

Developing a Pattern for Roma Children Inclusion in Preschool



Introduction

Guided by UNICEF Albania, with the financial support of Swiss Development Cooperation and Austrian Development Agency, and following the strategic directions of Ministry of Education and Sports (*hereafter*, MoES) and Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth (*hereafter*, MOSWY), three national NGOs¹ have engaged in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the initiative “Every Roma Child in Preschool” in Albania. The 12-months-extensive-commitment² has resulted in outstanding outcomes in improving the access, participation and support mechanisms established to facilitate the enrollment and attendance of Roma children in preschool.

The scope of the paper is to identify the roadmap of advocacy, networking efforts and outcomes conducted as part of the initiative. The documentation and reporting of specific activities, challenges and results have been an integral part of deliveries by the NGOs and the networks of collaborators, as part of monitoring and evaluation component of the initiative. However, this paper transcends the scope of reporting, attempting to encompass the process of change brought about by the initiative undertaken. It aims to describe the map towards the outcomes, facilitating further program development. The paper will picture the alignment between strategies and outcomes. Beyond the scope of solely presenting a case study, the paper will contemplate on the features of successful advocacy strategies to equip program planners and implementers with a referral material to plan for result.

UNICEF theory of change has been helpful to map out the change process, as it hinges upon defining necessary strategies to bring about long term outcomes. The content of the document is informed by reviewing periodic and final reports, project documentations, media related information, and interviews with project implementation teams.

The paper starts by presenting the rationale for undertaking such an intervention/initiative. This part will describe the process of planning with the teams of UNICEF and partner NGOs. It continues with the elaboration of the implementation strategies, taking a strategic stance. The change outcome section of the paper portrays the dimensions of results. At the conclusion are incorporated challenges and opportunities to be explored in continuity.

Rationale

Ensuring that Roma and non-Roma children alike receive an equal start in life has been one of the focuses of the cooperation between UNICEF and the Albanian Government. There is widespread agreement that previous efforts to improve social inclusion have not touched poor

¹ Children Rights Observatory, CRCA, YWCA

² Years 2013-2014

Roma children to the extent required. Compared to the majority population, living conditions of many Roma families and children remain extremely poor.

Indeed, the Roma community mapping exercise undertaken in 2012 by MOSWY and UNICEF confirmed that many - though not all - Roma families and children have little access or make inadequate use of maternal and infant healthcare, organized early childhood development opportunities, parenting and family counselling services, schools and pre-schools.

While these data served to create a picture of where the Roma communities live and who is – in principle - accountable for providing them with access to services, the pressure by the communities, civil society, NGOs, media and other actors was not yet there to demand local politicians, government structures and service providers to act efficiently so that Roma families are assisted in their most fundamental concerns.

In order to continuously bring together the local and central policy makers with the real situation and evidence on the advancement (or non-advancement) of early inclusion of Roma children, there was a need to create a network of government and non-government actors in Roma localities who would be working together to produce new evidence, best practices, data and identify gaps in policies and local solutions. Production of “evidence packages” in each location would have to be followed up with advocacy and civil society pressure for more accountability of local governments to address the early inclusion of Roma children in Albania.

Prior to developing the intervention to meet these objectives, UNICEF team performed careful analyses of the up to date interventions’ outcomes, concluding that the previous efforts in early inclusion of Roma in preschool have predominantly been donor driven, not sustainable and contributed to a parallel system. To this end, a new approach which would work to mainstream Roma children within the current system of preschool should have been adopted to bring meaningful results.

The definition of the advocacy issue right at the start as “Every Roma Child in Preschool” can be considered a successful strategic approach, focusing on a prevailing, determinant issue and targeting specifically on the matter. Indeed, not only preschool inclusion of Roma is an important factor for achievements later in life, but as well it comprises a very tangible issue that would facilitate the advocacy message delivery.

Strategies

Definition/framing of the issue

The project interventions under “Every Roma Child in Preschool” have proven commitment through fact finding and understanding of the issue at each and every context level. The first was *identifying the problem* from the right angle. While the initial problem appeared to be low access of Roma children to preschool, once the problem was discussed with local communities Roma participants and others, it was reframed to be “*Lack of an enabling environment for Roma*

children to access preschool” highlighting the necessity of the system to change. From many of the project research work and assessment on the ground resulted that many Roma parents were willing to send children to preschool but the barriers for them were from the system which would not encourage and support them; either enrollment was made difficult for them or the economic situation of Roma parents would not allow them to send children to school.

Alongside the fact finding to define the issues, organizations have mapped out the stakeholders related to the matter. Through the individual or collective activities, a general perception has been established on the institutions and individual influence/power, attitude and importance they would play in the implementation of the strategies and their outcomes. The reports provided during the project span highlight that political leaders, managers/directors, specialists/experts, service providers, opinion leaders, media, civil society and key influential individual of Roma communities have been identified.

In relevance to the above described process, organizations have developed the advocacy messages and delivery channels to the different stakeholders identified from central, local and community level. The delivery of messages has been strategically timely organized, in order to provide the bases of support for change.

The exploration of the phenomena and gathering of data has provided the organizations with the credibility/trustworthiness when later presenting the facts/research. Most importantly the research on the issues has been performed in collaboration of the beneficiaries, Roma community leaders, or Roma coordinators/community workers, establishing the support and providing capacity building.

Capacity building

In order for the intervention to succeed, coming to the same understanding of the issue “why Roma children” and “why Early Childhood development” was deemed crucial to the progress of the interventions. Capacity building through trainings was undertaken for the project staff, NGO’s, and other partners/collaborators. Raising the capacities of parents in knowing the importance of the yearly years for the future of their children was the main topic for the family based information and education sessions.

National wide dialogue

To voice the rights of Roma children, a national wide dialogue was initiated at central and local level, through the organization of hearing session of Roma Children at the National Assembly, Roma Day with the parliamentarians, hearing session of the Roma children at the municipality counsel of Tirana, open forum of children and parents with Minister of Education and Sports, workshops, round tables, technical meetings, official letter communication with institutions.

At the workshops/meetings, the current status of Roma child rights situation is presented based on the evidence produced by the partners/allies. This holistic approach aligned with the broad sectorial representation. The meetings have encouraged participants to identify the bottlenecks of the current system and the best approaches to mitigate them in order to have positive outcomes. As the conversation agenda is shifted from problematic (mainly led by the civil society actors) to the possible solutions (led by the governmental representatives), the latest have progressively expressed the commitment to address the matter.

Conceptualized as an ongoing strategy, the roundtables/workshops have been periodic, adding up the value of how the progress is made, sharing of best practices/lessons learned and planning for the next steps. A combination of representation was deemed important in these meetings, central level representatives chairing local policy discussions, creating the linkages, support/motivation and creating the mechanisms to voice back the issues to be addressed at the top/central level.

Access to services

The access to services component has been designed as a twofold approach; on one side raising the demand of families and parents towards accessing preschool and on the other side that this demand is well received by the local duty bearers who should be prepared to work with vulnerable families requesting services.

The networks of partners created locally have contributed to the common understanding of the issues to be addressed as well as the sequencing of addressing such problems. Working with families on providing knowledge and information on child development was designed as a strategy to foster dialogue with the families in order to then be used for raising demand towards Roma children inclusion in preschool education. This process would be used as well for the identification of new cases of children not registered to be followed up with the next steps needed for their enrollment in preschool. On the other side, working with the services would require knowledge on human rights, change in their mindset about how to serve vulnerable communities, and knowledge on the particular focus of the project, child development and inclusion of vulnerable communities. The mobilization of actors has been using a stick and carrot approach; on one side prizes were planned for the individuals and institutions which are really considered as positive deviance “as they have been working against all odds to changes the situation and include Roma children in preschool and secondly service providers are held accountable if no progress has been made by comparing the results with other areas more advanced or by simply showing that they could be doing more on the issue.



The most supportive local institutions	AWARDS	“Most dedicated employee”
Regional Education Directory of Berat		Mr. Gjok Bici , Director of School “Nikoll Miri”
Fushe Cidhen Commune		Mrs. Elona Stafuka , Doctor of the health center in Shkoza
Municipality of Korçë		Mrs. Jonida Matohiti , Inspection specialist, Regional Education Directory of Tirana

The case of Kristina and Aleksia

In their family, Mrs. Fatima is the only member of the family that works as a sanitary at the “Koço Glozheni” maternity house, whereas her husband is currently unemployed. The economic conditions of the family are very poor because with one salary the household has to fulfil basic needs, including the rent of the house where they live.

Despite the poor economic situation the desire for education and knowledge has never abandoned them. This is perfectly reflected in Kristina who attended one of Tirana’s crèches for two years. The family highly valued the importance of early childhood education and care as a potential for the future. The family managed to pay the fee despite the poor economic conditions. It was identified the need to facilitate the process of registration of the girls in the kindergarten No. 36 and “Lidhja e Prizrenit” school.

The challenge of the family to register the two girls in the educational institutions of Tirana consisted in the absence of a residence document near the kindergarten and school in mini-municipality No. 9, as they were registered at mini-municipality No. 11. The implementing organization thanks to the collaboration of the Regional Education Directorate and the directors of the kindergarten and school managed to acquire the necessary documentation to do the transfer and proceed with the children registration/enrolment.

Upon the identification of a Roma child not enrolled in kindergarten, the following steps were undertaken to make this happen by the *network members* (CPUs, Roma community leaders, NGOs, etc):

In collaboration with the Roma **family**: Ensure that children are prepared to attend the kindergarten (clothing, daily hygiene, etc.).

In collaboration with the **health sector**: Provision of the immunization card. In case a child had not undergone the requested vaccines compulsory for the enrollment in kindergarten, the health centre would take the adequate measures;

Ensure that the child undergoes the “koprikulture” analysis free of charge in all the health centers as an affirmative action towards disadvantaged families;

In collaboration with the **education sector**: Visit the nearest kindergarten and ensure that a child friendly environment is created for the integration of the child;

In collaboration with **kindergarten** director and educators: Provide support for the daily inclusion of children and their continuous attendance.

Monitoring and evaluation

Under the framework of this initiative, a national survey was taken forward by the network of collaborators/institutional partners to assess the access of Roma children in the crèches, education and health sectors. In addition to providing an understanding of the various access data and factors related to it, the survey aims to improve the accountability of the institutions, by establishing a baseline for further monitoring and evaluation mechanisms/activities. This is exceptionally significant, as current data available offer solely a snapshot of children registration figures, missing/leaving out the children excluded of the system, failing, as well, to present a comparable progress/regress of the matter in years.

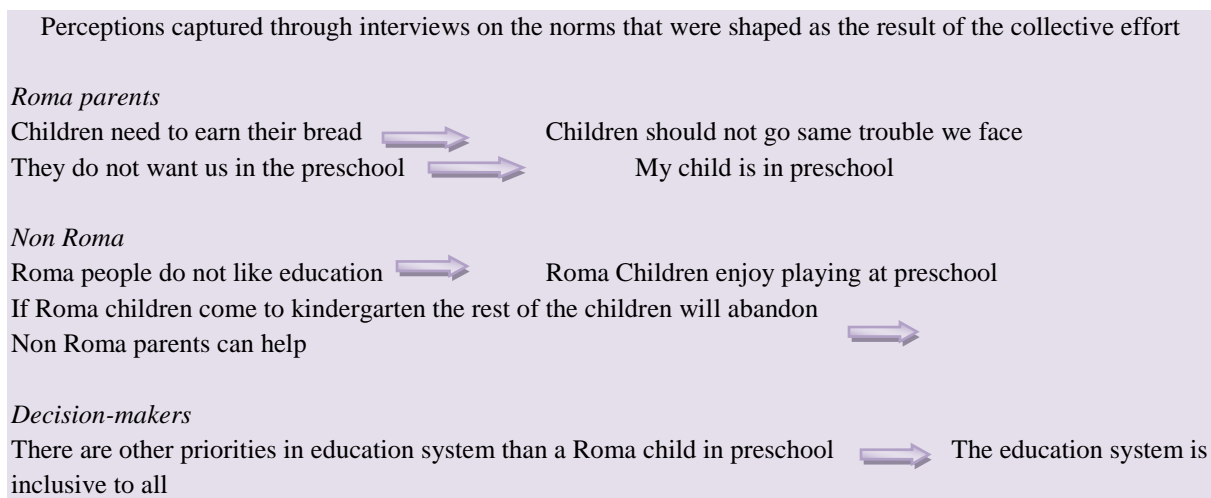
Furthermore, continues monitoring activities, such as regular visits to kindergarten or schools have been conducted to oversee the attendance of the children in preschool.

Change results for children

Shift in social norms

Social norms (both within Roma community and wider community) around the involvement of Roma children in preschool constitute a bottleneck for inclusive access. The diverse strategies used have raised awareness among Roma and non Roma - parents, service providers, decision-makers, local political leaders and community in general to demise the prevailing norms that restrain exclusion of Roma children in preschool. The shift in social norms intended to transform Roma preschool involvement into a social expectation.

Apart from the changes brought into the norms among family members, “Every Roma Child in Preschool” intervention has worked with the mindset of local service providers on how to work with vulnerable families. A communication for behavior change around the behavior of “reaching out” has been prepared in a participatory way to be implemented during second year of project implementation.



The case of Sanije M., in Rom village, Fier

Sanije is 5 years old and lives in the Rom village of Fier. She has an older sister of 6 years old and a younger sister of 7 months old. Sanije is not enrolled in preschool. Through the visits in preschool and meetings with the family, mainly the grandfather who was identified as the decision maker of the family, the problem was identified to be twofold: firstly, the family was not convinced on the importance of sending their daughter/granddaughter to preschool and secondly Sanije did not have all the needed documentation for being enrolled. She missed the documentation issued from the health centre.

The Observatory of the children rights helped convene the local network of health, child protection unit, the school and kindergarten of the area in order to develop a viable strategy for enrolling Sanije in preschool. This strategy in this case would need to work in parallel with the family and.

Visits to health center with the nurse and doctor of the health centre together with the mother were organized in order to have Sanije checked, and issue her the immunization card which is needed.

Several sessions were organized with the family of Sanije in order to inform them on the benefits of preschool for the future of Sanije but also for the other daughters of the family. Meetings were also conducted with the basic school who oversees the work of the preschool in order to push for the enrollment of Sanije.



Immunization card for Sanije



As a result of the numerous efforts of the network of partners of Every Roma in preschool, Sanije was finally registered. Her name is finally added to the list of the children enrolled in the preschool of Rom village.



Change of policy

Identified as a ‘champion’, supporting the cause, the Minister of Education and Sports approved the guidelines to facilitate the process of Roma children inclusion in preschool. This constitutes a significant step forward in terms of policy framework for Roma preschool inclusion. Prioritized in a special guideline³ from the central level, Roma preschool inclusion was translated into a local priority and action. This policy signposted the overall progress at the local/sub national level.

Financial Resources

Unfortunately, resourcing for children, including Roma children is not a common practice. When the partners working in Fushë-Kruja attained the commitment of the Mayor to budget for 5 Roma children to attend preschool, this was promoted, indeed as a success story serving to catalyze similar change. From same initiative a Roma girl benefitted in Kukes. The challenge of shaping these commitments into an annual budget for local government units is the subsequent target for the team to pursue with the local governments.

³ Order of Minister of Education and Sports, No. 21 dated 08.08.2014

Management and Coordination

Partnerships have been built to address issues regarding early childhood education for Roma children. The initial intend of the project to become the ‘glue’ was accomplished at each and every activity undertaken. The coordination of a broad range of sectors, levels of hierarchy/governmental layers, and different stakeholders including Roma families and community in large established the ground for effective local actions, and building sustainable mechanisms to function/operate in the future.

The management of cases of vulnerable families/children has never proven more successful as efforts/activities were planned and implemented. The whole approach served as a model to inspire and guide working principles for the future.

Access to Services

Access to services happened as families, communities, and relevant institutions became aware about the importance of the issue and the underlying factors of inclusion. They were empowered with capacities to address issues, and supported by an environment that promoted inclusion.

Project in figures in one year

Type of service	Number
Children enrolled in preschool	409
Children enrolled in school	74
Number of identified unregistered children	154
Children registered in civil registry	44
Children immunized	184
Number of persons trained by the project	714
Number of persons contacted in family	1,977
Number of visits to preschools	903

Quality

Roma and non Roma families would be reluctant to enroll children in a preschool where quality is not present. Hence, the creation of a welcoming and inclusive environment at preschool became a message to share and build on. The quality of care in preschool was improved as teachers, program staff, CPUs, local NGOs engaged children in the summer camp, where a ‘taste’ of inclusion was introduced to all. The quality aspect of the intervention is crucially important not only because of findings from research which show that low quality preschool can do more harm than good but also because in order to ensure the attendance of the enrolled kids, quality plays a primordial role.

Way forward

From the onset, the initiative “Every Roma Child in Preschool” has introduced the important changes, including structural and cultural ones. The bases of support are strengthened through alliances and collaboration among different stakeholders and increased salience of and prioritization of issue is achieved. The increased sense of power has been reached because of improved capacities among service provider and parents, as well as through the practice of positive experience related to the changes conveyed by the intervention.

However the path of establishment/embedding these changes is very fragile, since most of the difficulties families face, are related to poverty, basically on issues that relate to long term processes of change.

To better sustain the achievements of the initiative, it would be deemed important for the future to plan and implement activities that will aim support to uphold/maintain and strengthen the changed attitude/practices. An approach to be pursued as continuity from previous intervention efforts is proving incentives/motivation to the potential champions of change. Thus, identification of success will be combined with further strengthening of positive practice, and its dissemination. Activities to transcend the positive experience from region to region may be considered to learn positive lessons at different contexts. All activities to be planned and implemented in the future should recognize the priority in strengthening the leadership role of local actors.

It may be an opportunity at this stage to introduce other advocacy messages considering the path/pattern of success achieved.

There would be advantages in advocating on children preschool inclusion in general, as some of the barriers children will face in attending regularly preschool will relate to the kindergarten institutions. The advocacy message can become from inclusion to respected and valued child or from child in the institution to child friendly institutions, in order to promote child engagement. Finally, it is paramount to consider the Territorial and Decentralization reform and the Social Care Service reform taking place currently. For a more sustainable outcome/change, the initiatives in the future should focus at advocating institutionalizing mechanisms of support at municipality level, such as: allocate necessary annual budgets in support of children for infrastructure and transportation to kindergartens; and case and emergency management of Roma families/children in vulnerable situation; enhanced role of the social worker in outreach; clear roles and responsibilities of stakeholders to improve coordination and management; design “basket of services” to be provided to the vulnerable communities; and community care services especially for children with disabilities.

Annex 1: The project in pictures



Besnik registered first in the civil registration Komuna qender and then village kindergarten, Romina Alushi registered in Rom village kindergarten, Megi Shacma enrolled after family visit



A triptic of picture demonstrating the information and advocacy with the kindergaren to the registration of Krsitol V., in Baltëz Village, Dërmenas Commune, Fier



Views from Shkoza kindergarten after enrollement of Alken Bilani, 3 years old in and Bashkim Karafili 5 years old in Roskovec,

Pictures from immunization campaign organized with health personnel in Shkozë

