

Early Childhood Program (ECP)

Parent Empowerment, Professional Networking and Policy Monitoring to Support Young Roma Children and their Families

Discussion Paper for the Portfolio Review on 14 October, 2015

A. Introduction

The Roma population in Europe faces enormous socioeconomic challenges, characterized by a high degree of social exclusion, which has a lasting negative impact on Roma children. The isolation of many Roma settlements in a number of countries hinders the successful inclusion of Roma children into early education and care provision. ECP's work is underpinned by the belief that investment in early childhood development (ECD) is linked to direct returns in equity and social justice and that adequate ECD services are essential for giving Roma children an equal start in life.

Within the ECP 2014 – 2017 strategy, the Roma Initiative is within a specific portfolio, *Concept: Policy monitoring, Professional Networking and parent empowerment to support young Roma children and their families*.¹ This concept seeks to protect and improve the lives of Roma children and their families by directly working with them in their homes and communities.

The ECP's Roma Initiative promotes the well-being and full inclusion of young Roma children through a holistic approach that seeks to eliminate development gaps between Roma and majority children by engaging parents, professionals, para-professionals, local and national governments, civil society, and regional partners in collective activities. The initiative comprises three complementary components: 1) Roma parenting support programs, community-based pilot programs focused on empowering parents and improving home learning environments; 2) Professional networking of Roma and non-Roma ECD professionals, paraprofessionals and NGOs through the Romani Early Years Network in collaboration with the International Step by Step Association (ISSA); and 3) Advocacy and policy monitoring through the Roma Early Childhood Inclusion reports which are implemented with the Roma Education Fund and UNICEF and capture the current state of early childhood services.

B. Parameters of the Portfolio

This discussion paper is narrowed in terms of its chronological scope and as such intends to provide detail about more recent work (2011-15), albeit, some elements of the portfolio go back to the early days of the Roma Initiative at ECP. Further in this document we also attempt to provide an illustration of the evolution and the range of approaches taken, with lessons learned in the process. The work reviewed here is linked with the work reviewed in April 2014 as part of the ECP's Step by Step Program portfolio review. This portfolio captures OSF's investment in work with the National Foundations, Step by Step NGOs and ISSA, Roma and other national and international NGOs.

C. Our Assumptions and Hypothesis

Conclusive evidence shows that early and appropriate interventions, addressing risk factors, growth, cognitive and social-emotional development can improve health, well-being, and competence of children in the long-term. Evaluations of well-conceived ECD programs demonstrate that children who participate in these programs tend to be more successful in later life, are more competent socially and emotionally, and show better verbal, intellectual and physical development during early childhood than children who are not enrolled in high quality programs.² An abundance of research also shows that

¹ We decided to drop the 'Kopaci' title of the concept as the word 'kopaci' is not widely used and recognised amongst Romani, Gypsy and Traveller populations in Europe.

² La Paro, K. M., & Pianta, R. C. (2000). Predicting children's competence in the early school years: a meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, Winter 2000(70), 443-484.

increasing participation in quality ECD programmes increases effectiveness of education systems by reducing grade repetition and drop-outs and increasing primary school achievement and completion.³ However, in the case of Roma children there is a paradox: although they are the ones to gain most from such interventions, they lag behind in enrolment in preschool institutions compared to non-Roma children. For instance, only 9% of Roma children aged 4 attend preschool in Greece and less than 30% in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.⁴ The picture is similar across a number of countries across Central and Eastern Europe, with the exception of Hungary where pre-school enrolment for Roma children is close to 80% due to the introduction of a compulsory pre-school attendance from the age of 3.

Our work is underpinned by three core assumptions:

Empowerment. Our first assumption is that empowering Roma parents is critical to realize justice, equity and access in education and care for young Roma children. Roma parents experience multiple and complex challenges in terms of social isolation, exclusion, and powerlessness. Given the lack of voice and power and deeply entrenched social barriers, they are often unable to take advantage of opportunities to exercise their individual rights. For the purpose of our work we distinguish between individual and collective (community and organizational) empowerment. By the individual empowerment of parents we aim to produce positive effects of Roma parenting whereby different stakeholders are encouraged to deliver services in a responsive and inclusive way, avoiding stigma, recognizing the strengths of families rather than seeing them as ‘problems’, enabling parents to determine their own requirements for inclusion and feeling confident in their leading role in supporting their children’s healthy development and learning.

In terms of community and/or organizational empowerment we hypothesize that work on collective Roma empowerment will lead to a time when the Roma themselves as well as the Roma-led organizations have a strong capacity to lead and take charge of the destiny of their children by advocating with decision makers, local, national and international stakeholders. Our ambition is that eventually we will see a shift in the field, whereby Roma parents, Roma early childhood education and care professionals and NGOs will be driven by their own strategies, which are focused on representing the interests and demands of the Roma before authorities and influencing decision-making.

Nevertheless empowerment poses challenges, and in most cases is still a theoretical rather than a practical construct. In practice we find that Roma empowerment is indistinct and proves problematic to measure and account for. This holds true especially in terms of collective empowerment and advocacy. Our grantees, both Roma and non-Roma NGOs, have critical roles to play in supporting Roma parents’ capabilities and helping link them to the state, the private sector and others; however it is important that they represent Roma parents’ interests together *with* them, rather than *for* them.

Networking. Our second assumption is that linking Roma and non-Roma professionals and paraprofessionals, who work with Roma children through a network will enable the sharing of best practices, the building of capacity and will eventually lead to improved educational outcomes for Roma children. If practitioners work directly with children and families they can become key players in promoting social justice and inclusion. In addition, few Roma are found in the early childhood workforce and this is a gap that we are working to make visible and address. Research, including our studies⁵, shows that employing Roma staff would increase participation of Roma children in preschools and hence we seek to increase the number of Roma professionals working in formal preschool and primary institutions. Through the establishment of a network we aim to provide an effective mechanism for learning and innovation and enable collaboration beyond the institutional, cultural and functional boundaries of a single organization. The establishment of networks can be a ‘very effective way, if managed well, to enhance the work we are already supporting in one particular area or one particular part

³ Aboud & Hossain (2010) “The impact of pre-primary school on primary school achievement in Bangladesh” (Early Childhood Research Quarterly); Berlinski, Galiani & Manacorda (2008) “Giving children a better start: preschool attendance and school-age profiles” (Journal of Public Economics, 92:1416-1440).

⁴ EUFRA (2014) Roma survey – Data in focus - Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014_roma_survey_education_tk0113748enc.pdf

⁵ Roma Early Childhood Inclusion Report, Croatia (2015) http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/reci_croatia_report_eng-final_web.pdf

of a complicated field.⁶ Nevertheless, networks come with their own costs and risks.⁷ In the case of the Romani Early Years Network there are a number of constraints, including organizational, political and social factors.

Advocacy. Our third assumption is that the documenting and advocating for new approaches that show sustainable and demonstrable improvements for Roma children and their families can bolster effective policy changes to ensure Roma children receive quality services and equal treatment. We see a need to support the monitoring of policies and their implementation and to disseminate this experience across countries and among various groups of stakeholders, including national governments. We also hypothesize that a higher level of Roma parents' empowerment will lead to greater access to resources and information and advocacy-related activities, including advisory and political activities. Nonetheless, advocacy is challenging for a number of reasons, including discriminative attitudes and stereotypes towards the Roma community, lack of Roma role models in the early years field and restricted government funding.

The tools used to apply our main assumptions are grant-making, research, public communications, building an evidence base through 'best practice', and developing and designing new materials and resources to support effective practices. The Roma Initiative uses European Commission directives and communications, national Roma integration strategies, international and regional evidence, and specific examples of effective programming to advocate collectively with partners for sustainable policy changes and increased funding of Roma early childhood services. In the section on lessons learned, we reflect on how some of the aforementioned assumptions and tools proved challenging to implement in practice.

D. Our Place in the Field

There is a growing recognition of the importance of promoting and developing early years care and education provision and services that are inclusive of the Roma community as a means of addressing inequity, Roma empowerment and emancipation. Roma are a young constituency population, representing a significant demographic share in some European economies, therefore some national governments, in their measures to reduce social welfare budgets and improve economies, are beginning to address the need to reach the community in order to achieve effective economic growth. On the other hand, there is an active, critical lobby of Roma rights organizations and advocates who seek to promote social inclusion and inter-cultural education and care, openly arguing against the segregation of education and early years' services and maintaining a rights-based approach that seeks to promote ECD as a means of achieving equality. Still, efforts to integrate Roma children into mainstream programs across Europe are dismal and regrettably social justice for vulnerable Roma children has not been achieved.

The high impact of investments in early childhood to counteract inequity and poverty motivates the European Union (EU), World Bank, Council of Europe, UNICEF, the Roma Education Fund (REF), Bernard Van Leer, UNESCO and others. For 2014–2020, the EU is providing major funding for social inclusion programs carried out through national governments to provide services, including in early childhood education and care. The EEA and Norway Grants⁸ have provided funding for early years projects in Romania, Bulgaria and Serbia, mainly through REF. The Council of Europe introduced ROMACT, a program that aims to increase the absorption of EU funds by strengthening the capacity of local and regional authorities to develop and implement Roma inclusion projects. Despite these efforts, national governments are slow in taking initiatives further and the funds do not often reach small or middle-sized NGOs largely due to lack of capacity.

OSF has been engaged in the promoting of Roma rights for decades and focus on the improvement of the outcomes and life trajectories of young Roma children complements other efforts within the OSF's network, including the Roma Initiative Office, Human Rights Initiative, Justice Initiative and Open Society Initiative for Europe, as well as externally. REF has an important role of investing in Roma education focuses on increasing access to pre-school and transition to

⁶ OSF Internal Resource - Funding Networks: A Strategy Conversation with Chris Stone, Grantees, and OSF Staff/ Networks: A Typology for Grant Makers

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The EEA Grants and the Norway Grants 2004-09 were established in connection with the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. The enlargements required a substantial increase in the contributions towards European cohesion. The number of beneficiary countries of the EEA and Norway Grants, as well as the size of the funding has grown substantially.

school. ECP complements this with programming emphasizing quality, linked with children’s outcomes, and targeting home learning environments for children under three years of age. There is much benefit from seeking to combine these two approaches (access and quality) to programming in order to create continuity between home and school environments across the early childhood age range. ECP uses a high agency approach in order to actively leverage the ECP’s extensive experience working with young Roma children and the capacities of multiple long-term partners: the national foundations, the Step by Step NGOs, UNICEF, Save the Children and others. Geographically, the ECP also works in a number of countries - the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and potentially Belgium, Greece and Italy, countries outside the Decade of Roma Inclusion and where REF is not present.

E. Our Work – History, Successes and Challenges

The Early Childhood Program (ECP) has been investing in ECD for Roma children since the inception of the Step by Step Program in 1994. A range of Roma-focused initiatives contributed to the Step by Step program implementation over the years, including development of culturally-appropriate resources and trainings and piloting of socially inclusive preschool and primary programs. Funding for Roma initiatives for ECP was halted when REF was established in 2005, with all Roma-allocated funds shifting to REF. Modest funding was restored to the ECP budget in 2008 and has formed an increasingly important strand of ECP’s work.

Since 2011 the Roma Initiative has consisted of three complementary strands of work, linked to our main assumptions of Roma parents’ empowerment, professional networking and advocacy to amplify impact for Roma children and their families. The Initiative aims at promoting improvements in home learning environments, establishment of community-based services for children under three years old, empowerment of parents, reduction of prejudice and xenophobia, and implementation of institutional and policy reforms that will dramatically improve the social inclusion and reduce poverty and discrimination experienced by young Roma children and their families.



Roma Parent Support Projects (RPSP)

The Roma Parent Support projects pilot community-based services that are culturally and contextually relevant for Roma caregivers and their young children from the prenatal period through early primary school. The projects focus on improving the context of children’s development in their homes and communities and on the empowerment of their parents. They aim to promote the confidence, competences, and capacities of parents as primary educators and advocates. From 2011 onwards ECP has funded RPSP projects in Albania, Croatia, Czech Republic, Kosovo, Macedonia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Ukraine and the United Kingdom. Our partners are the Step-by-Step NGOs (Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Slovakia and Ukraine), the national

OSF offices (Czech Republic, Croatia, Albania and Ukraine), Save the Children (Albania and Kosovo) and other NGOs (United Kingdom). The RPSPs were exploratory in their nature. While there are excellent examples of quality formal preschools and primary schools that include Roma children, there is less knowledge regarding how to develop and implement high impact community-based, multi-sectoral initiatives that reach younger children. ECP hoped to learn both from the successes as well as from the difficulties and challenges encountered.

In 2015, we conducted a full review of the RPSP community-based projects with the help of external consultants, assessing opportunities for more in-depth policy work in a limited number of countries. The strategic review involved two levels of analysis – analysis of ECP-funded national projects including data on Roma children and their parents to assess the scale of need, and the opportunities for affecting change locally and potentially nationally by scaling up of the projects. The review

also included consultation with national experts dealing with health, education, and child protection in order to assess what structures and services exist nationwide to support Roma children and their parents. This process helped us to discover some best practices amongst the projects as well as to ascertain the ones that posed challenges. The review concluded that in Serbia and Slovakia there was a potential for national scale up, due to the best practice associated with the projects, the goals achieved and positive national developments related to higher investment in early childhood. The review also provided grounds for further investment in Ukraine due to positive developments at national level and the interest of the Ukrainian National foundation in piloting positions of Roma teaching assistants in early and primary education.

In Serbia, the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy and Roma NGO partners used the opportunity of a new national obligatory 9 month preschool preparation program to improve the home learning environments of young Roma children in their communities, including targeting the parents of young children and Roma early childhood paraprofessionals. The project successfully delivered its goals and achieved more than it originally planned. It was an ambitious, well-conceived program involving a range of experts from Roma NGOs, ECD specialists, health and social care professionals, local administrators and politicians.⁹ Further funding was recommended and ECP is currently negotiating cooperation on a national scale up project with the World Bank, Ministry of Education and local authorities in ten locations in Serbia. If negotiations go well, this modest expansion (from 3 pilot sites to 10 locations) will be collaboratively funded and evaluated by the World Bank and is viewed as a pilot for a full-scale national four year World Bank loan to Serbia, supporting inclusive early childhood and primary education, paying particular attention to inclusion of Roma and children with disabilities.

In Slovakia, the project in partnership with the Roma-led Wide Open School NGO Slovakia, a Step by Step NGO, focused on providing parenting programs in three locations in the country. Our review concluded that the impact of the Roma Confident Parents Program was highly positive in completing the objectives to improve the home learning environments for the children and to enrol them into pre-schools into kindergartens by using a multi-agency approach (health, social protection and education sector). Prior the start of the project up to half of the children in primary school age in these localities repeated first grade or were streamed into special schools for children with intellectual disabilities. The project finished with only 3 children repeating first grade and involved work with over 450 children in pre-school age. Despite the challenge of leadership change during the project duration, to our surprise, the project delivered its goals and provided an excellent practice. In addition, due to the current situation in Slovakia of having European Social Funds pass through to the municipalities to hire social workers, health field assistants and community centre workers, the review recommended that the project be scaled up to work with other municipalities that are also receiving EU funds. ECP is negotiating this further work.

In Ukraine the project started in 2011 and involved the Ukrainian Step by Step Foundation, working in co-operation with the International Renaissance Foundation and local Roma community organizations, for Roma parents with children aged 0–6 years in three communities in the Trans-Carpathian region. The strategic review identified that the goals of the project were achieved and that further work should be done on access to quality early years education that promotes diversity and inclusion of Roma children. Further work, to pilot the position of Roma teaching assistants in early and primary education and to promote full inclusion of Roma in mainstream schools near the participating communities, is being negotiated.

ECP supported the Open Society Foundation for Albania, working in partnership with the Step by Step NGO in Albania and two local Roma NGOs in Tirana, to implement a three year community-based Roma Parent Support project. From its initial stage the project was hindered by the threatened evictions of some of the Roma Ashkali and Egyptian (RAE) families. The review suggested a re-think of the approach for the implementation to continue at one location where the political situation was more stable. Also in Albania, Save the Children was supported by ECP to implement a home visiting program and parent support course, with an early years care and education ‘drop-in’ provision for previously homeless RAE families. However, the original goals of the project could not be followed and the lack of local government commitment did not provide a ground for scale or sustainability. The work in Albania was driven by the work of many

⁹ In September 2015, the City of Kragujevac won a second prize in the Council of Europe’s Dosta! Congress Prize for Municipalities for the ECP funded program ‘Strong from the Start’.

major players in ECD advocacy and the encouraging developments at a national level (albeit still donor driven) including the policy initiative by UNICEF 'Every Roma Child in Kindergarten'. Our review concluded that there are contextual constraints with the home-visiting projects and there were threats for sustainability and scalability in terms of policy changes. We decided our latest project should go through to December 2016 with appropriate technical advice, but no further.

In Kosovo ECP supported Save the Children together with the Kosovo Education Centre (Step by Step) and the project aimed to promote the rights of RAE children from the Mitrovica communities by increasing the capacity and commitment of public authorities and civil society stakeholders to provide community-focused early childhood services. The review concluded that we needed to pay more attention to project planning and implementation in order to secure national commitments in the interests of scalability and sustainability. In addition, Save the Children Kosovo did not work in partnership with Kosovo Education Center as planned. Further support for this project is not planned.

In the Czech Republic the projects started in 2012 in partnership with OSF Prague. They involved coordination of six Roma Parent Support projects spread in three areas of the country with a full-time post at the national foundation offices. Following ECP's visits in 2015 and a strategic review we found that the projects need to have a greater cooperation with preschools, primary schools and local authorities. More support was needed to be given to Roma children and Roma parents and greater cooperation with the OSF Roma Initiatives Office (RIO), specifically in the city of Ostrava where a number of OSF programs have focused work not only in terms of service provision but in terms of litigation and advocacy.¹⁰ A greater cooperation was necessary to ensure children who are enrolling in regular schools as a result of OSJI advocacy are accepted in truly inclusive and welcoming environments. Linking with municipal authorities is a focus that OSF Prague and ECP are pursuing more actively at present, for example through the ECD conference held in Ostrava in 2014 and by promoting linkages between local governments in the Czech Republic and in the United Kingdom.

In the United Kingdom the project we are supporting is focused on the implementation of an early childhood initiative for Roma migrants, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, living in the London. The project is in its initial phase and pilots training materials focusing on empowering and building competencies of Roma parents living in London. We expect that this project will be taken up in partnership with other available funding.

In Slovenia the project in partnership with the Education Research Institute (Step by Step) provided training, mentoring and support for ECD pedagogues and practitioners, based on research evidence, to embed successful inclusion practices that 'reach out to Roma' in the process of building trust. Due to the high emphasis on research and production of ECD materials as well as higher involvement of decision-makers, funding for this project will be absorbed within the Romani Early Years Network Slovenia. Further, the projects in Croatia and Macedonia provided successful practices that have now been taken up by further European Union funding.

These are some of the challenges we faced in the course of this work:

The **myth** that Roma parents do not instill educational values and pursuit of education persists at all societal levels, across governments to professionals and family units. In addition, increased intolerance, together with publicly promoted hatred against Roma, are a high challenge to tackle.

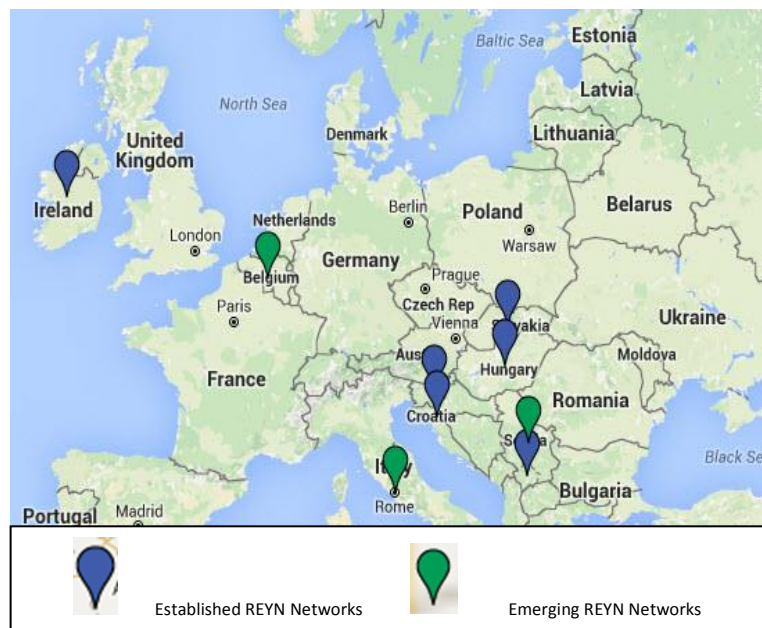
We found that some of our grantees were increasingly adapting to roles as **service providers**, however they were lacking in expert knowledge and experience of early years education and care provision. ECP could have placed more emphasis on providing technical assistance focused on early years practices. Some of the grantees were less committed in their effort to pursue enrolment of Roma children in mainstream preschool institutions so that they do not lose potential 'clients'. For

¹⁰ Case of D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic - The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights decided that eighteen Roma pupils who were placed in special schools in the Ostrava region between 1996 and 1999 were discriminated against by the Czech Republic. The D.H. case brought to the attention of the Czech society in general that Roma children were 27 times more likely to be placed in a special school than a non-Roma child (CAHROM, Ad Hoc Committee of Experts on Roma Issues, *Thematic Report of the Group of Experts on Inclusive Preschool Education of Roma Children in the Czech Republic*. Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2015, p.6).

example, in the Czech Republic more intense collaboration with OSF Prague and perhaps the hiring of a permanent staff member with ECD knowledge within OSF Prague could have provided greater results, especially in the city of Ostrava, where according to OSF Prague up to 80% of Roma children do not participate in early childhood education services. Similarly, in Kosovo, despite the fact that the project provided a good service provision, it did not succeed in higher enrolment of Roma children into pre-schools and primary education.

Our work showed that **evidence-based practice** is in demand and that there is a need for closer monitoring and technical assistance to support projects closely. At the outset the projects were approved and implemented one by one, without emphasis on structured evaluation. Considering them as a cohort of diverse projects that could be monitored through a cohesive framework would have offered a better opportunity to compare progress and improve the quality of programs that lagged behind. Elements of a common monitoring framework were added into the project midway and these were inconsistently adopted by grantees. It would have been important to conduct a baseline assessment throughout our projects and to ensure that best practices were documented and scale up is evidence driven. There is also a need to create continuity with primary schools, as well as to invest in the institutions engaged in scale-up.

The question of adequate **capacity and empowerment of Roma NGOs** is particularly critical. The majority of the RPSP projects provide substantial evidence that individual Roma parents were empowered; they felt less isolated, more valued and more confident in their parenting. However, we acknowledge that the projects have empowered groups, communities and organizations to a lesser degree. It is also of note that many Roma NGOs are small to medium organizations that have weaker financial management and are less eligible for funding within and outside OSF. This issue of capacity is also related to the shortage of Roma ECD professionals, which we address through the Romani Early Years Network.



The Romani Early Years Network (REYN)

The International Romani Early Years Network (REYN), based at the International Step by Step Association, aims to increase the quality and quantity of expertise of Roma early childhood professionals and leading paraprofessionals across Europe and Eurasia. The Network also aims to facilitate their collaboration with non-Roma early childhood professionals, through activities that promote mutual understanding. REYN International connects over 423 individual early childhood practitioners from different backgrounds who work with Roma and Traveller children, and their families and communities in 32 countries across Europe, the Caucasus and the Americas.

REYN International aims to be a safe learning community which enables ECD practitioners from different countries to improve their confidence and competences, gain recognition for their work and speak with one voice on behalf of young Roma children and their families. For example, in 2015, though funding by the Bernard van Leer Foundation for NGOs in Western Europe, REYN brought together ECD practitioners from Eastern and Western Europe in a meaningful exchange of experience, through study visits, workshops and seminars, where they learned about each other's work and efforts towards adequate Roma ECD provision.

ECP supported the set-up of the national REYN networks in six countries - Hungary, Croatia, Slovakia, Kosovo, Ireland and Slovenia and REYN networks are emerging in Serbia, Italy and Belgium. The networks are led by the Step by Step NGOs (Croatia, Kosovo, Slovenia, Slovakia and Hungary), other national NGOs (Ireland, Italy and Serbia) and one local authority (the City of Ghent in Belgium).

The strongest identified networks in terms of potential future sustainability, reach of professionals and innovative activities are REYN Croatia and REYN Hungary. Both have achieved a high number of members from all professional circles, including government. REYN-Croatia has been recognized by the public as a relevant information platform working to endorse the rights of Roma children – and as such, the network has been present in the media and in public events at the local and national level. Despite the challenging political context of increasing intolerance towards disadvantaged groups in Hungary, REYN Hungary is continuing to attract more members and has solid plans in terms of sustainability.

REYN Kosovo, REYN Slovenia and REYN Slovakia focused on the development of materials and resources for their members. All three networks provided relevant support to Roma and non-Roma early years professionals and opportunities for professional development; and although they had existed for a short period they still needed to work on attracting other funding sources. The REYN networks' visibility increased through the set up and launch of websites, Facebook pages and newsletters, but it was clear that the networks needed further support and strengthening in 2016. In May 2015 we launched a call for proposals and decided to continue supporting existing national networks and fund new networks in Serbia, Italy and Belgium. Funding was made available for up to three years, whereby by the third year the networks needed to match OSF funding with 50% of other funding.

Some of the networks have undertaken advocacy activities, such as REYN Croatia and are successfully raising awareness and involving major stakeholders involved in their campaigns; others were and continue to be involved in the drafting of the National strategies for Roma inclusion in their respective countries. Nonetheless, together with REYN International, managed by ISSA, the national networks need to emerge with strong advocacy goals and clear strategies for influencing effective early years policies, not only on national level but internationally.

These are some of the challenges we encountered:

The networks needed to be **realistic** about the resource commitment from their member organizations. REYN International as well as the national networks needed to make sure that networking is member-driven. Major obstacles appear to be the exceptionally high and positive expectations of networking outcomes and that the networks overwhelmingly expect to benefit from their membership in REYN International but are not always prepared to take initiative and contribute themselves. In addition, issues such as membership (individual or organizational) and language (English, Romanes and other national languages) are still to be agreed on.

The **sustainability** of the networks, including REYN International, is a challenge. Although networks such as REYN Croatia and REYN Hungary show advances in raising EU and other funds, the rest of the networks still depend on OSF for further funding. Most were launched in the last two years and it will take time for them to become fully independent, however we need to make sure that the issue of sustainability is addressed throughout the process of supporting them.

The REYN Networks have a potential for **international advocacy**. So far, they haven't focused on this but there are ideas about working together in joint campaigns, pending available support and funding.

Roma Early Childhood Inclusion Reports (RECI)

The RECI reports, a joint initiative of the Open Society Foundations, UNICEF and the Roma Education Fund, aim to produce and disseminate analyses of current early childhood policies that impact young Roma children in select countries. The reports aim to advocate for systemic reforms that ensure universal access to high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood development services. Each report is validated through a national consultation meeting of all stakeholders, including national government and local municipal representatives, policy-makers, Roma NGOs, ECD professionals and practitioners, researchers, international experts and civil society organizations. The participatory approach of the reports is a good practice, whereby Roma researchers themselves conduct interviews and provide important insights.

Work on the RECI reports began in 2009. The first phase of the RECI project focused on the production of a series of five national Roma early childhood policy analyses reports (Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania and Serbia) and one

Overview report.¹¹ The Overview report, the Serbian and the Macedonian reports were successfully launched and used to raise awareness about the lack of early childhood provision for the Roma communities. The Czech, Romanian and Hungarian reports went through a consultation phase but needed further work. In 2015 ECP revised RECI Czech Republic as the initial report needed stronger arguments for inclusion. This is particularly relevant as Czech education laws are being revised at present. Collaboratively with a team of Czech and one international researcher; staff of OSF Prague, UNICEF and REF; ECP produced a report with updated findings that documents barriers for improved access to high quality and effective early childhood education services in the country. The report is to be launched in November 2015.

The RECI Croatia report, the sixth in the series, was launched in Zagreb in February 2015. The report confirmed that education is one of the most critical areas of intervention for Roma children. The study indicated that parents either didn't know about existing local preschool facilities and support, or are unable to enroll their children due to exclusion, unemployment, absence of Roma teachers or teaching assistants, a shortage of kindergartens, rural isolation, or financial burdens associated with formal education. Follow on advocacy steps were agreed with REF and UNICEF, whereby OSF and UNICEF will work on the production of an easy-read format of the report, aiming to reach not only policy-makers but also teachers, Roma parents and their children. REF agreed to hold meetings with local authorities to raise awareness about the results of the study and in particular, advocate for adequate transport provision for Roma children to educational facilities. UNICEF is interested in using the results to argue for provision of national funding to municipalities to support full inclusion of Roma and other children that are left out of the system.

These are the challenges we found:

Despite the fact that both UNICEF and REF are keen to work on the next RECI reports, we found a number of challenges with the production of the reports. Although UNICEF secured funding from the European Commission for several reports and advocacy for a period of two years, ECP has been, both before and after this period, the lead in the production of RECI reports and we needed to address the **responsibilities** of each party, including financial commitments, the contracting of technical expertise and follow on advocacy. In the next cycle of reports we have agreed to re-consider these responsibilities and re-draft a memorandum of understanding between the three sponsoring agencies.

In the process, we also found that the **capacity of the contracted national research institutions** was limited. In the Czech Republic, for example, the initial report was written with an anti-Roma sentiment whereby the Roma were blamed for the situation they were facing. We found that we needed additional technical expertise for the revising of the reports and this had time and cost consequences. ECP has been working on a 'Terms of Reference' for a potential academic institution or a think-tank to take up the management of the production of the reports and in agreement with REF and UNICEF will be launching a call for proposals from such institutions in 2016.

The reports take a significant amount of **time** to produce. From start to finish one such report, including the comments from all agencies involved (regional and local UNICEF, REF and OSF representatives) takes over a year. This hindered a timely launch and follow on advocacy related to national developments in the countries for which they were produced. For example, the launch of the Croatian report was planned to precede the accession of the country to the European Union in 2013. Other reports, such as the Hungarian and the Romanian reports took longer to complete and as a result the data collected became outdated. At present, REF has undertaken to update the Hungarian RECI report and OSF will be taking steps to update the Romanian report.

Follow-on advocacy is an area to develop further through a clear strategy and relevant steps. Within the next strategic period we will be focusing on higher level advocacy on the European level for investment and inclusion of all Roma children in quality early childhood services and provision.

¹¹ "Roma Early Childhood Inclusion – Overview Report", RECI, a joint initiative of the Open Society Foundations, the Roma Education Fund, and UNICEF, published by UNICEF, 2010
<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/roma-early-childhood-inclusion-overview-report>

F. Lessons Learned and Going Forward

Many lessons can be drawn from this wide portfolio and these are some of the ways we can address them:

- ***Work with institutions in addition to raising awareness.*** We gradually came to realize that not only is broad public awareness of the early years in the context of the Roma community important but a supportive social movement for adequate provision, including work with the institutional providers of early education and care is paramount for success. In the process it became clear that the community-based pilot projects are stronger when they are linked with both NGOs and formal institutions from the educational, health and social provision sectors.
- ***Work on individual as well as collective empowerment.*** Our first approach saw us focused on parents' empowerment almost exclusively on the grassroots level. Gradually we have been steering towards extracting examples of best practices from the projects we supported to promote for advocacy and professional networking. Going forward we will be considering new emerging partners, particularly from the Roma civil society sector as the issue and awareness of the importance of ECD builds amongst traditionally Roma rights based activism.
- ***Incorporate evaluation and documentation.*** Evaluation, documentation and collection of baseline data has been a weak point in our work and we needed to address this. We are looking into establishing more rigorous documentation and evaluation of the Roma Parenting Support Projects, including collaboration with World Bank for evaluation and with Save the Children for appropriate documentation of child outcomes in the countries where potential scale up is being explored.
- ***Build the capacities of our grantees further.*** Some of the grantees we supported have become healthier organizations; however others have lagged behind. We need to improve communications with grantees and present opportunities for further development. With this in mind, in September 2015 we held a workshop for all grantees under the Roma Initiative. The networking event with grantees facilitated an exchange of experience between them, identifying successes and challenges in the implementation of the Roma Parenting Support Projects and REYN. The workshop also presented introductory trainings on assessment and evaluation tools to use to track child outcomes.
- ***Recognize our own limitations and address them.*** In 2011 ECP hired a Senior Program Manager to establish the foundations of the Roma portfolio. After a period of strategizing and further reshaping of portfolio, in 2013 the key staff person leading the portfolio left. The period of recruitment for a new staff member affected the further in-depth work on the Initiative. In September 2014 ECP recruited an officer to continue this work.
- ***Collaborate with other relevant stakeholders.*** We need to engage in a more intensive collaboration REF and other agencies and significant players, such as UNICEF, Bernard Van Leer and others —and aim to reach a greater strategic alignment. Joint advocacy around inclusive education, particularly in the Czech Republic and the DH case, has meant that the Roma Initiative at ECP has engaged with the Justice Initiative, Roma Initiatives Office, Human Rights Initiative and the Education Support Program. We are working towards greater cooperation with the National OSF Foundations in Serbia, Slovakia and Ukraine.
- ***Re-think geographies.*** The next strategic period also offers a unique opportunity for the portfolio to focus on new program's development against an interesting background of shifting national and regional opportunities and migrating Roma populations.¹² Anti-Gypsyism is gradually, although not imperatively, being given a status of a critical issue to be tackled across the EU member states. We will be focusing on shaping the geographical focus, whereby we intend to explore collaboration with OSIFE's work in countries such as Greece, Italy, UK and the Netherlands. An ECP staff member conducted a scoping visit to Greece in June 2015. Very few best examples and role models were allocated; we saw a strident need with a weak civil society sector and heavy involvement of academic institutions into Roma inclusion. We will be looking to also explore countries with larger Roma population – such as Romania and Bulgaria, and identify countries with political momentum for national change in the early years field.

¹² Between 600,000 – 800,000 Roma from Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe are present in the UK alone.