



**Recommendations for policy makers at  
the level of individual country of partner  
organization (SLOVAKIA)  
in the field of inclusion of Romani  
children  
into preschool programs:**

**Škola dokorán – Wide School n.o.  
Dr. Janského 470/9  
965 01 Žiar nad Hronom · Slovakia  
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## INTRODUCTION:

Skola dokoran – Wide Open School n. o., as a part of the international consortium, has been since October 2016 realizing the project: „KHETAUN (TOGETHER): Key Steps To Inclusion Of Romani Children Into Quality Early Childhood Programs“. The consortium consists from 4 partners (Slovenian, Latvian, Czech and Slovak partner organization).

In Slovakia the project has been implemented in Eastern Slovakia, Kosice region, directly in the most disadvantaged Roma community called „LUNIK IX.“ It is a pure Roma neighbourhood with approximately 4.000 Roma inhabitants, 1 elementary school and 1 preschool. All the project activities have been realized in the Preschool, Hrebendova 5, Kosice – LUNIK IX. This preschool is attended by 111 Roma children.

The goal of the project is, based on the experience of partners from 4 countries, to develop and implement a comprehensive model that enhances the professional competence of educators in working with Roma children, parents and the local community.

These recommendations have been prepared based on the knowledge and experience of project realizators for those relevant stakeholders who are responsible for the improvement of current situation in Roma communities in Slovakia, both from the local and from the national level.

Recommendations have been divided in four thematic groups:

- The importance of preschool education and ensuring social justice in education;
- Building trust and connecting preschool with different actors within the local community;
- Activities for children who are not enrolled in preschool and their parents;
- Programs for empowering Romani families with regard to childcare and encouraging child development.

Recommendations give a general analysis of the situation in each of the areas and specific suggestions for improving the situation at local and national level. It is anticipated that these recommendations will contribute to the Slovak government's ongoing efforts to promote the social integration of Roma communities. The government has embarked on ambitious reforms at all education levels. These findings and recommendations might inform the conversation to further shape educational reform plans.

## **AREA 1: THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION AND ENSURING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION**

### **Analysis of the situation:**

International research provides strong evidence that the first years of human life are crucial, with the first 1.000 days being pivotal. Early childhood experiences influence the whole of one's future life. Evidence from the biological, behavioural, and neurosciences has confirmed that the early years represent a period of both great vulnerability and great opportunity. This is the period when the foundations for lifelong learning are laid. Good quality health care and early childhood education can help children reach their full potential, and also mitigate many of the risks of growing up in a materially deprived environment. The lasting effects of early childhood education are manifested especially in improving children's chances to succeed in school. Early childhood education significantly reduces the risk of grade retention and significantly increases a child's chances of finishing secondary school.

In recognition of the importance of ECEC improved access to preschool education has become one of the key objectives within the government's social inclusion and Roma integration strategies. Using state and EU funds, the government focuses on the expansion of early childhood education and on increasing capacities in preschools in localities with higher number of children from marginalized Roma communities.

The participation rate of children aged 4 – 6 in preschools in Slovakia was 77,4% in 2014, well below the 95% Europe 2020 target. One of the main reasons, though not the only one, is low investment in this level of education. The OECD (2016) places Slovakia among countries with the lowest investment in ECEC from gross domestic product.

There is a robust international evidence that the earliest possible inclusion of Roma children in early care programs is crucial for their school success in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Slovakia does not yet have a compulsory system of early childhood education. With the age-based split system of ECEC services in Slovakia, policies for early intervention (age 0 to 3) and preschool education (age 3 – 6) are disconnected. Responsibilities related to ECEC governance, regulation, and funding are divided between different authorities. Slovakia lacks legislative framework, policies, and national strategies aimed at comprehensive and prioritized early intervention and care. Systemic structural coordination between different sectoral stakeholders with ECEC interests and responsibilities for children aged 0 to 6 is necessary.

### **Recommendation for the local level:**

- Improve the access to quality early learning opportunities in public preschools; a safe and stimulating environment; qualified providers; a quality curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, interactive, culturally and linguistically sensitive. A center climate that encourages active parental participation and continuous assessment by educators of program quality and child development outcomes.
- Reach the maximum engagement of children aged 3-6 from marginalized Roma communities in pre-primary education in preschools.
- Promote the importance of the Early childhood education for Roma children to their parents and caregivers.
- Provide the multicultural education on the local level for ECEC professionals.
- Extend the offer of preschool education in municipalities with high concentration of children from marginalized Roma communities.
- Pursue equality mainstreaming and gender mainstreaming.
- Identify and address specific barriers to inclusion of members of the most disadvantaged groups.

## Recommendation for the national level:

- Increase the participation of marginalized Roma children in pre-primary education, subject to broadening the capacity of the network of preschools and programs for education and upbringing of children of a preschool age in regions where the number of Roma steadily increases, including the implementation of programs targeting the improvement of cooperation with parents, and the increase in the number of ECEC professionals in pre-primary education.
- Increase investment in ECEC to a level of provision comparable with other European Union member states and the OECD average (0,5% of overall gross domestic product).
- Introduction of a compulsory last year of preschool education for all children.
- Legislate that all calls for increasing capacity of preschools include criteria to ensure ethnically and socially mixed preschools to every extent practically possible.
- Developing and implementing desegregation standards in schooling (along with indicators and subsequent monitoring of segregation), which should respect the principle of social interaction of Roma and non-Roma children while maintaining the highest possible quality of education and achieving best results, with the exception of Roma national schools and locations with a majority representation of Roma population (but the condition of maintaining highest possible quality of education and achieving best results remains).
- Developing specific models of school integration (inclusion) for a whole portfolio of situations and target groups, with an ambition to establish a general model of an inclusive school (to both the internal and external assessment of the quality of the school a so called „school inclusive index“ would be added as one of the motivation tools for implementing programs of inclusive education). In creating an inclusive educational environment a priority must be placed on the specifics of students coming from the environment of marginalized Roma communities, physically handicapped persons, members of national minorities, foreigners and immigrants.

## **AREA 2: BUILDING TRUST AND CONNECTING PRESCHOOL WITH DIFFERENT ACTORS WITHIN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY**

### **Analysis of the situation:**

An important factor that positively affects the participation and achievement of children in preschools is cooperation with parents and the wider community. Roma parents, however, are not seen as equal partners in the life and work of the preschool, and are not actively involved in the broader educational processes and learning experiences of their children. Prevalent approaches to parental involvement are top-down, information-type approaches, rather than the active engagement of parents with approaches that respect and utilize their cultural and social capital.

Parents' decision whether to enroll their children into a preschool also depend on their previous experience with the preschool, which reflects on their relations in the wider community. World Bank findings indicate that 50% of Roma parents said they would place their children in preschool if there was a Roma ECEC professional on staff. This is a proven policy development that enhances institutional trust and provides a great degree of reassurance of Roma parents. Without this support, some Roma parents are reported to believe that their children would be humiliated or cast down at school, and this is a reason they do not send them to preschool.

Roma parents attitudes to the enrollment of their children in preschools and schools are heavily influenced by their impoverished living conditions. This attitude pattern is a direct result of the damaging impacts of poverty, gross social exclusion, and discrimination. Poor Roma families live in a state of permanent deprivation and their priority is just day-to-day survival. Discrimination in the labour market is experienced also by educated Roma, a reality that indirectly further reinforces the conviction held by many Roma that education is not a pathway to success or a better life.

Support services offered through European Union-funded projects are not often tailored to the specific needs of individual Roma communities. Comprehensive intervention strategies and programs for Roma families that are rights-based; combine education, social care, health and community services; and ensure the direct involvement and empowerment of Roma communities are generally missing.



### **Recommendation for the local level:**

- Establish multi-institutional partnership that include local authorities, Roma community representatives, and parents, to improve home – preschool cooperation and support integrated extra-curricular activities aimed at children’s overall wellbeing and development.
- Initiate appropriate actions to promote social cohesion and harmonious ethnic relations in Slovak society. It is important that a partnership – rather than a power position, top-down approach be taken with Roma communities.
- Support preschools in implementation of programmes focused on improvement of cooperation with parents of Roma children and in engagement of ECEC professionals in preschools.
- Stabilize, optimize and broaden network of community workers in the area of health education and advisory (terrain medical service). Ensuring quality pre- and post-natal health care for mothers and infants within the communities, through visiting health services and the use of Roma bridging personnel. Reasonable family living standards. Counseling for self-care during pregnancy, preparing for delivery, parenting and family planning. Parent education and support.
- Mobilise all relevant actors, making use of the opportunities and value the contribution from members of the most disadvantaged groups.
- Support mutual learning by highlighting good practice, developing knowledge and strengthening the analytical tools.
- Create conditions for better mutual tolerance in the society, combat segregation and institutional prejudice.
- Act to address issues of community health, housing, and utility infrastructure in marginalized Roma settlements. Poverty and the dire environment circumstances in which most young Roma children grow up seriously restrict their access to quality ECEC.

### **Recommendation for the national level:**

- In active partnership with local authorities, NGOs, Roma community representatives, and other relevant stakeholders, develop a national desegregation strategy and ensure methodological and financial support for the development of such strategies at the local level. Provision of quality early care and education programs for Roma children should be considered an important part of this desegregation strategy.
- Improve the motivation, school results and attendance of Roma children in elementary schools, which requires ensuring the availability of qualified and diverse educational programs focused on supporting the individualized needs of the student; increase the inclusiveness of the educational system, increase the effectiveness of the system of social support of education, reevaluation of the system of funding the marginalized Roma children, establishing a permanent funding mechanism for supporting all-day educational and caretaking system in elementary schools with the proportion of marginalized Roma children of more than 20%, and ensuring conditions for supporting activities targeting work with families, applying comprehensive integration of gender sensitive and multicultural upbringing in elementary schools. Gradually establish conditions preventing teenage mothers to drop out of school prematurely.
- Address problematic issues of education and upbringing in special schools and school facilities, including school consultancy and prevention services; improve the process of diagnostics and placement of children into the system of special education and remove the reason for unjust placement of children into this system (methodology of diagnostic exams must take into reasonable account the abilities of children from marginalized Roma communities. Create specific models of school inclusion for all types of disadvantaged children.
- Provide the greatest possible accuracy and to thoroughly use the control mechanism during the process of expert pedagogic-psychological diagnostics of children aged 5-6 before they start their obligatory schooling and after they finish their annual preparation as well.
- Improve access to quality education including education and care provided in the early childhood, but also elementary, secondary and university education with special emphasis on removing possible segregation at schools; prevent premature termination of school attendance and ensure a smooth transition from school to employment. Implement policies that will bridge gaps in the educational level of Roma and the rest of the population.
- Establish a national and local coordination structure for the development of a comprehensive ECEC strategy to facilitate purposeful cross-sectorial coordination among relevant ministries, the Office of the Plenipotentiary for Roma communities, local/municipal authorities, and other key civil society players.



## **AREA 3: ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN WHO ARE NOT ENROLLED IN PRESCHOOLS AND THEIR PARENTS**

### **Analysis of the situation:**

Roma children's access to, and participation in, early care provision (aged 0-3) is negligible, and participation of Roma children in preschools is disproportionately low at 18% compared to 72% for the non-Roma population. In addition, participation of Roma children in preschools reflects an intergenerational downward trend. Fewer Roma children now access preschool education compared with parent and grandparent generations. Poor children benefit from the early intervention even more than other children and especially if the support is sustained. High quality ECEC programs help children from a disadvantaged environment to develop their intellectual capabilities more dynamically, which increases their chances for successful early schooling experiences, their subsequent educational careers, and even their adult lives. Contact with an educational institution in early childhood makes school more understandable, making the transition to school. Roma children who attend an ECEC program better understand the rules and requirements of school, adjust more easily, and have higher self-confidence, they are also more motivated to learn and are more responsible. They are better at establishing social connections and developing communication skills that make learning easier and improve their overall socialization skills in school and life beyond.

Access to preschool for Roma children is hindered by a marked under-capacity of preschool pupil places, often combined with geographic inaccessibility of preschools. Many poor parents could not sustain the hidden costs and charges associated with preschool. The rules and regulations for state assistance with preschool costs are not clear to many parents. Systematic support work and collaboration with Roma families is generally missing. Parents are not usually sufficiently informed about the administrative demands of enrollment procedures, which are often inflexible and potentially confusing. Roma parents often have legitimate concerns about prejudice and racial stereotyping by ECEC professionals, members of local government, and non-Roma parents. This dynamic also makes the entry of Roma children into the unfamiliar environments of preschools more difficult and threatening. Roma children's preschool attendance is also affected by high rates of sickness and the lack of health assistants and care facilities in their communities.

Improving access to ECEC for children from birth until their enrollment into elementary school is high on the European agenda. One of the Europe 2020 targets is directly related to ECEC: at least 95% of children (from age 4 to compulsory school age) participating in early childhood education. In recent years, the focus moved from increasing the capacities of early care institutions and preschool education providers to improving their quality.

### **Recommendation for the local level:**

- Prioritize the placement of Roma children in mixed and internally unsegregated preschools, in the interest of integration and social cohesion, and the avoidance of de facto racial segregation.
- In situations where Roma settlements are some distance from preschools, the construction of new preschools within or near the settlement may be an option. It is important, however, to ensure that the best interest of Roma children are the primary concern in such decision.
- At the municipality level, promote coordinated and comprehensive actions in relation to the delivery of services to marginalized Roma communities, including ECEC, health, housing, employment and infrastructure.
- It is important to foster access to, and support for, the activities of community/mother's centers, because such community resources have strong potential to further the goal of providing quality care for Roma children and their families.
- Ensure accessibility of healthcare services, improve their real accessibility by removing obstacles (both geographical and financial), introduce a program of minimal dental care, and improve the communication between members of marginalized Roma communities and medical personnel in the provision of healthcare, with a potential impact on improving the provision of healthcare in the communities.
- Reduce occurrence of infectious diseases using health education, and increasing the number of individuals who undergo preventive vaccination with the goal of bridging the gap between the members of marginalized Roma communities and the majority population.
- Increase awareness of education on parenthood, reproduction health, motherhood and childcare, implement educational comprehensive non-stereotypical activities aiming at increasing awareness on sexual and reproduction behavior.

### **Recommendation for the national level:**

- Innovative alternative and flexible programs aimed at effective parenting and child welfare, and home-based programs, especially for children aged 0 to 3, should be promoted and financed through state and EU programs. It is important to draw on good practice from previously implemented projects and best practices from near and far.
- Strengthen programs for family and community involvement within existing national projects. Allow greater flexibility to address the specific needs of individual communities; generic solutions to address the varied problems of diverse Roma communities do not exist.
- Initiate comprehensive data collection on the representation of Roma children aged 0 to 6 in formal and non-formal education and health services and other ECEC programs, and the impact of different kinds of services on children and their families.
- Birth registration. Communication and counseling for health care, nutrition and feeding, with an emphasis on infant-caregiver interaction; attention to the play, social development and language development of toddlers through providing a responsive, rich and stimulating learning environment.
- A massive increase in the schooling of marginalized Roma children aged 3 years and over in pre-school facilities – a significant investment into pre-primary education of marginalized Roma children along with supporting early childhood care programs;
- Remove administrative barriers to preschool enrollment for Roma parents from segregated communities by providing easy access to complete information on available financial aid and administrative requirements. Ensure that Roma families receive routine reminders and support throughout the process.

## **AREA 4: PROGRAMS FOR EMPOWERING ROMANI FAMILIES WITH REGARD TO CHILDCARE AND ENCOURAGING CHILD DEVELOPMENT**

### **Analysis of the situation:**

Because most children now spend a large part of their early childhoods in some form of childcare, the importance of family and community involvement in early childhood preparation for formal education settings has increased. The family influence in the child's first five years of life is critical for the development of important academic and social outcomes. Effective formal and informal connections between schools, family and other actors of the wider community encourages the active participation of parents in their children's learning, ultimately improving children's later achievements and adaption to society. The importance of support for building the self-confidence is associated with more appropriate parenting.

Stimulating children's learning in the home environment supports the concept of intergenerational learning, generally highly valued as a strategy for resolving social and societal problems. The home-school relationship is also governed by the State Educational Program. Preschools must provide serious support and cooperation with parents of children with special educational needs, though the form of support and cooperation is not specified.

Poverty negatively impacts health, as poor families tend to have limited access to nutritious foods, quality healthcare, and information about safe and healthy living. According to the 1992 – 2012 findings of the Prognostic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Science, compared with the whole population of Slovakia, the infant mortality rate in Roma communities was approximately 2,5 times higher in the first year of life. Poverty is also a root cause of hunger and malnutrition. The World bank data links poor Roma enrollment in kindergartens with high levels of Roma child hunger, and also identifies a direct link between kindergarten enrollment and slum living conditions.

**Recommendation for the local level:**

- Families should be recognised as key actors. ECEC policies and national projects should promote the active involvement of parents, intergenerational learning should be also supported.
- Improve the care of ECEC professionals and increase the proportion of ECEC professionals fluent in Romani (local community dialect).
- Support the usage of the Romani language and check the interest of the Roma parents in teaching the Romani language at elementary and secondary schools during the enrollment process.
- Communication targeting demystification of the Roma and education.
- Supporting pro-inclusion attitudes, education and expertise.
- Increase awareness of education on parenthood, reproduction health, motherhood and childcare, implement educational comprehensive non-stereotypical activities aiming at increasing awareness on sexual and reproduction behavior.
- Ensure a positive and welcoming climate for Roma children and parents. Teaching practice should reflect on and accommodate all the different needs of children from diverse backgrounds, including Roma children. The organization of classes should avoid institutionalized ethnic segregation.

### **Recommendation for the national level:**

- Create a system of comprehensive professional programs for early childhood education and care, with emphasis on supportive provision to families and preventative measures to ensure adequate levels of pre- and post-natal care, nutrition, infant health screening for developmental delays and disabilities, and unhindered early child development.
- A focus on developmental school readiness; getting schools ready for children; eliminating all forms of segregation, special schools and classrooms; and aiming to encourage families to support their children's learning.
- Exercising the right to education in a Romani language or to learning the Romani language, and supporting further development of identity using support for the use of Romani language on all levels of education; providing education for teachers of Romani language and literature and supporting further education of teachers teaching in the Romani language; preventing all forms of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism and other manifestations of intolerance; support for inter-ethnic and intercultural dialogue and understanding.
- Provide the preparation of the „Romani language and literature“ teachers and to support the education of teachers teaching in the Romani language.
- Ensure the availability of high-quality and variable educational programmes to cover individual pupil's needs with the focus on the development of cognitive functions and on acquiring of key competencies.
- Enhancing the efficiency of the education social support system.
- National projects on inclusion of Roma children should include a range of ECEC programs with the active involvement of parents.