



## **Increasing access to and management of Structural Funds for quality education of Roma**

Presentation by Costel Bercus, Chair

*for the seminar on the Contribution of EU Funds to the integration of Roma  
Follow-up process – Hungary*

Roma Education Fund was established 2005, in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, with the ultimate goal to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma

Currently, we operate in 14 countries of Europe, with programs for:

- project support to NGOs, local schools and other public authorities,
- tertiary level scholarships for Roma students,
- policy development on education reform,
- cross-country learning and exchange,
- and reimbursable grants.

To give you some numbers, in 2009

- About 43,000 parents participated in their children's education with REF support.
- Around 11,000 children were helped to continue with their early childhood education and over 6,000 to complete secondary education.
- 1,100 children were granted scholarships for studies at tertiary level.

A number of methods and mechanisms to increase capacities for accessing and managing Structural Funds are embedded in REF programs. One of these is the Reimbursable Grant Facility.

Due to the gaps between contracting and disbursement of funds, one of the main challenges amongst NGOs managing (educational) projects with support of the Structural Funds is related to *cash flow and the timely implementation of activities*. Therefore, in 2005, REF set up a reimbursable grant facility, which allows organizations to start and continue their activities before actual funding from the EU becomes available. The grant capacitates organizations to manage more effectively their projects and to continue accessing other opportunities generated by Structural Fund programmes.

By the end of 2009, REF has delivered 24 reimbursable grants amounting to around 400,000 Euro, which further leveraged approximately EUR 11.5 million in Structural Fund support for education of Roma.

In addition to support in overcoming issues of cash flow, REF also *builds capacities of local NGOs and public institutions to prepare, manage and evaluate projects in the field of education*. Through a network of in-country facilitators we are able to work closely with various stakeholders to address needs such as:

- Constructive partnerships and dialogue amongst actors,
- Collection of baseline data at the start of the project, and
- Development of monitoring and evaluation tools and procedures.

This type of support and facilitation, both in project preparation and during the implementation phase, provides NGOs and public institutions with essential skills and practice which can be further applied in accessing and managing Structural Funds

After the first five years of operations, REF is now increasingly focused on consolidating the learning from its project portfolios and scaling-up interventions with support of governments and Structural Funds.

Recently, REF established its first operational office in Romania, in view of creating a mechanism to access Structural Funds and strengthen its ability to support local organizations, public institutions and Roma students.

So far, REF in Romania has been successful in securing over EUR 10.000.000 in Structural Funds to support local partner activities for pre-school and primary school students, to offer scholarships for Romani secondary school students, coupled with mentorships and teacher training, to offer university scholarships for Roma students in the health profession, and to facilitate the transition from university life to labor market integration amongst Roma university graduates.

The activities of the operational foundation in Romania are still at the beginning, yet we are hopeful that it can support the process of scaling-up effective practices in inclusive education through the use of Structural Funds. It also serves as an intermediary organization between the Managing Authorities and local organizations and institutions, therefore creating another line of access for local actors.

In Hungary, the ceiling of support for Structural Funds projects is much smaller than in Romania, which limits the possibilities for other organizations to act as intermediary institutions. This may be something to explore further in terms of how to create additional mechanisms, which can increase access amongst smaller organizations and institutions, while building their capacities.

Finally, I would like to mention that the Roma Education Fund is the lead in a consortium of partners implementing the Early Childhood Education component of the EU Roma Pilot Program. The project, called "A Good Start", will demonstrate how to expand proven small-scale pilot activities to reach large numbers of Roma children and to create sustainable service schemes adjusted to local needs.

The pilot project is expected to support 5,000 children from ages zero to six to access early childhood education and care services in 16 locations across four countries (Hungary, Macedonia, Romania and Slovakia). In these different locations, national and local governments will work with non-governmental organizations to build sustainable partnerships able to increase the range of services provided to young children over time. The project will therefore provide an important start to long-term, effective support for Roma children across a range of their developmental needs.

The learning and outcomes from the pilot can provide an important input to discussions on how Structural Funds can be used to scale-up successful methods generated from local projects.

Thank you for your attention.

Costel Bercus

Chair