



SCHOOLS IN BIH KNOW HOW TO INCLUDE ROMA CHILDREN

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THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The right to education is a basic human and child right and the safest way to change a path from poverty to a decent life and from marginalisation to participation in society. And yet, a staggering 80% of Roma children in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) are excluded¹ from primary schooling. This policy brief is based on research conducted in BiH in autumn 2006 and in it I will present the main points around Roma exclusion and the ways to overcome it in B&H focusing on the level of schools. More detailed version of this research can be found in policy study: "Inclusion of Roma children in B&H education: principal challenges and solution". The brief will also offer a critique of the current dominant policy for the education of Roma children i.e. the Action Plan on the Educational Needs of Roma and Members of other National Minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (NPA). The findings of this research show that the NPA is not producing the desired results because it divides responsibility between several stakeholders, while at the same time neglecting the role of individual schools in including Roma children.

Whilst acknowledging the role of Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), the position taken here is that NGOs cannot and should not overtake responsibility for the provision of education for Roma children. Instead it is argued here – taking note of successful practices identified in the schools - that the long-term inclusion of Roma children in B&H education can only be achieved if individual schools take more responsibility in meeting their pedagogical and educational demands. In addition adopting and implementing this policy option does not require additional resources, any change in legislation or significant increase in the workloads of teachers and school management.

¹ In this brief exclusion will be used as a term for non attendance or drop out of Roma children from education, because they so often encounter exclusionary practices and barriers, such as: prejudice, long standing discrimination, lack of understanding for their lifestyle, inability to pay for books and school materials.

EXCLUSION OF ROMA

Roma people in B&H suffer from extremely poor housing and experience severe discrimination in employment and educational opportunities. According

"We have lots of Roma children in our classes, but we have a number of difficulties because parents are irresponsible and do not send them to school... they are not excluded, they exclude themselves" (*Defectologist*).

to the B&H Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, employment amongst Roma in B&H is as low as 1.5 per cent. OSCE argues that the position of Roma is strongly linked to gross violations of their human rights. Vast numbers of Roma have not reclaimed their pre-war property and have been left without compensation (ERRC, 2004).

By reviewing education policy documents in B&H it appears that the exclusion of Roma children from education is being addressed from several different avenues. However, it is interesting to note that no policy currently addresses the practices of individual schools nor suggests feasible actions that can be taken at the school level in order to reduce exclusion. When researching inclusive education in April and May 2006 in B&H, I also explored the issue of Roma exclusion. It appears that teachers, school principals and pedagogues in B&H are supportive of inclusive education, but do not consider Roma children to be part of inclusion initiatives, even though inclusive education is considered as one aspect of inclusion in society (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, Shaw, 2000) and does not apply only to children with special needs. Furthermore, I was surprised to learn how little consideration some schools give to the schooling of Roma children. Teachers seem oblivious to the life style of Roma people, the levels of poverty they live in and the levels of discrimination they experience. They are also unwilling to adopt school instruction, or to make school a flexible place, accessible for Roma children (in Bećirevic, 2006).

EXCLUSION FROM EDUCATION

Existing data suggests that 80% of Roma children in Bosnia and Herzegovina who are not in school do want an education (Budimo Aktivni and UNICEF, 2005). The same study revealed the presence of prejudice and discrimination towards Roma children from parents of other children and school staff. Research conducted for this policy study - involving interviews with children and parents – have confirmed the preceding claims. Indeed all Roma parents and children interviewed in this study stressed how important education is to them. This finding strongly challenges the views – expressed by some opinion formers and members of the general public that Roma people have a very low awareness of the importance of education and actually forbid their children from attending school. The main reasons for school nonattendance, as reported in this study, as well as in several other studies (UNICEF, 2005; Save the Children, 2006a) are the inability of parents to pay for schoolbooks, stationery and transport when that is necessary. Also if they are not approached and offered support directly either from Roma associations, NGOs or schools, parents themselves do not know where to seek support if they have a problem in educating their children.

Addressing and solving the issues that surround Roma children's exclusion from education is of the utmost importance because denying children the right to education has grave consequences, and it means denying other rights as well. However, if it is provided, education promotes the realization of social and economic rights, increases employment chances, as well as health, access to housing and food. Education improves quality of life for individuals, but it also helps promote peace, democracy and economic development in a country (Save the Children, 2006b).

"...teachers need to have patience. Some of the Roma children are not so fluent with language. In this school teachers of mother tongue are instructed not to be too sensitive towards mistakes Roma children naturally make with language. It is easy to say you do not speak and write correctly and we are going to fail you" (*School principal, Sarajevo*).

ROLE OF NGOs AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Informants who participated in this research frequently referred to Save the Children, UNICEF and Open Society Fund and some the practices that these have introduced. Therefore it is evident that some of the initiatives and training that NGOs have conducted will be sustained in the future. However relying on NGOs to initiate actions and provide support on a permanent basis is not a feasible policy option. Also implicitly delegating responsibility for Roma education to NGOs without the meaningful engagement of school staff puts the Roma people in the position of outsiders, and thus may reduce their confidence in school management and teachers. Another reason why NGOs cannot take over responsibility is because their funding remains very uncertain. Larger NGOs and international organisations operate all over the world and every year they reduce funding for B&H in order to focus attention on countries that are currently in crisis. Therefore a policy option where NGOs have significant responsibility is not one that is appropriate for the education of Roma children in B&H. Instead state authorities will need to find ways to overcome the exclusion of Roma children using existing resources within the current educational system - without relying too heavily on NGOs and international organisations.

ACTION PLAN ON THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF ROMA AND MEMBERS OF OTHER NATIONAL MINORITIES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

At the moment, the NPA- Action Plan on the Educational Needs of Roma and Members of other National Minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2004) – can be considered the main policy document when it comes to the education of Roma children. Adopted in 2004 this document proposed several good measures, such as increasing resources, introducing the teaching of Roma language and raising awareness on Roma children's education. For example NPA proposals to remove financial barriers have been welcomed by all those concerned with Roma education, as well as among Roma parents themselves. One of the problems with the implementation of the goal in the action plan is that the NPA delegates responsibility to entity and cantonal ministries of social welfare, education and finance and municipal and school authorities. Giving responsibility to several bodies leads to a reduction in the responsibility of any single body thereby creating confusion as to who should provide what.

Another proposal made by the NPA is that more attention needs to be given to introducing the teaching of Roma language in B&H schools. While doing research with Roma children and their parents I asked them how they think their language needs could be addressed. They told me that they do not speak Romani, though they would like to learn it because it is an important part of their culture and heritage. Their idea was that learning Romani could take place somewhere in a community or as an extracurricular activity in the school. At this point in time, and perhaps in the coming years this suggestion should be realistically considered, as an immediate introduction of Roma teaching into schools is impossible because there are so few people who can teach Romani in B&H, and these few would not be able to fulfil the demands of all schools. In addition to these issues however probably the main shortcoming of the NPA's policy is that it does not give sufficient attention to what individual schools can do in order to increase inclusion, even though schools are naturally positioned in the centre of Roma children's education.



POLICY RECOMMENDATION: Schools and local communities take responsibility for education of Roma children

The policy option singled out in this research as the most effective encourages schools to take more responsibility not only in providing education for the average learner but in adapting the educational and school environment to a diverse child population. This policy option does not stand against the current NPA policy, but gives additional support to it by addressing the responsibility of schools, something that the current NPA failed to do. This policy option is drawn from discussions with school principals, teachers, Roma children and parents and is based on successful examples of what schools can do in providing books, employing Roma assistants and adapting teaching and school cultures.

In providing books and transport for Roma children, a proactive approach encountered in some of the researched schools made a real difference. For example the school principal and pedagogues were aware of a number of Roma children in their area and looked for ways to include them. Furthermore they sought co-operation with Roma parents, Roma associations, international NGOs and government bodies. Before the beginning of the school year school staff and management would get in touch with Roma associations or NGOs. Together they would exchange available data and agree on a strategy as to what steps to undertake and where to seek support. Were support for school-books not to be provided by the Ministry of Education,

the school principal would then seek support from municipality officials and international organization.

When it comes to the role of Roma assistants it is important to note that not all schools require one - only schools in those areas where there is a significant population of Roma. Schools visited within this project reported that help from a Roma assistant increased inclusion of Roma children. If the government refuses to meet the cost of employing Roma assistant, schools could seek support from international organizations or the municipality. In order to reduce the cost 2-3 schools in one area could share the services of one Roma assistant. The role of Roma assistant is crucial when it comes to connecting the Roma community and the school. A Roma assistant would have

“They need little bit more love and attention. . .when they just come to school we need to work a lot on socialization with younger children. Educationally in later classes they experience problems with more difficult subjects’ mathematics and physics and that is where they need extra bit of attention” (School principal).

a responsibility to conduct assessments before every school year on the number of Roma children that are due to be enrolled in a particular area/municipality, to act as a liaison between Roma and a school, and to advise staff on the needs of Roma children.

When it comes to adapting school instructions and school cultures this research shows that the values promulgated by school management were reflected by the whole staff who demonstrated flexibility in

Table 1:
Techniques for schools identified as successful for education of Roma children

	TECHNIQUES	WHAT IT ENTAILS
FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPAL AND MANAGEMENT	Prepare and encourage teachers to get more involved	Discuss Roma issues at staff meetings. Encourage staff to show flexibility towards the life style of Roma children and to give extra attention to Roma children. Examine major difficulties that staff encounter and help them to find ways to overcome those.
	Seek support from municipality officials	Try to arrange meetings with head of municipality to discuss issues of Roma children’s education. Seek support from municipality funds for books for underprivileged Roma and other children.
	Seek support from international organisations	Through letter, e-mail or call describe the situation in your school and ask for support in the education of Roma children.
	Investigate why children drop out	Collect available figures on Roma children in your area, from NGOs or municipality. Visit Roma settlement with Roma representative. Talk to parents and children about reasons for non-attendance and offer your support.
	TECHNIQUES	WHAT IT ENTAILS
FOR TEACHERS AND ALL SCHOOL STAFF	Show willingness to include Roma	Provide a little bit extra attention to Roma children, even if only a few minutes. Give praise for every achievement and support where the child needs it. Address bullying or any discrimination towards Roma children. In accordance with their age talk to class as a whole about equality and respect for others regardless of their national or social status.
	Develop an individual and tailor made approach for every Roma child	Some Roma children have problem in mastering language, do not discourage them but pay extra attention to that. In other cases Roma children’s achievement might be affected because they never attended school and do not know behaviours appropriate for the school. Talk to a child individually and seek support from a pedagogue or Roma assistant. Encourage every child to express their concerns and worries and try to address those in a supportive manner.



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A "Policy Development Fellowship Program" has been launched by the Open Society Fund BiH in early 2004 with the aim to improve BiH policy research and dialogue and to contribute to the development of a sound policy-making culture based on informative and empirically grounded policy options.

The program provides an opportunity for selected fellows to collaborate with the Open Society Fund in conducting policy research and writing a policy study with the support of mentors and trainers during the whole process. Twenty seven fellowships have been granted in three cycles since the starting of the Program. All policy studies are available at www.soros.org.ba

teaching and readiness to address the pedagogical needs of Roma children. In discussions school staff stressed that educating Roma children does not require any special methodology or technique. According to those in the field when educating Roma children, school staff needs to be understanding and flexible – able to give that little bit extra attention to Roma children. Their role also encompassed addressing any discrimination that occurs in the school, because it is this that hurts Roma children and makes them feel unwelcome. Again addressing discrimination does not require any additional program, but simply making children aware that differences are welcomed and need to be celebrated. If taken forward this policy option has a chance to increase inclusion of Roma children and support the development of a more flexible and responsive education system.

How to achieve this policy option

This policy option can be realistically achieved because it is something that is already practiced in some schools in B&H. Cantonal ministers of education would play a role by meeting school principals and putting this option across. Right now there is momentum to achieve this option because of the pressure from international organisations, NGOs and human rights activists to achieve greater inclusion of Roma children. If this policy option gains acceptance Roma children will be treated as all other children of B&H who come from an underprivileged background, and not as outsiders. Furthermore OSCE and international organisations already have some data on the numbers of Roma children and where they are located and this needs to be communicated to education ministries as a starting point of reference. In addition a booklet containing instruction on the inclusion of Roma, information on Roma community, resources that schools can utilize and ways that the school culture can be adapted will be produced and distributed to schools.

The safest way to end the poverty that Roma people live in is by providing them with access to inclusive and relevant education. Achieving an education system that is inclusive is a never-ending process that needs to be started from the schools and local communities if we want it to be accepted and further developed. If schools adopt inclusive values and

principles they will be more successful in educating Roma children and in overcoming obstacles for any other marginalized group in society. Based on these premises and on the assessment of the current situation I have suggested a policy option where schools are placed at the centre of improving the access and quality of education for Roma and all children.

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This policy brief is based on a research "Inclusion of Roma children in B&H education: principal challenges and solution". Complete study can be found on <http://www.soros.org.ba/index.asp> or if requested from osf@soros.org.ba