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**UNESCO and Council of Europe**

***"Towards quality education for Roma children:  
transition from early childhood to primary  
education"***

**Audit of Pre-school provision**

**Briefing paper for the Experts' UNESCO/Council of Europe  
Meeting**

**UNESCO, Paris 10<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> September 2007**

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"But what ever policy responses are made to the needs of minorities, it is essential that care is taken in making provision in terms of what the recipients want educationally for their children. Parents should be involved at all levels of decision making and, if possible, also in the teaching. In this way, it is ensured that they are taking part in shaping their own destiny in harmony and co-operation with the rest of society.....  
In some areas (*in UK*), mobile pre-school play-groups have been developed as well as schemes for adult literacy.....  
The Roma culture is rich in tradition and this can make a positive contribution to the life and work of any school." <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Gypsies: A Minority at the Crossroads", Arthur R Ivatts, UNESCO Courier, November 1974, p.7.

## **BACKGROUND AND PHILOSOPHICAL POSITION**

There is little doubt that over the last half century all the international evidence has confirmed the importance of children's early-years educational experiences as being the essential foundation for happy and successful adult lives. This assessment takes on greater significance in the twenty first century Europe with its knowledge based economy. As an empowerment tool, education is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalised children, youth and adults can emerge from poverty and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities and the wider world. As the foundation for all learning and life chances, early childhood education has the proven potential to offset the disadvantages caused by poverty or marginalisation with their dual inherent threats to the enjoyment of full human rights. It is timely, therefore, that UNESCO and the Council of Europe should jointly devote time and energy to assessing what progress has been made in recent years to improve the access to, and quality of, pre-school educational experiences for Roma and Traveller children within the Member States of the Council of Europe. It is also appropriate that creative time should be set aside by an international group of experts so that a powerful contribution can be made to the improvement of early childhood education for Roma and Traveller children and to their successful transition to quality primary education. This paper attempts to provide a brief audit of the state of play in this regard and as a working document for the UNESCO/Council of Europe conference in Paris – 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> September 2007.

The reader of this briefing paper is requested at the start to be aware of a number of potential pitfalls in relation to the interpretation of the information and data presented about Roma and Traveller children and communities. The specific focus on these particular groups within the context of their restricted access and marked under attainment as measured within formal school-education, should in no way be interpreted as an implicit statement of under attainment by all the groups, nor all individuals within any of the groups. Readers are also advised to note the author's concern regarding the creation and or confirmation of stereotypes, either negative or positive, within the context of a document constrained by the need for brevity. It is also to be noted that the prescription for early childhood education within institutional settings, in no way suggests that there is any deficiency within Roma and Traveller home backgrounds and or child socialisation. Further, that the representation of these groups as a focus of UNESCO and Council of Europe concern, should in no way be seen as an implied cultural pathology or a deficit model of the lifestyle and culture of all or any of these groups.

## **THE TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS**

In order to avoid any confusion for the reader, the term '**early childhood education**' will be used in the main as standard throughout this paper and will refer to any organised educational provision outside of the home for children in the age range of one to seven years. (Other frequently used terms include: pre-school, early years, kindergarten, playgroup, nursery, pre-grade one, preparatory year, 'zero year' etc.) It is to be noted that the age at which children begin their formal primary education varies from one Member State to another, but in the main, it is between the ages of five years and seven years of age. The majority of children in early childhood education are between the ages of three and six.

Although the text will comply with the Council of Europe adopted usage of the term 'Roma and Traveller', some quoted references will include other terms such as Gypsy or Sinti, for example. The references will only be used to give accuracy to the quoted sources.

Acronyms will only be used subsequent to the use of the full title and initially indicated within brackets.

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION - BASELINE CONTEXT 1990-2005**

This baseline context assessment 1990-2005, has been conducted on the following criteria:

- Available data
- Access and Attendance
- Obstacles
- Attainment
- Quality of provision and good practice evidence
- NGO actions

### ***Available data***

Despite the endemic problem of the data deficient environment surrounding policy, provision and practice associated with Roma and Traveller communities,<sup>2</sup> there is a modest amount of evidence stemming from the research and investigatory work of prominent international agencies, to be able to provide a picture of the nature and extent of early childhood education and the access of Roma and Traveller communities to primary education. The Save the Children report draws attention to the fact that since 1990 it has been the 'supra-national European institutions which have increased the focus of attention on 'Roma/Gypsies' and contributed to the generation of reliable data, "To date their activities have largely centred on information gathering..."<sup>3</sup> The paucity of sound data has been a continuing feature in this area of policy within most Member States. In 2004, the report published by the European Union commented thus, "The scarce reliable data that does exist, points to very dramatic gaps between the situation of Roma and non-Roma throughout Europe in fields relevant to EU social inclusion policy (*including education*)."<sup>4</sup>

### ***Access and Attendance***

For the purposes of this section of the paper, the evidence in the Save the Children report of 2001 is used as the baseline starting point.<sup>5</sup> It is to be noted

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<sup>2</sup> This reference makes no inference that weak demographic data in relation to these communities is on account of the communities' failure to comply with administrative procedures in the form of national censuses. Data is most frequently weak because of a lack of their inclusion within census and other monitoring categories and or a well justified fear on the part of communities that voluntary ethnic self-ascription will be used to inflict discriminatory policies.

<sup>3</sup> "Denied a future", Save the Children Report, London 2001. Volume 1, page (p) 21.

<sup>4</sup> "The situation of Roma in an Enlarged European Union", DG Employment and Social Affairs, European Communities 2004 (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> "Denied a future", Volumes 1 and 2, Save the Children, London 2001.

that this report covers a wide range of European countries both in Southern and Western Europe and also Central and Eastern Europe. The general picture from this report provides baseline evidence of restricted access to early childhood education for Roma and Traveller communities. The degree of, and causes of, these restrictions are wide and complex respectively. In a majority of the countries investigated, forms of early childhood education were available, and in some cases, associated with equal rights of access. The availability of provision, however, was not always ensured by legalisation and apart from a few exceptions, access/take-up for Roma and Traveller children was markedly below that for the majority population despite marked variability in Member State provisions. A study in 1998 in Romania estimated that while 17% of the Roma population attended early childhood education, the rate for non-Roma was near to 60%.<sup>6</sup> The picture was, however, very variable with access to provision ranging from 2% to 85% across all the countries covered by the study. In many instances within countries in Eastern and Central Europe, the evidence suggested that the level of access and attendance in early childhood education had deteriorated significantly since the change to market economies in the early ninety nineties.<sup>7</sup> In one example quoted, children identified with 'mild disabilities' were provided with privileged access to early childhood educational opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

The very variable pattern of access to early childhood education was also reported to be reflected in the access of Roma and Traveller children to primary education although in all cases rights were enshrined in national legislation and nationally ratified international conventions.

### **Obstacles**

The most common casual factors militating against access and regular attendance<sup>9</sup> in early childhood educational opportunities included the following:

- A lack of the correct individual documentation as, for example, birth certificates. The cost factor in securing these documents was seen as the main reason for families not possessing them.
- Poverty. It was reported that most provision was only accessible on the payment of fees and that for most Roma and Traveller families these expenses were sometimes impossible to pay given the high rate of unemployment. For some families, it was said that the additional costs associated with pre-school attendance was a further disincentive to accessing such provision. The sharp rise in the levels of Roma unemployment following the change to market economies was seen as a key factor in the reduction of Roma pupils in early childhood education.
- Access and attendance was also adversely influenced in countries suffering social and political strife and military conflict.
- The juxtaposition of the early childhood educational provision to some Roma and Traveller neighbourhoods was seen to be a further hindrance to families with no means of transport.

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<sup>6</sup> "Denied a future", Save the Children Report Volume 1: Eastern Europe, London 2001, page 323.

<sup>7</sup> The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Republic of Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Romania. – The countries in Eastern and Central Europe included within the Save the Children Report, "Denied a future", London 2001.

<sup>8</sup> "Denied a future", Save the Children Report Volume 1: Eastern Europe, London 2001, page 63.

<sup>9</sup> 'Regular attendance' is defined in this briefing paper as 80% attendance for an individual child out of the days/sessions possible. It is to be noted that 'attendance' is thus different to 'enrolment' and 'access'.

- In one case cited it was suggested that the fear of abduction and child trafficking prevented some families from having the confidence to place their young children within early childhood educational institutions.
- In situations where Roma children were disproportionately represented in special schools it was felt that this acted as a disincentive in some cases to place children in early childhood education.
- Parental fears for children’s welfare and safety in anticipation of prejudice on the part of the staff of institutions and non-Roma pupils and their parents. In many situations this was also seen as an explanation for discriminatory provision and planned or de facto segregation.<sup>10</sup>
- The fears within some families that their children were not competent in the official language of instruction in the early childhood educational setting.
- In a few cases it was mentioned that in situations where the use of buses are part of Roma desegregation programmes, access to early childhood education may be difficult and or compromised for some families.

### ***Attainment***

The scrutiny of evidence from the wide range of texts produced by international agencies provide little evidence in relation to the measured achievements of Roma and Traveller pupils who have accessed and attended early childhood educational institutions. The documentation as referenced above mainly confines itself to rights, availability and Roma and Traveller levels of access and participation. At the time of the Save the Children report in 2001, it would seem that curriculum objectives for children prior to primary education focused on ‘preparatory’ experiences aimed at a successful integration into the first grade at six/seven years or the first year of formal primary education. In most cases curricular processes are detailed rather than any measured attainment outcomes. The curricular aims for most Roma pupils would seem to be the acquisition of the national (or institutional) language of educational instruction. This was clearly the prime motivation of the introductory programme of a preparatory year to the first grade for Roma children, as for example, in Bulgaria. In the latter case, the programme also included “..additional teacher training for teachers of Roma/Gypsy children”.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Quality of provision and good practice evidence***

Curriculum quality was said to be in evidence in a number of countries within provision based on the Step-by-Step programmes. These programmes were part of the Open Society Fund and were implemented in the early nineteen-nineties. Many of these projects were dedicated to minority integration in kindergartens.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon is well documented. See, “Separate and Unequal –Combating Discrimination Against Roma in Education”, Edited by, Edwin Rekosh and Maxine Sleeper, Public Interest Law Initiative, Budapest 2004.

<sup>11</sup> “Denied a future”, Save the Children Report Volume 1: Eastern Europe, London 2001, page 101.

<sup>10</sup> “Denied a future”, Save the Children Report Volume 1: Eastern Europe, London 2001, pages 104 and 282.

In the United Kingdom, many Roma and Traveller children benefited from the 'Sure Start' programme for early years education and the Foundation Curriculum was introduced as a requirement for all children after the age of five years within formal educational settings. This curriculum was broad and balanced and had clear and measurable learning goals across a comprehensive range of learning experiences.

### **NGO Actions**

In many countries in Eastern and Central Europe, the innovative approaches to teaching and learning within early childhood settings was the result of the work of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). A project detailed within the Save the Children report 'Denied a future', identified good practice in kindergartens in Bulgaria in which the curriculum was made inclusive by the preparation of materials, the use of bilingual teaching methods and the introduction of 'Roma/Gypsy language, history and cultural traditions'.<sup>13</sup> The evidence seems to suggest that where such projects were implemented the level of access, attendance and attainment of Roma and Traveller children was very encouraging. The active participation of the communities in the design and implementation of such provision was seen as a further strength of the provision. Another successful project for early childhood education was also detailed in the report in regard to NGO actions in Croatia. A series of summer schools were organised and these had a clear focus on Roma language, history and culture.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the significant number of reported NGO productive and innovative partnership actions taking place in the nineteen nineties in most Member States in relation to the early childhood education of Roma and Traveller children, the literature suggests that cost effectiveness was not always good. In addition, few of the initiatives led on to sustainable policy and provision by local and or central governments. A number of such actions also failed to challenge both the segregation of Roma and Traveller children, and the notion of their educational needs as being 'special' rather than mainstream.<sup>15</sup> The Save the Children report was uncompromising in its condemnation of governments across Europe in terms of their policy stance in relation to the educational needs of Roma and Traveller communities.

"The way that Roma/Gypsies are viewed by policy-makers shapes how policy towards them is formed and implemented. The current lack of success of Roma/Gypsies and Travellers within mainstream educational systems reflects a long history of governments failing to adopt effective and appropriate policies towards Roma/Gypsies in general. This failure is rooted in the inability and, in most cases, the reluctance of policy-makers and decision-takers to fully appreciate the history, circumstances, aspirations and capabilities of Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people. There are few, if any, other population groups in Europe against which regular racist pronouncements and actions still pass largely unremarked.

<sup>13</sup> "Denied a future", Save the Children Report, Volume 1, 2001, page 103. Reference to the Bulgarian National Committee of UNICEF 1991-93.

<sup>14</sup> "Denied a future", Save the Children Report, Volume 1, 2001, page 132-134.

<sup>15</sup> "Denied and future", Save the Children Report, Volume 1, 2001, page 104-107.

The tendency has been for Roma/Gypsies to be seen as “the problem” rather than the key to the solution, and it is still unusual to come across acknowledgements that “the problem” could be the outcome of personal or institutional racism or well-meaning but ill advised policies. The consequences of failed government initiatives have been deepening misunderstanding, fear, and suspicion, contributing to the generation and reproduction of prejudice on both sides. The end result is frequently to apportion blame to Roma/Gypsy and Traveller people themselves and for policies and practices that were derived without any consultation with, or involvement of, their end users.”<sup>16</sup>

## **SECTION 2**

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION – AUDIT CONTEXT 2005-2007**

The most recent reports based on intensive research and surveys reiterate the fundamental importance of early childhood education. The UNICEF report of 2007 usefully links the situation of Roma and Travellers with the importance of early childhood education. “Pre-school can be particularly helpful for children from families and communities that have traditionally been excluded from education, and for those who only speak a minority language or whose home circumstances make it hard for them to benefit from early stimulation.”<sup>17</sup>

A number of important publications have been issued within this second audit context period and this section of the briefing paper attempts to draw together and summarise the evidence in a way that will indicate the degree of progress made over the last two or more years in relation to early childhood education for Roma and Traveller communities. However, the assessments used by the international monitors and other observers focus very much on countries in Eastern and Central Europe, and in particular, the Roma Decade countries. To this extent, the audit scope is somewhat limited at this stage and much of the situation in Western and Southern Europe will only be able to be described in Section 3 of this briefing paper which will analyse the current questionnaire returns from the Council of Europe Member States.

In the interests of consistency of analysis and drafting format, the same headings from the ‘Baseline Context’ above will be used for this section.

- Available data
- Access and Attendance
- Obstacles
- Attainment
- Quality of provision and good practice evidence
- NGO actions

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<sup>16</sup> “Denied a future”, Save the Children 2001, Volume 1. pp.23,24.

<sup>17</sup> “Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion – Roma Children in South East Europe”, UNICEF, Serbia 2007. p.46.



## **Available data**

Accurate and informed assessments of early childhood education for Roma and Traveller children as evidenced within the most recent reports and surveys, is universally reported to be beset by a lack of sound and reliable data. The continuing data deficient environment and its dysfunctional impact on the monitoring and measurement of progress, is well described in the most recent report by 'Decade Watch'.

"So far, the perhaps biggest gap in Decade implementation has been the lack of data on Roma, covering education, employment, health and housing. Data collection is sparse, irregular and not nationally representative..... However, what is lacking two years into the Decade is systematic and regular data collection to allow tracking of progress on Roma inclusion over time. Only the systematic and regular collection of disaggregated and nationally representative data will allow governments to report on the outcomes of their efforts under the Decade in 2015." <sup>18</sup>

These concerns are echoed in the Annual Report 2006 (*published summer 2007*) of the Roma Education Fund (REF).

"National monitoring systems and policies have not significantly improved, and the national statistical systems are adapting slowly to tracking inequalities and poverty."<sup>19</sup>

A good deal of the early childhood educational assessments contained within the most recent reports from the international agencies still seem to rely on data linked to specific projects and or surveys conducted during the late nineteen nineties and the three or four years following on from 2000. The authoritative report by the Open Society Institute, "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma",<sup>20</sup> reiterates the concerns previously expressed in relation to the poor data context for all the countries covered in Volume 1.<sup>21</sup> In regard to the four countries covered in the report, no comprehensive official data on educational provision and outcomes are available. Data that does exist routinely fails to disaggregate on the basis of ethnicity and so the educational fortunes of Roma children are obscured. In all four country studies the report makes robust recommendations to the relevant governments on the issue of data collection and the need for it to be ethnically disaggregated and inclusive of Roma. Evidence across the Decade countries suggests that some governments have been slow to respond to formal recommendations for improvements in data collection.

Data collection as evidenced within the reports and other sources scrutinized for this briefing paper frequently fail to include data on early childhood provision in terms of access and outcomes. Across all Member States, there is a very variable picture in this regard but the prescriptions for action should be heard loud and clear. In its report on "Roma and Travellers in Public Education",<sup>22</sup> the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia calls on all educational authorities

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<sup>18</sup> "Decade Watch – Roma Activists Assess the Progress of the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2006", Open Society Institute (OSI) and World Bank, Hungary 2007. p.19.

<sup>19</sup> Roma Education Funds – "Annual Report 2006", Roma Education Fund, Budapest 2007.

<sup>20</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1. Monitoring Reports 2007, Open Society Institute, European Union (EU) Monitoring and Advocacy Programme, Education Support Programme and Roma Participation Programme.

<sup>21</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1. Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Serbia.

<sup>22</sup> "Roma and Travellers in Public Education – An overview of the situation in the EU Member States, EUMC, Vienna 2006. p.13.

to collect systematically ethnically differentiated statistical data on the educational situation of Roma and Travellers and which gauges the impact of policies and measures. Clearly, more rapid progress is required in this crucial area of policy development and for it to include data on early childhood education. The monitoring and assessment of equity in education now demands this development across a majority of Council of Europe Member States.

### **Access and Attendance**

In regard to the available non-governmental information, the most comprehensive assessment material is documented for the Roma Decade countries. There is evidence of progress in the access and provision of early childhood educational opportunities for Roma communities. However, the picture is very variable and generalisations are to be treated with caution. The Annual Report 2006 of the Roma Education Fund commends the progress that is in evidence but expresses concern on account of the very variable picture that is emerging.<sup>23</sup> The 'Decade Watch' report very usefully attempts to introduce a scoring system for the progress made by the Decade countries. In a score from 0 to 4 the grade '0' is equated with 'No government action' and a maximum grade '4' is defined as 'Integrated policy, setting the standard for government action and ownership'. In connection to policies and actions surrounding early childhood education (coded '3.2'), the evaluation team use the available evidence to provide a score for all the Decade participating countries. These are as follows:<sup>24</sup>

1. Hungary	4
2. Romania	1
3. Serbia	2
4. Bulgaria	2
5. Slovakia	3
6. Croatia	1
7. Montenegro	1
8. Czech Republic	2
9. Macedonia	2

Within the timeframe of this section of the briefing paper (2005-2007), there is thus evidence of progress in terms of Roma access to some form of early childhood education.<sup>25</sup> In an increasing number of cases this has been secured by the legislative actions to introduce compulsory pre-school preparatory years, although some form of pre-school provision is in place in all the Decade countries. It is important to note the distinction between the structural possibility of access to early childhood education and actual Roma enrolment. (See *footnote 8*) Some elements of provision make a positive contribution to the practical feasibility of enrolment and are linked to measures to promote access to early childhood education, as for example, with the provision of a free meal, books and learning materials and support with school transport. In many cases, early childhood education is free of charge, particularly for the pre first grade preparatory or 'zero-year', but this is by no means general, although in most cases where fees are obligatory, arrangements are made to facilitate access for those families on low income (social disadvantage) and or disability. In some countries, as for

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<sup>23</sup> Roma Education Funds –“Annual Report 2006”, Roma Education Fund, Budapest 2007.

example, Hungary, access to early childhood education cannot now be refused to socially disadvantaged families from the age of three years.

Despite the general and welcome expansion of free compulsory education with its incorporation of at least one year of early childhood education and associated policies to promote access and regular attendance, the implementation of policy in some countries is reported to be less than inclusive when it comes to Roma communities.

The Decade evidence of enrolment of Roma children into early childhood educational opportunities, and the number of years of such experience, forms a far from satisfactory picture overall. In Bulgaria, for example, despite the possibility of Roma pre-school inclusion being estimated at around 16%, 'Decade Watch'<sup>26</sup> reports that there is no government funded measures to promote access of Roma to the preparatory school year despite the change in the law making the preparatory year compulsory. Relatively small numbers of Roma children are said to participate in the pre-school programmes and opportunities as compared to non-Roma in Bulgaria, Croatia,<sup>27</sup> the Czech Republic<sup>28</sup> and Romania.<sup>29</sup> Romania is reported by UNICEF to have planned for a year-on-year increase in Roma participation in early childhood education. This programme has been initiated in cooperation with UNICEF, although it is pointed out in their report that if 5% per year is the target, in many countries with sizeable populations of Roma, it will still take 15 years to achieve access rates of around 80%. Generations of children will be disadvantaged in the process.

Given the modest advances in availability of early childhood education, particularly within the recent EU member countries and the Decade countries, the assessment of the feasibility of Roma access by the international players would indicate weaknesses in participation rates on account of a number of extraneous factors. Fees and or associated school attendance costs, such as trips and extra-curricular activities, is still a serious hindrance for many Roma families. More structural issues which appear to persist despite legislative and regulatory improvements, relate to poor or limited provision in or near to Roma segregated neighbourhoods and or their geographic isolation from mainstream provision. There are frequent references to the limitation of access opportunities on account of poor or no provision within rural areas and in isolated 'Roma' villages. In addition, UNICEF reports that in some cities, access to early childhood education gives priority to working parents and this reality is a structural disadvantage to those Roma families where one or both parents are unemployed.<sup>30</sup>

Caution is necessary in regard to the data presented within some international texts relating to 'attendance'.<sup>31</sup> Attendance and enrolment sometimes appear as the same thing. For the purposes of this briefing paper, 'enrolment' is where a child is officially registered with a school, and 'attendance' is the recorded actual attendance as a percentage of the total attendance possible in terms of full days or half day sessions. Data on actual attendance, as opposed to enrolments, is very thin within the otherwise laudable texts scrutinized for this briefing paper.

## **Obstacles**

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<sup>26</sup> "Decade Watch", p.30.

<sup>27</sup> "Decade Watch", p.32.

<sup>28</sup> "Roma Decade", p.80.

<sup>29</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", p.331.

<sup>30</sup> "Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion – Roma Children in South East Europe", UNICEF, 2007, p.47.

<sup>31</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.33

Despite the evidence of encouraging developments in policies and actions aimed at early childhood education for Roma children, albeit a very variable picture overall in Eastern and Central Europe, there are still many persistent and identifiable obstacles for Roma in securing satisfactory levels of access and regular attendance. Many Roma children and their parents continue to be faced with sometimes multiple hindrances to pre-school education. Reference to some of these has been covered in the earlier part of this section. These and other factors include:

- Improvements in early childhood educational opportunities are not always systematically and uniformly communicated to Roma parents. This militates against improvements in levels of Roma access to such opportunities.<sup>32</sup>
- Although much basic early childhood education is free, poverty remains a constraint for many families who either do not qualify, who find the burden of bureaucracy too complex to deal with, and/or cannot afford the associated costs of school attendance such as transport, books, meals and extra-curricular activities.<sup>33</sup>
- The lack of appropriate child and family documentation is still reported as undermining access to early childhood education for many Roma.<sup>34</sup>
- Capacity issues are frequently quoted in relation to the basic shortage of early childhood educational places in schools. This is exacerbated in rural areas.
- Social and geographic isolation are also seen as a continuing hindrance to access for many Roma families. Neighbourhood residential segregation is said to have a negative and damaging impact on access to early childhood education.
- Discrimination is also reported to be a factor in admission to early childhood education for some families.<sup>35</sup> National reform policies aimed at administrative and fiscal decentralisation allows local authorities (municipalities) latitude of policy discretion which may have a negative influence on the implementation of equity policies aimed at improving access of Roma to educational opportunities.<sup>36</sup>
- Negative public attitudes to the integration of Roma in mainstream educational settings.<sup>37</sup>
- The determined motivation of Roma mothers to access their children to early childhood education may be undermined by the poor education of Roma women. Evidence suggests that in some circumstances Roma women have consistently lower literacy rates than for Roma men on account of gender inequality in access to education. "This is especially of concern, since the wellbeing of the family and especially the children is closely related to the level of education of the mother."<sup>38</sup>

## **Attainment**

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<sup>32</sup> "Decade Watch", p.80.

<sup>33</sup> "Decade Watch", p.80.

<sup>34</sup> "Equal Access to Quality education for Roma", Volume 1, p.490.

<sup>35</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.204.

<sup>36</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.363.

<sup>37</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.121.

<sup>38</sup> "Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion – Roma Children in South East Europe, UNICEF 2007, p.33.

Data on Roma and Traveller pupil attainment in early childhood education continues to be noticeably thin and unsystematic. Information on attainment comes mainly from the detailed reports of special projects and or the monitoring and evaluation of the international agencies. Most of the published data on Roma and early childhood education focuses on issues of structural access, enrolments and attendance, and the legislative and administrative indicators of change and measured improvements. Comprehensive details on pupil attainment is sadly lacking in most cases and is perhaps one consequence of the emphasis being placed on the nature and quality of educational policy reform and provision rather than measured outcomes. The Roma Education Fund Annual Report is unrepentant in its call for more to be done to ensure universal enrolment of Roma children and their full participation in at least one year of early childhood education and for methods of assessment and monitoring outcomes to be more routine and systematic. Given the need for rapid improvements in the educational fortunes of Roma and Traveller children across Europe, it would seem important for individual baseline assessments to be established so that the monitoring and assessment of progress and outcomes can be recorded and evaluated. The "Decade Watch" report draws attention to the difficulty of assessing outcomes for the Roma in education on account of gaps in data.

The individual project reports provide much encouraging evidence on the learning achievements of Roma pupils who benefit from quality education provided in well organised early childhood settings. A good example of this is given in the REF Annual Report 2006 (Published summer 2007) in relation to a pre-school project in Serbia.<sup>39</sup> The sound partnership approach involved 632 Roma children and the appointment of Local Roma Coordinators (LRCs). The coordinators visited all the homes and hindrances to early childhood education were identified and overcome. The attainment outcomes were very significant in that 473 of the cohort successfully accessed primary school with only four children failing to pass the enrolment examination. The project also brought Roma parents closer to the school and also had very positive influences on the attitudes of the schools and local communities.

### ***Quality of Provision and Good Practice Evidence***

The texts scrutinized for this section of the briefing paper provide a range of information which allows the construction of a picture of the actual quality of early childhood education, albeit fragmented and restricted in coverage to a sizeable minority of Member State countries.

Although the overall picture in Eastern and Central Europe is negative, there are many exceptions and examples of positive developments and indicators of good and promising practice. One such example has been given above in relation to the innovative work of the Roma Education Fund in Serbia. The Fund has been very supportive of the development of early childhood education for Roma in many of the Decade countries. Their productive partnerships have been a catalyst to the showcase modelling of good and promising practice. Provision and outcomes would seem to have met with quality and minority standards.<sup>40</sup>

Another example of good practice is reported in the REF Country Assessment Report on the Czech Republic. Early childhood educational opportunities of quality have been implemented since 2004 with the introduction of 'preparatory classes'

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<sup>39</sup> "Roma Education Fund – Annual Report 2006", p.53.

<sup>40</sup> "National minority standards – A compilation of OSCE and Council of Europe texts", Published by Council of Europe, Strasbourg June 2007.

for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The classes follow a special curriculum and each child is given their own individual learning programme. The curriculum covers intellectual development (language and communication skills/numeracy and knowledge development –music, art, practical and physical education) as well as the development of cultural-social and hygienic habits.<sup>41</sup>

However, in any race equality audit, the hindrances to quality provision and good practice need to be identified and monitored. The follow issues were detailed within the international texts studied although the lack of uniform data makes comparisons and quantitative generalisations unwise:

- An alarming lack of involvement of Roma parents in the life and work of the pre-schools their children attend.<sup>42</sup>
- A minority of Roma children having access to bilingual education that would facilitate the use and development of their first language (sometimes referred to as 'mother tongue') and few teachers with such language skills.<sup>43</sup>
- Books and curriculum materials either failing to be inclusive of Roma and Traveller traditions, culture, history and language, or frequently carrying negative and racist stereotypical information and images.
- An unhelpful correlation between the percentage of Roma children on role and the quality of the learning environment. The more Roma segregated the situation, the more impoverished the physical and learning environment thus reflecting discrimination in the allocation of educational resources.<sup>44</sup>
- Low teacher expectations of Roma children and negative attitudes betraying a professional perception of Roma lifestyle and culture as a deficit model.
- Limited or poor assessment of attainment, progress and child development (personal and social).<sup>45</sup>
- In some countries a lack of early childhood curriculum standards.<sup>46</sup>
- Financial constraints resulting in the deployment of few Roma teacher assistants to contribute to the establishment of a more bilingual learning environment.
- Very few early childhood educational institutions offer help to enable Roma children to acquire skills and confidence in the language they need in primary school.<sup>47</sup>
- Limited evidence of curricular reflection of education for cultural and ethnic diversity.<sup>48</sup>
- Lack of child-centred teaching and learning.
- Professional standards assessed as weaker in terms of qualifications and pedagogical skills in Roma segregated schools and or classes.
- In many countries educational inspectorates are reported to lack appropriate training, skills and resources to enable them to make sound equity judgements on the quality of education in relation to the specific needs of Roma and Traveller children.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Advancing Education for Roma in the Czech Republic", Country Assessment and the Roma Education Fund's Strategic Directions. Roma Education Fund, Budapest, 2007, p.23.

<sup>42</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma" Volume 1, p.284 and p.270

<sup>43</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.189.

<sup>44</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.277.

<sup>45</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.40.

<sup>46</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.564.

<sup>47</sup> "Breaking the Cycle of Exclusion", p.47.

<sup>48</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1, p.121

<sup>49</sup> "Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma", Volume 1.

## **NGO Actions**

The audit period under consideration (2005-2007) provides an interesting picture of the work of the civil society/NGO sector. A large number of NGO sponsored projects which focused on pre and primary schooling for Roma communities have come to an end and particularly in those countries that have become recent member of the European Union. While the projects frequently resulted in very successful and positive outcomes, as for example, the Save the Children work in Montenegro and Serbia, criticisms have been made in terms of their modest sustainability and locality, district, regional and national replication. This is not a criticism of the projects and their work, but more a statement of disappointment that authorities and governments seemed reluctant or unable to adopt the showcase models and scale-up so that more Roma and other minorities might benefit in the long term.

To some extent the shift of action from the NGO sector to governments with the active cooperation of powerful international players reflects a change in the international funding programmes, as for example, the change from PHARE funding in Accession States to the subsequent Structural Funds for full Member States.

Over the period 2005 to 2007, there is evidence of more actions by governments but frequently with the support and encouragement of key international agencies. The Roma Education Fund is able to list a significant number of actions in partnership with government in the Decade region that have led to the development of good practice in terms of access of Roma to quality early childhood educational opportunities.<sup>50</sup>

A further catalyst to improvements in the educational opportunities for Roma communities, including early childhood education, and particularly in the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, is the audit mirror facilitated by the intensive research and survey work that is increasingly being provided by the international agencies such as the World Bank, Open Society Institute (OSI), United National Development Programme (UNDP), UNCIFE, the Council of Europe, and the Roma Education Fund and others. This work would seem to be absolutely vital if the progress already made is to be maintained and strengthened in the coming years. The evidence to date is that despite many examples of progress, uniform actions are sluggish to materialise and the context is in some ways defined as less favourable than it was a few years ago. The Roma Education Fund Annual Report lists a number of contextual issues that have the potential for hindering further progress and must be considered as a matter of concern. These are: "a lack of political commitment to implement many of the legislative and policy provisions for Roma inclusion, especially in countries that have already joined the EU; a slower pace for educational reforms; some ill-conceived policies; and political instability and the emergence of populist parties with a xenophobic and anti-minority agenda."<sup>51</sup>

## **SECTION 3**

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<sup>50</sup> "Roma Education Fund Annual Report 2006", pp. 80-100.

<sup>51</sup> "Roma Education Fund Annual Report 2006", p.11.

## **ANALYSIS OF COUNCIL OF EUROPE MEMBER STATE QUESTIONNAIR RETURNS - AUGUST 2007**

In preparation for the UNESCO/Council of Europe expert meeting in Paris, September 2007, the Council of Europe asked participating Member States to complete a brief questionnaire on the situation re the early childhood and primary education available for Roma and Traveller communities. At the time of writing, eight returns had been received and the subsequent analysis has been constrained to some extent on account of the lack of more information. However, on the basis of the information received from the respective Ministries of Education, it has been possible to make a number of observations relevant to the subject of this briefing paper.

### ***Available data***

Despite the provision of valuable up to date information on general educational policy and provision, the collective data is noticeable thin although the questions answered were not prescriptive in this respect. Ethnically disaggregated data was said to be available in some Member States, but this only linked to school aged children as opposed to pre-school cohorts. In the United Kingdom and Spain, policies are in place that will shortly lead to ethnic monitoring for early childhood education, albeit on the basis of voluntary ethnic self-ascription. From the collective information provided it has not been possible to conduct a race equality audit in terms of the access, enrolment and attendance of Roma and Traveller children and the extent to which they are actually benefiting from the impressive and wide range of pre-school programmes available. Some good general pre-school statistical data was in evidence as, for example, in Norway.

### ***Access and Attendance***

The evidence thus far would indicate that there are very clear universal rights for all families to access their children on an equal basis to early childhood education. There is variation across Member States in terms of the voluntary and compulsory dimensions of the provision, as too, the degree and nature of access costs. Some is free while other opportunities impose a financial burden on families. In most cases, however, it would appear that special arrangements exist to facilitate access for poorer families in those situations where fees and or other costs are required. The compulsory element is linked to the penultimate year to primary education and these arrangements are part of legislative changes which are really reflective of an extension of compulsory full-time education being added to the lower end of the age range.

Many respondents said that while no special arrangements exist for Roma and Traveller communities in regard to aiding their access to early childhood education, these families are entitled to, and so may benefit from, policies targeted towards inclusion and measures to improve access for ***all*** children including these from minority ethnic communities. In some Member States the legislative framework includes arrangements for ensuring a legal right to a pre-school place irrespective of the capacity of any one institution. In one example, the policy places a legal obligation on the municipality to ensure that there are a



sufficient number of kindergarten places.<sup>52</sup> Such policies are no doubt expensive, but attention should be given to the development given the previous evidence from international institutions on the restricted access for Roma children on account of geographic isolation and or a shortage of early childhood school places.

The policies aimed at mainstreaming provision for Roma and Traveller communities by avoiding 'special Roma projects' are to be commended in terms of their compliance with the philosophical prescription as expressed within the recent Annual Report of the Roma Education Fund.<sup>53</sup>

The main philosophy behind REF's interventions is that efforts to make school systems more responsive to the Roma should actually benefit all children and society as a whole. Roma children do not need different, separate education initiatives. On the contrary, they need a more child-centred approach, whereby all children, despite their differences, can improve and develop as part of a broader society. This can only be achieved if governments collaborate on improving policies and institutions and if Roma become fuller members and participants in the system.

The most advanced policy developments reported are characterised by the thoughtful attempts of governments to ensure inclusion by making school and other systems more responsive to Roma and Traveller community needs. This organic approach is based on careful and systematic monitoring of policy success indicators such as levels of enrolments and actual attendance. Because of the shortage of data in some circumstances, informed estimates are used to justify such creative policy initiatives.

Data on enrolments and attendance of Roma and Traveller children at the early childhood stage of their education was not requested, but from the previous evidence it would seem that statistical data is in general sadly lacking and this situation makes it difficult to assess policy success rates, identify good practice and further prevents any attempts at race equality audits.

### **Obstacles**

Member States were asked to identify both positive and negative impacts of policies re Roma and Traveller communities and their access to early childhood and quality primary education. A majority of responses indicated a clear policy commitment to the identification of obstacles confronting Roma and Traveller communities in accessing education. This constructive approach is commonly linked to policy actions aimed at securing real inclusion within the education system for disadvantaged and marginalised communities, and is to be welcomed.

A number of responses indicated an expectation for children from minority language backgrounds to learn the language of instruction through a process of osmosis and "socialisation with their peers and teachers during the every day learning activities". In this context, the seeming lack of a commitment of skilled

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<sup>52</sup> The Norwegian government's legalisation provides one such example.

<sup>53</sup> "Annual Report 2006 – Roma Education Fund, Budapest 2007, p.5.

bilingual support to teaching and learning in the early childhood setting may represent a significant obstacle to language acquisition for many children.

A number of Member States are at the stage of establishing rights of access to early childhood education, but are conscious of significant levels of non-participation by Roma and Traveller communities. Some negative interpretations of this reality are in evidence although there appears to be a growing realisation that additional policy developments are required to insure realistic access and regular attendance. Some suggested policy initiatives, however, betray a lack of understanding in relation to race equality in education and the dangers of segregation.

### ***Attainment***

Member States were not asked to provide evidence on pupil attainment and in this context the previous assessments as detailed above in this briefing paper stand as the definitive statements on levels of attainment.

However, in many Member States there are clear curricular and learning objectives for early childhood education, and in many cases, these have statutory weight.

### ***Quality of provision and good practice evidence***

Within the returns from Ministries of Education there are a large number of policies which aim to improve the quality of the educational experiences of young children. These are of direct benefit to children from minority backgrounds, including Roma and Traveller communities. A number of these developments are very encouraging and include:

- Recognition of the importance of learning the language of instruction and the provision of additional hours for specialist teachers.
- Evidence of a greater degree of cooperation between central governments and regional/district educational structures in designing policies focused on inclusion and reducing inequality.
- A welcome number of policies include the objective of involving local communities and listening to the articulation of needs.
- Concerted efforts by central governments, regions and municipalities to raise awareness of the background and needs of Roma and Traveller communities by well targeted in-service training and seminars/conferences.
- Similar awareness raising training for teachers and other professionals working with Roma and Traveller communities.
- A careful analysis of identified barriers to access and educational success with appropriate policy responses.
- In many Member States there is evidence of well established rights and practice in relation to education for diversity. "Kindergartens shall provide an environment in which different individuals and different cultural expressions meet with respect for their differences."
- Bilingual support for Roma and Traveller children is a strong feature in some Member States. "Kindergartens must support them (*minorities*) in their mother tongue".

- A growing number of examples of curriculum inclusion in the form of the culture, history and language of Roma and Traveller communities and the realisation that this is of benefit to the quality and accuracy of knowledge for all children.
- Developments in the collection of ethnic data so that outcomes can be monitored and evaluated.
- In a number of Member States the initiation of quality research to investigate policy dysfunction and hindrances to access, attendance and educational success for Roma and Traveller children/pupils.
- Evidence of the development of policies targeted on improving the relationships between families and schools so that parents can play a fuller and more active role in the life and work of the schools their children attend. These developments are also linked in some cases to 'outreach' policies in an attempt to engage with 'hard-to-reach- communities.

### ***NGO Actions***

Although a variable picture is in evidence, the general and welcome trend is for effective partnerships to be established between different levels of government and Roma and Traveller NGOs. Some of these are helpful in the building of formal structures leading to the development of action programmes, joint identification of needs and productive of policies to secure access and inclusion. A best practice example is the partnership between the UK's Department of Children Schools and Families, and the Save the Children UK organisation. A wide range of actions concerned with the early childhood education for Roma and Traveller communities have been put in place.

### ***Conclusions to Section 3***

The returned questionnaires by Member States have provided a range of useful information and there are many indicators of positive change and development in relation to the provision of early childhood education for Roma and Traveller communities, and their eventual access to quality primary education. However, the analysis contained within Section 2 of this briefing paper would still stand as the definitive statement of the state of play across the member States of the Council of Europe.

Prepared for the Council of Europe  
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