



**Eurodiaconia**  | Connecting faith  
and social justice  
through action

# EDUCATION AND SKILLS ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE FOR ROMA INCLUSION

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**POSITION PAPER**



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# Eurodiaconia

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## WHO WE ARE

Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice.

## OUR ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

- Love
- Courage
- Dignity
- Hope
- Trust

## OUR MISSION AND VISION

Inspired by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where social injustice is eradicated and each person is valued, included and empowered to realize their fullest potential, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organisations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe.

**Editor:** Clotilde Clark-Foulquier

**Authors:** Andrea Sánchez Caballero

## **INTRODUCTION**

Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice. Together our membership represents the needs and unique experiences of 58 national and regional organisations in 32 European countries. Many Eurodiaconia members work extensively with historically marginalised minorities, including Roma communities, through the provision of social services, assistance to access education and the labour market, but also through the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and vocational training. Non-profit social services providers play a key role filling the gaps on Roma inclusion, often stepping in when national and local governmental action is lacking.

Education, training and life-long learning, as per Principle I of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) stands as a pivotal element in transcending poverty, fostering life and social development, and ensuring equity of opportunities. This is particularly relevant for the full inclusion of Roma, and requires involvement in quality and inclusive education, as well as access to skills during the lifecycle. However, Roma across Europe face significantly low participation levels in ECEC, as well as completion of formal education beyond lower secondary levels, which presents a multi-faceted challenge enhanced by decades of segregation from mainstream education and structural anti-gypsyism.

Eurodiaconia recognises the potential of the European Skills Agenda, and the initiatives launched under the European Year of Skills for the implementation of the EPSR. However, general policy instruments should specifically include references to Roma and people with a minority background, to provide a comprehensive response, rather than isolating access to education and skills for Roma in the European and National Roma Strategic Frameworks (NFSFs). The Agenda needs to prioritise inclusive education and training, opportunities for low-threshold support, up-and-re-skilling of low-skilled workers, with a particular focus on people with an ethnic minority background for a successful implementation.

## **ACCESS TO QUALITY INCLUSIVE MAINSTREAM EDUCATION FOR ROMA**

Access to early quality education and training, including ECEC, creates the base for developing essential and transferable skills to fully participate in society. However, less than half of Roma children participate in ECEC, and only a quarter of those aged 20-24 have completed upper

secondary education, underscoring the substantial gap in educational achievement with the broader population.<sup>1</sup>

Factors contributing to this educational gap reinforce each other, and include urban segregation, limited or no access to essential services and infrastructure, as well as mistrust from Roma families towards national institutions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a school curricula that does not align with students' needs, social biases, insufficient understanding of Roma culture, and the failure of mainstream schooling system to acknowledge important gender and cultural considerations, are also key determinants of absenteeism and early dropouts.<sup>3</sup>

## **STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SKILLING**

### **DISCRIMINATION AND ANTI-GYPSYISM IN SCHOOLS**

Research has also highlighted the ongoing prevalence of anti-gypsyism and discrimination against Roma students, which is linked with deficiencies in the quality and inclusivity of many educational systems across Europe.<sup>4</sup> Around 20% of Roma children experience school bullying or harassment due to their ethnicity, as reported by their parents or guardians.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, discrimination also extends to the relationship with school authorities, as reported by Roma parents and students (from 7% to 11% between 2016 and 2021).<sup>6</sup> The former contributes to increase the dropout rates of Roma before completing their education.

### **SCHOOL SEGREGATION**

Despite policy at European level, school segregation remains a prevalent challenge, particularly, in countries such as Slovakia, Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania, where over half of Roma children aged between 6 and 15 years old are enrolled in segregated schools.<sup>7</sup> This situation reflects a deep structural issue within the educational systems of several European countries. Indirect discrimination of Roma pupils often takes place through policies or practices that are apparently neutral, but lead to disproportionate discriminatory outcomes, placing certain groups at a

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<sup>1</sup> [FRA \(2023\) Roma in 10 European Countries. Main Results. Roma Survey 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup> [OECD \(2020\) Inclusion of Roma Students in Europe: A literature review and examples of policy initiatives](#)

<sup>3</sup> [P. Hamilton \(2018\) Engaging Gypsy and Traveller pupils in secondary education in Wales: tensions and dilemmas of addressing difference](#)

<sup>4</sup> [FRA \(2023\) Roma in 10 European Countries. Main Results. Roma Survey 2021](#)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> [FRA \(2023\) Roma in 10 European Countries. Main Results. Roma Survey 2021](#)

disadvantaged position.<sup>8</sup> The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has been addressing this issue, resulting on relevant case-law where the Court found that applicant Roma children placed in segregated schools suffered from direct and/or indirect discrimination when they were deprived from their right to education.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of Roma students into mainstream schools is paramount to exercise their right to education and non-discrimination, reduce educational disparities and for the transition to secondary or tertiary education.

### **TOY for Inclusion Project, The Salvation Army (the Netherlands)<sup>10</sup>**

TOY for Inclusion is a pan-European project that promotes inter-sectoral cooperation between ECEC, social health services and Roma communities to build trust between families, schools and service providers. Our member, the Salvation Army, and other partners in TOY for Inclusion, aim to create intergenerational inclusive and safe spaces to learn and play. They facilitate the transition to mainstream primary schools of children in vulnerable situations, mainly Roma and children with minority backgrounds. Since 2018:

**16 Play Hubs**

**8 EU countries**

**+10.000 children, 5.000 adults and 1.000 practitioners involved**

## **TOWARDS INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR ROMA**

These prevailing challenges underline the importance of implementing inclusive education policies at both local and national levels. Such policies should foster educational systems that are responsive to the needs of disadvantaged students, offering support, mentoring, and career guidance while prioritising the overall student well-being. Building strong connections between families and academic institutions, along with peer support, are crucial to create inclusive learning environments and stronger academic engagement.<sup>11</sup>

Central to our mission is advocating to ensure that every child has the opportunity to access quality and inclusive education, irrespectively of their background. Inclusive schools enhance students' involvement and participation, while working to eradicate exclusion and segregation. Such schools cultivate a sense of belonging and encourage the development of non-discriminatory attitudes among children and their families, helping students to realise their full academic

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<sup>8</sup> See: [ECtHR, Horváth and Kiss v. Hungary \(2013\)](#), 105

<sup>9</sup> See: [ECtHR, D.H. and Others v. the Czech Republic \(2007\)](#); [ECtHR, Sampanis and Others v. Greece \(2010\)](#); [ECtHR, Horváth and Kiss v. Hungary \(2013\)](#); [ECtHR, Lavidia and Others v. Greece \(2013\)](#); or [ECtHR, Szolcsán v. Hungary \(2023\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Toy for Inclusion Project](#)

<sup>11</sup> [N. Alexiadou \(2019\) Framing education policies and transitions of Roma students in Europe.](#)

potential.<sup>12</sup>

Eurodiaconia Roma Inclusion Network highlights the importance of integrating Roma cultural representation in mainstream schools, especially, in European countries with a high Roma population. This entails developing school curricula that resonates with students from diverse backgrounds, incorporating and embracing Roma history and culture, and providing training for educators in anti-gypsyism and intercultural communication. Moreover, increasing the representation of Roma educators is also key to build inclusivity and trust with Roma families.

Nevertheless, inclusive education is not yet a reality for all students in Europe. As reported by Eurodiaconia members<sup>13</sup>, discrimination and segregation from early to compulsory education remains a common practice. Significantly, spatial and school segregation of Roma not only compromises the quality of education, but also perpetuates inequality and exclusion. This prevents Roma students from future civic engagement, full social participation and the realisation of other fundamental rights.

#### **Rhomano Kher, Kirkens Bymisjon (Norway)<sup>14</sup>**

Romano Kher is a Roma cultural and resource center established in 2018. Kirkens Bymisjon, assisted Norwegian Roma representatives in the development of this initiative, and is the current center operator.

The center is composed by

- The 'Culture House', where they organize events bringing Roma culture closer to both minority and mainstream audiences;
- 'The Bridge Construction Service' where individual guidance and skills development for public services is offered. The team is composed by Roma and non-Roma advisers. This service also advocates for attitude and policy changes, offering dialogue lectures in schools;
- 'Kelasame' after-school activity service for children and young people;
- and the media platform 'Nevimos Norvergo' showing Roma culture, food, and discussing current issues faced by Roma in Norway.

## **ACCESS TO SKILLS FOR ROMA INCLUSION**

The development of a comprehensive range of skills –from literacy and digital skills to specialised and technical competencies, entrepreneurship, or transversal skills, such as languages, communication, or learning strategies— is a long-term investment for personal and economic well-being. In a wider perspective, it is also an investment in social cohesion as they enable active

<sup>12</sup> [OECD \(2020\) Inclusion of Roma Students in Europe: A literature review and examples of policy initiatives](#)

<sup>13</sup> See: [Eurodiaconia, Preliminary Study: Access to inclusive education \(2022\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Romano Kher](#)



social participation and engagement. However, income and social inequalities often limit the access to quality learning environments, as well as the necessary support for social mobility for those in a disadvantaged position.<sup>15</sup>

## **STRENGTHENING EMPLOYABILITY AND EDUCATIONAL LEVEL**

Under the European Year of Skills and the European Skills Agenda, the EU has prioritised empowering individuals and leaving no one behind in the labour market. The EU is focusing on enhancing skill development and improving labour and social integration, while matching aspirations and demanded skills. Despite these efforts, the socio-economic background is still a significant determinant of educational and learning outcomes, particularly affecting the Roma youth, which continues falling through the cracks of educational and vocational training systems. There is an overrepresentation of young people neither in employment, education, or training (NEETs) (56%), even higher among young Roma women (69%).<sup>16</sup>

Our members have identified the urgent need to improve the inclusion of Roma in educational and vocational training, with a particular focus on mobile Roma and women. Eurodiaconia members provide training services and skilling interventions usually targeting people with lower employability or those who require specific support to access work. In these cases, skills are a bridge towards inclusive jobs, either on mainstream labour markets or supported employment.

Increased investment in inclusive reskilling, upskilling and lifelong learning, following Principle I of the EPSR, is essential to create the base for more inclusive labour markets where all have a chance to access employment, and where social mobility is facilitated. Our members emphasise the importance of adaptable upskilling and reskilling programs, advocating for positive flexibility. The former entails accommodating various learning paces, cultural backgrounds and personal circumstances. For instance, balancing professional and family life, mental health needs or promoting intercultural awareness, among others. This approach is key to create a learning environment that is inclusive and sustainable in the long-term. Likewise, active outreach measures towards the Roma community must be promoted to ensure that everyone can benefit from life-long learning opportunities.

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<sup>15</sup> [OECD \(2019\) OECD Skills Strategy 2019. Skills to shape a better future.](#)

<sup>16</sup> [FRA \(2023\) Roma in 10 European Countries. Main Results. Roma Survey 2021](#)

### **The Roma Gate, Deaconess Foundation (Finland)<sup>17</sup>**

The Roma Gate Project is part of a broader initiative by the Helsinki Deaconess Institute aimed at improving the inclusion of migrant Roma in Pietarsaari by strengthening their employability, educational level and social participation. A key component has been working together with the Roma community and create a multicultural team. Their training programme overcame initial challenges by consulting and adapting to the specific circumstances of the Roma participants. This engagement led to tailoring their trainings (daily life skills, competences, language, etc.) adapting to factors like literacy levels, schedule flexibility and transport accessibility in the city.

**+ 100 participants**

### **Diakonie Training Center, Diakonie Kosova (Kosovo)<sup>18</sup>**

Since 2000, Diakonie Kosovo runs a vocational training centre in Mitrovica, one of the poorest cities in Kosovo, with extremely high unemployment rates among Roma, Askhali and Egyptian minorities (RAE).

Diakonie Training Centre offers vocational trainings on electric installation, construction, heating and water service installation, tailoring, hairdressing, and cooking, facilitating the acquisition of skills and the access to the labour market. Likewise, the training centre offers psychosocial counselling, as well as basic skills development services for RAE in more vulnerable positions related to literacy, health, care, etc.

## **ADAPTING TO UPCOMING CHALLENGES: SKILLS DEVELOPMENT FOR A DIGITAL AND GREEN ECONOMY**

While specific disaggregated data on the digital poverty experienced by Roma is not readily available, it is observed that countries with significant Roma populations often experience high rates of digital deprivation too.<sup>19</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has been a catalyst for integrating e-teaching and e-learning, yet it has also exacerbated educational inequalities.

Factors like location, income, age, sex, and ethnicity notably influence access to new technologies. For instance, unequal access to remote learning exemplifies how the digital gap can widen disparities in educational opportunities. Roma learners and families encounter significant barriers to access education and training due to poverty, spatial segregation and the subsequent lack of access to essential services and infrastructure. This leads to a more challenging educational journey, labour market integration and active social participation.

On this matter, as part of the European Year of Skills and the Digital Education Action Plan, the EU

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<sup>17</sup> [The Deaconess Foundation](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Diakonie Training Centre](#)

<sup>19</sup> See: [Eurodiaconia \(2021\) Roma Child Poverty and Social Exclusion](#)

has implemented a promising approach focused on high-quality, inclusive and universally accessible digital education. It aims to adapt education and training systems to the challenges of the digital era. Under this framework, Eurodiaconia welcomes the acknowledgement of the disadvantaged position of Roma to benefit from the green and digital transitions. Namely, the Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in educational and training, recognises that underachievement rates on digital skills are linked to gender, socio-economic and migrant background.<sup>20</sup> Learners from low-education or low-income families, among them Roma, have a limited access to computers at home and also start to use digital devices later than others.<sup>21</sup>

Equipping Roma learners with the necessary skills to not be left behind in the green and digital transition is a primary challenge. Understanding the specific needs of digitally deprived Roma will be fundamental to better monitor the incidence of digital poverty in preventing their access to relevant information, essential public services, education, healthcare, social services or employment.

Targeted funding and inclusive access to skills and lifelong learning should be directed to increase the support for those who have less opportunities, such as NEET Roma, young Roma women or mobile Roma. Facilitating the development of transversal and digital skills is essential to adapt to labour market transitions.

### **DIRA Project, Deaconess Foundation (Finland)<sup>22</sup>**

The DIRA is an international project that aims to foster inclusive societies and enhance the socio-economic status of Roma adults by improving their access to digital services, skills and knowledge.

Our member, the Deaconess Foundation (Finland) in cooperation with 4 international partners in Italy, Serbia, and North Macedonia, aims to increase the digital literacy of Roma through an e-learning platform, training materials and workshops. This initiative not only enhances the transfer of knowledge between Roma, but also encourages participation in lifelong education.

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<sup>20</sup> [Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training, COM \(2023\) 206](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Council Recommendation on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training, COM \(2023\) 205](#)

<sup>22</sup> [DIRA Project](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND SKILLS FOR ROMA DURING THE LIFE CYCLE

We call on all Member States to:

- Fully realise UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education for Roma, as well as Principle 1 on education, training and life-long learning of the EPSR, with relevant actions, based on inclusive and desegregated education, following non-discrimination and combatting anti-gypsyism as an overarching principle. For example, facilitating community engagement by setting advisory boards with Roma representatives to provide input on education policies and curricula;
- Actively increase effective equal access to quality inclusive mainstream education by developing more ambitious actions, targets and monitoring programmes of NRSFs, concerning all forms of education, including lifelong learning and adult schools, social mobility, and active school desegregation, to align with the sectoral objective on education 1 of the EU Roma Strategic Framework;
- Swiftly implement the [Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success](#), which aims to ensure better educational outcomes for all learners, regardless of background or situation and to decouple educational attainment and achievement from social, economic and cultural status;
- Swiftly implement the [Council recommendation on Roma equality, inclusion, and participation](#), aimed at tackling inappropriate placement of Roma children in schools for persons with special needs, encouraging personal development programs, increasing families and students involvement, addressing school bullying and enhancing educators awareness regarding the needs and rights of Roma students;
- Swiftly implement the [Council Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets](#). Roma children and other vulnerable groups must be particularly targeted on national plans to increase participation in quality ECEC, to avoid being left behind at the beginning of formal education;
- Target Roma children in the Child Guarantee National Action Plans, particularly in those countries with high levels of Roma population. For this, it is key that Roma and civil society organisations working with Roma children are included in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of those plans, as they are well fitted to identify and reach out to this target group;

Eurodiaconia also calls on the EU within its competences, and on national governments to:

***Tackle educational segregation:***

- Member State must fully acknowledge their obligation to provide equal access to education for all irrespective of their ethnic or racial background under European Union Law (ECHR, ECFR, EU Racial Equality Directive 2000/43/EC) and International Human Rights Law (ICCPR, ICERD, CRC), and as recognised by the extensive case-law of the European Court of Human Rights
- Fighting segregation requires more than legal and policy frameworks, we call on Member States to strengthen political commitment and the effective implementation of spatial and educational desegregation strategies at the local and national levels. Inclusive education must go hand-in-hand with active-desegregation. For instance, relocation plans from segregated to mainstream schools should be accompanied by funding to build the capacity of non-segregated schools, as well as infrastructure investment (e.g. improved transport connections) to facilitate access for marginalised students.

***Promote and provide inclusive mainstream education:***

- Promote and provide funding for inclusive schools and inclusive recreational activities. Capacity building among teachers should be promoted.
- Governments, institutions, and schools must
  - actively work to tackle structural anti-gypsyism and exclusion of Roma in educational policies and at school environments,
  - work together for the construction of an inclusive and safe educational environment, putting in place adequate infrastructure for all students, developing an inclusive curriculum embracing diversity, Roma history and culture in schools and after school activities. These are important steps to improve educational outcomes and reduce absenteeism of Roma children.
- Governments must utilise a holistic approach to effectively tackle discrimination against Roma children and encourage their school attendance. This approach should ensure the consistent participation of Roma on the development and implementation. Therefore, considering all stakeholders, from parents to teachers, school directors and local authorities to overcome mistrust and systemic discrimination.

- Active outreach to Roma families, facilitated by a team of Roma social workers, is important to build trust with Roma families and encourage them to send their children to school.

***Ensure access to inclusive training and skilling programmes for all:***

- Enable access to reskilling, upskilling and lifelong learning, which creates the foundation for more inclusive labour markets, targeting those with the lowest skills and who are furthest from the labour market
- Integrate active outreach measures in social and upskilling policies to reach out to Roma beneficiaries and avoid the so-called 'creaming' of those who are most likely to be employed, through the promotion of scholarships for Roma students and employees in education and training
- Public employment services should be inclusive and accessible, where equal and universal access is guaranteed for all. They must also be a safe space free from bias and any form of discrimination
- Ensure a smooth transition between interventions, trainings and job placements. Mobility should be understood as a continuous process stressing transition points, rather than a two-step process (from the intervention into the job) that is often ineffective for low employability profiles. For instance, through social enterprises or accompaniment into jobs
- Member States should address the increased digital exclusion of Roma communities, and implement targeted measures to enhance digital skills within educational systems and ensure broader internet access and digital devices. Targeted funding must be provided for Roma to develop essential skills to thrive in the green and digital transition beyond the NRSFs by addressing Roma in mainstream digital, educational and skilling policies

***Implement an intersectional approach:***

- Tackle structural discrimination on education and skilling against members of racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, such as Roma. Attention must be paid to social groups facing multiple or intersectional discrimination.
- European Institutions and Member States should mainstream an intersectional approach in all policies related to education, skilling, lifelong learning, and employment, as well as to implement policy action to decrease the barriers faced by people with multiple vulnerabilities .

- Roma women and girls must be particularly supported in education, skilling and life-long learning policies through an intersectional perspective. On this matter, governments must provide for sufficient and affordable ECEC in areas with high Roma populations, to enable young Roma mothers to complete their education, including secondary and tertiary levels, and facilitate their integration in the labour market.
- Policymakers should increase efforts to safely collect disaggregated data on the basis of factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and health. There is particular room for improvement in relation to the regularity and comparability of the data. A coordinated approach at EU level remains essential to make inequalities and structural discrimination visible and address them accordingly.

### ***Support and funding for non-profit social service providers working with Roma***

- Local and national funding should be allocated towards successful projects promoting the education and employment of Roma.
- Member States must enable not-for-profit-social educational service providers to offer effective and inclusive educational programs by establishing a proportionate allocation of funds to those committed to inclusive education.
- Member States must provide sustainable funding to not-for-profits that provide educational and school-related services, as well as vocational training and skilling programmes. When contracted by the State, ensure they are well-paid for the services they provide.
- Member States must invest in training and employment of teachers, education professionals, and social workers on interculturality, Roma history, and tackling anti-gypsyism, to reinforce the support they offer to Roma students. High quality and up-to-date training are crucial to ensure that professionals have the adequate tools and knowledge to support the diverse needs of all learners



*Figure 1 photo provided by Salvation Army*

# Eurodiaconia

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## Contact

Tel.: ++32 (0)2 234 38 60  
Email: [office@eurodiaconia.org](mailto:office@eurodiaconia.org)  
Fax: +32 (0)2 234 38 65  
Web: [www.eurodiaconia.org](http://www.eurodiaconia.org)



Rue Joseph II 166 – 1000 Bruxelles – Belgium



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