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## **INCLUSION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN ALBANIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM: RHETORIC OR REALITY?**

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# INCLUSION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN ALBANIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

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*Education of children is a public good which aims at providing relevant tools and means of independence by promoting their diversity, encouraging their active participation and respecting their human rights. Low access to education of Roma children remains problematic for Albanian society, as a whole has failed to transform schools in sustainable cultural agents by comprehensively balancing their development needs with their social inclusion demands. Marginalization and social exclusion of this ethno-linguistic minority who lives in extreme poverty is the main cause of their low enrolment rate, high school abandonment and low school progress. Several efforts made by the Albanian government to mitigate this problem did not yield tangible results because they looked at it from the outside rather than from the inside. Top-down fragmented interventions were insufficient to be synchronized with the voice of this ethnic group. The expectations gap in Roma children education widened due to lack of options and freedom to make choices and protect their self-identity. The Decade of Roma Inclusion has helped bringing the issue of Roma children education to the center of the discourse of both, local and central institutions. However, its success highly depends on their commitment. Policies and programs supporting Roma children education are designed and implemented by people who belong to the majority of the population. As a result, their attitude determines their success or failure.*

**Merita Meçe**  
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## I. INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion refers to processes that ensure greater opportunities and necessary resources to those at risk of poverty and social exclusion in order to achieve full realization of their fundamental rights<sup>1</sup>. Removal of obstacles that prevent people from realizing their capacities requires improvement of individual's capacity to respond to exclusion risks as well as improvement of the services to be adaptable, flexible and accessible<sup>2</sup>. Thus, to yield positive results, inclusion should be seen as a two-sided process where the excluded and the majority of the population accept and accommodate the characteristics of the other<sup>3</sup>. This is very important in the case of ethnic minority groups, such as the Roma population in Albania, whose children have low access to education and suffer from discrimination.

The role of education in child development and upbringing is twofold: (a) it is seen as a vehicle which helps a child to grow and to become an independent adult; and (b) it serves as a means to transmit cultural values that bind him/her to the family, community and society<sup>4</sup>. Since 2006, Progress Reports of the European Council have systematically reflected low levels of inclusion of Roma children in Albania's educational system. Being committed to implementing the Stabilization Association Agreement with the European Union, the Albanian government has regularly amended the country's legal framework to improve

Roma children's access to education<sup>5</sup>. However, reality shows that the measures taken so far have not been always translated into positive outcomes for this community.

Using secondary data sources, this paper integrates sense of community belonging and social inclusion as two central concepts for highlighting weak aspects of governmental interventions to address persistent shortfalls of Roma children's education in Albania. This analysis will guide the conclusion that community belonging should not lead to exclusion but to inclusion if policies, programs and measures undertaken by the government provide options that are meaningful for these children and their families.

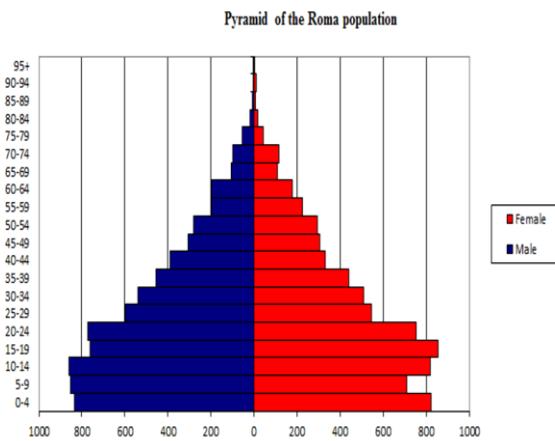
## II. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE ROMA MINORITY IN ALBANIA

The Albanian Constitution of 1998 recognizes Roma population as an ethno-linguistic minority. According to 2011 Census data, this population represents 0.3 percent of the total population or approximately 8,500 people<sup>6</sup>. This proportion is relatively lower than that in other neighboring countries such as Montenegro, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia<sup>7</sup>. The majority of Roma population is Muslim by religion (69 per cent)

followed by those who are Orthodox (3 per cent) and Catholics (1 per cent)<sup>8</sup>.

Historically, Roma population migrated from Northwestern India and has been residing in Albania since the 14th century<sup>9</sup>. It represents a very diverse group, organized in tribes that distinguish from each other by their lifestyle, customs and linguistic dialects. It has been mainly involved in trading horses, begging and making handicrafts<sup>10</sup>. Early marriage, in general, and child marriage, in particular, has been evident among Roma community. 6.1 per cent of Roma boys and 18.9 per cent of Roma girls have been married at least once when they have been between 13 and 17 years old<sup>11</sup>. This population has a high birth rate as the children under 14 years old represent 33.9 percent of the total Roma population<sup>12</sup>. Figure 1 shows a large basis of population pyramid dominated by young age groups.

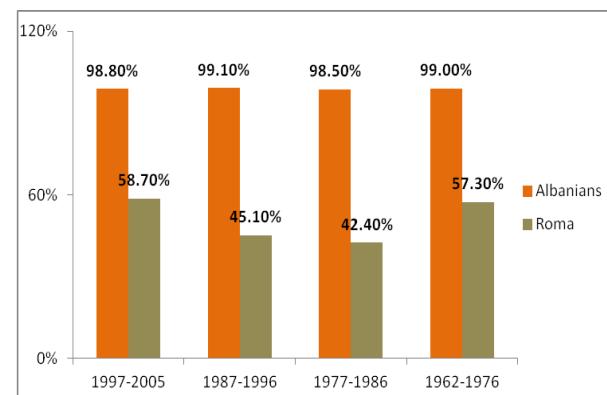
**Figure 1: Distribution of the Roma population by age-group in Albania**



Source: Survey with Roma families, 2011

Roma language and culture have been preserved over centuries making them distinct features of its identity and cohesion. Currently, 65 percent of Roma families speak Roma language at home compared to 29 percent who speak both, Roma and Albanian. Only 6 percent speak Albanian language<sup>13</sup>. Systematic exposure to oppression and discrimination has been rooted in cold relations between Roma and Albanians over centuries.

In general, Roma population in Albania has had low access to education even during the years of socialist system (1945-1990). Figure 2 shows that the percentage of Roma children who attended school over years has been lower than that of the Albanian children.



Source: INSTAT (2015)

After 1991 when Albania changed its political system from socialist to a democratic one, a hard transition to market economy increased the socio-economic gap between Roma and non-Roma population. Having low level of education and skills, they have been mainly



involved in second hand clothes trade and scrap collection<sup>14</sup>. Data from 2011 Census indicate that 58.3 per cent of Roma women and 44.8 per cent of Roma men aged 15-64 years are unemployed. Almost 50 per cent of Roma women have never worked. Usually Roma people have been involved in unstable work mainly in temporary employment (27 per cent), seasonal work (11 per cent) or periodic economic activity (17 per cent). Only 15 per cent of Roma people have permanent and secured job<sup>15</sup>. Limited access to labor market has been followed by lack of income, low financial means and high levels of poverty. Data from 2011 Census indicate that 8 per cent of Roma families suffer from malnourishment and hunger<sup>16</sup>, while 65 per cent of them are unable to ensure sufficient food<sup>17</sup>.

### **III. BARRIERS TO EDUCATION ACCESS**

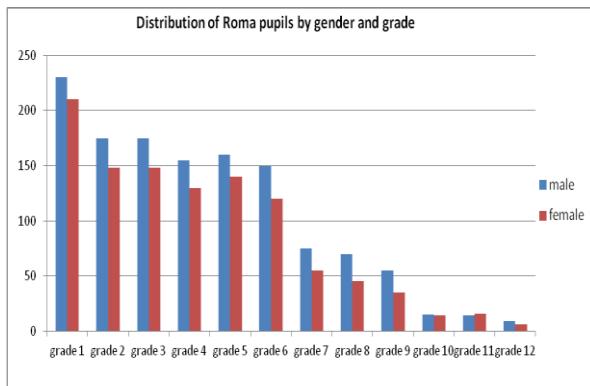
Social inclusion has strong connotations with human development because achieving high levels of human development cannot be understood if some segments of the population have limited opportunities to participate in socio-economic, political and cultural life, and enjoy their rights<sup>18</sup>. The right to education functions as a multiplier and its full realization has a double effect on minority children helping them break the cycle of social exclusion and preserve their culture as a distinct group<sup>19</sup>.

Children's right to education is enshrined in the Albanian Constitution<sup>20</sup> and recognized in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) ratified by the Albanian government in 1992. Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child 2010 clearly states that children have equal rights to education without any discrimination in conformity with their mental and physical development<sup>21</sup>. But, research indicates that gross enrolment rate in compulsory education (for children aged 7-15 years) is 48 percent for Roma versus 91 percent for non-Roma population; gross enrolment rate (upper secondary education for children aged 16-18 years) is 13 percent for Roma versus 60 percent for non-Roma population<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover, data from 2011 Census highlight gender disparity in school abandonment among Roma children. Even though this phenomenon starts when they are at age of 8 and increases as they age, 30 per cent of Roma boys and 44.6 per cent of Roma girls abandon school when they are between 10 and 16 years old<sup>23</sup>. Figure 3 illustrates significant decrease of the number of Roma children especially in secondary education during 2011-2012 academic year, while Figure 4 shows the distribution (in percentage) of illiterate Roma school age children in various districts of the country.

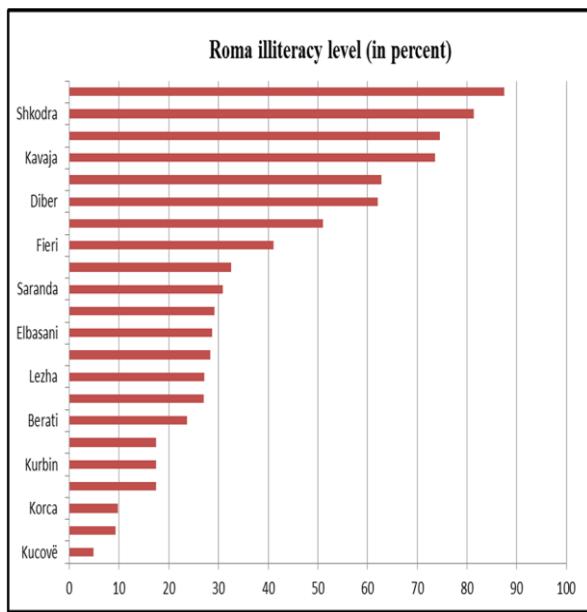


**Figure 3: Distribution of Roma pupils in the 2011 - 2012 academic year, by grades in Albania**



Source: Survey with educational institutions, 2011

**Figure 4: Roma children aged 7-18 years illiteracy level, by district (in percent) in Albania**

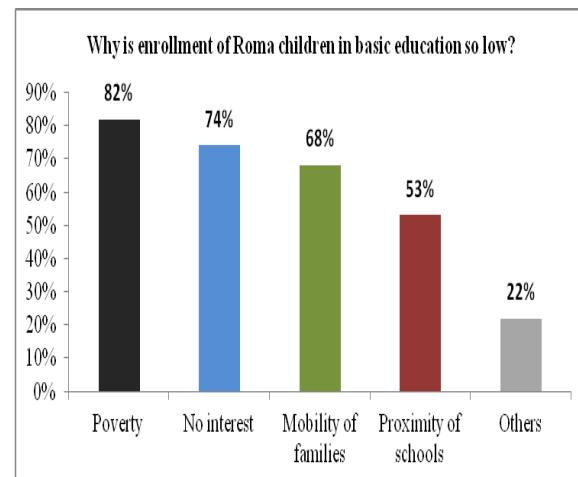


Source: Survey with Roma families, 2011

Low access to education, low school progress and high drop-out rate of Roma children are linked to various factors such as income poverty, low level of education of their

parents, language barriers, cultural norms of early marriages, geographical proximity of schools, and other factors<sup>24</sup>. Figure 5 shows that 82 percent of Roma respondents identified poverty as the main cause of education deficit of their children, followed by 74 percent of the respondents who identified lack of interest, and 68 percent who identify family mobility to earn daily bread through temporal and seasonal work.

**Figure 5: Causes of low enrollment of Roma children to school in Albania**

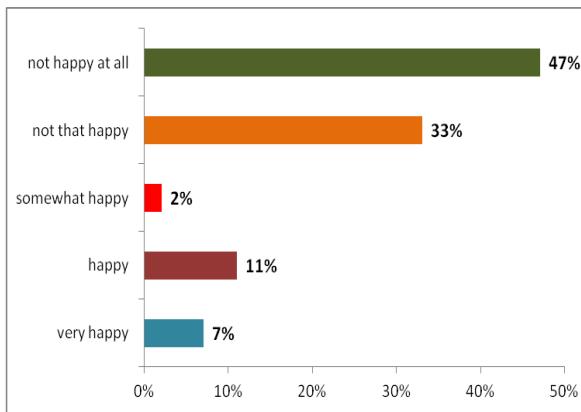


Source: Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2013:40

However, the school is not perceived as a cultural agent that continuously promotes diversity within its environment by encouraging cultural dialogue and respecting cultural differences. On the contrary, it is seen as an institution where various discriminatory attitudes arbitrary exclude Roma children and make them feel unhappy. According to a qualitative study conducted with 423 Roma

children residing in a Roma neighborhood in Tirana during the academic year 2009-2010, 47 per cent of Roma children were unhappy at all with the school versus 7 per cent who declared to be happy<sup>25</sup>. Figure 6 shows distribution of Roma children by their happiness at school.

**Figure 6: Happiness of Roma children at school, 2009-2010 academic year in Tirana, Albania**



Source: Sulaj & Bezati (2011)

Among the main reasons of being unhappy at all at school has been discrimination. Roma children have mentioned various discriminatory forms applied within the school premises including insults and refusal to stay together with non-Roma pupils<sup>26</sup>. This indicates that Albania has not taken successful steps to fully implement recommendations provided by the European Union on reinforcement of the protection of human rights, notably for women, children and Roma through implementing concrete and well coordinated anti-discrimination policies at both, central and local level<sup>27</sup>.

#### **IV. ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF ROMA CHILDREN'S EDUCATION**

The appalling situation of Roma children education obliged the Albanian government to undertake various policy reforms and to adjust the legal framework to tackle its root causes. Table 1 shows that measures taken at the strategic level indicated political commitment of the Albanian government to enhance inclusion of the Roma community. Measures taken at the institutional level emphasized concrete structures established to coordinate and monitor strategies and programs targeting Roma community. Finally, adjustments made at existing legal framework aimed at minimizing discrimination and improving protection of this community.

**Table 1: Measures taken by the Albanian government to decrease Roma children education deficit**

Level	Measure taken	Purpose
Strategic level	Strategy for Improving the Living Conditions of Roma community (2003); Action Plan for strategy implementation;	To enhance social inclusion of Roma community targeting education, health, housing, culture, employment and



	Roma Inclusion Decade (2005-2015);	social protection;
Institutional level	Establishment of Roma Technical Secretariat in 2004 <sup>28</sup> ; Appointment of inter-ministerial working group to deal with Roma issues in 2010; Nomination of one representative of Roma community at State Committee for Minorities;	To coordinate policies and programs targeting Roma community among various ministries and governmental institutions; To ensure representation of Roma community at policy-making level;
Legal level	New Law 10221/2010 on Protection from Discrimination approved; Appointment of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination in 2010; Approval of 2012-2015 Strategic Plan and the Action Plan for the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination	To ensure effective protection from any kind of discrimination due to gender, race, ethnicity, color, and any other reason;

Source: [www.qbz.gov.al](http://www.qbz.gov.al)

Moreover, since 2004, the Albanian government supported “Second Chance Program” for children who have dropped out of school or are hidden at home because of the blood feud<sup>29</sup> where a total of 438 Roma children attended it during 2011-2012<sup>30</sup>. It amended the law on birth registration to allow Roma children unregistered in the Civil Status Office be registered without paying any fine for late registration. It allowed unregistered Roma children in the Civil Status Office attend the school and applied the scheme of scholarships for poor Roma households to support education of their children. It approved in 2010 a new decision of the Council of Ministers on reimbursement of school books for Roma children. In 2012, it approved a new law 69/2012 on pre-university education system and a new normative clause in 2013 guided by the principles of the best interest of the child, promotion of children’s rights, protection against any form of discrimination, inclusion and equal opportunities for quality education<sup>31</sup>.

In addition, the Ministry of Education and Sports collaborated with the regional directorates of education to organize training of education personnel on cultural diversity, gender equality and ethnicity. But did all these efforts improve the education of Roma children? Were they translated into positive outcomes for education of Roma children?

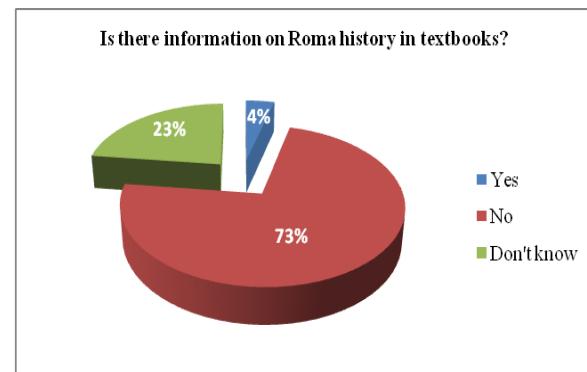
## V. PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROMA COMMUNITY ABOUT STRATEGIES AND MEASURES APPLIED BY THE ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND INCLUSION OF THEIR CHILDREN

A synergy between Roma inclusion and respect of human rights require well coordinated policies, programs and measures to foster inclusion rather than to increase exclusion and segregation of this minority. To be able to make choices, Roma children should have options and freedom to assess their beliefs. Protection of their culture is important for their self-identity<sup>32</sup>. However, the research indicates that the school books in Albania do not provide information about the Roma community. It is mentioned only as part of a linguistic group under the human rights curricula<sup>33</sup>. The data from Figure 7 show that 73 percent of the respondents state that there is no information on Roma history in textbooks.

This lack of inclusion of Roma history in textbooks is not in conformity with the Convention of the Rights of the Child which states that “States have obligations to promote and protect cultural identity of children” (Article 8) and “recognize their rights to use their language” (Article 20). Compared to our neighboring country, Montenegro, which has

initiated the preparation of a Roma dictionary to foster Roma literacy<sup>34</sup>, Albania lags behind.

**Figure 7: Knowledge of Roma respondents about Roma history inclusion in textbooks in Albania**



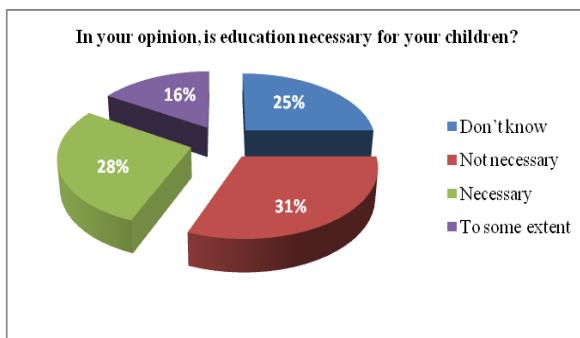
Source: Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2013:39

Moreover, research indicates that Roma parents do not see education of their children as being linked to their employment because they do not believe that it will help them to alleviate poverty. That is why they are not confident that their children will have minimal skills to complete basic education<sup>35</sup>. The data from Figure 8 show that 31 percent of Roma respondents stated that the education of their children is not necessary, 28 percent stated that it is necessary, 25 percent stated that they do not know while 16 percent stated that it is necessary to some extent.

Besides this, the access to textbooks of Roma children has been hampered in practice by both, unclear administrative procedure and delay of reimbursement. Instead of delivering them for free to children of this minority

group, late reimbursement procedure discouraged Roma parents. Lack of money to pay on the spot followed by a lack of a

### Figure 8: Opinion of Roma respondents about the necessity of education of their children in Albania



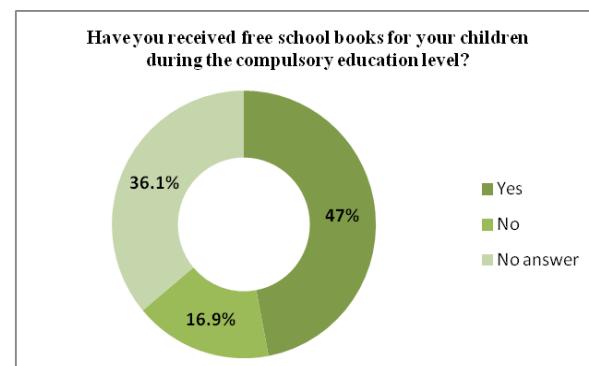
Source: Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2013:37

standardized procedure of issuing a document that confirmed the ethnic group of the child benefiting from reimbursed books delayed school enrolment of Roma children<sup>36</sup>.

Differently from neighboring countries such as Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia where textbooks, transportation and dormitory accommodation are free for Roma children in secondary education<sup>37</sup> and Montenegro where textbooks are free for Roma children up to the third grade<sup>38</sup>, in Albania these initiatives are not institutionalized yet. The data from Figure 9 show that 47 percent of Roma parents declared that they received school books for free for their children followed by 16.9 percent who declared that they did not receive

them for free while 36.1 percent did not prefer to answer.

### Figure 9: Roma respondents distributed by receiving free school books in Albania



Source: Nelaj. D (2013) Education, housing and health. In *Roma Decade and the situation of Roma community in Albania 2012*, Open Society Foundation for Albania

Even though 40 percent of Roma families declared that they relied on informal economy to make their living mostly on playing music, begging and scrap collecting, only 2 percent of them confirmed that their children got scholarships by the local government to continue their schooling<sup>39</sup>. Thus, this good incentive did not trickle down to the neediest. Furthermore, 67 percent of children in Second Chance Program belong to Roma community which shows a failure of the current education system to keep them in regular classes. Despite its good will, this program has targeted only children who have abandoned the school leaving out those who never went to school. In many cases, this program was ran by civil society organizations leaving it out of the control from the state instructions<sup>40</sup>.



On the other hand, implementation of various uncoordinated programs has encouraged school segregation changing demographics of the neighborhood where the school is located. Providing food and clothes to Roma children to motivate them to attend the school, these programs have transformed some of the schools with absolute majority of Roma children negatively impacting healthy school environment<sup>41</sup>.

## VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The increased level of illiteracy among Roma children should be seriously taken by policy makers and the Albanian society as a whole because high fertility rates among this community might lead to a higher level of illiteracy of the total population. Taking into consideration new development pattern of Albania towards European Union integration, the high number of uneducated Roma people will negatively influence their well-being, employment and social inclusion. The increased number of malnourished Roma children will prevent them from healthy development and school progress resulting in the widening knowledge gap between them and non-Roma children and non-realization of their full potential. This should bring into the attention of planners, policy makers and community-based organizations that belonging to a Roma minority should not put barriers between insiders and outsiders, but it

should build bridges to overcome difficulties and to move forward. In this aspect, social inclusion should not be seen as a spatial metaphor where belonging remains static and agency of individuals is ignored<sup>42</sup>. The dynamics of Roma reality and cultural diversity should be promoters of bottom-up change ensuring better involvement of Roma people in systematically designing, coordinating and monitoring of every initiative and program that target this group.

## VII. CONCLUSIONS

The inclusion of Roma children into the education system in Albania faces several gaps and weak aspects which derive from various disconnected and fragmented initiatives designed to help Roma population. While the education system is the product of the society as a whole, initiatives undertaken tend to look at the Roma population as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. A failure to combine Roma population cultural diversity with well articulated programs and policies has increased discrepancies in their application at the local level leaving out many Roma children to enjoy their benefits. Vastly implemented by people who belong to the majority of the population, they have not been able to change their mindset and tackle multi-dimensional problems of the Roma children education deeply rooted in the aggravated discrimination and social exclusion.



### Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP, “Beyond transition towards inclusive societies” (2011).

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<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Sedletzki, “Fulfilling the right to education for minority and indigenous children: Where are we in international legal standards?”, *State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous People* (2009), 43-53.

<sup>5</sup> Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, “Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the National Roma Integration strategy and Decade Action Plan in Montenegro in 2012 and 2013” (2014), at <[www.romadecade.org](http://www.romadecade.org)>

<sup>6</sup> INSTAT, “Equal access to education of Roma children: Comparative study in two areas of the Fier district, Rom village (Drize) and Baltez village”, Open Society Foundation for Albania (2013).

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<sup>8</sup> INSTAT, “Roma and Egyptian population in Albania: Socio-demographic and economic profile based on 2011 Census”, Institute for Change and Leadership in Albania & Institute of Roma Culture in Albania, Tirana, Albania (2015).

<sup>9</sup> Hermine De Soto, Sabine Beddies, and Ilir Gedeshi, “Roma and Egyptians in Albania. From social exclusion to social inclusion”, the World Bank Washington, D.C., Working Paper 53, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Masson Hardie Hasluck, “The Gypsies of Albania”, 17(2) *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (1938), 48-61.

<sup>11</sup> INSTAT, 2015, *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Gedeshi and Jorgoni, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> De Soto, Beddies and Gedeshi, *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Gedeshi and Jorgoni, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> INSTAT, 2015, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Absolute poverty line at PPP = USD 2,15

<sup>17</sup> INSTAT, 2015 *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Milcher, *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Sedletzki, *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Article 57, The Albanian Constitution. (1998), Tirana, Albania.

<sup>21</sup> Article 16, “Law 10221/2010 on Protection from Discrimination”, Official Gazette 15/25 February 2010, at <[http://qbz.gov.al:81/botime/fletore\\_zyrtare/2010/PDF-2010/15-2010.pdf](http://qbz.gov.al:81/botime/fletore_zyrtare/2010/PDF-2010/15-2010.pdf)> (Accessed: October 2, 2014)

<sup>22</sup> UNDP-WB-European Commission Regional Roma Survey (2011).

<sup>23</sup> INSTAT, 2015, *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> De Soto, Beddies & Gedeshi, *ibid.* Gedeshi & Jorgoni, *ibid.* Dritan Nelaj, “Education, housing and health”, *Roma Decade and the situation of Roma community in Albania 2012*, Open Society Foundation for Albania (2013), 50-73.

<sup>25</sup> Anila Sulaj and Fatmir Bezati, “School drop out by Roma children in Albania”, 3 OPTIME (2011), 117-122.

<sup>26</sup> Sulaj and Bezati *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, “Albania: Progress report”(2014), at <[www.ec.europa.eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu)>

<sup>28</sup> Under the restructuring of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, this has been moved under the Directorate of Social Inclusion

<sup>29</sup> Blood feud refers to honor killing based on Kanun, a set of customary laws that guided life in Albania during 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was banned during the years of socialist system (1945-1990) but was reactivated during the years of transition (after 1990s) due to the failure of the rule of law.

<sup>30</sup> ICLA & IRCA, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Article 6, Law 69/2012 on Pre-university education syste, at <<http://qbz.gov.al>> (Accessed: October 2, 2014)

<sup>32</sup> Will Kymlicka, “Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights”, (Oxford University Press, USA, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, “Civil Society Monitoring Report on the Implementation of the National Roma Integration strategy and Decade Action Plan 2012 in Macedonia” (2013), at <[www.romadecade.org](http://www.romadecade.org)>



<sup>34</sup> Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2014, *ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2013, *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> Nelaj, *ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2013, *ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, 2014, *ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Nelaj, *ibid*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>42</sup> Robert George Garbutt, “Social inclusion and local practices of belonging”, 1(3) *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* (2009.), 84-108.



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