

UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF YOUNG ROMA CHILDREN IN EUROPE

Cooperation: European Public Health Alliance, Eurochild, Romani Early Years Network an initiative of the International Step by Step Association, and Minority Initiative

The cooperation is dedicated to all Roma children and their families in Europe, emphasising two important issues:

- **Disproportionate hardship** faced by Roma children in Europe
- The importance of **early years** for Roma children's **health** and **rounded development**, unlocking their **full** and **unique potential**.
- **Lack of available data** on the status of young Roma children in Europe
- **Overrepresentation** of Roma children in:
 - **Education** for children with **special needs**
 - **Social care institutions**

Each and every child deserves a fair start and equal opportunities in life. However, across Europe Roma children disproportionately face hardship during the early years and beyond. The first six years of a child's life are critical in determining the rest of their lives. Early Childhood Development (ECD) is therefore crucial in ensuring that Roma children have all the opportunities to unlock their full and unique potential and grow up in good health and wellbeing – to grow and thrive.

However, there are barriers which make realising this difficult. The size of the problem is difficult to determine because of a lack of (disaggregated) data. Adverse conditions for Roma children and their parents are also persistent, as antigypsyism and poor social determinants lead to hardship in all facets of life; employment, education, health, housing to name a few. A result is that Roma children are disproportionately placed in separate schools, sent to 'special needs education', or simply removed from their parents and placed in institutional care. Additionally, poverty and discrimination run through these issues like a red thread, a structural issue.

The families and communities that should benefit from social inclusion measures rarely have any say in project design, delivery or evaluation. Despite the large amounts of money available through EU programmes, there is an absence of accountability mechanisms to effectively monitor and evaluate impact. Still, there is perspective for improvement, which is exactly what this cooperation addresses.

What we provide for Roma Early Childhood Development:

- Leverage EU political influence and funding to support and accelerate reforms at national level
- Assessment and research
- Monitoring and evaluation
- *Professional support and assistance (emphasising cultural sensitivity) in:*
 - Further education and training
 - Social work management
 - Roma NGO capacity building in specified fields

Call to Action

It is essential to continue raising awareness of current and prospective politicians and policy makers of the importance of **family strengthening, tackling discrimination** and **supporting children and families** living in **adversity**. EU funds alone do not challenge **deep-rooted social inequality** and discrimination. Therefore, more investment and oversight mechanisms are needed in social protection, health, and education. Only then can we hope to reach the most vulnerable, to strengthen families, and to prevent family separation.

By creating synergies among different actors on shared concerns, civil society can equip itself to tackle child poverty and drive change on key issues. In addition to using our knowledge as a tool, we can involve the community – and children in particular – in a meaningful way. Social participation in the design of programmes and projects can provide the key to alleviating poverty and preventing family separation.

It is possible to reach meaningful inclusion, with and for Roma. We prioritise **early childhood** – through education and care – and the status of young Roma children comprehensively and inclusively. That means we look at early childhood through a lens of key areas impacting a child's development, not only through availability and accessibility of educational services and programs in the early years, but also through emphasising the importance of living conditions, safety and security, health and wellbeing, responsive parenting, and opportunities for early learning.

Angles of action:

- **Fostering cross-sectoral policy coordination at EU level:** Enhance sustainable impact for young Roma children by ensuring EU cross-sectoral coordination across policy initiatives targeting vulnerable populations.
 - **Leveraging the Child Guarantee policy instrument:** Utilise the Child Guarantee to address child poverty and unique challenges faced by young Roma children, promoting their access to essential services and opportunities.
 - **Prioritise the most vulnerable children in achieving the Barcelona targets:** Encourage Member States to implement ambitious national plans for early childhood education, prioritising vulnerable Roma children to foster an equitable society.
 - **Prioritising child- and family-centred National Roma Inclusion Strategies:** Incorporate comprehensive and inclusive actions targeting child development, family status, and living conditions in National Roma Inclusion Strategies.
 - **Combating Antigypsyism:** Implement resolute policies and measures to combat antigypsyism and discrimination against young Roma children and their families, ensuring access to essential services and democratic participation.
 - **Making sound data-based decisions for real transformation:** Inform policies and actions impacting young Roma children and families with key data to address major problems and support holistic development in a nurturing environment.
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