

PRESS RELEASE

Roma inclusion in schools takes more than just promises

Budapest, 2 April 2007 – *Roma children in schools are often segregated from non-Roma children and face disadvantage in every aspect of their education. The Governments participating in the “Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015” have set an ambitious course for themselves towards changing this situation. Yet in the first two years of the Decade they have scarcely found their bearings on the enormous task lying ahead. While policies and programmes remain unfulfilled, Roma children continue to face discrimination, isolation, and exclusion.*

These are the main findings included in the volume of **monitoring reports** on *Equal access to quality education for Roma* released in Budapest today by the Open Society Institute. The volume is being presented at the Conference “Education Reform to Support Roma Inclusion” convened by the Roma Education Fund. The countries reviewed in the volume are Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Serbia.

The reports paint an alarming picture: In Romania and Bulgaria 15 per cent of Roma children never enrol in the education system. For those who do enrol in school, the drop-out rates are 4 to 6 times higher than the national average. In Serbia the drop-out rate of Roma children is 15 times higher than national average.

The monitoring reports detail specific barriers preventing Roma children from achieving equal access to quality education. Roma children are shunted into segregated schools or classes where the quality of education received is invariably lower: lower standards in the curricula, poor human and material resources allocated, low expectations of teachers, materials used in the classroom which often reflect prejudice and bias.

In Bulgaria up to 70 percent of Roma children study in segregated schools or classes, while 51 per cent of pupils in special education are Roma; in Hungary, over half of Roma children study in classes that are predominantly Roma. According to some estimates, Roma make up 80–85 per cent of pupils in special schools for children with intellectual disabilities in Belgrade, Serbia.

The reports presented today do note that Governments in the reviewed countries have energetically adopted policies and programmes to improve education opportunities for Roma. In particular, National Action Plans were drafted in the framework of the “Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015”, of which education is one of the main four focus areas. However, as highlighted by Mihai Surdu, Education Expert with the monitoring project, “even when problems of segregation have been identified, a comprehensive approach to the problem has not been initiated in any country”.

2007 is the European year of equal opportunities for all. Yet, this initiative will remain another empty promise as long as national Governments only haltingly address one of the most blatant forms of inequality in Europe – segregated, low-quality education for Roma.

Policy recommendations included in the country reports address in detail how Governments in the reviewed countries can improve the ability of central and local structures to implement vital strategies. For example, they highlight the importance of pre-school education in ensuring equal chances to Roma children (only 16 percent of Roma children attend pre-school education in Bulgaria).

The report recommendations also invite these Governments to capitalise on the good practices that have been developed. These include the network of Roma school inspectors in Romania, NGO pilot projects training Roma teaching assistants in Serbia, and NGO projects implementing desegregation in Bulgaria.

The country reports also stress the importance of data collection to ensure informed policymaking. Currently, even official estimates on the proportion of Roma in the population are widely held to be unreliable. With no mechanisms in place to consistently monitor the proportion of Roma who attend schools, and track their results against the average or majority population, the policies adopted are unlikely to make any headway.

The Open Society Institute calls for immediate Government action to adopt and enact the necessary legal and practical measures to eliminate segregation. It also calls for the creation of financial and other incentives for national and local administration to implement integrated, inclusive, high-quality education for all. Such action in support of today's children will ensure that future Roma adults are given the tools they need to access employment, and actively and constructively participate in the societies in which they live.

Reports on the other five countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion (Croatia, Czech Republic, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovakia) are due later in the year.

Notes to the editors

The monitoring of *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma* is a project of the EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP) of the Open Society Institute (OSI), carried out in cooperation with OSI's Education Support Program (ESP) and Roma Participation Program (RPP). The full text of the report is available online at <http://www.eumap.org>. More information on OSI is available at <http://www.soros.org>.

The reports are presented at the conference on "Education Reform to Support Roma Inclusion", organised by the Roma Education Fund (REF), to review the last two years of progress on Roma inclusion in the education systems of the Roma Decade countries. For more on REF see <http://www.romaeducationfund.org>. For more on the "Decade of Roma Inclusion" see <http://www.romadecade.org>.