



Workshops in the settlement following the pandemic. Photo credit: CYI

# PROTECTION THROUGH EDUCATION

Year 3 | November 1, 2019 – June 30, 2020



## PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Protection through Education program supports Roma children with pre-school and primary school education to increase school participation and performance and decrease street-involvement of Roma children living in informal settlements.

CWS, Week of Compassion and H. Stepic CEE Charity support this program. The Centre for Youth Integration, or CYI, implements it.

Since the beginning of school year 2019/20, the program successfully delivered outreach and psycho-social support, advocated for the rights of families and provided educational support for both children and their parents.

The highest number of children participating in the program from November 2019 until March 2020 was 122 (71 girls and 51 boys). On March 15, the Government of Serbia introduced a state of emergency due to the coronavirus pandemic. The next day, it closed kindergartens, preschools and schools, resulting in temporary modification and adjustment of project activities until the state of emergency was lifted on May 7.

There are now 173 children in the program. Of those, 96 are girls and 77 are boys. This number includes new pre-schoolers who have been mapped since April onwards. It also includes three cohorts of children: first graders, pre-schoolers and children that are currently in the process of enrolment in preschool.

Some highlights from the reporting period include:

- All participants of preschool age were successfully enrolled in preschool
- 95% of first-graders successfully finished the first grade
- Memorandum with "Dr Arcibald Rajs" elementary school was signed
- Eleven extracurricular activities were organized for the beneficiaries
- Expert from Autonomous Womens Center held a training for Protection through Education team members
- Starting from March 16, CYI made a decision to temporarily suspend all in-person activities due to the pandemic. Staff continued to work from home on administrative tasks and were remotely in contact with all beneficiaries, their families and school staff via phone.
- In person activities were restarted in mid-May with all precaution measures in place, including wearing PPE and limiting group activities to 5 children and 2 team members.
- CYI and the Protection through Education program supported all participating families living in informal settlements with food and hygiene packages.

<b>Total number of children participants</b>	<b>173</b>
Number of future preschoolers	55
Number of preeschoolers	62
Number of first-graders	56
Number of workshops held for children <sup>1</sup>	127
Number of classes attended by the Protection through Education team	151
Number of extraculicular activities organized for children	11
Number of contacts with institutions (meetings, email or telephone)	2,742
Number of meetings with decision makers	94
Average number of volunteers involved on monthly bassis	30

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<sup>1</sup> this is the number of all of the workshops held for children, including educational and equality workshops.

## PROGRAM RESULTS

### **Objective 1 - Increase age-appropriate preschool and first grade enrollment, attendance and performance of vulnerable Roma children (especially girls) that are at high risk of being street involved living in two segregated informal settlements in Belgrade**

*1.1 Activity “Access, enrolment and attendance” - education team will provide support to Roma families, children and schools in order to enable access and support enrolment of children into local primary schools in accordance with the informed preferences of parents.*

All activities usual for the beginning of the school year have been regularly implemented. In the first months of reporting period, the emphasis was on collecting parental consent, on motivating parents to start or complete requirements to enrol their children in school or in preschool, providing additional support for children to adapt to the school environment, as well as to adopt basic hygiene habits. Emphasis was also placed on completing medical examinations and taking the certificates and other necessary documents required for enrolment to educational institutions.

Educators completed the assessment of learning needs of all participants and developed individual learning plans, which were revised as needed in collaboration with teachers throughout school year. School teachers rely heavily on CYI’s educators, noting dissatisfaction with the implementation of Government inclusion laws and lack of resources necessary to work with children requiring extra support.

First graders - At the moment of reporting, there were 56 first-graders, 26 boys and 30 girls. Out of those, 53 children successfully completed the first grade and will start second grade in September. Three children did not finish the grade.<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to regular attendance of first-grade aged participants, school data indicates that 82% of children attended classes regularly (53% of them were “very regular”<sup>3</sup> at school and 27% “regular”<sup>4</sup>).

During the reporting period, the Protection through Education team was present in classes 151 times in four schools providing direct learning support to 27 participants (15 boys and 12 girls) once a week. Each month, an average of 13 volunteers helped take children to or from school - 410 outreach activities in this regard, until mid-March and closing of the schools.

Pre-schoolers – At the time of this report, the Protection through Education team was providing service to 62 children of preschool age—39 girls and 23 boys. Twenty of them are coming from the Vuka Vrcevic settlement and 40 from Mali Leskovac. Two live outside of the mentioned settlements.

Among program participants, 56 formally enrolled in preschool last fall. One is currently considered as “passive”<sup>5</sup>, and eight are considered as pre-schoolers since they didn’t enrol into first grade due to various reasons.<sup>6</sup> Fifteen children were taken by their parents and 41

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<sup>2</sup> One child was absent from too many classes and therefore, couldn’t be graded, while two other children did not adapt very well and were recommended by school to repeat the first grade.

<sup>3</sup> Attended over 80% of classes.

<sup>4</sup> Attended between 50% and 80% of classes, but still considered regular by teachers.

<sup>5</sup> The boy did not show up in pre-school for at least 3 months and the team cannot trace the family.

<sup>6</sup> Lack of medical documentation, recommendation to re-attend the preschool, etc.

were taken to preschool by our team. All of them finished the preschool and are in the process of enrolling in first grade. Currently 36 of them are enrolled, while 24 are in the processes of medical examinations and two of them are yet to start with process of enrolment. Attendance of the pre-schoolers that finished preschool, by the data of preschool institution, was estimated as regular taking into account health condition of our beneficiaries.

Future pre-schoolers - Mapping of future pre-schoolers started in April as usual. Because of emergency state in place at that time, initial mapping was done through Google Earth and Maps with additional information obtained through telephone inquiries with people from the settlements. So far, the team mapped 55 children who will be enrolled in preschool starting in September 2020: 27 girls and 28 boys. The program team submitted applications for their enrolment in three preschool groups in Palilula municipality. The main activities regarding new generation of pre-schoolers include signed permissions of parents that their children could be involved in PtE activities, advising them about necessary documentation, providing mediation between them and institutions. Most of the educational workshops that will take place during July and August will aim for better socialization and evaluation of capacities of this group of children.

During the reporting period there were only a few children who had difficulties in adjusting to the school and preschool environment. Most children adapted relatively quickly, and the main reasons for missing out from preschool and school were due to colds and other medical issues such as lice. In order to increase the regularity of children in the program, the outreach coordinator designed a plan of activities to be implemented from January 2020 onwards. The plan is based on continued support of expert team for 18 children, who were more absent, including coordinating visits to the health institution by a program nurse who scheduled examinations and informed and motivated parents by telephone. If the nurse failed to reach the parents, or they did not appear within the agreed dates, support was provided through an outreach visit to the families in order to additionally motivate them. These activities included daily calls by a nurse or outreach coordinator, with regular field visits. Social worker of the Protection through Education team was also included in these activities.

*1.2. Activity "Direct learning support" - education team will provide direct learning support to Roma children that have been assisted to enroll in school through a school-after-school program at CYI's community education support center located in a secure space near the target settlements.*

During the reporting period, 117 educational workshops were held with 39 children (18 boys and 21 girls) attending. The focus is predominantly on children who are not assisted during school classes, and thus require additional work after school.

It should be noted that the Protection through Education team did not have any direct activities with children starting from mid-March until mid-May due to the pandemic. Also, activities in May were held in "one on one" form or in groups with maximum of four children since we respected all safety and health measures. The Protection through Education team adapted to new conditions caused by pandemic and proceeded with new form of providing learning support to children, by sending them online educational and extracurricular materials. During the state of emergency and curfew, educators were constantly sending reading and video materials and assignments to beneficiaries who had access to messaging apps. Others were assisted through regular telephone calls. In this way, the program supported all 56 first-graders.

In first few months of the school year, the focus was on assessment, with the aim of identifying strengths and areas in which a child needs support (school curriculum, socialization, language learning etc). Workshops were organized to work more intensively with pre-schoolers and first graders who needed extra support to adapt to the school environment or had difficulties with pronunciation of Serbian. Monthly, there were 16 volunteers on average helping in workshop facilitation.

On the last weekend of the month of December, two creative workshops for the preparation of New Year's greeting cards for parents were organized.



*Creative workshop for children Photo credit: CYI*

**1.3. Activity “Preventing drop-out” - education team will provide support to schools and Roma parents to prevent school leaving and contribute to creating conducive conditions for the retention of children in primary school.**

Some examples of this support include the following:

- The team worked with mother of one participant and the school’s drop-out coordinator to keep that girl enrolled in school, although teacher proposed moving the child to another school on the basis of not fulfilling school tasks. The solution was found with Individual Learning Plan developed for this girl.
- Two boys required extra support in adapting to school environment and minimizing the risk of dropping out – a social worker from the program worked with boys and their parents, who showed low motivation to overcome the problem. With persistence and ongoing support, the boys eventually accepted and adapted to school environment, resulting in pretty regular attendance.
- In December, a meeting was organized with the principal and school staff from Jovan Popovic Elementary School. The topic of the meeting were frequent allegations made by parents of program beneficiaries that some teachers have been intensely advising them to sign out their children from school and offering to sign a request for transfer of children to evening school. The parents added that the requests were already prepared by teacher who was claiming that was in children’s best interest. This information was shared with school administration, resulting in school principal’s decision to forbid any such actions in future.

- When the state of emergency ended, it was agreed with the teacher of one participant that the boy would come to the school with his parents, where he would do assignments with the teacher so that she can grade him. Protection through Education educators visited the family to motivate them to bring the boy to school. Since both parents were not able to take the boy to school, the educators took the boy and in the school yard, with the teacher, provided support in mastering the school material. The boy got graded.

## **Objective 2 - Increasing the ability of parents to support their children's education**

*2.1. Activity "Family strengthening" - education team will provide support to families to create conducive conditions for children's participation in and academic achievement at primary school, and to overcome barriers and mitigate circumstances that prevent participation or raise the risk of early school leaving and negatively impact on academic performance.*

During the project the Protection through Education team is providing necessary school materials for all participants. Support was provided in the form of school materials and school equipment to 91 participants. Forty-five families were provided 104 hygiene packages,<sup>7</sup> as well as shoes and clothes.

CYI distributed food and hygiene packages to participating families and other people living in the settlements in response to needs resulting from the pandemic.

The program data counted 11,079 telephone or face-to-face conversations with parents or relatives of children regarding access to public services and accompanying challenges. There were an additional 199 conversations with institutions. For example, a mother of one participant who has a disability was supported in collecting and submitting the documents for free transportation to and from school for her child. Her daughter was entitled to this service but needed somebody to guide her through entire process and assist with documents collection.

In January medical and outreach workers provided support to local health institution in conducting mandatory vaccination of children from one of the settlements. Some of the pre-schoolers were not vaccinated and therefore couldn't attend preschool during flu epidemic declared at the time. The precondition was obtaining certificates of vaccination which they didn't have. The nurse also completed the health insurance database for all program beneficiaries which should ease further efforts in that regard.

This year inclusion of Roma parents in school councils became a project priority. The team mapped 12 parents who were assessed to have some level of capacity to engage in the councils – however, all of them didn't want to become part of school councils citing lack of time. Further efforts were stopped due to the virus outbreak. School administration agreed to take a more active role working with the team in motivating parents to join the councils as the new school year approaches.

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<sup>7</sup> Packages are most often made of soap and shampoos for children, baby powder, wet wipes, children's toothbrushes, shampoo for lice, nail clippers, diapers, sanitary pads etc.

2.2. Activity “Specialized support for children that are street-involved or at high risk of street-involvement” - education team will refer children that are identified to be street-involved to CYI’s Drop-In Shelter and outreach service for street-involved children.

There are 30 children that are street involved or at high risk of being involved (20 girls and 10 boys). These are mutual beneficiaries of the Drop-in shelter and both teams are working together on providing additional support to them and their families.

### Objective 3 - Conducting gender sensitive trainings and workshops for Roma girls and boys, mothers and fathers, to challenge the traditional gender stereotypes

#### 3.1 Activity “Equality workshops for children”

A total of 43 participants—23 girls and 20 boys—attended 10 equality workshops. Topics covered by these workshops include differences in dressing, physical appearances and professions, individuality and the right to choose freely how to dress and do their hairstyle, discussion on “boys-only” and “girls-only” activities, International Women’s Day, and tolerance. Style of the workshops is adjusted to the age of participants and all the themes and issues are presented and discussed through play and creative techniques, which is highly welcomed by children.



Equality workshop Photo credit: CYI

### *3.2 Activity "Equality workshops for parents"*

CWS intended to work with a gender consultant in designing the curriculum for the workshops. However, the pandemic affected the plan, leaving no room to hire an experienced consultant which would design the workshops. The program team started organizing basic equality workshops from February on (the emphasis in the first months of the program was on children), so the activity had to be suspended once the state of emergency was declared in mid-March. Only three workshops were organized and only four mothers took part in them.

This topic is very sensitive in Roma communities and requires strong and focused effort to even make the first steps, taking into account habits and norms of the community. Therefore, this is something CWS will discuss further while monitoring the development of COVID-19 in Serbia and related measures.

It is obvious that parents need additional motivation to join this type of workshop. The program team noted several requests for a bit different type of activity, which was introduced (although not originally planned in the proposal) during the year and named it "Open Doors." It provides a set time, twice a month, when parents can come and discuss issues of concern. Subjects included reproductive health, the importance of education, adult education, gender roles, gender-based violence and exercising the right to financial and social assistance. During the reporting period eight mothers and two fathers participated in this activity. This activity was put on hold when the pandemic started; feedback from the parents said they miss "Open Doors" as that was a convenient way for them to have conversations with social worker and nurse one-on-one or in small groups.

## **Objective 4 - Advocating for the adoption of affirmative action policies for the inclusion of Roma children living in informal settlements in education**

### *4.1 Activity "Policy advocacy"*

In all contacts with individuals, organizations and institutions the program is insisting on comprehensive support for children from the settlements and their families and for all people living in extreme poverty in informal settlements. During the reporting period the Protection through Education team had 85 meetings with professionals and decision makers and 2,742 contacts with institutions by telephone or email.

In November, there were meetings with several NGOs, including Caritas, resulting in their direct financial support to beneficiaries. In December, CYI signed a memorandum of cooperation with one more primary school "Dr Arcibald Rajs" increasing their presence to four school providing assistance to children from the program.

In December, the Protection through Education coordinator attended a thematic group on early child development and education that is regularly organized by Network of organizations for children of Serbia. There are five thematic groups and CYI is included in three of them. In these meetings organizations give their input to the Network regarding the current issues in Serbia in the field of child protection.

On December 5<sup>th</sup> CYI in cooperation with Republic Institute for Social Protection and the Network of organizations for children of Serbia, organized the Conference "Children in the



Street: System. Experience. Cooperation." The conference was dedicated to the response of the system to position of children in street situation, with special reference to General Comment no. 21 of the UN, life experiences of these children, which are often traumatic and also the experience of children from the Drop-in shelters and the need for cooperation from all actors in the system.

CYI also participated in an expert consultative meeting regarding the development of a new strategy for the development of education until 2027, organized by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. CYI later gave its comments and recommendations regarding the subject and scope of work. In February, International Labour Organization held several consultative meetings and workshops with Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans' and Social Affairs and with Ministry of Internal Affairs, all of them were attended by CYI representatives with a goal of addressing child labour and begging activities.

In June, the Protection through Education coordinator participated in several focus groups with parents of CYI's beneficiaries in order to collect information regarding the right to social welfare. This research is done by governmental Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit and the main goal is to collect information which could initiate amendments of the current law.

During the state of emergency, the Protection through Education team was involved in research done by the Network of organizations for children of Serbia titled "To be a child at the time of COVID-19 pandemic." Since it is important to obtain perspective of children living in extreme poverty, the team talked with several children and included their inputs in questionnaire.



*Photo credit: CYI*

## **Objective 5 - Assessing impact of the project, sharing knowledge and good practices regionally**

*5.1. Activity "Research" – CWS and CYI will conduct a research in target settlements to document and assess the impact of the program on children.*

During first semester, educators completed the assessment of learning needs of current beneficiaries. This information, together with school results and data provided by the teachers, will be compared and analysed with data collected at the end of the school year and presented in final report.

At the end of March, the Protection through Education team started with collecting data on educational status of former beneficiaries. This was first done through telephone calls since all in person contact with beneficiaries was put on hold, due to the pandemic. At the time of reporting, the Protection through Education team had collected information on the educational status of 383 former beneficiaries. This data will be analysed during summer months.

*3.2. Activity "Sharing knowledge and good practices" - sharing developed good practices for provision of education support for extremely vulnerable children in severely excluded families through the Network of Organizations for Children Serbia (MODS) and the Regional Resource Centre (Child Hub platform).*

On November 20, for International Children's Day, CYI organized gathering of program teams and partners at Cafe bar 16. This event later that day merged with an event organized by the Network of Organizations for children of Serbia in the same venue attended by colleagues from other NGOs and public institutions. Throughout the day guests had a chance to get information about activities of the program and share their thoughts and ideas.

Developed good practices of the Protection through Education program will also be shared through the Network of Organizations for Children Serbia and the Child Hub platform in future months.

Protection through Education had 38 posts on Facebook and 29 posts on Instagram during the reporting period that reached more than 50,000 people.

## **VOLUNTEERING PROGRAM**

This year, the volunteer response was excellent. A total of 78 volunteers answered the first call, and 38 answered the second call. After first call, CYI organized two meetings and two trainings for volunteers. After the second call the pandemic escalated and activities were put on hold.

New volunteers were quickly involved in the realization of activities. In the first outreach visits, they were accompanied by CYI staff in order to get acquainted with the context of the settlements, as well as with basic principles of outreach work. After several outreach visits, most of them have acquired enough skills to be able to conduct outreach visits with an experienced volunteer. The overall impression was that new volunteers were motivated and quickly adapted to the program.

In average, 30 volunteers were involved in activities monthly. During the reporting period, there were 410 outreach visits done by volunteers with the support of the Protection through Education team and 292 outreach visits without the supervision of the team. They participated in workshops on 83 occasions.

Additionally, even the during state of emergency the Protection through Education team got support from 26 volunteers, who were mainly creating online material for our program participants.

## THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Due to the coronavirus pandemic and declaration of the state of emergency in Serbia, CYI put all direct activities with program participants on hold starting from March 16.

Since all preschool and school institutions in Serbia were closed, Protection through Education team members were in frequent contact with families to provide relevant information, give advice and keep up to date with their health status and needs. All of them were contacted twice a week. Regular contact was maintained with preschools, schools and local Welfare Centre. Teachers contacted the program team many times asking for help in getting in touch with children. Most teachers tried to arrange some form of teaching through Viber groups starting from April. Prior to that, the Protection through Education team gathered information on availability of internet and messaging apps among children and their parents and shared them with teachers. The program team also conducted an online workshop with five children using one of the apps. The rest of children with access to internet were receiving videos and other educational materials.

The official school program was broadcast on national television. The issue was that some families don't have TV sets at home; those that do have commented that the pace of lectures was too fast for most of the children in the settlements, especially those who even in regular circumstances need extra support.

So far, there were no reported cases of Covid-19 among beneficiaries. Most families in settlements live in extreme poverty and were running out of food and hygiene products during imposed curfew as they were not able to go and collect recyclables to earn money. Among the information regarding prevention and emergency measures, Protection through Education staff shared phone numbers and Facebook groups offering free psychosocial support to citizens.

It is important to note that in the beginning of March, a Protection through Education team member tested positive for COVID-19. She was hospitalized, and all team members were in mandatory preventive isolation. By the end of the month, she was discharged on household isolation since her health status improved. Due to this case, CYI was strongly against any field work or direct contact with the beneficiaries.

Since no protective or helping measures were undertaken by the responsible authorities for people living in informal settlements, CYI launched an appeal to the Ministry of Labour Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs and to the Secretariat for Social Protection of the City of Belgrade, asking for provision of adequate support to children and adults living in informal settlements. They also contacted the UN Country Team in Serbia, Delegation of EU, Save the Children and other donors and provided them with information on the situation in informal settlements in Belgrade where CYI works. Unfortunately, CYI received an unofficial answer from the mayor's office that the city of Belgrade has no plans for any activities towards people living in informal settlements.

## **ADDITIONAL PROGRAM RESULTS**

Among Protection through Education activities, there are also 11 extracurricular activities. These kinds of activities were not organized in the last four months due to the pandemic. These activities included: two theatre plays, "Stone Fog," designed especially for the program participants by a local theatre group; two art workshops organized by students of the Faculty of Fine Arts; visit to the Science fair in Belgrade, other children's plays, and a comic book exhibition. There were 68 children present at extracurricular activities.

Every year CYI organizes a New Year's children's play for all program participants.

## STORY OF SUCCESS

Iljmija comes from a big family with six siblings. His parents support their family by collecting recyclables. They often have their children help, so Iljmija often works on the streets.

In addition to participating in the Protection through Education program, Iljmija also visits the CWS-supported drop-in shelters that CYI operates.

Despite his harsh living conditions, Iljmija is now regularly attending school. But the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic left him in a tough situation. The official school program was broadcast on national television, and teachers used messaging apps to provide additional support. But Iljmija wasn't able to watch his classes on TV. His parents don't own a phone, so he couldn't get that extra support...or even receive his homework assignments.

At the end of the day, though, Iljmija will be graded just like the other students who do have TV and phone access. His only other option would be to take an exam during the summer holidays and risk failing the school year. For Roma children like Iljmija who come from informal settlements, this type of setback can often make them give up on overcoming all of the challenges between them and an education.

The Program through Education team and Iljmija's stepped in to help him. The program team were able to get in contact with his parents, which is a challenge because they are often away from home working on the streets. They told the team that they weren't able to take Iljmija to his school, where he could receive extra support to make up for what he was missing. So two educators from the Protection through Education team took him instead.

Iljmija's teacher put together a learning corner in part of the school yard, where she could safely teach him during the pandemic. She prepared extra lessons and assignments for him and worked alongside the program educators when needed. Everyone took precautions by wearing masks, social distancing and using disinfecting sprays.

With the extra support, Iljmija successfully completed his assignments and got his grades. Despite the pandemic, and thanks to his teacher and the Program through Education team, he didn't fall behind.