

Achieving an Inclusive Recovery in Romania

Roma Dimensions of the Recovery Process

On March 1, 2021 a virtual roundtable discussion on *Achieving an Inclusive Recovery in Romania - Roma Dimensions of the Recovery Process* took place. The event brought together Romanian government representatives, international development partners and (Roma) civil society organizations. The objective of the roundtable were two-fold:

- to discuss the needs and priorities of vulnerable population groups in Romania in connection with the economic crisis due to COVID-19; and
- to brainstorm how to best integrate opportunities for high-impact social and economic support for vulnerable population groups into Romania's economic recovery.

Key Messages and Recommendations

1. **The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened existing inequalities for Roma and marginalized communities.** The World Bank shared findings from high frequency COVID-19 household and community surveys which identified six channels through which Roma communities were affected by the crisis:
 - (i) **Roma were heavily affected by the pandemic measures:** Overcrowded living conditions and lack of access to running water made it hard to comply with hygiene and social distancing measures. Food security remains a concern in marginalized rural areas and communities with large Roma settlements.
 - (ii) **Roma suffered income losses and were less likely to have been protected through the COVID support measures.** Informal and low-income workers most were most heavily affected through employment channels. The government's rapid mitigating measures reduced impacts among formal workers – but left informal workers less protected,
 - (iii) **Marginalized communities were severely impacted by health services disruptions.** The onset of the pandemic gave rise to delays in consultations, treatments and monitoring and 1 in 3 poor households (bottom 20%) had difficulties accessing the adequate amount of sanitary and hygiene products during the State of Emergency.
 - (iv) **School disruptions affected students from poorer and rural backgrounds more heavily.** Poorer children were more likely to struggle with distance learning, in part due to a lack to IT equipment and stable internet access. Concern that in particular Roma girls will not return to education once schools reopen.
 - (v) **Roma have experienced increased levels of stigmatization and discrimination in connection with the pandemic.** The crisis has resulted in stigmatization, scapegoating and increased inter-community tensions.
 - (vi) **Local communities have been an important source of resilience for marginalized population groups during the pandemic.** Local communities have been critical in identifying vulnerabilities and closing service gaps that arose due to the crisis
2. **Romania's economic recovery will benefit from investing in Roma inclusion.** Speakers underlined that the recovery will need to leverage the energy and talents of all Romanians, irrespective of their ethnicity. Romania's Roma population is a young population group which provides the country with a largely untapped potential for social and economic growth. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and the programming of the EU's 2021-2027 Social and Investment Funds (ESIF) provide an

unprecedented opportunity to remove critical barriers in access to basic services, social services, and economic opportunities for Roma communities.

3. **Closing Romania’s socio-economic inclusion gaps requires a whole-of- government approach to develop comprehensive investments that are driven by clearly defined outcomes and measurable targets.** The discussion noted that the agenda has suffered from a “mainstreaming” philosophy that created siloed sectoral approaches that were limited in scope and impact. For the NRRP and ESIF, an integrated investment roadmap for addressing the multi-sectoral dimensions of Roma exclusion will need to be developed. This investment roadmap should include clearly defined results (outcomes) and indicators to measure progress. Resources that have been earmarked for investments in inclusion should not be diverted to other objectives.
4. **Participants highlighted priority actions in five areas:**
 - (i) **Invest in the closure of basic infrastructure and services gaps.** Expanded support should focus not just on access concerns but also through understanding whether service delivery models may not reach marginalized groups.
 - (ii) **Improve coverage and adequacy of safety nets,** in particular in the minimum income scheme, which is one of the least adequate in the EU for lifting recipients out of poverty.
 - (iii) **Invest in the acquisition of skills for most disadvantaged students,** focusing on basic skills (primary education) and digital skills (primary and secondary), with a particular focus on the specific needs of Roma girls to ensure they do not drop out of education early.
 - (iv) **Improve capacity and geographical coverage of primary health care** in particular in the most marginalized communities in Romania.
 - (v) **Invest in Active Labor Market Policies (ALMPs) for inactive population groups and informal workers,** including through public works programs that target women and youth, re-skilling and up-skilling as well as support to entrepreneurship programs to professionalize informal business structures
5. **A stronger focus on localized approaches and community involvement is necessary to ensure investments are effective, sustainable and improve socio-economic cohesion.** Participants noted that Romania’s marginalized communities are diverse and so are the challenges they face. Communities are best placed to name their needs, propose solutions and identify priorities for the allocation of financial resources. Community-driven approaches are moreover beneficial to improve intra-community trust and cohesion.
6. **Innovative financial instruments can catalyze the delivery of integrated approaches for the socio-economic inclusion of marginalized communities.** The question of how this new programming period can generate real change was discussed at length. Participants agreed that making integrated approaches for Roma inclusion a reality requires multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approaches. In order to move beyond the small-scale individual project-style (EU-funded) investments towards more ambitious outcome-focused interventions, innovative results-based financial instruments (e.g. social bonds) can catalyze multi-stakeholder partnerships and investments by rallying stakeholders around mutually agreed outcomes and results indicators.
7. **A whole-of- society approach is required to make an inclusive recovery a reality in Romania.** The discussion highlighted that while policies and investments will be indispensable, they will not be sufficient in making equal opportunities for Roma a reality. Discrimination and racism have been identified as key drivers for Roma exclusion. A whole-of-society approach that goes beyond the government and insular policy communities is necessary to meet the challenge of an inclusive recovery. Engaging with citizens on this agenda in a proactive and constructive manner will be necessary to achieve equality of opportunity for Roma in all areas of their lives.