



A GOOD START:

Mainstreaming the Access of Disadvantaged
Romani Children to Quality Early Childhood
Education and Care

A Good Start's Implementation Model

CONTENTS

Preface	7
Acknowledgements	9
1. Introduction	10
1.1. Background of the AGS project	10
1.2. An overview of the AGS project – Framing the model of intervention	10
1.3. A Good Start: The approach	13
2. Executive Summary: Key Lessons of AGS	16
2.1. Ensuring access to ECEC services for Roma	16
2.2. Financial and material incentives	16
2.3. Segregation and discriminatory treatment of Roma in ECEC	17
2.4. Community-based services	17
2.5. Activity-based community empowerment approach	18
2.6. Interactions between Roma and non-Roma, participation of non-Roma	18
2.7. Quality of ECEC services	19
2.8. Romani language in ECEC services	19
2.9. Mediators and Romani preschool assistants	19
2.10. Supporting transition to primary school	20
2.11. Attitude of local authorities	21
2.12. Participation of Roma in AGS implementation	21
2.13. Building stable and extensive partnerships	21
2.14. Integrated approach	22
3. Description of the Implementation Model of the AGS Project	23
3.1. Related REF policy objectives	23
3.2. Rationale of the model: social and educational problems the project intended to address	23
3.2.1. The situation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in European Union member states	23
3.2.2. ECEC in relation with vulnerable groups	24
3.2.3. Access to quality ECEC for disadvantaged Romani children	25
3.2.4. Barriers to access of ECEC for Romani children	27
3.3. The priority challenges and the main objectives of the model	29
3.3.1. Economic barriers	29
3.3.2. Persistence of segregated services for Romani children	32
3.3.3. Access hindered by spatial constraints and distance	33

3.3.4. Lack of information and parental engagement	33
3.3.5. Impact of poverty	34
3.3.6. The quality of services	35
3.3.7. Lack of intercultural educational strategies	35
3.3.8. Decentralization	36
3.3.9. Lack of engagement on the part of local authorities	36
3.4. The main objectives of the AGS model	37
3.5. Description of the core components of the AGS project	38
3.5.1. Promoting enrolment through mediators/Romani preschool assistants	39
3.5.2. Promoting enrolment by eliminating barriers for families	40
3.5.3. Promoting enrolment with need-based material support	41
3.5.4. Providing transportation to ensure access to services	41
3.5.5. Solving spatial constraints to promote enrolment	42
3.5.6. Developing quality of services	42
3.5.7. Facilitating transition to primary education	43
3.5.8. Parental engagement, empowering families	43
3.5.9. Building partnerships with local authorities	43
3.5.10. Building partnership with institutions (kindergarten/health services/community centers/school authorities)	44
3.5.11. Regular assessment and monitoring using common instruments and quality frameworks	45
3.6. Different project components (unique activities) in the target localities	46
3.6.1. Covering kindergarten fees for Romani children	46
3.6.2. Developing alternative community-based service provision	46
3.6.3. Improving the institutional learning environment	47
3.6.4. Providing expert services	47
3.6.5. Preventing enrolment into special education	48
3.6.6. After-school tutoring	48
3.6.7. Empowerment of parents (especially mothers)	48
3.6.8. Working with tertiary education institutions for future educators	50
3.7. Notable results and positive changes	51
3.7.1. Access, enrolment, and attendance	51
3.7.2. Quality improvement of ECEC services	55
3.7.3. Development of children's skills	57
3.7.4. Progression to primary schools	58
3.7.5. Engagement and empowerment of parents	58
3.7.6. Successful cooperation practices for ECEC provision	60

3.8. Main lessons learnt during the implementation of the project components	62
3.8.1. Planning and coordination	62
3.8.2. Building stable and extensive partnerships	63
3.8.3. Capacity of local NGOs	64
3.8.4. Attitude of local authorities	65
3.8.5. Participation of Roma in AGS implementation	65
3.8.6. Mainstreaming	66
3.8.7. Segregation and discriminatory treatment of Roma in ECEC	66
3.8.8. Infrastructure	67
3.8.9. Community-center-based services	68
3.8.10. Financial and material incentives	68
3.8.11. Activity-based community empowerment	69
3.8.12. Romani-non-Romani interactions, non-Romani participation	69
3.8.13. Role of the mediators and Romani preschool assistants	70
3.8.14. Quality of ECEC services	72
3.8.15. Romani language in ECEC services	73
3.8.16. Community events targeting Romani parents	73
3.9. The monitoring and evaluation system of the project	74
3.9.1. AGS data collection framework	74
3.9.2. Baseline surveys and studies	74
3.9.3. Project implementation plans and input indicators	75
3.9.4. Household survey	76
3.9.5. Online database	77
3.9.6. Community assessment	79
3.9.7. Indicator worksheets	80
3.9.8. Continuum for Assessing Caregivers in Center-, Community-, and Home-Based Programs	80
3.9.9. Qualitative assessment of the AGS project	81
3.9.10. Roles in the internal monitoring process	81
3.9.11. Responsibilities for collecting data	81
3.9.12. Correcting and updating information	82
3.10. Project implementation arrangements	82
3.10.1. Project management structure	82
3. 11. Financial resources	82

3.12. Project sustainability	83
3.12.1. Sustainability on the level of families	83
3.12.2. Sustainability on the level of the ECEC institution	84
3.12.3. Sustainability on a municipality level	84
3.12.4. Sustainability on the level of the higher-education institutions	84
3.12.5. Sustainability through REF activities	85

PREFACE

Professionals working in the field of social inclusion or education have come to agree that interventions to promote early childhood development¹ have long-term social and economic benefits. But despite these benefits, there is still low provision of early childhood education and care services to Roma in a number of EU member states. Although it is evident that investing in early child development (ECD) services for Romani children is essential to ensuring the social integration of Romani communities, questions still remain as to how these interventions should be designed.

This paper is a presentation of the experience accumulated in an Early Childhood Education and Care project (ECEC) that was called A Good Start (AGS) and was initiated in the framework of the Roma Inclusion pilot project of the European Commission. The aim of this paper is to disseminate information about how to use the project's model for educational inclusion of Romani children. The project allowed for experimental implementation of this model in three CEE countries (Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia) and one Western-Balkan country (FYR Macedonia). Since the project that lasted only two years, AGS cannot claim to have achieved long-term results or huge structural changes. Nonetheless, the organizations that were active in the implementation gained solid practical experience. This experience – together with continuous feedback from project beneficiaries, project evaluators, and project partners (NGOs, local stakeholders, and national governments) – enable us to measure our plans and expectations against the empirical evidence produced by project activities. In this way, we can identify those interventions and experimental approaches that had significant positive results in the different settings of the 16 project localities, and are therefore worth scaling up. Meanwhile, we can also identify approaches that failed to meet expectations.

In our opinion, the experience accumulated through the monitoring and evaluation process of the implementation cycle can also provide useful input for the tasks of identifying the needs of local communities regarding ECD services and of measuring the efficiency of interventions designed to promote better access to quality ECD services for Roma.

The paper consists of three major parts: (1) an introduction to the background of the AGS project and the design of the project's interventions; (2) the conclusions (key messages) of the AGS interventions; and (3) a description of the implementation model of the AGS project – with details of local-level activities and outputs in the annex.²

¹ European Commission. June 2009. *Early Childhood Education and Care. Key Lessons from Research for Policy Makers*. An independent report submitted to the European Commission by the NESSE Network of experts.

² Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_aggs_policy_paper_1.pdf

Budgetary implications of the AGS project are also presented in the annex, which includes two scenarios of cost per beneficiary: the minimal cost of intervention and the optimal allocation.

This publication is neither an academic study nor a quality assessment report.³ It was compiled with the aim of sharing the key lessons learnt through the implementation of the AGS project. The idea was to inform all of those who are seriously concerned about the future of Romani children and about finding approaches that can be expected to ensure results in the field of Roma inclusion. In our opinion – which was supported by the project – without real success in early childhood inclusion, it is very difficult to find reasonable means of peaceful and dignified coexistence of Romani and non-Romani communities in Europe. The lessons we can learn from experiences like the AGS project might suggest useful directions for the future efforts that are necessary in this field.

³ The quality assessment report of the AGS project will be produced jointly by the Slovak Governance Institute and the World Bank.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The information presented in this document is based on available project documentation, including: the AGS Project Proposal; the 2011 Interim Report; Overview of the AGS Project in FYR Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia; Timetables of AGS Activities; Planned Indicators Tables; AGS Baseline Studies (Country Concept Notes/Community Assessments); Tables of Achieved Outputs by September, 2012; a report from the 4th Transnational Workshop, “A Good Start Summit” (held in Romania in November 2011); the two *Household Survey Reports* (2010, 2012); the REF and International Step by Step Association (ISSA) Joint Proposal for funding from the Bernard van Leer (BvL) Foundation; the Proposal for LEGO Foundation funding of REF Toy Donations to Possible Partner Kindergartens and Community Centers; ISSA progress reports; the AGS report for the Network of European Foundations (NEF); reports to the European Commission; the three Good Practice Guides; the Case Studies; the AGS policy paper on *Using EU Structural Funds for Early Childhood Education and Care with Focus on Marginalized Roma Communities 2014–20*; a few final narrative reports of partner organizations; the first drafts of the Qualitative Assessment Country Reports by SGI; and publications of the Roma Education Fund (REF). The main author of this paper is Orsolya Szendrey, a consultant to the Roma Education Fund and an expert on Roma integration issues.

This paper does not necessary reflect the opinions and views of project partners who provided their feedback.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE AGS PROJECT

At the 2002 Barcelona Summit, European Council Member States made a commitment to early childhood education and care (ECEC): The Member States agreed that, by 2010, they would provide full-day places in formal childcare arrangements for at least 90 percent of all children between the age of 3 and compulsory school age – and at least 33 percent of all of children under the age of 3. But progress has been uneven. For the infant to 3-year-old range, five countries have exceeded the 33-percent target, and five others are approaching it, but the majority is falling behind, with eight countries serving only 10 percent or less of the children in this range. For children 3 and older, eight countries have exceeded the 90 percent target and three others are approaching it, but coverage is below 70 percent in close to one-third of the Member States. In 2009, education ministers reinforced this effort by setting a new European benchmark for providing ECEC to at least 95 percent of children between age 4 and the start of compulsory education by 2020. The current EU average is 92.3 percent, with a significant number of countries lagging far behind (Bulgaria, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Romania, and Slovakia).

Along with understanding the need to make ECEC places available for children, Member States and EU officials have also recognized that the quality of such services is paramount. In February 2011, the European Commission set out the key issues for future European cooperation in ECEC, with the aim of improving the availability and quality of services from birth to the start of compulsory schooling: “Early Childhood Education and Care – Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow” argues for increased access to high-quality non-segregated early childhood education.

Providing two years of preschool education for all Romani children has also been one of the targets of the Roma Decade since 2005. Efforts to increase Romani preschool participation and introduce material support are listed as specific objectives of the Romanian and Hungarian National Action Plans for the Decade of Roma Inclusion, and the involvement of school mediators is also promoted in the Romanian plan. The Bulgarian and Hungarian Action Plans paid special attention to educational desegregation, while the Slovak Action Plan was intended to decrease the number of Romani children attending special schools and classes. Nevertheless, several years after their adoption, these Decade action plans have only been partially implemented in most of the Decade member countries – a fact highlighted in the country assessment reports of the Roma Education Fund (REF).

The *EC Communication on an EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies* (EC 2011) issued in April 2011 and endorsed by the European Council on June 24, 2011, calls on all Member States to “widen access to quality early

childhood education and care” (p. 6). According to the European Commission's May 2012 assessment of national Roma Integration strategies, all Member States have acknowledged education as a priority area, next to employment, in their national Roma Integration strategies. Moreover, 14 Member States have proposed measures to widen young children's access to ECEC. This result is encouraging, according to the Commission's assessment, but to close the gap in access to ECEC, planned measures should be fully implemented and become much more widespread. For this reason, the Commission listed the need for Member States to increase enrolment in ECEC as one of the most urgent policy priorities in several of their Country Specific Recommendations – which stress the need to eliminate school segregation and misuse of special needs education, improve teacher education and school mediation, and raise parents' awareness of the importance of education.⁴

The Roma Inclusion pilot managed by the European Commission had four intervention areas. Its aims included contributing to identifying and disseminating policies and effective good practices – to improve Romani children's access to quality ECEC, and to enhance child development for Romani children from birth to age 6.

A Good Start (AGS) pilot project was designed to meet the following expectations, which are set in the application guidelines of the European Commission in 2009. These principles are also fully in line with REF's objectives and intentions:

- Focus on the entire period of early childhood (age group: birth to 6) rather than just on the immediate pre-school period.
- Integrate all aspects of early childhood development (education and care, health, nutrition).
- Include outreach and intensive work with families rather than just provision of services in preschool education.
- Use a data-driven approach that permits clear measurements of the costs and added value of the project activities, the number of people benefitting from the project, the “unit cost” of results achieved, and the sustainability of results over time.
- Give an explicit focus to designing and conducting activities in a way that facilitates mainstreaming, scaling up, and international transfer in cases where these activities are successful and further funding is available.

1.2. AN OVERVIEW OF THE AGS PROJECT – FRAMING THE MODEL OF INTERVENTION

Starting in June 2010 and ending in June 2012, the REF project, A Good Start: Scaling-Up Access to Quality Services for Young Romani children (AGS), focused on early childhood development. The project was financed with a EUR 2 million budget from the European Parliament and co-financed by REF. It was managed by the European Commission, DG Regional and Urban Policy, and it operated in 16 localities in four countries – FYR Macedonia,

⁴ Available online: <http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/news/ref/news-and-events/news-release-access-early-childhood-education-and-care-key-equal-start-roma>

Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. The project directly targeted disadvantaged Romani and non-Romani children, from birth to age 6 or 7 years, as well as their parents or caregivers, by offering preschool, community, and home-based services. The wide range of activities was tailored to the local situation and needs of the Romani communities. The project activities were designed on the basis of baseline surveys, which were carried out by REF and its partners prior to the application, in order to get an overall picture of the coverage and quality of ECEC services and schooling in each targeted locality.

The AGS project supported almost 4,000 children, from birth to age 6, in accessing early childhood education and care services in the 16 locations. The project was an important start to the work of providing long-term, effective support for Romani children across a range of their developmental needs. This work is a key element of breaking the cycle of poverty.

The AGS project was led by REF and implemented through a cooperative partnership between REF, three international partners – the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), the Fundación Secretariado Gitano (FSG), and the Slovak Governance Institute (SGI) – and 12 local partner organizations active in social inclusion and education of Romani children in the target countries. While REF had overall responsibility for implementation, ISSA ensured early childhood development expertise and provided capacity-building activities for different stakeholders in the project. FGI was responsible for policy dissemination. SGI carried out project monitoring and evaluation activities. Support on project monitoring and evaluation was also provided by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). AGS local partners worked with local kindergartens to ensure quality teaching and good attendance and to provide alternative education programs where there was an absence of spaces for children. Local partners also provided advice and parenting skills training for parents, to help them create a nurturing and supportive environment at home. Practical support was offered to overcome barriers to education: In several target localities, children were accompanied on the way to school and provided transport, and they also received the basic items needed for attending preschool. In the target countries where lack of official documents and vaccination is an issue, community mediators and health mediators – coordinated by local partners – helped families to obtain personal documents and to access health services.

With additional financial support from the Bernard van Leer (BvL) Foundation, as of June 2011, REF and ISSA have provided additional AGS services in Šuto Orizari, Skopje, FYR Macedonia; Nagyecsed, Mátészalka microregion, Hungary; Zborov, Slovakia; and Telechiu village, Romania. The supplementary AGS services were meant to strengthen the quality of the education and care services received by the targeted Romani children in these four localities, and included: capacity building to improve the quality of services from caregivers; provision of parental support and informal training on adult education; provision of additional material resources and equipment required for increasing the quality of services in line with the training; regular mentoring and follow up meetings. Another part of the project was the provision of educational developmental toys through “toy libraries.” Toy

libraries offer educational toys for children to borrow. Some of them also provide information and advice about play and learning, and an opportunity for parents to borrow books related to parenting. The toy libraries are expected to help to redress some part of the imbalance between the supply of play equipment available to children from more affluent homes and those growing up in families affected by poverty, while also contributing to the development of parenting skills.

1.3. A GOOD START: THE APPROACH

A Good Start captures the four central aspects of the EC Roma Inclusion pilot project:

1. It focuses on providing children with a good start in life. The project was geared toward children and provided them with good quality services across multiple aspects of development, to give them a good developmental start. The project used a common monitoring and evaluation framework across target countries to evaluate the efficiency and impact of the services.

2. It spreads out from well-established partnerships and now can start to expand the range of services provided to young children and their families. The “Good Start” of the project’s title emphasized an approach to developing more comprehensive services by starting with what is working already for young children and building onto these existing, successful collaborations. The practice and experience of adding services, either by building the capacity of existing partners or by adding selected new partners, provided a good start for continuing to extend the services after the project ends. National and local governments and Romani NGOs were partners in each location.

3. It makes a start in assessing long-term impact. Since the AGS pilot was implemented over the short term, and significant impact on child development outcomes cannot be seen within the timeframe of the project, the pilot interventions were designed to provide a good start to measuring longer-term impacts by establishing and measuring progress against a set of key intermediate indicators. A significant amount of baseline data had been gathered: The monitoring and evaluation scheme included local data collection using common cross-country standards. The overall aim was to measure whether the gap is closing between outcomes for Roma and non-Roma.

4. It provides a good start for understanding how to move from small-scale pilots to sustainable interventions on a significantly larger scale. The key innovation in the AGS pilot was to evaluate how to scale-up small-scale project activities that have already been tested. The goal of scaling-up is to reach all Romani children in a community. Because there were activities in four countries and 16 locations, it was possible to demonstrate how to develop and implement complex interventions across multiple locations — thus providing vital information for governments at the local, regional, and national levels.



2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: KEY LESSONS OF AGS

The following is a summary of the key lessons that were learnt through the implementation of the AGS project:

2.1. ENSURING ACCESS TO ECEC SERVICES FOR ROMA

Shortages in infrastructure cannot (and should not) be resolved by small NGOs, and alternative home-schooling initiatives should not substitute formal schooling. Furthermore, it is important not only to provide supply but also to create demand on the side of the community.

AGS partners are in agreement that ECEC strategies are necessary on the national and local level to promote Romani inclusion and to facilitate better educational achievements by both Romani and non-Romani children. Even without substantial investment and adequate financing from the state, AGS projects were able to provide adequate short-term assistance in places where ECEC infrastructure was missing, but long-term ECEC strategies are doomed to fail. Construction and/or renovation of preschool facilities are critical for development of sustainable, all-inclusive educational policies, and this infrastructure work must be included in countrywide development strategies and national education plans. When construction is not possible, or when there is a risk of segregated facilities, competent authorities should provide transportation services.

Besides supporting the provision of facilities, AGS encouraged the community to embrace the benefits of ECEC. Building local parents' understanding of the importance of early childhood development and establishing trust towards the service providers is crucial to ensuring that Romani children will access these services.

2.2. FINANCIAL AND MATERIAL INCENTIVES

AGS experiences proved that, without providing financial/material incentives to the parents, regular pre-school attendance of Romani children living in poverty could not be achieved.

When a child attends preschool, her family must invest time and money. Although this investment may be negligible for a middle-class family with a stable income, it can pose an enormous burden for a Romani family living well below the poverty line. Even if the ECEC service is provided free of charge, the cost of meals, clothing, and in some cases also transportation had to be paid for by the parents of socially disadvantaged children, in all the

target countries except Hungary.⁵ For this reason, REF and its partners argue for the provision of free-of-charge preschool services for children from 3–6 years old in each EU member state, as well as further subsidies (free meals and material support) for the children of poor families, amongst them mainly Roma.

2.3. SEGREGATION AND DISCRIMINATORY TREATMENT OF ROMA IN ECEC

AGS experiences show that elimination of segregation remains a continuous challenge. This situation must be monitored and addressed by subsequent REF activities in the AGS localities, to ensure that AGS developed facilities are not used to maintain segregated kindergarten classes for Romani children.

Evidence proved that much must be done to change local attitudes and prepare the staff of mainstream institutions to integrate children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. It is also necessary to ensure that local stakeholders obey the anti-discrimination provisions and are fully aware of the relevance and future impact of inclusion of Romani children in preschool education.

AGS activities designed to address segregation included initiatives to facilitate transition to school. These activities were especially important in Slovakia, where AGS tried to avoid misplacement of Romani children into special education programs. It was also necessary to ensure that Romani children who participated in the AGS program were not automatically channeled to segregated "zero" classes.

2.4. COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Where the capacity of services made it impossible to allow more children to be enrolled in preschool, AGS achieved good results with alternative community-center or home-based services, but this is not always a long-term solution.

These services proved to be beneficial for Romani children, but REF only recommends scaling-up of these models with certain restrictions. The educational program (content) and the professional preparedness and capacities of the service providers (staff) should be thoroughly monitored and evaluated. The ultimate goal of these programs should be the integration of children into mainstream services within the shortest possible time – at the latest for the last year of kindergarten education.

Community-based services proved to be efficient in the two target localities in Romania (the settlements of Telechiu and Mofleni-Craiova), where families live in circumstances similar those of the poorest African countries. In these cases, the gap between the local majority society and the children living in the Romani settlements is so wide that community centers must provide intensive support services to remedy the situation and give Romani children a chance to integrate into the public school system later on.

⁵ In Hungary, free meals are provided for children of low-income families and families with three or more children and further financial support is provided twice a year for families of multiple disadvantaged children attending preschool from the age of 3.

2.5. ACTIVITY-BASED COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT APPROACH

Based on the AGS experience, REF believes that community development should be built on the active involvement of members of the Romani community in “learning by doing” type of activities. This kind of activity proved to reach and involve more parents effectively with measurable impact, than those activities that simply target NGOs.

Activities that directly target and actively involve parents, and build their capacity, proved essential to reversing the negative experience most Romani parents have of their own education – and to building understanding and thereby promoting educational opportunities for Romani children of poor families. The “Your Story” (Meséd) program and the Home-Preschool Liaison program, implemented in Hungary, proved to be the most efficient methods of increasing the involvement of Romani parents in the education of their children. The Meséd program also directly contributed to improved parental skills and literacy skills of Romani mothers, and at the same time improved access to reading for Romani children. In the Hungarian case, AGS project implementation also showed that, when it comes to mobilizing parents more successfully, direct involvement of Romani women facilitators in community-based activities proved more effective than involvement of Romani NGOs, which are dominated by men. This is a departure from the approach of several Romani inclusion projects, in which Romani participation is supposed to be ensured by targeting Romani NGOs as implementers. The mapping of what AGS services were used by parents and their children underline this conclusion: For the four AGS countries, parents valued as most beneficial community motivation events, courses, the Your Story initiative, and Home Preschool Community Liaison activities.

2.6. INTERACTIONS BETWEEN ROMA AND NON-ROMA, PARTICIPATION OF NON-ROMA

Future AGS-type projects should react to the negative stereotypes of majority society and challenge them with activities involving every relevant party.

The AGS project had an explicit but not exclusive focus on Roma. Where non-Roma were in any way part of the beneficiary group of AGS, the feedback was very positive. Nonetheless, a general experience of AGS in each target locality was that openness and communication are still missing between the Romani community and the majority population. It became clear that much is yet to be done concerning this relationship, in order to overcome segregation and intolerance against Roma in the target countries. Along with involving, motivating, and building the capacity of Romani parents, specific activities should also focus on preparing the non-Romani majority for inclusion of Romani children in local institutions. When designing activities targeted to the local non-Romani communities, it is important to consider that non-Romani parents cannot be effectively sensitized by Romani NGO activities. Non-Romani parents will only support AGS goals and accept Romani children if they have direct experiences (positive or neutral) with Romani children. That is why the kindergarten operates with intercultural sensitive pedagogy and partnership, and regular interactions between Romani parents and the institution are facilitated (for example, by the Home Preschool Community Liaison program).

2.7. QUALITY OF ECEC SERVICES

AGS experience suggests that teacher training sessions by themselves have a limited power to make dramatic changes in learning environments, and that more systematic work is needed to improve the quality of ECEC services.

Systematic changes are especially vital in the context of cultural diversity, where anti-bias, social justice, and inclusive approaches should be strengthened. The national policy framework of AGS target countries should give a greater focus to promoting intercultural understanding as a key dimension of the educational process.

Training, combined with mentoring and monitoring activities, proved to be very effective in ensuring that quality practices are in place in kindergartens, and in offering a more sustainable investment.

Other forms of cooperative activities promoting knowledge transfer and mutual learning among early childhood teachers and caregivers of beneficiary institutions are recommended for future pilot projects designed to promote participation of Roma in ECEC.

2.8. ROMANI LANGUAGE IN ECEC SERVICES

The rights of children to use their mother tongue must be respected, but at the same time, resources should be offered to help teachers assist children in overcoming the language gap and in learning the official language of instruction.

The language barrier was a challenge that staff of AGS beneficiary institutions had to face when working with Romani children in kindergartens and nurseries in several of the target localities. Along with training in diversity and intercultural sensitivity, teachers also needed follow-up monitoring and professional assistance to help them prepare for working with minority children who do not speak the official language. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that kindergarten-aged children should learn the language of school instruction during their kindergarten years: Fluency in the official language is a fundamental precondition of achievement in school, and without it, students will lag behind and will most probably end up in segregated “catch-up” classes.

2.9. MEDIATORS AND ROMANI PRESCHOOL ASSISTANTS

Mediators played a crucial role in the success of AGS activities. The core tasks they performed included outreach work, enrolment support, and attendance monitoring, but AGS mediators also addressed several other issues specific to the needs of their local community. Romani preschool assistants proved to be highly beneficial in encouraging the inclusion of Romani children into the institutions.

Mediators in several localities found that it was not possible to carry out an ECEC intervention without addressing other needs of the children's families. This might be the reason for the current trend in which two or three different mediators (for example, for health, employment, education) participate in Romani projects, to help to

solve the complex array of problems their clients face. REF experience suggests that, in future AGS-type projects, it is important to be careful that mediators deal with families in a holistic way – rather than taking the fragmented dysfunctionality that characterizes many public services. AGS experience also showed that harmonization of donor activities, available support, and benefits targeting a particular locality is essential to avoid tensions within the beneficiary community and to ensure synergy of interventions for better results.

When training mediators and preparing them for their tasks, it should also be made clear that mediators will be expected to empower the community, so they should know when to step up and encourage direct interaction and cooperation between teachers, caregivers and beneficiary families, especially parents.

Romani preschool assistants were employed in kindergartens in several AGS target localities. Their participation in preschool activities were praised by all actors (Romani parents, mediators, teachers, and head teachers), and they proved to help efforts toward inclusion of Romani children. However, it should be underlined that the position of Romani assistants must be stable and sustained as a public service. A lack of stability, and dependence on project funding, cause uncertainty, which hurts efficiency: If a Romani assistant can only identify him/herself as a temporary assistant in an institution, it is more difficult for her or him to build partnerships and to integrate successfully into the community of teachers, parents, and children.

2.10. SUPPORTING TRANSITION TO PRIMARY SCHOOL

It is essential to ensure that participation in ECEC is followed by a smooth transition to the normal primary school.

REF provided different services, tailored to local needs, to facilitate transition to primary school for Romani children including: open house events in schools; expert services of speech therapists, psychologists, and special needs experts provided for kindergarten-age children; follow-up on school-entry testing and support for Romani families in this procedure; active school enrolment support by mediators, involving schools and local authorities; and after-school tutoring in the first school year to prevent Romani children from transition to segregated classes that follow a special curriculum. Based on the experience of the pilot, each service tested in AGS is crucial for securing successful transition to primary school for Romani children. Furthermore, preschool teachers, Romani preschool assistants, mediators, and other professionals working in partnership with Romani parents, have an important role in informing parents and building their capacity to prevent Romani children from being enrolled in segregated classes or schools (zero grade, special classes, or schools for special-needs students, schools gathering only Romani children from the locality or residential area).

2.11. ATTITUDE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Willingness of local authorities to cooperate was critical for successful implementation of services.

Without the support of mayors and local councils, the project's scope and sustainability were hampered. In many localities, mayors appeared more concerned with the opinions of median-voters and short-term goals than with sustainable ECEC strategies, which require time to create effective outcomes. In many locations, officials were reluctant to undertake projects promoting desegregation, and they often limited their contribution to providing one-time help only. Lobbying activities, frequent meetings, and demonstrations were helpful in changing attitudes and opinions. In some of the AGS localities mayors – convinced by the interim results – became actively supportive and proud of being involved in the project.

2.12. PARTICIPATION OF ROMA IN AGS IMPLEMENTATION

In every country of the project, AGS implementers followed the principle of involving Roma, and especially Romani members of the beneficiary community, in various roles of project implementation.

Local Roma assisted the project, working as mediators/mentors, facilitators, community center workers, or Romani preschool assistants, or by providing accompaniment for children on school buses. Meanwhile, numerous Romani experts from the implementing organizations also took part in the management of the project. The benefits of active participation of Roma in the project cannot be overemphasized. The experiences of REF local partners proved that the Roma involved were not only key to outreach in the community and to achieving outcomes in several activities, but were also equal partners during the work of the project. Furthermore, the Roma who worked on the project served as models for their community and helped local stakeholders to gain awareness of the ultimate goal and rationale of the project – and to transform anti-Romani attitudes into a more supportive one.

2.13. BUILDING STABLE AND EXTENSIVE PARTNERSHIPS

The experience of AGS shows that close collaboration in an ECEC development project ideally should start in the planning phase. This collaboration should include every actor who is relevant to the project's activities, and it should continue throughout implementation and evaluation.

The cooperative partnership should, at a minimum, consist of the targeted institutions, the maintaining local/regional authority (municipality), local NGO partners, representatives/members of the beneficiary community, and the "umbrella" or donor organization – which provides coordination and close supervision of implementation, independently from any state actor.

"Umbrella" organizations like REF play a crucial role in AGS-type initiatives. These organizations – just like donor organizations in global grant development programs – have the capacity and potential to initiate interventions, to assist local stakeholders in launching projects, to provide coordination and professional supervision over

project implementation (through active participation in project activities), and to facilitate information and experience sharing on a national and transnational level.

REF and its partners in AGS implementation learned that this kind of multinational and multidimensional development project can be a magnet for donor activities in the target localities – and the resulting new donations lead to even broader impacts by the interventions and support for the sustainability of outcomes.

2.14. INTEGRATED APPROACH

The particular strength of the AGS project was its integrated approach to ECEC and its explicit, but not exclusive, targeting practices, which are designed to scale-up pilot projects and good practices. The project activities in each AGS target locality were flexibly tailored to Roma population needs to access ECEC services.

In the case of Romani children facing great socio-cultural disadvantages, the teamwork of a range of different professionals is required to achieve AGS objectives, because children's needs go beyond strictly educational challenges and also can include material shortcomings, health issues, housing problems, and so on. For this reason, AGS worked with entire families, not only preschool-aged children, and involved a wide range of NGOs, local authorities, and educational and health institutions – including kindergartens, municipalities, social and health service providers, universities, and community centers. The objective was to build a bridge between the needs of the target community and the system of standardized services. Along with the AGS project's "core activities" of enrolment support, material support, teacher training, transportation, and so on, specific activities were implemented to meet the different circumstances and needs of the beneficiary communities to overcome barriers. These additional activities might include an immunization campaign, support for access to identification documents and basic health services, follow-up on school entry testing, after-school tutoring, and counseling and informal adult education programs for parents. The final survey data of the 16 localities show that these extra services were considered to be highly valuable for the beneficiary parents: Community events, "Your Story" and HSCL programs were valued the highest (37 percent); assistance with obtaining ID papers was valued by 33 percent; material support was valued by 31 percent of those surveyed; vaccination of children by 24 percent; and home visits by project staff, who helped solve various problems on top of assisting with enrolling children to kindergarten, was valued by 18 percent.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION MODEL OF THE AGS PROJECT

3.1. RELATED REF POLICY OBJECTIVES

The Roma Education Fund (REF) was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. Through its activities, REF promotes Roma inclusion in all aspects of the national education systems of countries participating in the Decade of Roma Inclusion, as well as other countries that wish to join in this effort. REF has been supporting expanded access to preschool education in several countries, with activities like information campaigns, assistance with the registration process, and work with parents to promote preschool attendance. External evaluations have shown that, in REF-supported projects between 2005–2010, there was a direct link between attendance in pre-school and increased enrolment rates of Romani children in mainstream primary education. These projects targeted both children and their families – which is why almost 30,000 parents were involved. In these preschool programs, Romani children significantly improved proficiency in the language of instruction, early development of social skills, and intellectual capabilities. In addition, the projects also helped both teachers and Romani assistants to begin improving their professional competences and their abilities to cope with stereotypes and prejudice against Roma, while also building trust between Romani parents and educational institutions.⁶

3.2. RATIONALE OF THE MODEL: SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS THE PROJECT INTENDED TO ADDRESS

3.2.1. The situation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in European Union member countries

The European Union is generally seen by both European and US early education researchers as a world leader and policy model when it comes to providing ECEC services.⁷ Nonetheless, research also highlights significant gaps and variability in the provision and quality of ECEC services among the EU countries – particularly between the "old" and "new" EU members.

⁶ EF Strategy 2010–2015. Available online:

http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/ref_strategy_2010-2015_final.pdf

⁷ *Early childhood education and care. Key lessons from researches for policy makers. An independent report submitted to the European Commission by the NESSE networks of experts*, European Commission, 2009.

With the exception of the Nordic countries, there is generally insufficient spending on ECEC services in relation to need. In some European countries, there are very limited or no publicly funded provisions for children under the age of 3, and the participation rate in subsidized settings is very low. Moreover, in most cases the subsidies only cover tuition, not meals or extracurricular activities.

Child-staff ratios and staff educational and care qualifications are of particular importance in delivering quality ECEC services. Although appropriate professional education standards have been recorded in the Nordic countries, there is a need to improve staff qualifications in the majority of EU countries. The levels of in-service training vary greatly between countries and between the education and child-care sectors.

3.2.2. ECEC in relation with vulnerable groups

There is a growing understanding that the inclusion of vulnerable groups into quality ECEC services is both an equity and efficiency issue.⁸ Definitions of disadvantage or vulnerability by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and later EURYDICE, refer to problems caused by socio-economic, cultural, and/or language factors. Romani children constitute a group that could be characterized by all three types of problems. Minority children comprise 3 percent of the total population of children under 6 in Europe, and 17 percent of European households with a child under the age of 6 live on the poverty threshold. Children from families with one parent are also at a disadvantage with relation to ECEC.

It is more efficient and more equitable to invest very early in the education of children from vulnerable groups, because efforts to correct problems later prove to be not only inequitable but also more expensive. There is a growing body of recent evidence, produced by education economists, about the large socio-economic returns of investment in the early education of disadvantaged children.⁹ The European Commission points very clearly to the socio-economic returns brought by early education in its 2006 Communication *Efficiency and Equity in European Education and Training Systems*:

“Pre-primary education has the highest returns in terms of the social adaptation of children. Member States should invest more in pre-primary education as an effective means to establish the basis for further learning, preventing school drop-out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels.”

In line with global evidence, the *Toward an Equal Start* World Bank (2012) study, and the *Roma Early Childhood Inclusion (RECI)* study by UNICEF, REF, and the Open Society Foundations (2012), found that quality ECEC services raise educational outcomes for Romani children. The findings of the World Bank report – based on the 2011 UNDP/World Bank/EC

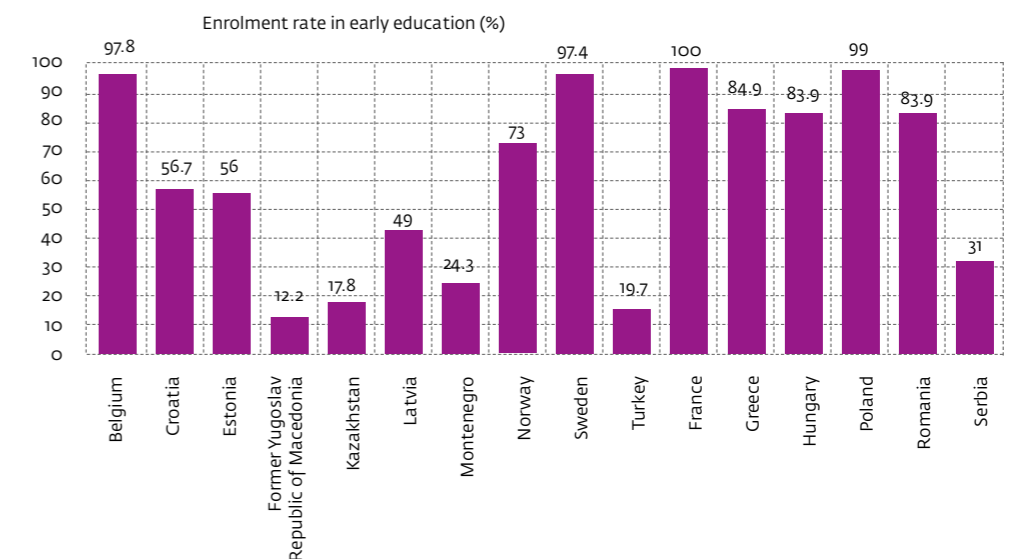
⁸ EURYDICE (2009) *Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Tackling Social and Cultural Inequalities*, EURYDICE, Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, 2009. See also, REF (2006), NESSE (2009).

⁹ REF (2006), NESSE (2009), OECD (2006), EURYDICE (2009). See also *Expected Long Term Budgetary Benefits to Roma Education in Hungary*, Gábor Kertesi and Gábor Kezdi, Roma Education Fund (REF), 2006. The analysis of the benefits brought by the investments in early education starts from the age of 4.

regional Roma survey in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia – shows that Romani children attending preschool have much higher scores on measures of learning, and much higher likelihood of subsequent enrolment into secondary schools. Furthermore, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, children attending preschool are much less likely to be channeled into “special needs” education designed for children with learning disabilities.

3.2.3. Access to quality ECEC for disadvantaged Romani children

Empirical data about the enrolment and participation of Roma in ECEC has been scarce. However, existing evidence¹⁰ based on partial research and estimates provided by Romani NGOs (including baseline data for the AGS project) show a very low level of enrolment in preschool and the virtual absence of Roma from nursery-school-type ECEC. Those disadvantaged Romani children who are enrolled in kindergarten are spending on average less than half of the time that non-Romani children spend in class.



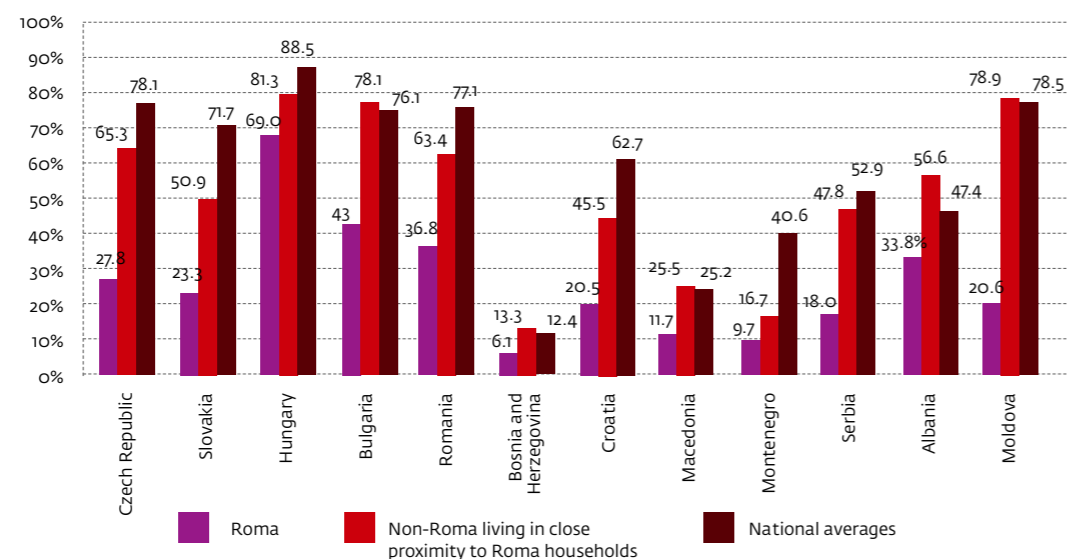
SOURCE: OSCE: Mapping of Participation of Roma and Sinti Children in Early Education processes within the OSCE Region (Warsaw, 2010).

The new *Toward an Equal Start* World Bank (2012) study found that Romani children's access to quality and inclusive early childhood development services remains stark in comparison to children of majority populations – a continuing demonstration of the lack of equity in this, and many other areas of life for Romani families. The inequities in

¹⁰ EUMAP 2005, and REF Country Assessments 2004–2009.

education start early. Unlike non-Romani children, with the exception of Hungary, the large majority of Romani children aged 3–6 are not in preschool: Only 40 percent of Romani children are in preschool in Bulgaria, compared to the national average of 75 percent; in Romania, the figures are 32 percent compared to 77 percent; in the Czech Republic, it is 32 percent compared to 79 percent; and in Slovakia, about 20 percent of Romani children are in preschool compared to the national average of more than 70 percent. In Hungary, where services are free-of-charge and the government promotes enrolment with financial support for children of poor families to access preschool at an early age, the situation is better: 69 percent of Romani children aged 3–6 were enrolled in preschool in 2011, while the national average of preschool attendance is 88 percent.

Preschool attendance rate of children aged 3–6 or 3–5



For most countries figures are for children aged 3–6, for Czech Republic, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovakia, for children aged 3–5.
SOURCE: UNDP-WB Roma Survey 2011, UNICEF database 2012 for school year 2010/2011.

According to AGS's *Household Survey*¹¹ in 2010, participation of children ages 3–7 in programs of formal or informal early childhood education and care is significantly higher in the Hungarian and Romanian project localities than in the Slovak and Macedonian localities. In all of the Hungarian project localities, enrolment in kindergartens

¹¹ The survey was administered to 1,028 families who represented a total of 1,781 children from birth to age 7 in FYR Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia participating in AGS in 2010. The figures relate directly to the recurrent beneficiaries of this project, the parents or children who have participated in more than one activity or a recurring/ongoing activity.

exceeds 84 percent of 3–7-year-olds. In the two Romanian localities, enrolment of 3–7-year-olds is distributed in kindergartens (above 50 percent) and community centers (around 30 percent). On the other end of the scale are the Slovak and Macedonian localities, where the share of children ages 3–7 who stay at home and are not enrolled in formal or informal education reached 45 percent and 72 percent, respectively. Overall, the situation is different for children younger than 3: From this group, 92 percent of all the children participating in the project are not enrolled anywhere; instead, they stay at home with their parents.

3.2.4. Barriers to access of ECEC for Romani children

Beyond the structural obstacles and challenges affecting ECEC in the European Union in general, and vulnerable groups in particular, there are a set of additional barriers that can keep disadvantaged Romani children from accessing quality ECEC.

Poverty: According to the AGS survey, the most important barrier is poverty. Compared with non-Roma, there is a much higher share of Roma¹² living below the poverty line. Poverty stems primarily from unemployment, which disproportionately affects Romani women and children. The disproportionate impact of unemployment on Romani women and younger Romani generations has negative implications in the accessibility of ECEC services.

Health issues: Other important barriers to ECEC are related to Romani children's health status, which is negatively impacted by poverty and poor housing conditions, low vaccination rates, poor nutrition, and a low level of access to prenatal care by Romani mothers.¹³

Insufficient facilities: In several European countries, there is a lack of ECEC facilities for all children. There are not enough places, and their quality is under the required minimum, especially in rural or underdeveloped areas, or in the settlements of big cities. In FYR Macedonia, the existing network of 184 facilities of 51 kindergartens has a total capacity of 25,000 children – which is 11 percent of the total preschool-age population in the country. In Romania, the Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation reports that resources are available for half of the children of the relevant age.

Administrative problems: The administrative procedures required for enrolment in ECEC services are often restrictive and exclusionary.¹⁴ The restrictive administrative enrolment procedures are particularly relevant for countries from South Eastern Europe, where enrolment rates in early education are low due to a shortage of

¹² UNDP 2001, *Avoiding the Dependency*; UNDP 2005, *Faces of Poverty, Faces of Hope Vulnerability Profiles for Decade of Roma Inclusion Countries*; World Bank 2005, *Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the poverty cycle*.

¹³ UNICEF 2007, "Breaking the circle of exclusion. Roma children in South East Europe."

¹⁴ *Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma*, Vol. 1. (Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Serbia) and Vol. 2 (Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Slovakia), Open Society Institute, EUMAP, 2007, and Country Assessments prepared by the Roma Education Fund for eight countries that are members of the Decade of Roma Inclusion during 2005–2009.

places available, and where an important segment of Romani children lack birth certificates, ID papers, certificate of employment, registration with a health practitioner, or other documents. The most exclusionary enrolment procedure in some countries in South East Europe requires priority at enrolment to be given to those children whose parents are employed.

Language problems: There is a variable share of Roma using the Romani language at home in the EU countries. The highest shares of Romani speakers are in Bulgaria, with more than 60 percent of Roma using the language, and in Romania, where approximately 50 percent of Roma use Romani. The number of Romani speakers is also high in FYR Macedonia. An important segment of Romani children do not know the official language of instruction sufficiently well when entering compulsory education.¹⁵ To date, only a few small-scale experimental projects in Romania tried to introduce bilingual kindergartens, which use the Romani language for learning the official language of instruction. About 20–30 percent of Romani children assessed in Slovakia¹⁶ for placement in special schools did not know the Slovak language in which the tests were administered.

Prejudice: In several EU-member countries, prejudice and biased behavior against Roma also create obstacles that can keep Romani children from being enrolled in kindergarten. According to the responses of Romani parents interviewed for the AGS *Household Survey* and the quality assessment research, misleading and false information – concerning issues like the availability of places, the cost of services, or the cost of obtaining necessary medical certificates – provided by local municipal officials or head teachers was the reason for the non-enrolment of Romani children into preschools in several instances in Romania and Slovakia.

Segregation: There is a growing body of evidence indicating both educational segregation of Roma in compulsory education in EU member and candidate states and also the low quality of education delivered in segregated educational settings.¹⁷

Approach of parents: Lack of interest by Romani parents in the education of their children is one of the reasons most frequently mentioned by teachers, school officials, and non-Romani parents to explain low participation of Romani children in preschool education and the underachievement of Romani children in school. This idea is, however, not supported by self-reported preferences among Romani parents in the *Regional Survey* of the World Bank (2011): The vast majority of Romani parents questioned said they would like their child to complete secondary and some even tertiary education. The *Toward an Equal Start* World Bank study (2012) found that more than 80 percent of Romani parents want a secondary education for their sons and daughters. The *Household Survey* of the

¹⁵ EUMAP 2005.

¹⁶ *School as Ghetto, Systemic Overrepresentation of Roma in Special Education in Slovakia*. Roma Education Fund, 2009.

¹⁷ ERRC 2004, *Stigmata*. Available online: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=1892>; PILI 2004, *Separate and Unequal*, http://www.pili.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=342%3Aseparate-and-unequal&catid=122%3Afeatured&Itemid=95, EUMAP 2005 and REF Country Assessments 2004–2009.

AGS pilot also concluded that Romani parents of 3–7-year-old children most often reported a pedagogical motivation for preschool enrolment of their children, namely that “the child can learn there,” while the second-most common reason they gave was that “the child will have a better chance to succeed in primary school and later.” More than 58 percent of parents think that children do better in school if they attend kindergarten or another educational program. According to the survey, the share of parents with expectations that their children will go higher than a primary education is almost equal for girls (71.5 percent) as for boys (71.98 percent). The findings of the same survey, however, underline the fact that the level of education attained by parents has important implications for the educational path of children: seven out of 10 children ages 3–7 whose mother had not gone to school at all are at home and not enrolled in preschool.

3.3. THE PRIORITY CHALLENGES AND THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE MODEL

The experience of the AGS program in all four countries shows that, in spite of the recognized benefits of ECEC, severe gaps exist in terms of policies (numerous aspects are not addressed at all) and implementation (more effort, coordination, and resources are needed). Progress in making national early education programs genuinely inclusive for Romani children continues to lag behind the promised outcomes. AGS stakeholders have identified the major causes for prevailing exclusion of Roma from quality ECEC services in all four project countries.¹⁸ First round data was collected in 2010 and a research report, called *A Good Start Survey Spotlight on its Localities and Households*, was published in 2011.¹⁹

The priority challenges addressed by AGS interventions are as follows:

3.3.1. Economic barriers

According to the AGS *Household Survey*, 60 percent of the fathers in the target localities were unemployed and without any job in the formal or informal sector. The mothers had, on average, attained lower levels of education compared to the fathers, with gender differences being greater in FYR Macedonia and Romania.

The AGS *Household Survey*, carried out in the 16 localities of the project in 2010, found that economic issues were the most important reasons for not enrolling children: some 59 percent of all parents with non-enrolled children ages 3–7 indicated that it was too expensive for them to send a child to kindergarten and 40 percent reported having no money for clothes for their children to attend school.

¹⁸ AGS *Household Survey* demonstrates that, in Slovakia, 90.2 percent of children age 3 are not enrolled in any ECEC programs; in Macedonia the percentage is even higher, reaching 94.52 percent. Hungarian and Romanian enrolment rates are higher for 3-year-olds but still very low for children aged 0–2; Romania is as high as 70 percent and Hungary 72 percent.

¹⁹ Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/ref-ags-household-survey-screen_o.pdf

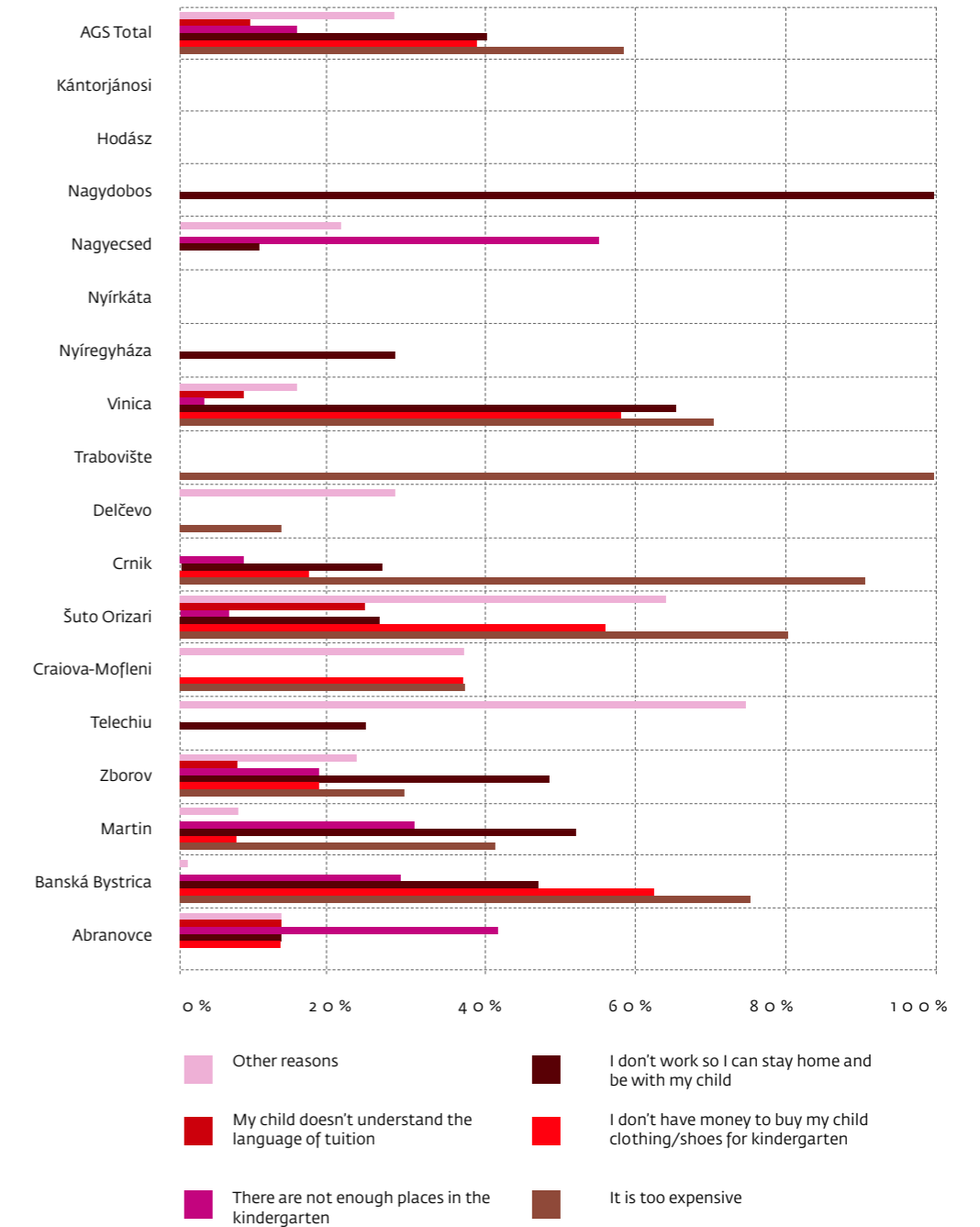
Combining these figures with parents' answers as to why they did enroll their children in kindergarten, it can be concluded that financial support is not a motive to send children to preschool, but rather a necessary prerequisite.

A figure from the *Household Survey 1 Research Report* follows, presenting the most important reasons for non-enrolment of children ages 3–7 in kindergartens in the AGS project. Data was collected when the project started in 2010.

In Kántorjánosi, Hodász, and Nyírkáta in Hungary, there were no non-enrolled children in this cohort. The main reasons identified in the Research Report are:

- It's too expensive: 59 percent.
- I don't work so I can stay home and be with my child: 41 percent.
- I don't have money to buy my child clothing/shoes for kindergarten: 40 percent.
- Other reasons: 29 percent.
- There are not enough places in the kindergarten: 16 percent.
- My child doesn't understand the language of tuition: 10 percent.

Reasons for non-enrolment of children ages 3–7 in kindergartens



3.3.2. Persistence of segregated services for Romani children

A core principle of the AGS interventions, and one of the *Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion*, is that Roma should have access to integrated (not segregated) provision of services. This is important for the practical reason that segregated provision is almost always of inferior quality – and also for the principle that building a multicultural society requires children to interact with each other from an early age. Still, segregation persists, and the level of integration or segregation varies across countries and within countries. For example, in Hungary, the Guszev kindergarten has only Romani enrolment, as it is located in a Romani settlement, and the two preschools in the Mátészalka microregion in Hungary included in AGS are also segregated. The same is true of the kindergarten in Craiova in Romania. In FYR Macedonia, the very low levels of enrolment of Roma mean that segregation is not, in general, a problem. In Slovakia, the situation varies widely by locality, with Roma constituting a tiny minority in preschools in Banská Bystrica but slightly more than half of children in preschools in Abranovce.

A particular manifestation of segregation is a propensity to enroll Romani children in special education when they begin formal, compulsory schooling. This is a particular problem in Hungary and Slovakia. A recent study conducted by REF found that approximately 60 percent of children in all forms of special education are Roma; and close to 85 percent of children in special classes in “mainstream” schools are Roma. The same study found that children enrolled in special education from an early age are unable to find reliable employment and, on average, will never return the public investment on their education.²⁰ The Slovak government has a policy objective of reducing this enrolment.

Segregation of Romani children in ECEC institutions is often caused by geographical segregation of Romani communities; services that impose extra requirements, such as fees from which Romani children are *de facto* excluded on account of their social disadvantages; and discriminatory attitudes of service providers. According to the *Household Survey* of the AGS localities, the ethnic composition of kindergartens and their classes tend to reflect the local concentration of Roma in a given area or locality. This means concentration of Roma in preschool is greatest in parts of a town or village where the majority of the population is Roma or in segregated settlements outside of a town or village. Three out of four parents reported that their children attend a kindergarten where more than half the children are Roma, and 36 percent of the parents had children in kindergartens where all or almost all children were Roma. In Romanian localities, the children were placed mainly in “Romakindergartens” where all or almost all the children were Roma. The ethnic composition of kindergarten classes is similar to the level of the whole kindergarten in all AGS countries except Slovakia. In Slovakia (in Zborov) parents reported that their children attend a mixed kindergarten, but they had all, or almost all, Roma in the class. In this case, the class was created in the AGS project as a short-term solution, but remained through the project cycle, despite intensive efforts made by AGS staff to persuade local school officials to change the composition of classes. These

²⁰ REF (2009) “School as Ghetto: Systemic Overrepresentation of Roma in Special Education in Slovakia.”

mostly Romani facilities tend to be poorly equipped and lacking in qualified staff. They often do not engage children in cognitive activities and fail to involve Romani communities and parents. In-school segregation has also been recorded in other countries, though the situation varies. Unlike the rest of the AGS target countries, FYR Macedonia had a situation where children predominantly attended kindergartens with only a few Roma. This was the case for 50–70 percent of the respondents in Trbotivište, Delčevo, and Vinica. The reason for the low concentration of Roma in classes in FYR Macedonia was the overall low participation of Roma in formal preschool education there (about 13 percent).

3.3.3. Access hindered by spatial constraints and distance

Spatial isolation is particularly a problem for children from low-income families, children living in rural areas, or children from ethnic minorities, such as Roma – especially in countries where government-funded, center-based instruction programs are limited. The problem is often due to inadequate infrastructural capacity (as well as inadequate standards of facilities: classrooms, bathrooms, equipment, heating, and so on) and inadequate transport in rural and geographically segregated areas, a particularly difficult problem in winter time. Although the *Toward an Equal Start* World Bank study (2012) demonstrated that distance to preschool facilities is not significantly associated with a low enrolment rate, AGS reported a lack of kindergartens and limited spatial capacities of ECEC infrastructure in several target localities. According to the *Household Survey*, capacity problems are a specific issue in FYR Macedonia, with 91 percent of respondents in Crnik and 100 percent of respondents in Trbotivište reporting there is no kindergarten nearby, and in Slovakia, where 43 percent of the respondents in Abranovce, 30 percent in Banská Bystrica, and 32 percent in Martin reported that there were no places in kindergartens.

Focus groups organized in the context of the *RECI National Report for Romania*²¹ revealed that the most frequent reason given by Romani parents, especially those from rural areas, for non-enrolment in preschool is distance from services. Families from isolated communities face additional transportation costs, and there are still many places – especially in rural areas – where public transport is altogether not accessible.²² It should also be noted that, while infrastructure for children ages 3–6 is generally accessible, facilities for children from infancy to age 3 are scarce.

3.3.4. Lack of information and parental engagement

Many Romani parents did not complete formal education and face difficulties in supporting their children’s language skills and educational development.²³ Because of their isolation, Romani communities often rely on a traditional

²¹ Available online: http://www.romachildren.com/?page_id=504

²² Open Society Foundation, Roma Education Fund, UNICEF (2011) *Roma Early Childhood Inclusion Overview Report*.

²³ The AGS survey shows that, in Hungary, 60.1 percent of mothers completed primary school but only 0.3 completed university. In Slovakia 55.5 percent of mothers completed primary school, 21.8 percent went on to secondary vocational training and 0.4 completed university. In Romania, the numbers are critically low: only 4.4 percent of mothers completed primary education. A similar situation exists in Macedonia with only 19.5 percent of mothers finishing primary school and only 3.3 percent completing a vocational secondary education.

understanding of child rearing. There is little knowledge about the benefits of ECEC in many communities, and that lack substantially reduces enrolment of Romani children in such programs. Among children who are between the ages of 3–7, and whose mother has not gone to school at all, seven out of 10 are at home and are not enrolled in any preschool program. In addition, many Romani parents are not only functionally illiterate, but are constantly absorbed by the struggle for survival. This often means that children receive limited support at home, as their parents are unable to provide them with guidelines and a model.²⁴

The World Bank *Regional Survey* (2011) sought to capture the home environment in Romani families because parenting practices and time spent with children in stimulating activities contribute to cognitive and emotional development, and therefore are important for educational outcomes and learning in early childhood. The findings of the World Bank survey are in line with the results of the AGS *Household Survey*: Romani children have limited access to reading, parenting skills of Romani adults need to be strengthened, and the involvement and activity level of parents should be increased in order to promote the development of young children in their home environment.

The AGS *Household Survey* also highlighted that mothers are the key players, as they are engaged in different types of educational activities with the children, while fathers are two-to-three times less active in this area. The most common situation reported by the parents was that no adult in the family engaged in an educational activity with the child. The least frequently mentioned educational activities are reading books or looking at picture books, and teaching letters and counting. The limited amount of engagement with books is linked to the availability of books for the families, who averaged four children's books per family, and in FYR Macedonia more than half of the parents reported they have no children's book at home.

Experience shows that parent's involvement is a prerequisite for higher enrolment in ECEC and successful educational development. Informing parents about educational activities and potential builds trust between parents and educational institutions, and dismantles hurtful stereotypes that Roma are uninterested in educating their children. Mechanisms for parent involvement are generally available in each target country, but in practice it is not clear whether parents, and especially poorly educated Romani parents, have a say in the way their children are cared for and educated.

3.3.5. Impact of poverty

Romani children often live in environments where their family must function at basic survival levels, engendering a negative effect on infant health and development prospects. Many Romani children are born into desperately poor households, where no adult is employed. Housing and community infrastructure are often unhealthy, without

²⁴ A survey on engagement of household members over the age of 15 in different activities with children, such as reading books or telling stories, shows that little engagement takes place. In general, adults surveyed in FYR Macedonia and Romania tend to be less engaged in these activities than those from Hungary and Slovakia.

sewage, running water, or heating. According to the *Household Survey*, only three-quarters of the households participating in the AGS project have a kitchen indoors, with the lowest share of indoor facilities in Skopje/Šuto Orizari (34 percent) and Vinica (45 percent). Toilets inside are available in only 51 percent of households and running water in 63 percent of households, with Vinica, Skopje/Šuto Orizari, Telechiu, Craiova-Mofleni, and Nyírkáta lagging behind. Romani children are hospitalized for pneumonia and respiratory illnesses at double the rate of children from mainstream backgrounds; ear and skin infections are rife.²⁵ The health conditions of vulnerable children further reduces their opportunities to attend ECEC services regularly and causes non-welcoming attitudes on the side of majority parents and professional service providers.

3.3.6. The quality of services

Concerns about the quality of accessible ECEC services can include unfavorable structural features, such as a high child-staff ratio; inadequate training of staff; curricula that are neither developmental nor educational; and programming that is unsuitable for children with special educational needs, such as those who lack a second language. According to the AGS *Household Survey*, Romani is the mother tongue for 46 percent of children in families surveyed in the four countries, with large differences among individual localities. In Hungary, Hungarian is the mother tongue of above 93 percent of the children, but this contrasts with more than 84 percent of the children having Romani as a mother tongue in the rural Slovak localities of Abranovce and Zborov, the Romanian locality of Craiova-Mofleni neighborhood and Macedonian localities, like Vinica, Crnik, and Skopje/Šuto Orizari. The surveyed parents are motivated to enroll their children in preschool so that they learn the common language of tuition early. While only 10 percent of children who were aged 3–6 and enrolled in kindergarten had some, usually mild, problems with understanding the language of tuition, the share of children with such problems doubled at the entry to primary school, according to their parents. In Šuto Orizari, more than 20 percent of parents claimed they do not enroll their children because of language issues; in Abranovce more than 10 percent made similar claims. Limited budgetary provisions for ECEC prevent development of holistic approaches and enhancement of existing services. Low wages result in a shortage of qualified staff, experienced mediators, and administrators. There are few incentives and no hands-on pedagogical training, so there is a significant reduction in the number of possible candidates for teaching positions, especially in rural and geographically segregated areas. Experience has shown that preschools with predominantly Romani children not only have a lower standard of classrooms and didactic equipment, but very often lack adequate human resources, and scarcely employ Romani professionals.

3.3.7. Lack of intercultural educational strategies

An effort to develop bridges between different ethnic groups is often absent. Countries' strategies tend to consist largely of support measures that target Roma as "disadvantaged learners" rather than measures to promote

²⁵ UNICEF CEE/CIS Regional Office (2010) *Situation Analysis: An Overview of Inclusive Education in Central Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States*. Geneva.

intercultural understanding as a key dimension of national education policy. It should be noted that many of the disadvantages that the Roma face inside educational institutions are caused by discrimination and an instinctive tendency toward segregation among majority populations. The issue needs to be tackled at early school levels, by changing the attitudes of both children and parents toward the Romani minority. More often than not, however, efforts to promote human rights and intercultural understanding are present only in specific projects, which do not affect the structure and operation of the general education system. As such, these efforts are unlikely to bring about the necessary ideological and systemic changes and, for this reason, their added value and sustainability remain questionable.²⁶

3.3.8. Decentralization

Studies by the World Bank (2011) and Open Society Institute (OSI) (2007) bring attention to ways in which decentralization may enable segregation. In theory, decentralized educational services can address local needs better by paying greater respect to the unique situation and problems of each community, so that vulnerable groups and individual students receive more attention. However, the studies found widening differences of access to, and quality of, education between regions, localities, and communities. They also found that – without clearly delineated responsibilities for local authorities, regular inspections, and an effective mechanism to address potential problems – decentralization may fuel segregation of Roma. A potentially confusing division of responsibility is particularly evident in Hungary, where local authorities have a key role: Schools make 68 percent of the decisions while the local government makes another 29 percent.²⁷ In FYR Macedonia and Romania, local municipalities are responsible for the management and maintenance of crèches and kindergartens; in FYR Macedonia, local governments also have responsibility for primary education.

3.3.9. Lack of engagement on the part of local authorities

Local-level involvement in implementation of measures to benefit Romani populations is practiced to some extent in all four countries, but proper engagement with Romani issues is still very much absent. In some instances, programs that showed some degree of success (that is, establishing health and education mediators) were discontinued once funding became the responsibility of local authorities. Public servants are rarely involved in project-oriented approaches to Roma inclusion, a situation that curtails sustainability of activities and transfer of knowledge. At the same time, public services rarely reach out to, or cater to, Romani communities. A lack of cooperation between local authorities, public servants and Romani communities – and the pervasive bias and anti-Roma attitude found in the Central and East European countries – frequently result in policies and decisions by elected local councils and mayors that favor segregated provision of services for a community's Romani population.

²⁶ EUMC (2003) *Breaking the Barriers – Romani Women and Access to Public Health Care*. Vienna.
²⁷ *Education at a Glance*, 2004.

Country specific causes for a low enrolment rate of Romani children in ECEC programs, and the policy framework of each AGS target county, are detailed in Annex 1.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_aggs_policy_paper_1.pdf

A description of AGS target localities and the beneficiary communities can be found in Annex 2.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_aggs_policy_paper_1.pdf

3.4. THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF THE AGS MODEL

There are two main objectives of the AGS model:

1. To scale-up access to quality ECEC services for disadvantaged Romani children.
2. To improve early childhood development outcomes for Romani children, so as to enhance their school readiness and subsequent life opportunities.

These objectives were fulfilled through a wide range of activities that were tailored to the local situation and the needs of the participating Romani communities. The design of the AGS interventions was developed by keeping in mind both important common features across countries and differences among target localities. The common features informed the design by creating a general approach for interventions and a core set of activities – which cover a range of development dimensions – to be carried out in each location.

The general approach of the AGS project included two key elements:

- 1. To design a set of project activities that provide innovative solutions tailored to local needs, which are determined by a thorough assessment based on data collection and on the opinions of local stakeholders:** In each AGS locality, standardized data tables were designed and used to collect data on the provision of ECEC services and the participation of Romani children in these services, in order to identify gaps for focused interventions. It is evident from these baseline surveys that there are not enough places for complete enrolment of the children in the 3–6-year-old cohort in all the target localities. For this reason, flexible alternative solutions to increase access to ECEC services for Romani children are envisaged in these localities: community-based and home-based programs to develop a learning environment for children in their communities until the provision of mainstream ECEC services can be developed. Training programs in parenting practices, nutrition, health prevention, and immunization issues through health mediators' campaigns are additional activities.

2. To benefit the highest possible number of children through the project: In the two locations AGS addressed in Romania, there are 145 Romani children ages 3–6 who were not enrolled in ECEC. REF and its partners targeted 100 percent enrolment in those two localities. In Hungary, both in the urban locality and in the microregion, the project plans 100 percent enrolment of the 205 Romani children who are currently not signed up for preschool. In Slovakia, the objective was to increase enrolment to the full capacity of the existing preschool institutions. Those 50 children (about 20 percent of the total) who could not be enrolled in Slovakia, were served with an at-home preparation program, as well as training for the mothers of the preschoolers. In the five AGS localities in FYR Macedonia, the baseline surveys showed an estimated 3,273 Romani children were not enrolled in kindergarten. Given the lack of facilities in FYR Macedonia, REF targeted the enrolment of 207 children in kindergarten, while the rest of the children received alternative ECEC services.

3.5. DESCRIPTION OF THE CORE COMPONENTS OF THE AGS PROJECT

The AGS project was designed to address the needs – determined by the local and national context – of the 16 target localities, in order to optimize the efficiency of interventions so that they create real opportunities and real differences for the beneficiary children. This approach is reflected in the variety of activities involved in the project.

A mixture of common and unique activities have been implemented in each target locality. The interventions were either center-, community-, or home-based.

The AGS project's four core components, which defined common activities for all localities, are as follows:

1. Improving access to ECEC services for Romani children

- Addressing barriers to access ECEC services for Romani children ages 3–6 (including administrative, financial, and spatial barriers, capacity constraints, and health issues).
- Providing enrolment and attendance support through Romani mediators.
- Providing home visits and counseling for families of Romani children from infancy to age 6.

2. Quality ECEC programs for Romani children

- Improving the quality of teaching and the learning environment.
- Improving quality by empowering Romani mothers (adapting the Home Preschool Community Liaison subprogram).
- Preventing segregation of Romani children.

3. Parental empowerment

- Offering non-formal adult education to engage parents and improve parenting practices (working on literacy skills and using “Your Story”-kind of programs in center- or home-based settings).
- Holding community motivation events – with the active participation of head teachers, nurses, mayors, and so on – and distributing information leaflets.

4. Promoting sustainability of services

- Building partnerships, informing and involving a wide range of local stakeholders in project activities.
- Undertaking negotiations with decision-makers on the local and national level.

In more detail, the AGS project's common activities, which are determined by the core components, include the following interventions:

3.5.1. Promoting enrolment through mediators/Romani preschool assistants

AGS has been instrumental in highlighting the need to use qualified preschool teachers, Romani assistants, and mediators – mainly Romani community mediators – in ECEC, especially in geographically segregated or isolated communities. REF considered it essential to have trusted mediators working as a link between the Romani community and public institutions. Sometimes the mediator addresses both educational and health issues, and sometimes they specialize in just one of these areas. In some localities, mediators are trained community members; in others, they are professionals who have built good connections with the community. Because of the different circumstances in different locations, these functions were carried out in different ways.

In the four AGS countries, door-to-door visits by mediators provided families with information about ECEC benefits and helped build links between families and institutions – with very satisfactory results. The home visits proved to be an effective way of promoting the enrolment of children into ECEC services, and follow-up visits were a good way to get children and parents involved in AGS activities. The visits also allowed for successful dissemination of information on hygiene, health prevention, and health problems – as well as discussion of sensitive topics that would not be appropriate for a group meeting or community event. Communication with parents and regular visits provided the basis for families and educational institutions to cooperate, thereby reducing attendance problems in the communities. Through home visits, mediators assisted the parents in finding solutions to problems like absenteeism. The mediators in the project organized parent-teacher meetings and open houses; they helped to promote Romani enrolment; and then they monitored enrolment, in close cooperation with kindergarten pedagogical and administrative staff. All the mediators had pre-established relationships with the community in which they worked – and they were provided with ongoing training, together with preschool staff, so they could act as information points for the community.

The mediators involved in AGS fulfilled a range of roles particular to the contexts of different localities. In all cases however, they became an essential bridging point between the community, service providers, and AGS partners. In each target locality, mediators found that it was not possible to carry out an ECEC intervention without addressing other needs of the beneficiary families. Some of the AGS mediators therefore found themselves dealing with housing or social issues, or mediating between local authorities and the Romani community. For example, in some localities of Slovakia, community mediators took the role of teaching assistants and acted as caregivers for Romani children attending kindergarten or alternative home-based services. Macedonian mediators tailored their services to local needs, and therefore focused on assisting ID application procedures (filling in applications, paying for fees, and so on) and managing the obligatory free vaccination for children, while also discussing issues related to early child development. In Romania, mediators supported the members of the two target communities in obtaining identity documents, putting together the documentation needed for preschool and school enrolment, and registering with a general practitioner to access basic health care services. (Of the 300 inhabitants of Mofleni community, only 25–30 people were registered for health care before the project, according to the data collected by the health mediator.) The Romanian AGS partners also took actions to draw up property deeds for some of the Romani families, and forwarded requests to connect houses to the electrical grid (Mofleni) or public water supplies (Telechiu) – as well as seeking improvement of public roads (Telechiu) or installation of other utilities for the dwellings of the two Romani communities. In several cases, AGS mediators assisted parents in accessing the labor market, with activities like writing a resume, searching for available jobs, and contacting potential employers.

3.5.2. Promoting enrolment by eliminating barriers for families

It has been stated above that the low enrolment of children in ECEC is often caused by a high level of poverty. Romani families often are not able to afford enrolment fees or to access adequate health services, and they often lack information about positive impacts of ECEC programs. The AGS project was actively involved in eliminating these barriers and in providing necessary resources for families in dire need. The project made sure that any financial assistance was contingent on active involvement of families in awareness-raising activities, as well as their commitment to participate in ECEC projects, including informal adult training, assistance for children, enrolment of children, and so on. Tailored home visits played an important role in assessing particular needs including:

- the financial situation of families;
- vaccination and health examination (especially in FYR Macedonia);
- identity documents (especially in FYR Macedonia and Romania);
- information about requirements for enrolment;
- assessment of children’s educational development needs;
- pre-natal assistance.

This approach proved very successful in Skopje/Šuto Orizari, where mediators worked with families in order to help them acquire birth certificates, get their children vaccinated, and enroll them in kindergartens. Assistance was provided in each locality, with generally positive results and an enhanced participation rate. Home visits were especially useful in geographically segregated communities, where the majority of households do not have telephones or access to essential information via the Internet. The use of mediators also allowed parents to communicate in Romani, which proved especially beneficial in FYR Macedonia and Romania. Home visits demonstrate that formal education strategies are in acute need of individually tailored approaches and alternative methodologies, especially when dealing with low-income groups and geographically segregated communities.

Individual activity plans helped to address especially difficult cases. Using external resources from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the scope of the AGS project was widened in one of the Hungarian AGS localities in the second year of implementation. This allowed AGS to give increased attention to those families for whom the project did not succeed in involving all children ages 3–6. The individual activity plans assisted 16 children, for whom further intensive steps and an even more integrated approach were defined: These families were in direct contact with a community mediator, who facilitated contact to public agencies with great success.²⁸

3.5.3. Promoting enrolment with need-based material support

Assistance was organized to directly address missing items required for regular preschool attendance. In general, clothing (shoes, tracksuits, and pajamas), school supplies, and hygiene packages were needed in three target countries, FYR Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia.

The cost of lunch was also covered for AGS beneficiary children in kindergartens and community centers in Romania and Slovakia. In Hungary, need-based material support was not provided within the AGS project because, since 2009, a special social subsidy for “multiply disadvantaged children” who are enrolled in kindergarten is available, to cover the costs of clothing, education supplies, and travel.

3.5.4. Providing transportation to ensure access to services

Transportation and accompaniment to and from preschools and community centers was also organized in numerous Macedonian, Romanian, and Slovak localities, to facilitate access to ECEC services for children living in isolated and distant communities. (In one locality, preschool was only accessible via a walk of more than 40 minutes by the side of a busy road that lacks pavements for pedestrians; in another, Romani children had to go a long way downhill to kindergarten and had to climb uphill to get home.)

²⁸ Based on this intervention, which began with the 2011/12 school year, more than five children ages 3–6 were already enrolled.

In FYR Macedonia, based on the needs identified by local partners, transportation was provided for the enrolled AGS children in Vinica and Delčevo during the winter period. The municipality of Delčevo took on the additional responsibility of covering the transport costs for the AGS beneficiary children from the village of Trbotivište who were enrolled in the Delčevo kindergarten.

3.5.5. Solving spatial constraints to promote enrolment

In FYR Macedonia, given the lack of facilities, adaptations were made in the rural communities of Crnik to create kindergarten classrooms co-financed by the AGS project and the municipalities. In Vinica, the local kindergarten was also short on space and was unable to include AGS children before construction of an additional 100 square meters of space on the preschool facility. This work was also funded jointly by the project and the municipality.

In the Romanian localities, the number of places in kindergarten was increased according to the needs of the target population of 3–6-year-olds, as determined in the survey conducted at the start of project implementation in 2010. A nursery for children ranging in age from infancy to 3 years was also established in the framework of the AGS, in the community center of Telechiu. Establishment of the nursery involved: rearranging the community center, constructing an annex building to provide a suitable lavatory for the nursery, and purchasing appropriate furniture, equipment, and educational materials for ECEC activities.

In Zborov, Slovakia, the AGS project assisted the municipality in converting two classrooms in the municipal preschool into three classrooms, thereby allowing the formation of a new class.

3.5.6. Developing quality of services

For the AGS project, the core activities implemented by the ISSA in the four countries consisted of providing training on Quality Inclusive Early Childhood Education services. Through its trainings, ISSA introduced practitioners to a child-centered and holistic approach to child development and care, an approach that included: teaching students from diverse backgrounds, raising multicultural awareness to topics like Romani culture and language, child-centered learning, monitoring child progress, and creating linkages between preschools and primary schools. ISSA's trainings also promoted quality practices in home-learning environments, center-, or community-based services. In each of the four countries, project participants conducted different types of training, which focused on various topics and had different target groups, depending of the type of intervention implemented in the community. The training programs were tailored to the objectives of the project, the specific needs of the target population, and the implementing intervention required – and they had the ultimate scope of improving the competencies of adults working directly or indirectly with children from birth through age 6. A secondary goal of the trainings was raising awareness of parents and community members about the importance of the early years in a child's development, strengthening the community's capacity for providing a nurturing and healthy environment, and fighting against discrimination, which hinders the children's access to services and opportunities for later success.

3.5.7. Facilitating transition to primary education

Different activities have been tested to facilitate transition to primary school for Romani children. In each locality, parents were provided with enrolment assistance, which involved explanations of enrolment procedures and assistance in completing them, including obtaining birth certificates, vaccination and medical certificates, and so on. Professional cooperation and harmonization of pedagogical approaches and programs of kindergartens and primary schools were also promoted through training of teachers and caregivers. Open house events were organized in Hungarian and Slovak preschools and primary schools. The main goal was to make sure all Romani children in each given community were receiving mainstream school services.

3.5.8. Parental engagement, empowering families

AGS built its initiatives on the notion that parental involvement in a child's preschool activities leads to improved academic success and serves as a gateway to involvement of parents during the child's elementary school years. In each country, the focus of outreach activities aimed at empowering families, and especially women, included parental education programs designed to: impart the importance of preschool; improve quality of preventive care, including explaining the need for immunizations and check-ups; and build trust between communities and early childhood education and care institutions.

On-the-ground activities managed by the local partners included innovative methodologies adapted to local circumstances via home visits by qualified professionals, in-school sessions, and community-center events designed to attract families and promote community relations. These activities focused on:

- Nurturing and sensitive childrearing – skills required in addition to the basics of providing good nutrition and an environment conducive to learning.
- Parent-school communication, which includes parent-teacher meetings, informal conversations, and information sharing.
- Learning at home and in community centers, especially in localities where preschool facilities are absent, and providing adult education, especially for mothers.
- Decision-making, which entails participation in community events, parent-teacher organization, and awareness raising.
- Self-esteem building activities, including reading sessions organized for mothers.
- Cultural exchange and mutual learning.

3.5.9. Building partnerships with local authorities

In each location, municipal governments were key partners. The AGS project recognized that, in order to secure sustainability of initiatives, it is important to involve local authorities and convince them to participate actively. That is why AGS operated in partnership with local authorities, creating synergies among all available resources and enhancing inter-organizational reciprocity.

In some communities – for example, Slovakia and Telechiu, Romania – AGS partners managed to secure financial support from local authorities for provision of transport and for salaries of nurses, teachers, and preschool assistants. Funds for refurbishing classrooms were provided, and in FYR Macedonia and in Romania, successful partnerships were created to cover infrastructure costs jointly. The municipality of one of the urban localities in Slovakia, which first engaged with a local Romani community through the AGS project, planned a number of consecutive activities in the areas of hygiene, employment, and housing – and successfully applied for EU Structural Funds to build and operate a community center.

In FYR Macedonia, the NGO Ambrela is part of the Working Group of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and it actively cooperates with local health institutions and the civic registration office to share information on IDs for newborns, so that they can receive immunization and be included in the data registry. At the public health center in Skopje, partners were able to obtain free-of-charge health certificates, which are needed for children to enroll in kindergarten. This was largely due to the commitment and capacity of NGOs to form networks and exert pressure on public agencies.

Another form of cooperation with local authorities is based on information sharing and mutual learning. AGS partner CRAJE, operating in Romania, serves as a reference point for local governments, and is very active in recommending experts to work with Romani communities and preparing and testing children, in order to see who requires extra assistance from psychologists, speech therapy experts, and so on. Romanian partners deliver contextual knowledge about Roma to the local authorities and lobby local authorities for enhanced attention to the challenges facing Roma.

In Hungary a successful form of cooperation was the so-called “mayors’ forums,” where local government, kindergarten representatives and AGS staff had the chance to exchange good practices and to discuss opportunities and possibilities for sustaining the AGS project’s activities.

3.5.10. Building partnership with institutions

(kindergarten/health services/community centers/school authorities)

Local AGS projects built strong inter-organizational relationships with public and private institutions, such as kindergartens, community centers, and universities. The relationships with kindergartens vary, but overall experiences have been positive. In Telechiu, Romania, the implementing NGO (Ruhama Foundation) cooperated with the school inspector’s department, which committed to covering the costs of salaries to hire two teachers.

In Šuto Orizari, FYR Macedonia, cooperation between NGOs and local kindergartens resulted in a decision to waive the tuition fee for vulnerable children. A specialist in children with special needs was provided in order to assess individual children and make recommendations for teachers and parents. The specialist met with teachers and

parents together, to discuss the particular needs of each child and outline educational methodologies required to guide the child’s educational development. Along with providing a valuable health service for the community, this initiative also enhanced trust between teachers and parents.

In Hungary, promotion of face-to-face discussions between teachers and parents, as well as regular meetings between NGOs and school staff, proved effective in building consensus on action plans and strategies. Moreover, the involvement of college students in ECEC initiatives resulted in a fruitful exchange of information, and knowledge about enhanced teaching methodologies.

In Slovakia, the project was carried out with the assistance of the Methodological-Pedagogical Centers in Banská Bystrica and Prešov. These centers especially assisted with the training of institutional staff, and evaluation of the training outcomes in practice, but they also helped support the enrolment of children in rural localities. Cooperation with the school inspectorate in Slovakia provided communication channels for spreading awareness about the barriers to ECEC that Romani children face, as well as specific issues confronting families. In some localities, the Regional Bureau of Public Health also got involved in the project.

In Romania, experts were appointed from specialized public institutions – the Department of Social Assistance, the County School Board of Bihor, the District Public Health Authority – to handle some of the work necessary for obtaining the operating permits to host the AGS nursery within the community center and to increase the capacity of the public kindergarten in Telechiu for one more group of children. These public experts helped to design the interior of the nursery, and to purchase appropriate furniture, sanitary equipment, toys, and teaching materials. In the Mofleni community, educators from the local nursery conduct educational and social activities with children three times a week.

An interesting feature of AGS implementation is that, in some localities, cooperation expanded beyond public institutions and included other actors, mainly religious institutions. In Zborov, a nun from the Sisters of Salome is running educational activities for younger children. Both the caregiver and the children attending the program could benefit from the fruitful cooperation within the AGS project: The caregiver nun, who did not have a professional background, was trained and assisted by the local ISSA partner, while the children received educational and material support. There was also close cooperation with the local priest in Telechiu, Romania, through the project.

3.5.11. Regular assessment and monitoring using common instruments and quality frameworks

Monitoring employed a common methodology but was handled at the local level, using people and organizations trusted by the communities. The partner SGI worked out a monitoring strategy for the AGS project and trained REF country officers and country facilitators about how to elaborate monitoring visits. Part of the monitoring strategy included the standardization of instruments used for monitoring visits: observation grids, interview

guides and guidelines, stakeholder analyses, and so on. SGI also supported REF in fine-tuning the system of project indicators and ensuring consistency in the measurement of indicators in all project locations. It is believed that these activities resulted in improved monitoring procedures in REF programs targeting ECEC.

ISSA also provided special training to REF country facilitators, to show them how to use the ISSA tool (Continuum for Assessing Caregivers) for assessing the caregivers working in AGS settings. The training focused on concrete exercises for using the external assessment tool, including observing videos from AGS settings, scoring indicators, and discussing the indicators. REF country facilitators gained handy, easy-to-use knowledge when visiting local institutional partners.

3.6. DIFFERENT PROJECT COMPONENTS (UNIQUE ACTIVITIES) IN THE TARGET LOCALITIES

While the above-described common approaches proved effective across all AGS locations, there were some important differences in the policy environment and in the institutional and partnership arrangements of each locality, and these differences are reflected in the project design. Because the various countries and localities have their own unique circumstances, the core set of activities described above had to be supplemented with different approaches designed to address particular situations. These included:

3.6.1. Covering kindergarten fees for Romani children

In FYR Macedonia, parents are required to pay 30 percent of the costs for their children to attend preschool, a fee of EUR 25 a month. Around 133 children, aged 2.5–6 were registered in the kindergartens at the beginning of the project, including 57 children from Šuto Orizari, 22 from Delčevo, 30 from Vinica, and 24 from Crnik.²⁹ For the majority of targeted children, the fee for kindergarten participation was provided by the project, while for seven children from Šuto Orizari, the fee was waived by the kindergarten and for nine children from Crnik, it was paid by the municipality. The project partners made efforts to target children coming from very deprived families – especially in Šuto Orizari and Vinica – while in Delčevo and Crnik, all children of the appropriate age were identified, and efforts were made to include them in the kindergarten.

3.6.2. Developing alternative community-based service provision

Alternative community-based services have been developed where needed, to serve isolated communities and communities that have insufficient places in kindergartens or with other formal service providers. In Slovakia, in Abranovce and Zborov, where existing facilities are insufficient to accommodate all children, activities were undertaken in the framework of the AGS pilot to ensure that children who cannot be enrolled in preschool

²⁹ Numbers received from interviewees for the quality assessment in Macedonia.

receive adequate preparation in a home environment, so they can make a successful transition into primary education. In these localities, AGS children participated in informal preschool activities at the home of one of the Romani AGS mediators. In Zborov, some 15 Romani children also attended the Školička – the “Little School” operated in the house of a religious order that was involved in AGS activities.

In Romania, two different approaches were tested. The first approach, which was used in the Molteni neighbourhood, involved the establishment of community/multi-functional centers. These centers are information and counseling points for the Romani community, designed to support Romani families in solving various issues and to provide information and counseling with all types of challenges, but especially challenges pertaining to early childhood development. Such centers are created in partnership with municipalities/local authorities and School Inspectorates. There was also an emphasis on cost-effective arrangements and low-cost materials, as well as on improving skills for using community resources and the existing resources of the everyday environment, to enhance children's development and learning. Some of the proposed forms for this approach included half-day programs for children, with a place for parents to join and meet; programs and premises for parent groups to meet once or twice a month, either with or without children, for workshops; and home-based meetings/workshops for parents.

A detailed description of the community-based interventions is available in the AGS Case Study: *Community Resource Centers: A Holistic Approach to Meeting the Complex Needs of Roma Families in Romania*.

3.6.3. Improving the institutional learning environment

In the Hungarian urban locality of Nyíregyháza, AGS provided support for the all-Romani kindergarten in the segregated Guszev settlement to improve the educational environment and equipment for the children. A Romani assistant was also hired in the kindergarten in the framework of AGS.

In Romania, the existing educational facilities were renovated and developed at the start of the project: AGS oversaw provision of kindergarten sanitary facilities, access to water supplies, proper furnishing of classrooms, and educational equipment and materials – key elements that were missing in the preschools of the target localities before the project.

3.6.4. Providing expert services

Children benefitted from the AGS's provision of the expert services of speech therapists and psychologists in Romania and Slovakia, and special-needs specialists in the Macedonian localities.³⁰

³⁰ Nevertheless, all attempts of the local partners in the Molteni community (Romania) to involve a pediatrician or a general practitioner (family doctor) in the project have failed. None of the medical practitioners contacted by AGS implementers said they could work permanently in the Molteni community, or work extra hours visiting the Roma community regularly.

3.6.5. Preventing enrolment into special education

As noted above, inappropriate enrolment of Roma in special education is a major challenge in all countries. But the approach AGS used to tackle this challenge reflects important differences in each country. For example, in Slovakia it is very common that children enter special education because they participated in a special preparatory class during their preparatory years: It is almost inevitable that children who start in a special program during preschool end up in special education, or in “zero grades,” in mainstream primary schools. While these classes are meant to allow children to catch up, they rarely do so – and the zero grades consist almost exclusively of Romani children. The new Education Law in Slovakia, however, makes it clear that parents must give their consent to enrolment of children in special education. So the AGS project’s activities with parents had a special focus on empowering families to assert their rights to choose the type of education their child will receive, with full knowledge of the options available to them. The project also sought to generate good practices of “informed consent” that can be adopted by the Ministry of Education in Slovakia. The Methodological-Pedagogical Centers in Banská Bystrica and Prešov, the local Slovak partner organizations of AGS, participated in school enrolment testing of Romani children from Zborov and Abranovce, in order to help the children and their families avoid misplacement of Romani children into special schools. REF believes in the many benefits of a fully inclusive public education system, where all children attend quality kindergarten and schools regardless of ethnic background or disability status.

3.6.6. After-school tutoring

In each location in Slovakia, tutoring for AGS beneficiary children was provided as a separate project activity in the first year of primary education, to compensate for the lack of home preparation for school that is common among children of disadvantaged Romani communities. It was the ultimate goal of this activity to foster the schooling success of Romani children and to prevent them from continuing their studies in segregated classes after the first year of school. The after-school instruction was carried out in primary schools, and involved teachers of the classes attended by the children. Teachers worked with small groups of children, so that they were able to focus on addressing individual needs of the children. As a result of this activity, the children’s performance and rate of progression improved significantly, and so did teacher-parent communication.

3.6.7. Empowerment of parents (especially mothers)

In Hungary and Romania, a specific activity was designed to help mothers learn to read and encourage them to read with their children and improve their children’s literary skills. The Hungarian “Meséd” (“Your Story”) reading sessions and the Romanian “Telling Stories” project facilitated involvement of parents (especially mothers) in various educational activities. Meséd provided the opportunity for Romani women to improve both their reading and parenting skills. In the Meséd project, Romani mothers meet together weekly with a trained facilitator (eight out of nine facilitators are Romani women) for two-hour sessions in groups of eight-to-15 members. During the first hour of each session, group members receive a new children’s story book. The books chosen are of a high quality and generally convey messages to children about their feelings, behavior, and other life lessons. The

mothers take turns reading the story aloud, while the facilitator guides the reading and initiates discussion about elements of the story and pictures. This constructivist learning technique encourages readers to explore the text and facilitates improved comprehension.³¹ By involving the women in the story, the facilitator is able to both engage them in the text and demonstrate a teaching technique to be replicated with their children.

The Meséd activities are designed to indirectly support and empower women caregivers as well as to directly provide the skills and knowledge that will improve ECEC outcomes for young children. Many Romani women have had negative experiences with formal education, due to barriers with language, discrimination, or other reasons. These experiences may have occurred when they were children themselves, or in the often very formal settings of typical adult education. Meséd facilitators are carefully trained in ECEC, and in facilitation skills, to ensure that they cultivate a supportive, caring, and non-judgmental atmosphere in their groups. The groups become an informal learning environment where women are able to re-establish their confidence in reading. The success of this ECEC intervention relies heavily on taking a systemic approach that educates and empowers Romani mothers – who of course are important mediators in any effort to improve the development outcomes of their children.³²

Beyond promoting the specifically educational aspects of the groups, facilitators also encourage women to express their feelings and describe their struggles as a parent, and to share stories, cultural insights, and other common concerns among themselves. As it helps develop friendships and a collaborative system between group members, Meséd aims to promote sustainable outcomes by empowering communities of women and their families to support one another. Altogether 396 reading sessions were led by nine Meséd facilitators, of whom eight were Roma.

A detailed description of the Meséd program is available in the AGS Case Study: *The Meséd Project*.

“Parents School,” a training program covering parenting practices, offers a second alternative approach for empowering parents. The program was initiated in Telechiu village, Romania, and the overall goal of its activities is to create more effective home learning environments for families whose children do not attend formal crèches and preschools. ISSA’s resource “Parenting with Confidence,” as well as other resources and methods, were used to support and expand skills and knowledge that help parents improve the development of their young children.

The local AGS partner also organized free literacy courses for parents at the community center of Telechiu at the end of 2011. These courses were intended to develop minimum reading and writing skills for adults from the community,

³¹“Constructivist” learning theories hold that learning is an active process that every individual embarks upon to organize and construct meaning from the world. To learn this way, children must be immersed in opportunities to make their own personal discoveries of language, and to develop reasoning. See S. K. Green and M. E. Gredler, “A Review and Analysis of Constructivism for School-Based Practice,” *School Psychology Review*, 31, No. 1 (2002).

³² *Ibid.*

especially for parents of the AGS beneficiary children. The large number of parents who are illiterate affects the development of children, because it makes it difficult for parents to actively support their children's education, and they are hindered in effective communication with institutions that provide public services.

The Home Preschool Community Liaison (HSCL) Program, a pilot that involved beneficiaries in Hungary, was designed for Romani parents to take an active role in preschool sessions – for example, by delivering lessons on topics of their choice, such as baking, fishing, and so on. This pilot aimed to strengthen cooperation between the institutions and the parents of Romani children, and to empower parents, so they gain confidence and enjoy increased respect and understanding from members of the preschool community. Through the HSCL Program, parents also received counseling in preparation of their training sessions from AGS mentors, and kindergarten teachers received training in running the program.

3.6.8. Working with tertiary education institutions for future educators

In Hungary, the AGS Pilot approached the local teacher training institution, the College of Nyíregyháza, and established cooperation through common activities. The students of the Pedagogy and Humanities faculties of the College of Nyíregyháza obtained experience in working with disadvantaged groups, and this training counted as part of their formal coursework or practical training obligations. The involvement of the College in the partnership was one of the main components of the sustainability of the AGS pilot results in Hungary. The participating college students gained experience that is vital for forming proper attitudes towards Romani children – and for achieving competence in teaching socially disadvantaged children. Moreover, the attitude of a tertiary educational institute, and its training scheme, was also changed through this cooperation: Teaching practice for students of teacher training colleges typically took place in the most elitist institutions, where teachers in training rarely meet any child with social disadvantages or ethnic differences. For example, Nyíregyháza College usually provides practical training for its teaching students in a local kindergarten where only 2 percent of the children are multiply disadvantaged. (The children's ethnicity is unknown as Hungary does not collect ethnic data.) The participation of college students in the various activities of the AGS project, such as in the Meséd and HSCL sessions, has contributed a great deal to their professional development.

A summary of main project activities by target localities is included in Annex 3.

A detailed description of the activities of the AGS project in the 16 target localities can be found in Annex 4.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_ags_policy_paper_1.pdf

Dissemination and cross-country learning activities can be found in Annex 5.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_ags_policy_paper_1.pdf

3.7. NOTABLE RESULTS AND POSITIVE CHANGES

In the framework of the project's Qualitative Assessment,³³ AGS evaluators interviewed a variety of stakeholders in all of the project localities in each country, to evaluate the relevance of AGS activities to the target group and the effectiveness of the project. Interviews and focus groups covered project implementers, parents of children, mediators, teachers and administrators in preschools and primary schools, local government representatives – and in some localities, other professionals and experts, for example, health professionals in FYR Macedonia. Desk research included a thorough analysis of the available project documentation: project description, targeted country outcomes, project reports, and documents from implemented activities.

Hard indicators of the project were collected and analyzed in the two rounds of Household Surveys (HHS) conducted in the AGS target localities. HHS1 was conducted November 2010–April 2011 and HHS2 May–July 2012. The most notable achievements of the AGS project, acknowledged by the qualitative evaluation reports of the four target countries³⁴ and indicated by the results of the two Household Surveys, are summarized below:

3.7.1. Access, enrolment, and attendance

Hungary: AGS achieved improvements in enrolling the youngest children and helped to improve regularity of attendance. This can be explained by the work of the community mediators, who continuously liaised between the preschool institutions and families. Community mediators conducted home visits and actively reached out to the community. They assessed the problems that families are facing and raised awareness about ECEC. Based on interviews with different stakeholders, mediators successfully handled conflicts between parents and kindergarten representatives and mobilized the community for the upcoming events and activities.

Other program elements, such as “Your Story” and the HSCL, supported a change in attitudes of both parents and teachers, thereby contributing to a better understanding of the importance of ECEC and a better relationship among these stakeholders. These shifting perceptions also were mentioned among the factors that had an effect upon attendance.

FYR Macedonia: Without exception, everyone interviewed stated that the biggest result of the project was “the inclusion of the children in kindergarten.” Based on the judgments of kindergarten teachers and directors, observations from local partners, and especially the reactions of parents, many of the children improved their

³³ In line with standard OECD DAC criteria applied by the EC to evaluate Structural Fund interventions, the Quality Evaluation of the AGS project covers relevance of AGS to its target group, and effectiveness of the project (to what extent the objectives have been met), based mainly on qualitative data. It also looks at shorter-term impacts, including those outside of the expected results. Sustainability is briefly addressed, though it is a complex issue in the context of the pilot nature of the intervention. Efficiency is not addressed directly, but some remarks on administrative arrangements that came out of stakeholder discussions are noted.

³⁴ At the time of compilation of the current document, the draft version of the qualitative assessment country reports were available.

Macedonian language skills, gained hygienic habits, and socialized with the other children. Other skills – drawing, singing, playing, and so on – which are equally important as language skills, are slowly improving and are almost at the same level as that of other children enrolled in the kindergarten, regardless of their ethnicity.

For almost all the parents interviewed, the project's provision of financial support for the inclusion of their children in the kindergarten, that is, covering the participation fee of EUR 25, is the most important and valuable benefit. With only two exceptions, almost all of them said their children would not go to the kindergarten without this kind of support.

The local partner in Skopje provided further material support, such as clothing, hygienic material, and so on. This type of assistance was crucial for a number of Romani families, and in some cases was indispensable for the attendance of children in the kindergarten.

Based on the needs identified by the local partners, transportation was provided for the enrolled AGS children in Vinica and Delčevo during the winter months. After the municipality of Delčevo took over transportation from the AGS, there were reported problems that caused the AGS beneficiary children from Trabotivište to be absent from kindergarten for several days. This would indicate that the transportation service is fundamental to ensuring regular attendance. Accompaniment on the school bus for the AGS children was provided only in Delčevo during the winter period. In an individual initiative, the grandfather of an AGS child accompanied the children in 2010, without receiving income from the project. Based on the positive experience of this volunteer effort, which pointed to a need, local partner KHAM petitioned REF for the reallocation of some funds, and during the second winter of the project, this person was engaged by AGS.

Romania: All parents interviewed in the investigated Romani communities in Romania said that the positive developments for their children grant them a privileged status. In all the interviews, parents stressed that, without AGS intervention, they would have never had the opportunity to provide these educational services to their children. Increased kindergarten attendance is the most visible and appreciated result of the project, according to AGS project experts, representatives of local and regional institutions, and representatives of the community as a whole. Increasing attendance entailed the development of local educational institutions in both investigated communities. In Telechiu, the first nursery ever was set up in a community center, in the middle of the Romani community. The new nursery provided access to early development services for children from infancy to age 3 who were living in poverty. It also ensured that older children would not be absent from school because they have to take care of the little ones at home while their mother works to ensure a minimal family income, according to mothers interviewed.

Regular kindergarten attendance – and attendance at the nursery in the case of the Telechiu village – was achieved by building a close relationship, based on trust and continuous active communication, among the staff

of the community center, educators, and parents, through the AGS project. This direct relationship, established mostly during home visits, helped to raise awareness at the community level about the need for early childhood education, involved parents in the activities of the center, helped to set up a close relationship between parents and teachers, and ensured a high attendance rate in kindergarten and school.

The frequency of kindergarten attendance is strongly conditioned by the support that families with preschool children received as part of the AGS project. Romani parents say that, without this assistance, their lack of money would prevent them from purchasing the goods required for the education of their children. Providing a hot meal a day for children who attend kindergarten or nursery, and ensuring transportation for those who attend kindergarten and live a few miles away, amounts to vital support for Romani families. According to the parents, without this support, the attendance rate would decrease dramatically, especially during winter.

The AGS project also helped create a more welcoming and attractive environment for children by adequately refurbishing classrooms, building a lavatory, and purchasing educational materials, games, and toys.

Slovakia: Attendance improvements were noted by mediators and officials of the preschool and local government across all AGS localities in Slovakia. Attendance and children's educational outcomes improve when parents trust educational institutions. That is why it helps to open up the institutions to Romani parents, through formal communication channels, like inclusion of Roma on the school board, and informal channels, like participation in open days or other school events. In general, there was positive feedback from parents and preschool staff on holding open events and encouraging all parents to actively engage with the institution.

In those localities where distance to the preschool was an issue, accompaniment and transportation helped improve attendance significantly. Material assistance compensated for the lack of required equipment in some families. In some localities, mediators recommended providing the aid to the school rather than directly to families.

In localities where the demand for preschool places exceeded availability, AGS intervention involved informal preschool teaching. Children in all localities who were not yet enrolled in preschool took part in some preschool activities led by an AGS project mediator. Where capacity of preschools is insufficient, informal preschool activities led by qualified mediators appear to have significant benefits. While this is not a full substitute for preschool education, it can in part compensate for the lack of facilities, or complement services in places where preschool is available only for children right before entering the school.

For all localities and countries, the AGS Household Survey results indicate positive tendencies in enrolment and regular attendance at preschools. The share of children staying at home, among those younger than 3 years, decreased from 89 percent to 83 percent – and for children ages 3–6, the proportion staying at home dropped from 33 percent to 25

percent. In all countries, the non-enrolment rate (share of children staying at home) decreased continuously as their age rose. There were different breakpoints – age levels at which enrolment rates substantially increased: In Hungary, the breakpoint was age 3, by which time only 9 percent of children were not enrolled in any type of institution. In Slovak AGS localities, the non-enrolment rate remained relatively high, even at the age of 3 (89 percent), but started to decrease more rapidly in every further age cohort. In AGS localities in Romania, which recorded the most rapid improvement in use of ECEC services by children between birth and age 3, the break appeared by the age of 2, with only a third of children that age not enrolled. In AGS localities in FYR Macedonia, the overall non-enrolment rate was significantly high, even for 5-year-olds, and children's stay-at-home rates only decreased at age 6, when compulsory education starts. By the end of the project, the overall enrolment rates improved in all age groups. The greatest improvement was recorded in AGS Romania, especially in the group of children from infancy to age 3, thanks to a new crèche and preschool class opened in Telechiu and increased kindergarten enrolment in Craiova-Mofleni. In FYR Macedonia, the share of non-enrolled children ages 3–5 decreased due to an increase of children entering kindergartens in several localities, including Skopje/Šuto Orizari, Crnik, and Vinica. In Slovakia, there seems to be a trade-off between improving enrolment of children ages 5–6, at the end of the AGS project, while more 4-year-olds remained non-enrolled. The situation in Hungary after the project was in general similar to the high enrolment levels recorded in the initial survey, with a decrease in non-enrolment of 2-year-olds: from 63 percent to 34 percent.

Parents who did not enroll children younger than age 3 either said the children are too young or that parents without work can stay home with the children. For children aged 3 and above, the reasons for non-enrolment differed in each country. Most children of this age were enrolled in AGS localities in Hungary and Romania. In Slovakia, the most frequently mentioned reasons for keeping children ages 3 or above at home were financial concerns, along with a lack of places in kindergartens and parents who do not work, so they can stay home with the child. In Macedonia, financial concerns – like the cost of kindergarten, shoes, and clothing – receded, because AGS intervention in that country included paying the monthly tuition fee in kindergartens. But financial concerns remained an important barrier in Skopje/Šuto Orizari. Other frequent reasons for non-enrolment included: parents without work can stay home with the child, the child does not like to go to kindergarten, or the child does not understand the language of instruction.

Comparisons of the two surveys also show improvement in the number of days attended in preschool and primary school in the AGS localities. The average attendance for the whole AGS project improved between the two surveys, from 4 to 4.2 days out of five. Measured in terms of non-attendance, the rate of absent days dropped from 19.6 percent to 15.8 percent. It should be noted that the final survey was carried out in early summer 2012 and the initial survey was carried out partially in winter months, when factors like more frequent illnesses, difficulties in commuting to preschool, and so on might skew attendance results. Nonetheless, kindergarten enrolment, as well as the number of respondents, increased between the two surveys, especially in Macedonia and Romania, and a greater

intensity of kindergarten use was accompanied by improved attendance in Hungary and Romania. Attendance in Slovakia remained almost the same, and in FYR Macedonia it actually decreased. The low attendance rate was explained in qualitative country reports by migration, sickness, problems with access, and lack of money or trust in teachers in AGS Slovakia, while AGS Macedonia cited problems with transportation, heating, and humidity in kindergartens, as well as ineffective communication with parents.

There was an increase in use of ECEC-related health and welfare family services by disadvantaged Romani children up to age 3 and their families, according to the second Household Survey. The positive effects of AGS are clearly visible in wider child immunization reported by parents. Overall, the vaccination rate of children was relatively high, at 87 percent, at time of the first survey – a few months after the start of the project. At the end of the project, the vaccination rate as reported by parents increased to almost 100 percent. At the beginning of the AGS project, lower rates of child immunization were reported in some localities in Romania and Macedonia. A significant change was reported in Skopje/Šuto Orizari, where the share of all children vaccinated in a family rose from 29.3 to 98.6 percent at the end of project – and in Craiova-Mofleni with a rise from 79.3 to 90.9 percent. Vaccination of children was evaluated by parents as one of the three most useful activities of the AGS project in Skopje/Šuto Orizari.

3.7.2. Quality improvement of ECEC services

In all the target countries, initial training for teachers, mediators, and facilitators was designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning in kindergartens, preschools, community centers, and home-based settings. Training was tailored to local needs, and differed country by country.

Hungary: An important contribution of the training component of AGS in Hungary is that it created space for intensive knowledge sharing – via multi-stakeholder workshops, HSCL trainings, and mayors' forums – which triggered shifting attitudes and improved practice. The multi-stakeholder workshops organized at the Nyiregyháza College and facilitated by the Partners Hungary Foundation enabled the exchange of experiences of a very diverse group of participants: community mediators, "Your Story" pilot facilitators, kindergarten teachers, college students, and college lecturers. In the framework of the workshops, both the College staff and the professional facilitators from the Partner Hungary Foundation introduced topics that were often inspired by the needs of the participants. On these occasions, interactive working methods were highlighted as being very appealing, interesting, and effective. Because trainers were active with almost all AGS participants, they could highlight interesting case studies and transfer them from one training situation to another.

When it comes to quality development of kindergarten services, the HSCL Program can be highlighted as a very beneficiary activity, which considerably improved the relations among kindergarten staff and parents and supported parenting skills and other soft skills of the parents. A very important contribution of the project is that it enhanced the presence in preschool institutions of Romani culture and traditions, which were also emphasized

by trainers. Local municipality representatives confirmed the improvement of the institutions, remarking that there were prevailing prejudices against Roma before the AGS project, but the liaisons of the HSCL program, and the possibility to bring parents into the institutions, changed attitudes.

Macedonia: Romani preschool assistants and nurses provide important links between preschool institutions and the community. They help to bridge language barriers and help kindergartens to effectively cooperate with families. They tend to introduce topics and initiatives that depict Romani culture. The role of Romani preschool assistants is highly appreciated both by parents and kindergarten staff in Eastern FYR Macedonia. Without exception, all parents, mediators and local partners said that the four Romani preschool assistants engaged in the AGS project are very important for their children and for the community. Increasing the numbers of Romani teachers and Romani preschool assistants in all kindergartens is highly recommended by parents and local partners. When non-Macedonian-speaking children are enrolled in kindergarten, the need for translation (from Romani or Turkish) is intensive during the adaptation periods.

The AGS project's enrolment of three special-needs specialists in Šuto Orizari contributed to better inclusion of children with certain problems in adaptation or other health problems.

Romania: From the beginning, teachers, caretakers, and permanent staff of the community center have all been driven towards special training in diversity and specific work with children from disadvantaged families. At first, the lack of training in intercultural education methods and the inability to manage cultural diversity posed a serious communication barrier. This barrier was overcome with the help of ISSA training sessions and advice from local AGS experts on education. In the focus groups, it was easy to see a considerable difference between the attitudes and pedagogical methodologies of educators who had been trained through the AGS project and those elementary school teachers who have not benefited from AGS trainings and activities.

The language barrier is another challenge that staff had to face when working with Romani children in kindergartens. The solution came naturally, in the absence of formal methods for working with children whose native tongue is not the official language: The teaching staff of the nursery and kindergarten learned to adapt their pedagogical skills and, through games, they learned some basic Romani from the children, while the Romani children smoothly developed their communication skills in the Romanian language.³⁵

³⁵ Overall, language barriers for children in many localities became a greater challenge at the end of the project, as the share of children having no difficulties with language in kindergartens decreased from 72 percent to 64 percent. However, a closer look at localities where more children with language difficulties appeared at the end of project shows that these are exactly those localities that experienced a rise in kindergarten enrolment during the AGS project – and where Romanes mother tongue is common, that is, Telechiu, Craiova-Mofleni, Šuto Orizari, Crnik, and Vinica.

Slovakia: At the start of the project, Nadácia Škola Dokorán (Wide Open School Foundation), the Slovak member of ISSA, carried out a single training course for project mentors and some of the teachers from preschools. This was a three-day course in diversity, which received positive reviews from the participants interviewed. Training courses that targeted the staff of schools and preschools together also were considered very valuable.

The Bernard van Leer extension to AGS showed the benefits of bringing in skilled trainers and facilitators to build a community involving teachers and Romani mediators. The trainings brought together teachers with coordinators and mediators, who were mostly local Roma. There was positive feedback both from teachers and from mediators. There were Romani women who said these trainings led to a lot of personal growth. And, in a region with generally tense ethnic relations, the interaction between Roma and teachers facilitated a lot of learning for both sides.

Language issues frequently arose in Slovakia. In many preschools, teachers and parents acknowledged the benefits of having Romani assistants. Primary school teachers agreed there were major differences between children who attended preschool and those who enrolled in school without any preparation in various areas, including their knowledge of Slovak.

AGS discovered numerous highly competent individuals who seized the opportunity to make valuable contributions to the project in Slovakia. Among Romani parents, there are individuals who lack formal education but their life experience and attitude qualifies them to serve as mediators or assistants. The mothers and fathers who were involved as preschool assistants or mediators helped children and staff in a variety of ways. Sometimes these positions were covered by public funds. AGS experience confirms that Romani involvement has great potential benefits for the quality of partnership with Romani families, and for education of Romani children.

Tutoring in smaller groups, an activity piloted in Slovakia, proved to help children from disadvantaged families perform better in the first grade of primary school. This is a relatively cost-efficient intervention, which could be scaled up and more rigorously evaluated.

3.7.3. Development of children's skills

In all the typical skills that relate to school, such as simple basics of reading, writing, recognition of letters, and mastering the national language, there is a slight improvement between the two groups of 5-year-old children served at the beginning and the end of AGS, according to HH2 data. A set of nine child assessment questions (based on UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and the ISSA child profile) was used in the Household Surveys, to reflect on the development of skills relevant for school readiness of children. In both surveys, parents reported whether each of their children from ages 3–7 had mastered those skills. Since one of the goals of preschool education provided within AGS project was also to prepare children well for compulsory education, it is important to see if the skills of 5- and 6-year-old children, for whom entry to primary education is most relevant, changed during the project.

The questions showed improvement in most basic skills. Only in the areas of showing self-confidence and doing everyday routines, which are both quite subjective categories, did AGS record some regression. At age 6, most children achieved the skills needed for compulsory education. Progress is visible in time (between HHS1 and HHS2), and also in age (children aged 6 improved in some skills, like recognizing letters or numbers, more rapidly than the 5-year-olds).

3.7.4. Progression to primary schools

Most of the children covered by AGS surveys progressed on to the mainstream primary schools. In the initial survey more than 68 percent of the children went to mainstream schools, and at the end of project this share increased to 75 percent. Very few children were sent to special school (only one in HHS1 and two children in HHS2). However, in Slovakia, these numbers can be misleading, because mainstream primary schools often establish special classes for “mentally challenged” children. In some cases, children are placed in special classes, even though parents indicated they went to mainstream primary schools.

From AGS localities, all children in surveyed families entered the first grade of standard primary school in Abranovce, Craiova-Mofleni, Crnik, Delčevo, Trbotivište, Vinica, Nyíregyháza, Nyírkáta, Nagyecsed, and Kántorjánosi. The proportion of children sent to the school readiness program decreased from 21.7 percent (32 cases) to 14.8 percent (21 cases). In both surveys, all of them were from the Slovak localities of Banská Bystrica (2) and Zborov (19), and all were placed in the so-called “zero grade,” a common school readiness program used in Slovakia.

3.7.5. Engagement and empowerment of parents

Hungary: The “Your Story” program proved to be very powerful, and was mentioned by all the interviewees as the core of AGS and the most successful element of the project. It achieved progress in terms of improving parenting skills, improving literacy of the participating women, community cohesion, and empowering women to develop further and continue with their education. A careful selection process, and continuous, practical professional training of the Romani “Your Story” facilitators, was an indispensable element of the program’s success. All in all, the program was very strong in empowering Romani women. A lot of them reported personal development, better communication skills, and higher self-esteem. This was most visible among mothers who came from very poor backgrounds. Based on the estimates from the local partner, out of the 240 mothers in the program, 50 re-enrolled to complete their secondary education.

The community events that were comprised of a cultural and a professional program had a positive effect on inter-community relations, which were already reinforced by the “Your Story” program. They also supported the improvement of the relations between the Romani community and the representatives of the local governments, kindergartens, and other ECEC-related services, as the active and often voluntary involvement of the parents became obvious.

FYR Macedonia: Romani parents from the four project localities were involved in motivational, educational, and health workshops targeting parents of AGS children and other interested parents. The need for these workshops was bigger in Šuto Orizari and Vinica, and to some extent in Crnik, but less in Delchevo, where a previous project covered similar topics. Parents and local partners agreed that the health workshops were most successful, with more than 100 participants, and most helpful for the targeted parents: They gained useful knowledge and information about child care, prevention of some diseases, access to health care, immunization, breastfeeding, and nutrition. A number of children were immunized due to the well-organized immunization workshops, where parents were informed about the need for immunization and the usual reactions after vaccination. The good cooperation established between the immunization services in Delčevo and Šuto Orizari and the local partners also encouraged immunization.

An increase in parents’ awareness of the importance of preschool education is reported by the partners, especially in Šuto Orizari and Vinica, as result of the motivational workshops organized at the beginning of the project.

Romania: Kindergarten attendance frequency was also positively influenced by the parenting skills training and counseling services provided by AGS project experts at the community center. Parenting training mainly addressed the relationship between parents and their children. Following AGS activities, parents said they learnt that young children are capable of learning and that the role of parents in educating children before they start school is important. The training and continuous counseling received from ISSA trainers and the local team brought a significant contribution to the development of a more open and positive parent-child relationship and parent-teacher relationship.

The adult literacy courses organized for the Romani community in Telechiu proved a real success among parents. Even if these courses were not enough to improve adult literacy, parents still valued the utility of the courses, and were glad to have come to know the alphabet, to be able to sign their names, and to read simple words.

The “Story Telling” club proved to be a useful training activity for parents and children alike. Most parents were deprived of this important educational step during childhood, and now, in adulthood, they fully understood the role of storytelling in the development of their children.

Community motivation events held in the AGS project comprised a welcome and fruitful attempt to break the communication barriers between the Romani and non-Romani population of the village. These events brought together Romani and non-Romani parents and children, as well as the local AGS team and members of local institutions.

Slovakia: Parental education took on a variety of formats in Slovakia. In each of the localities, there were sessions outside of the home, with talks or discussions covering topics related to early childhood education. In most cases, the public events were cast as Community Motivation Events, focusing on education and health. In addition

to project mentors, in some localities these events involved well-known Romani leaders or public officials. Some project mediators stressed the need to mix educational content with events that entertain target parents.

The mothers in focus group interviews spoke favorably about the group meetings that the project organized for them – meetings where they were giving information about school, health issues, hygiene and “everything concerning their lives.”

Home visits were sometimes also mentioned as having an educational component, as most mediators had to be ready to discuss and address a variety of life issues with the families beyond early childhood education and care. Home visits often took place with many family members – from two or even three generations – and even more distant relatives, friends, or neighbors present. Mediators often focused on developing mothers’ skills to work with their children.

While a comparison of the Household Survey data did not show a remarkable overall change in engagement in educational activity during the AGS project, there was a significant improvement in helping children do their homework (from 50 percent to 62 percent). Development among individual AGS countries varied: The highest engagement in activities with children was in Hungarian AGS localities, which also recorded the highest increase overall in helping children with homework (20 percent) and reading with children (10 percent). In Slovakia, engagement in almost all types of activities with children decreased systematically, except for doing homework with children. In Romania, engagement remained roughly the same during the project. Families in FYR Macedonian AGS localities were the least active, with only two-thirds of household members playing with children and less than a third reading, telling stories, or drawing with children. Nevertheless, the Household Surveys showed that their engagement did increase slightly in all activities with children that were measured.

The surveys seem to support the positive effect of AGS, as parents grew more ambitious and optimistic about the education of their children. By the end of the project, parental preference for general secondary education of their children rose significantly for both girls and boys. According to the second Household Survey at the end of the project, the number of parents who said they would be satisfied with the lowest education levels for their children – such as finishing only compulsory education or only primary education – decreased from 16 percent to 8 percent.

AGS health and community mediators and AGS local partner workers became a significantly more important source of information for parents. One important aim of AGS was to provide parents with relevant information regarding development of their children and their health and immunization. When comparing the initial and final Household Survey results, there was an increase of more than 10 percentage points in receiving information from AGS health and community mediators and AGS local partner workers.

3.7.6. Successful cooperation practices for ECEC provision

Hungary: The AGS project brought a better quality of relations for all institutions in the target localities of Hungary. In this country, the AGS project implemented an integrated approach that connected several stakeholders

responsible for ECEC. This structure was supported by professional facilitators, who helped to build up communication structures, assisted in the planning of several events and activities, and trained the AGS staff.

The Project enabled cooperation with an institution of tertiary education: Teacher-trainee and adult-education students from a local college were involved in AGS. In the last two years, all students finishing their studies in these fields gained practical experience via their involvement in AGS. With the help of the community mediator, these teaching students had the opportunity to get to know the Romani communities and the activities implemented in course of AGS. In some cases, lecturers and project implementers identified shifting attitudes.

Another successful activity was the so-called mayors’ forums, where local government, kindergarten representatives and AGS staff had the chance to exchange good practices and to discuss the possibilities and opportunities for sustaining the AGS activities.

FYR Macedonia: As a result of successful and effective cooperation between local authorities, local implementing partners, and AGS management, all the Macedonian municipalities in the target localities – except for Šuto Orizari – participated in the project with financial and/or in-kind support. The local partners also maintained and deepened the cooperation with the immunization services in Šuto Orizari and Delčevo.

Romania: The most obvious challenge the AGS local partners had to face during project implementation was to involve local representatives, informal leaders, and ECEC experts in an active local initiative group that would address management and organizational problems systematically, and attempt to find solutions to the specific needs of the Romani community. The formation of this initiative group, and the development of effective communication between its members, is one of the successes of this project. The County School Board and local authorities intervened effectively to: supplement teaching positions in the kindergarten, approve structural changes in kindergarten buildings, approve the establishment of the nursery in the community center of Telechiu, and pay overhead costs for the community center of Telechiu. These efforts indicate a commitment to continue supporting the positive results of AGS in the future.

The involvement of representatives from local authorities and institutions – schools, other educational institutions, local municipalities and health services, churches, and so on – in a relationship with the Romani community produced results in each specific area and in each particular activity: Specific groups helped by giving operating licenses, endorsements, or expert advice on project implementation.

Slovakia: Communication with school officials and teachers, and cooperation with local governments, was key to ensuring the project’s positive impact in this country. Even in localities where the local government was initially less enthusiastic, local leaders warmed to AGS activities after seeing the results. AGS management worked hard to share information and stay in touch with local governments: REF staff was closely involved in communication

with the local governments and school administrators – and as a result, local governments often co-financed some aspects of ECEC or were crucial in arranging state support. In one of the localities, the local government agreed to set up a separate room for a new class of Romani children.

Another local government used active labor-market policy instruments to finance four jobs for workers supporting the project's activities. They met weekly, in a working group of local officials, to discuss issues concerning local Roma: housing, education, infrastructure, public safety, and so on.

Outputs and outcomes of AGS activities are listed in the local level project results framework in Annex 6.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_ags_policy_paper_1.pdf

Direct and indirect beneficiaries of the project are detailed in Annex 7.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_ags_policy_paper_1.pdf

3.8. MAIN LESSONS LEARNT DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROJECT COMPONENTS

The main lessons learnt, and main difficulties encountered, during the implementation of project activities are summarized below.

3.8.1. Planning and coordination

Although AGS partners faced coordination problems common to most pilot projects and innovative interventions, minor problems were addressed relatively quickly, due to open communication, transparency, and technical assistance provided to local NGOs by international partners. The long-term outcome of the project is highly influenced by the commitment and involvement of all local stakeholders. Implementation of complex project activities required much attention, time, financial resources, and problem solving from REF and its partners. In the scope of the AGS pilot, REF included 16 localities from four countries, a much larger reach than that required for European Commission funding. The rural target area of Hungary was a special case, because AGS worked in the Mátészalka microregion with five smaller settlements, piloting a microregional focus. Although the AGS project was implemented successfully, thanks to enormous efforts from project staff and significant additional activities and funding, it became obvious that the project's testing of innovative approaches to multidimensional problems facing Romani communities is more efficient in a smaller target area, with a limited number of localities.

Because the AGS pilot was the first large-scale project implemented by REF, the whole organization was involved in a serious learning process – about management and coordination of activities with local and international partners, as well as internal coordination within the organization. Close collaboration and regular exchanges of experience, conducted through monitoring site visits, meetings, and discussions, were also a vital part of the learning process.

It became evident that the key to success is planning in advance, quality management, monitoring, and systematic feedback throughout the project cycle. In terms of quality management, the initially planned workload was underestimated. The human resources of REF's AGS management were limited, given the complexity of activities and quantity of problems that needed solving, especially in FYR Macedonia. These challenges to project implementation made for a tremendous workload and lengthened reaction time, with possible impacts on efficiency.

In terms of financial planning, the scale of the interventions of the FYR Macedonian AGS portfolio – which targeted 2,461 children and their parents – did not match the eligibility rules applied in the EC's Roma Pilot. The Macedonian local partners played a crucial role in the project, but could not receive funding from the EC grant, with the exception of per diem and travel costs. This problem was not foreseen when the project was planned, but the restrictions in terms of eligibility of expenditures caused immediate difficulties as soon as project implementation started. Without sufficient additional resources, the project would have failed in FYR Macedonia, because the cost eligibility criteria applied for Macedonia in the EC Roma Pilot was not adjusted to the expected interventions in the call for proposals. REF was able to solve the problem by raising more funding, thanks to its unique position in the international donor community, so AGS could secure the implementation of project activities in FYR Macedonia. Although REF handled the issue, similar situations could have been a real danger for a smaller implementing agency.

3.8.2. Building stable and extensive partnerships

Formalized regular meetings with local stakeholders proved to be an effective way of ensuring support for AGS activities, developing communication among local decision-makers about Romani inclusion issues, and promoting sustainability of project results in two AGS target countries. Ideally, close collaboration should start in the planning phase and include every relevant actor in the project. At the very least, the cooperative partnership should consist of the targeted institutions, the maintaining local/regional authority (municipality), local NGO partners, representatives and/or members of the beneficiary community, and the "umbrella" or donor organization – in order to provide coordination and close supervision of implementation while ensuring a transnational exchange of good practices and learnt lessons. Inclusion of local public stakeholders in charge of child protection, health care, and social services in the preparation phase may have lead to a wider impact of AGS activities in each locality.

In the case of Romani children facing situations of socio-cultural disadvantage, achievement of AGS objectives requires the teamwork of different professionals, who can address more than the educational needs of children and

also assist with material shortcomings, health issues, housing problems, and so on. Cooperation of these diverse actors is even more important when it comes to entering preschool, because the enrolment initiative rarely comes from the families themselves but rather is thanks to efforts made by these intermediation mechanisms. When different professionals all pull in the same direction, their teamwork allows them to offer greater support and to enhance the opportunities for children. Once the most suitable and necessary people are identified, teamwork enhances negotiating power, makes it easier to reach decision-makers and increases the influence that the project can exert on public administrations and institutions with the power to remedy exclusion of children from preschool.

The “umbrella” or donor organizations that are independent from the state, like REF, have a crucial role in AGS-type initiatives. These organizations are positioned and have the potential to initiate interventions, to assist local stakeholders in launching projects; to provide coordination and professional supervision over project implementation, through active participation in the project activities; and to facilitate information sharing between project staff with experience in similar interventions and the public. After the first phase of implementing the interventions, the coalition of necessary local partnerships was stable and operating on a regular basis, the necessary interventions had been made, and the outcomes of project activities could already be seen. At that point, the “umbrella” or donor organization could continue with less active involvement: Rather than working on individual project activities, the organization can assist in planning, and monitor implementation of follow-up activities, to ensure sustainability and scaling-up of successful project interventions.

Local civil partners (mainly NGOs) play a key role in maintaining the balance among local actors, facilitating formation and operation of local partnerships, and intermediating between the local municipalities, institutions, public services, and target families to promote children's enrolment and attendance. Local civil partners have to focus on the empowerment of the target community (parents) to make a difference in the lives of their children. One provocative lesson from the AGS project is that it is not always the involvement of the local Romani NGO that makes this type of ECEC intervention successful: What is needed is any actor who is independent from local authorities and able to mobilize the parents and involve them in project activities. For example, the Hungarian AGS project benefitted from the fact that REF did not have a strong partner organization in the target localities, so that local communities were targeted directly and got involved in activities through facilitators (members of the community).

3.8.3. Capacity of local NGOs

NGOs' capacity to implement and manage projects emerged as an important issue during the implementation phase. Projects targeting ECEC are multidimensional and require not only strong administrative capacity but also professionals working in specific areas – finance, strategic planning, impact evaluation, liaison and legal matters, and so on. Numerous grass-roots NGOs cannot afford to hire professional staff and have difficulties combining organizational work with delivery of services.³⁶ Professional support and technical assistance delivered by the REF Romani country facilitators, local experts employed by REF in each of its target countries, was crucial in offsetting

areas where NGOs were lacking. The financial contribution of REF was also necessary to avoid cash-flow problems during project implementation. It became evident that engaging local NGOs in project implementation requires an “umbrella/donor” organization to provide earmarking of funds and human resources for technical assistance and monitoring of activities. Only through such support can local knowledge be successfully utilized for delivery of effective services.

3.8.4. Attitude of local authorities

The willingness of local authorities was critical for successful implementation of services. Without the support of mayors and local councils, the scope and sustainability of projects was thwarted. In many localities, mayors appeared more interested in the opinions of median-voters and short-term results than in sustainable ECEC strategies that require time to yield effective outcomes. In many locations, they were reluctant to undertake projects promoting desegregation and often were satisfied with providing one-time help only. Lobbying activities, frequent meetings, and demonstrations were helpful in changing attitudes and opinions. Bringing in Structural Funds to the localities proved even more persuasive. Financial contributions from local budgets are essential to promote sustainability and enhance quality of ECEC services, but since they are not mandatory, delays are frequent and strategic long-term planning is rare.

Stakeholders note that financial assistance from the mayor's office must not take the form of ad-hoc charity initiatives (for example, donation of materials, clothes, and so on), but should cover strategic budget and development plans in line with regional and national reform plans. AGS partners agreed that financial support is often contingent on the personal will of local mayors, not on legal regulations or strategic planning. They also agreed that this arrangement systematically hampers sustainability of projects and long-term cooperation between local authorities and NGOs. According to AGS stakeholders, the role of central government and overarching ECEC strategies is instrumental in enforcing compliance and implementation of programs for marginalized minority groups on the local level.

3.8.5. Participation of Roma in AGS implementation

Involving Roma, especially Romani members of the beneficiary community, in various roles of project implementation was a principle that AGS implementers followed in each country. Local Roma worked in the project as mediators/mentors and facilitators, helping with “Your Story” reading groups, in community centers, as preschool assistants, and as accompaniment on school buses. The benefits of the active participation of these Roma in the project cannot be overemphasized. The experiences of AGS local partners proved that these actors were not only key to outreach in the community, and to achieving outcomes in several activities, but were also community models,

³⁶ The initial local organization responsible for project implementation in the Mofleni community in Romania had already been acquainted with the Romani community of Mofleni through a few previous actions and programs, but it failed to properly manage project activities and resources in the case of the AGS project. Romani Criss, together with REF, decided to cancel the services of that NGO and organize a new implementation team, consisting of Romani Criss members and local experts, to further manage project implementation in Mofleni.

who did a lot to help local stakeholders gain awareness of the ultimate goal and rationale of the project, and to help change anti-Romani attitudes.

AGS experience demonstrates that active parental involvement at home and school – for example, in the Home Preschool Liaison Program in Hungary – significantly boosts program effectiveness and promotes all aspects of school readiness, motivation, and social skills. It can also break down common stereotypes and provide a basis for building intercultural understanding and trust.

The tangible impact of such involvement is that Romani community members, particularly the parents of beneficiary children, are ready to work together on project activities with the project staff, something that happened with several Romani parents in many AGS target localities.

3.8.6. Mainstreaming

Although the AGS program has significantly improved quality, both national and local authorities have been slow to recognize early child development as a critical condition for successful primary education that is vital to the school achievements and success of Romani children. Programs for young children, from infancy to age 3, are few in number and limited to small-scale NGO projects financed by various international donors. For most of these smaller programs, the question of sustainability and stable funding is acute. Community center educational activities for children appear to be a solid bridge-builder for eliminating barriers to mainstream preschools and schools. But it is essential that the project's final aim is to get children into formal preschool. In Telechiu, for example, a kindergarten class that was offered in the community center under AGS has been transformed into a state kindergarten class due to the lobbying efforts of an NGO. Equal, inclusive education, without segregation – along with quality of services – should constitute a major goal of central, regional, and local governments. The implementation of equal treatment provisions and maintenance of high quality on the local level should be thoroughly monitored, and activities should be designed and implemented to promote high-quality work and an inclusive attitude among service providers and local authorities.

3.8.7. Segregation and discriminatory treatment of Roma in ECEC

AGS experience shows that elimination of segregation remains a continuous challenge, which must be monitored and addressed by subsequent REF activities in the AGS localities to ensure that AGS-developed facilities are not used to maintain segregated Romani kindergarten classes.

Evidence proved that AGS was successful in promoting access to preschool services for Romani children in localities where the proportion of participating 3–6-year-old Romani children in such institutions was much lower than the national average. Nonetheless, the newly created preschool classes were predominantly or purely for Romani children in some places, and in some preschools in Slovakia, Romani children attended for only a half-day, while

children in other classes were provided full-day service. In FYR Macedonia, Romani parents and Romani mediators reported differences in teachers' approaches toward Romani and non-Romani children in the kindergarten. These cases show that much must be done to change attitudes, to prepare the staff of mainstream institutions for integrating children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and to ensure that local stakeholders obey anti-discrimination provisions and are fully aware of the relevance and future impact of inclusion of Romani children in preschool education. AGS implementers, especially local partners, continued to be in a tough situation when trying to intervene in cases of unequal treatment of Romani children in the target localities, as they always had to concentrate on the ultimate interest of the beneficiary children: to keep them in mainstream institutions and maintain cooperation with the local municipality and the institution. To this end, AGS management and partners invested enormous efforts in negotiations to change attitudes of local authorities and head teachers – with varying degree of success.

Such efforts helped out in Zborov, Slovakia: During the project's first school year (2010–2011), the newly created Romani preschool class only operated for a half day, while children in other classes received full-day service, but by the second academic year, the 20 Romani children received the same full-day service as the others. This was considered a great success. Still, because the services were provided in segregated settings during the AGS implementation (2010–2011 and 2011–2012), the obvious goal for REF is to arrange for integrated services by the 2012–2013 school year.

Prevention of segregation was also the goal of AGS activities designed to facilitate the transition to school. These activities were mostly focused on Slovakia, where AGS tried to avoid misplacement of Romani children into special education and to ensure that successful AGS intervention was not followed by automatic channeling of Romani children into often-segregated “zero” classes.

3.8.8. Infrastructure

AGS partners are in agreement that national and local ECEC strategies are necessary for promoting Roma inclusion, and facilitating better educational achievements of Romani and non-Romani children. Infrastructure shortages cannot (and should not) be resolved by small NGOs, and alternative home-schooling initiatives should not substitute formal schooling. Although AGS projects were able to provide assistance in places where ECEC infrastructure was missing, without substantial investment from the state, long-term ECEC strategies are doomed to fail. Construction and/or renovation of preschool facilities is a critical part of development of sustainable, all-inclusive educational policies, and it needs to become part of countrywide development strategies. When construction is not possible, competent authorities should provide transportation services.

3.8.9. Community-center-based services

Alternative community-center- or home-based services were provided in AGS localities where capacity of services did not allow more Romani children to be enrolled in preschool. These services proved to be beneficial for Romani children, but scaling-up of such models is only recommended by REF with certain restrictions. The educational program (content) and professional preparedness and capacities of the service providers (staff), as well as community involvement and support, should be thoroughly monitored and evaluated. The supreme goal of these programs should be the integration of children – from at least the last year of kindergarten – into mainstream services within the shortest possible time.

Even though construction of kindergartens in geographically segregated areas has been criticized, AGS partners agree that it is more effective to work with children from infancy to age 6 in places closer to their own communities, as long as quality and equal access standards are met and integration of children is ensured from age 5. This approach proved to be most efficient when targeting segregated Romani communities that are relatively far from the closest town or village, communities where most families live in extreme poverty, totally excluded from local society in isolated Romani settlements. This was the case of the two target localities of Romania, Telechiu and Mofleni (Craiova), where families live in circumstances like those of the world's poorest countries. In these cases, the gap between local majority society and the children living in the Romani settlements is so wide that intensive support services of the community centers are needed to remedy the situation and give Romani children a chance to integrate into the public school system later on.

Conditions in the Romanian target settlements are presented in a short video filmed in the framework of AGS.

The film is available at: <http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/videos/good-start-country-videos-romania>

3.8.10. Financial and material incentives

Without providing incentives to the parents, AGS implementers found it impossible to achieve regular attendance of Romani children living in deep poverty. The reason for this is very simple: A child's attendance of a creche or preschool requires efforts and investments from her/his family. These costs can seem negligible for a middle-class family with a stable income, but they are an enormous burden for a Romani family living well below the poverty line. Even if schooling is provided free, the cost of meals, clothing, and in some cases also transportation had to be paid for by parents of socially disadvantaged children – in all the target countries except Hungary.³⁷

³⁷ In Hungary free meals are provided for children of low-income families and families with three or more children. Since 2009, further financial support is provided twice a year for those multiple disadvantaged children attending preschool from the age of 3, whose parents have low income and qualifications not higher than the 8th year of primary school.

3.8.11. Activity-based community empowerment

The parental education and empowerment programs of the AGS project in Hungary and Romania piloted an action-based intervention with direct involvement of Romani parents, especially mothers. The success of these program elements, particularly the well-elaborated "Your Story" initiative, are expected to have a long-term impact on the lives of families and educational opportunities for children. Their success also reaffirmed the relevance and efficiency of an "action based" approach, originating in "community empowerment theories," for ECEC interventions targeting Roma. Direct targeting, active involvement, and capacitation of parents through activities were a key part of reversing the negative educational experiences that most Romani parents had, and building understanding and thereby promoting educational opportunities for Romani children from poor families. AGS could reach and directly impact far more children through the direct involvement of mothers in reading activities than REF has ever managed to access by supporting Romani NGO projects, which are usually dominated by men. Furthermore, a broader range of children from different age groups in different positions could become the focus of ECEC interventions if they were reached through their mothers. The Hungarian AGS project implementation shows that Romani women facilitators with direct involvement in community-based activities were more successful at mobilizing Romani parents than Romani NGO leaders.

AGS also sought to approach the community and to raise awareness through traditional methods – distributing booklets, holding community events and meetings, and so on. These activities were less effective because they only provided one-way communication between project implementers and beneficiaries, and it was difficult to organize any follow-up activity around events. That is why the most marginalized members of Romani communities could not be reached by these methods.

Based on the AGS experience, REF believes that community development should be built on the actual involvement of members of the Romani community, through "learning by doing" type of activities. This is different from many Romani inclusion projects, where Romani participation is supposed to be ensured by targeting Romani NGOs as implementers and mediators. Project dependence on the NGO sector – a situation caused by the inappropriate funding system – is very harmful in Central Eastern Europe, and often poses a serious barrier for effective interventions, as NGOs projects frequently cause the fragmentation of Romani communities.

The REF experience shows that successful facilitators could be either members of the beneficiary community or sophisticated professional mediators, and that the choice should depend on a thorough assessment of demands of the target communities.

3.8.12. Romani-non-Romani interactions, non-Romani participation

The AGS project had an explicit, but not exclusive, focus on Roma. Where non-Roma were in any way part of the beneficiary group of AGS, the feedback was very positive. A general experience of AGS in each locality was that

openness and communication between the Romani community and the majority population is lacking, and that much is yet to be done concerning this relationship if we hope to overcome segregation and intolerance against Roma in the target countries.

Many of those involved in AGS noted the need to organize activities between the Romani and non-Romani population, and to increase transparency of activities carried out to benefit both Romani and non-Romani local communities. For example, in FYR Macedonia, Macedonian and Turkish children were also beneficiaries of AGS, but their involvement should have been communicated more intensively in the project localities, according to both the local partner and the quality evaluator of the project. Although social interaction activities between local Romani and non-Romani families were quite rare, and an increase in frequency is required, the few occasions that brought together Romani and non-Romani parents proved extremely useful.

REF believes, that, along with involving and motivating Romani parents, additional activities should also focus on preparing the non-Romani majority for inclusion of Romani children into local institutions. Future AGS-type projects should react against the negative stereotypes of majority society and challenge it with activities involving every relevant party.

When designing activities targeting the local non-Romani communities, it is important to consider that non-Romani parents cannot be effectively sensitized by Romani NGOs. Non-Romani parents will only support AGS goals and accept Romani children if: they have direct positive or neutral experiences with Romani children; the kindergarten operates with interculturally sensitive pedagogy; and partnerships between Romani parents and the institution is facilitated – for example, through initiatives like the Home Preschool Community Liaison program.

Based on the positive experience of cooperation with the Pedagogy and Andragogy Faculty of the Nyíregyháza College in the Hungarian AGS project, future teachers in AGS-type projects should be approached directly and sensitized toward inclusive preschool education of Romani children.

3.8.13. Role of the mediators and Romani preschool assistants

The role of mediators should be more focused on outreach activities, and their work with families should be limited to assessment of needs, identification of responsible stakeholders and available resources, and mediation between families and public institutions. Mediators played a crucial role in the success of AGS activities. The core tasks they performed were outreach work, enrolment support and attendance monitoring, but AGS mediators also addressed several other issues of importance to the community in which they worked. Mediators in several localities found that it was not possible to carry out an ECEC intervention without addressing other needs of the families. In response, AGS mediators (mentors in Hungary) found themselves dealing with health issues, housing issues, and social issues – while also mediating between local authorities and the Romani community, or in conflicts between institutions

and Romani individuals. As a result, in several localities mediators were overloaded, and they found the complexity and quantity of tasks they performed in the project was too much for one person. Furthermore, mediators are not best placed and equipped to solve all the problems of the families – which might be the reason for the current trend of including two or three different mediators (health, employment, and education) in Romani projects, to address the complex of problems their clients face. REF experiences suggest that future AGS-type projects should not make mediators deal with families in a fragmented way that mirrors the dysfunctionality of public services. The number of home visits per mediator should also be limited to ensure an efficient workload: The number of families per mediator should not exceed 30.

When training the mediators and preparing them for their tasks, it should be emphasized that they have to be aware that they need to encourage direct interaction and cooperation between teachers, caregivers, and beneficiary families, especially parents. There were cases in the AGS project where kindergarten teachers reportedly used the mediators to communicate with Romani parents, and avoided approaching them directly. Romani parents also tend to communicate with teachers and other non-Romani professionals through the mediators: Parents are reluctant to talk to the teachers, especially if they have problems in school. It is essential to limit mediators to their professional role of empowering communities and facilitating direct communication between the beneficiaries and the institutions.

Romani preschool assistants were employed in kindergartens in several AGS target localities. Their participation in preschool activities was praised by all actors, including Romani parents, mediators, teachers, and head teachers, and they proved to have a huge positive impact on inclusion of Romani children into institutions. Romani assistants performed diverse tasks in the preschools, and in some places they were charged with various tasks on top of the ones that AGS management planned and expected. In preschools in Slovakia, the Romani preschool assistants eventually took on the role of a preschool teacher, since they were regularly left alone with the class of Romani children. Romani assistants in FYR Macedonia also regularly took care of children in the afternoon, when the teachers left the preschool. These examples suggest a need to formulate the role and exact tasks of the Romani preschool assistants, and to agree upon that role with the management of kindergartens and the local municipality, in order to prevent talented and devoted Romani assistants from being exploited due to inadequate human capacity in public preschools and a weak capacity to represent their own interests. Special in-service training programs³⁸ are also recommended in the target countries, to help undereducated Romani preschool assistants with promising individual competences to gain the required level of education while simultaneously working in public preschools.

³⁸ Such programs have been implemented with promising results in Hungary in the framework of an EU-funded program, and a similar program currently under implementation is designed to promote the employment of Roma adults in child-care and social institutions.

3.8.14. Quality of ECEC services

The quality of educational services is mostly dependent on the level of professional training of the teachers who provide services. The experience of AGS implementation shows that more systematic work is needed to improve the quality of ECEC services in each target locality. The AGS project was implemented together with the ISSA, a network of experts in ECEC, but experience suggests that more intensive preparation was needed from ECEC professionals, in order to ensure that ISSA quality pedagogy standards are met.

The main instrument used in AGS for assessing the quality of practices was ISSA's Continuum for Assessing Caregivers. ISSA developed the instrument based on its Principles of Quality Pedagogy, making adjustments for the assessment of home-based and center-based learning environments. The instrument was administered near the start of the project in preschools attended by AGS recurrent beneficiary children, and as part of the assessment, preschool sessions were videotaped. Preschool teachers, and later in the project also REF country facilitators, received training in the use of ISSA's tool, but there was a lack of subsequent follow-up activities to assess the use of these tools and to guarantee that the ECEC services provided in the project met quality standards. It would have helped to determine whether the individual portfolios of AGS beneficiary children were developed, and to ensure that progress and development needs were recorded continuously during the school year. From this experience, it became clear that follow-up mentoring of teachers (and caregivers of home-based and center-based services), as well as systematic monitoring of beneficiary children's progress, should be built in and implemented in future initiatives.

AGS experience suggests that trainings themselves have a limited power to make dramatic changes in learning environments, especially when we refer to the context of cultural diversity, where anti-bias, social justice, and inclusive approaches need to be strengthened. Mentoring activities have proven effective in ensuring that quality practices are in place, and in offering a more sustainable investment in the framework of the extension of the AGS project that was supported by the Bernard von Leer Foundation at four sites.

According to the plan envisaged, ISSA local partners were involved in the implementation of project activities in varying degrees in the different target countries and localities. For example, in Slovakia and Hungary, more intensive participation by ISSA member local organizations contributed to the success of project activities remarkably. Joint training of preschool and primary school teachers was a success in Slovakia. An effort to provide continuous training for teachers, caregivers, and mentors of AGS beneficiary children was piloted in Hungary, where the Pedagogy faculty of the College of Nyíregyháza and the ISSA local partner organization, Partners Hungary, facilitated multi-stakeholder workshops together. These workshops proved to be an effective source of continuous learning and knowledge transfer for participating teachers and AGS mentors, and they would be worth scaling-up in future projects. Other forms of cooperative activities promoting knowledge transfer and mutual learning among preschool teachers and caregivers of beneficiary institutions are also recommended as pilot activities in future projects designed to promote participation of Roma in ECEC.

When children attended informal preschool activities in the AGS project, it was mainly due to capacity constraints that hindered access to mainstream services in some target localities. These home-based and community-center-based services were recognized by families and teachers as being beneficial for the targeted children. Still, these informal settings did not receive systematic evaluation of the quality of pedagogy. Feedback from mentors and teachers participating in the project suggest that the mediators running informal preschool sessions should receive more intensive training to be prepared for educational tasks.

3.8.15. Romani language in ECEC services

The rights of children to use their mother tongue must be respected, and resources should be offered to teachers to assist children in overcoming the language gap. The language barrier was a challenge that staff of AGS beneficiary institutions had to face when working with Romani children in kindergartens and nurseries in several target localities. The use of Romani language varies among target countries and even target localities – in some localities Romanes is the first language while in some others children speak primarily the majority language.

AGS did not address the language issue with unified and formal methods for working with children whose native language is not the official language of instruction. Furthermore, no clear framework was provided to detail how to incorporate Romanes into preschool education. What the AGS did do was provide Romanes-speaking teaching assistants in every locality where the Romani language appeared to be a barrier to including Romani children in preschool.

In the case of some preschools, the solution came naturally, in an informal manner: the inclusion of Romanes-speaking children was successful, and the children learnt the official language of instruction rapidly and without serious obstructions to the class. Although the actual practice mostly depends on individual teachers, in the case of Macedonian preschools, it became clear by the end of the project that having Romani assistants translate for children speaking Romanes as a mother tongue should not be the only possible solution for the language issue. This alternative was sometimes rejected – as in FYR Macedonia, where preschool teachers reportedly forbid Romani preschool assistants and parents from talking to the children in Romanes in the kindergarten. In such cases, it should be formulated clearly that children have a right to use their mother tongue unrestrictedly. Along with giving training on diversity and intercultural sensitivity follow-up, the AGS project found mentoring and professional assistance to be an essential part of getting teachers prepared for working with minority children who do not speak the official language.

3.8.16. Community events targeting Romani parents

In some AGS localities, community events and parental education programs attracted numerous parents, while in other countries the interest in participation was modest. In order to organize successful community events, the program should often be interactive, giving participants a chance to discuss issues in small groups with invited

professionals. It is equally important that the themes covered in such events are tailored to the interest and need of the targeted community. For this reason, it is important to assess previous events held in the community, and it is useful to involve community members in planning and facilitating the event. Romani cultural programs were presented in Hungarian events, and the participation of well-known and recognized members of the Roma community in Slovakia also proved to be helpful to attract parents to such programs.

3.9. THE MONITORING AND EVALUATION SYSTEM OF THE PROJECT

3.9.1. AGS data collection framework

The data collection framework for the AGS project was detailed in the original project proposal. In the course of implementation, the framework underwent extensions and adjustments, thanks to the contributions of international and local AGS partners, the staffs of REF and the Slovak Governance Institute, UNDP, and a World Bank team charged with assisting AGS with monitoring and evaluation.

The design of the project was elaborated in a manner conducive to monitoring, evaluation, and further analysis of the project's policy implications.

The main instruments used for project design were:

- **Baseline surveys** for establishing the current situation and existing needs in the targeted locations.
- **Project implementation plans**, which guide the logic of intervention and are the main accountability tools during implementation.

Both instruments are part of the common procedures that REF has been using as a grant-giving organization since its establishment, and that REF highly recommends for use in other development projects.

3.9.2. Baseline surveys and studies

Baseline surveys were prepared in FYR Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, by REF and its partners, in the context of AGS project application. The role of the baseline surveys was to give an overall picture of the coverage and quality of ECEC services and schooling in the given localities.

The baseline surveys contained items on the following topics:

- demographic and socio-economic data;
- data on residential segregation and specifics of the Romani communities, including language;
- accessibility of public services, including nursery schools, kindergartens, counseling for special-needs children, child welfare and health services, educational counseling, and logopaedic services;
- data about the type of ECEC providers in existence, and financial sources of those providers;

- data about available places in kindergartens and primary schools, and enrolment rates;
- qualifications of educators and teachers and the availability of training;
- the infrastructure situation in existing kindergartens and schools;
- participation of Roma in educational decision-making at the local level;
- main educational problems encountered by disadvantaged Romani children.

The main sources of information in completing the baseline surveys were: local authorities, regional or local structures of the ministries of education, and local Romani NGOs or informal Romani leaders. REF country facilitators led the process of data gathering. Data were gathered in the period from August–September 2009, before finalizing the application.

3.9.3. Project implementation plans and input indicators

The project implementation plans describe the activities to be implemented, the deliverables, the timeline, the responsibilities of REF and its partners, and the share of each activity in the budget. REF was the main partner responsible for implementation and conducting data gathering through the local partner organizations, REF country facilitators, and educators/pedagogues involved in the project. In coordinating data collection, REF ensured the confidentiality of information provided by respondents, and fully respected EU and local legislation regarding protection of personal data.

The extensive collection of data as part of the project was influenced by two key factors:

1. The pilot nature of the project: There was an expectation that the project methodology and implementation will be thoroughly evaluated. In addition, the innovative nature of project activities meant that the understanding of needs and methods of data collection evolved during the course of the project.
2. The lack of data on Roma from outside sources: There is a significant problem with the absence of reliable socio-economic data on Roma from public sources. In some cases, this lack is the result of issues surrounding collection of ethnic data, but in other cases it reflects a broader lack of data on marginalized groups in general. Some data that ideally should be available from national statistical offices or public administrative sources had to be collected, or compensated for, in the course of project data collection. A highly problematic issue in monitoring and evaluating efficiency and impact of interventions targeting Roma is ethnic identification, which is also a contentious issue within government policies. Amongst the target countries, only FYR Macedonia collects data for administrative purposes. In Hungary and Slovakia, policies and programs intended to promote Romani inclusion target “socially disadvantaged” (Slovakia) or “multiply disadvantaged” (Hungary) populations. The AGS Project did not address this issue directly, but it was a central element of the data collection and reporting process to ensure that any relevant data collected is made available to the authorities wherever possible, so that access to services for Romani children and their families can be monitored.

The data collection framework consisted of the following main instruments:

1. **Household Survey:** A questionnaire of recurrent beneficiaries³⁹ of AGS project activities, administered twice to the same families⁴⁰ by trained enumerators affiliated with the local partners – once around the beginning of the project and then again at the end of project implementation.
2. **Children's Database:** A proprietary database with an online interface, into which local implementing partners entered information from the Household Survey and then periodically added certain information on the educational participation and progress of children who were recurrent beneficiaries of the project.
3. **Community Assessment:** A questionnaire filled out by the local partner in each of the project localities, once before project implementation and once near the end of project implementation. This assessment focused on relevant characteristics of the localities, such as the socio-economic situation of the Romani community, the degree of marginalization, and participation in preschool education and primary school education.
4. **Indicator Worksheets:** A monitoring spread sheet filled out by local implementing partners every four months,⁴¹ to report on two sets of output and outcome indicators – locality-specific indicators and indicators unified at the project level.
5. **Continuum for Assessing Caregivers in Center-, Community-, and Home-Based Programs:** An assessment designed by the ISSA to assess the quality of practices in the early childhood services.

Additional instruments used within the AGS monitoring framework are the Narrative Report Forms.

3.9.4. The Household Survey

As part of data collection to evaluate the effects of project activities, AGS implementers carried out a *Household Survey* of 1,028 families in the project localities. These families included 1,781 children in the target-age group (0–7). Given the pilot nature of the project, its evolving activities, and the number and variety of project localities, it was necessary to address many complex issues related to methodology and administration. The survey was carried out early in the project – though not before its implementation – and then conducted again near the end of the project.

As one of the project objectives was to reach all Romani children in project localities, one basic problem to address was that of obtaining a complete list of Romani children in the target age group. Even in localities where data was obtained from local governments, not all local partners had access to full lists. The survey therefore doubled as a local census exercise: In each family approached, survey takers covered basic attributes of the

³⁹ Recurrent beneficiaries were defined by the project team as children and families involved in repeat activities within the project (to avoid administering the questionnaire to families of children only involved in one-off activities). The definition was then qualified for each locality's individual activities and characteristics.

⁴⁰ Those families that enumerators were able to reach, that is, excluding, for example, families that have migrated.

⁴¹ This was timed to coincide with their formal reporting requirements.

household, including asking for a list of children and their dates of birth. Nonetheless, the question of whether AGS reached all possible beneficiary children in some of the localities remained unanswered.⁴²

The use of project mentors as enumerators for the survey has obvious drawbacks, but there were also some advantages. In some localities, use of mentors guaranteed access, better understanding, and perhaps, more candid replies. The responsiveness of respondents varied, probably depending on how open each given community was to the outside.⁴³

Using local NGO activists to take the survey offered a key cost advantage while benefitting the community. In addition, there was a potential to build capacity, because partner organizations could use the survey results and methods for other activities. Several local partners reported that they benefitted from a better understanding of the prevalence of some issues covered by the survey, and that they were able to use the results, or reports from the Children's Database, in communication with outside stakeholders and in project applications. Some local partners also mentioned plans to carry out other surveys, and expressed appreciation for the ability to get a basic statistical overview of certain issues in their target communities. And some partners appreciated that survey gave them an incentive to communicate directly with all their potential beneficiaries, and allowed them to form new partnerships and new activities.

First round data was collected in 2010 and a research report, called *A Good Start Survey Spotlight on its Localities and Households*, was published in 2011.⁴⁴ The second *Household Survey* was conducted at the end of the project, and the research report came out in October 2012. This type of survey proved to be very useful for getting a clear picture of the motives, strategies, and circumstances of the targeted Romani families, and for tracking changes that make it possible to verify the project outcomes and effects in AGS localities.

3.9.5. The Online Database

The aim of this database was to establish a mechanism to allow local partners to enter data on a regular basis. In order to provide greater ease of use and build capacity of local partners, a proprietary online database was prepared.⁴⁵ Over the course of the project, the database gained new capabilities, which were requested by monitoring staff and local partners.

⁴² Local partners took measures appropriate to their local circumstances to maximize the likelihood of reaching all potential beneficiary children in the target age-group.

⁴³ The response rates achieved on this non-random sample were much higher than response rates in the UNDP Regional Survey carried out in 2011.

⁴⁴ Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/ref-ags-household-survey-screen_o.pdf

⁴⁵ The database was programmed in Ruby on Rails by a Slovak programmer, Miroslav Záhorák, who was supervised by Slovak Governance Institute staff member Martina Kubanova.

The database covered the families of recurrent beneficiaries. The basic structure of data reflected the contents of the *Household Survey*, and the survey was used to generate a list of families and their children in the target age group 0–6 (7).⁴⁶ The database used a multilingual user interface. Individual children were linked to educational institutions in their localities and certain selected AGS activities. Additional modules on attendance and succession to primary school were added.

The items included in the databases with the beneficiaries and their families are useful for the exterior impact evaluation, to be carried out by the World Bank and UNDP. The variables to be included in the database of beneficiaries are:

- ethnicity of the child⁴⁷;
- size of the city/village as measured by the number of inhabitants;
- size of the first-grade class;
- percentage of disadvantaged children (eligible for welfare support);
- share of girls;
- average family size;
- average monthly spending per household;
- average size of the house/apartment;
- parents' education levels;
- employment status of parents;
- number of books at home;
- pre-program social-emotional competences and basic abilities.

The database generated figures, tables, reports, and lists for local users and monitoring staff.⁴⁸ Local partners were interested in reports about their localities but also in national and international comparisons. Several local-partner project staff interviewed reported that they were able to learn more about their community from the database report generated with the *Household Survey* data. This data also sometimes served as input for planning other projects or submitting financing proposals.

⁴⁶ The target age depended on the educational system in each country.

⁴⁷ Regarding the characteristic of ethnicity, the survey allowed multiple-choice answers, including the possibility that the subjects do not identify themselves or their children as Roma.

⁴⁸ Access to information, especially to personal information, was limited by individual.

Sample A Good Start project database report



3.9.6. Community Assessment

Community Assessments at the start of project were a diagnostic tool for communities. However, much of the analysis and diagnosis was on background information and was too subtle and complex to capture in a written instrument. The initial design for the Community Assessment was part of the project proposal. As activities and the monitoring framework crystallized, the assessment required design changes, to reflect the variations between localities.

In the end, the assessment covered:

1. demographic and social situation of the settlement;
2. accessibility of public services;
3. preschool institutions in the locality;
4. schools;
5. preschool population;
6. quality of human resources;
7. Roma community characteristics;
8. a summary of required ECEC interventions.

The resulting tool was about 20 pages, though it mostly consisted of large tables.

Some data was available from local authorities in some project countries. Other data was with health authorities or school authorities. Access to the data depended on legislation but also on the formal and informal relationship between the local partner collecting data for the Community Assessments and public authorities. Problems arose in those countries where ethnic data is not or cannot be collected by public authorities. Census sources often have unreliable data about Roma, and administrative data is of differing quality. The structure of data collected naturally varied between countries – depending on issues such as what age is considered preschool, and so on. For questions that depend on national institutional structures, it is very difficult to design an assessment that works well across countries. The types of preschool and school institutions also vary, as do matters like possible educational status, and so on. If the format is adjusted for each country the processing and analysis can become more complicated.

Some of the local partners involved in completing the Community Assessments saw value in both the information gathered and in the communication with local authorities involved. This was a welcome input into planning of activities within this project and planning of other projects. Results of the survey and tabular and visual reports from the survey are also used by local NGOs in project planning and funding applications.

3.9.7. Indicator Worksheets

Local partners reported data on indicators using a monitoring spreadsheet. The spreadsheets were submitted by email every four months. For practical reasons the instrument was developed in English. In the course of the project, it became clear that, even with partners who communicated in English, the intricacies of data collection required additional support and clarification for the various indicators used.

Given the complex structure of project activities, many local partners had individually designed indicators at the level of outputs and outcomes. This required individualized reporting tables for specific indicators. At the same time, to report data at the level of countries and the entire AGS project, data was collected in a unified indicators table, reflecting the logical framework for activities. A specific complex issue arose related to providing cumulative figures: For many activities and beneficiaries it was difficult for local partners to track numbers of unique individuals. This made it difficult to aggregate data at the project level. Continuous follow up, on-site training and assistance worked very well to solve these issues.

3.9.8. Continuum for Assessing Caregivers in Center-, Community-, and Home-Based Programs

The quality of educational services is mostly dependent on the level of professional training of the teachers providing services. The experience of AGS implementation shows that more systematic work is needed to improve the quality of ECEC services in each target locality. The AGS project was implemented together with ISSA, which is a network of experts in ECEC, but experience suggests that more activities targeting the ECEC professionals were needed, in order to ensure that ISSA quality pedagogy standards are met. The main instrument used in AGS for assessing quality of services was ISSA's Continuum for Assessing Caregivers. Preschool teachers and REF Country Facilitators received

training in the use of ISSA's tool, and the instrument was administered after the first round of ISSA's trainings took place – for example, training on diversity and social justice, or anti-bias training for kindergarten teachers.

REF country facilitators used the monitoring tool and filled in the scoring sheets, in combination with video recordings, once in the first academic year of the project (2010/2011) and again during the second academic year (2011/2012). There were diverse experiences, as the teacher trainee systems are very different in the AGS target countries and standards are not always met. There was a lack of subsequent follow-up activities to assess the use of the Continuum for Assessing Caregivers and to guarantee that the ECEC services provided in the project met quality standards. For this reason future initiatives should include follow-up mentoring of teachers (and caregivers) of home-based and center-based services), as well as systematic monitoring of beneficiary children's progress.

3.9.9. Qualitative assessment of the AGS project

Focus groups, and in-depth individual interviews with parents, local authorities, and kindergarten staff, were implemented in spring 2012 by a cooperative team of the World Bank, the UNDP and the SGI, in order to evaluate the project before finishing it. The focus groups assessed how well the project activities were carried out, and also what effect they had on the beneficiaries. Focus groups and interviews provide the evaluators with the opportunity to get real feedback from the perspective of the beneficiaries, and also other stakeholders, on what works and what is not so effective. The quality assessment report of the AGS project is to be produced jointly by REF, SGI, the World Bank, and UNDP.

*More details on the monitoring process of the AGS project and the conclusions of the evaluators (including the questionnaire setup, problematic and sensitive questions, translation issues and piloting of the survey, the issue of age cut-offs, survey settings and organizational aspects, the data format of the indicator worksheets, the issues of reporting cumulative data, and the organization of training for the enumerators) are discussed in the **AGS Data Collection Guide**, produced by SGI.*

3.9.10. Roles in the internal monitoring process

The respective REF country officer and the project manager were responsible for internal monitoring of the progress of activities in AGS localities. The financial manager, along with the financial and administrative coordinator, visited the local partners every six months and monitored financial reports, invoices, and back-up documentation. The country facilitators met the local partners every month and delivered Country Project Team minutes through the project manager to the Pilot Management Team.

3.9.11. Responsibilities for collecting data

A wide range of information was collected throughout the project, for monitoring and evaluation purposes, by the partner NGOs and REF's country facilitators. The NGO partners were responsible for: collecting information and completing the community assessment (with baseline data on number of Roma and services), conducting household questionnaires (with socio-economic data, and parent's attitudes and behaviors regarding early childhood

development), and completing the children's database (with individual data on the children and their progress). They also completed narrative reports and indicators tables, with details on activities and outputs to help determine progress towards objectives. This involved getting information from a range of sources – parents, teachers, and schools, amongst others. REF's country facilitators undertook an assessment of the quality of kindergartens and home-based teaching. Teachers participating in the project collected information on individual children in terms of their emotional, social, and cognitive development.

3.9.12. Correcting and updating information

Throughout all stages of monitoring and evaluation, REF and/or SGI randomly checked that the personal data had been correctly and accurately inputted into the data-sheets. Most of the data for the instruments were collected more than once – and some on a quarterly basis – so there is an opportunity for updating the information and also ensuring accuracy if there are any uncertainties.

3.10. PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

3.10.1. Project management structure

The project implementation was based on the partnership and close cooperation of the implementing organizations, high-profile experts, and local project teams. The management structure was designed to ensure: broad participation of different professionals with relevant expertise at various levels of the implementation of the activities; synergy between the separate activities; and smooth coordination between the members of the team. The nature of the project required strong coordination and smooth interaction between its participants.

A detailed description of the project management structure of AGS and its operation is included in Annex 8.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_aggs_policy_paper_1.pdf

A description of local implementing partners of AGS is included in Annex 9.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_aggs_policy_paper_1.pdf

3.11. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Budget of the project:

Grant requested from the EU: EUR 2,046,104

Beyond this grant budget, REF involved number of other donors who financed complementary activities to the

AGS project with a total of EUR 437,712 in the following manner:

Bernard van Leer foundation:	EUR 260,918
LEGO foundation:	EUR 107,660 (EUR 100,000 in material support)
Network of European Foundations:	EUR 69,134

To ensure the smooth operation of this project, the Roma Education Fund allocated an additional EUR 54,449 to cover unanticipated costs.

Financial models for ECEC interventions promoting access to services for Romani children can be found in Annex 10.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_aggs_policy_paper_1.pdf

3.12. PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

During the last two years, REF has gained relevant experience regarding ECEC for disadvantaged Romani and non-Romani children while implementing AGS. The project proved that limited access to ECEC services can be targeted effectively through comprehensive interventions that are implemented by a cooperative partnership of organizations. However, the project also demonstrated that the sustainability of services can only be ensured if the structural and systematic problems of mainstream public services are also addressed.

REF has raised funds in order to implement the second phase of AGS, with a focus on institutionalizing the project's achievements and continuing the strategic partnerships with local and national decision-makers. Although the complex interventions of AGS were delivered by REF and a team of local and international partners, the project would not have been successful without the participation and support of many other local stakeholders, including: kindergartens, municipalities, health authorities, registration offices, and so on. AGS Sustainability Plans detail who can provide resources (for hiring mediators, providing transportation, and so on), and how the results of AGS can be institutionalized.

The second phase of AGS will focus on the locality-level Sustainability Plans that have been prepared with, and signed by, local partners and other local stakeholders.

3.12.1. Sustainability on the level of families

In addition to the above-mentioned project-based sustainability plans, there is an inherent sustainability of the project results. On the level of a beneficiary family, there are certain natural sustainability factors of AGS achievements that have positive effects, including: improved parenting practice in preparation of children for preschool or school; good attendance of children in kindergarten; increased parental participation in the life of kindergartens; and increased educational ambitions of mothers. The project empowered parents, especially mothers, to support their

children's access to early childhood education and care more effectively. As a result of such activities, and after seeing their children's positive experiences, some mothers have gone back to school to improve their own formal education. The positive experience gained by Romani children and their families will maintain the demand for early childhood services in the short term, and will increase the demand for quality education, in the medium term.

3.12.2. Sustainability on the level of the ECEC institution

Some project outcomes will also be sustained by ECEC institutions that were involved in AGS. Participating kindergartens showed an interest in building AGS activities (for example, the Home Preschool Liaison Program) into their Pedagogical Program. In this way, activities that were practiced in AGS, and fostered cooperation and real partnership between kindergarten teachers and Romani parents, will be part of the system, and will continue to shape the attitudes of ECEC service providers and Romani parents alike, so that positive outcomes will be sustained.

3.12.3. Sustainability on a municipality level

Persuaded by the visible results of the activities performed by mediators in the AGS project, mayors of AGS localities are willing to hire Romani mediators to continue their good work – helping the community by mediating in conflicts, accompanying children to preschool, visiting families regularly, monitoring attendance rates in kindergartens, and so on. When financial resources can be secured, these mediators will be hired by the municipalities as detailed in the Sustainability Plans.

3.12.4. Sustainability on the level of the higher-education institutions

The project's work with key institutions that are responsible for systemic aspects of providing or improving ECEC services has a considerable impact on the sustainability of results.

In Slovakia, the AGS project involved two Pedagogical Centers that are responsible for monitoring the quality of education, and these partner institutions now have the opportunity to disseminate the AGS approach and achievements through their core services.

In Hungary, AGS brought an additional dimension into the educational program of the participating higher education institution, the College of Nyíregyháza. The optional program offered learning about early childhood development and Romani inclusion as part of the obligatory theory classes. Furthermore, college-student participation in home visits, "Your Story," or HSCL events – as part of their practical training – was a successful and enriching practice. The college is willing to maintain the cooperation with REF, and to institutionalize the new program content and practical training. In this way, the college will continue providing the opportunity for students to gain first-hand experience from Romani families, to develop a positive attitude towards Roma, and to gain understanding of the barriers of education of Roma. Experience has shown that these pedagogy students acquire important skills, and also gain additional interest in working in such environments to provide quality services for Romani children.

3.12.5. Sustainability through REF activities

REF is committed to scaling up the good policy tools and practices identified, and developing this project through its core activities – such as grant support schemes and professional development of NGOs, and advocacy activities targeting national governments, regional authorities, and international organizations.

REF maintains a structured, practical cooperation, working in synergy with the Open Society Foundations Early Childhood Program, the Bernard van Leer Foundations, ISSA and UNICEF, all of which are involved in Romani early childhood development. Further research and joint advocacy actions at the national, municipal, and EU level are also planned by the partnership.⁴⁹

REF advocacy activities during the planning period of the next development programming phase (2014–2021) will be focused on expanding AGS project results outside of AGS target localities through European Structural Fund resources. Negotiations with national stakeholders have begun, and there already are some promising results regarding the follow-up of AGS project activities.⁵⁰ REF already has demonstrated experience in expanding pilot projects⁵¹ using national budget and EU resources. The pilot project has made the first step, and in a short time provided substantial positive outputs. In the period when countries prepare for the next Structural Fund programming, it is vital that ECEC be included in the design of Operational Programmes. New regulations provided by the EC allow for better conceptualization and planning of future large-scale initiatives and changes in legislation.⁵²

Plans for continuation of AGS activities in AGS II phase can be found in Annex 11.

Available online: http://www.romaeducationfund.hu/sites/default/files/publications/annexes_implementation_model_of_ags_policy_paper_1.pdf

⁴⁹ The first common action following the AGS project took place in Croatia in Autumn 2012, when OSF, ISSA, and REF launched the Roma ECD paraprofessionals' network. This pool of trained and talented professionals will provide a good base for future early childhood development projects in the countries in the region. REF, UNICEF, and OSF are committed to continuing the Roma Early Childhood Initiative (RECI) project, creating synergy with AGS experiences, and involving new countries in the framework of the additional policy advocacy component.

⁵⁰ The Hungarian government-maintained Sure Start program expressed interest in the AGS project, as several interventions can be taken over and implemented in their newly established facilities. The Open Society Roma Initiatives women's program recently started to operate mothers' clubs in Hungary, and AGS activities are planned for these clubs. In Slovakia, as a follow-up project to AGS, a large-scale early childhood development project will be implemented, and a random assignment evaluation and monitoring method is planned to measure the outcomes and results. The project will take place in the 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 academic years and will reach out to 1,200 children, ranging in age from birth to 6, to help them gain access to ECEC services. The implementing organizations will be the REF and Office of the Plenipotentiary in Slovakia. The evaluation scheme will be managed by the Slovak Governance Institute and the World Bank. In FYR Macedonia, REF created a partnership with the Minister for Social Affairs and Labor, in order to have the best use of the available Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds. The common goal is to implement a nationwide, quality ECEC program while using the available financial resources ensured by the IPA. In Romania, a larger-scale early-childhood development project, combined with impact evaluation, is planned: It is based on the active involvement of the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and the World Bank. REF will start ECD activities in Konik Camp Montenegro to implement a project called *Support to Integration and Voluntary Returns of IDPs to Kosovo* financed by EU Funds in early 2013. Project components include early childhood development interventions for children under age 6 – involving the community and promoting literacy for empowerment of Roma women.

⁵¹ For example, in Romania, a scholarship program supported by REF has been expanded by government funding, from 1,000 to 2,400 scholarships in double the number of counties; and in FYR Macedonia, the preschool program has been expanded from 15 to 20 municipalities, with 75 percent of the funding being taken over by the government. Indeed, one of the reasons for including FYR Macedonia in the AGS project was to help the existing preschool partnerships expand services to include health, nutrition, and other child development aspects; with a view to then expanding these models in the way the preschool model was expanded.

⁵² "Using EU Structural Funds for Early Childhood Education and Care with Focus on Marginalized Romani Communities in 2014–20," an AGS policy paper, July 2012.

Copyright © Roma Education Fund, 2013
All rights reserved

Photography © REF | Robert Miskovics.
Graphic design by Anikó Bieder and Balázs Gelsei – cadmium grafiklab.



With support from the European Union



The LEGO Foundation

CONTACT INFORMATION



Roma Education Fund

Roma Education Fund

Mark Center

Teréz körút 46, 1066 Budapest – Hungary

tel.: +36 1 235 8030

fax: +36 1 235 8031

e-mail: info@romaeducationfund.org

web: www.romaeducationfund.org

skype: [roma.education.fund](https://www.skype.com/join/roma.education.fund)