

# Promoting social inclusion of children in a disadvantaged rural environment

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## Introduction

Roma have lived in the territory of the Republic of Croatia since the 14th century. According to the 2001 population census, the Roma national minority makes up 0.21% of the population of Croatia, and includes 9463 members. However, according to the data of the Office for Ethnic Minority in Croatia, there is currently around 30 000 Roma people living in Croatia. It is difficult to accurately define the number of Roma people living in Croatia because some of them declare as members of some other nationality, and not as Roma. There is a higher density of Roma in some regions of Croatia: Medjimurje county, Osječko-baranjska county, Zagreb, Rijeka, Pula, Pitomača, Kutina, Đurđevac, Sisak, Slavonski Brod, Bjelovar, Karlovac and Vukovar.<sup>1</sup>

Roma people in Croatia are considerably marginalised in almost all public and social activities and living conditions of Roma people are far more unsatisfactory than those of average population and other ethnic minorities. The position of Roma and their living conditions have been on the very margins of social interest for years, and this has contributed to the significant deterioration of the quality of their living conditions, as compared to the average quality of living conditions of the majority population. This regards their social status, the way in which their education, health care and social welfare are organised, the possibility to preserve their national identity, resolving of their status-related issues, employment, presentation in the media, political representation and similar issues.

According to the information from the National Programme for Roma, an average Roma household has 5.6 members, only 7% of them are older than 50 years of age. They make up to 13.5 % of all social welfare beneficiaries. The living conditions of the majority of Roma who live in the Republic of Croatia are difficult, primarily due to the high unemployment rate, insufficient number of regular school attendants, inadequate housing and poor conditions in settlements inhabited by Roma. The best illustration of their material status is the data from the 2002 research according to which in 89% of surveyed households nobody had a regular source of income.

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<sup>1</sup> National programme for Roma (2003).  
<http://www.vlada.hr/nacionalniprogramromi/content/view/13/26/lang,english/>

## The compatibility of programmes with international documents

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia lays down fundamentals for an independent and democratic state through highest values such as freedom, equal rights, national equality, peace, social justice, respect for human rights, inviolability of ownership, conservation of nature and the human environment, the rule of law and a democratic multi-party system.

All democratic freedoms as well as citizens', human and minority rights are explicitly enumerated and guaranteed by the Constitution. National minorities' rights and freedoms are regulated in the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities (December 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

The documents that are especially important for the realisation of Roma population rights in Croatia are The United Nations and The Council of Europe documents.

As in many other countries, Roma population in Croatia has been marginalised to a lesser or greater degree as regards their economic, spatial, cultural and political situation. Estimating that there is a gap and that Roma people cannot overcome it alone, the Government adopted **The National programme for Roma people in 2003**.

The intention of this Programme is to provide systematic assistance to Roma to improve their living conditions and to include them in social life and decision-making processes in their local and wider community, while at the same time preserving their identity, culture and traditions.

The Programme has several main goals:

- Harmonisation of the Programme with international treaties;
- Inclusion of Roma in social and political life;
- Preservation of the Romani traditional culture;
- Status-related issues;
- Combating discrimination and legal aid;
- Education;
- Health care;
- Employment;
- Social Welfare;
- Protection of the family, maternity and youth;
- Physical planning.

In addition to the National Programme, the Government of Croatia is also a member of the Action plan of the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005.-2010. Antidiscrimination Law was enacted in January 2009.

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<sup>2</sup> The Constitution of Republic of Croatia (2002).

The Republic of Croatia has a very good legal and judicial basis with an aim of quality integration of Roma, but there is a lack of comprehensive projects that could translate it into good practice.

## Assessment of the possible relevance of the good practice to Croatia

Studying the discussion paper for the Peer Review, we find that most elements of the programme could be relevant and useful for our country. In this paper we would particularly like to point out the early intervention, especially those which consider education and preventing drop outs in primary school because that is a major problem in Croatia.

It is necessary to provide Roma children with education from an early age onwards (including primary care, day care, grade school). Also, we must not forget the parents who must be actively involved in an early education of their children because without their support and the awareness of importance of education, we might not be able to reach the goal.

Although primary school in Croatia is mandatory and it is assigned by the Law, Roma parents in many cases do not feel the consequences if they do not send their children to school. Considering that Roma people have a low rate of finishing school and that they consider school as “not important”, we believe that it is necessary to come up with courses in which parents will be introduced to the importance of education.

Considering the importance of education and early development of children, the Centre for Social Care Zagreb, Office Peščenica, conducts a programme “Modification of behaviour through play” (short MMPI). The programme is a preventive and non-institutionalised work with the goal of increasing the quality of life of elementary and high school children and their parents of lower socio-economic and educational status and to support them in developing social and life skills that would help them to function better in their families, peer groups and the community. At this moment, the Programme is performing in three elementary schools in Zagreb and has three Roma pupils.

The educational structure of unemployed Roma is shown in the table below<sup>3</sup>. The capital of Croatia (Zagreb) and Čakovec (Medjimurje county) are being compared.

	Zagreb	Čakovec
Higher education	1 (F)	0 (F)
High school	6%	3%
Primary school	31%	12%
No primary school	63%	85%

With the aim of overcoming these problems, the government of Croatia adopted some useful measures: free kinder-garden programmes, free day care in primary schools, financial supports

<sup>3</sup> The Croatian Employment Service statistics (2006).

and free accommodation for Roma pupils during their high-school education and financial support through higher education (university and college programmes).<sup>4</sup>

This resulted in lower drop-out rates of children from the school system - 70% in 2007 compared to almost 85% in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

According to these results, and the measures mentioned in the discussion paper and in pilot-projects, we assume that combining these two could make even better and objective results.

## **Assessment of the similarities/differences of the good practice with the experience of Croatia in relation to combating child poverty and promoting Roma inclusion**

According to the National programme for Roma, our country and Hungary have very similar goals in promoting Roma inclusion. The goal of the Croatian programme is to include Roma in the decision-making process at all levels (local, regional, national) in compliance with the relevant legislation and to raise awareness among Roma, especially among Roma women, about the opportunities and ways in which they can exercise their rights.

Child poverty in Croatia is not only the problem of Roma children, but a problem which widely affects the whole population and makes the situation of Roma even more difficult. The poverty rate in Croatia in 2008 was 18,9 %<sup>6</sup> which shows that poverty should be considered as a wide and serious problem.

## **Assessment of the potential transferability of the good practice to Croatia**

The programme in the micro-region could be useful for and implemented in Croatia for several reasons. One of them is that, like in Hungary, Roma population is concentrated in specific regions and those regions are burdened with similar problems as described in discussion paper. Another problem is that Roma children often do not speak the Croatian language well, and because of their social and emotional deprivation they often attend special programmes in schools. Also, the Hungarian pilot-project is very comprehensive and oriented to practice and direct work with the beneficiary and that is the approach we need, especially in some parts of Croatia.

In regions like Osječko-baranjska and Međimurje county, Roma people are moving toward villages, they mostly do not work and live on social benefits. No one has yet studied the reasons why this is happening, but there are strong beliefs that non Roma people are moving to the city and they are selling their houses for a price that Roma can afford. For instance, in Osječko-baranjska county this is not accepted well by the local population because Roma way of life is disturbing the life of people who have been living in these villages for all their lives.

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<sup>4</sup> The Decade Action Plan for Roma Inclusion (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The Decade Action Plan for Roma Inclusion (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics (2008).

Considering the good practice regarding education of Roma children and youth the question is: "What happens when we educate young people and they cannot find work afterwards?" Therefore we suggest that the programme should be broadened to another field and that is ensuring work places. Of course, this is not an easy task, especially in a country like ours, where unemployment rates are high and many people are living on the edge of poverty.

## **Assessment of possible ways to measure the results or the impact of the good practice**

In this section, we would like to mention some of the projects that have been conducted and empirically measured in Croatia over the past twenty years. Among the most significant ones are the 1982 research by the Zagreb Social Studies Institute, the results of which have been published under the title "Social Position of Roma in the Socialist Republic of Croatia"; the 1998 research by the Social Sciences Institute Ivo Pilar entitled "Social and Developmental Position of Roma in Croatia; and the 2002 research by the State Institute for the Family, Maternity and Youth entitled "Structure of Roma families and their perception of parenting".<sup>7</sup>

On the 3rd "Croatian Congress of Social Pedagogues with International Participation", authors Dropuljić-Jujnović, Žakman-Ban and Špehar Fiškuš<sup>8</sup> presented basic, course and preliminary results of the projects: "Social Inclusion of the Roma from Pušća living in Zagreb County" and "The Young Roma – trough success to success". Both projects are being revised as professional and scientific. The projects aim at the establishing of communication, recognition and analysis of needs, building of mutual understanding and meeting the existential social and cultural needs of the Roma population. The focus is on the actions towards individuals, a smaller community, for the purpose of creating a universal model of social inclusion of the Roma minorities in the Republic of Croatia. At the same time, special attention is given to respecting and supporting cultural specificity of the Roma. The first project, which includes a wide population, has been approved and financially supported by the Office for National Minorities of the Croatian Government. The second project, which mainly involves children and young people, is being implemented within the Mantra Kap Programme, as part of the main programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Both projects are under way and the authors suggest to include as target population the entire Zagreb county population.

The best ways of measuring the impact of the good practice are "before and after" measurements regarding different areas and objectives that were set - for example school drop-out rates, living conditions, unemployment rates, assessment and self-assessment etc.

<sup>7</sup> National programme for Roma (2003).

<http://www.vlada.hr/nacionalniprogramromi/content/view/13/26/lang,english/>

<sup>8</sup> The 3rd Croatian Congress of Social Pedagogues Abstract Book (2010).

## Questions about the policy that are being raised and debated in Croatia

The current issue in Croatia is integration of Roma pupils in schools.

On April 19, 2002, a group of 57 parents of Romani pupils in Međimurje County, Croatia, assisted by local counsel, Ms Lovorka Kušan, and the European Roma Rights Centre, filed an action with a Croatian court challenging their segregation into separate Roma-only classes in what are otherwise "regular" primary schools. The lawsuit, filed with the Čakovec Municipal Court, charged the Croatian Ministry of Education, the Međimurje County local government, as well as four primary schools in Orehovica, Macinec, Kuršanec and Podturen, with segregating the plaintiffs and numerous other Romani children into separate and educationally inferior classes based solely on their racial/ethnic identity. The complaint further alleged that the result of this practice is the denial of equal educational opportunities for most Romani children. The case went to the European Court in 2004. After a negative judgement in 2008, it reached the Grand Chamber upon appeal. In March 2010 The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights decided that the segregation of Romani children into separate classes based on language is unlawful discrimination, violating the European Convention on Human Rights. The Grand Chamber decision builds on the Court's groundbreaking judgments in *D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic* and *Sampanis v Greece*, which rejected the segregation of Romani students into special schools for children with mental disabilities or within mainstream schools on the basis of ethnicity. It is certain that the positive judgment by the Grand Chamber marks great progress for the advancement of Roma rights in general, as well as the right to quality education on equal terms for Roma and other marginalised groups and is a huge step forward for Croatian society.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.romadecade.org>