



MONTENEGRO //
**Advocacy and Awareness Raising
for the Increased Social Inclusion of
Children from Minority Groups**





Issue

Montenegro is home to approximately 8,300 Roma and Egyptian people, of whom 4,689 are children, representing 1.34% of the national population.⁷⁰ This group of children comprises a mixture of Roma and Egyptians who are legally domiciled and undocumented children from neighbouring countries. Low economic power, limited education, unemployment, inadequate housing conditions, social exclusion together with ethnic prejudices, and cultural norms make the Roma and Egyptian populations vulnerable to poverty and economic shocks. Consequently, there is a significant gap in health, education, and other development indicators between these children and their peers in the general population.

Roma and Egyptian children are affected by poverty, and they fare much worse than other children do across many social and wellbeing indicators. Some 150,000 people (24% of the total population) in Montenegro are at risk of poverty. Child poverty is a concern, with 32% of children living in income-poor households, 8 percentage points higher than the national relative poverty rate.⁷¹ **National poverty figures are not disaggregated by ethnicity.** However, according to the Montenegrin Red Cross (MRC), Roma and Egyptian children are an especially marginalised group and it suggests that they experience a much higher incidence of extreme poverty than the rest of the population.⁷²

Roma and Egyptian children experience multiple deprivations that are significantly higher than the rest of the population. The 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) indicates that 91% of children in Roma settlements are materially deprived, whereas for the general population the figure is 37%.⁷³ Disparities in early childhood development (ECD) and educational deprivations remain a challenge too: 16% of children aged 36-59 months in Roma Settlements are attending an early childhood education programme compared to 53% in the rest of the population; for children aged 3-4 years developmentally on track, the figures were 77% in contrast to 90%. Furthermore, children aged 0-5 months in Roma Settlements were less likely to be breastfed, at 14% compared to 20% for the rest of the population. Significant disparities can be seen in the attendance and non-completion of compulsory education too. For example, some 77% of Roma children of primary school age go to school, compared to 96% for the general population. Moreover, primary school completion rates are 56% for Roma compared to 96% for the general population, and 22% of Roma children of primary school age are out of

school compared to just 3% from the general population, respectively. Secondary school completion and attendance rates for Roma children are only 3% and 7% respectively (compared to 86% and 88% for the general population).⁷⁴

Multiple intrahousehold deprivations adversely affect these children. According to the MICS, child marriage in Roma Settlements remains a significant challenge, whereby 23% of women aged 20-24 years married before the age of 15, compared to 6% of men. The consequences of child marriages can be far-reaching and long-lasting, with school drop-out being one of them. This contrasts sharply with the general population, the figures showing 2% for women and 0% for men.⁷⁵ A 2017 study on preventing child marriage in Montenegro suggested obstacles to the change included a lack of a clear definition and limited data on child marriage; insufficient inter-sectoral coordination, and a lack of community-based initiatives to address social norms.⁷⁶ In terms of household violence where children were subjected to severe physical punishment, 11% of Roma aged 1-14 experienced this compared to 4% of the national population.⁷⁷

While the social protection system is well funded, figures for 2013 indicate that 1.8% of GDP is spent on social assistance,⁷⁸ which accounts for a reduction in poverty by a modest 7 percentage points. There are 14 social protection benefits pertinent to families, but the main tax-financed benefits for families are: one, a means-tested child allowance which is paid for children aged 0-18 if attending school or registered as an unemployed person (for children aged 15-18). This is paid at different rates depending on a household's circumstances.¹³ Two, a means-tested minimum income guarantee (MIG) 'Family Allowance' benefit, which is paid to low-income households with and without children.¹⁴ In 2018, 15,152 children received the child allowance and 31,287 family members received the MIG. Although nearly every third child experiences poverty, only 10% of children receive the child allowance. This means that up to 100,000 people vulnerable to poverty are not covered by the means-tested assistance programmes.⁷⁹ All citizens, non-citizen legal residents, and certain categories of asylum seekers are eligible for these benefits if they pass the means test.⁸⁰ However, the law excludes those groups whose legal status is undetermined. This affects some Roma and Egyptian children who are undocumented or are legally resident but encounter problems accessing their entitlements.

¹³ A monthly child allowance of 24.11 is paid for each eligible child for up to three children; 40.28 is paid for a child with a disability; 40.28 is paid for a child without parental care. A means-tested birth grant of 112.43 is also paid to each newborn child.

¹⁴ Depending on household composition, a monthly benefit ranging from 67.89 to 129.06 is paid for the minimum income guarantee.

According to the MRC, the main problem in improving the Roma and Egyptian population's position is a lack of information and the challenge of obtaining a status of permanent legal residence that would allow them to access available social services and benefits and have access to the labour market. While the birth registration rate in Roma settlements is high at 96.2%,⁸¹ some families still have undocumented status. Some families have lost their status and do not have documents from any country, while others have limited information on their entitlements and are

not reached effectively by social services. Research done by the MRC in 2015 shows that a significant number of these families are not applying for means-tested benefits due to a lack of required legal documents, despite being eligible. MRC figures indicate that the take-up rate for child benefits by eligible Roma and Egyptian families is low at 28.38%, and 11.55% for the universal childbirth grant. Awareness and documentational challenges are barriers to benefit take-up.⁸² Thus, in 2015-2016 UNICEF and the MRC sought to address this challenge.

Actions



Given the multiple challenges facing Roma and Egyptian children, in 2016-2017 UNICEF Montenegro, in partnership with the Montenegrin Red Cross, embarked on an effort to improve the social inclusion of 2,500 Roma and Egyptians in five municipalities. The intervention aimed to increase their access to and awareness of social protection cash transfers, the child protection system and other social services. The MRC was an important partner as it has field presence with local branches and staff members who are trusted by the Roma and Egyptian community.

UNICEF Montenegro organised a one-day course to build MRC staff capacity to have the latest knowledge on social protection rights in the country, and therefore enable MRC staff to disseminate this information further and hopefully increase entitlement take-up. Later, local MRC branch staff organised workshops to provide information about the Montenegrin social protection system

and the rights of the Roma and Egyptian population. To support entitlement take-up, local MRC staff created 3,000 multilingual informative leaflets containing basic information on social protection entitlements and distributed them to Roma and Egyptian communities. The MRC also conducted two series of participative workshops on child and social protection services and benefits with the community, and 172 informational workshops for 895 Roma and Egyptians were held. Forty-four workshops were organised on obtaining proper and valid information about the right to apply for social protection benefits.

UNICEF Montenegro also endeavoured to sensitise the social service workforce to work with Roma and Egyptian communities in a culturally sensitive way. For example, three regional training workshops for social workers and other key partners were conducted to encourage a human-centred and human-rights approach and therefore improve outreach and quality service delivery.



As an important backdrop to these efforts, in 2017, UNICEF Montenegro strove to enhance the child allowance by conducting a review of means-tested social assistance transfers with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare. This had potentially positive repercussions for Roma and Egyptian children too. Based on the analysis presented, growing scientific evidence on the importance of ECD investments and comparative evidence in relation

to economic growth and human capital formation, different scenarios for the potential introduction of targeted benefits for children aged 0-3 and 0-6 were developed. This was an attempt to advocate for universal social protection provision for children. UNICEF fostered a partnership with the Faculty of Economics, the University of Montenegro in conducting this study.⁸³

Impact



UNICEF Montenegro achieved an important policy impact that made a significant contribution to improving child outcomes for all children, including eligible Roma and Egyptian children, which was an increase in the child allowance amount by 24% in 2017, therefore increasing its adequacy.⁸⁴ This was achieved through UNICEF's evidence generation and advocacy efforts.

UNICEF Montenegro and the MRC contributed to better social inclusion for Roma and Egyptian children and their families and connected them with services and benefits.

Results showed that Roma and Egyptian participants expressed a great level of interest in the workshops in which they participated, and the training unlocked a willingness to learn more about their rights and entitlements. Modest improvements were seen in their conditions, whereby some families exercised their right to claim benefits. As the intervention evolved, 98.8% of participants claimed that they improved their knowledge of their rights to services and benefits, during the workshops and individual visits. Despite increased awareness, benefit take-up was hampered at first because many families still needed to obtain the necessary documentation first. However, by the end of the project, 111 Roma had obtained child allowances, which was more than expected. Moreover, it was evident that MRC branches enjoyed good cooperation with Roma and Egyptians, and trust and receptiveness towards MRC staff increased.⁸⁵ Improving the inclusion of these children is a UN-wide priority and UNICEF-MRC's activities contributed to cross-sectoral efforts in this direction.

As reported in UNICEF Montenegro's Annual Reports, the cultural sensitisation of social workers regarding the Roma and Egyptian communities produced results too. The capacities of the social service workforce to cooperate with this population in a more culturally sensitive way were improved. Social workers now approach their beneficiaries with a human rights-based manner. Moreover, this has complemented the interventions on increased demand for social protection services.

Social inclusion of Roma and Egyptian families, especially those with children, remains a priority for UNICEF Montenegro and this requires a holistic approach. Going forward, UNICEF will continue to advocate for and implement wide-ranging activities to ensure children and adolescents, especially those from Roma and Egyptian families, can access basic services. UNICEF is working to ensure that these children attend quality preschool education through a) awareness-raising activities for parents on the importance of early childhood education (ECE), and b) making sure that preschool professionals can provide quality education to all children, including Roma. In collaboration with the Ministry of Education, UNICEF is investing in information systems to prevent school dropout and detect pernicious problems, such as violence. At the same time, UNICEF is supporting central educational institutions in their efforts to ensure that children benefit from quality education.

ENDNOTES

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