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PILOT PROJECT FOR EARLY WARNING SYSTEM FOR MISSING CHILDREN

*POLICY DOCUMENT:
DESIGNING A FRAMEWORK MODEL FOR MISSING PERSONS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM
CASE STUDIES WITH FAMILIES AT SOCIAL RISK IN NORTH MACEDONIA WITH SPECIAL
EMPHASIS ON LACK OF EDUCATION AS A POTENTIAL RISK OF DISAPPEARANCE*

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FOREWORD

Following the experiences of other countries that have warning systems for missing children, CSO "Journalists for Human Rights" in cooperation and under the project management of "ECPAT Austria", implemented the Pilot project for an early warning system for missing children with a main goal to improve existing approaches and find new methods for the prevention, investigation and mitigation of human and child trafficking, as well as protecting or strengthening the rights of the affected persons by exchanging experiences and acquiring new knowledge. Introduction of an early warning system for missing children is the final outcome of the project involving various stakeholders (public and private sector, civil society organizations, media), implemented from July 1, 2021 until December 31, 2023, was with financial support from the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection of Austria.

Within the framework of the project, a series of activities were carried out for the exchange of experiences and the acquisition of new knowledge by all involved parties (the public and private sectors, civil society organizations, the media), such as: strengthening the capacity of institutions to identify and direct key innovative techniques for prevention of human trafficking (transposition of European legislation, management policies - security of personal data, etc.), one-day training for journalists covering social rights, one-day training to strengthen the capacities of target civil society organizations, study visits to Austria for exchange of good practices for professional staff from relevant state institutions and for representatives of NGOs and journalists, a child protection policy was drawn up, as well as a toolkit for online safety, a two-day workshop with experts from the country and from Europe to implement a system for early warning, and a round table where experiences were shared from the field of suppression of human trafficking and the search for missing persons, but also indicated the conditions and challenges for successful implementation of the early warning system for missing children.

Additional activities were carried out to strengthen the early warning system for missing children like two two-day trainings for representatives of institutions on protection and sharing of personal data, trauma management and self-care related to missing children, child trafficking, conflict resolution, trust building and sustainable teacher-parent relationships, initiating a system for the inter-institutional exchange of information on children who are absent from school for more than three days in order to increasingly eliminate the risk of children going missing, conducting 10 case studies to learn more about the living conditions of children in families with precarious and socio-economically disadvantaged living situations, a three-day study visit for journalists from Austria to North Macedonia, was organized to strengthen the capacity and networking of journalists reporting on social issues and missing children, so they can prepare a story with the aim of publishing it in their media.

Networking of various stakeholders (NGOs, institutions, media), sharing of data, and the proactivity of citizens, but also strengthening capacities both financially and through trainings, exchange of experiences, preventive campaigns, different approaches adapted to the conditions in each country are what makes the alert system for missing children a universal tool that can be useful in quickly and safely locating children, both those who have disappeared and those who have left alone, because they also have risks to life that may not be apparent at first glance are obvious. Cooperation

with all stakeholders active in the project implementation period so far has already been confirmed with several initiatives for further support, and with already initiated and signed memoranda of cooperation with a number of involved parties.

This policy document is also part of the activities that are aimed to further insure sustainability of the Early warning system for missing children and in long-term its' institutionalization.

Designing a framework model for missing persons and conclusions from case studies with families at social risk in North Macedonia with special emphasis on absence from education as a potential risk of disappearance

Author: Fikrija Tair-Selmani

Introduction

The disappearance of persons is a global problem that worries us all and points to the need to institutionalize an efficient Early Warning System for cases of missing children in North Macedonia following examples that are already successfully functioning in the world and in our neighborhood. According to official data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in the last three years (from 2020 to 27.10.2023), 74 minors were missing. Of them, 65 have been found, while nine children are still missing¹. The fact that some of the persons reported as missing are not found at all or the search ends with tragic news is of additional concern.

Missing children represent a high-risk group because they are exposed to other types of risks such as abuse, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, kidnapping and recruitment into organized criminal activities. The existence of cases of missing persons in itself leads to the need to open a discussion with professionals in this area, including the competent institutions and the Macedonian public, to institutionalize an early warning system for cases of missing children in North Macedonia. Good practices from countries where such a system has already been established are useful to stimulate professional discourse and to see ways of effective inter-institutional cooperation and to establish appropriate procedures that protect children, minimize the risks of their disappearance, as well as establish a mechanism to find them in case of disappearance.

Some of the countries already have established practices and mechanisms for quickly finding the missing, while there are countries that still have difficulties in creating a framework or model that will help them solve this problem more easily, or have not developed such a mechanism at all. The concept of establishing a mechanism to deal with this global problem of missing persons and its institutionalization depends on the national context and socio-cultural values in defining what constitutes a missing person or when a person is declared missing. When establishing such a system, the most vulnerable and marginalized children should be taken into account, including Roma children and children with disabilities, who are at high risk of disappearance and abuse. This mechanism should cover the most vulnerable categories, and provide preventive actions in cooperation with educational institutions, educational mediators, social centers, social workers, persons who work with children in institutions or small group homes and institutions and civil organizations that work with marginalized

¹ Free Europe. 2023. "Amber Alert" will search for missing children in North Macedonia. Available on: <https://shorturl.at/xELPR>

groups, other persons of social risk and persons without regulated civil status, that is, who are not listed in the birth registry records.

This policy document was developed for the needs of the "Pilot project for Early Warning System for Missing Children" implemented by the Civil Organization "Journalists for Human Rights" in cooperation and under the project management of the partner organization ECPAT - Austria, funded by the Federal Ministry of social affairs, health, care and consumer protection.

The policy document refers to the need to institutionalize an early warning system for missing children in the Republic of North Macedonia and follows the recommendations that refer to the practices of countries that have already established a model for missing children and early warning systems for missing children such as "Amber Alert" in the United States², The European Center for Missing Persons - "Amber Alert Europe" examples from the region such as "Find Me" in Serbia, "Neno Alert" in Croatia and "Amber Alert" in Greece and Bulgaria. In North Macedonia, such a system is being established through the implementation of the Pilot project for early warning system for missing children by the NGO "Journalists for Human Rights" in cooperation and under the project management of "ECPAT Austria". The system follows the experiences of these countries and is guided by the example of the system "Austria finds you"³ (Österreich findet euch).

Accordingly, the document provides an overview of the potential risks of children going missing, focusing on the link with the education system. Furthermore, absence and truancy from the education system as one of the potential risks of disappearance, as well as the obligation to regulate and monitor the absence of children from schools or other institutions where children are taken care of in North Macedonia, with the aim of prompt response and timely prevention of such occurrences.

In addition, this document takes into account the knowledge derived from the ten case studies processed according to the Case Study Form, by a hired expert from the civil organization "Journalists for Human Rights", through which socio-economic assessments of the risks of disappearance of children from a vulnerable category, who are temporarily or completely out of the education system, in order to formulate appropriate recommendations and conclusions to establish and institutionalize a functional early warning system for missing children that will serve as a tool for relevant institutions and stakeholders.

² Official website of the US government, Department of Justice. More at the following link: <https://amberalert.ojp.gov/>

³ More at the following link: <https://www.oesterreichfindeteuch.at/>

1. National context and definition of the problem of missing children

Educational institutions, in cooperation with parents/guardians of children and other competent institutions, play a significant role in monitoring the development of children's mental and physical health, their progress and socialization in the environment in which they spend most of the day. That is why their involvement in monitoring and, if necessary, alerting for a certain deviation from the children's daily routines is extremely important in the process of early detection of the risks of children going missing.

Children who, for various reasons, less often attend school often have worse academic results and are more likely to be excluded from school, give up and drop out. They may also feel less connected to their classmates and find it difficult to return to school. This can contribute to stunting their social and emotional growth, as well as long-term consequences that extend beyond the education system and adulthood, which can result in them being unskilled and out of the labor market by mid-adulthood⁴.

The fact that absence from school increases the risk of children becoming victims of human trafficking is also confirmed by the International Labor Organization (ILO). According to the ILO, victims with no education are 22.76 times more likely to be victims of child trafficking than victims who attended high school⁵.

The reasons for the absence or existence of children who are outside the education system are numerous and different depending on many factors. The most common reason is the unfavorable socio-economic conditions that define the standard of living of a family, which happens to be generationally trapped in the cycle of poverty and subjected to social exclusion and marginalization. Marginalized groups, including the Roma community, are exposed to a greater risk of dropping out of the education system due to the socio-economic situation in families, antigypsyism⁶ that excludes them from the system, discrimination and segregation in education, harassment and peer violence that children from this category can face in the school or any other care institution which is the main motive for dropping out of the system. Such a situation in itself increases the risk of going missing, abuse, exploitation, entry into a network of human trafficking or any recruitment into organized criminal activities by the very act of of a child going missing.

Although the Law on persons without regulated civil status was adopted in North Macedonia in 2020, the problem of identified persons who are not listed in the birth registry/persons without regulated civil status has dragged on for years, further contributing to complication of the investigation process of the competent institutions, in cases of reporting of missing persons/children, their personal

⁴ Dräger, J., Klein, M., & Sosu, E. (2023). The long-term consequences of early school absences for educational attainment and labour market outcomes.

⁵ Organization for Migration and the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University. (2023). [From Evidence to Action: Twenty Years of IOM Child Trafficking Data to Inform Policy and Programming](#).

⁶ Antigypsyism is the specific racism against Roma, Sinti, Travelers and others who are stigmatized as "Gypsies" in the public consciousness. Antigypsyism is often used in a narrow sense to indicate anti-Roma attitudes or to express negative stereotypes in the public sphere or hate speech. Antigypsyism encompasses a much wider range of discriminatory expressions and practices, including numerous implicit or hidden manifestations. Antigypsyism is not only about what is said, but also about what is done and what is not done. To recognize the full impact, a more precise understanding of it is necessary.

identification and identification of the perpetrators. This problem further makes more vulnerable children who are not registered anywhere and who are at social risk, and thus are outside the educational process.

Another problem is the process of reintegration of returnee children from Western European countries who once left the education system and after a certain period have to return to it again. Namely, returnee children from Western European countries face a problem in the process of recognizing the certificates and diplomas they receive in Western European countries for the period in which they continued their education there. Those diplomas/certificates are often not equivalent to the appropriate level of education that they need to continue on their return to our country, so instead of continuing to study with classmates of their own age, they continue to study with classmates who are younger, that is, the age they had when they left the country. An additional problem is the need for financial resources for the nostrification of diplomas/certificates, which most of the time the families of these children cannot afford. In such cases, there is a gap that is a potential risk for these children to drop out of the educational system..

The commitment of parents in the educational process of children is another segment that affects the reason for increasing the risk of children going missing, as well as drop out from the educational process. Most often, not devoting quality time through which children's development would be monitored is related to parents' rigid work schedules, the level of flexibility of working hours, unemployment and involvement in the informal economy for the purpose of economic gain and their dedication to earning money to feed the family. The search for a certain socio-economic status and prestige in society by the parent can affect the distraction and obligation of the parent to monitor the children in their educational development as well as their mental and physical health. In addition, the information overload and uncontrolled interaction of children in the online space is a potential for changing the child's behavior and the risk of making reckless decisions that lead to the risk of their disappearance and abuse.

The risky behaviors of children as a consequence of the above reasons related to the parent/guardian and the competent institutions, in addition to certain deviant behaviors including the use of alcohol and narcotics, as well as problems with the mental and physical health of children increase the risk of being expelled from the educational system and risk of going missing. Hence, there is a need for a system that will quickly recognize the vulnerability of children, there will be a quick reaction from schools in the event of children's absence, in order to respond promptly and prevent the negative consequences that target them and their families.

2. Legal framework

The legal framework of the country includes various documents that guarantee and realize the rights of children, and we can take them into account when establishing an early warning system for missing children. The legal framework includes the adoption of conventions, legal acts and sub-acts, protocols, directives and public policies that will contribute to the protection of rights, but also ensure the safety of all children.

2.1 International framework

1. Convention on the Rights of the Child ⁷

⁷ United Nation. Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/fgHT7>

This convention is one of the oldest and universally accepted as a human rights instrument. This convention itself includes a whole spectrum of human rights from civil, political, economic, social, to the cultural rights of children. At the basis of this Convention, four guiding principles or general requirements for all rights contained in the document have been established, namely, non-discrimination, the best interest of the child, the right to life, survival, and development, and respect for the views of the child. The Convention was adopted on 20 November 1989 by the United Nations General Assembly and entered into force in September 1990. It was ratified in the Republic of North Macedonia in 1993.

2. Optional protocols to the Convention on the rights of the child

The two optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child were adopted in 2000. The first is the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Military Conflict, while the second is the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. In June 2011, the Human Rights Council of the United Nations adopted the draft version of the third Optional Protocol on communication procedures in the violation of children's rights. The new protocol will allow the Committee on the Rights of the Child to investigate communications with children and their representatives regarding violations of their rights.

3. Convention on the civil aspect of international child abduction⁸

This convention, also known as the Hague Convention, is the main international agreement covering the international abduction of children from their parents. This convention provides a process through which a parent can request that their child be returned to their home country. The Hague Convention also deals with issues of international access to children. It was ratified in our country on September 27, 1991.

4. International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance⁹

The Convention aims to prevent enforced disappearances, reveal the truth when they occur, and ensure that victims and their families receive justice, find out the truth and are compensated. The Convention is considered one of the strongest human rights treaties adopted by the UN. Unlike other crimes under international law, such as torture, enforced disappearances were not prohibited by a universal legally binding instrument until 2010 when this Convention entered into force. The Convention provides a definition of the crime of enforced disappearance and specifies the actions that states must take in order to prevent the occurrence of this crime and to enable the investigation and prosecution of those who committed it.

5. Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings¹⁰

This convention was adopted by the Council of Europe in 2005. The Republic of North Macedonia ratified it on May 27, 2009, and on September 1, 2009, the Convention entered into force. The definition of trafficking in human beings provided by the Palermo Protocol is almost mirrored in Article 4 of this Convention of the Council of Europe.

⁸ Convention on the civil aspect of international child abduction. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/jnUZ3>

⁹ International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/duJQ>

¹⁰ Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/acHOY>

6. Interpol-National Central Bureau¹¹

Connecting national law enforcement with other countries and with the General Secretariat through a secure global police communications network called I-24/7. The purpose is to exchange information (crime data and intelligence) with National Central Bureaus of other countries that will assist in the investigation of potential criminal activity.

2.2 National legal framework

7. Child Protection Law¹²

This law regulates the protection of children, which according to the law is an organized activity based on the rights of children, but also on the rights and obligations of parents for family planning. In addition, the law itself regulates the protection of children, which provides for the provision of conditions and a level of standard of living that corresponds to the physical, mental, emotional, moral and social development of children. At the same time, it foresees care by providing adequate material assistance to parents for child support, raising, care and protection of children and organizing and ensuring the development of institutions and services for the protection of children.

Also, this law regulates the very care and upbringing of children that can be organized and provided in a kindergarten/center for early childhood development, as well as the exclusion of any form of discrimination, for which fines are provided otherwise.

8. Social Protection Law¹³

Through this law, the system and organization of social protection, social protection rights, financing and the procedure for exercising social protection rights are regulated. In connection with children, this law regulates the services for day care, accommodation in institutions, fostering in a family, the way of functioning of the Centers for the support of foster families, as well as the rights established by the Law on the Protection of Children.

9. Primary Education Law¹⁴

This law regulates the educational process that takes place in primary schools, as well as the activity of primary education as part of the unique educational system. Particularly important from this Law is Article 8, which indicates that primary education is compulsory and the parents or guardians of the student are obliged to enable their child to fulfill the obligation for compulsory primary education and upbringing.

A counseling program for students in elementary schools and their parents/guardians is another important part of this law and it is implemented for both parties in the event that the student attends classes irregularly for unjustified reasons with more than ten unjustified absences, i.e. has unsatisfactory results or manifests inappropriate behavior.

10. Secondary Education Law¹⁵

This law regulates the organization, functioning and management of secondary education, as part of the system of upbringing and education. In Article 3 of this Law, it is indicated that secondary

¹¹ Interpol-National Central Bureau. Link: <https://www.interpol.int/en/Who-we-are/Member-countries/Europe/NORTH-MACEDONIA#>

¹² Child Protection Law. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/envAN>

¹³ Social Protection Law. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/eAFQ9>

¹⁴ Primary Education Law. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/adh09>

¹⁵ Secondary Education Law. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/mxyDF>

education is compulsory and is free in public secondary schools, and discrimination based on gender, race, skin color, national and social origin, political and religious belief, property and social position is not allowed.

11. Criminal Code¹⁶

For the first time in February 2002, human trafficking was defined as a crime in the Criminal Code, i.e. in the chapter entitled "Crimes against humanity and international law" with the introduction of Article 418-a, paragraph 1 of the Criminal Code, which reads:

“He who by force, serious threat misleads or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, by abusing his position or the state of pregnancy, weakness or physical or mental incapacity of another, or by giving or receiving money or other benefit for the purpose of obtaining consent of a person who has control over another person or otherwise recruits, transports, transfers, buys, sells, shelters or accepts persons for exploitation by means of prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, pornography, forced labor or servitude, slavery, forced marriages, forced fertilization, illegal adoption or a similar relationship or illegal transplantation of parts of the human body, shall be punished by imprisonment for at least four years”.

In addition to this article, other articles that are related to action against human trafficking in the Criminal Code are:

- “Establishing a slavery relationship and transporting persons in slavery “ (Article 418);
- “Smuggling of migrants” (Article 418-b);
- “Organizing a group and encouraging the execution of acts of trafficking in human beings, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in children” (Article 418-c).

In 2008, a new article was added to the Criminal Code, that is, Article 418-d paragraph 1 was added, which is named "Trafficking in minors", and this article is supplemented by introducing criminal liability of legal entities for human trafficking.

The last change was made in 2014, it refers to amendments in Article 418-a, paragraph 1 and additions whereby the word "fertilization" is replaced by "pregnancy" and "begging and exploitation through legal activity" is added to the section on forms of exploitation. Amendment to the Criminal Code mentioned in paragraph 14, the text of article 418-d, paragraph 1 also replaces the word "minor" with "child".

12. Law on Police¹⁷

In the Law on police, point 6. "Search for persons and objects" in article 51, it is indicated that the police is authorized to carry out measures to search for persons and it is stated that the police are responsible for issuing an announcement to find missing persons, where Article 51 reads:

„(1) The police is authorized to carry out search measures for persons and objects. (2) The search measures referred to in paragraph (1) of this article are a warrant, a summons and an announcement. (3) A warrant is issued for finding a person for whom a detention order has been issued in accordance with the law. (4) A summons is issued for finding a person for whom there are grounds to suspect that he is a perpetrator of a crime or misdemeanor. (5) An announcement is issued for: 1) determination of a person's residence or place of residence; 2) determining the identity of a person who is unable to

¹⁶ Criminal Code. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/ijwyl>

¹⁷ Law on Police. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/kmy78>

provide personal information about himself or a corpse whose identity cannot be determined; 3) finding missing persons and 4) finding objects related to a crime or misdemeanor, as well as objects that have disappeared.”

13. Border Control Law¹⁸

This law regulates the border control, the competences of the local police, the cooperation between the state authorities that have competence in border management and the international police cooperation. Particularly important Article 33 in the section "Categories of persons for whom special rules apply when performing border checks" which regulates the execution of border checks, where it is stated that special rules apply to minors.

14. Rulebook on the manner of performing border checks and border surveillance

In this rulebook, Article 50 explains the way in which minors are checked, while Article 50 reads:

“Minors crossing the border are subject to the same border checks upon entry and exit as well as adults. When performing border checks, special attention is paid to minors, regardless of whether they are traveling accompanied or alone. When the minor is accompanied, the police officer should check whether the companions are the parents of the minor, especially in the case where the minor is accompanied by an adult and if there are serious grounds for suspecting that the minor has been unlawfully taken from the person who is his parent or legal guardian. If the minor does not travel with a parent or guardian, the person accompanying him/her must have a power of attorney issued by the parents or legal guardian.”

While Article 51 indicates the way of performing control when the minor child is a foreign citizen and Article 51 reads:

“When the minor is a foreign citizen and travels unaccompanied, it is checked whether the minor has permission for independent travel given by the parent or guardian certified by a competent foreign authority or a diplomatic consular representation of the Republic of North Macedonia abroad.”

3. Early Warning System for Missing Children and Missing Persons Framework Model

The system for protection and early warning against dangers and violations of children's rights needs to have a comprehensive approach, taking into account all stakeholders in successfully solving the problem, including:

- Institutions and organizations whose competence is related to the protection of children and their rights, that is, which provide services related to the protection of children and their rights;
- Early warning system for missing children and institutions that conduct investigations into cases of missing children;
- The public who, following clearly defined instructions and given accurate information, could help in prevention, early warning and follow-up of cases;

¹⁸ Border Control Law. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/giM06>

- Professionals who will offer support to parents and children after a certain action that caused trauma or any violation of the child's right;¹⁹

The approach can be direct, when we have a case for which there is a report of a missing child in the competent institution, and indirect, where with inter-institutional cooperation and the involvement of parents/guardians and civil society organizations, the risk of the child's disappearance is prevented or detected early. We can consider the indirect approach through the participation of educational institutions and/or social work centers that monitor the attendance at school, the behavior and development of the child, have communication with the parent/guardian and, if necessary, include the other competent institutions.

3.1 „Amber Alert“

The already developed systems for missing children indicate a successful finding of the missing through the use of an approach with the division of activities into activities that are implemented by the institutions in accordance with the legal regulations and activities that are supported by the public and civil society organizations. According to Robert Hover of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, about 95% of Amber Alert cases are resolved within 72 hours²⁰.

In order to decide when such systems should be activated, criteria should be established by the competent institutions, which are usually the following ²¹:

- The person who has been reported missing is a minor, that is, he has not reached the age of 18;
- A missing person report has been submitted by the minor's legal representative, from whom consent is requested to publish information about the disappearance of the minor and his photo to the public;
- The assessment for activation of the system is by the competent institutions in the event that the missing person is in danger and/or has the potential to be a victim of a serious crime.

The first early warning system for cases of missing children, Amber Alert, was developed in Texas, USA in 1996, in response to the kidnapping and murder of nine-year-old Amber Hagerman, after whom the system was named. The report to the police was made by a witness. The lifeless body of the girl was found five days after the abduction, less than ten kilometers from the place of abduction. According to the autopsy data, it was revealed that Amber was alive for at least two days after the kidnapping. Knowing this fact, if in this case the news of Amber's kidnapping had been spread among the local population, there was a high probability that the authorities would have found the girl alive. This case raised the issue of the need to involve the general public in reporting and expanding this type of information and alert information about missing children in the United States, in order for that inter-institutional collaboration to develop a missing child alert system. Thus, in 1996, this practice of public information system for cases of missing children in the United States established the national program "Amber Alert" with conditions that must be met in order to be able to activate this system. Following this example, other countries began to establish such a system, adapting it to their national context and needs.

¹⁹ According to the proposed framework for locating a missing person from the section Institutional practice in cases of disappearance of persons. p. 20. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/opxlZ>

²⁰ Amber Alert Serbia. Available at: <https://amberalert.rs/>

²¹ European Centre for Missing Children. Available at: <https://www.amberalert.eu/amber-alert-in-your-country>

3.2 Missing Persons Framework Model (conceptualization)

Already established model frameworks for missing children can serve as an example and be adapted to the national context of a country that is in the process of establishing an early warning system for cases of missing persons. The framework elements must be well formulated, clearly laid out and defined so that they can be put into use by the competent institutions..

Elements of a Missing Persons Framework Model ²²:

1. Establishing a clear definition of what constitutes a missing child according to national legislation ie:
 - A missing child who is absent from home without the permission of a parent/guardian;
 - Family kidnapping, keeping a child from a parent or other family member or guardian;
 - Non-familial abduction, forced and unauthorized taking of a child from someone who is not a parent/guardian or family member;
 - Lost or injured child;
 - A minor who is abandoned or unaccompanied by a parent/guardian;

The different categories under the definition of a missing child indicate the appropriate approach by the competent institutions during the investigation and this list is supplemented according to the national context.

2. Establishing an easy mechanism for reporting a missing child

The state should enable the public in an easy and simple way to report a missing child free of charge through an online platform or a free telephone line, accompanied by educational materials and information on how to report and identify the risks of missing a child, while ensuring the protection of the identity of the person submitting the application. In addition, the platform should serve as a campaign to raise public awareness of the existence of the problem and the importance of the public's contribution to the process of finding missing children.

3. Urgent investigation after reporting a missing child case

Accurate information on when a child is missing, the time to start an investigation that needs to start immediately, and inter-institutional coordination are essential for a quick resolution of the case, given that some research indicates that the risk of causing more harm to the missing child increases with each subsequent hour.

4. Strict control during cross-border travel with a child

This implies mandatory compliance with all legal rules and regulations during border control according to the competences. In addition, if the database at entry and exit from the border is integrated with the register of missing persons, the effect is faster.

5. Established a national register of missing persons that can be made available to competent institutions and the general public

The national register usually contains basic information about the missing person, i.e. first name, last name, age, parents' name and place of residence, as well as details about the place from

²² Прилагоден модел по примерот. Global Missing Children Center. 2019. Global Model Missing Child Framework. Достапно на: <https://shorturl.at/aes05>

where it is assumed that he disappeared, a description of the child's appearance and information/contact where they can citizens to report if they notice it.

6. Establishing a good mechanism for managing the register and the information in it in order to identify the course of the investigation, the responsible institutions that were part of the process, and the activities undertaken to find the missing child

This management system is important to be able to serve the competent institution as an example for future cases or in case there is a repetition of the same example, or a crossing of cases that can lead to new knowledge and a new direction in the investigation.

7. Establishing a system for distributing a photo of a missing child

This includes distributing information and a photo of the missing child in agreement with the parent/guardian, through websites, social media, public screens, apps, mail, TV screens, bulletin boards, etc. This step should be taken based on the judgment of the competent institution, to be in the best interest of the investigation and to minimize harm to the child.

8. Method of response and initiation of investigation by competent institutions

Establishing policies, standards and operating procedures that will be undertaken and followed equally and in the same way for every case of a missing child without exception. Law enforcement authorities should not dismiss or ignore any report or information related to a missing child and must immediately initiate an investigation, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or the circumstances of the disappearance. An example of unequal treatment when reporting a missing person is when the authorities take into account their personal beliefs based on stereotypes and prejudices about a certain missing child and do not immediately start the investigation, connecting the child's disappearance with certain so-called "cultural or traditional values".

9. Inter-institutional cooperation and formal agreements

Cooperation between institutions is inevitable in the process of finding a missing child. At the same time, it is necessary to clearly define the roles and approach of each of the competent institutions in the investigation process, but also in the process of prevention of disappearance of children, all in order to avoid additional effort and overlap in the work of the institutions.

10. Encouraging the involvement of the public and civil society in minimizing the risk of children going missing

Encouraging various issues related to the problem, educating and encouraging all stakeholders to report unusual child behavior or child disappearance. In addition, to raise public awareness with campaigns on this topic, to inform the general public about the available services and resources related to the topic, to establish regular communication of the teaching staff with parents and educational mediators with a special emphasis on families at social risk and marginalized groups.

11. Institutionalizing a rapid warning system for a missing child case following the example of the "Amber Alert" explained above in the text.

4. Absence from the educational system as one of the potential risks for disappearance, conclusions from case studies with families in the social risk/vulnerable category in North Macedonia

Deeply embedded issues of stigmatization, shame, entrapment in the cycle of poverty, generational efforts for survival on the one hand, as well as the dysfunctional system to get out of this situation on the other hand, lead to complicated situations in the cycle of poverty and building attitudes, values and expectations that target male and female children differently in families living on the margins. Such conditions contribute to increasing the risk of exclusion or truancy from the educational system, as well as the potential for exploiting the difficult circumstances of these children, putting them at risk of disappearance and exploitation by persons or groups, most often human traffickers who offer help in various forms and bring them into this process.²³

There are various reasons for difficulties in accessing education for children from social risk and marginalized groups, including the Roma, which are associated with socio-economic status and exclusion from society. Previous research and analysis indicate that Roma students have poorer performance, less attendance at classes and high rates of dropping out of education due to lack of knowledge of the Macedonian language, segregation even in the earliest stages of the educational process, unregulated civil status, antigypsyism and discrimination, the inability to reintegrate if they have the status of returnees from Western European countries, as well as lack of adequate infrastructure, inadequate housing, no health care and no organized or public transportation from Roma settlements to schools.

From the UNDP Regional Roma Survey²⁴ from 2017, the difference in the enrollment of Roma children in primary education can be observed, which is 78% for Roma children compared to 88% for non-Roma children. The existence of segregation in schools was confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights in 2022 in two schools in the Republic of North Macedonia. In addition, during 2020, the realization of online teaching caused the difficulty of the educational process for Roma children. Many Roma children who are part of families at social risk were not able to attend classes due to the fact that they did not have electronic devices (computer, tablet, smartphone) and internet network. According to the Regional Roma Survey, 42% of Roma have access to a computer compared to 72% of non-Roma.²⁵

As an additional problem that has appeared in recent years, there are returnee children who have foreign diplomas/certificates, but due to the inability of the parents to cover the funds for equivalence/recognition of the students or due to the non-recognition of the same by the educational institutions, the children remain outside the education system. According to the law on primary education, schools have an obligation to help children returning from abroad in learning the mother tongue and the language in which they follow the classes. But, unfortunately, this possibility is not applied and is a reason for some of the Roma children to drop out due to language barriers, show

²³ Wood, L. C. (2020). Child modern slavery, trafficking and health: A practical review of factors contributing to children's vulnerability and the potential impacts of severe exploitation on health. *BMJ paediatrics open*, 4(1). Available at: <https://shorturl.at/hvGMU>

²⁴ UNDP. 2018. Regional Roma Survey 2017. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/mpFRW>

²⁵ Ibid

poorer results compared to the rest of the students, and some even leave the educational process. In addition, the law stipulates that those children who are not included in education and are over the age limit for inclusion in appropriate education, have the right to primary education under equal conditions as other children. For inclusion in education of this category, the Education Development Bureau prepares curricula for inclusion in the appropriate education classes.

Families who live in makeshift dwellings and do not have adequate housing are outside the state system, and children are exposed to being on the streets. According to the Shadow Report prepared by Romalitiko, two centers for street children operate on the territory of Skopje, one in Kisela Voda and one in Šuto Orizari. According to the data, the number of street children in the territory of the state in 2021 was 70 children²⁶. This figure has the potential to be higher, and thus a serious risk for a greater number of missing children who would remain invisible, and those who break the law, unpunished.

From the existing public policies that can help prevent education truancy, the engagement of educational mediators and opportunities for scholarships, mentoring and tutoring stand out. With the latest changes in the Primary Education Law, for the first time, the role and competences of educational mediators were systematized, through which they provide support to Roma students who come from socially disadvantaged families and/or have been out of the education system for a long time. The Ministry of Education and Science, for the academic year 2023/2024, announced a call for hiring 40 Roma educational mediators to support the basic education of Roma. In addition, support with scholarships, tutoring and mentoring are activities that the MES and civil society organizations motivate Roma students to progress in education.

From September 2019, students with mild disabilities are enrolled in regular schools. This is one solution according to the Primary Education Law, which provides for the transformation of special primary schools into resource centers. They will keep the educational component for students with complex needs, but will also have an additional activity. Considering that it is a new reform that is in the process of implementation, it remains to monitor its implementation and impact among Roma children and children with disabilities²⁷.

4.1 Case studies analysis

In order to elaborate how to use the potential and obligations of educational institutions to reduce the risk of children going missing, especially emphasizing children who live in families who are at social risk, are members of marginalized communities, including the Roma community, children without due care, the conclusions of the ten case studies were analyzed, which were performed according to the Form for case studies prepared by an expert in the field of social work selected by the civil organization "Journalists for Human Rights" for the needs of the "Pilot Project for for Early Warning System for Missing Children".

²⁶ Institute for Research and Policy Analysis – Romalitiko. 2023. Shadow report on public policies for Roma integration 2021-2022.

²⁷ Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. 2023. Strategy for Roma 2022-2030. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/aDQT1>

The form for case studies²⁸ prepared by the expert, is a document with clear instructions for collecting and processing the information from the case studies. Guided by the guidelines, focus groups, meetings with families and interviews were conducted in the field, through which ten stories were processed²⁹ with real content that protects the identity of families. Then an overview with conclusions about the socio-economic and civil status of the families is elaborated³⁰. This situation is cited as a potential risk for absence from education, as an obstacle to realizing the rights of family members (right to education, right to housing, social and health care, formal employment, etc.), as a reason for functioning in the circle of poverty and on the brink of existence. The common feature of all stories is exposure to discriminatory and antigypsyism practices.

The ten case studies have been previously selected by experts hired by the NGO "Journalists for Human Rights", and will be analyzed for the purposes of this policy document, which increases the potential for the comprehensiveness of the analysis to have limitations in the way of selecting families with which was discussed. However, from the case studies, insights can be drawn about the reasons for the truancy or complete exclusion from the educational system of families who have a similar socio-economic status. In this direction, we can consider the case studies from several aspects: the status, the education of the members, their views on education, the way of livelihood and certain specifics that separate them from each other.

According to the demographic data that can be extracted from the stories, these are families made up of young parents up to 35 years old, some of them live in informal marriages or as single parents, with an average of four minor children from the following cities, Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo, Gostivar, Prilep and Berovo, some of them are returnees from Western European countries. Mostly the parents have completed primary education, incomplete primary education or have never been part of the educational process, and one of the reasons is their unregulated civil status. Some of the children are involved in the educational process in primary and secondary education or have never been part of the educational system due to unregulated civil status.

Part of the families are without adequate social and health care, which makes them powerless to face their personal health condition and the health condition of their children, among which there are examples of children with chronic diseases or those suffering from cancer. The socio-economic situation is in an unfavorable state, some of them are recipients of social assistance that cannot satisfy their existential needs, which is why they additionally work informally, mostly as collectors of secondary raw materials or hygienists. They live in improvised dwellings, or in homes with one room without access to clean water and with improvised toilets in which there are no basic elementary conditions for life, dignified living and no opportunity to perform school duties. In addition, there is an example in which the family is brought to the brink of poverty, forcing the parents to involve the children in informal work as collectors of secondary raw materials or are forced to beg.

²⁸ More in the annex 2.

²⁹ First family "The Family of Ali and Melisa: Navigating Challenges for a Better Future, Second family "The Memet and Zehra Family-Invisible Challenges", Third Family "Emilian and Lela family-A cry for help", Forth family "Resilience against the Odds: Mirela's Story of Hope ad Determination", Fifth family "Hope Amidst Hardships: The Inspiring Narrative of Enisa and Florin's Resilient Family", Sixth Family: Alfred's Struggle for Education and Care in Prilep", Seventh family " Alina's Struggle for Education and Basic Necessities in Gostivar, Eight family "Challengdes of Education and Legal Status for Sebat and Afrije's Family in Berovo", Nineth family "Struggles of the Salamov Family in Tetovo", Tenth family Amran's Struggle of Education, Documentation and Asylum"

³⁰ The families are from Skopje, Kumanovo, Tetovo, Gostivar, Prilep, Berovo

According to the conclusions from the stories, the following reasons can be distinguished for a truancy or complete exclusion from the educational process:

- inability to reintegrate returnees from Western countries into the educational process, that is, they do not recognize the certificates they have received from abroad or do not have the means to nostrify them;
- peer violence as a cause of fear or reduction of motivation among children to go to school;
- mistrust in institutions;
- non-reaction by educational institutions in case of absence of a child;
- wrong attitudes of parents about the benefits of education (fear of children being taken away, fear of underage marriages, etc. and creating a perception of education as a luxury);
- discrimination during enrollment in schools;
- inadequate housing for the performance of school duties;
- unregulated civil status that limits basic human rights;
- inadequate infrastructure in the place of residence without access to basic living conditions;
- long distance from the place of residence to the school and lack of transportation;
- peer violence;
- intergenerational poverty, etc.

The phenomenon that connects all families whose children are part of the education system is the discrimination in the education system which is related to the problem of enrollment in schools located near their residence, whereby parents are forced to enroll their children in a school that is quite far from their place of residence. The parents also mention the help from the civil society organizations by involving the children in additional educational activities that affect the motivation, success of the students and the positive attitudes of parents about the importance of education to get out of the circle of poverty.

A more comprehensive inclusion of examples and families from social risk and marginalized groups such as the Roma community and children with disabilities is needed to make a more detailed and comprehensive analysis of the causes of truancy from education and the connection to the risk of children going missing.

The ten case studies illuminate long-standing problems that have been ignored by the state system for years, such as barriers in the education system, problems with regulating civil status, economic instability and legal challenges facing citizens living on the margins, and thus are exposed to a greater risk of going missing. The narratives that show a positive outcome are the perceptions of the majority of families who see education as a way out of the cycle of intergenerational poverty, but also their awareness of the need for a functional system that will restore their trust in institutions.

Conclusion

The disappearance of children is a phenomenon that worries us all, and its increasing frequency indicates the need to institutionalize an efficient and functional early warning system for cases of missing children in North Macedonia following examples that are already successfully functioning in the world and in our neighborhood. "More than 250,000 children disappear every year in Europe, and in North Macedonia, on average, about 300 people, of which a significant number are children." The fact that some of the persons reported as missing are not found at all or the search ends with tragic news is of additional concern. Missing children are a high-risk group because they are exposed to other types of risks such as abuse, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, kidnapping and recruitment into organized criminal activities.

In the process of institutionalizing the Early Warning System for cases of missing children in North Macedonia, it is necessary to open a discussion with professionals in this area, including the competent institutions and the Macedonian public, through inter-institutional cooperation and cooperation with civil society organizations. Good practices from countries where such a system, such as the Amber Alert, is already in place is useful to stimulate professional discourse and establish appropriate procedures that will protect children, minimize the risks of their disappearance and help the functionality of the mechanism for finding them in case of disappearance.

This policy document refers to the need to institutionalize an Early Warning System for missing children in North Macedonia and follows the recommendations that refer to the practices of countries that have already established Early Warning Systems for missing children with an appropriate model adapted to the national context. In addition, it takes into account the conclusions of Case Studies by an expert hired by the Civil Organization "Journalists for Human Rights" to reflect the assessments from a socio-economic aspect about the risks of disappearance of children from social risk, persons without regulated civil status, marginalized groups such as the Roma and children with disabilities, as groups with the potential to be temporarily or completely outside the education system, and thus at risk of disappearing. The ten case studies illuminate problems that have been ignored by the state system for years, such as barriers in the education system, problems with the regulation of civil status, economic instability, unequal treatment and legal challenges faced by citizens living on the margins, and thus are exposed to a greater risk of disappearance.

It is additionally essential to emphasize the need for direct involvement in the process of prevention and psychosocial support, sensitization and training of all those who work with children and protection of their safety, focusing also on institutions for caring for children without parents and small group homes. Another significant segment in this process is the role of parents/guardians, educational institutions, police and social centers through monitoring the development and actions of children in the prevention of peer violence and other deviant phenomena and conditions that are a potential risk of truancy and reckless decisions, and thus the risk of going missing.

The document was prepared for the needs of the "Pilot project for early warning system for missing children" implemented by the Civil Organization "Journalists for Human Rights" in cooperation and under the project management of the partner organization ECPAT - Austria, financed by the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, health, care and consumer protection. The review of recommendations for the establishment of an early warning system for missing children and the conceptualization of a model for missing children, together with the conclusions of the case studies will serve the relevant

institutions and stakeholders to work towards the institutionalization of a functional early warning system for missing children, as well as work to prevent cases of disappearance.

Recomendations

In order to institutionalize and establish an early warning system in cases of missing children, apart from the need to introduce a functional system that will allow space for reporting cases, it is also necessary to take into account the indirect risks of disappearance in order to prevent such occurrences. In this case, the inter-institutional cooperation and support, as well as the involvement of the general public in the process, is extremely important.

(I) Recommendations for institutionalizing an early warning system in cases of missing children

1. Enacting laws on key issues in order to institutionalize and establish a functional early warning system for cases of missing persons by regulating the topics with a separate law or appropriate norms that can be integrated into the Law on Police or other laws.

The following issues should be regulated by law:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which person will be considered a missing child;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the assessment criteria and who is responsible for making a decision on when and if the early warning system will be activated, taking into account the danger to the child's life;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What criteria represent a risk for the child's safety in case of activation of the system and whether there are conditions for suspending the system;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What will be the procedure for activating the system, i.e. does the authority that activates the system do it independently or does it additionally require the consent of other authorities including the family, how does it distribute the information and through which channels;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the time interval after the report of disappearance after which the system is activated, taking into account the urgency of action;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the criteria for registration in the Register for missing children, what data is entered in the Register, who manages the data in the Register, is there a way to delete that data from the Register and how is the data left in the Register. Most of the time these Registers are managed by the Ministries of the Interior.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With which competent institutions and organizations (authorities, bodies, public services, centers, civic organizations, etc.) should cooperation be established and information exchanged in the case of missing children, with the obligations of all stakeholders to be clearly regulated data management. In this context it is necessary to create a legislative initiative to create a bill that will allow the police to work and ask for help from the public and non-profit organizations in the investigation of missing persons.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the purpose of data processing in the case of a missing child, clearly defining which data is processed, which persons the data refers to and what is the time frame for data storage.

2. The investigating authority should have a key role in the operation of the early warning system. The early warning system and the entire procedure surrounding its activation should be quick. The frequency of activation of the system should not be frequent as this may compromise its functionality, but all this must not prevent its rapid activation in order to justify its insertion into the state system.
3. Cooperation between the investigating authority and the police is required when activating this system, whereby the investigation in the case of a missing child should be started immediately without waiting for a certain legal period to consider the child missing. Who activates the system is one of the essential issues when introducing this system and therefore it should be clearly defined.
4. The social protection system should be involved in making decisions to activate the early warning system for cases of missing persons, taking into account the records kept by the Centers for Social Work;

The social work center should provide information about the missing child if it is recorded in their registers which would help to assess the risk exposure of the missing child and whether the parent/guardian is a potential risk to the child.

5. It is necessary to think in the direction of establishing cooperation with companies that manage social networks in order to control children in the online space and expand information about missing children. (Example the company "Meta", owner of the social networks Facebook and Instagram.) This cooperation would facilitate the rapid publication and urgent dissemination of messages about missing children, thus reaching a larger number of people in the digital environment.
6. It is necessary to open a special free phone line for reporting missing children that will be incorporated into the early warning system for cases of missing children.
7. A feasibility study should be done regarding the institutionalization and introduction of the early warning system in cases of missing children, which will determine the capacities of the state in terms of having software, hardware and other available resources, as well as the legal regulation, as resources that can be adapted or help in the functionality of such a system and for its maintenance.
8. The established policies, standards and operational procedures should be equally and in the same way undertaken and followed for every case of a missing child without exception. Law enforcement authorities should not dismiss or ignore any report or information related to a missing child and must immediately initiate an investigation, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or the circumstances of the disappearance.
9. Inter-institutional cooperation with clearly defined roles is needed. A clear approach of each of the competent institutions in the investigation process, but also in the process of prevention of children going missing, in order to avoid additional effort and overlap in the work of the institutions.

10. The system should contain information and update it accordingly, on the ways of reporting cases of disappearance and space for campaigns in the direction of prevention and protection from disappearance with a special focus on children who are at social risk.
11. To enable mechanisms for offering support in the process of prevention to victims with mandatory activation of competent institutions.

(II) Recommendations for the prevention and minimization of the risks of children going missing

1. It is necessary for educational institutions, teaching staff and professional services in schools to be included in the early warning system in cases of missing children. To react if they notice a change in children's behavior, unjustified and justified absences through frequent communication with parents/guardians of students as well as educational mediators, personal assistants of children with disabilities, etc. with a special emphasis on children from social risk and marginalized groups such as the Roma community and, if necessary, to include other competent institutions.
2. The state educational inspectorate should be proactive, i.e. react and prevent when it receives information from the teaching staff about frequent unjustified absences of children from school.
3. To establish inter-institutional cooperation in the exchange of information about children who are absent from the educational system and to act accordingly.
4. The state should provide disaggregated data on different grounds (ethnic, gender, etc.) in order to find potential disproportionality in cases of missing persons and efficiency in investigations, as well as the work of relevant institutions to find appropriate mechanisms to overcome these problems.
5. Competent institutions and social centers should develop a more effective mechanism for registering children on the street, react accordingly and, if necessary, involve other competent institutions. In addition, it is necessary that social workers be included within the framework of schools.
6. The state should allocate a budget for national campaigns that will inform, prevent and stop the disappearance of children, in cooperation with civil society organizations.
7. To use and upgrade the capacities of journalists who report on the topic in order to raise the awareness of the general public and to open a media space for the problem of child trafficking, missing children, the risks to vulnerable categories and the violation of children's safety.
8. Educational mediators, personal assistants and social workers and psychologists should be involved in overcoming the problem of missing children in cooperation with professional services in the school and parents/guardians including street children.

9. Institutions for children without parents or small group homes to develop a better system of locating and checking children when they go outside these institutions for holidays, vacations, etc.
10. Opening of new centers for street children with comprehensive programs for the integration of families into social flows.
11. To clearly define the responsibilities of social centers and the police in interventions related to persons at social risk and better inter-sectoral cooperation.
12. Direct involvement in the process of prevention and psychosocial support, sensitization and training of all those who work with children and protection of their safety is required.
13. To improve services for children and introduce a special institutional unit that will work exclusively with children who are exposed to any risk and develop appropriate methods for case management and their protection.

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Annex 1: Successful educational measure using the example of the project "Roma School Mediation at Viennese Schools"

Author: Danijela Cicvarić, social worker at the association Romano Centro

1. Starting situation

As a rule, Roma children do not come to school with the same starting positions and knowledge as children from the majority population. This is due to unequal levels of prior knowledge, as only a small number of Roma children attend a pre-school programme (kindergarten, pre-school). The problem is insufficient knowledge of the German language as well as the unfavourable socio-economic situation of the families from which they come.

Most Roma children and young people or their families who have been cared for by the Roma school mediators are affected by multiple and chronic problems.

From its experience in working with Roma children, the Romano Centro association has known for many years that most Roma children have massive problems at school (e.g. absenteeism, unclear residence status of their parents, health impairments, financial difficulties, ignorance of the Austrian education system, lack of education of the parents) and that the educational situation of Roma with a migration background is generally very poor. In addition, there are hurdles due to a lack of language skills and/or insecurities of the parents.

Since September 2000, Romano Centro has been employing Roma school mediators (formerly school assistants) in selected Viennese schools, who provide important support for many Roma children, parents and teachers. They mediate between the above-mentioned actors, motivate and accompany the children in the classroom and support them in their learning, help the teachers to understand the cultural background and life situation of the children and the parents to find a positive approach to school in order to be able to support their children. Due to their knowledge of their mother tongue (Romani, Serbian, Romanian) and their own affiliation to the Roma ethnic group, the school mediators have an identification function for the children and are available to the parents as confidants - with an understanding of the social, cultural and everyday background.

Roma school mediation is successfully carried out in many European countries (e.g. Finland, France, Spain, Czech Republic) and is cited as a successful model in the ongoing process of developing strategies for Roma integration in many countries. It is particularly highlighted by the EU Commission in its assessment of national measures or cited as an example of best practice (European Commission, C (2013) 778 final).

The Roma Strategy of the Austrian Federal Government from 2017 provides for the use of Roma school mediators on the one hand in the education sector, to improve the educational situation and on the other hand in the area of the labour market, for educational and career counselling at the interface between school and work. In the expanded National Roma Integration Strategy, which was published in 2021, Roma school mediation is also highlighted as a measure in the two areas mentioned (Federal Chancellery, Roma Strategy 2021).

1.1 Tasks of Roma school mediators

- Supporting school-home relations and communication between teachers and Roma parents
- Information, advice and support for parents in school and educational matters
- Contact person (in several languages) for Roma students and parents and for teachers in case of concerns or problems of/with Roma students
- Accompaniment of teaching outputs to ensure the participation of Roma students
- Supporting Roma students in the classroom during lessons, especially through communication in their mother tongue
- Provision of additional learning opportunities or support opportunities for Roma children
- Providing students and teachers with knowledge about Roma culture and history in order to promote mutual understanding and self-confidence among Roma students
- Provision of support services to the families to improve the social situation and orientation in the social landscape of Vienna
- advising children, young people and adults on the topics of education and career choice as well as on questions of education and training; Accompaniment of young people to initial and vocational training offers as well as motivation to proactively search for them
- Participation in selected, self-esteem-strengthening youth projects

1.2 Goals

Overarching goal: to increase the educational opportunities of Roma children

Specific objectives:

- Improvement of children's school performance, with a special focus on improving German language skills
- Improvement of communication between parents and school, participation of parents in school events, parents' evenings, etc.
- Stabilization of the family environment in order to make school success possible in the first place
- Reduction of absenteeism and early school leaving
- Provision of additional learning opportunities and meaningful leisure activities, identification of training and career prospects
- Avoidance of unnecessary assignments in special schools
- Increasing parents' educational awareness, imparting knowledge about the school system and funding opportunities
- Reducing prejudices against Roma at school

- Reduction of Roma families' fears about school, such as the fear of being recognized as Roma. Families should gain confidence in the school and feel accepted
- Support for the little siblings of the school children, support in preparing for school, in the search for childcare places
- Developing Educational Prospects
- Promoting the integration of young people into the labour market
- Gender mainstreaming (youth projects with boys and girls)

1.3 Experiences and feedback

The feedback on the work of the Roma school mediators from the schools is very good. The teachers, principals and school social workers see the Roma school mediators as an important additional resource for their school, which makes it possible to better deal with the problems of the families and which leads to the reduction of mutual prejudices and fears. The communication between the parents and the school improves significantly, the parents participate more in school life and feel welcome and taken seriously at school. In many cases, Roma school mediators can also contribute to improving the social situation of families and motivating children more to go to school. The fact that "being Roma" is becoming an issue in the schools where Roma school mediators work has no negative effects, as all feedback on this topic shows. On the contrary, in many cases the Roma school mediators enable the children and their parents to be proud of their origins, culture and language because the topics are dealt with and valued at school. All these positive developments make a significant contribution to increasing children's educational opportunities. In addition, the directors emphasise that despite the many existing support services in schools, such as: school social workers, school psychologists, mother tongue teachers, the Roma school mediators achieve the best success with Roma parents. The directors also believe that many Roma students who come to school irregularly are more likely to be present on the days when Roma school mediators are also at the site. Parents see Roma school mediators as confidants who represent their interests and the interests of their children.

1.4 Recommendations

- Regular deployment of Roma school mediators in primary and secondary schools
- Roma school mediators to be recruited from the community
- Roma school mediators either have training in a psychosocial profession (e.g. social workers) or they attend further training in the psychosocial field (if they have not completed training, close cooperation with school social workers, school psychologists)
- Regular supervision of Roma school mediators
- Sustainability and secured financing
- Individual free learning aid, which is available for families or children at home

1.5 Sensitization of the majority society

Members of the Roma ethnic group are restricted in many areas of life due to long-standing exclusion and ongoing structural discrimination. They are disproportionately affected by poverty and illiteracy, access to the labour market and educational institutions is made more difficult for them,

and their state of health is significantly worse than that of people from the majority society. Serious action against antigypsyism requires measures in all areas of society (e.g. media, educational institutions, etc.) in order to achieve the goal of Roma inclusion in Europe and measures to initiate the social discussion about antigypsyism.

1.6 Recommendations:

- Sensitization of school staff (e.g. teachers, directors) in educational institutions
- Sensitization of social workers (child and youth welfare, and social workers from other relevant institutions)
- Raising awareness among police and judicial officers
- Raising awareness among journalists
- Raising awareness among medical staff (doctors, nurses, etc.)
- Sensitization of civil servants

2. Socio-economic sector

From many years of experience with Roma families, we know that regular school attendance of Roma children depends on many factors. The socio-economic sector is one of the most important areas on which regular school attendance depends. If families do not meet their basic needs, such as a secure income, secure housing or basic needs such as food, electricity and heating, the least of their worries is whether their children attend school regularly.

2.1 The Austrian social system

Compared to other European and non-EU countries, the Austrian social system is very well structured. Social benefits (cash and non-cash benefits) are provided by various bodies and institutions. Different legal requirements also apply to the receipt of the various benefits (e.g. Austrian citizenship or persons treated as Austrian citizens, certain residence permits). The most important financial services in Austria are:

- Family allowance (received by families regardless of their income)
- Minimum income (for persons with no income or an income below the threshold)
- Unemployment benefit (for unemployed persons)
- Housing allowance
- Child allowance

In addition, there are many counselling centres in Austria, including some Roma associations, which support families with their social and economic problems and, above all, help them to improve their economic situation.

In order to improve the economic situation of Roma in the long term, regular employment is needed above all. Due to their low level of education, the situation on the labour market is also difficult for Roma in Austria. In the last 10 years, a number of measures have been taken to improve the situation of Roma in the Austrian labour market. These have been or are being funded by the EU fund but also nationally (ESF, Federal Ministry of Labour and Economic Affairs).

These measures not only support Roma in their job search, but also help them to improve their skills. During the duration of the qualification measures, the participants of these measures receive the cover of their living expenses. This financial benefit is financed by the employment office.

In 2022, the first Austrian National Strategy on Roma Inclusion was evaluated (Sensiro). As part of this study, many of the Roma interviewed indicated that it would be very important for them if Roma worked in relevant institutions such as educational institutions and other relevant offices. The visibility of Roma in these institutions would, in principle, create more trust in these institutions.

2.2 Recommendations

- In the case of non-gainful employment or income below the limit, a legal entitlement to social assistance arises
- Family allowance until 18. Age (up to 24 years in the case of education), regardless of the income of the parents or guardians
- Childcare allowance (regardless of whether the parents or guardians worked before the birth of the child or not)
- Secure housing conditions or financial support for housing
- Unemployment benefit (at least 6 to 12 months) in case of dismissal
- Labour market projects specifically targeted at Roma and their needs
- Labour market projects with qualification measures. For the duration of the qualification measures, the employment office takes over the coverage of the living expenses / financial security during the measure
- Roma are employed as staff in all relevant institutions

3. Instruments for monitoring

3.1 Roma Civil Monitor and Sensiro

The policy for Roma integration in Austria has evolved in recent years, especially since Austria committed itself to Roma integration vis-à-vis the EU. The evaluation of the first Roma Strategy, which officially ended in 2020, was carried out in 2021 and 2022. This study was evaluated by the University of Vienna on behalf of the Federal Chancellery (Sensiro). The study showed that the measures described above were not implemented or hardly implemented at all in many areas. The Roma interviewed showed that the economic, education and labour market situation had not improved significantly. On the basis of this study, the new measures for the continuing Roma strategy (2030) will be developed.

Since 2017, the Romano Centro association has been analysing the national strategy for the inclusion of Roma in Austria (Roma Civil Monitor), independently of the state institutions. "*Independent evaluation according to standard evaluation criteria is key to ensuring targeted investments and needs-based measures, but also to evaluating and planning future strategies, programmes and funding cycles*" (Karoly, 2019).

3.2 Evaluation of the measures and importance of the development of quality standards for the expertise of school mediators in North Macedonia

- Roma school mediators either have training in a psychosocial profession (e.g. social workers) or they attend further training in the psychosocial field (if no completed training, close cooperation with school social workers, school psychologists)
- Regular training (education, family law, children's rights, social law, etc.)
- Regular supervision of Roma school mediators

- Annual face-to-face feedback meetings with the principals in whose schools Roma school mediators are employed
- Questionnaires for teachers with whom Roma school mediators work
- Questionnaires for parents or guardians of the Roma students in care

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ANNEX 2: Assessment of risks of children missing school in vulnerable communities in North Macedonia - Case studies

Introduction

Nestled within the heart of the Balkans, North Macedonia is a country of cultural diversity and resilience. Yet, within its borders, some families face formidable obstacles on the path to education for their school-age children. Discrimination, lack of essential documentation, and economic hardship have cast shadows over the educational aspirations of these families residing in and around Skopje. In this series of case studies, we delve into the lives of five distinct families, each grappling with their unique set of challenges.

These case studies offer a glimpse into the lives of families who have come to North Macedonia from different corners of the world, seeking refuge and a fresh start. Some have embarked on the arduous journey of seeking asylum in European Union countries, only to be deported back to North Macedonia, where they continue to face uncertainties. Others, born into marginalized communities and trapped in a cycle of poverty, find their children compelled to beg for their survival, leaving them with precious little time for school.

In this collection of case studies, we aim to shed light on the unique and intersecting challenges faced by these families, offering a glimpse into their stories, struggles, and hopes. While their circumstances may differ, a common thread binds them: the unwavering determination to break free from the constraints that limit their children's access to education. Through their narratives, we hope to raise awareness, foster empathy, and inspire collective action to support these families and their children in realizing their dreams of a better future through education.

FIRST FAMILY

“The Family of Ali and Melisa: Navigating Challenges for a Better Future”

In the heart of Skopje, North Macedonia, a family strives for a brighter future against the backdrop of their unique circumstances. Ali, a 34-year-old man who completed elementary school, and Melisa, 32, who reached the 7th grade, share an unbreakable bond that transcends the absence of marital vows. Together, they raise their four children with unwavering determination and dreams of a prosperous life.

Ali's employment lies in a company specializing in organic waste and products, but his commitment to providing for his family extends beyond the workplace. During his precious moments of free time, he scours the streets, collecting plastic bottles to supplement the family's modest income. Melisa, equally diligent, earns her keep by collecting plastic bottles and taking on house cleaning jobs in their local community.

Their financial situation presents a formidable challenge. The family relies on social welfare, receiving a monthly sum of 7,000 denars. This meager income, however, is almost entirely channeled into a pressing issue—the purchase of antibiotics for Ali, who bears the weight of a heart operation and the constant fear of recurring health issues, leading to debilitating panic attacks and depression.

Education shines as a beacon of hope in their lives, and the couple instills this value deeply in their four school-going children. Their eldest daughter, aged 16, aspires to become a flight attendant, maintaining excellent academic performance while working as a hygienist in family homes. She guards her family's living conditions and her father's health issues as closely held secrets within her school environment.

The second daughter, 14 years old and in the 9th grade, exhibits less enthusiasm for academics, opting for extended interactions on social networks. Her mother, worried about the potential consequences of her digital inclinations, faces the challenge of safeguarding her daughter's future against early marriages.

A 10-year-old daughter in the 5th grade poses additional challenges. She displays aggressive behavior both at school and at home, leading to a school recommendation for an evaluation at the Mladost-Institute for Mental Health for Children and Adolescents (Simpo). However, her mother hesitates, given the pressing family concerns that occupy her mind.

The youngest daughter, aged 8, fights her own battle, one against cancer, which has plagued her since birth. While her condition prevents her from attending school, medical professionals hold out hope that she may join the educational journey in the 2024/2025 academic year.

Despite residing centrally in Skopje, the family faces hurdles accessing local schools, suspecting discrimination based on their Roma ethnicity. Their children, therefore, attend a school located in a different municipality, far from their home, due to restrictions on enrollment.

Family unity serves as the cornerstone of their resilience. They continually emphasize the value of education to their children, underscoring the importance of completing their studies, avoiding early marriages, and striving for a brighter future through gainful employment. Ali actively contributes by ensuring his children are transported to and from school, instilling in them a strong sense of self-worth and potential.

Health concerns further compound their challenges. The children rely on their mother's health insurance, while Ali, despite being employed, grapples with ongoing health issues stemming from his heart condition.

In summary, the Ali and Melisa family's journey is marked by financial struggles, health woes, and potential discrimination in their quest for education. Despite these obstacles, their unwavering commitment to securing a better future for their children shines through. Their story serves as a poignant reminder of the need for comprehensive support and interventions to address their unique circumstances, ensuring access to healthcare and quality education without the burden of discrimination.

SECOND FAMILY

„The Memet and Zehra Family – Invisible Challenges“

In the midst of North Macedonia's scenic landscapes and bustling cities, the Memet and Zehra family confronts a multitude of challenges that often go unseen by the world. This family's story is one of resilience, poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination, woven together by a shared hope for a better future for their children.

Meet Memet, a 29-year-old father with an elementary education, and Zehra, also 29, who completed her primary schooling. Although they are not married, they share a common bond of love and responsibility as they navigate life together, armed with dreams for their children.

The family's financial situation is tenuous at best. Zehra used to work as a cleaner in a mall but ceased working two years ago when she became pregnant. Even before her pregnancy, she was not officially employed. Memet, meanwhile, used to receive welfare but stopped visiting the employment agency two years ago. The lack of job offers left him disillusioned. Both parents are illiterate, further complicating their ability to access opportunities, fill out forms, or seek gainful employment.

Memet and Zehra feel they face discrimination, particularly because of their Roma ethnicity. They perceive that their rights and opportunities are limited due to this discrimination. Their four children, aged 11, 9, 4, and a newborn, have encountered challenges in their education journey. They once attended school, but the distance proved too daunting, and no one seemed to take notice when they stopped attending. While their family bonds remain strong, the parents lack the knowledge to navigate the bureaucratic process of enrolling their children in school.

Despite their struggles, Memet and Zehra have grand aspirations for their children. They yearn for them to actively participate in the educational process, engage in extracurricular activities, or benefit from non-formal education opportunities. Accessibility, especially in terms of transportation to schools and activity centers, remains a paramount concern.

The family's decision to seek asylum in Germany disrupted their children's education. The eldest daughter, who had attended school for six months in Avtokomanda with the dedicated accompaniment of her mother, had to abandon her studies. Now, they endeavor to enroll their children in a local school, but the bureaucratic barriers persist, mainly because they reside in the Keramidnica settlement, falling under a different municipality's jurisdiction, Fr. Gazi Baba.

Issues with social assistance and housing add to their predicament. An offer to relocate to Chichino Selo was declined due to its remote location from the city center. The family

expressed a willingness to live in Shuto Orizari or Vizbegovo in social housing but has not received any offers or guidance on how to exercise this right.

Their living conditions are modest—a small, one-room house measuring approximately 16 square meters, equipped with a Polish toilet and access to water. Healthcare access is also a matter of concern for the family. The high cost of medications for their children during illness weighs heavily on Zehra's mind. She emphasizes the need for institutional solutions to make essential medications more affordable for children.

To make ends meet, Memet and Zehra collect plastic bottles. They amass up to 90 bags of plastic bottles each month, selling them for 150 MKD per bag. Their employment status is informal, and they lack contracts, leaving them uncertain about their employers' identities and the terms of their work.

The Memet and Zehra family's journey illuminates the formidable challenges faced by marginalized families in North Macedonia. Poverty, illiteracy, discrimination, and limited access to education and healthcare cast shadows on their aspirations. Nevertheless, their unwavering determination to secure a better future for their children shines as a beacon of hope. Their story underscores the urgent need for comprehensive support and interventions to address their unique circumstances, ensuring access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, while combatting discrimination to empower families like theirs in their pursuit of a brighter future.

THIRD FAMILY

“Emilian and Lela Family – A cry for help”

In the outskirts of Skopje, North Macedonia, resides the Emilian and Lela family, facing an arduous journey through a maze of challenges that arise from their statelessness. This family's story unfolds in the shadows, marked by resilience, determination, and the fervent hope of securing a brighter future for their children.

Emilian and Lela are young parents, fervently seeking stability for their family. However, their lives are complicated by the lack of official documents for Lela and their children, rendering them effectively stateless. Without these essential documents, the children are trapped in a nightmarish limbo, denied access to basic rights such as education and healthcare.

The family resides in a suburb of Skopje, inhabiting a rented house for which they pay 5,000 denars monthly. Emilian's income, derived primarily from collecting plastic bottles, seldom exceeds 1,000 denars monthly. This meager income is far from sufficient to meet their basic needs, let alone secure a brighter future for their children.

The dire financial situation and the family's statelessness have pushed Lela to take extreme measures. She often ventures out onto the streets with her children, resorting to begging for

money to make ends meet. Their survival hinges on the generosity of others, revealing the depths of their desperation.

Despite their dire circumstances, Emilian and Lela harbor a powerful dream for their children—a dream of education. They yearn for their daughters to attend school, complete their education, secure employment, and ultimately, escape the cycle of poverty. This aspiration is grounded in the parents' deep desire to provide their children with a brighter future.

The Emilian and Lela family faces numerous hurdles on their path to education. Their stateless status leaves them in a grim situation, as their children are effectively "phantom" citizens. These young souls are denied access to schools, health insurance, and basic rights, which other children take for granted.

Despite their fervent hopes, the family has never engaged with the educational system, the Ministry of Education, or their local municipality to inquire about the reasons for their children's exclusion from school. The labyrinthine nature of bureaucracy and the fear of discrimination have kept them at arm's length from official institutions.

Emilian and Lela acknowledge that they are in dire need of assistance from institutions, as they grapple with the complexities of their statelessness and the pressing urgency of securing their children's access to education and healthcare. However, they have yet to receive any help or guidance to navigate their precarious situation.

The Emilian and Lela family's story underscores the dire consequences of statelessness on individuals and families. Poverty, lack of documents, and the absence of access to essential services cast a long shadow over their aspirations. Yet, their unwavering determination to secure an education for their daughters is a testament to the power of hope and resilience. Their story serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for comprehensive support and interventions to address the unique circumstances of stateless families, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to access education and build a brighter future.

FOURTH FAMILY

"Resilience Against the Odds: Mirela's Story of Hope and Determination"

In the outskirts of Skopje, North Macedonia, a single mother named Mirela resides with her three children, ages 17, 11, and 3. This family's story unfolds against the backdrop of financial hardships, discrimination, and the unwavering determination to provide a brighter future for their children.

Mirela shoulders the responsibility of single-handedly caring for her three children. While the father of her eldest child maintains communication, the fathers of the younger children are

absent from their lives. They neither assist in raising the children nor provide financial support.

The eldest daughter, aged 17, completed high school and holds a diploma as a waiter. Before finishing school, she worked as a dishwasher in a prominent city center restaurant. However, her request for a promotion to a waiter position after graduation was denied. Mirela believes her daughter faced discrimination due to her Roma ethnicity.

The middle child, aged 11, attends school regularly and receives additional support at a center that aids Roma children with their studies and homework.

Mirela herself had previously worked as a cleaner in a company but left her job when she became pregnant. She is currently the primary caregiver for her toddler, and she receives government assistance for her third child, which amounts to approximately 4,000 denars per month.

Mirela is hesitant to seek regular employment out of fear that it would jeopardize the financial aid she receives from the government. This fear is rooted in her recognition of the immense financial strain her family faces and the importance of the assistance she receives.

Despite their challenging circumstances, Mirela holds strong convictions about the value of education. She hopes all her children will complete their education, viewing it as a pathway to secure employment and better life choices. Her eldest daughter exemplifies this ambition, as she refuses to conform to traditional expectations of early marriage and instead aspires to pursue a career.

Mirela and her children have sought help from both government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to alleviate their hardships. However, the shame associated with their situation has made them reluctant to share their struggles openly.

The family's living conditions are far from ideal. They reside in a small room and rely on wood for heating, which, given their limited income, poses a significant financial burden. Even covering their monthly bills is a formidable challenge.

Mirela's story is one of resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Discrimination, economic hardship, and societal pressures have shaped their experiences, yet they remain steadfast in their pursuit of education and better opportunities. Their narrative highlights the need for comprehensive support systems, including access to education and employment opportunities, as well as assistance with financial stability and improved living conditions. The story of Mirela and her children underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive society that recognizes and nurtures the potential of every individual, irrespective of their background or circumstances.

FIFTH FAMILY

„Hope Amidst Hardships: The Inspiring Narrative of Enisa and Florin's Resilient Family"

In North Macedonia, a family of five, led by mother Enisa aged 27 and father Florin aged 29, grapples with a series of challenges while nurturing dreams of a brighter future for their children. With children aged 12, 10, 9, and 3, this family's journey is marked by determination, limited formal education, financial instability, and an ardent desire for improvement.

Florin, the father, completed his elementary education, but his academic journey halted there. Enisa, the mother, was denied the opportunity to attend school due to her father's prohibition. Nevertheless, she persevered and taught herself to read and write over the years. Despite her resourcefulness, her lack of formal education presents a significant barrier to securing formal employment.

The family's living arrangements include residing with Florin's parents, with the mother-in-law providing substantial assistance in caring for the children. While they share a household, Enisa and Florin are not officially married.

Both parents receive welfare to sustain their family. Florin supplements their income by undertaking per diem work, although he remains unregistered as an employed worker. Their financial stability is far from assured, compelling them to explore avenues for improvement.

The youngest child in the family faced significant health challenges, including entwined intestines. After two surgeries in Skopje, medical professionals recommended an operation in Germany. In March of the previous year, the family departed for Germany, accompanied by all their children. During their three-month stay, they resided with Florin's aunt, who provided invaluable support due to the language barrier.

While in Germany, the family had the opportunity to enroll their children in regular education. However, misconceptions about potential repercussions, including the possibility of child removal if the children did not attend school regularly, filled them with fear. As a result, they chose not to send their children to school in Germany.

Nonetheless, they maintained communication with the teacher of their 10-year-old daughter throughout their stay. Thanks to the teacher's assistance, the daughter successfully completed the fourth grade and advanced to the next grade upon their return to North Macedonia.

Enisa and Florin recognize the instability of their financial situation and actively seek ways to enhance it. They are determined to provide better prospects for their children, ensuring they have access to education and the opportunities it can afford.

Enisa and Florin's story reflects their relentless pursuit of a better life for their family despite numerous challenges. Their limited formal education, coupled with financial instability and misconceptions about education abroad, have shaped their journey. However, their

aspirations for their children's education and future demonstrate their resilience and unwavering commitment to improving their family's prospects. This narrative underscores the significance of support systems and opportunities for families facing barriers to education and economic stability, emphasizing the importance of inclusive policies that empower individuals to break free from these challenges.

SIXTH FAMILY

Alfred's Struggle for Education and Care in Prilep

In the heart of Prilep, Alfred, a devoted single father, faces the daunting challenge of raising his six children alone after his wife tragically succumbed to cancer. The weight of caring for their offspring—aged 20, 18, 15, 13, 11, and 8, with the youngest struggling with lung issues—falls solely on Alfred's shoulders. Despite his best efforts, only the two eldest have managed to attend and complete school. To support his family, Alfred sporadically engages in woodcutting and transportation work, yet the constant worry about his children's well-being hinders his ability to work regularly.

After his wife's passing, Alfred relinquished his regular employment, finding it impossible to leave his children unattended for long hours. His commitment to their care took precedence over earning a consistent income, exacerbating their economic struggles and hindering the children's access to education. Despite not receiving formal education himself, Alfred possesses basic reading and writing skills, which enable him to navigate daily life.

The family's hardships extend beyond education. Basic needs, particularly consistent access to water, remain unmet. While an NGO's intervention provided housing reconstruction, ensuring a stable roof over their heads, the lack of reliable water access poses a significant challenge. Alfred acknowledges the critical necessity of water, stating that it's essential for his children to attend school in a clean and presentable state.

Despite enduring these adversities, Alfred remains steadfast in his commitment to his children's education. He fervently desires to enroll his children in school from the upcoming year, recognizing the transformative power of education. Emphasizing the value of familial support, Alfred imparts the importance of being there for each other to his children, even as his own extended family's support remains intermittent.

The children, echoing their father's aspirations, express a genuine yearning for schooling. Their eagerness to learn, forge friendships, and explore new horizons underscores their shared desire for education and a brighter future. This collective aspiration serves as a beacon of hope amidst their challenging circumstances, illuminating the family's resilience and determination to overcome obstacles.

Alfred's narrative is a poignant reflection of the intersecting struggles faced by single-parent families dealing with economic hardship and limited access to education and basic

necessities. It underscores the pressing need for consistent support in meeting fundamental needs like water access while highlighting the transformative potential of education. Alfred's unwavering dedication and his children's aspirations stand as a testament to resilience and hope amid adversity.

SEVENTH FAMILY

Ajlina's Struggle for Education and Basic Necessities in Gostivar

In the outskirts of Gostivar, Ajlina, a 32-year-old mother, resides with her 37-year-old husband and their ten children. Despite having documentation, none of the family members, including the parents, have ever attended school. Their livelihood depends on collecting waste and salvaging steel for income.

Their living conditions are dire, living in an improvised home without basic amenities. The dwelling lacks windows, suffers from constant water leaks through the roof, and is devoid of heating, water, or electricity. The family's daily life revolves around makeshift solutions—a Polish toilet, bathing with heated water acquired from neighbors using a baby bathtub or a large bowl.

Education has eluded the children; none have been enrolled in school. Ajlina justifies this decision, believing that the children need to work to contribute to the family's income. With the burden of providing food and essential medication weighing heavily on her, she sees education as a luxury the family cannot afford.

The family's plight reveals the harsh realities faced by those living on the margins. The parents' illiteracy and reliance on irregular income sources exacerbate their inability to prioritize education for their children. The absence of basic living necessities further restricts the family's options, perpetuating a cycle of poverty with no access to formal education.

Ajlina's dilemma is emblematic of systemic challenges faced by marginalized families. Her reluctance to send her children to school, driven by the necessity to secure basic needs, underscores the cyclical nature of poverty that denies the children opportunities for a better future.

This case highlights the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that address multifaceted issues—providing education alongside support for basic living standards and economic opportunities. It underscores the necessity of holistic support systems to break the cycle of poverty, offering marginalized families like Ajlina's a path towards a more promising future.

EIGHTH FAMILY

Challenges of Education and Legal Status for Sebat and Afrije's Family in Berovo

Sebat,42 and Afrije,34, along with their five children, reside in Berovo in a house that lacks legal authorization. Their home's history traces back to Sebat's mother, who previously cared for a man residing in the house. Following his passing, she and her three sons moved in. However, the property was claimed by the country, leaving the family in a house that isn't legally theirs. To sustain themselves, they cultivate a vegetable garden adjacent to their residence, cultivating their food.

A decade ago, due to the deplorable state of their home, the family sought better opportunities and migrated to Germany. They found work and settled there for several years, during which the children attended school. However, amidst whispers of potential expulsion from the country, they abruptly departed for Paris, where they resided for seven years. Meanwhile, Sebat faced a conviction for theft in absentia, resulting in a ten-year prison sentence. Upon their return to North Macedonia, he spent a year in prison, eventually proving his innocence with legal assistance.

The family's return posed unforeseen challenges regarding the children's education. The two eldest daughters (16 and 15 years old) struggle to resume their education as their grades achieved in France aren't recognized here. Officials insist they must revert to the fourth grade, a setback in their academic progress. Moreover, the youngest daughter (age 6) faces an additional hurdle. Born in Germany, she lacks documentation, requiring her parents to visit Germany to acquire the necessary paperwork. Though she attends school, she may not receive formal proof of completing the first grade by the school year's end.

Furthermore, both Sebat and Afrije work on contractual terms, denying them health benefits or pension contributions.

The family's narrative embodies the complex interplay between migration, legal status, and educational challenges. Legal intricacies regarding recognition of academic achievements from abroad and bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining documentation for the youngest daughter hinder the children's access to education. Additionally, the lack of social security benefits for the parents underscores the vulnerabilities faced by families in precarious work situations.

This case underscores the need for streamlined processes to validate foreign academic achievements, facilitate documentation procedures for children born abroad, and advocate for labor rights to provide social security benefits for families like Sebat and Afrije's, navigating the complexities of migration and legal status while striving for their children's education and well-being.

NINETH FAMILY

Struggles of the Salamov Family in Tetovo

Residing in a challenging and remote area in Tetovo, the Salamov family confronts severe living conditions lacking basic amenities. Devoid of water and electricity, the terrain's steep and treacherous access makes daily tasks like fetching water or sending children to school an arduous undertaking.

The family comprises five children, one of whom, the eldest daughter Fatima, aged 19, is married but lacks personal documents. The family's matriarch, Amelina Salamov, yearns for employment opportunities but remains unemployed. The grandfather, who receives a pension, lives with the family, yet they don't receive additional assistance. Ramo Salamov, the father, earns sporadic income through informal labor, collecting waste, and cutting wood.

Complicating matters, the family grapples with documentation issues, hindering formalization of Sara's marriage due to incomplete registry records. Educational barriers further exacerbate their struggles; 14-year-old Eliza attended primary school for just one year. A 12-year-old daughter faces integration difficulties and requires re-establishment in the first grade. Another 12-year-old son faces irregular school attendance due to the arduous journey from home to the primary school. Additionally, the youngest son, aged 8 and in the second grade, faced a month-long absence due to an altercation with another child.

Amidst these challenges, an educational mediator collaborates with specialists, striving to facilitate the youngest son's school attendance and adaptation, with agreement from the school's director and teacher.

The Salamov family's case reveals multifaceted barriers impeding their access to basic amenities, education, and legal documentation. The absence of necessities like water and electricity, compounded by complex administrative hurdles, deprives the family of essential resources and opportunities. Educational challenges faced by the children, from sporadic attendance to integration issues, underscore the need for tailored support and interventions.

This case highlights the imperative for comprehensive assistance, including legal aid for documentation, infrastructure improvements for remote areas, and tailored educational strategies to ensure the children's schooling despite adverse circumstances. Collaborative efforts among specialists, educators, and community advocates remain crucial in mitigating these challenges and providing essential support for families like the Salamov, striving for a better quality of life and education.

TENTH FAMILY

Amran's Struggle for Education, Documentation, and Asylum

Amran, a 22-year-old man from Kumanovo, possesses basic literacy skills despite never having attended school due to a lack of documents. His work experience primarily involved dealing with scrap metal, but he's presently unemployed, having faced non-payment issues in his previous job. He aspires to seek asylum in Germany but is unable to due to his undocumented status, a recurring impediment in his life.

His partner, with whom he isn't legally married, migrated to Germany and gave birth to their child while seeking asylum. She completed the 9th grade in elementary school and hails from a relatively affluent family, previously not dependent on social assistance.

Amran resides in a community with six brothers, three sisters, and their families. Several of his brothers attempted to relocate to Germany but encountered difficulties due to issues like fare evasion on trains, resulting in legal consequences. Living in a neighborhood with social housing structures, their financial situation fluctuates. Previously, Amran's father received social security benefits, but the current status indicates otherwise, while one of his brothers remains a beneficiary.

Presently, Amran faces additional legal challenges after being involved in a recent altercation, leading to a pending court appearance.

Amran's story highlights the entwined challenges of education, legal status, and financial stability prevalent in his community. His lack of formal documentation obstructs access to education and hinders opportunities for legal migration. The aspirations of seeking asylum, similar to his partner's endeavor, remain a distant dream due to bureaucratic hurdles.

The family's reliance on social assistance, intermittent access to benefits, and legal entanglements underscore the precariousness of their situation. The experiences of Amran and his family depict the hurdles faced by marginalized communities, where documentation barriers hinder education, mobility, and access to social services.

This case emphasizes the need for streamlined pathways to document acquisition, education opportunities for individuals without formal documentation, and increased support for marginalized communities navigating legal, educational, and migratory challenges. Collaborative efforts among social service agencies, legal aid organizations, and educational institutions are vital in facilitating a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals like Amran, striving for stability and better prospects.

Conclusion

Bringing together different case studies from families in North Macedonia illuminates the complex web of challenges faced by individuals from different socio-economic spectrums. Amidst these multifaceted woes that encompass educational barriers, paperwork complexity, economic instability, and legal hurdles, a compelling emphasis is emerging on the critical role of education as both victim and beacon of hope.

The narratives vividly depict the far-reaching consequences of limited access to education, whether stemming from discrimination, documentation problems, remote life circumstances or disrupted migration experiences. Education, often compromised, remains a cornerstone for breaking the cycle of disadvantage, yet many families struggle with obstacles that perpetuate limited opportunities.

The complexity of documentation compounds these challenges, significantly hindering access to basic services, employment and education for families with migration experiences or inadequate legal status. The bureaucratic struggle becomes a barrier to securing basic rights and vital education for their children.

Moreover, economic hardship exacerbates these complexities, leaving families with insufficient resources to meet basic needs or invest in their children's education. Despite these enormous challenges, the resilience and unwavering determination of these families shine through, underscoring their deep commitment to education as a pathway to a brighter future.

These narratives serve as a poignant reminder of the urgent need for systemic reform and comprehensive support structures. Streamlining documentation processes, improving access to education in marginalized communities, and addressing economic disparities emerge as critical steps. Collaborative efforts involving government bodies, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations and legal aid entities are imperative to remove these barriers and foster an environment that advocates for inclusion, fosters education and empowers families to thrive despite adversity. This collective effort is essential in transforming struggles into stories of success and resilience, where hope prevails even in the face of the most challenging circumstances.

(NOTE: Names of persons in the stories are fictional; identities are known to the organization conducting the research activities and in order to respect wishes of persons interviewed and prevent victimization of families and children are shared only based of legal requirements)

Case study questionnaire for families with children at risk of being/absent from school

A. Information for parents/guardians

1. Personal data

Father

- name surname
- age
- gender
- nationality
- Address
- Phone, email

Mother

- name surname
- age
- gender
- nationality
- Address
- Phone, email

2. Education

Father

- primary (6-15 years)
- Secondary vocational (2 years), technical (4 years) high school (4 years)
- Completion of compulsory high school/leaving high school (period from-to, reasons)
- Higher education (college, university)
- Other qualifications – trainings, further education, work experience

Mother

- primary (6-15 years)
- Secondary vocational (2 years), technical (4 years) high school (4 years)
- Completion of compulsory high school/leaving high school (period from-to, reasons)
- Higher education (college, university)
- Other qualifications – trainings, further education, work experience

3. Work experience

Father

- employment (if applicable)
- company (from-to)
- informal work

Mother

- employment (if applicable)
- company (from-to)
- informal work

4. Social measures of support/help from institutions

Father

- help for further education
- career counseling, employment support
- retraining, counseling and help from school
- counseling and assistance from a center for social affairs
- help from the municipality
- employment office
- psychological help, anti-addiction therapy,
- other counseling (civic organizations, etc.)

Mother

- help for further education
- career counseling, employment support
- retraining, counseling and help from school
- counseling and assistance from a center for social affairs
- help from the municipality
- employment office
- psychological help, anti-addiction therapy,
- other counseling (civic organizations, etc.)

5. Other conditions affecting employability

Father

- health problems
- disability

Mother

- health problems

- disability

7. Possible ambiguities with institutions and organizations

- Employment Office (registration, monetary compensation, other measures)

- Center for social affairs (cash assistance, guaranteed minimum assistance, child allowance, third-party care, etc.)

-Municipality (social housing, social services, etc.)

-Other institutions/organizations

B. Data regarding the educational process of the children

1. How often is your child unexcusedly absent from school?

- I don't know that he is absent

-often

- when ill

- doesn't go to school at all

2. What are the main reasons for your child's unjustified absence from school?

- he has no access to school, it is far away

- we don't have money to send him/her

- doesn't want to study

- I don't know

- refuses to answer

3. Have you noticed any changes in your child's behavior or mood before or during the unexcused absence?

- no

- yes

- other:

4. How often do you communicate with school representatives about your child's unexcused absence?

-nobody ever called us at school

-once/rarely

- the teacher often calls

5. Have you taken any measures or actions to deal with your child's unexcused absence?

- no

- yes

6. What are the measures/activities you have taken?

7. Have you had questions or sought advice from school staff to help resolve the problem of unexcused absences?

- no

- yes

8. What is the response from the school?

9. Are there any factors or circumstances in the home environment that could cause the child's unjustified absence?

- dysfunctionality of the family community

-social problems (poverty)

- parents' lack of information (ignorance of legal obligations)

-does not know

10. Have you talked with your child about the meaning and consequences of unjustified absence from school?

- no

- yes

11. Does your child have relationship problems with other students or teachers, which may be related to the unexcused absence?

- I don't know

- yes

- no

12. What could be the possibilities for support and solving the problem of unjustified absence?

13. How do you evaluate the importance of regular school attendance for your child's development?

14. How many members are there in your family (children, adults)?

15. How would you describe the relationship and communication between your family members?

16. What are the main parental responsibilities of in your family?

17. How do you support each other and work together as a family in solving challenges and problems?
18. What are your basic values and beliefs that you pass on to your children?
19. How much time do you spend together as a family during the week?
20. What are your customs and routines when it comes to your children's school activities and assignments?
21. How often do you talk and give advice to your children about their education and success in school?
22. What measures and strategies do you use to support and motivate your child to be present and engaged in school?
23. What are your expectations and goals for your child regarding education and school activities?
- which ones for boys, which ones for girls.....
24. What are your child's wishes and goals regarding education and career (interests and hobbies, future profession/job, locally or abroad)?
- which ones for boys, which ones for girls.....

C. Other challenges identified (interviewer's note)

Eg: health (inability to get treatment), family (eg violence), work / education (eg discrimination), housing (eg homelessness. eviction...), addiction, legal issues (eg undocumented people), finances (support measures, debt, etc.), Other



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