

Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015
International Conference on Creativity and Innovation in the Education of Children from
Socially Disadvantage Backgrounds, 19-20 November 2009
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Dear ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of the World Bank at this conference which is dedicated to creativity and innovation in education of children from socially disadvantage background, including Roma.

As we all know, problems that Roma face with regard to education are vast and they include all levels and aspects of the educational process; so indeed, we need creativity when addressing these issues.

In recent years, the issues that Roma face with regard to education have been given attention by governments participating in the Decade. Countries participating in the Decade have committed themselves to undertake measures that will facilitate access to an integrated education from which Roma children can benefit. The measures put in place by these countries include desegregation plans, training for teaching assistants and school mediators, after-school support and scholarship programs.

However, the vast majority of Roma in Europe still face numerous barriers in accessing quality education. In some countries, and as confirmed by recent work done by the Roma Education Fund, a significant part of the Roma children is sent to special schools, i.e. schools for children with mental disabilities. In such schools Roma children do not get a degree preparing them for an increasingly more competitive labor market. On the contrary: they are denied the right to adequate education and emerge stigmatized from this schooling experience. These children will grow up and become adults who will face enormous difficulties when searching for employment and will be condemned to low-paid, unskilled jobs.

Roma children are also segregated from non-Roma children in separate classes or schools because of spatial segregation or because of open racial discrimination. Isolated from their non-Roma peers and frequently taught by under-qualified instructors, these children emerge from schooling ill-equipped for life in a multicultural society. In addition, other children don't have the possibility to learn about Roma and their culture.

The above mentioned issues that Roma children face in accessing education were also highlighted in the recent conference on education organized by the Serbian Presidency of the Decade of Roma Inclusion. Conference's participants emphasized that the Decade countries should make systemic changes in their respective educational system that will go beyond 'pilot projects' through the development and implementation of programs and policies aiming to integrate Roma children into mainstream education.

One of the main topics of the conference was also early child education. Participants recommended that governments develop and implement legal frameworks that will regulate the inclusion of all children up to three years into existing educational systems and to develop mechanisms for inclusion of children from different cultural and ethnic background into mainstream educational institutions. Moreover, it was emphasized that parents are the first

educators of their children and what children learn in homes is important for their later approach to life and learning. However, a comprehensive approach to early childhood development requires adequate levels of funding.

I would like to underline several reasons why it is important to invest in early child development, also based on World Bank research conducted in other regions. Environment and experiences, particularly in early childhood, have a significant and long-lasting impact on children's capacities and competent functioning. Therefore, early interventions that reshape children's early environments and experiences in positive ways can set children on trajectories for success in a way that interventions later in development cannot. Ensuring healthy child development, therefore, is an investment in a country's future labor force and capacity to prosper economically and as a society.

Early Child Development (ECD) programs benefit children, families, and communities. The reduced dropout and repetition rates, improved school achievements, greater adult productivity, and higher levels of social and emotional functioning encouraged by ECD programs make them a highly cost-effective means of strengthening society as a whole by ensuring that its individual members live up to their full potentials.

However, only few Roma children so far are able to attend early childhood education programs. There are numerous reasons for the non-participation of Roma children in early education programs, including the non-compulsory nature of the preschool education, a lack of pre-school infrastructure to accommodate all pupils, a lack of funds for supporting preschool education of vulnerable children as well as the timely provision of information to Roma parents. There are also worrying reports of segregated pre-schooling facilities for Roma children. This is deeply problematic because, as mentioned previously, early childhood education is imperative to ensure the children's success in compulsory levels of education through enhancing learning skills and knowledge, and easing reported language difficulties.

There is a range of pilot projects conducted by REF's and other organizations that have achieved good results. An example is REF's project "Let's Go to School Together" aimed to pilot an approach combining teacher training, support for children in the classroom, and outreach to parents.

However what is missing is ensuring sustainability of such good practices examples. Therefore, the governments participating in the Decade should ensure sustainability of successful pilot projects, develop systematic policies and allocate sufficient funds for the implementation of policies that will ensure access of Roma children to quality education. This means to ensure that early education programs are free of charge and increasingly mandatory in an integrated school environment for all children, including Roma.

This conference which brings together representatives from a host of different government agencies, including representatives from civil society and individual experts, provides a platform for the exchange of good practice and successful initiatives and for identifying innovative approaches for combating education disadvantage of Roma children.

Like my colleagues I very much look forward to the outcomes of the conference. Thank you !