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From the foreword by James D. Wolfensohn, President, The World Bank
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Roma in an Expanding Europe: 
Breaking the Poverty Cycle

By
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Cover design by Joyce Petruzzelli
Cover photos by Mathieu Mazza and Dena Ringold

This is an executive summary of the larger volume: Roma in an Expanding Europe: Breaking the Poverty Cycle. The main report brings together analysis done by teams of researchers in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Spain, and the Slovak Republic, working together with the World Bank. The full list of contributors is included in the main report.
FOREWORD

Roma have suffered from severe poverty and exclusion throughout European history. For many Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, the period of transition from communism has been especially dire. Low education and skill levels, compounded by discrimination, have led to widespread long-term unemployment and deteriorating living conditions. Even in countries on the brink of accession to the European Union, Roma are likely to live in poverty, and lack access to education, health care, housing, and other services.

Their plight has not gone unnoticed. Over the past decade, governments, civil society, and the international community have actively supported initiatives to keep Roma children in school, expand access to jobs, and overcome discrimination. Many of these interventions have helped and the time is right to scale up. Lessons from these projects can make policies more inclusive and can expand their reach. This volume calls for an inclusive approach to overcoming Roma poverty, based on increased involvement and participation of Roma in society, and respect for their diversity.

There is reason for optimism. The process of EU accession has focused attention on the need to address Roma exclusion at the national level and has highlighted common European challenges. Most importantly, a small but growing core of experienced and dedicated young Roma leaders now can work both within their communities and with governments to advocate change.
This volume was prepared for the conference “Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future” in Budapest, Hungary, June 30-July 1, 2003. I hope that this conference will catalyze an ongoing dialogue between the new Roma leadership and the wider policy community that will improve the living conditions and future opportunities of Roma over the long term.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Increasingly severe poverty among Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has been one of the most striking developments in the region since the transition from socialism began in 1989. While Roma have historically been among the poorest people in Europe, the extent of the collapse of their living conditions in the former socialist countries is unprecedented. While most Roma had jobs during the socialist era, formal unemployment, and poverty among Roma communities is now widespread. And the problem is a critical one. Because of higher birth rates, the relative size of the Roma population is increasing across the region. A minister of education in a leading European Union (EU) accession country recently noted that every third child entering school in his country is Roma. Policies to address Roma poverty therefore need to be an integral component of countries’ economic and social development strategies.

Who Are the Roma?

Roma, or “gypsies,” are a unique minority in Europe. Unlike other groups, they have no historical homeland and live in nearly all countries in Europe and Central Asia. The origins of Roma in Europe are widely debated. Historical records indicate that they migrated in waves from northern India into Europe between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. Roma are extremely
diverse with multiple subgroups based on language, history, religion and occupations. While Roma in some countries are nomadic, most in Central and Eastern Europe have settled over time, some under Ottoman rule and others more recently under socialism.

Estimates of the size of the Roma population differ widely. Census data are intensely disputed, as many Roma do not identify themselves in such questionnaires. By most estimates, the share of Roma has grown to between 6 and 9 percent of the population in Bulgaria, FYR Macedonia, Romania, and the Slovak Republic. These shares are likely to increase in the near future because of high population growth among Roma and decreasing fertility among the majority populations. Romania has the highest absolute number of Roma in Europe, estimated at between 1 and 2 million. Large populations of between 400,000 and one million Roma also live in Hungary, Bulgaria, the Slovak Republic, Turkey, and Serbia and Montenegro. Western Europe’s largest Roma populations are found in Spain (estimated at 630,000), France (310,000), Germany (70,000), and Italy (130,000). In total, about 7 to 9 million Roma live in Europe—a population equal to that of Sweden or Austria.

Why has attention to Roma issues increased so sharply over the past decade? Political liberalization following the collapse of the iron curtain in 1989 allowed for increased international and domestic awareness of the situation of Roma, including emerging human rights violations and humanitarian concerns related to deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. National governments have a large stake in the welfare of Roma, for human rights and social justice concerns, but also for reasons of growth and competitiveness. In countries where Roma constitute a large and growing share of the working age population, increasing marginalization of Roma in poverty and long-term unemployment threatens economic stability and social cohesion. Understanding the nature and determinants of Roma poverty, and taking policy action are thus important priorities.
Roma Poverty

Roma are the most prominent poverty risk group in many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. They are poorer than other groups, more likely to fall into poverty, and more likely to remain poor. In some cases, poverty rates for Roma are more than ten times that of non-Roma. A recent survey found that nearly 80 percent of Roma in Romania and Bulgaria were living on less than $4.30 per day (Figure 1). Even in Hungary, one of the most prosperous accession countries, 40 percent of Roma live below the poverty line. As with non-Roma, poverty among Roma is highest among families where the household head has a low level of education or is unemployed, and among families with three or more children.
Why Are Roma Poor?

For several interwoven reasons, Roma poverty is rooted in their unfavorable starting point at the outset of the transition from planned to market economies. Low education levels and over-representation among low-skilled jobs led to disadvantages on the labor market, which are compounded by discrimination and low expectations of employers. Roma have thus had more difficulty re-entering the job market than other groups and have become caught in a vicious circle of impoverishment. Additional barriers include a lack of access to credit and clear property ownership. These factors, combined with an over-dependence on welfare, create a poverty trap that precludes many Roma from improving their living conditions or starting their own businesses. Persistent disadvantages in education, including low school attendance and overrepresentation in “special schools” intended for physically and mentally disabled children, make it highly probable that without policy interventions the next generation of Roma will remain in poverty. Moreover, very few Roma are active in local or national politics, which mutes their political voice.

Access to social services in Eastern Europe’s transition period has been threatened by growing need and tight fiscal constraints. These conditions have brought formal and informal charges for previously free services and eroding service quality. Roma are particularly hurt by increasing barriers to access because they are at a higher risk of poverty and are often geographically isolated.

Similarly, because Roma frequently live in settlements where property ownership is unclear, or remote areas, they may lack the documentation necessary for enrolling in school and claiming social assistance or health benefits. The high prevalence of Roma in informal sector employment—such as petty trade and construction—also limits their access to benefits based on social insurance contributions, including health care and unemployment benefits.

Social and cultural factors also affect access and interactions with service providers. Because of language barriers, Roma may
have difficulty communicating with teachers, understanding doctors, and maneuvering through local welfare offices. Poor communication and stubborn stereotypes of both Roma and non-Roma breed mistrust and reinforce preconceptions on both sides. Moreover, the overall absence of Roma personnel involved in policy design and delivery of public services means that few individuals can bridge between cultures.

**Regional Context**

Roma issues have gained increasing international attention over the past decade because of emerging evidence of human rights violations and seriously deteriorating socio-economic conditions within many Roma communities. These developments have caught the attention of international organizations such as the UNDP, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE, as well as NGOs including the Open Society Institute, Save the Children, and UNICEF. Perhaps most significantly, Roma issues are now an integral part of the European Union accession process; in 1993 attention to Roma issues was adopted as part of the Copenhagen criteria for accession. At the international level, Roma NGOs, such as the International Romani Union and the Roma National Congress have become increasingly active.

**CONTEXT AND CONTENTS**

**The Role of the World Bank**

In 2000 the World Bank published the first cross-country report on the poverty and human development challenges facing Roma in Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike prior analyses which had largely focused on questions of human rights, the Bank report addressed Roma issues from the perspective of eco-
nomic and social development. The main volume—on which this summary is based—updates and expands that work, incorporating the findings of new surveys and publishing, for the first time, some of the background studies which were included in the 2000 report.

Surveys and case studies are still incomplete. Further work is needed to examine the particular circumstances of Roma living in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Albania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, among others. Issues related to health, housing, and the situation of Roma women also need further attention. These gaps stem from the lack of information and measurement challenges. Despite the severity of Roma poverty, information on their living conditions and challenges is scarce, often unreliable, and frequently anecdotal. This analysis is intended to fill these gaps—and to stimulate further action.

Contents

The chapters draw on both quantitative analyses of household surveys and qualitative, sociological case studies that document the experiences of Roma communities in different countries, focusing on Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia and drawing on examples from other countries. The first chapter provides background on Roma, their characteristics and origins. It also discusses contrasting policy approaches that have shaped the position of Roma in Europe over time. Chapter Two looks at the nature and characteristics of Roma poverty using quantitative data from household surveys—including a new cross-country household data set on Roma. It examines the correlates of Roma poverty, including poor housing conditions, education, and health.

Chapters Three and Four report the results of detailed field studies by Central and East European sociologists on diverse Roma communities in Slovakia and Romania. These studies draw directly from interviews with Roma and non-Roma to provide a better understanding of the inter-related challenges Roma face in accessing markets and services. One of the strongest findings was that access to public services and labor
markets is compounded by the geographic isolation of some Roma settlements. Often, these isolated settlements originated from exclusionary policies of the past. Today the geographic isolation of Roma settlements limits access to education, health care, and waste collection, and thus increases poverty over the long run.

Other causes of Roma poverty are inter-related as well. For instance, Roma parents’ choice to enroll their children in “special schools” intended for the mentally and physically disabled is sometimes driven by discrimination experienced by Roma in regular schools. Roma parents sometimes feel they are protecting their children by sending them to special needs schools with other Roma children, but the education they receive there ill prepares them for life, again exacerbating the risks of poverty and exclusion over the long term.

Finally, Chapters Five and Six look at the experience of projects in Hungary and compare the Central and East European experience with that of Spain, a West European country with a large Roma population. Chapter Five reports the results of a survey of Roma projects in Hungary and shows that, despite the proliferation of such projects after 1989, it remains difficult to evaluate their impact. Case studies of several projects show several factors to be important, including the quality of project leadership, local economic conditions and monitoring and evaluation.

**THE ENVIRONMENT FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT**

Policies to ease Roma poverty need to be designed with three key factors in mind: (i) the multidimensional nature of Roma poverty and its inter-connected roots; (ii) the diversity of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe; and (iii) the process of European integration.
Multidimensional and Interconnected Roots of Roma Poverty

Roma poverty has multiple and inter-related causes which reinforce one another in a vicious cycle of poverty and exclusion. Roma often have poor access to labor markets because of low education levels, geographic isolation, and discrimination. Low education levels result from constraints on both the supply and demand side. Roma often face discrimination in school and feel that schools ignore Roma culture and language. In addition, Roma sometimes lack sufficient food or clothing to support school attendance. Thus, attitudes, experiences, and social conditions conspire to reduce Roma education levels and labor market performance. Because of these inter-connected roots, one cannot adequately address Roma poverty by focusing on a single aspect. Rather, a comprehensive approach is needed.

In several countries, researchers found that Roma poverty was caused in part by poor housing conditions. In many cases, this is because Roma were left out of the property and land privatization processes that took place during the early 1990s. Information was scarce about how to navigate the bureaucratic procedures for property ownership, and Roma were less likely than others to do it successfully. Hence Roma today disproportionately live unofficially, contributing to poverty in complex ways. According to one man interviewed in Kyjov, a segregated Roma settlement in the town of Stará Ľubovňa, Slovakia, “We built our house with a building permit, but there are still problems with the site, although it was officially given to us during socialism. But today the land is not ours, therefore we can not install any water, gas, or sewage pipes.” This example shows that Roma poverty is rooted in incompatibilities between Roma social practices, dominant state behaviors and norms, limited political representation, and geographic exclu-
A defining characteristic of Roma is their diversity. Researchers describe a "kaleidoscope" and "mosaic" of Roma groups—based on ethnic, occupational, religious, and economic characteristics. The proportion speaking dialects of the Roma language differs greatly from country to country, as does the proportion living in cities, integrated neighborhoods, or segregated rural settlements. These differences have a major impact on welfare status. A one-size-fits-all approach to Roma poverty will not work. Efforts to create, define, or represent a single Roma community will similarly founder on the rocks of internal cultural diversity. Roma tend to have distinctive problems of integration and access, but the situation of different communities and individuals varies immensely and cannot be reduced to a single, simple set of answers or policy responses.

A study of nine Roma communities in Romania, included in the main report, illustrates this diversity. Each of the nine communities consists of different combinations of Roma subgroups, with different languages, religions, and occupations. The Zabrauti neighborhood of Bucharest contains a mosaic of Roma ethnic groups, varying from the quite traditional Sporitori, who speak the Roma language, to more integrated Roma who speak primarily, or only, Romanian. The urban community of Babadag has three main Roma groups, the largest of which is Muslim. However, in the rural community of Iana, most Roma are active Orthodox Christians. Other communities are relatively homogenous. One urban and one rural community studied in Romania consisted primarily of Hungarian-speaking Roma. Another rural community was populated by relatively well-off Caldarari Roma, who speak the traditional Roma
language, and work primarily in trade, after being laid off from a large state-owned enterprise. Such diversity complicates any approach to addressing Roma poverty, since the root causes may also differ dramatically.

The European Dimension

Policies for addressing Roma poverty also must be framed in the context of the Central and Eastern European countries’ drive for membership in the European Union. The timing of the publication of this volume and other reports on Roma are not coincidental. The accelerating process of European integration has focused attention on the Roma issue through the adoption and monitoring of the Copenhagen criteria for EU accession. Based on these criteria, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have built institutions and legislative mechanisms to address Roma issues. However, this is only the beginning. Even once accession happens—as early as 2004 for some countries—addressing Roma poverty will require a long-term approach, as part of each country’s overall economic and social development program.

Interactions between Roma policy and the European accession process can be seen most vividly in Hungary—the first Central and East European country to apply for EU membership, and also the first to make a substantial policy effort to address Roma issues. Hungary passed a Minorities Act in 1993 that granted considerable cultural, educational, and linguistic rights to Hungary’s thirteen recognized minorities, including Roma. This Act created a system of national and local minority self-governments that let minorities initiate social, educational, and development projects. Approximately half of these are Roma self-governments. Hungary has also established a national Office for National and Ethnic Minorities, an independent Minorities Ombuds-
man to oversee minority rights and protections, and a Roma Office under the Office of the Prime Minister to coordinate Roma policy across the government. Together, these offices enable Hungary to comply with EU norms, in part through the implementation of a "medium-term package" of measures aimed towards social inclusion of Roma. Hungary’s extensive experience with Roma institutions and projects provides an important example for other EU aspirants.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND APPROACHES

While the plight of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe has not gone unnoticed, many lessons still need to be drawn and new policy approaches pursued. During the past decade, numerous initiatives by governments, NGOs, and international organizations have been launched to address various aspects of the Roma issue, from combating human rights violations, to addressing racial stereotyping in the media, and promoting education and employment. The level of activity varies significantly across countries. As many of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe move toward becoming EU members, a more systemic policy-oriented approach is needed to address gaps in Roma economic and social development. Project lessons from the 1990s can be used to inform policy interventions in key areas such as education, health, social assistance and the labor market.

Together, the multidimensional and inter-related roots of Roma poverty, the diversity of Roma communities, and the European background constitute a unique context for policy. This report outlines a number of policy implications. First, a comprehensive policy approach is required to address multiple and inter-related causes of Roma poverty simultaneously. Second, primary emphasis needs to be placed on furthering the social inclusion of Roma in European societies. In identifying policy approaches, useful lessons can be drawn from other countries with similar experience. And finally, greater attention needs to be paid to policy implementation and evaluation and the central role of Roma themselves in these processes.
Links with Systemic Reform

Improving conditions for Roma are inherently linked to the overall success of each country’s economic and social development strategies. So each country must implement policies that promote and sustain growth, while improving social welfare outcomes and the inclusiveness of policies for all populations. However, sector-wide policies will not be sufficient to reach all Roma, so targeted interventions are needed to address unique problems of exclusion and ensure that Roma are able to work and participate fully in public services.

Related to this, better access to quality social services for Roma is linked to the overall effectiveness of the education, health, and social protection systems in each country. Throughout the region, countries have embarked upon systemic reforms to improve the efficiency, equity, and relevance of public services. These measures are making a difference. In many ways, the inherited systems were ill-suited to the reality of a market economy, and one way in which they have proven ineffective is their inability to reach all vulnerable groups, including Roma. Addressing systemic issues and improving access and quality of social services will improve conditions for the entire population. Again, these system-wide measures need to be accompanied by interventions designed to reach Roma.

Toward an Inclusive Approach

As Roma poverty is rooted in broad-based social exclusion—economic, social, and geographic—addressing it calls for an inclusive approach which would aim to expand and promote Roma involvement and participation in mainstream society while maintaining cultural and social autonomy. Only policies that allow Roma to take advantage of opportunities in national and European labor and housing markets, education and health sys-
tems, and social and political networks have a chance of reducing poverty over the long term. Policy mechanisms would include those which make existing policies more accessible to Roma, and identifying areas where targeted initiatives which specifically reach Roma are needed. An emphasis on policies of inclusion would complement rights-based approaches by tackling the economic and social barriers which Roma face.

A central policy goal should be the multifaceted inclusion of Roma into institutions and mechanisms that create economic and social opportunities. Emphasis should be placed on providing incentives, rather than forcing compliance. Interventions which reduce the isolation and exclusion of Roma can help improve living conditions over the longer term. An inclusive approach also needs to rely on greater participation of Roma in the projects and programs which affect them. A number of successful projects use Roma mentors as liaisons between Roma and non-Roma communities. For example, Roma teachers’ assistants who work with parents, or peer advisors who assist with job placement, can facilitate integration while strengthening the Roma community itself.

Addressing exclusion and the wounds of segregation also involves overcoming divisions between Roma and non-Roma communities. This would build trust and help develop social capital within communities. Such measures need to involve both Roma and their non-Roma neighbors. In most cases, policies should target communities at large, rather than Roma in particular—although there may be exceptions where explicit attention to ethnicity would be appropriate such as overcoming language barriers. Multicultural education and a curriculum which includes the history and culture of Roma and other minorities are critical vehicles for overcoming cultural barriers. Training teachers, local government officials, and other personnel working in social services can address discrimination within public services. Finally, public information campaigns can promote multiculturalism and raise awareness about discrimination.
Learning from Example

When considering future policy directions, a key source of ideas and experiences may be found in the policy experiences of other countries and regions in minority policies, particularly in the West. North and South America provide interesting counterpoints to Europe’s experience, in part because the histories of African and indigenous peoples in the Americas offer more parallels to that of Roma than other national minorities in Europe. While all ethnic groups have distinct features, minority-majority relations share important similarities everywhere, and much can be learned from the policy experience of other countries which have confronted these issues over centuries.

What is distinctive about Roma in Europe is that they have endured centuries of exclusionary and assimilationist policies without being absorbed into majority societies. They remain stateless and have founded no movement for statehood because they lack a historic homeland. These general characteristics underline the challenges facing an integration-oriented approach to Roma poverty. However, they also focus attention on the stakes involved in getting policy right. Policy-makers need to approach issues of Roma poverty from a long-term perspective, with a clear idea of objectives and trade-offs.

Learning from Evaluation and Implementation

Development of a comprehensive national policy response to Roma poverty entails attention to monitoring and evaluation. The wealth of Roma projects in Central and Eastern Europe has provided a great deal of experience in implementation. But very few initiatives have been evaluated or monitored, making it extremely difficult to identify lessons for future interventions. It is important to examine this body of experience to distill lessons for future work. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation should be built into new and ongoing initiatives. So should opportunities for exchanging information within and across countries.

A first step is increasing the availability and quality of information on Roma. To address this, countries need to examine their statistical instruments—for example, censuses and house-
hold surveys—and administrative data, to assess how they can better capture policy-relevant information on Roma and other minorities. Multilateral coordination, advice, and guidance can be important for ensuring comparability of data. More information on international practices, particularly in addressing the privacy issue on ethnic identification, is needed. The outcomes of targeted public policies and NGO initiatives also require close monitoring, and program evaluations should be used for ongoing policy development. Mechanisms should be in place for disseminating lessons across regions and countries.

Privacy concerns about data collection must be respected. But up-to-date information is critical for policy makers to make decisions about program design and to monitor outcomes. Such data collection should benefit Roma in the long run through better designed and targeted interventions. Privacy concerns can be respected by making declarations of ethnicity voluntary and using periodic sample surveys, rather than national administrative data, to collect information on specific topics. Involvement of Roma groups in the development and implementation of surveys, as well as the analysis, is also extremely important. This was an emphasis of recent censuses in Slovakia and Bulgaria. Qualitative assessments can also provide valuable information for project design.

The importance of building monitoring and evaluation mechanisms into projects and policies cannot be overstressed. Monitoring should be an integral part of all projects to ensure accountability. Equally important are evaluations to assess project impacts and outcomes. These require collection of baseline data at the outset of projects for comparison once they have been completed. For example, an intervention designed to improve school enrollments should measure enrollments prior to the project and assess whether participants stay in school during the project, as well as afterwards. The time horizon for outcome evaluation should also be enough to assess longer-term
impacts. Again, in the case of education, the evaluation should assess not just whether children are in school at the end of the project, but what they have learned, whether they graduate and continue their education, and how the project affects their chances in higher education and the labor market.

Ensuring Participation

Regardless of whether programs and policies are explicitly designated for Roma, Roma participation is essential. The success of the inclusive approach outlined earlier rests on the ability of Roma to contribute to the development processes which affect them. The experience of policies and programs directed at Roma during both the socialist and transition periods showed that involvement of Roma in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs is essential. The recent past is littered with projects and programs that, however well-intentioned, failed because they were designed and implemented without the involvement of the future beneficiaries.

Ensuring Roma involvement in policy and project development rests on the existence of effective mechanisms for participation. While Roma have been increasingly involved in civil society and various aspects of policy-making, significant challenges to ensuring effective communication and involvement remain. Some of these have been discussed in this volume, including low education levels and illiteracy which diminish the potential pool of Roma leaders and voters, and mistrust and prejudices between Roma and non-Roma. Continued expansion of opportunities for Roma to participate in civil society at the local and national levels is essential. So is non-Roma involvement. The example of Slovakia, in particular, highlights the perils of separation and segregation. Roma who lack opportunities for interaction with wider society, including other Roma communities and non-Roma, are cut off from society. Increasing contacts and partnerships between non-Roma and Roma will facilitate inclusion and address the mistrust and miscommunication that limit the progress of local and community development.
Policies and interventions to improve the living conditions of Roma need to balance three related sets of objectives: first, increasing economic opportunities by expanding employment; second, building human capital through better education and health; and third, strengthening social capital and community development through increased empowerment and participation of Roma. Initiatives need to be designed and adapted to local circumstances and the varying conditions and needs of different Roma groups.

**Employment.** Expanding labor market opportunities is a priority throughout the region. It is critical that employment opportunities be widely shared, and that the poorest have the means to take advantage of new jobs. In the case of Roma, specific attention is needed to address the barriers of lower education status, geographic isolation and discrimination. Initiatives that increase opportunities for Roma in the labor market start with improvements in education status. Improving access to credit is an important aspect of increasing opportunities for Roma and other low income groups to engage in entrepreneurial activity. NGOs can play an important role in training and capacity building among communities to initiate projects. Partnerships between these organizations and banks are needed to establish credit mechanisms. Expanding the availability of microcredit can eventually decrease the role of local usurers in some Roma communities, who currently lend funds at extortionate rates.

Increasing the effectiveness of public works programs is another important element of promoting employment. Actions are needed to improve the quality and training content of public works jobs, so that participants gain transferable skills. Similarly, training programs can facilitate labor market reentry for low-
skilled and unskilled workers. However, because international experience with training programs is mixed, programs need to be carefully designed to fit labor market conditions.

At the policy level, it is also critical that anti-discrimination legislation be in place and that effective and accessible mechanisms are available for appeals. Beyond legislative measures, project interventions can overcome barriers between non-Roma and Roma by building confidence through on-the-job training and employment experience. For example, a successful public works project recently implemented in Bulgaria illustrated to non-Roma contractors that Roma could be reliable and effective employees. Possible approaches could include tax incentives for employers who employ Roma.

EDUCATION. Because of the central role of education for securing improvements in welfare and economic status, education has been a priority focus for government and NGO involvement. More project activity has taken place in this area over the past decade than in any of the other sectors. Initiatives in education take various forms and intervene at different points within the education cycle.

A priority starting point is reducing barriers that keep children from starting school. Many children are discouraged from starting school because of difficult economic circumstances at home and cultural differences, including language. Economic constraints can be addressed through the coordination of social assistance and education policies to alleviate the cost of education to poor families. A range of options exist, including school feeding programs—which can supplement nutrition while encouraging school attendance—policy measures that link provision of child allowances to enrollments, and scholarships for low-income students. Social workers can play an important role in identifying households in need of assistance.

Preschool programs are important bridges for preparing children for the classroom. Preschool programs are important bridges for preparing children for the classroom environment and overcoming language differences. A number of countries have experimented with tar-
geted preprimary initiatives to facilitate school attendance and performance. In 2002 the Bulgarian government announced its intention to make preschool attendance free and compulsory for all students.

Initiatives that reduce dropouts and facilitate continuation to secondary and tertiary education are also critical. Mentoring programs and extracurricular activities that provide tutoring and supplementary educational activities have been introduced in some countries. More recently, in Hungary and the Czech Republic, secondary schools that target Roma children have been opened. These schools integrate Roma studies, including language, history, and culture into the curriculum. Many of the ingredients of success, including involving parents, supporting students outside of the classroom, and incorporating multicultural approaches to education have the potential to improve the quality and inclusiveness of education systems as a whole, to the benefit of the entire population.

Improving the quality of education for Roma students can have positive effects on school attendance and educational outcomes. A key element of this is reducing negative discrimination within school systems and, in particular, diminishing the role of “special schools” intended for the mentally and physically handicapped. Practices of channeling Roma students into these schools need to be reviewed, as do policies that limit the future opportunities of special school graduates. Special education should be reformed to address true learning disabilities and special needs of at-risk children.

Limiting the use of separate classrooms and schools for Roma can improve education quality, as well reduce segregation and divisions between Roma and non-Roma communities. Within schools, this should include eliminating separate classrooms. For geographically remote settlements, other options could be included. A project in Bulgaria transports children from segregated Roma schools to integrated schools.

Teachers play a central role in defining the quality of education for all students and need to be adequately trained to deal with the challenges of a multicultural environment. Ongoing support mechanisms that help teachers on the job are also critical. Training could include Roma history and culture, conflict
resolution, and classroom management. A number of countries have also experimented with Roma teachers assistants and mediators who can assist in the classroom environment, as well as provide a link between Roma communities and schools. Similarly, parental involvement at all levels of education should be explored and fostered, including bringing parents into the classroom as teacher’s aides, participation in parent-teacher associations, and regular parent-teacher interactions.

HEALTH CARE. Relative to the other policy areas, much less is known about the health issues facing Roma communities. In this context, improving monitoring of health status, is an important priority. More effective monitoring of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and HIV/AIDS is critical, as is attention to reproductive health more broadly. Another primary challenge in health care is improving the availability of health care to isolated Roma communities. Policies that expand access to remote rural areas and urban communities can include incentives for physicians, community health workers, and social workers to work with communities on both addressing their problems and teaching prevention. Public health interventions can be designed to overcome barriers to accessing care. Some countries have experimented with Roma mediators to engage in health promotion activities within Roma communities, and to facilitate interactions between Roma and health care professionals. Information campaigns are also critical for addressing many emerging health risks, including substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and conditions associated with poor nutrition and housing conditions. Other initiatives can include improved dissemination of public health information through the media, schools, and coordination with organizations such as churches and NGOs within the Roma community.

HOUSING. Because of the wide diversity in the types of settlements and communities where Roma live, housing is a complex area
which requires close coordination between central and local governments and communities. An important priority in housing policy is the presence of effective legislation and enforcement mechanisms which prevent discrimination and clarify property ownership. In many slum areas and settlements, unresolved questions regarding the ownership of buildings and residency rights blur responsibilities for upgrading and maintenance, and block incentives for residents to invest in and maintain properties.

Equally important considerations in housing are policies and programs which ensure adequate mechanisms for community involvement and choice. Because of the legacy of failed housing programs and projects during the socialist era, this is particularly critical. A number of facilities have emerged recently which provide promising opportunities for communities and households to apply for resources for community development and upgrading of housing, including micro-credit arrangements and social funds.

Measures can be undertaken to alleviate poor conditions in some of the most disadvantaged Roma settlements. Measures can include: (i) clarifying property rights and resolving questions regarding the ownership of land and buildings which prohibit residents and local governments from investing in and maintaining properties; (ii) reviewing and simplifying procedures for obtaining building permits to allow residents to upgrade their property; and (iii) providing clear information to the public on procedures for applying for construction permits and acquiring property.

**Utilities.** Mechanisms for expanding coverage of utilities and public services to settlements should also be identified. Options include expanding access to utilities and public services by bringing isolated settlements into the mainstream utility networks. While inhabitants should be charged for utilities, subsidies may
Box 1: In Their Own Words

Interviews with Roma throughout the region highlight the range of experiences and living conditions, across and within countries. These snapshots illustrate this diversity. The challenges they face are explored further throughout this volume.

Education:
Many Roma children do not attend school. Some parents are unable to send their children to school because they lack basic supplies, or even clothes. Other children are excluded because of social and cultural factors, such as language.

We can’t afford to send them to school in the winter. We have no sneakers, no proper shoes for snow. They can’t go to school in slippers. They don’t have jackets or warm clothes either. We can’t afford anything—copybooks, pens. Children have no money for meals. That’s why they don’t go to school.—Parent, Bulgaria.

Children from segregated Roma settlements do not master the Slovak language and do not understand their teachers. The teachers do not speak the Roma language, so they communicate by using gestures.—School Director, Slovakia.

While demand for education is low in some Roma communities, other parents expressed a strong interest in their children’s education and recognized its importance for their future success.

My grandson is a first grade student. We sent him to kindergarten and hope in the future that he will put more importance on education than we did.—Grandparent, Slovakia.

I waited for my daughter to return from school every day and asked her what happened at school. I sat beside her when she was writing up her homework. I would not let her go out until I saw that she had finished. I would not allow anyone at home to touch her and make her do some other housework…I do not know what will happen to her after she completes her education, but whatever that is, it will be better. She can become a doctor, a teacher. She will go higher than us.—Parent, Bulgaria.

Employment:
Formal unemployment in some Roma settlements can reach 100 percent. Many Roma face severe obstacles in finding a job because of their low education and skill levels, as well as discrimination on the labor market.

Who is going to give me a job? I have no education, no skills and am Roma. Even in my neighboring village nobody wants to give us any work.—35-year-old father of five, Slovakia.

If his Bulgarian name is Angel or Ivan or Stoyan or Dragan, he’ll get all the application forms and be asked to come in. As soon as they realize he’s Gypsy, Roma, he’s...
be needed for low income households, particularly in the case of public goods, such as sanitation. Local governments and communities can be provided incentives to deliver services in settlements, possibly through a central fund. Finally, opportunities can be provided within public works programs for the improvement of basic infrastructure and services in Roma communities.

**SOCIAL ASSISTANCE.** Safety net programs which provide cash assistance to the poor are an important source of income for many Roma families. Many countries in the region are engaged in important reforms of cash benefits to improve their effectiveness, and their ability to reach the poor through improvements in targeting. A critical issue is ensuring that such programs meet the needs of poor households, but that they do not discourage those who can from working—and leaving them in a “poverty trap,” dependent on social benefits.

Work incentives can be built into social assistance programs through time limits, work requirements and other means. Benefits should be phased out so that low wage workers—the working poor—would still be entitled to benefits, but at a level that would not discourage them from working. This would improve incentives for those at the margin and increase income among low-income working families. The role of social workers
also needs to shift to re-employment facilitators who can help the unemployed find work. Work related programs, such as support for child care and transportation subsidies for low income workers can also facilitate labor market participation and break the dependency cycle.

CONCLUSIONS

Poverty among Roma remains one of the most pressing issues for Central and Eastern Europe states as they move towards EU integration and sustained economic development. Using a variety of sources and approaches, this report examines the nature of Roma poverty—a multifaceted challenge that can only be addressed by a policy approach that attends to all dimensions of Roma social exclusion and focuses on the potential contributions Roma can make to social and economic development. Since the dominant policy approach in the years after socialism has tended to rely on a fragmented set of projects, often delivered by local NGOs with limited assistance from the state, the opportunity to make a difference through a comprehensive change of direction is significant and bright.

The current level of activity and interest in Roma issues in Central and Eastern Europe provides a promising start. The next step is to integrate the lessons of this experience into policy. The mechanisms to facilitate this have been put in place. Most Central and East European countries have formulated strategies for improving the conditions of Roma and established institutions to develop, coordinate, and administer policies and projects. However, the agenda is complex and improvements will not come overnight. Indeed, poverty among Roma communities in some West European countries highlights the scope of the challenge. Effective policy responses will require a multi-layered approach involving cross-country partnerships among Roma and international organizations, national and local governments, NGOs and communities.
Roma have suffered from severe poverty and exclusion throughout European history. For many Roma in Central and Eastern Europe, the period of transition from communism has been especially dire. Low education and skill levels, compounded by discrimination, have led to widespread long-term unemployment and deteriorating living conditions.

Their plight has not gone unnoticed. Over the past decade, governments, civil society and the international community have actively supported initiatives to keep Roma children in school, expand access to jobs, and overcome discrimination. Lessons from these projects can make policies more inclusive and can expand their reach.

This volume was prepared for the conference “Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future” in Budapest, Hungary, June 30–July 1, 2003. I hope that this conference will catalyze an ongoing dialogue between the new Roma leadership and the wider policy community that will improve the living conditions and future opportunities of Roma over the long term.

From the foreword by James D. Wolfensohn, President, The World Bank