



## Challenges for combating Roma child labor through education in Romania

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According to an uncompromising definition<sup>2</sup>, “Any child out of school is a child labourer”, because sooner or later he/ she will be engaged in a certain type of work. Children’s rights are not to be negotiated. As for the moment, in Romania there is no statistical evidence to document the link between education and child labour, (for neither Roma or majority population), I do consider that the above definition can help bridge the gap between education and work. For the purpose of this paper, I consider “child labour” work which interferes with education in terms of attendance and school dropouts, but also in terms of school performance.

Child labour in Romania is far from resembling the forms associated with Victorian England or the textile industries of South Asia. Mainly it refers to children who combine a (limited) school attendance with work in small family farms. For the majority population, it is not school attendance, but school performance that is affected by work. As a cause of low educational achievement school dropout intervenes at a later stage, for the Roma population, the situation is more critical.

Child labour is not a typical feature of Roma minorities and there is no statistical data linking ethnicity with child labour phenomenon. However, due to their economic and social exclusion, the Roma population has the highest risk of being in situations that involve child labour and school dropout. Despite an increasing tendency for Roma school attendance, enrolment in primary and secondary education is respectively 25% and 30% lower than the national rate and 17.3% of Roma children aged 7 - 16 years never attended any form of education<sup>3</sup>. In Romania 88% of Roma, as compared to 84% in Bulgaria and 91% in Hungary, live below the national poverty line<sup>4</sup>. According to the governmental sources<sup>5</sup>, 80% of the children from Roma population live in poverty, out of which 43.3% in severe poverty.

Officially, the Romanian Government does have a record of being concerned about the welfare of children. In 1990 it was among the first countries that ratified the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. It also ratified the relevant International Treaties and Conventions and more recently, signed up to the Decade of Roma Inclusion. Unfortunately though, there are concerns that increasing numbers of child labour and higher rates

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<sup>2</sup> The definition belongs to Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya Foundation, based in India. The most acknowledged definitions are the one used by ILO. According to it, there are mainly three different types of work: light work (it does not interfere with education and can be positive), child labour (children below 12 years of age working in any economic activities and those aged 12 to 14 years engaged in harmful work) and the worst forms of child labour (children being enslaved, forcibly recruited, prostituted, trafficked, forced into illegal activities and exposed to hazardous work). However, as the lines between the three categories are often problematic and arbitrarily defined, it seems more realistic to regard them as a continuum from the light and positive ones, to the most hazardous ones [Ben White, 1994, 1996].

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, 2006, *The State of the World's Children 2006. Excluded and Invisible*.

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, 2006, *The State of the World's Children 2006. Excluded and Invisible*.

<sup>5</sup> CASPIS (National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Commission) cited by ILO IPEC.

of Roma school dropouts are emerging phenomena in Eastern Europe and particularly, Romania.

The National Institute of Statistics found that out of Romania's 3.9 million children between 5-17 years, there are 40.620 child labourers according to parents' declarations and 70.690 according to children's declarations. The number of economically active children<sup>6</sup> is, according to the same sources, 82.884 (based on parents declarations) and 141.905 (based on children's declarations). No specific reference to the category of "worst forms of child labour" is made, although the study includes children who, according to ILO standards, do enter this category. Unofficial estimates<sup>7</sup> consider the phenomenon is much larger, ranging from 900,000 economically active children, out of which approximately 300,000 children are working in exchange for payment, most of the time without legal forms and outside their households. According to this last source, the number of children in the worst forms of child labour is between 60.000 -70.000.

The ILO IPEC country Report<sup>8</sup>, found that the increase in poverty in Romania is "not only the result of economic polarisation, but also the consequence of deficient state financial support and limited access to services". Until recently, the monthly child allowance was conditioned by school attendance and thus encouraged poor and large families to send their children to school, even if irregularly. Since June 2006 however, children who dropout from school are also eligible to receive this allowance. There are regulations with penalties that stipulate that it is the parents' responsibility to send their children to school. Unfortunately though, these laws are almost never enforced. Often, families perceive using their children as labour as an undesirable but hopefully temporary solution from poverty.

Many times when concerns on child labour are approached in Romania, the problem of street children comes into the open. They are considered the largest group of children in the worst forms of child labour. As many street children are Roma, the problem tends to be "ethnicised", even if the actual statistical evidence is problematic. Although the issue of street children is often linked with labour, the connection is rarely made. Programs designed to meet the needs of street children rarely address the situation of less visible children living in poverty or in other situations that might lead to different ways of living on the streets. The National Plan of Action for Combating Child Labour tends to focus on the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency and less on a majority of working children at risk of entering this critical category.

At the bottom in terms of social visibility, are the work performed by Roma girls. Whilst they have the highest risk of dropping out from school, Roma girls perform many domestic cores that cause physical and emotional burnout. Their work is hardly socially recognised, but exposed to abuses and mistreatment. In society at large, but also in Romanian legislation, the very notion of "work" equates with "employment". Due to such an industrial approach to child labour, Roma girls' domestic work, albeit less socially visible, but no less exposed to abuse and exploitation, remains unacknowledged. Programs rarely address the situation of Roma girls living in poverty or in other hazardous situations that put them at the risk of dropping out school.

Given the information listed above one can see the need for more inclusive social policies concerning Roma children in Romania, in order to ensure the Decade of Roma Inclusion in regards to compulsory education. My overall aim is to bring the problem of Roma's working children, from the margin, to the centre of social concern. The research aims to increase public consciousness about the problem of Roma child labour and to propose effective recommendations to discourage early school dropouts and early entry into labour. The project has a double level: one at the institutional level, aiming to frame the current level of policy in regard to Roma child labour, and the other at the grassroots level, aiming to explore Roma children and their families own perspective on children's work and schooling.

<sup>6</sup> „Economic activity covers all market production (paid work) and certain types of non-market production (unpaid work), including production of goods for own use" [IPEC and SIMPOC, Every Child Counts New Global Estimates on Child Labour, Geneva: ILO, 2002]. Children's economic activity is not necessary objectionable.

<sup>7</sup> C. Ghințaru, 2004, Institute of Research into Employment and Social Protection.<sup>5</sup> International Crisis Group, Southern Serbia: In Kosovo's Shadow, Crisis Group Europe Briefing N.43., 27 June 2006.

<sup>8</sup> International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, ILO, PROTECT CEE, Romania.

The study will evaluate recent central and local initiatives to eliminate Roma child labour through education. The rationale is to illustrate to what extent Romanian institutions are aware of the main international challenges concerning child labour. The main concern is to identify those institutional and policy arrangements that can increase the level of school attendance among Roma working children, possible answers will be sought in the innovative experiences of programs like Bolsa Escola and Program for the Eradication of Child Labour (PETI) in Brazil, MV Foundation (India) and IPEC (ILO) which operates in Romania since 2000.

The second part of the policy study will be based on ethnographic research which will investigate Roma parents and children's own perspectives on childhood, work and education. It will challenge the assumption that all persons within Roma ethnic group share the same values and understand childhood, work and education in the same way. Roma are not a monolithic ethnic group. There are many ways of being a Roma child in today Romania. Gender, age, region, occupation, social class, family and community particular situations, make Roma child labour a complex phenomenon in need for complex solutions. Under these circumstances, a single in depth case study in a particular community might risk being less relevant for the larger phenomenon and the recommendations based on it, not easily replicable. The research will aim at producing a typology of Roma child labourers, highlighting approximately five patterns of Roma child labour in today Romania and considering the following issues: causes of child labour, consequences for education, values attached to work and schooling.

Through the ethnographic research, the policy study will incorporate different approaches to child labour, and consequently, different cultural dilemmas. It will consider the fact that social values attached to childhood, work and formal education might be in contradiction with policy values which advocate the elimination of child labour through education. Considering that Roma children (boys and girls) represent a highly vulnerable group, the research will aim to respect their rights to confidentiality, informed consent and participation. The research aims at an epistemological shift: from the general consideration of children as irresponsible, to the one of Roma children as socially aware and able to shape the world they inhabit.

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