



**EVERY CHILD
DESERVES TO
THRIVE**



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About EPHA

EPHA is a change agent – Europe’s leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. We are a dynamic member-led organisation, made up of public health civil society, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups working together to improve health and strengthen the voice of public health in Europe.



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“Every Child deserves to Thrive”, but barriers for disadvantaged children and families remain enormous

On 14 May 2019, EPHA organised an event in Bucharest under the auspices of the Romanian Presidency of the European Council, “Every child deserves to thrive”. The event provided up-to-date information about the status quo of Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Europe, with a particular focus on Romania. It also offered a crucial “reality check” by integrating the perspectives of representatives of disadvantaged Roma communities, many of whom parents and/or grandparents, from different parts of the country.

EPHA Deputy Director **Sascha Marschang** opened the event and talked about EPHA’s work on mainstreaming Roma health as part of a fellowship programme funded by the Open Society Foundations (OSF). He stated it was important to ensure that the post-2020 EU Roma framework scaled up action on ECD given that the evidence showed clear long-term health and economic benefits deriving from investments in giving children and families the best possible start in life. He also explained that supporting ECD is crucial for attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the European Semester and the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) as two important policy tools at the EU level to monitor ECD progress. He highlighted that the event took place just before the European Parliament elections and the ensuring institutional renewal process in Brussels, and that EPHA and its partners would be raising awareness among newly elected MEPs and European Commission officials to scale up ECD in Europe.

Former EPHA collaborator and co-moderator **Marius Tudor** (European Parliament) urged the authorities to speak up for the many deprived children, especially those with vulnerable backgrounds. He expressed hope that decision-makers will take into account what will be said during the event.

Representing the Romanian Ministry of Health, **Mihai Calin** stated that the first years of life are very important not only for children, but for society at large. He briefly reviewed some of the programmes implemented in the country, noting that pregnant women have been a particularly important target in terms of enabling improved access to maternal healthcare services and a new campaign that supports breastfeeding. Moreover, Romania recently introduced a National Vaccination Plan and has taken measures to improve access to vaccination services. A number of projects provided more specific ECD support.

Representing Eurochild, **Agata D’Addato, Senior Policy Coordinator**, stressed the importance of investing in ECD as a means to tackle inequalities and foster social cohesion. She highlighted that neuroscience has shown that the first three years of life are crucial for brain development as it is a period during which the foundation of personal, cognitive, and psychological development, as well as emotional attachment, is being laid, thus quite significant for enabling lifelong health. Ensuring that the right policies are in place is especially important for the most disadvantaged children, yet policymakers commonly overlook the 0-3 age group. Investing in ECD is of high importance for reducing inequalities at a young age, but also for preventing the risk of poverty and exclusion in adulthood by laying the foundations for successful lifelong learning, social integration and cohesion, and employability.

Ms D’Addato argued there is a growing awareness in Europe around the links between ECD and other societal challenges, reflected in the 2018 Council conclusions of the Bulgarian EU Presidency, the EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (2014) and other policy developments at national and regional level. However, 1 in 4 children in the EU remain at risk of

poverty and social exclusion, while a 2016 report of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency revealed that a shocking 80% of Roma are at risk of poverty.

Highlighting the multidimensional nature of child poverty, she delved deeper into the EU policy framework, highlighting principle 11 on childcare and support to children of the EPSR, the mention of tackling child poverty in the EU's new Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 and the "Child Guarantee" supported by the European Parliament as significant developments that need to be properly implemented and monitored to position ECD at the front and centre of EU priorities. Developments at EU level are looking promising on several fronts. We have an extraordinary opportunity to influence now. Brexit is casting a shadow on what is possible, but broadly we would assess the appetite for a stronger EU social agenda in general, and more EU investment in children in particular, to be pretty high right across the rest of Europe. Eurochild and partners are embarking on a Europe-wide ECD campaign to influence policies and services in the fields of social welfare, pre- and post-natal health care, early education and care, parenting and family support and child protection, which will be vital in the context of the SDGs.

Moving back to the national level, Save the Children representative **Roxana Paraschiv**, representing Save the Children Romania and working at the Information, Documentation and Research Centre on the Rights of the Child, shared her experience of programmes implemented by her organisation, including "Mother and Child" and other initiatives targeting children, especially in communities and between the ages of 1 and 5 years old. The lack of GPs in some areas presented a key problem in addition to the fact that many mothers did not possess correct information about the benefits and risks of breastfeeding, although the rate was improving.

Only small numbers of children in this age group have access to education in this age group, although Save the Children had launched its first summer kindergarten already 20 years ago, in 1999. Expansion of such programmes depended on good communication between health and school mediators, local authorities, and community leaders. She expressed hope that soon all Romanian children will be able to attend quality pre-school education to gain the necessary skills.

Providing a grassroots perspective, **Marius Constantinescu**, Global Network for Democracy and Human Rights (Bucharest), argued that access to healthcare remains a huge problem in the Roma community, with appalling consequences. For example, Romania has the highest rate of tuberculosis - a dangerous communicable disease which claims many lives - and hepatitis presents another challenge, in addition to drug and alcohol addiction being at very high levels. He specified that the health of Roma is often only addressed on paper, while reality showed a different picture. He also expressed concern that, as many Roma children are being born at home, ECD-related benefits do not trickle down to the families concerned.

Mihaela Ionescu of the International Step-by-Step Association (ISSA), based in the Netherlands, warned that rising inequalities present a problem in many EU countries, which is becoming systemic as governments are no longer able to face up to societal challenges, both at the national and at the EU level. Critically, ECD services should be of high quality and serve the needs of the community. She gave the example of playgrounds, which can make a profound difference to children's development as they stimulate learning through play. In addition to policymakers, parents also need to be mobilised so that they could have a better understanding of what is at stake for their children. Moreover, she argued that the voice of children themselves must be included in discussions about ECD to better identify and comprehend their needs and aspirations.

Things are still far from perfect but the EU is providing a useful and important framework via the National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS) and by tackling antigypsyism, affirmed **Nadir Redzeqi** of the Roma Education Fund (REF). The EU's Roma strategy represents a huge positive shift after centuries of discrimination against Roma in Europe. The remaining question is how to implement the NRIS at the local level so that the most disadvantaged can also feel the benefits. Apart from investing in ECD, it was important to ascertain how governments were dealing with the implementation of all relevant policies affecting the lives of families and children.

Leading Romanian ECD expert **Carmen Lică**, Step by Step Centre for Education and Professional Development (Bucharest) stressed that "ECD is as much about access as it is about quality. Participation in quality ECD services makes a difference for the future of every child and that means that policies and investment in these types of ECD services should be a priority for all of us".

That quality ECD services are still very distant for members of the Roma community became crystal clear during the discussion with local community advocates, moderated by Ms Lică and **Szilvia Pallaghy**, Open Society Early Childhood Program (London) who urged the participants to speak in their role as professionals, parents, and grandparents, encouraging them to share their personal experiences dealing with these issues. In doing so a number of very concrete challenges were brought to the fore that need to be overcome as a matter of priority:

- Many parents experience economic hardship - they lack knowledge of the importance and impact of ECD and simply adopt the same model of education they grew up with;
- Direct communication with communities is the exception to the rule, and as a result many of the real needs never come to the fore;
- Ethnic discrimination in the form of antigypsyism remains an institutionalised barrier to accessing public services, including healthcare;
- A lot of kindergartens and schools are difficult to reach in the absence of organised public transport in rural and isolated areas;
- Economic barriers to attending school include lack of financial resources for buying clothes, shoes and learning equipment, but also lack of access to supporting tools such as eyeglasses or hearing aids;
- Poor or non-existent sanitation is another barrier that can also lead to exclusion (e.g. exclusion based on appearance or unpleasant odour);
- While government programmes and NGOs are providing support to mothers and toddlers, the most vulnerable children are often not benefitting from such services; public authorities need to be held accountable for their negligence.

Moreover, it was argued that the results of EU-funded projects often remain invisible since long-term sustainable results are difficult to achieve; in the worst case, EU funds can even create a rift in the community between those who directly benefit from them or who are involved in their management, and those who remain excluded.

Participants also stated that there is already a "good practice" database on ECD in Romania, but key indicators for measuring the success of relevant initiatives are still lacking.

About the event <https://epha.org/every-child-deserves-to-thrive/>

Press release <https://epha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/epha-every-child-deserves-to-thrive-statement-eng.pdf>



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