

**Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015**  
**15th International Steering Committee Meeting,**  
**Belgrade, 17-18 February 2009**  
**Simon Gray, World Bank – Talking Points**

Deputy Prime Minister, Ministries, Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to greet all the participants from across Europe especially from Spain. The World Bank is pleased to say a few words on the occasion of opening of the 15<sup>th</sup> International Steering Committee of the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

We are living in a much changed world to that when Serbia took over the Presidency in July 2008 in Budapest. The international economic crisis presents a significant danger for the poor and most vulnerable. Tight credit and a global recession are eroding government revenues and limiting their ability to meet education, health, employment and housing goals.

In many countries in the region the pressures facing government's is to look for savings and thus cut expenditures in the face of significant funding constraints. The challenge in this whole process is to identify essential and effective programs for the poor and protect them as much as possible from cuts. For example, it is widely recognized that there are some shortcomings, in terms of funding Roma programs, in the 2009 budget. We recognize government has a limited ability to maneuver, given the high level of public expenditures that go on non-discretionary items such as wages and pensions. Nevertheless we at the World Bank will do our best to help the authorities here in Serbia in their efforts to protect vulnerable groups from the crisis when they come to rebalance the budget in the next couple of months. The same holds for my World Bank colleagues in other Decade countries.

While everybody's focus is on poverty risks in the short term in the wake of the economic crisis, education is key to lifting the poor out of poverty over the medium term. However, it requires attention now, in the midst of the crisis. This is why the focus of the steering committee on education is welcomed.

Roma Education Fund projects have shown that the barriers that Roma face in access to education such as low participation of Roma children in preschool education, segregation of Roma children in "Roma schools" or in special schools and high dropout rates can be successfully tackled.

For example, some of the lessons learned are:

**Well-designed interventions can serve multiple purposes.** The desegregation of primary schools in two big Hungarian cities shows how. The REF supported the closure of ghetto schools where Roma students received very poor quality education. But a neat innovation was to use teacher trainees as pedagogical support to help Roma integrate; Roma students received academic tutoring and teacher trainees learnt practical skills in working with diverse student populations. This desegregation process has now spread to 3 other cities.

**Innovations need to be piloted and then evaluated.** The good experience then needs to be scaled up and spread to other places and countries. This is exactly what REF has done with its secondary school scholarship programmes. The model was tested in Macedonia. Now it has been successfully expanded to both Romania and Serbia. At the same time, we at the World Bank believe that more rigorous impact evaluations should be conducted to assess the full impact of Roma inclusion interventions- in particular in education. Demonstrating objective impact with hard figures is best way to convince Ministries of Finance and parliaments to authorize the necessary funding for Roma inclusion policies and to protect them from budget cuts in times of crisis.

These projects have been successful. But it is no longer sufficient to rely on pilot projects and piece-meal interventions alone if we want to see improved standards of living and the real integration of Roma into mainstream society.

Looking at Serbia, it is heartening to know that the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and the Ministry of Education are working on the ways to eliminate unequal treatment of Roma in education system and toward securing inclusive and better quality education for Roma children. We look forward to hearing more about this and the efforts in the other Decade countries around the table here.

Let us not be discouraged in these difficult times but pull together with the government to continue in the implementation and realization of the goals set out with the Decade of Roma Inclusion.

We will endeavor to play our part.

Thank you,