sup> Gerganov, E., Varbanova, S. and Kyuchukov, H. 2005

opportunities – with or without education – as factors in the decision to drop out of school.

*When I don't have an appropriate book, the teacher makes me leave the classroom - he doesn't care. Other children make fun of me then, and I'm very unhappy. That's why I've dropped out of school. Children also laughed at me when they saw my worn-out tennis shoes and they used to insult me by calling me a Gypsy.*  
 Romani child, Serbia

Source: cit\_bfUNICEF 2006bcit\_af ref\_bf(UNICEF, 2006 ref\_num515)ref\_af

early. While boys are seen as future breadwinners, girls tend to be socialised with a focus on preparation for marriage and childbearing.<sup>38</sup>

*My dad thinks only he (brother) should go to school and I shouldn't. Since I have no mum, there's no one to clean the house and to wash the clothing, and dad thinks that I shouldn't go to school.*  
 Romani child, Serbia

Source: cit\_bfUNICEF 2006bcit\_af ref\_bf(UNICEF, 2006 ref\_num515)ref\_af

### A new heightened interest in educational achievement

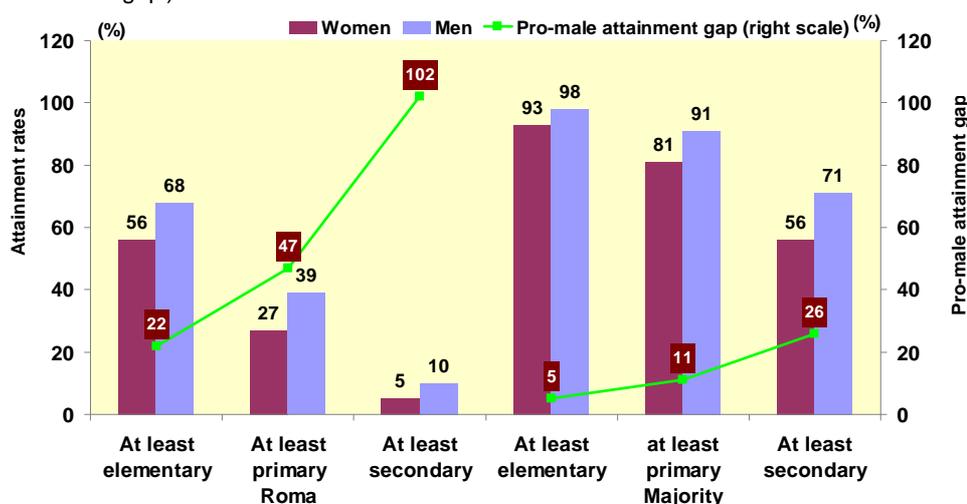
At the same time, discussions with Roma show the high value they place on education as a pathway out of poverty. There is widespread agreement that all children should attend school and obtain

Girls are particularly likely not to finish their education. In traditional Romani communities, girls' education seems to be less valued than that of boys, with the result that girls tend to acquire only basic literacy skills and then drop out of school

Figure 6: Gender differences in education

#### Pro-male attainment gap

Elementary-, primary- and secondary-school attainment rates for Roma and majority men and women, as well as the percentage difference between the two (the 'pro-male attainment gap')



Source: UNDP, 2006

\* Travellers are an indigenous community with a shared history of a nomadic way of life and cultural identity.

<sup>38</sup> UNDP 2006

an education that would give them a chance to enter the labour market.<sup>39</sup> A study with Romani and Traveller\* parents in England revealed changing attitudes towards education and an increasing involvement of Romani and Traveller parents in their children's education. However, the research points to the 'collision of changing parental views with an unchanging establishment', which could maintain the exclusion of Romani children from the school system.<sup>40</sup> Only by opening education systems to the specific needs and backgrounds of all students and by building bridges between schools and parents from marginalised population groups will schools be able to provide equal access to education for every child.

***The family: strong relations, with tensions between tradition and the desire for inclusion***

A high-quality family situation – one that provides warmth, trust, and care, and a supportive and stimulating environment – is the most important factor for children's positive development.<sup>41</sup>

There is very little data on children's family relationships and existing data is often not disaggregated for ethnicity. The quality of family relations is determined by a range of factors such as the well-being of each family member, the family's culture and values, its living conditions, the social cohesion within the community and the family's social inclusion in society. All these factors can

either support children or put them at risk.

Roma have maintained a distinct identity in spite of a long history of discrimination and persecution. A report by the European Commission states that "Communal solidarity is frequently affirmed and reinforced by close extended family bonds. Family celebrations feature prominently in social priorities. Cultural traditions are respected and adhered to diligently, and may include pollution taboos [taboos against 'contamination' by other cultures] and, in some communities, autonomous systems of individual and community justice. Pollution taboos are traditional with many cultures but are also frequently associated with the development of strategies by marginalised groups to maintain identity against the forces of oppression and/or cultural assimilation."<sup>42</sup> The Roma's response to discrimination and social exclusion may thus be withdrawal into their own ethnic community.

A secure cultural identity and a high degree of family cohesion can be protective for Romani children, giving them a sense of belonging and strengthening their social resources. However, at the same time, they may reinforce barriers between Romani communities and the majority population and strengthen traditions that, in a context of changing societies on the one hand and severe poverty and deprivation on the other hand, can hold children back from developing to their full potential.

<sup>39</sup> Open Society Institute 2005a

<sup>40</sup> Bhopal, K. 2004

<sup>41</sup> Orthner, D., Jones-Saupei, H. and Williamson, S. 2004, Quilgars, D., Searle, B. and Keung, A. 2005

<sup>42</sup> European Commission 2004

In addition, poverty, unemployment and deprivation as well as experiences of discrimination and humiliation are stress factors in the life of parents and children and impact on the quality of family relations. They can lead to higher than average levels of alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, child maltreatment and neglect.<sup>43</sup> Poverty also increases the risk of children being forced to beg or to work to help the family survive, or worse, living on the streets or being trafficked. Across South East Europe, Romani children seem to be overrepresented among the victims of trafficking<sup>44</sup> - desperate to escape the extreme poverty in which they live, they are easy prey to traffickers.

Romani children are thus often subject to greater risks, without being able to benefit from the services that could potentially provide a degree of protection and support – not only because traditional Romani communities are often isolated from mainstream society, but also because they place great value on keeping family problems within the family. It is therefore likely that domestic violence, child maltreatment and neglect, mental health problems and other problems within the family remain undetected, and so children are not able to find external support and assistance.

The situation of girls can be particularly difficult. As seen from the statistics on school enrolment rates, girls tend to be seen primarily as future wives and mothers. However, debates within the Romani community on gender relations are revealing new tensions between cultural traditions and individual rights in changing communities. A publication by

the European Roma Rights Centre indicates that, traditionally, “Romani parents exercise strict control over the girls of the family from an early age. They rigidly steer them away from any possibility of committing acts which would reflect badly on the family image. This control often deprives these young women of normal entertainment and the kinds of relationships that non-Romani young women usually have. Also, this control can be a reason for parents to stop them from continuing their formal education after their early teenage years. In order to control female sexuality, education for girls is limited, and soon after the onset of puberty, often Romani girls are married to prevent sexual experimentation.”<sup>45</sup> Girls and women who had sexual relationships before entering marriage often face stigmatisation. And because their value in traditional Romani communities depends to a great extent on their role as mothers, early childbearing is encouraged. In fact, Romani women have no option to live independently – they belong either to their husband’s or their father’s house.<sup>46</sup>

However, this picture does not represent all or even most Roma. Many Romani families have become more open, trying to balance maintaining their cultural identity with social inclusion in the wider society. This is reflected in the high value Romani parents place on the education of their children, both girls and boys, but also in changes in fertility rates. A Hungarian study shows that between 1990 and 2002 the percentage of teenage pregnancies among pregnancies of Romani women overall have declined from 34 per cent to 29 per cent, with fertility rates of Romani girls also declining in even the most disadvantaged groups.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Duncan, G. and Brooks-Gunn, J. 2000, cf. Hoelscher, P. 2003

<sup>44</sup> UNICEF and Terre des Hommes, 2006, Karoly, M. 2005

<sup>45</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2000

<sup>46</sup> European Roma Rights Centre 2000, UNDP 2006

<sup>47</sup> Janky, B. 2006, Open Society Institute 2005

## Part 2

### The Decade of Roma Inclusion – will children benefit?

The data presented in Part 1 clearly shows that Romani children in South East Europe are at risk across all dimensions of child well-being, due to an unwholesome mix of poverty and deprivation, social exclusion and discrimination, and some traditional cultural practices. As a result, Romani children have fewer developmental opportunities than their peers from the majority societies, increasing the risk that intergenerational cycles of poverty and social exclusion will be perpetuated.

Policies for children do not generally have a high priority in South East Europe. The reduction of child poverty, improvements in the quality of education, and the reform of social services and child protection systems are not sufficiently addressed in many countries. Particularly vulnerable groups of children such as Romani children, children with disabilities or children in institutions are likely to suffer most from the lack of coherent child and family policies. The Decade of Roma Inclusion, by drawing attention not only to the most disadvantaged but also to the youngest in the population, offers an opportunity to develop policies that will help create more inclusive and positive environments for children across all of South East Europe.

### ***CRC principles: the standard for policies affecting children***

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which has been ratified by all of the countries of South East Europe, sets out four guiding principles that should ideally serve as the basis for the development of policies to improve the situation of Romani children and young people, since the Convention defines children as ‘a person under 18’.<sup>48</sup>

The principle of *non-discrimination* (Article 2) goes to the heart of the experiences of many Romani children and their families. The Decade for Roma Inclusion must ensure that discriminatory practices such as segregation at school are brought to an end and that anti-discrimination policies are implemented and enforced at local, regional and state level. The lack of political will - in particular at the local level - is due primarily to the negative stereotypes that prevail in the majority population. Overcoming them will require the sensitisation of politicians, teachers, health and social workers as well as the general population to their unjustness and the human rights violations to which they lead. Applying the principle of non-discrimination also requires recognising and compensating for the impacts of discrimination. Children who are transferred from special education classes into regular schools, for example, will need flexible support both to make friends in their new peer group and to succeed in their education.

The principle of the *best interests of the child* (Article 3) indicates that careful consideration should be given to the

<sup>48</sup> Bradshaw, J., Hoelscher, P. and Richardson, D. 2006, Santos Pais, M. 1999

impact of policies on children, and underlining the fact that children are subjects with rights. In policy development, Roma tend to be seen as a homogeneous mass, not taking into account the cultural diversity among Romani groups, in addition to the variations in individual needs and resources among both the children and the adults. Rather than targeting policies and programmes at 'the Roma,' governments need to ensure that all social policies apply to all children, regardless of their background. Policies that make societies more inclusive and remove barriers to access to healthcare, education, employment, social services and social welfare benefit all families and children in poverty, while special programmes for specific groups carry the risk of perpetuating their exclusion from mainstream society. Focus group discussions with both Romani and non-Romani participants show a broad consensus in the view that governments should support all poor and vulnerable people in a country.

*Everybody should be treated equally - what I want, somebody else wants it also. If possibilities are open for one person, why not for another? The problem of poverty is shared by all.*

*Roma, FYR Macedonia (Open Society Institute 2005a)*

*It should benefit all poor people, not only the Roma... What if a Bulgarian kid goes and says 'I also want some of this food'? What will they say - 'Well, sorry, but it's only for Gypsies'?*

*Roma, Bulgaria (Open Society Institute 2005b)*

*Should only Roma in dire financial status be helped? Of course not. Everybody needs help. These efforts [Decade of Roma Inclusion] are a fundamental source of ethnic tension in Bulgaria. Remember what happened with the Bulgarian Muslims? These efforts are disconnected from reality. Non-Roma, Bulgaria (Open Society Institute 2005b)*

The third principle, *survival and development* (Article 6), reflects the fact that childhood, and especially early childhood, is a special period in the life of every individual, during which he or she requires special care and protection in order to develop to his/her full potential. The CRC takes a holistic view of the child, giving equal weight to children's civic, political, social, economic and cultural rights, and highlighting that they are interrelated, universal and indivisible. Accordingly, policies need to be based on a coherent, multi-dimensional strategy, building on the cooperation and coordination of different sectors.

Finally, the CRC highlights children and young people's right to *participation* (Article 12) – to be heard and to have their views taken into account in matters that affect them. Indeed, the engagement of the Romani community - children as well as adults - is crucial if social inclusion is to become a reality. Policies need to be developed in partnership with Roma communities, building on their strengths and resources and addressing the issues they identify as priority. Children have the right to play an active role in this process – and in fact it is only through their involvement that environments that are truly supportive of Romani children can be created in communities, schools, etc. Experiences in the EU show that successful community-based programmes in disadvantaged communities are based on the engagement of all actors.<sup>49</sup>

### ***The Decade's objectives: combating poverty and social exclusion***

Following a high-level conference on 'Roma in an expanding Europe' in

<sup>49</sup> Hoelscher, P. 2004

Hungary in 2003, the governments of nine countries in Central and South East Europe committed themselves to combat the poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination suffered by the Roma. In February 2005, they signed the Declaration of the Decade of Roma Inclusion,<sup>50</sup> launching the first broad regional initiative to improve the living conditions of Roma. The participating countries are Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia. The Decade brings together governments, intergovernmental and nongovernmental organisations, and Romani civil society.

All participating countries except for Romania have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs)<sup>51</sup> that focus on four priority areas: housing, employment, health, and education. The NAPs lay out a 10-year plan. Often, however, the proposed strategies lack quantifiable targets as well as budget lines. This is in part due to the fact that there is little reliable data on Roma, as seen in Part 1. It is thus a positive first step that all of the countries highlight the need for collecting baseline data in all areas and using it to monitor the situation of Roma.

In addition to the NAPs, Bulgaria and Romania - as new EU Member States - have submitted 'National Reports on strategies for social protection and social inclusion' as part of the EU Social Inclusion Process.<sup>52</sup> These reports include specific references to the Roma. Croatia also has a National Programme for Roma, which goes beyond the four

priority areas of the Decade for Roma Inclusion.

This chapter draws mainly on the NAPs, adding other information where available. It reviews the policies developed by the South East European countries to improve the situation of Roma, and assesses whether children can expect to benefit from the proposed measures.

### ***Insufficient efforts to address the lack of identity documents***

As seen in Part 1, the lack of personal documents – citizenship, birth registration, residence permits, passports, etc. – is a reflection of social exclusion, as well as one of the root causes for its perpetuation from generation to generation. The often enormous gaps between the official Romani population and estimates of their actual number suggest that the problem is substantial and needs to be addressed urgently if any sustainable improvements in the situation of Roma are to be made. Children's right to be registered at birth (Article 7 of the CRC) is compromised by a range of institutional barriers.

Efforts to address this issue are unfortunately featured in only two national plans developed to date by the countries of South East Europe. Romania recognises the problem of access to identity cards in its 'National Report on strategies for social protection and social

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.romadecade.org/index.htm>

<sup>51</sup> All NAPs for the Decade of Roma Inclusion can be accessed at: <http://www.romadecade.org/action.htm>

<sup>52</sup> Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2006, Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family 2006.

inclusion' to the European Commission. Among the examples of good practice, the report highlights a community-based project to prevent school abandonment and help impoverished mothers into employment. The project systematically includes actions to overcome the barriers to education, among others by helping families obtain IDs. The Croatian 'National Programme for Roma' includes a plan to create mobile teams to circulate in areas with large Romani populations to help Roma regulate their status. The teams would be composed of representatives from government administrative services, as well as members from the Romani community and NGOs. The measures were planned for 2004. No further information or assessment is available.

None of the National Action Plans (NAPs) for the Decade of Roma Inclusion refer to the issue of personal identity documents.

***Attention to employment: a good start, but broader approach required to reduce the levels of poverty and deprivation***

The NAPs for the Decade are organized around sectoral areas – employment, housing, health and education – and do not specifically address poverty and deprivation as cross-cutting issues. The Bulgarian NAP nevertheless includes an additional section on 'Protection against discrimination and guaranteeing equal opportunities,' which foresees improving the effectiveness of the social assistance

system by training social workers in how to work in a multi-ethnic environment.<sup>53</sup>

Child poverty reduction is generally not high on the political agenda in South East Europe, and social benefits are highly biased towards pensioners and, in the countries of former Yugoslavia, war veterans. Developed within this context, the NAPs are silent on the issue of ensuring that Romani children and their families have equal access to social benefits and social protection measures. The Croatian 'National Programme' to the contrary places responsibility on the Roma, noting, for example, that the low number of Romani recipients of disability benefits is due to their negligent behaviour (failing to apply for assistance for their disabled family members), and assuming that most unemployed Roma 'are registered with the relevant services for the sole reason of getting the unemployment benefits.'<sup>54</sup>

Discrimination and other barriers in accessing social services and the labour market are not adequately recognised and addressed.

Nevertheless, the choice of employment as one of the areas of focus constitutes a first step towards poverty reduction. Generally, the strategies outlined in the NAPs aim at increasing the 'employability' of Roma with a very low educational level, who are either long-term unemployed or active in the grey market. There are four main areas of intervention: training, creating employment opportunities, supporting self-employment and business start-ups and – to a much lesser extent – initiating system reforms. Training ranges from 'boosting the Roma's motivation for

<sup>53</sup> Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2005

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.vlada.hr/nacionalniprogramromi/EnpZRSP.htm>

active job hunting' (Serbia) and basic literacy courses to vocational programmes. A Council of Europe report notes, however, that many such courses seem to be designed without the involvement of the Roma themselves, and therefore run the risk of not fitting their needs or offering qualifications which are not marketable.<sup>55</sup>

One of the common strategies is the support of entrepreneurship among Roma, by helping them to start businesses and legalising grey market activities such as the sale of goods on the street. Noteworthy in some of the NAPs (for example, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Serbia) are initiatives that build on Roma's individual expertise to start businesses, by providing training, consultancy services and access to micro-finance and start-up grants.

A great deal of emphasis is laid in the NAPs on employing Roma for public work programmes - often in Romani communities - in areas such as construction, environmental protection and forestry. In general, these are only short-term programmes which are not sustainable, and they do not seem to be linked to efforts to introduce participants into the mainstream labour market. According to the Council of Europe report cited above, experience would indicate that the success of these programmes will depend not least on how inclusive they are (not only targeted to Roma but to all unemployed or low-qualified people) and how much they pay. A project in Serbia, for example, did not attract many participants, because the monthly salary was less than half the going rate for informal jobs in the construction sector.<sup>56</sup>

In the EU, the labour market strategies that have proved to be successful are flexible and individualised, combining, for instance, counselling, individualised training plans, active mediation with employers, provision of childcare, and financial support for expenditures such as transport or adequate clothing.<sup>57</sup> In South East Europe, such policies are generally less developed, and many strategies seem to build on stereotypes of a homogeneous Romani population rather than on individual needs, strengths and opportunities.

In addition, greater efforts will be needed to address the major barrier of widespread discrimination. The NAPs list a number of strategies in this direction, such as increasing employment agencies' understanding of the situation of Roma, the hiring of Roma in employment agencies, the enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation and the mainstreaming of policies targeted at Roma into general employment policies. Bulgaria, for example, has indicated in its 'National Report on strategies for social protection and social inclusion' that part of its comprehensive strategy to bring Roma into employment is 'active intermediation for job placement' to encourage employers to recruit workers from the Romani community.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, the NAPs often remain rather vague and hesitant on these basic issues that, if not addressed, will undermine any sustainable effort to increase the labour market participation of the Romani population.

While some NAPs explicitly target women's participation in the labour market, none refer at all to children's needs. Issues such as the provision of

<sup>55</sup> Zoon, I. and Kiers, J. 2005

<sup>56</sup> Zoon, I. and Kiers, J. 2005

<sup>57</sup> Hoelscher, P. 2004

<sup>58</sup> Government of the Republic of Bulgaria 2006

childcare for working parents remain unaddressed, putting children, especially girls, at risk of having to take over household responsibilities and care for younger siblings.

### ***Little attention to children's needs in upgrading of Romani settlements***

There is broad recognition that the housing situation of Romani families, particularly those in informal settlements, needs to be improved urgently. Most countries note that they need to change legislation in order to be able to legalise informal Romani settlements and improve the access to housing. However, only the Serbian NAP aims at including Romani housing in national housing policy and planning – often Romani housing seems to be primarily seen as a Roma problem, exacerbating the social exclusion of Roma in society.<sup>59</sup>

All NAPs include measures to improve the living conditions and infrastructure in Romani settlements, connecting the houses to basic services such as water supply and sewage, electricity, and waste removal, as well as improving the roads – and, importantly, the access to the social infrastructure. Apart from improving the standard of the existing housing stock, new housing is needed to replace housing dilapidated beyond repair and to address overcrowding. Croatia, FYR Macedonia, and Montenegro plan new housing projects, including the provision of social housing to Romani families. Serbia, on the other hand, plans to resettle interested Roma in depopulated villages – a strategy that unfortunately will not foster the social inclusion of Roma.

Political will on the national as well as the local level is crucial. Romani settlements need to become an integral part of municipal development plans and urban planning. As the FYR Macedonian NAP points out, local authorities - who may not be too keen on solving Romani housing problems - will need 'encouragement.'

A report by the European Commission highlights that successful housing initiatives for Roma have involved the Roma themselves in the design, construction, maintenance and management of housing.<sup>60</sup> Among the NAPs for the Decade of Roma Inclusion, only Serbia and to some extent Bulgaria foresee the involvement of Roma and the development of self-governing bodies in new housing projects.

None of the Action Plans account for the needs of children, such as outdoor safety, spaces to play, access to transport, and recreational and sport facilities. Access to health and education may be implicit in the improvement of access to the social infrastructure, but is not mentioned specifically. Likewise there is no role foreseen for children and young people's participation in helping to improve their environment.

### ***A positive mix of strategies to improve children's health, but still some gaps***

Improving the health situation of Roma requires coherent and cross-cutting efforts in a number of areas. As seen in Part 1, among the main factors contributing to the poor health status of many Roma are severe poverty and poor housing conditions without access to basic infrastructures, which make it

<sup>59</sup> European Commission 2004

<sup>60</sup> European Commission 2004

difficult to pursue a healthy life-style in terms of nutrition, hygiene, and health prevention measures. These difficulties are compounded by illiteracy and low levels of education, which form veritable barriers to information about rights to healthcare, preventative measures, and healthy behaviours. Contributing even further to the higher risk of illness is the lack of access to healthcare services, and, when accessed, experiences of discrimination and substandard medical treatment.

The mix of policies proposed in the NAPs is similar across South East Europe, focusing on screening and monitoring of the health status of Roma, information and preventative measures, vaccination, improvement of access to health care - particularly for children and women - and the involvement of Roma as health mediators or health care workers. Some NAPs (for example, Bulgaria and Croatia) plan to establish mobile health units to bridge the gaps in the healthcare system. Differences can, however, be seen in the underlying assumptions of governments. Some countries, such as Croatia, consider that the main responsibility for their poor health status lies with the Roma themselves, and so propose an approach based on sanctions and controls, while countries that recognise the underlying human rights violations plan for more coherent and comprehensive measures with strong participation from Roma. Serbia, for instance, stresses the need for enforcement of existing legislation to ensure that Roma's rights are realised, while Montenegro plans to integrate health protection programmes for Roma into general health policies.

Children will be directly or indirectly affected by a range of the measures foreseen in the plans. All countries place

a strong emphasis on prevention through education in the areas of reproductive health and family planning, infectious and non-infectious diseases, vaccination, alcohol and drug abuse as well as positive health behaviour. Some of these campaigns and programmes are targeted to children and young people. Bulgaria also plans to offer health education classes at school.

Access to adequate healthcare for pregnant women and children is widely considered to be a priority, in order to ensure that newborn babies are registered with health centres, are fully immunised, and receive regular medical care. The Bulgarian NAP calls for a proactive role for doctors in tracing children for immunisation, while the FYR Macedonian NAP plans for annual check-ups in Roma communities to reach out to children who are not in school and to families with an unresolved status.

There are plans for a range of strategies to involve Roma in healthcare services - for example, by training Roma as health workers and taking affirmative action towards Romani students in medical schools. Romani mediators have proven to be successful in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. In 2000, for instance, a Romani NGO in Romania started to train health mediators to liaise between Romani families and the public health services. The mediators were particularly effective in promoting child immunisation programmes, helping mothers to access ante- and post-natal care, providing education on contraception and family planning, and identifying serious contagious diseases. They were also involved in recording Roma health data. Their work strengthened the links between Romani communities and public health services. Such examples of good practice need to

be scaled up immediately and progress monitored. In 2002, the Romanian Ministry of Health and Family began scaling up the programme to 34 pilot counties. However, although a positive step forward, this programme still does not meet all of the needs of Romani communities, especially since the effectiveness of mediation depends on the quality of the existing public health infrastructure and the actions taken to improve the living conditions in the communities. Serious problems persist in both areas.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Desegregation and improved educational opportunities: a major thrust in all countries***

Addressing the very low enrolment rates of Romani children in all levels of education, their high drop-out rates, and their widespread segregation into substandard classes will require comprehensive policy reforms throughout the education systems. Changes are needed in legislation, school regulations, and educational programmes, along with systems to ensure the enforcement of standards.

There is a broad consensus among the South East European countries on the measures to be taken. With funding available from the Roma Education Fund, strategies seem to be better developed and funded in education than in many other areas. A number of good practices already exist, that can be replicated in other countries.

A noteworthy initiative for example is the Roma Education Initiative (REI), led by the Open Society Institute, running education projects in seven countries.

They have in common that they follow a community-based approach that builds on partnerships between Roma communities, especially Roma NGOs, schools, and ministries and other governmental organisations. Above this the focus is on comprehensive approaches, reaching from early childhood development to completion of secondary or vocational education.<sup>62</sup>

All of the NAPs recognize the need to train teachers and educational staff to offer an education that is more inclusive and sensitive to the needs and cultures of all children. This training is often focused on respecting differences and promoting multicultural values; it also needs to sensitise teachers to the specific educational needs of Romani children.

There is also a broad consensus on the importance of preschool education, with all countries aiming at increasing the participation of Romani children. Some countries, Serbia for example, want to make one or two years of preschool obligatory, as preparation for primary school. Croatia plans to assess children's linguistic, psychosocial and physiological development, in order to be able to address specific needs in small groups.

Countries across South East Europe are engaged in desegregating Roma-only schools and introducing into the mainstream system those Romani children who were wrongly placed in special education. The NAPs include measures to change curricula and to develop new textbooks and materials that promote multicultural values and include positive information on Romani culture. They also aim at making the school system more inclusive for all children. Other measures are being developed to encourage children to complete

<sup>61</sup> European Commission 2004

<sup>62</sup> Mc Donald, C. and Lee, L. 2004

secondary education and pursue further education or vocational training. Incentives are offered, such as scholarships and possibilities for staying in semi-boarding schools. In addition, the employment of Romani teaching assistants has proved successful in providing needed support to Romani children in the classroom, both in terms of understanding the language and schoolwork and as mediators between the child, his or her parents and the school.

Recognising that poverty and deprivation also constitute barriers to education, some countries, notably Serbia, plan to give practical support to children from families receiving social welfare. This support will take the form of placement of children in day-long programmes; the provision of free snacks, schoolbooks, school kits and sports equipment; free participation in extracurricular activities; and, where necessary, free transportation. At the same time, programmes for specific groups of children and their parents - such as girls, school drop-outs, and returned migrant children - are aimed at encouraging them to continue their education by providing whatever support they need. An example is the 'second chance' programmes that allow young people to re-enter school and receive vocational training.

The NAPs recognise that resistance to the inclusion of Romani children into mainstream education might be encountered from both the parents from the majority population and the education staff. Some Romani families, after long-standing experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, may also be reluctant to embrace inclusive education for their children. The NAPs thus plan campaigns to counter stigmatisation and discrimination. Some NAPs also suggest reward systems either to schools that are

particularly successful in becoming inclusive or to Romani families and communities whose children are successful in the education system.

Addressing the educational situation of Romani children has high priority for all countries in South East Europe. The success and sustainability of educational programmes will depend, however – as in all other policy areas – on the political will of national as well as local governments. It will also depend on the development of coherent and cross-cutting strategies that match the needs and strengths of the Romani communities. This again will require the participation and/or representation of Roma at all levels.

### **Part 3 Conclusions and recommendations**

The above analysis of the National Action Plans for the Decade of Roma Inclusion shows that they hold great potential for improving the living conditions of Roma and combating discrimination in the four areas in which deprivation and inequities are the most severe: employment, housing, education and healthcare. The policies they put forward in education and to some extent in health directly target children, and any improvements in housing conditions and parents' access to the labour market will obviously also have a positive affect on children.

Part 2 of this report has already pointed out the major strengths of the NAPs, as well as a number of gaps in regards to their impact on the present and future well-being of Romani children. This concluding chapter makes a preliminary

assessment of the strategic directions that underpin the NAPs, and the extent to which they reflect the principles of the CRC. As shown in the previous chapter, the four guiding principles of the CRC - non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, survival and development, and children's participation - offer a clear and useful framework for the development of child-friendly policies.

All of the NAPs address the issue of *discrimination* against Romani children in education and healthcare. The proposed strategies are mainly focused on system changes, such as desegregation of the school system and expansion of access to healthcare and prevention, complemented with training of professionals and awareness-raising programmes. While these measures are crucial, they may not be sufficient. Many Romani children have already experienced the regular school system as a hostile environment, in which they are discriminated against by the teachers and excluded by their peers. There are cases in which non-Romani parents have taken their children out of school when Romani children have been brought into the mainstream.

General anti-discrimination policies thus prove to be the hardest to implement at the local level, and local authorities need strong political will to confront stereotypes and stigmatisation. Overcoming stereotypes will require the support of committed decision-makers and professionals for efforts to create spaces for different ethnic groups to get to know each other through meetings and exchanges in an atmosphere of mutual respect. This is particularly important at school. The mainstreaming of Romani children into regular education will successfully lead to real social inclusion only if mechanisms for dialogue between

children, teachers, and parents are put into place, and used to address the issues that will inevitably arise.

'*Survival and development*' is another principle which is – to some extent – recognised in government plans. In the health sector, the focus in general seems to be on children's survival: better ante- and post-natal care for mothers, and children's access to prevention (immunisation) and treatment. Child survival is also implicit in housing policies to tackle substandard living conditions and lack of basic infrastructure (water, sanitation, electricity, waste removal), and the health risks that are linked to them. Most of these plans, however, are rather long-term projects stretching over the entire decade, and may depend on donor funding – setting another generation of children at risk.

Other survival and development issues such as childcare, child protection, and access to social welfare and social services are addressed either not at all or not sufficiently. The NAPs do not reflect a holistic, multi-dimensional understanding of children's lives and well-being. The different dimensions of child well-being are interdependent: poverty and deprivation impact on children's health and cognitive development, malnourished or ill children will have difficulties in succeeding at school, etc. On the other hand, high-quality family relationships, friendship, and good health and education are important to children's growth and development. It is for this reason that the CRC affirms that children's rights are indivisible. There is a danger that 'Roma issues' will be treated solely within the four specific sectors, and within those sectors, will remain detached from general government policies – the 'ghettoisation' of Roma issues within

ministries mirroring the ghettoisation of Roma in society.<sup>63</sup>

This leads to the third principle, that governments should act in the *best interests of the child*. The growth and development of children are in general not the priorities of governments across South East Europe. During the 15 years of transition, countries have experienced growing disparities between rural and urban areas, poor and rich populations, accompanied by a deterioration in the quality of social systems - in particular childcare, health and education. In spite of ongoing reforms and efforts towards deinstitutionalisation, the number of children in public care is still high, and in some countries is even rising.<sup>64</sup> Romani children, as one of the most vulnerable groups, are the most likely to miss out. While targeted programmes for Romani children are necessary to end discrimination and offer them equal opportunities, special programmes for specific groups of children carry the risk of maintaining social exclusion. Thus targeted policies such as the desegregation of 'Roma' schools must go hand-in-hand with policies that make the school system inclusive for all children - for example, by responding more flexibly to the strengths and needs of individual pupils - including the disabled - and respecting diversity in ethnicity and religion. The primary aim of governments should be an integrated strategy of child- and family-friendly policies that offer all children, regardless of their background, the chance to develop to their full potential.

The fourth principle, the *right of children to be heard* in matters that affect them, features little in national policies. The involvement of Romani representatives

and mediators in different areas of policy-making is widely recognised in the NAPs as crucial for achieving sustainable improvements in the life situations of Roma. The participation of children, however, is not mentioned. And yet children and young people are directly affected by issues such as education or community planning. The involvement of children in decision-making processes at school and in their community can bring to the fore issues easily overlooked by adults - for example, the quality of children's relationships, their safety concerns in the neighbourhood, or the lack of green spaces to play and spend time. Moreover, children's participation can even help in addressing these issues, by empowering them to work together to improve their communities.<sup>65</sup>

The CRC points to the double role of children as citizens with rights and entitlements, as well as individuals who are vulnerable and dependent on their families. From a political perspective, child well-being is often mainly understood in terms of children's future as adults, focusing on their education and future employability while losing sight of their present lives. From this perspective, the situation of Romani children should not be approached from the standpoint that Roma are either 'victims' or 'a problem,' but instead as equal partners in the development process. The CRC principles provide an effective framework for escaping the stereotypes and institutionalized patterns of discrimination that have characterized the past. They provide the way forward in approaching the specific issues related to the Roma, but within a broader context of developing policies and programmes from which all children can benefit.

<sup>63</sup> Vuolasranta, M. 2006

<sup>64</sup> UNICEF 2006a

<sup>65</sup> Hoelscher, P. and Sabatini, F. 2006, Lansdown, G. 2001

## Recommendations for action

The recommendations below focus on three areas: the need for the monitoring of the well-being of Romani children, further action to end discrimination, and integrated policies to realise the rights of all children.

### ***Improved data collection for planning and monitoring progress***

The above analysis of the situation of Romani children revealed substantial data gaps and a lack of basic information. And even when some data is available, children in informal settlements or without birth registrations remain invisible. At the same time, existing data is often not fully exploited for the purposes of planning and evaluation.

- Administrative data needs to be routinely disaggregated for age, gender, ethnicity, and locality (urban/rural). Data should additionally be collected in dimensions of child well-being that are not currently covered: material deprivation, quality of education (attainment and well-being at school), child protection (violence against children, child trafficking, juvenile justice), children's relationships and subjective feelings of well-being.
- Existing household panel and survey data should be re-assessed for available data on children, both for Romani and non-Romani children, and child-specific indicators should be strengthened in future questionnaires. New surveys in countries with large Romani populations should consider oversampling.

- The monitoring of the situation of Romani and majority children should cover different dimensions of their well-being and whenever possible draw on children's views and experiences.
- New research should be participatory and allow comparisons with the majority population.
- The ombudsperson system should focus on the situation of Romani children as one of the most vulnerable groups in the population, in order to monitor the promotion and protection of their rights.

## ***Ending discrimination***

All governments acknowledge the need to put an end to the widespread discrimination against Roma, and plan a range of measures to address the most pressing problems; these include the training of professionals in health, education, and social welfare, as well as local authorities, but also awareness-raising campaigns among the wider population. There are a number of ways, however, in which these measures need to be strengthened.

- Because of the potential resistance from local authorities, clearer mechanisms of accountability, and for the identification of gaps and strategies to address them, need to be established and adequate funding provided in order to ensure that the strategies developed at the state level are properly implemented at the local level.
- Governments need to ensure that all children are registered at birth

and that the status of Romani children and their parents is regularised. Barriers in the access to personal documents, such as fees, lack of information, and overly complicated procedures, need to be addressed urgently.

- In the meantime, measures should be put into place to guarantee children's access to healthcare, education and social assistance regardless of their status.
- Mechanisms for ongoing consultations with all members of Romani communities, including children, need to be developed to ensure that due attention is given to children's needs in the improvement of housing and the surrounding neighbourhood.
- Schools need to become agents of change and commit themselves to becoming inclusive for all children, using more flexible teaching methods and clear processes for classroom management, in which the children can participate. The other measures foreseen in the NAPs - improved access to healthcare, efforts to increase enrolment rates and prevent school drop-out, and desegregation of the school system - can not alone ensure children's success at school.
- Because of the interrelationships between poverty and deprivation, low educational achievement, poor health, lack of employment and poor living conditions, sustainable improvements in the lives of Roma can only be achieved through coherent, cross-sectoral approaches, which actively involve the Romani community.

### ***Ensuring the realisation of all rights for all children***

Romani children are among the most vulnerable groups of the population. The gaps in addressing their needs point to the general lack of strategies to foster the development and well-being of all children. What is needed is an integrated and comprehensive set of child- and family-friendly policies and strategies that

- prioritise the reduction of child poverty and deprivation and ensure that all children's basic needs are met;
- improve the provision and accessibility of affordable childcare, in particular for children in poverty and in rural areas;
- are informed and influenced by the participation of children and their families, including from vulnerable and excluded groups of the population.

It is only by placing the development of policies and programmes for Roma within a broader context of policies and programmes for all children that sustainable results can be achieved, leading to the reduction and eventual disappearance of the current divide between Roma and majority populations.

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