



Eurodiaconia  Connecting faith
and social justice
through action

PRELIMINARY STUDY: ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

December 2022

Eurodiaconia is a European network of churches and Christian NGOs providing social and healthcare services and advocating social justice.

Mission

Eurodiaconia is a network of churches and Christian organizations that provide social and health care services and advocate for social justice. Together we work for just and transformative social change across Europe, leaving no-one behind.

Vision

Driven by our Christian faith, our vision is of a Europe where each person is valued for their inherent God-given worth and dignity and where our societies guarantee social justice for all people, including the most vulnerable and marginalized.

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INTRODUCTION



Eurodiaconia is a network of 58 Christian organisations and churches present in 32 European countries, providing care and social services and advocating for social justice.

Many of our members provide a wide range of child-related services such as day care centres, support for children with special needs and disabilities, family support centres, and counselling. They also provide education-related services such as preschools and elementary schools, special educational programmes, after-school programmes, tutoring, and programmes to improve school environment, impacting the lives of many children and families in situations of vulnerability.

This preliminary study looks into the available evidence and the long-standing experience of our members in this area to identify the most pressing issues around equal access to inclusive early childhood education and care (ECEC) and compulsory education, particularly for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Drawing from this, we deliver some key recommendations to policy makers both at the EU and national level.

For this paper, we have gathered our members' input through a webinar and a workshop earlier this year, together with questionnaires and in-depth interviews with members from Austria, Spain, Scotland, Romania, Serbia, Sweden and Germany conducted in June. Furthermore, this document builds on our 2021 work related to Roma child poverty ¹and our 2019 Policy Paper on child poverty and social exclusion²

This preliminary study is part of our developing effort to monitor the implementation of the 2021 Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, which calls on Member States to guarantee effective access of children in need to free ECEC and school education, amongst other services and basic rights. It will serve as a baseline to allow us and our members to examine the progress on access to ECEC and school education across Europe in the following years.

¹ Please find [here](#) our 2021 Policy Paper dedicated to Roma Child Poverty, and [here](#) the 2021 Roma Child Poverty Webinar Report.

² You can access our paper [here](#).

1. ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN EUROPE

Education is crucial for every person's life, as it is decisive for the development of one's potential, future employment opportunities, and full participation in society. But education is also the great equalizer and a key tool for tackling poverty, inequality and social exclusion, and breaking the cycle of disadvantage. That is why guaranteeing access to good quality, inclusive education for all children, irrespective of their personal characteristics, family situation, cultural and socio-economic background, is a cornerstone in the fight against intergenerational poverty³.

This is recognised by principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which states that *“everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market.”* Moreover, the principle 11, declares that *“children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality. Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.”*

However, across Europe, many differences persist regarding availability, access, quality, and inclusiveness of education. For instance, according to Eurostat, in 2018 94.8 % of children aged between four and the compulsory starting age for primary education were enrolled in ECEC in the EU. However, in Greece the number is as low as 75.2%, while in Denmark is 100%. Likewise, in 2018, there were on average, 13.6 pupils per teacher in primary education across the EU-27, ranging from 9.0 in Luxembourg to 19.5 in Romania⁴. Moreover, the 2018 PISA results showed that the school underachievement rate was below 10% in eight countries (Estonia, Poland, Finland, Ireland, Slovenia, Denmark, United Kingdom and Latvia) while it exceeded 20% in four countries (Malta, Cyprus, Romania and Bulgaria)⁵.

Differences and gaps do not exist only across countries, but also within them, as children's social background and personal circumstances still play a significant role in their educational experiences and outcomes. In fact, according to the European Commission there are striking educational disadvantages for children with a migrant background and those living in specific suburbs, rural and

³ While the idea of inclusive education was initially used for the inclusion of children with disabilities and special needs, it has expanded to a broader concept that considers the inclusion of all learners.

⁴ [Eurostat, Early childhood and primary education statistics](#)

⁵ [European Commission, PISA 2018 and the EU](#)

remote areas. For instance, in 2018 9.5 % of EU native-born were early school leavers, while for non-EU-born the share was more than twice as high (20.7 %)⁶. This is echoed by our members' experience on the ground, who also mention Roma children, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and children with disabilities along those groups especially affected by educational disadvantages and discrimination. They are more prone to experience a lack of accessibility, poor quality education, school segregation and exclusion.



⁶ [European Commission, Assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving](#)

2. FINANCIAL & NON-FINANCIAL BARRIERS TO EDUCATION

When we consult our members regarding some barriers that children face to access education, the issues of the lack of availability, accessibility and affordability come up very often.

For instance, in Latvia, our member Diakonija Latvija expressed that the availability and accessibility of education is a problem especially for children from marginalised or isolated areas of the country, which forces families to move to larger cities. This is particularly true for children with disabilities and special needs, as educational services are less available for them, and sometimes they do not have transportation to access it. Likewise, our Czech member Diakonie ČCE, observes a critical lack of schools for children with severe and multiple disabilities in Prague. This means that parents (and usually mothers) must stay at home with their children or commute for hours to find an available spot. In Austria our member Diakonie Österreich also highlights that availability of ECEC for children with disabilities is scarce, and the higher the need for support, the more difficult it is to be offered a placement.

Some of our members run services to fill in these gaps, but the recruitment of trained, qualified teachers and staff to work with children with complex needs is a big challenge. Often, they cannot pay good wages to attract these workers because of lack of funding, which has been intensified by the current cost of living crisis.

Diakonie Österreich – Inclusive preschools and kindergartens

Diakonie Österreich runs many inclusive preschools and kindergartens where both children with disabilities and without disabilities are welcome. Integration is an important part of their pedagogical work, which involves mutual respect for special characteristics and needs. They also offer integrated therapeutic support (speech therapy, ergotherapy) if required.

For instance, the [Diakonie Centre Spattstraße Kindergarten \(Linz\)](#) runs a Kindergarten with a strong focus on integration for children with special needs. They also run a pilot project for children with autism. In this group, the children find their way around easily in a manageable environment. They are looked after personally, so the kindergarten becomes a place of well-being for them as well. The aim is to enable children with autism to then attend an integration group and encounter other children after an introductory phase.

Other groups such as Roma children, migrant and refugee children are also affected by lack of accessible, available and affordable education. Although under the EU's Racial Equality Directive, children from all racial or ethnic backgrounds must have equal access to education, our members observe that this is far from being a reality and multiple barriers still exist. Roma children have lower levels of pre-school and school enrolment and attendance due to accessibility barriers such as lack of transportation, spatial segregation and discrimination. Moreover, according to UNICEF, insufficient school capacity, legal and language barriers, psychosocial issues, as well as limited catch-up classes are among the most common challenges faced by refugee and migrant children in education.⁷

With the COVID-19 outbreak, challenges faced by these groups and by children from low-income families were exacerbated as schools had to close and remote schooling was implemented. Our members reported that many children, particularly Roma, were unable to access online schooling during the pandemic, and many effectively missed a year or more of formal education. Besides lack of or insufficient access to digital devices members observed a lack of facilitating factors, such as access to electricity, internet, inability to use devices, or lack of parental support. For children already living in extreme poverty, who often have parents unable to assist them in utilising digital devices, simply providing laptops and tablets was not enough.

For instance, the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation in Serbia expressed that some of the children from low-income families that attend their educational programmes did not have any or only very poor access to internet. If some of them had internet access they had multiple children in the same family that needed to use a single computer or cell phone for classes. They also witnessed situations where parents working abroad were prevented from returning so children were left alone with their grandparents. Many of those children needed to work around the house and were not able to follow classes, a burden which fell more heavily on girls. These challenges are present all the time but were very visible during the pandemic and undermined vulnerable children's education.

Furthermore, according to Article 14 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights children are entitled to free compulsory education. However, affordability of education is still a challenge in many countries, as participation in education may entail costs such as tuition fees, registration, exam fees, school trips, canteen costs, transportation, school materials and clothes. These costs can be a barrier for children living in poverty. In fact, about one fifth of households with dependent children living in the EU report having great or moderate difficulties with paying for formal education⁸. In view of this situation, some

⁷ UNICEF, [Access to education for refugee and migrant children in Europe](#)

⁸ Eurostat, [Can you afford to pay for education?](#)

of our members are stepping in to provide support to families to buy school materials for their children. For example, the Diakonie Wien has been running the "Back to School" campaign for many years. School materials are distributed and - depending on the available donations - vouchers are provided.

Moreover, after-school programmes and special support for children who need it are not available, affordable nor accessible in some communities, and are particularly scarce in rural and remote areas. Similarly, in ECEC, despite progress in the last years, affordability and availability are still big issues, with many low-income families simply not able to afford it. In some countries less than 20% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds or rural and remote areas participate in ECEC, compared to more than 70% among top income households⁹. For example, our Austrian member reports that there is no legal entitlement to ECEC in Austria and there is insufficient data available to document the level of access, need, or support to children. When we consider that some research shows that the positive impact of ECEC is twice as high for children from disadvantaged families than for those from more advantaged backgrounds, this becomes a critical problem¹⁰. Thus, strong policies that address these first years are of key importance.

Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation – Assistance for Roma children during Covid-19

Our Serbian member works with Roma families, many of whom recently returned or were forcibly returned from abroad. Their project assists children to register in school and provides pedagogical assistance to Roma students. They have a team of mainly Roma associates, who are activists, pedagogists, and social workers, who work closely with families to ensure that their children are adjusting well to school and receiving the assistance they need to learn the language.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many children living in segregated villages were cut-off. Distance-learning was not possible for the families who lacked the necessary equipment. EHO provided children with tablets and created an application to provide additional support to the children and families to organise mentoring face-to-face so that the families could ask for support and connect with the mentors who could then provide support for the children with homework.

⁹ FEPS, Towards a Child Union

¹⁰ W.Barnett, Maximizing returns from prekindergarten education

3. EQUITABLE ACCESS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Equity and inclusion in education mean ensuring that every child has access to good quality, inclusive education regardless of their personal and social circumstances, and that learners who have more, or different needs receive adequate additional support. In that sense, inclusive schools respond to the diverse needs of all learners, aiming to increase their participation, and helping eliminate exclusion and segregation. They also foster feelings of belonging and contribute to promote non-discriminatory attitudes in children and their families. Thus, this educational approach benefits all children, whether they have special needs or not.

However, equitable and inclusive educational systems are still far from becoming a reality for all children in Europe. According to our members, segregation in ECEC and compulsory education is still common in many countries, usually producing a differing quality of services for some children. Notably, spatial and ethnic educational segregation remains a major systemic disadvantage for Roma children. As of 2016, Roma students attended schools where all (15%) or most (33%) of students are Roma¹¹. Segregated Roma schools are often underfunded, and students are often forced to learn in single-room style classrooms alongside students from different ages.

Both segregation and social marginalisation result in a disproportionate number of absenteeism and early school leavers among Roma pupils, with only 18% of Roma students completing upper secondary, vocational, or post-secondary education¹². Likewise, school segregation affects education quality, perpetuates discrimination, and it has been identified as one of the main drivers of inequality and exclusion¹³, hindering children's future civic engagement and participation in society. Thus, we find it particularly worrying that so far, from the 15 Child Guarantee national plans submitted, only 4 identify Roma children as a target group.

¹¹ [FRA, A persisting concern: Anti-Gypsyism as a barrier to Roma inclusion](#)

¹² [OECD, Inclusion of Roma Students in Europe: A literature review and examples of policy initiatives](#)

¹³ Ibid.

The Salvation Army, Netherlands – Project TOY for Inclusion

The TOY for Inclusion project is a pan-European project run in The Netherlands by Eurodiaconia member The Salvation Army. It aims to bring together children from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds to create an inclusive space for them to learn and play together. These spaces facilitate the entrance of Roma children and children from other ethnic minorities to mainstream primary schools and help create links between schools and families.

This initiative involves nearly 4.000 children each year, 30% from vulnerable groups, in 8 Hubs across 7 European countries.

Children with disabilities also often experience school segregation and exclusion. In many European countries they still cannot attend mainstream schools, and are only able to attend special schools when they are available. For instance, Diakonie Austria observes that a special school system for children with disabilities is still the norm in Austria. Moreover, while the last year of pre-school education is mandatory, this is not the case for children with disabilities. Thus, that year is not considered a right for children with disabilities, which leads parents to struggle to find a spot for their children. Equally, after compulsory school, children with certain types of disabilities do not have the right to go to upper secondary education, as there is no adapted curriculum or educational offer for them. In Romania, our member Filantropia Timisoara reports that many children with disabilities and other vulnerable children are still separated from their families and placed in institutions from early ages up until 18. They attend segregated schools, and most of them never finish their education nor manage to integrate into society.

Refugee children and children with a migrant background also experience school segregation, as they often attend schools with a disproportionately high presence of migrant children. They also tend to be overrepresented in special education¹⁴. Besides segregation, discrimination is also present in educational systems in Europe. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, in 2020, 45% of people of North African descent, 41% of Roma and 39% of people of sub-Saharan African descent said that they had faced discrimination within the context of education. In 2018, in some countries more than one in three pupils did not feel they belonged at school, and in a majority of EU countries, more than one in five pupils reported that they were bullied at least a few times a month¹⁵. Undoubtedly, discrimination and exclusion in schools affect children's development, educational performance and overall wellbeing, compromising their future.

¹⁴ [Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights: Fighting school segregation in Europe through inclusive education: a position paper.](#)

¹⁵ [European Commission, PISA 2018 and the EU](#)

To tackle this situation, many of our members put in place excellent programmes to foster school inclusion of children in need and to improve the school environment for all children, but they have limited funds and support to do so which affects the sustainability of their projects. Others run centres where they provide low threshold holistic, integrated services and support for families and children, such as day care, counselling, mediation, or psychosocial support. This helps them to build trust with families and encourages them to make use of services, increasing the accessibility and take-up of educational services and offering a welcoming environment for everyone.

Diaconia Spain – Compensation of Educational Disadvantages

Since 2015, our Spanish member has been implementing this program in 16 public educational centres across the country, focusing on schooling and reducing absenteeism of children from vulnerable groups and those at risk of poverty. The activities are especially aimed at children with a migrant background and Roma children but are open to other children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

They carry out activities to reinforce learning, provide school supplies and develop educational awareness workshops together with families. They work hand in hand with educational centres and churches to support children to continue and complete their basic education and increase the number of those who access higher education and job training. In addition, they work with families to change their perspective on academic training, seeking their involvement in their children's education.

4. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the EU competence in the field of education is limited, the European Union has proposed relevant policy initiatives in the last years, such as the 2021 Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), the 2021 Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, and the two newly adopted Council Recommendations on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets and on Pathways to School Success.

We welcome these advancements, but from this preliminary study it becomes clear that further steps are needed to achieve equal access to inclusive education for all children in Europe. Thus, Eurodiaconia calls on the EU and national governments to:

4.1 Improve access, availability and affordability

- All countries must urgently submit their Child Guarantee national action plans, paying particular attention to the financial and non-financial barriers that hinder access to inclusive, quality education and school-based activities for all children, and actively tackling school segregation.
- Roma children must be targeted by the Child Guarantee national action plans, particularly in those countries with high levels of Roma population. For this, it is key that civil society organisations working with Roma children are included in the preparation and implementation of those plans, as they are well fitted to identify and reach out to this target group.
- The integration of children with a migrant background into mainstream education regardless of their legal status, and the prevention of early school drop-out among migrant families must be prioritised across Europe. Authorities must work with migrant and non-migrant families and children to promote migrants' children inclusion and support local civil society and service providers who provide integration services and intercultural mediation for these children.
- European institutions must implement reforms to the EU economic governance, including the introduction of a golden rule for green and social investments to exclude key education funding from the debt sustainability calculations. Equally, national governments need to invest in the availability of afterschool and school-related services so no child is denied the support they

need. Furthermore, no child must be left without the education, school-related activities, or school support they need due to lack of family resources. It is thus urgent that countries pay attention to the education-related costs existing at the local level and provide support to low-income households to bear these costs when they are unavoidable.

- Countries must work on a proper follow-up, monitoring and measuring of how educational policies are being implemented and urgently tackle the gaps. Although many countries have policies and laws in place to foster inclusive education, our members indicate that many times they are not properly implemented on the ground.
- It is urgent that countries tackle the digital divide in education and monitor better the incidence of digital poverty in Europe. As recommended by the Child Guarantee, Member States must ensure that all school aged children have access to a digital device and to electricity and good internet in their homes. Moreover, digital skills should be mandatory in all school curricula, and adequate measures should be set to equip all children and youth with the technological skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the digital age.

4.2 Early childhood education and care for all

- As foreseen by the Child Guarantee, Member States must ensure that all children and families have a legal entitlement to ECEC and equal access to it, regardless of the employment status of the parents, socioeconomic background, disabilities, their country of birth, residence status, or ethnic background. This includes increasing availability of ECEC, giving priority to families in need, removing physical obstacles for children with disabilities and from remote areas, and recognising the administrative barriers some families face.
- We call on all Member States to swiftly implement the recently adopted Council Recommendation on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets. Roma children, children with a migrant background, and children with disabilities must be particularly targeted to allow them to access inclusive, high quality ECEC so they are not behind when they start formal education. Administrative processes and barriers, including residency requirements, should be streamlined.
- The European Commission must encourage Member States to collect disaggregated data on access to ECEC. There is a lack of available data to monitor the ECEC access gap between,

for instance, migrant children and children without a migration background. Thus, data collection by indicators such as country of origin, ethnicity, and disability status needs to be collected to monitor whether children from disadvantaged groups are adequately prioritised in policy outcomes and funding of ECEC.

4.3 Tackle segregation and discrimination

- We call on all Member States to swiftly implement the newly adopted Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success, which aims to ensure better educational outcomes for all learners, regardless of background or situation and to decouple educational attainment and achievement from social, economic and cultural status.
- It is urgent that countries prioritise active desegregation and deinstitutionalisation of all children to foster a sound and inclusive school education system. Special education should be the exception, and the inclusion of all children (including children with disabilities) into mainstream education should be the rule. These efforts should include for instance, free transportation to school, mandatory trainings for teachers on inclusive teaching methods, and individual assistance to children with special needs. Equally, work with communities should be carried out to sensitise on the importance of desegregation and active inclusion and tackle discrimination and stereotypes.
- Governments, institutions, and schools must actively work to tackle structural discrimination and exclusion of certain groups in educational policies and school environments. They must work together for the construction of an inclusive educational environment, putting in place adequate infrastructure for all students, developing an inclusive curriculum that respects and embraces diversity and training teachers and staff to work in inclusive school environments.
- Governments must utilise a holistic approach to effectively tackle discrimination against Roma children and encourage their school attendance. This approach should consider all stakeholders, from parents to teachers, school directors and local authorities to overcome mistrust and overhaul systemic discrimination. Active outreach to Roma families, facilitated by a team of Roma social workers, is important to build trust with Roma families and encourage them to send their children to school.

4.4 Support service providers

- We call on governments to enable not-for-profit-social educational service providers to offer effective and inclusive educational programs by establishing a proportionate allocation of funds to those providers that are highly committed to inclusive education. As evidence shows, schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils benefit from receiving targeted additional resources for the provision of inclusive programmes¹⁶.
- Countries must provide sustainable funding to not-for-profits that provide educational and school-related services, and when contracted by the State, assure they are well-paid for the services they provide.
- Governments must invest in training and employment of teachers, education professionals, and social workers to reinforce the support they offer to migrant and Roma children, children with disabilities and with other special needs. High quality and up-to-date training is crucial to ensure that educational professionals have the adequate tools and knowledge to support the diverse needs of all learners and enable inclusive education.
- The provision of wrap-around services in the form of after-school support, pedagogical assistance, and language services are crucial and need to be further supported and funded. Better cooperation and integration among services for families and children, and community-based approaches to programmes and day care centres increase the accessibility and take-up of educational services, offering a welcoming environment to all.

¹⁶ As pointed out by Diakonie Österreich, experiences in countries such as Canada and The Netherlands have shown that needs-based allocation of funds in the education system with a focus on equal opportunities can prevent the education gap from growing. More information can be found here: <https://www.diakonie.at/unsere-themen/bildung-fuer-kinder-und-jugendliche/chancenindex>



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