

## RESPONSES TO COVID-19 OUTBREAK IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

:: CONCEPT ::

### BACKGROUND

In the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus, many Roma communities are particularly vulnerable to the current pandemic and to the restrictive measures taken for the protection of the citizens against the virus. The living conditions and basic sanitary infrastructure in many Roma communities are not appropriate to ensure that the preventive measures enacted by their respective governments are fully respected. This puts Roma in a higher risk from the current pandemic.

In the Western Balkans, governments are implementing a wide range of preventive and restrictive measures related to mobility and economic activity of the people. Among Roma, in addition to the pre-existing problems, such as lack of access to clean water and electricity, the conditions for self-isolation are not appropriate as the number of members per household exceeds the approximate standards. In many communities there is also lack of disinfectants (including gloves and masks), which further increases the risks of the virus spreading inside the communities.

Education has been discontinued and all the curricula have moved online and via national television. This burdens also young Roma, who have limited means (access to internet, TVs and laptops) to follow their education curricula. With limited access to internet, comes also limited access to public information, and lack of awareness of the newest decisions of the authorities that directly affect them.

In addition, as citizens are advised to stay at home, the possibility of Roma to perform everyday services for income is limited, and in many instances not possible. A great number of Roma are engaged in undeclared work (collection of secondary raw materials, seasonal work, selling of goods in open markets), all of which have been banned due to preventive measures imposed by the governments. This further increases the difficulties for Roma to provide food, water and hygienic products for their families, as well as pay bills or any loans they might have. Government measures so far to support the economy is limited to formal businesses.

There have been reported cases of discrimination against Roma. Measures related to self-isolation at home as well as group quarantine, especially for citizens returning to their home countries, has been imposed in the entire WB. Roma Integration 2020 is receiving indications of alleged cases that should be further investigated and, of course, discrimination must be forbidden, particularly in these difficult times.

The Roma Integration 2020 has strictly prescribed terms of the action and has no contingency and flexibility to act in the current conditions with the view to contribute to the relief measures for the most vulnerable Roma. Therefore, the Roma Integration 2020 is proposing adjustment of the course of action during the emergency state, including actions related to policy advice to the governments and direct help to the people in need, which requires approval by the donors.

### ACTIONS PROPOSED

The RCC Roma Integration 2020 project has engaged in gathering information about the situation of vulnerable Roma communities throughout the Western Balkans (WB) in cooperation with the NRCs, various CSOs and IOs.

Having this situation in mind and the mandate of the Roma Integration 2020 action to provide policy advice and technical support to the Governments in the Western Balkans in implementing effective Roma integration policies, the following interventions are proposed:



1. Policy advice to the government - The Roma Integration 2020 will communicate in writing with the government partners, particularly the NRCs, to request the following measures to be undertaken by the governments:
  - All Roma settlements without connection to the water system are identified
  - The Roma settlements without connection to the water are supplied with cisterns with water (from the municipalities)
  - The waste from the Roma settlements is regularly collected and disposed (organised by the municipality with the necessary protective measures for the workers)
  - All public areas in the Roma settlements are regularly disinfected
  - All Roma settlements and/or households disconnected from any public utility (electricity, water) are immediately reconnected and ban on disconnection is enforced during the emergency
  - The price for electricity is reduced or subsidised for the households in the Roma settlements
  - The price for internet and TV subscriptions are reduced, subsidised or provided for free to the Roma households in the settlements, and provision of free of charge internet hot-spots in the Roma settlements is negotiated with the providers
  - Roma households renting social housing are exempted from rent fees during the emergency
  - Social aid is approved and provided during the emergency period to materially deprived families, including undeclared workers, in a fast administrative procedure
  - Roma health mediators and teaching assistants are equipped with the necessary protective materials (masks, gloves, disinfectants) and enabled to work in the Roma settlements in order to: provide information on the protective measures; instruct people how to protect their health; assist children in accessing educational content and materials during quarantine
  - Covid-19 tests and health protection is guaranteed for everyone, including those without health insurance and that lack access to documents
  - Forbid dismissal of Roma health mediators and teaching assistants (since many are working on short-term (3-12 months) service based contract that is renewed periodically) and their salary is increased to the level of the other workers dealing with the crises (medical staff, police, etc.)
  - Evictions and execution of debt is suspended during the crisis
  - Budget allocated for Roma-policy measures is not cut to finance the pandemic response. At maximum, budget could be reallocated from less priority measures to measures for Roma affected from Covid-19 consequences
2. The National Roma Contact Points and the Roma Integration 2020, as a matter of urgency, will convene regular emergency response meetings for the situation of Roma, with representatives of the relevant ministries/institutions responsible for the areas of labour/employment, social welfare, health, education, housing, communal utilities, local self-government, economy, finance and EU integration; the EU Delegations, relevant CSOs and international organizations and donors.
3. These meetings will aim to make a comprehensive assessment of the situation (including mapping of most deprived localities) and prepare short, medium and long term plans to respond to the crisis within the Roma communities:
  - Short term response: emergency deliverance of basic needs, including food, hygiene and protective materials, etc.; reconnection to utilities in cases of disconnection;
  - Medium term response: providing for regular needs assessment and flow of basic needs, utilities (water - drinking and washing, electricity, internet/TV, waste management, public places hygiene, etc.), health services (information and response to cases), adequate isolation conditions, and financial services (rapid social aid, prolonging of payments, reduced or annulled prices for utilities, social housing rent and other services where possible, etc.), regular flow to information relevant for coping with the crisis and education for children;
  - Long term response: recovery from the effects of the emergency on Roma, including recovery of jobs and economic activity, assistance in payment of financial





burdens and outstanding debts for natural and legal persons, recovery from physical damages, recovery from health issues, etc.

4. The meetings will also help the National Roma Contact Points and relevant line ministries to prepare budgets to fund short, medium and long term plans, respecting the Roma Responsive Budgeting principles, and make sure:
  - Funds allocated for Roma integration are not relocated for other needs, but on the contrary retained and boosted for the purpose of helping Roma to cope with the emergency situation, according to the short, medium and long term plans;
  - Mainstream measures undertaken as a response to the crisis relevant for the Roma are budgeted with a view to make sure Roma benefit to the level of their needs and with due account to their specific conditions;
  - Donors are familiarised with the plans and their financial allocations are coordinated.
5. The National Roma Contact Points will take into account the existing public infrastructure for implementing the plans (municipalities, Roma mediators - health, education, etc., social centres, health facilities, etc.).
6. The National Roma Contact Points should, in cooperation with the existing equality bodies, establish a mechanism for gathering information and responding to allegations of discrimination and/or arbitrary treatment of Roma during the crisis, for advising the crisis managing structures on mainstream measures in order to ensure Roma are not deprived from relief or disproportionately affected, and for monitoring the reporting in media regarding the situation of Roma in order to prevent negative stereotyping.
7. The National Roma Contact Points should elaborate the plan to the crisis managing structures of the Government and the Government itself for adoption, including the budget.
8. The National Roma Contact Points should establish particular cooperation with the EU Delegation in order to make sure the plans are in line with the EU priorities and plans regarding the crisis and IPA funds are adequately used for this purpose, including mainstream and specific.

## ROMA INTEGRATION 2020 SUPPORT

The Roma Integration 2020 action is prepared to support the Governments of the Western Balkans to realise the elaborated proposal. The action shall make its policy experts available to the Governments in order to provide technical assistance in coordinating, preparing plans, gathering information, preparing budgets based on Roma Responsive Budgeting principles, etc. The action shall also react promptly in case of further technical assistance needed by the Governments. The action will be ready to provide modest solidary contribution to the budget needed for realisation of the short, medium and long term plans in order to encourage the needed allocations from the public budgets and contribution by the donors, if necessary.

The action will provide the following support:

- **Roma responsive budgeting:**

Given the fact that the outbreak of COVID-19 will have many budgetary implications, which will require re-programming and relocation of funds, it is of utmost importance that these processes do not affect disproportionately any already allocated funds for measures furthering Roma integration. Line ministries responsible for different priority areas for Roma integration and most importantly Ministries of Finance need to be able to recognise and provide an appropriate response to the potential for promoting Roma integration when preparing and adopting policy proposals and concrete measures, especially in state of emergencies as at the moment Roma are the most vulnerable and exposed to health and economic risks.





- **Making the most of the EU accession process:**

The EU is the largest financial donor in the WB, and as such it is of great importance that the EU accession process plays a pivotal role in managing the COVID-19 outbreak. In this regards, it is important to analyse what type of funding and policies can correspond to fight the pandemic. As Roma integration plays a crucial role in the EU accession, specific attention must be devoted on how governments treat the needs of Roma communities in such emergencies. The action will provide the necessary monitoring and appropriately communicate alarming issues to the European Commission, including the EUDs on a weekly basis. The RI2020 team stands ready to provide any inputs and policy advice on how Roma might benefit from the emergency packages prepared by the EU for the WB.

- **Socio-economic impact on Roma:**

The WB governments have started to calculate the costs of the pandemic that will hamper the economies, and started preparing plans for re-vitalization. Once the health emergency passes the economic recovery will be the most difficult phase. If the EU is expected to face recession as result of this pandemic, (economic recession is expected from 2-10 points), the WB economies and its citizens can also expect to feel the disturbing cost of the pandemic. In order to ensure that Roma communities have minimum negative socio-economic impact from the COVID-19 outbreak, the action will conduct an analysis of how to minimize such effects.

- **Policy advice:**

Based on the above mentioned, the RI2020 will continue to monitor the situation and advice the governments on how to adapt their measures to address the specific needs of Roma. The RI2020 will also continue to provide data and information on how government measures impact the Roma communities, including information on activities undertaken by other stakeholders (CSOs, IOs, donors), on a weekly basis.

