

Roma Education Fund's statement on COVID 19 effecting Roma communities and access to education

The Roma Education Fund (REF) calls for the attention of the European Commission (EC), governments of respective EU Member States, candidate and other European countries¹ to urgently react on the extremely vulnerable position of Roma communities in the light of COVID 19 pandemic.

REF was established in the framework of the Roma Decade Initiative in 2005 and its mission is to close the educational gaps between Roma and non-Roma. Therefore, REF supports policies and programs that ensure the provision of quality education for Roma, including desegregation programs. Through its activities, REF supports the inclusion of Roma in all levels of national education systems in EU member states and enlargement countries. As of being committed to tackling educational issues Roma face due to COVID 19, the Governing Board and Directors of REF decided to establish an Emergency Fund in order to react on the needs in a certain limited scope considering financial frames.

The core problem

Racial systematic discrimination of Roma in education institutions is an ongoing reality in all countries where REF operates. In emergency situations, such as the current one created by the COVID-19 pandemic when physical distancing and isolation are requested, the discriminatory practices affect even more dramatically vulnerable groups such as Roma, especially in terms of early childhood development and health, both physical and mental, and educational achievement.

As of proclamation of state of emergency in many EU, candidate and other European countries, kindergartens and schools have been closed down until further notice. Education has been turned to either online or remote set up requiring flexibility of both staff and students and specific resources to support education at distance. Proper housing, encouraging and supportive home environment, language assistance, internet access, possessing laptop/PC and television as well as electricity supply represent the minimum conditions for all children to continue their formal education.

¹ REF country of operation: Albania, Bosnia Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo*, Moldova, Montenegro, North-Macedonia, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine.

REF through its widespread European network including civil society organizations, collected data indicating that most Roma children and their families (particularly those living in rural areas and in settlements) have no access to internet, do not have computers and other electronic devices, and, in some cases, even electricity is not available.

Additional challenges Roma families face are massive job layoffs, unsecure or lack of basic income, lower ability to afford healthy diets, which is particularly worrying for children's physical and brain development. Limited food supplies, poor access to medical coverage and health services, access to clean drinking water to hygiene products and electricity. The lack of these basic facilities additionally worsens the health status of Roma, both parents and children and increase their vulnerability to the pandemic. The outbreak discriminatory practices by several state authorities in terms of locking down Roma settlements will have a long-term negative impact on the educational achievements of Roma. As well as it will further stigmatize Roma communities leading to deepened isolation.

Consequences of inaction

Considering the urgent basic needs of Roma people, surrounded by either discriminatory practices against Roma or ignorance of state institutions it is very worrisome what the (near) future of marginalized Roma communities will bring.

If no specific measures are taken by the European Commission and respective national governments, Roma students are denied the access to education - which is a human right - throughout the entire period of lockdown, undoubtedly leading to poor educational attainment and school dropout. Even more, in Hungary, receiving social aid is dependent on school attendance. Since lack of internet access and electronic devices (laptop, smartphone, tablet, etc.) is higher in regions where significant numbers of Roma reside², most Roma children cannot attend online classes, thus leading to exclusion from obtaining social aids and family allowance. Cutting social aids from Roma communities and being excluded from service provision in such a crucial and dramatic time period, represent significant barriers to reducing poverty and combatting social exclusion of these most disadvantaged communities.

² Zoltan Hermann, To how many students the online education reach to? (Hány diákhöz nem jut el az online távoktatás?) Available at: <https://www.mtakti.hu/koronavirus/hany-diakhoz-nem-jut-el-az-online-tavoktatas/12769/?fbclid=IwAR1Jq0XvQEaE6PM8vivDUGPYZMYaZp2omvJHQnWn9yfu70JoEzK5OJDNUao>

European Commission and national governments should take an urgent action to insure to have access to basic infrastructure and goods that are preconditions for preventing the burgeon of COVID 19 in Roma settlements. Many from the Roma community members live in overpopulated areas and inadequate houses where communicable diseases, COVID-19 in particular can easily progress and endanger elderly population not excluding young persons and children with chronical diseases.

REF calls upon the European Commission;

- to ensure that EU emergency funds allocated for tackling COVID 19 are specifically reflecting to the needs of Roma and vulnerable children as described above.
- to define policy binding criteria for recipients of Funds (Member States) that take into account the needs of vulnerable groups, such as Roma, and work towards reducing the gap in education. These criteria must include civil society participation and consultations with Roma and other organizations representing vulnerable groups to guarantee the equitable and proportional distribution of funds during and after the pandemic.
- to urge Member States to develop an urgent response to the educational needs of Roma and vulnerable children by allocating funding to improving their access to education, including IT equipment, access to internet and digital literacy that may prevent poor educational attainment and school dropout.
- to introduce measures concerning poverty reduction as a key to sustainable inclusion including eliminating segregated housing, providing better access to utilities such as electricity and clean drinking water, etc. For the realization of the EU Child Guarantee, officially approved mechanisms are needed in place.

REF draws particular attention of European states;

- to ensure that the current situation of physical distancing is not used for further discrimination and stigmatization of Roma and vulnerable communities.
- to guarantee the right to education of Roma children during and after the pandemic by elaborating sustainable and comprehensive national policies aiming to effectively reduce the educational gap between Roma and non-Roma, including ethnic segregation in schools. Such polices must provide an immediate response to current challenges faced by Roma parents and children and school professionals in continuing formal education, and may include:
 - access to electricity and internet
 - adequate equipment for providing and following online classes (PC, laptop, tablets), including TV devices for tele-school

- digital literacy for teachers, children and families
 - educational mediators for liaising with Roma families and schools
 - adequate learning environment.
- to ensure that all children receive financial, social, pedagogical and psychological support during and after the pandemic to handle the effects on education and health regardless of children's school attendance.
- to ensure that Roma community members and vulnerable groups enjoy the same level of safety and protection as non-Roma and have access to clean water, sanitary, food supplies and information.
- to guarantee the equal access to quality healthcare and prevention by adopting Universal health coverage and condemning all forms of discrimination and exclusion from health care services considering the current pandemic situation. Human rights protection must be at the heart of the policy response of Member States and other European countries towards the pandemic. They must establish effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms for countering discriminatory practices in access to education and health services.
- to ensure the adoption of adequate and timely intervention plans that can guarantee equal access to healthcare to Roma people and vulnerable groups living in segregated settlements in case of positivity to COVID-19.
- to ensure that virus testing, and medical treatment is available, accessible and affordable for all. Such health and prevention services must be provided without discrimination and must not stigmatize patients.
- to ensure protection of customers and prevent unjustified increase in food and medicines prices which may particularly affect Roma.

Supporting organizations

Name of organization

Logo

European Public Health Alliance



EUROCHILD



International Step by Step Association



Romani Early Years Network

Association of citizens for supporting of marginalized groups "Roma Resource Center"



Association of Roma "Euro Rom" Tuzla



Association of Roma Intellectuals



Center for Youth Integration



Eduroma



Group for Children and Youth "Indigo"



Humanitarian and Charitable Association of Roma "Moon"



NGO Young Roma - Mladi Romani



NGO Ambrela

Social Integration & Empowerment Centre -
SIEC



Plan&Go



Roma Association Strengthening- Zuralipe



Roma Support Centre "Romalen" Kakanj



RomaVersitas Albania



RomaVersitas Hungary



RomaVersitas Kosovo



Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians -
VoRAE

