TOWARD AN EQUAL START:
CLOSING THE EARLY LEARNING GAP FOR ROMA CHILDREN IN EASTERN EUROPE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A large body of international evidence underscores the importance of early intervention – from conception to age 8 - for child development and later life outcomes. This includes recent articles in The Lancet (2011) pointing to the long-term benefits of early childhood development in institutions and at home, including quality preschool. Early childhood development programs are particularly beneficial to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Effective investments in this area have the potential to reduce inequalities perpetuated by poverty, poor nutrition, and restricted learning opportunities. This report explores the gaps in early education and care experienced by Roma children between the ages of 3 and 6 in Eastern Europe, and looks at measures to close those gaps.

New evidence from the UNDP/World Bank/EC regional Roma survey implemented in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic (2011), similarly points to the benefits of pre-school for Roma children. For example, Roma children currently in preschool have better cognitive outcomes, and those who attended pre-school are much more likely to complete secondary school than Roma children from the same communities and with similar backgrounds who have not attended preschool. They are also much less likely (33% reduction in the Czech Republic and 70% in Slovakia) to be enrolled into special needs primary schools designed for children with learning disabilities.

Yet, while more than 75% of all children aged 3-6 are in preschool in each of these countries, the large majority of Roma children are not. The report finds that more than 80% of Roma parents wish at least a secondary education for their sons and their daughters. But multiple disadvantages stand in the way of reaching that goal for the vast majority of Roma, especially inequalities early in life. In Bulgaria only 45%, in Romania 37%, in the Czech Republic 32%, and in Slovakia 28% of Roma children aged 3-6 are in pre-school. Hungary, where preschool is compulsory, and where the government supports poor families for out-of-pocket expenses and school lunches, and gives them subsidies for regular pre-school attendance, enrolment is considerably better: 76% of Roma children are in preschool.

Many Roma children lack a strong early learning and care support mechanism at home. The vast majority of Roma children grow up in poverty and many regularly go hungry. Their parents have minimal levels of education. This creates multiple disadvantages from malnutrition to limited early learning stimulation. For example, most children 3-5 years lack access to books: at least 50% of Roma children in Bulgaria and Romania have no books at home. In Slovakia, half have one book at home. In the Czech Republic and Hungary the situation is a bit better: 5 and 4 books at home, respectively.

1 The full report will be made available online on June 4th, 2012 from www.worldbank.org/roma. For questions regarding the release of the report, please contact dkowalska@worldbank.org
Roma children aged 5-6 years old lag behind their non-Roma neighboring children in cognitive outcomes. The gaps in self-reported outcomes (by parents) are large. For example, while approximately half of Roma children are able to identify at least ten letters of the alphabet (with the exception of Romania, where the level is one quarter), between 50-94% of non-Roma neighboring children can. Similarly, whereas approx. two-thirds recognize the symbols for numbers 1 to 10 (with the exception of Romania where this is half), between 79-94% of their non-Roma peers can.

The report points to four main policy measures to increase pre-school enrollment and improve early learning at home: (1) better inform parents on the benefits of preschool for children’s later-life outcomes; (2) promote inclusive pre-schools by reaching out to parents and by involving them more directly in pre-school with the help of Roma teaching assistants; (3) remove cost barriers possibly coupled with regular attendance subsidies. In addition: (4) support parenting at home. These conclusions follow from the finding that the vast majority of Roma parents wish their children to complete secondary education, but that many also stated a desire to raise children at home in their early years when asked why they did not enroll their children in preschool. Cost was also a consideration. Almost half of parents reported being willing to reconsider enrollment if there were a Roma teaching assistant. More than half said they would reconsider if there were no fees, or if they received food coupons.

Practical experience from a number of government and NGO-led initiatives also support these conclusions. As example is Hungary’s much higher enrollment coupled with programs to remove cost barriers and even provide explicit subsidies to enroll children based on conditional attendance. Recent local Roma secondary school graduates hired as kindergarten teacher’s assistants would be in a good position to more easily build trust with parents and provide them with information, get them more involved in the local pre-school, and support them with parenting techniques at home. They are also relatively inexpensive, and this early work experience may boost their long-term employment prospects, and create important role models to aspire to for young Roma who are still in school, especially girls.

The report also calls for systematic piloting with variations of different programs, and implementing randomized impact evaluations. Findings from impact evaluations can build public support for scale-up of proven programs. Impact evaluations can address questions such as: how far can the provision of information alone – which is a very inexpensive program – go in boosting pre-school enrollment rates, or is continuous outreach also necessary? How effective are preschool attendance subsidies in boosting enrollment relative to information and outreach? Similar education evaluations from around the world have shown that finding answers to these policy questions is entirely feasible and can provide valuable information not only to further guide policy options, but also build public trust in inclusive education investments. The report points to various government and NGO-led initiatives that fall under the policy measures mentioned above to address the early learning gap. Systematically evaluating their effectiveness can shift the debate toward implementation and scale-up of proven initiatives.

Finally, the report points out that ensuring that poor Roma and non-Roma children alike receive an equal start in life by investing in early childhood development is essential to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and is also smart economics. The majority of Roma youth enter the labor market unprepared, perpetuating the cycle of poverty from one generation to the next. With more than 30% of Roma in Eastern European countries younger than 15--double the number among the general population--Roma make up a large and growing share of young people entering the labor force. Countries cannot afford to have such inequalities in opportunity translate into wasted productive resources, lower productivity and growth.