

## **GUARANTEE - Guaranteeing the Right to Education for Roma Children**

From 2019 to early 2022, the ETC Graz worked with local partners to implement the GUARANTEE project in Stolipinovo, Plovdiv (Bulgaria), and Nordstadt, Dortmund (Germany). GUARANTEE was co-funded by the European Union's Rights, Equality, and Citizenship Programme. The project took a human rights-based approach with the right to education at its core. It emphasised dropout prevention and stereotype deconstruction through learning support combined with leisure activities such as sports. GUARANTEE targeted girls and boys aged 11 to 14 in order to empower them to continue their education after completing primary and lower-secondary school.

Activities such as boxing, rock climbing, dancing, fine arts, swimming, and summer schools at the Black Sea coast were carried out in the two neighbourhoods. All courses were combined with intensive social work, as well as learning support. In total, about 160 children continuously took part in the programme. The courses were held as much as possible during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Action research within the GUARANTEE project was done by desk research, analysing conducted interviews with the participating children, their parents and involved teachers and trainers, as well as by evaluating participatory observation. The findings clearly showed that project activities improved mutual trust among participating children, their families, and involved teachers/trainers.



The project's activities were also beneficial in terms of overcoming stereotypes (both of the majority population and of the Roma community) and identifying discrimination. The project resulted in access to and achievement in education, as well as participation in society, by promoting empowerment and self-esteem among participants. Contact between Roma and non-Roma children was encouraged, as was the participation of girls. The combination of sports and learning proved to be extremely effective. The value of education was highly appreciated by the parents interviewed. Furthermore, all interviewed parents emphasised the importance of participating in the program for their children. They saw the link between learning support and sports as extremely important and beneficial.

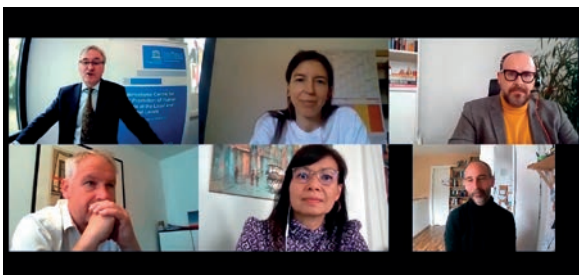
Capacity development was critical to the success of the GUARANTEE project. The project provided an opportunity for professional staff to experiment with new formats, contents, and methods. Furthermore, the exchange between Plovdiv and Dortmund schoolteachers and social workers strengthened mutual understanding and made different professional living environments tangible for both sides.

The GUARANTEE project also examined structural, institutional, and societal (external) factors. Roma people in Bulgaria face numerous disadvantages and discrimination. In Bulgaria, 68 % of the population has a negative attitude toward Roma. Almost half of Roma students attend de facto segregated school classes. Children from Roma communities, particularly girls, drop out of school much earlier and at much higher rates than the national average. According to a 2016 EU-Midis survey, 86% of Bulgarian Roma were at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Roma life expectancy

in Bulgaria is more than five years lower than in the rest of the country. The primary causes are a lack of medical care combined with malnutrition. For Bulgarian Roma, migration is a major concern. In an estimated 40% of all households, at least one family member lives in another country. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the situation of Roma in Bulgaria has deteriorated.

The fact of migration dominates the situation of Roma in Germany. Germany is the top receiving country for Bulgarian emigrants, with an estimated 40.000 Roma living there. In some cases, living conditions are even worse than in Bulgaria. Some buildings were drowned in garbage, unsanitary and caused health problems, and informal workers and illegal prostitutes queued on the streets. Many children and teenagers arriving in Germany from poorer and more segregated Roma neighbourhoods face particularly perilous circumstances. Their knowledge frequently differs from what is taught in German schools. Dropout is also an issue, particularly among females.

The GUARANTEE project's research focused on key factors for process success and the promotion of the right to education. On the one hand, successful organisational settings were examined as the importance of well-known and competent institutions taking responsibility over programme. The project staff and social workers, as well as the venues for the activities, must be carefully chosen. On the other hand, key success factors within the programme were examined. All parts of the GUARANTEE project corresponded to the 4 A's scheme of the right to education because it followed a human rights-based approach with the right to education at its core. The programme activities lasted the entire duration of the project. The group dynamic was mixed, but stable. The GUARANTEE project's activities established a direct link between sports, leisure time activities, and learning activities. Human rights education, in its various forms, played an important role in all programme activities. Furthermore, the facilitation of values as key success factors, such as voluntariness, self-organisation, self-efficacy, relationship, self-esteem, mutual trust, team play, and fairness, was investigated.



*Participants of the panel discussion at the European Conference on Guaranteeing the Right to Children for All in European Cities, which took place on 27 May 2021: Klaus Starl (UNESCO Centre), Lucia Fresa (City of Bologna), Danijel Cubelic (Vice-President of ECCAR, City of Heidelberg), Thomas Rajakovics (Sports Director, City of Graz), Niko Reinberg (Caritas Styria - Asylum and Integration)*

The GUARANTEE project practically demonstrated that the positive effects of desegregation can be realised when the negative effects of barriers are avoided at the same time. Despite unfavourable starting conditions such as segregation, marginalisation, and social disadvantages, the GUARANTEE project was a success in terms of the right to education. Even though the project took place in two completely different neighbourhoods and settings, the same programme was carried out. As a result, if the key success factors identified in the analysis are observed, the project may be considered transferable to any location.



Participating in the GUARANTEE project last year was a fantastic experience. GUARANTEE demonstrated that vital educational opportunities for vulnerable children and young people can be maintained even during a Pandemic! **Simone Philipp**