



Roma Education Fund

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BOOK

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Special Issue: A Good Start





## A GOOD START

This winter issue of REF Triquarterly News puts a special focus on A Good Start, REF's flagship program for early child education and care.

In 2011, A Good Start (AGS) continued its progress towards ensuring that children from ages zero to six have access to early childhood education and care services in 16 locations across four countries (Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia). AGS is supported in part by the European Union and the Network of European Foundations.

The country-specific implementation that AGS has and continues to present unique challenges in each country and each locality. The long-term outcome is highly influenced by the commitment and involvement of the local stakeholders. Comparing the objectives and targets set at the beginning of the project with the current status we can identify some main trends that have developed during the implementation of AGS, as follows:

1. Recurring beneficiary children are defined as those children involved repeatedly by the local partners and REF. The target number of children (4,000) is the total number of Romani children in the 16 localities; we are working with approximately 2,000 recurring beneficiary children.
2. AGS is successfully getting children into kindergarten. Although there are sometimes challenges with ensuring attendance, this is considerable progress as the first step in ensuring Romani children have decent educational opportunities.
3. In three countries (Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia) out of the four AGS countries, kindergarten facilities do not have enough capacity; in these instances, community and home-based AGS interventions gained higher importance.
4. Due to the limited financial resources and the complexity of the local challenges, after one year of implementation, REF decided to invest additional funds to ensure a more complex and quality ECD project for participating Romani communities.
5. Working with parents on parental skills, involving and motivating them, providing the necessary information through home visits, community events, early literacy programs, or in open house events is crucial; thus, these activities have the foremost priority in the project.
6. In many cases it was and it is still difficult to overcome prejudice.
7. During implementation, some issues arose with a few local partners, which lead to alterations from the details of the original project design.



## HOUSEHOLD SURVEY: A BASELINE

As part of its activities, a survey<sup>1</sup> was administered to 1,028 families in all 16 localities participating in A Good Start.

A total of 1,781 children aged zero to seven are represented within the surveyed families. The figures relate directly to the recurrent beneficiaries of this project (parents or children who have participated in more than one activity or a recurring/ongoing activity). As such, the findings are just indicative and are not necessarily representative at the country or local level for Roma.

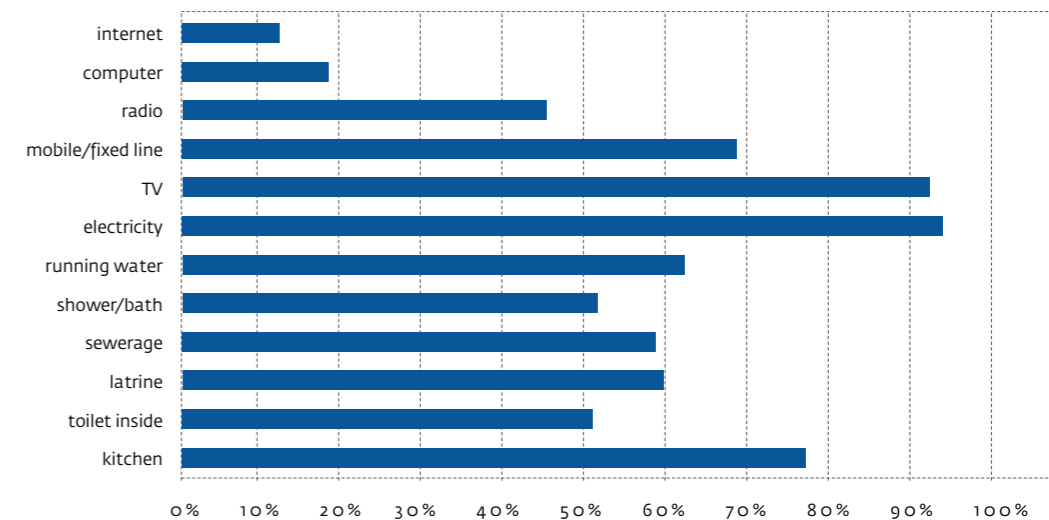
FIGURE 1. Localities in the framework of A Good Start



<sup>1</sup> Elena Gallová Kriglerová from the Center for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture, and Judit Kontseková and Martina Kubánová from the Slovak Governance Institute are the main authors of a final report about the AGS project, available at: [http://www.romaeducationfund.org/sites/default/files/publications/ref-ags-household-survey-screen\\_o.pdf](http://www.romaeducationfund.org/sites/default/files/publications/ref-ags-household-survey-screen_o.pdf)

A snapshot from these findings shows that extreme poverty is prevalent among the majority of AGS beneficiaries. AGS is interested in the living conditions of Roma, particularly in those cases where basic needs cannot be met by families struggling in substandard living conditions; as such conditions can and do affect student achievement and thus the achievements of AGS. The survey found that over 90 percent of AGS households are supplied with electricity and have a television, but only three out of four households have a kitchen. Just under two-thirds have running water, and indoor toilets are present in just over half of households. Family dwellings are usually inhabited by three people under 18 years and two people over 18 (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. AGS Household Survey: Does the house or dwelling in which you live have...



Consonant with all the indicators in the survey that highlight low educational achievement of parents, early parenthood, few employment opportunities, and low school enrollment rates for children, it was economic barriers that proved to be nearly insurmountable in most cases and explain the low enrollment rates for young Romani children. When households were asked about their reasons for not enrolling children in preschool, kindergarten, or primary school, 59 percent of all parents with non-enrolled children ages three to seven indicated that it was too expensive for them to send a child to kindergarten and 40 percent reported having no money for clothes for their children to attend. It is here where AGS has begun to have an effect, increasing not only enrollment but Romani parents' involvement in their children's education through its comprehensive intervention in early childhood development.

## AGS BY COUNTRY

### Slovakia

#### **Banska Bystrica**

In Banska Bystrica, for the year 2011–2012, 22 children were enrolled and are attending preschool on a regular basis with the support of **County Association of Roma Initiatives (KARI)**. AGS provides the monthly tuition fee and nutrition for these children, as the parents are unable to cover these costs. They also offer transport and accompaniment to school. There are some serious challenges with attendance and early school leaving at preschool, though AGS has seen some success, success that was limited by health problems for children and a change in the mediators. Challenged by the poor economic status of the regular beneficiary families, in the second year of the implementation in the 2011–2012 academic year, AGS financed the enrollment fee and food for 22 children. This was the main challenge in this location and AGS managed to provide a short-term solution for it. Also, mediators provided more regular home visits to families in need, so children's attendance rate improved. By December 2011, the mediators had carried out 629 home visits. There have been four community events on education with 154 participants and two on health for 67 participants. In some cases, where the child does not attend preschool for more than five working days, the health assistant visits the family to assess what is happening and provide help to the family. As a result of the events and visits, KARI has organized the immunization of eight children under age six and the use of prenatal care by 11 mothers. Further, 93 children received clothing support across four kindergartens and four primary schools. Eleven pupils are receiving after-school instruction, seven at Senica primary school and four at Bakossova primary school. According to the tutors, students are making progress in concentration, writing, and mathematics.

#### **Abranovce and Zborov**

Since the start of AGS, 100 home visits have been carried out by the **Equal Chances** mediators in Abranovce, a small village in the northeastern Slovakia.<sup>2</sup> As a result, seven children have been enrolled in kindergarten and, according to the partner, attendance is now near perfect. Here, the main obstacle to AGS for Romani children in preschool education is insufficient space in the local kindergarten. Informal preschool education is a short-term measure which at least prepares children for preschool. These informal education sessions are carried out by both the community mediator and the family assistant. Nine children are currently participating in this activity. The children meet either in the local cultural house or they are visited by the mediator and assistant at their homes. Twelve children are currently receiving after-school instruction in Abranovce.

<sup>2</sup> These 100 home visits were provided not just to the families of the seven enrolled children. In Abranovce, the number of inhabitants is 613 and, according to the implementing partner, an estimated 30 percent of the population is Roma, who live concentrated in one part of the village. Out of 64 children aged zero to six, 38 are Roma. In the village, there is one kindergarten with a capacity of 21 children that is insufficient to accommodate all the children aged three to six. Due to this, 50 percent of Romani children are not attending kindergarten while all ethnic Slovak children attend. In the past, this kindergarten has been included in a project that was implemented by the Slovak Ministry of Education in cooperation with the NGO Equalizing Chances and others and aimed at improving participation of Romani children in inclusive preschool education.

There have been about 300 home visits in Zborov carried out since the start of AGS. This academic year (2011–2012), 21 children were enrolled in a new kindergarten class. This new class became an integral part of the kindergarten as registered at the Ministry of Education, but the capacity of the kindergarten is still insufficient. For marginalized Romani children, the kindergarten/ preschool service is essential for later school success. Families live in the settlement without running water and electricity, and they cannot afford to buy proper clothing and shoes.

The new classroom will become a full-day class from February 2012, but for now remains segregated as it does in many countries in Central and South Eastern Europe, a condition that is not unique to Slovakia and one that should only act as a temporary and transitional step. The **Bernard van Leer Foundation** sub-project (see the following pages for a more detailed description) funds a teacher and kitchen assistant as well as hygiene packs, furniture, toys, and other educational materials along with the enrollment fee and food for the children. Parents would not be able to pay for this themselves. Training was given to teachers and mediators by the **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** to ensure quality provision of services. Informal kindergarten sessions/family education in the home are held once a week for children aged four to six. In addition to the government-related services and the informal kindergarten sessions, the convent of the Catholic Church maintains an additional kindergarten room for AGS beneficiary children. This class accommodates about 11 Romani children four times a week. Partners have reported that AGS beneficiary children's communication in Slovak has improved, along with hygiene habits and social skills.

A major challenge here is enrollment in mainstream education. Based on the school readiness test, school-age children are placed either in zero (preparatory) classes or in mainstream classes. In September 2011, a few AGS beneficiary children managed to join mainstream education, but the others were placed in zero classes. They will spend one more year in the school system and there is a high chance that they will start their school career in segregated classes. Equal Chances is lobbying the authorities to provide a Romanes-Slovakian translator, as in many cases the language barrier is a problem. In Zborov there are six after-school tutoring classes financed by the project. As of December 2011, 42 pupils were attending instruction. The target group was broadened to cover older children; for example, there was an event held with Romani teenagers – pupils of the elementary school – talking about issues such as addiction and the importance of education.

#### **Martin**

The **Cultural Association of Roma in Slovakia (KZRS)** works with Romani families in the communities of Bambusky and Ambra Pietra along with other parts of Martin with concentrated communities of Roma (Komenského, Na Kamení, and Podhájska). The mediators from KZRS have carried out 783 home visits since the start of the project. They also organize community motivation events and education with the parents in the home. These activities focus on attendance issues and early childhood education and care, motivating parents to send their children to kindergarten and improving parenting skills.

After-school tutoring is provided to 41 pupils in five primary schools at least twice a week. According to the tutors, the pupils are improving their communication, widening their vocabulary, and getting accustomed to cooperating and working together. Three local assistants provide accompaniment to 32 children attending primary school. As in Zborov, there is a problem with segregation in Martin. A segregated class was created for Romani pupils in the primary school A. Dubcek. KZRS was active in lobbying against this class, but it has not been changed, even though Romani parents expressed that it was against their wishes.

## Romania

### *Craiova-Mofleni*

There have been 216 home visits since the start of the project in Craiova. The school mediator meets with parents and discusses issues regarding the importance of education and regular attendance and accompanies about 10 children on a daily basis to and from kindergarten or the community center in Mofleni. The children were also provided with school supplies. Due to this work, led by **Romani CRISS**, this year 21 children have been enrolled in first grade and 17 in kindergarten. In Craiova, a newly renovated community center was established and is maintained with AGS financial support. Within AGS, Romani CRISS offers education and play activities to children between the ages of zero and six. As of December 2011, 42 of these sessions were held, with between nine and 16 children attending each time; an increasing number of the children attend the community center on a regularly basis. The activities are helping the children to develop their ECEC skills and knowledge such as on hygiene issues, communicating, drawing, and counting.

Romani CRISS has organized eight community motivation workshops on health and education with a total of 58 participants. Psychological counseling sessions are provided for the children needing support; to date there have been 15 sessions. For those with speech problems, there has been speech therapy sessions organized at the center in Mofleni. So far, 32 sessions have been provided to four children.

### *Telechiu*

AGS in Telechiu is coordinated by the **Ruhama Foundation**. The mediators there have carried out 161 home visits on education access issues and to advise families regarding problems they are facing, such as the lack of jobs and discrimination. There have also been community motivation events covering parental responsibilities, childcare, educational and social activities, and the educational development of small children. To date, 120 parents have participated in parents' meetings at their children's school. There have been eight extracurricular events for children aged three to six years with 111 children and 51 parents (10 are non-Romani parents). Increasing numbers of parents are interested in reading and writing. In spring 2011, there were seven to 10 parents in the literacy program; there were 15 attending by the end of the year.

There has been a substantial increase in enrollment in Telechiu. In the 2010–2011 school year there were 18 children at the Romanian kindergarten; this year there are 44. In total for the 2011–2012 school year, 48 children have been enrolled with support from AGS and attendance being monitored for the two kindergarten groups with a standard schedule (18 children in the group for children aged five to six years and 27 children in the kindergarten for children aged three to five years) as well as three children in the kindergarten group taught in Hungarian.

Fourteen children from the Romani community currently attend the Early Childhood Education and Care program for zero-to-three-year-olds, which is held five days a week, four hours per day. The program is held at the multifunctional community center of Telechiu, where information and counseling is also offered for Romani families. Under the **Bernard Van Leer Foundation** sub-project, the building of the community center will be extended to provide services for children up to the age of three. Also, staff has been provided with ECEC training on nutrition, cognitive, social, emotional development, and age-appropriate learning by ISSA. They were also taught to use the ISSA-developed Child Portfolio and adhere to early learning and development standards. According to Ruhama, positive results for the children in the project so far include regular attendance, more discipline, improved communication in Romanian, and acquired knowledge and information appropriate to their age.

## Macedonia

### *Suto Orizari*

In Suto Orizari, Skopje, the main activities of the project have been home visits, evening meetings, and community motivation events coordinated by **Ambrela NGO**. The services were tailored to local needs. For example, in Shuto Orizari, many Romani families are living in deep poverty without official documentation (ID) and birth certificates for their children. In these cases, Ambrela NGO assisted the families in filling out forms, paid the fees for them and, together, they managed the whole process. Meetings have been aimed at informing parents about immunization and health-related issues, motivating them to send their children to local kindergarten/preschool, helping families to get identity documents, and obtaining important vaccinations for children.

Although the work is very resource-intensive in Suto Orizari, the NGO has made significant progress. As of December 2011, Ambrela staff and mediators had made 1,036 visits to Romani families and held 35 health and education evening meetings reaching 598 parents. Its staff and mediators helped 239 people to get identity documents and about 577 children to be vaccinated through an immunization campaign.

According to official data from 2005–2006, only about 3.5 percent of Romani children in Macedonia are enrolled in preschool. Lack of physical space and financial costs are among the main reasons for this. Alongside the AGS activities, Ambrela is implementing activities within the **Bernard van Leer Foundation** sub-project. The main focus of this is the enrollment of Romani children into the local Veselko kindergarten, which belongs to Snezana kindergarten.

Parents are provided support with enrollment, tuition fees are covered, and the children are provided with a nice set of clothing. In addition to this, the kindergarten building was painted as part of the project.

As a result of these activities, 57 Romani children have been enrolled. The majority of these children are living in extreme poverty and, without the project, many of them would not have a birth certificate and would not receive any professional early childhood development (ECD) services. Further, sickness is a major problem as the housing conditions for some of the families are deplorable; many of the children live together in one room, without sanitation or running water. Repeated cases of head lice, for example, keep some children out of preschool, but parents cannot afford to treat such problems. The **International Step by Step Association** provided training seminars to the kindergarten staff and Ambrela mediators to help them to deliver a high-quality inclusive service. ECD experts are working directly with families, and parenting workshops are organized and tailored to those in greatest need.

Ambrela also hired three learning experts who assessed all 57 enrolled children. In this personalized assessment, the children's cognitive and learning competences were presented and future suggestions are formulated for the parents. Finally, Ambrela has been very active in terms of promoting project activities and raising awareness of the project through international conferences and study visits, television, and radio.

#### **Eastern Macedonia**

**Kham NGO** is the implementing partner in the other locations in Macedonia – Crnik, Delchevo, Trabotiviste, and Vinica. Kham's seven mediators have made a total of 1,094 home visits to families from the start of the project to end of December 2011. These are focused on motivating the parents to support the education of their children and overcome obstacles to enrollment as well as providing information on health, education, and other issues of relevance to the parents. Evening meetings are organized for the parents in each of the target localities. These focus on topics such as the developmental phases of the child, the importance of regular immunization, and improving communication between parent and child.

Kham helped to enroll 21 children into the "Veseli Cvetovi" kindergarten in Delchevo, paid the tuition fee, and helped to motivate the parents about the importance of education. REF also provided some financial support for improvements in the kindergarten, including providing some new doors. Migration has meant that some families left the region, with some replacements among the children. Tuition fees are covered – according to the director of the kindergarten most children could not attend without this support. There is also a Romani teaching assistant to help the Romani children in the kindergarten. Lack of kindergarten spaces is a major problem in Delchevo; 150–200 children don't have the opportunity to attend kindergarten due to lack of facilities. According to teachers and parents, the children here are getting used to the routine in the kindergarten and learning songs, improving their communication skills, and becoming more confident.

In Crnik, a satellite kindergarten (of Pehcevo kindergarten) was renovated in November 2011. REF financed the renovation and provided equipment including beds and toys. There are now 25 children in the project attending the kindergarten, including a few Turkish children. There is mildew on the walls of the second room where the children should sleep, so for now a full day is not possible. REF and Kham are lobbying the municipality to tackle this and some of Romani parents have offered to help as they can. The parents told REF that the kindergarten has a very good impact on the children's development and their own lives.

Three additional rooms were made available for the children in the kindergarten Goice Delchev in Vinica, and 30 Romani children were enrolled into preschool education there. In Vinica, a bus is provided to transport the children to the kindergarten, as the families live far from the school and at the top of a steep hill.

#### **Hungary**

In Hungary, the mediators/mentors have been visiting families frequently to inform parents about the importance of preschool education, increase their knowledge on health issues, and help them with problems regarding housing and employment. To date in Nyíregyháza, there have been 977 home visits to 139 families (with 281 children under seven years of age). In the Mátészalka micro-region localities of Hodász, Kántorjános, Nagyecsed, Nagydobos, and Nyírkáta, there have been a total of 3,884 home visits to 814 families. Further, there have been five community motivation events on health and education in Nyíregyháza and 13 across the micro-region. Since the start of the project, 342 Romani children have been enrolled in kindergarten in Nyíregyháza and the other localities in the Mátészalka micro-region. In order to improve effectiveness, REF recruited the **RomanoTrajo NGO** to take over the main coordinating role in Hungary from August 2011, organizing the mediators in Nyíregyháza and implementing the Home School Community Liaison Program (HSCL) and community motivation events.

The *Meséd* or *Your Tale* program has proven very successful in Hungary. The cognitive development of children is strongly linked to their vocabulary and, in the case of poor families, the vocabulary is smaller. *Your Tale* is helping to address this issue by providing educational support to Romani mothers and teaching them about the importance of reading to their children. The confidence of the mothers has increased as have their writing skills and knowledge of early childhood education and care. As intended, the mothers are reading to the children. *Meséd* is helping to address this issue. *Meséd* was implemented by **Unity in Diversity Foundation** and a team of trained facilitators (all but one are Romani women). From the start of the project to December 2011, there were 144 sessions in Nyíregyháza, reaching 72 mothers and 181 children, and 252 sessions in the Mátészalka micro-region, reaching 100 mothers and 270 children. The activity ended in December 2011 and altogether 46 mothers were motivated to register in evening classes of secondary grammar school or vocational school to continue their education.





### Meséd / Your Tale in Hungary

The methodology of the *Your Tale (Meséd)* program is divided into trimesters. In the first phase of the program facilitators concentrate on developing mothers' reading and comprehension skills. In the second phase the element of writing is added. Drama pedagogy is added in the third phase, helping parents develop their skills in handling the challenging situations facing them in their everyday lives such as negotiating with kindergarten teachers, doctors, or employers.

During the nine-month *Your Tale* sessions, mothers and facilitators read new books each week for two-hour sessions in groups of eight to 15. At each session, group members received a new children's book. High-quality story books, particularly those that convey messages to children about their feelings, behavior, and other life lessons, were sourced especially for the project. The mothers took turns reading the story aloud, while the facilitator guided the reading and initiated discussions about elements of the story and pictures. In this way, the facilitator could engage them with the text and show them a teaching technique to be replicated with their children.

After the second phase, one of the beneficiary mothers was hired as a *Your Tale* facilitator. She and the other facilitators/mediators have been instrumental in negotiations with authorities and school heads in organizing adult evening classes.

Though not a target or intended outcome of the *Your Tale* sessions, AGS has captured some data on some secondary effects of the program. For example, out of 172 participating mothers, 58 have found jobs, possibly attributable to their increased involvement and improved self-perception. This hints at how far-reaching the effects of *Your Tale* have been.

The **College of Nyiregyháza** is also a partner in the Hungarian project. Andragogy<sup>3</sup> and teacher training students observe and participate in the activities of AGS. One hundred and forty students have participated in *Your Tale*, 58 students in the Home School Liaison program, and 57 in home visits since the start of the project. As part of their obligations, the students receive lectures on multicultural education and attend different AGS activities (home visits, *Your Tale*, and HSCL sessions). AGS provides a chance for students to communicate with young Romani pupils and Romani parents, to make friends, and ultimately understand a different culture. This helps to eliminate any prejudices they have and improve their social work. Seventeen students from the college who were involved in observing activities in the project started a campaign to collect toys for *Your Tale* families on their own initiative.

<sup>3</sup> Andragogy refers to teaching pedagogy specifically for adult education and training.



As of December 2011, 16 parents in Nyíregyháza and 56 parents in Mátészalka micro-region had participated in the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) program. In August 2011, the **Bernard Van Leer Foundation** sub-project started activities aimed at ensuring quality provision in one selected locality, Nagyecsed, and also provides some supplementary services including toy libraries.

#### Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) program

The concept of establishing collaboration between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning, targeting in particular families and/or neighborhoods identified as being "at risk" (poverty, unemployment, high early school leaving rates) was initially introduced in Ireland. The Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) program component of A Good Start aims to do just this. The principle of the program is that parents are one of the main actors in the education process. Once a week during a period of six weeks, parents came to preschool and gave classes (art, storytelling, sports, and so on) to preschool children, divided into small groups. The parents had the opportunity to show their talents and skills through this activity as well as become familiar with the kindergarten teacher's work.

As a result, strong partnerships bonded the parents and kindergarten teachers. According to the kindergarten's experiences, there is an interest in continuing these efforts after having undertaken six HSCL programs. In Kántorjános, Nyírkáta, and Nyíregyháza, there is interest in running more sessions with parents, who generally do not take part in the work of the kindergartens. This would mean that kindergartens would involve more parents in their everyday work with children; they have found these occasions to influence the development of children. A total of around 70 parents were involved in the program through December 2011.

Through HSCL, parents acquire an understanding of the work of teachers and build a better relationship of trust and knowledge with the preschool. Furthermore, preschool teachers receive training by the International Step by Step Association.

#### Summary

Table 1 shows the number of AGS beneficiaries in 2011 by country. Table 2 subsequently shows the number of beneficiaries by partner.

TABLE 1. AGS beneficiaries by country, 2011

	Recurring beneficiary children who received AGS services	Parents who participated in AGS activities
Hungary	693	953
Macedonia	767	3,682
Romania	171	443
Slovakia	535	560
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,166</b>	<b>5,638</b>

TABLE 2. AGS beneficiaries by partner, 2011<sup>4</sup>

	Number of parents	Number of children
<b>Macedonia</b>		
Ambrela	2,588	650
Kham	1,094	117
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,682</b>	<b>767</b>
<b>Hungary</b>		
Romano Trajo and others	953	693
<b>Romania</b>		
Romani CRISS	323	102
Ruhama Foundation	120	69
<b>Total</b>	<b>443</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>Slovakia</b>		
KARI	140	100
KRZR	245	170
Equal Chances	175	265
<b>Total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>535</b>
<b>Grand total</b>	<b>5,638</b>	<b>2,166</b>

<sup>4</sup> Unless given a more precise number, parent number is based on number on parents visited (as all families receive visits). Number of children is based on counting those in formal and informal education; inclusion of other extracurricular (or in some cases material) support depending on information available.



## EVENTS AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS

A number of new developments and enhancements were introduced into AGS in 2011; the following provides a detailed description of them, a number of which have been mentioned in the AGS country updates.

### **The Bernard van Leer Foundation (BVL) sub-project – Additional resources for quality maximization within A Good Start**

In 2011, AGS received additional funding from the Bernard van Leer Foundation (BVL) to enhance the effectiveness of the program's implementation. Within this sub-project, the REF and its partner the International Step by Step Association are focusing on strengthening the quality of the education and care received by Romani children with the provision of supplementary services in four locations among those where AGS takes place.

During the implementation, ISSA practitioners apply their child-centered and holistic approach and promote quality practices in home learning environments, center-, or community-based services. These supplementary services provide more mentoring, organize more community motivation events, provide support to parents, and offer informal trainings on adult education. Also, they ensure the provision of additional material resources and equipment required.

In order to choose which organizations would deliver the extended services of AGS through support from the BVL sub-project, REF initiated a call for applications among the eight direct implementing Roma NGO partners. One proposal was selected per country, based on the following criteria that stipulated that the proposed actions must:

- help to ensure a quality early childhood development (ECD) program,
- address an identified need for better service in the locality,
- include outstanding partnerships and committed staff,
- deliver the greatest impact,
- include innovation development, and
- help to promote sustainability.

The four selected applications were from the following partners:

- Equalizing Chances is working with a larger Romani community in Zborov, northeastern Slovakia. Their home- and center-based ECD interventions are supported by the local municipality and a convent.
- Ruhama Foundation from Romania is working with a smaller Romani settlement and providing its services in a community center in Telechiu village in eastern Romania. Their center- and home-based approach offers a daycare center for three-to-six-year-old children; within the BVL sub-project they offer an alternative daycare center for zero-to-three-year-old children as the community center has enough facilities to do so.

- In Macedonia, REF would like to strengthen the quality of services offered by the Ambrela NGO in Suto Orizari, Skopje, Macedonia. Here, where the majority of families (approximately 70 percent of the total Romani population) are socially deprived, there is a huge need for an extension of quality services, more kindergarten support, regular mentoring, and advice for staff on a professional level.
- The Romano Trajo Association is working in Nagyecséd, Hungary, where the participating local Romani families (mostly the mothers) have already created a strong and supportive community. Besides attending the Your Tale sessions, these mothers are volunteering in the Parents Association. Although the community is open-minded and active, more material support would be required for families facing extreme poverty, in addition to more mentoring and follow-up meetings for quality purposes.

### **LEGO Training of the Trainers**

In 2011, AGS started a cooperation with the LEGO Foundation. As a result of this new cooperation, 28 kindergartens, two community centers, and eight toy libraries in sixteen localities in four countries will receive in-kind donations.

As an important part of the toy donations, the teachers involved in the program are provided with professional training. A training of teacher trainers was held in REF's Budapest office in early December 2011 by a Master Trainer and Educational Advisor from the LEGO Foundation. REF invited six young professionals with various backgrounds from Hungary, Macedonia, and Romania to learn how to use LEGO as a fun toy and playful learning tool.

During the two-day training, the LEGO expert introduced the small group of teacher trainers to a variety of fun games and structured activities that develop the children's cognitive skills, social skills, language, imagination, and creativity. By working hands-on, children learn how to work together in small groups, make small presentations, focus, and listen to others. The children develop their motor skills working and playing with the LEGO bricks as well as learning colors, shapes, how to count, how to follow rules, and so on.

The trainers will be responsible for training the teachers and also participating in the monitoring and evaluation of the project. The six teacher trainers conducted five teacher trainings in February 2012. Approximately 120 teachers ultimately will be trained.

### **Toy Libraries**

Toy libraries can offer services to children and families through regular, free-of-charge toy loan. These libraries provide carefully selected educational toys for borrowing; some libraries also offer information and advice about play and learning and provide an opportunity for parents to borrow books related to parenting.

Toy libraries support children by:

- enabling children from all backgrounds to have access to toys that have an educational and stimulating value;
- enabling children to develop important skills;
- helping children learn to share; and
- educating children (and their parents) about responsibility (children are rewarded when they return their toys on time and in good condition).

AGS learned and examined the practices of toy libraries through a study visit with the National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries in the UK. One of the visited toy libraries, the Pimlico Toy Library, was opened in London in 1985. Two hundred families make up Pimlico's membership, each of which pay a minimal annual enrollment fee. At Pimlico, they believe that parents need to understand why it is important to play with the children, so they are focusing on teaching parenting skills in addition to other activities.

During the visit, AGS staff were provided with practical advice on how to set up the AGS Toy Libraries. A Toy Library Guide and a training module were developed in order to ensure a successful start. A training was delivered to all of the communities that participate in the AGS Toy Library sub-project. AGS Toy Libraries will be run soon in the localities of Zborov and Martin, Slovakia; Telechiu and Craiova-Mofleni, Romania; Skopje and Vinica, Macedonia; and Nagyecsed and Kántorjánosi, Hungary.

### Andi nénje

Andi nénje – Auntie Andi, as children of the kindergarten group call her – is one of the most important in the lives of many Roma kindergarteners in Nyiregyhaza. Andi, their pedagogical assistant, now advancing to a preschool mentor, is the ultimate key to the success in and out of school for many children coming from the socially deprived settlement of Nyiregyhaza.

#### ***What did you want to be as a child?***

I've always wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, like my grandma used to be, but in the end I chose something else. But then fate sent a kindergarten along my way, and I love to work there as a pedagogy assistant.

#### ***If you look back and compare your life story as a child to the story of the children you work with in A Good Start, how different or how similar you think your stories are?***

I come from a poor family, and so do these children. I'm fully convinced though, that no matter how poor is the family from where you came, if you have the ambition and are hard-working enough, then you can break out of poverty and with a proper job you assert yourself in life.

#### ***Do you feel successful?***

I will only feel successful when I get to help all the poor people around me. I'm here to support, urge, and enforce parents to educate their children. Children must continue their studies, finishing primary education, and parents have to make sure they can support in earning them at least a professional qualification, as education is the only exit from their current situation.

#### ***Looking back at the past year of AGS, how do you perceive its effects in the lives of the beneficiaries?***

Well, in the premises of AGS there are again a great pool of children enrolled in the beginners group – 29 new three-year-olds in the kindergarten. The kindergarten nurses and I went to visit all families with children aged three, and luckily enough, one discussion was just enough for the parents to agree that enrolling kids to kindergarten at the earliest possible age is the only beneficial solution. Those who aren't allowed to go to school until the age of five, simply because their parents tend to think it is safer for them at home, they will hardly even be able to name colors or their home address. Mothers would love to see the *Your Tale (Mesed)* program component of AGS grow and continue, they all talk passionately about it, how they started reading books at home, having participated at the courses.



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