



Educational workshop: Photo credit CYI

PROTECTION THROUGH EDUCATION

Year 3 | November 1, 2019 – October 31, 2020

Final report

PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Protection through Education (PtE) program is implemented by The Centre for Youth Integration (CYI) with funding support from H. Stepic CEE Charity, CWS Europe and Week of Compassion. CWS provides managerial support to the implementing partner, which includes advice and substantive input on program design and activities, ongoing guidance during the Covid-19 pandemic that required the reprioritization of activities, monitoring and oversight, and a program evaluation that will take place in the coming months.¹ CWS provides technical expertise to CYI and other partners with special focus on gender mainstreaming.

The CYI Drop-in Shelter is a key community asset linking Roma communities (children and families) with the school system. CWS has supported the CYI Drop-in Shelter since its inception (financial and technical) and is one of the main factors that contribute to sustainability of the service and the success of the PtE program.

The PtE program supports Roma children by providing pre-school and primary school education to increase access to and retention in school. The program is also aimed at improving educational achievements and decrease street-involvement of Roma children living in two informal settlements in Belgrade, Serbia. The one-year project began on November 1, 2019 and ended on October 31, 2020.

During 2020 this program was heavily affected by school closures and people movement restrictions imposed by the Serbian authorities to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. Fortunately, CWS and partners created systems and workarounds to continue to support communities and implement the program.

Throughout the school year 2019/2020, the program successfully delivered outreach and psychosocial support, conducted advocacy on the rights of families towards local and national authorities, and provided education support to children. The program also worked toward empowerment of parents.

The program worked with two cohorts of children, those in first grade in the year 2020/2021 and pre-schoolers. Total number of children reached varied throughout the school year and was measured monthly. By the end of the period the program team was working with 133 children (73 girls and 60 boys).² In August 2020 the program recorded the highest number of unique child participants, reaching 183 children (101 girls and 82 boys).³

Key highlights of year three include:

- PtE team signed four Memorandums of Cooperation with elementary schools in Palilula municipality, as well as with preschool institution of Palilula;
- Thirteen extracurricular activities were organized for child participants;
- Starting in March 16, CYI temporarily suspended all in-person activities due to the pandemic. Staff continued to work from home on administrative tasks and were remotely in contact with all participants, their families and school staff via phone;

¹ The results of the evaluation will be shared with Week of Compassion once completed.

² As of September 2020, children who attended first grade in school year 2019/2020 are no longer program participants.

³ This is due to the overlap of three cohorts of children during this period.

- In-person activities were restarted in mid-May 2020 with all precaution measures in place, including wearing PPE and limiting indoor group activities to five children and two team members;
- 82% of program participants attended school regularly in 2019/2020;
- Program team conducted research regarding educational status of former participants showing that 81% of them are still attending school.

PROGRAM RESULTS

Total number of children participants	183
Number of future preschoolers in school year 2019/20	59 ⁴
Number of preschoolers in school year 2019/20	56
Number of preschoolers in school year 2020/21	66
Number of first graders in school year 2019/20	56 ⁵
Number of first graders in school year 2020/21	64
Number of workshops held for children	223 ⁶
Number of classes attended by the PoE team	157
Number of extracurricular activities organized for children	13
Number of contacts with institutions (meetings, email or telephone)	3,689
Number of meetings with decision makers	132
Average number of volunteers involved on a monthly basis	23

⁴ Number of children that were considered as future preschoolers in the school year 2019/2020. These children are now enrolled in preschool and there are 66 of them.

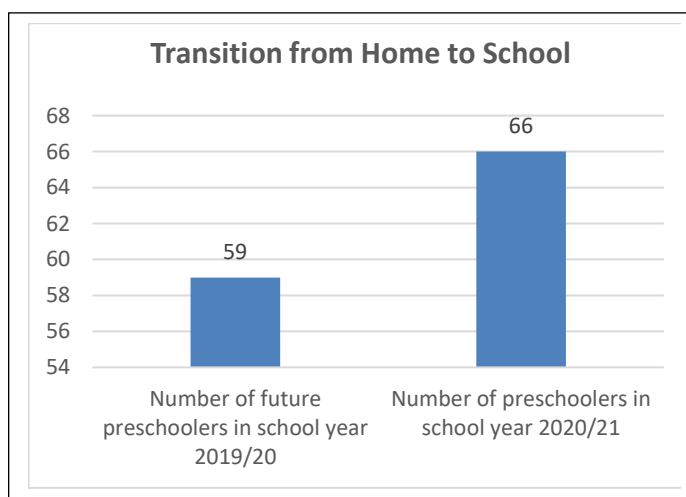
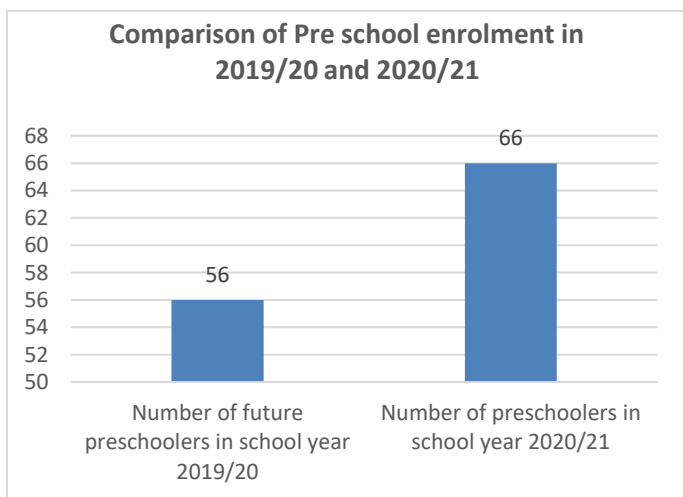
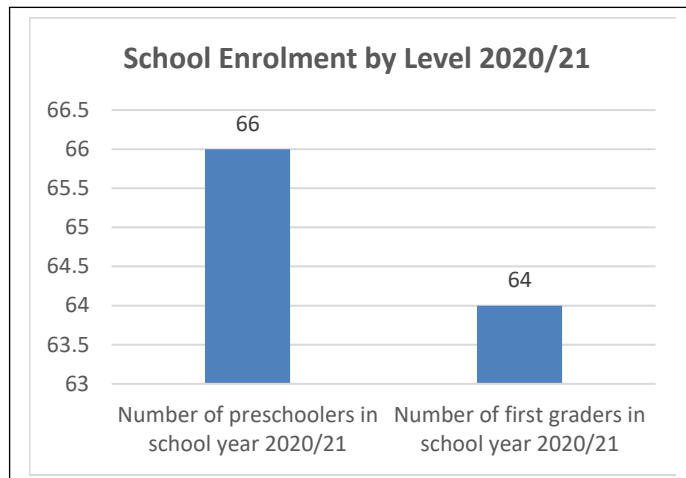
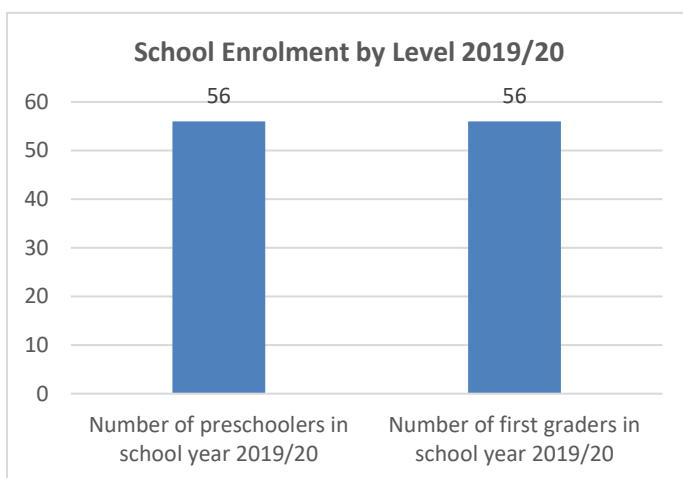
⁵ Number of children that finished the first grade in June 2020. They are no longer part of the program.

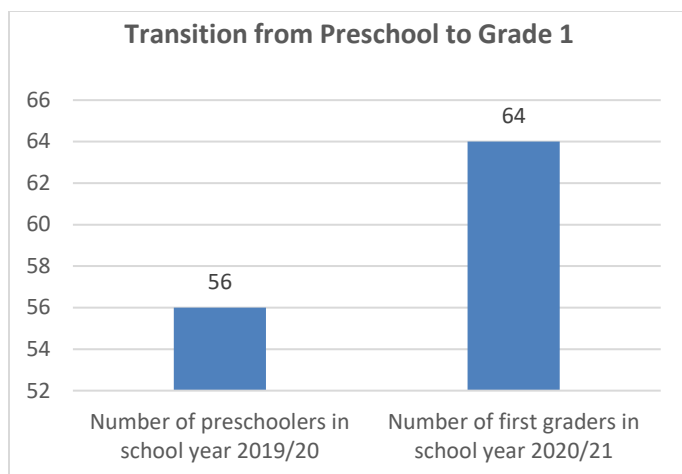
⁶ Number of all of the workshops held for children, including educational and equality workshops.

PROGRESS AGAINST OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Increase age-appropriate pre-school 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 to enable access and support enrollment of children into local primary schools in accordance with the informed preferences of parents.





In this reporting period and with the goal of increasing school enrolment, the program included community mobilization to create awareness among parents on the importance of enrolling their children to school and collection of parental consent, providing coaching and counselling support to children to enable them to adapt to the school environment, and promoting the adoption of basic hygiene practices. Support was also provided in ensuring the children complied with health requirements such as medical examination and vaccination prior to school admission.

First graders - At the end of the project, there were 64 children enrolled in first grade (39 girls and 25 boys). However, the team also worked with another 3 children of first grade appropriate age. Two girls who were still waiting for the report of the intersectoral committee⁷ on their enrolment are likely to start with school next year, while a boy did not enrol because his parents were still in the process of collecting medical certifications needed for the enrolment. The project staff working to support them in that process. The number of pre-schoolers in the previous year expected to transition to first grade in 2020/21 was 56.

Regarding the school year 2019/2020, there were 56 children enrolled in primary school. Out of those 56, 53 first graders (93%) finished the grade on time and three (7%) completed it in August, after taking additional corrective exams. One girl could not be graded since she was absent from too many classes. The school allowed her to take the corrective exams, which she passed. The other two children did not adapt very well to school environment, and although it was initially recommended that they should repeat the grade, after consultation with teachers, they were allowed to continue school with their peers. All these children are currently in second grade.

When it comes to regular attendance of first-grade aged participants in 2019/20, school data indicates that 82% of children attended classes regularly (53% of them were “very regular”⁸ at

⁷ Intersectoral committee is a local body comprising of experts from three sectors: health, education and social welfare. Their role is to conduct an overall assessment of children in vulnerable situation who require additional support in several areas, including school.

⁸ Attended over 80% of classes.

school and 27% “regular”⁹). In the first two months of the new school year, attendance rate for the new group of first graders was around 76%.

The current school year has started with all COVID-19 measures in place. This included possibility of distant learning from home. Parents had to choose which schooling regime their children would attend in this school year. Having in mind appalling living conditions in informal settlements, all parents of first graders in the program chose school attendance in person, with only one exception¹⁰. The project team assisted the parents in communicating their decisions to schools after they explained both options and discussed the situation.

The Protection through Education team was present in classes 157 times in four schools providing direct learning support to 27 participants (15 boys and 12 girls) once a week. Certain challenges were faced due to COVID-19 measures as the new school year began. Classes are divided into two groups with no more than 15 children per group. Each child must sit alone at a desk and mask wearing is mandatory. The program is in the process of signing memorandum of cooperation with one more school where a significant number of participants are enrolled.

Pre-schoolers (Transition from home to school) - In the last month of project implementation (October 2020), the team was working with 66 children of age appropriate for preschool, 32 girls and 34 boys. All of them were successfully enrolled.

Throughout the school year 2019/2020 and during summer months, PtE team worked with 69 unique children that were preschool participants (43 girls and 26 boys). Out of those, 56 were enrolled in preschool, unlike others which did not enrol for various reasons such as not collecting required documents on time, but the team offered support through workshops, regardless of the enrolment status of children. Together with volunteers (13 on average per month) they were also taking these children to and from preschool and providing them with snacks daily. Pre-schoolers also received slippers and an additional pair of socks for use in preschool institutions and workshops. Attendance rate was satisfactory, taking into account health status of these children who were more likely to catch a cold or a flu during winter months due to their living conditions. As with other groups, activities with pre-schoolers were also put on hold during the lockdown and resumed afterwards with all protective measures in place.

Future pre-schoolers - During the last months of spring and throughout the summer of 2020, a new generation of future pre-schoolers was mapped. During the state of emergency that ended on May 7, mapping was done through Google Earth application (mapping houses in the settlements) and via phone contact with people in the settlements. Once the outreach work resumed, the activity continued in-person. By the end of August, there were 59 future pre-schoolers (28 girls and 31 boys). An additional seven children together with these 59 enrolled in preschool during September and October 2020, with the support of the project staff (66 in total).

The main activities of the new generation of pre-schoolers included getting signed permissions from parents on participation in the program, advising them about necessary documentation,

⁹ Attended between 50% and 80% of classes, but still considered regular by teachers.

¹⁰ This one exception is explained in detail in Story of change section.

providing mediation between them and institutions and helping them acquire all the required documents. Workshops had the goal of better socialization and evaluation of children's capacities to prepare them for stepping into the educational system. Activities at the workshops were focused on mastering age-appropriate skills such as colour recognition, counting to 10, orientation, fine motor skills and graphomotor exercises. Also, as every year, the need for improvement of communication in Serbian in terms of vocabulary and speech production was detected in most children.

To ensure continuity of learning despite the Covid-19 pandemic, all schools instituted Covid-19 preventive measures, which included social distancing, wearing face masks and distance learning from home, where this was feasible. Where distance learning was not feasible due to the very poor living conditions in informal settlements, children attended school in person while adhering to all Covid-19 control measures.

The program team was present in classes 157 times in four schools providing direct learning support to 27 participants (15 boys and 12 girls) once a week. Since program participants lag their peers in their development and adaptation to school, educators present during classes would usually provide additional support. Teachers look at this support as an added value as they do not have time or capacity to dedicate additional support needed by Roma children.

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The main activities of the new generation of pre-schoolers included getting signed permissions from parents on participation in the program, advising them about necessary documentation, providing mediation between them and institutions, and helping them acquire all the required documents. Workshops were conducted to improve socialization and evaluation of children's capacities to prepare them for entering the educational system. Activities at the workshops were focused on mastering age-appropriate skills such as colour recognition, counting, orientation, fine motor skills, and graphomotor exercises. Serbian language gaps continue to be a gap identified in all Roma children. This is a requirement for continued advancement in the education system and the PtE program supports efforts to improve their knowledge and use of Serbian.



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 this year, there were 205 educational workshops held. The workshops were held after school and on weekends focusing on learning assistance, helping master the school curricula, complete their homework, and catch up with other children

From October 2019 to June 2020, 39 first graders (21 girls and 18 boys) received additional learning support. From July to September, workshops were provided to 41 children (19 girls and 22 boys), all future pre-schoolers. And finally, in September and October 2020, educational support was provided to 42 first graders (28 girls and 14 boys).

Due to Covid-19 pandemic movement restrictions, from March to May 2020 schools were closed and direct educational support was not provided. The program adapted by sending educational and extracurricular materials via phone and messaging apps. In May when some in-person teaching started, activities were held one-on-one or in groups with maximum of four children. The program supported 56 children, all first graders during the school year 2019/2020. It should also be mentioned that educators were contacted by teachers to help them reach

several pupils that could not be graded due to their absence. The educators held several workshops with these children and then accompanied them to school to be graded once the state of emergency ended. Workshops had a strong focus on building skills (soft -eye contact, participation, interaction with others- and hard – Serbian language) of children to be ready for school and master the curriculum.

Additionally, there were 17 older children, siblings of program participants, who attended workshops and became involved in supporting children in mastering the school curriculum.

The program team assessed educational status of current participants at the beginning and the end of school year. Assessment included graphomotor skills, printed letter recognition, reading and writing words, reading and writing sentences, recognizing and writing written letters, recognizing and basic arithmetic. The assessments showed improvement of all the children's academic performance throughout the school year.

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.

As part of this activity, the social worker and educators keep regular contact with teachers and other school staff and monitor school attendance of first graders, any gaps in attendance will be reported to parents, and together they will timely resolve the issue. The attendance rate was at 82% of program participants. In cases where a child would frequently skip school or completely drop-out, the program would offer re-integration support. Program's social worker, educators, and medical nurse (if needed) would coordinate with schools and parents to re-integrate that child, providing tailored needs-based support to address circumstance that led to child leaving school.

Examples of this support include the following:

- The team worked with the mother of one participant and the school's drop-out coordinator to keep the girl enrolled in school, although teacher proposed moving the child to another school based on not fulfilling school tasks. The solution was found with an 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 the boys and their parents, who showed low motivation to overcome the problem. With persistence and ongoing support, the boys eventually accepted and adapted to the school environment, resulting in more 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 participants 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 (Covid-19 related), 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. The program 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.

Objective 2: Increase parents' ability 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.

This year the program focused on ensuring children and families had the adequate supplies to attend school, access public services, involve parents in program implementation and include parents in school councils.

During the reporting period, which includes the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 school years, all participants received all necessary school materials¹¹ as families cannot afford them. These items are integral to school attendance. Families were supported with packages¹² containing hygiene supplies, clothes, and footwear. Hygiene items were provided 237 times and 52 families received shoes and clothing for their children.

On top of the above, the program team distributed food and hygiene products to 124 families in the program when the state of emergency ended. These packages were donated in-kind from local partners.

The program assisted all families of participants regarding **access to public services** and for that the team made 15,612 telephone or face-to-face conversations with parents or relatives of the participants and 230 conversations with public institutions. For example, a mother of one participant who has a disability was supported in collecting and submitting the documents for

¹¹ School materials include notebooks, pencils, crayons, pencil cases, erasers, school bags. Textbooks are also provided for those children whose families do not receive social assistance from the state (and automatically, qualify for free of charge textbooks provided by local municipality).

¹² Packages contain soap and shampoos for children, baby powder, wet wipes, children's toothbrushes, shampoo for lice, nail clippers, diapers, sanitary pads, etc.

free transportation to and from school for her child. Her daughter was entitled to this service but needed somebody to guide her through the entire process and assist with document collection.

All parents of program beneficiaries face similar challenges whether it is lack of knowledge about the rights and entitlements, the need to have someone guiding them through interaction with public institutions (collecting documents necessary for school enrolment, medical examinations of children as a condition for school enrolment, completing other administrative procedures) or mediating between them and schools during enrolment, but also throughout the school year. Parents often cite lack of self-confidence to attend parents' meeting¹³ at schools or to engage in interaction with teachers and other school staff, so the program staff assists and accompany them during those events, as well.

In the effort to **include parents to take part in implementation of project activities**, which is one of the main recommendations coming out of CWS program evaluation in 2019, six parents participated in after-school workshops with children, as assistants. They were all mothers with the required skills and in a better financial situation and having no more than two children and had available time. In this way, parents become more aware of the school curriculum, homework, and other tasks as a step closer towards their increased support and involvement in children's education.

This year **inclusion of Roma parents in school councils** became a project priority. The team mapped 12 parents who were assessed to have the ability to engage in the councils. Several meetings with the parents were organized where the team explained how the school's parents' councils look like and what would be expected from them in that role. None of the parents, however, wanted to do it citing lack of time. They work long hours, mainly in grey zone, and must take care of younger children and older family members. Furthermore, many of them simply do not see that type of involvement as beneficial neither for them, nor their children, according to the feedback provided. Further efforts in motivating them to reconsider this engagement were stopped due to the coronavirus outbreak. The school administration agreed to take a more active role working with the team in motivating parents to join the councils. CWS believes that the key to succeed in this effort, besides greater involvement of the school administration, would have to include additional work in empowering parents and motivating them to join the councils. In addition, some type of financial or material incentives for joining the councils could be discussed.

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 (20 girls and 10 boys) in the program that are street-involved or at high risk of becoming involved. These are frequent visitors of the Drop-in shelter and the PtE project and both teams are working together on providing additional support to them and their families. The Drop-in shelter provides these children psychosocial and other types of support from

¹³ Not being held, though, since the pandemic has started because of the imposed measures on group gatherings.

professionals specialized in working with street involved children, which helps creating positive self-image and increasing their motivation for education, thus contributing to their school retention.



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”

This activity aims to increase children’s knowledge of traditional gender stereotypes and roles within Roma community, and build their capacity to question those. Roma communities follow traditional/patriarchal gender roles; women and girls are expected to take care of household and children solely, leave school at early age or do not attend it at all and get married, often before they turn 18. Sixteen equality workshops for children were attended by 65 participants (36 girls and 29 boys). Topics covered by these workshops include differences in dressing, physical appearance, 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.

No quantitative assessments were conducted to determine the change in attitudes, but the educators reported noticeable changes in children’s behaviour – boys and girls now sit together more often, participate equally in tidying up the space after the workshops (in the beginning, boys expected the girls only to be responsible for that) and object to claims that girls are the only one allowed to wear pink or boys to play with cars.

3.2 Activity “Equality workshops for parents”

As a result of series of gender workshops organized by CWS for its local partners and gender mainstreaming training attended by one of CWS Europe’s staff, CWS decided to put the issue of gender equality on the agenda of this program. If we want to see Roma children making good results in school, we need to work with both fathers and mothers and bring the issue of equality and gender stereotypes closer to them. Only by parents challenging the values and roles they grew up with, will their daughters have higher chance of retaining and successfully completing their schooling. The intention was to work with a gender consultant in designing the curriculum for the workshops. The pandemic affected the plan leaving no room to hire a consultant to 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. Until then, only three workshops were organized with four mothers participating in them. In August, one more equality workshop took place and the group of four was joined by one more mother.

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

It is obvious that parents need additional motivation to join this type of workshop. The program team noted several requests for a different type of activity, which was introduced during the year and named “Open Doors.” It provided a set time, twice a month, when parents could 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 past year, thirty mothers and two fathers participated in this activity. This activity was put on hold when the pandemic started, but then resumed during summer months. Feedback from the parents was very positive and they saw the activity as a convenient way for them to have conversations with social worker and nurse one-on-one or in small groups. In total, 22 “Open Doors” sessions took place this year.

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”

CWS and CYI focused their advocacy efforts on the adoption of affirmative action policies for the inclusion of Roma children living in informal settlements in education. This effort had a national and international reach, including Serbian, European Union, international NGOs, child rights and human rights groups. In all contacts with individuals, organizations, and institutions the program staff 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 program team had 85 meetings with professionals and decision makers and 2,742 contacts with institutions via telephone or email.

In November 2019, there were meetings with several NGOs, including Caritas, resulting in their direct one-time financial support to program participants who are returnees from the EU under the Readmission agreement. In December, CYI signed a memorandum of cooperation with one more primary school "Dr Arcibald Rajs" increasing their presence to four schools providing direct learning assistance to children from the program during school classes.

In December 2019, the program coordinator attended a thematic group on early childhood development and education that is regularly organized by the Network of Organizations for Children in Serbia (MODS). 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.

Also in December, CYI in cooperation with Republic Institute for Social Protection and MODS, 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 situations, with special reference to General Comment no. 21 of the UN, life experiences of these children, which are often traumatic and the experience of children from the Drop-in shelters and the need for cooperation from all actors in the system. The event was a great learning opportunity and a venue for exchange of experience and good practices, but also for identifying gaps in cooperation, as it was attended by representatives of the social system (welfare centers), school administrations, university staff and NGO practitioners.

CYI also participated in an expert consultative meeting regarding the development of a new strategy for the development of education through 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 the goal of addressing child labour and begging activities.

In June 2020, the program coordinator participated in several focus groups with parents of CYI's participants 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. By improving the law on social welfare, the chances for more families living in settlements to be assisted by the state increases.

During the state of emergency, the program team was involved in research done by MODS titled "To be a child at the time of COVID-19 pandemic." Since it is important to obtain perspectives of children living in extreme poverty, the team talked with several children and included their input in questionnaire.

In July, the coordinators had a Skype meeting with Ombudsperson of Serbia about including CYI staff in several visits to institutions all around Serbia. The initiative is part of the National Preventive Mechanism and includes visits of civil society to wards, camps, prisons, etc. Related training was organized by Council of Europe in October.

In August, the program team participated in Save the Children's campaign "Back to school". The main goal was to make video clips of children talking about the school. Several program participants joined. Links of the videos can be found here: [link 1](#), [link 2](#).

The program coordinator participated in a Skype meeting with UNICEF representatives about U Report in Serbia¹⁴, stating that any data regarding children in Serbia would not be complete without inputs from children living in informal settlements. Since the U Report is completed electronically, most of the program participants would not have a chance for their voices to be heard. People from UNICEF were very much interested to include the participants in these activities, and it was agreed it should be done through focus groups.

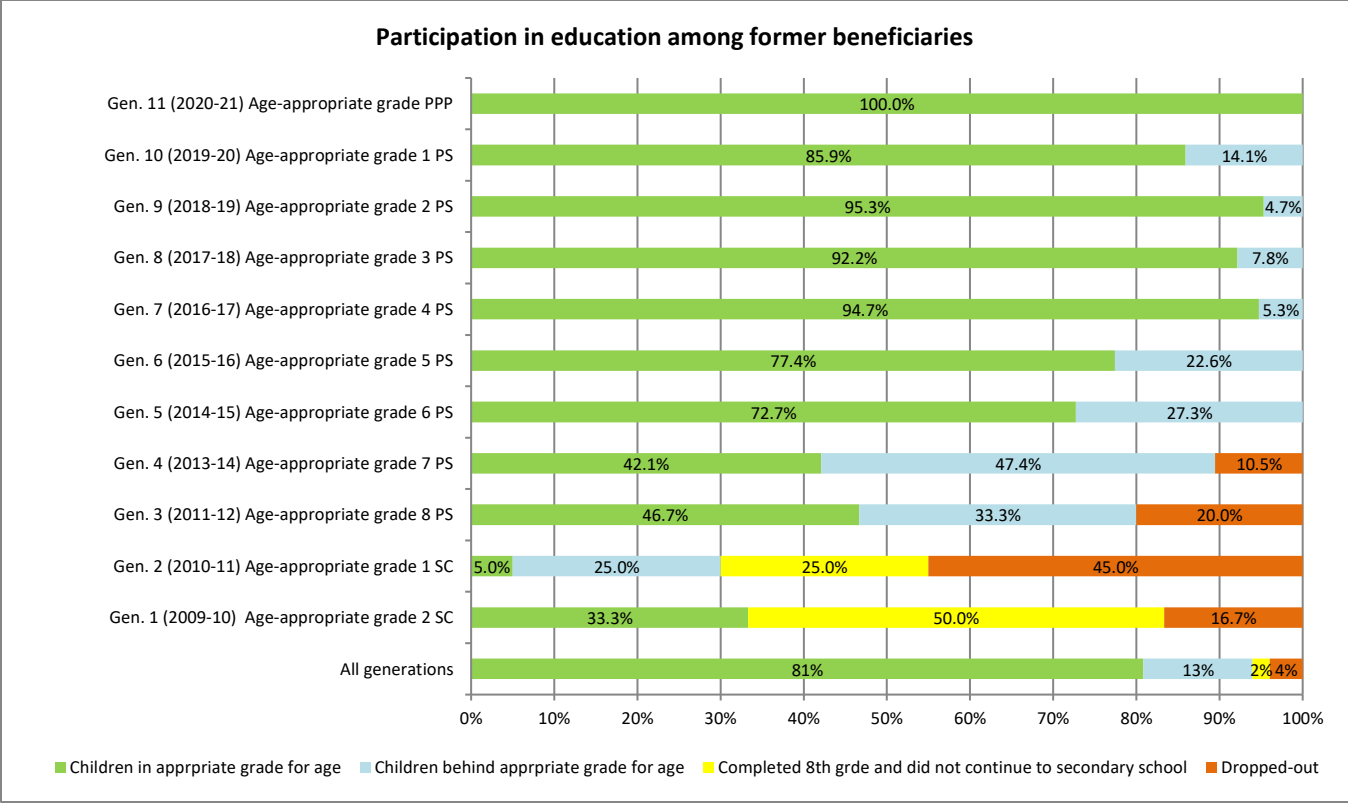
Some of the most important institutions and organizations the program team was in contact with during this cycle were school administrations (7) from Municipality of Palilula, Welfare Centres and Health centres of Palilula, Assembly of Municipality of Palilula, Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, Secretariat for Social Protection of the City of Belgrade, Cabinet of the Mayor of Belgrade, the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia, the UN team in Serbia, the EU Delegation, and the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of Serbia. In all these contacts and meetings, the team reiterated the need for greater affirmative policies and actions towards involvement in education of children living in informal settlements in Belgrade.

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.

The program conducted research on the educational status of former program participants since the inception of the program in 2009. Data on 11 generations of participants was collected and analysed, proving that program activities directly contributed to the increased number of children from informal settlements in the educational system and lower dropout rates among them.

¹⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/u-report-serbia>



The following analysis is based on a sample of 381 out of 503¹⁵ (74%) children, out of which 165 are boys (43%) and 216 are girls (57%). **Among the sample, 308 (81%) former participants have continued to attend school.**

Former participants in the age group for preschool through 7th grade continued with their schooling, and most of this group of children are in the age-appropriate grade. Among children that should be attending 7th grade and beyond, drop-out rate increases (10.5% in the 7th grade and 20% in the 8th grade).

Compared to research conducted in 2018, children’s participation in educational system has improved at every grade of elementary school over the last two years. Overall attendance rates in the age-appropriate grade among former participants has increased, according to the sample, from 64% to 81%. The drop-out rate of former participants has dropped from 21% to 4% overall.

5.2. 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 and the Regional Resource Centre (Child Hub platform).

On November 20, 2019, for International Children's Day, a gathering of program teams and partners was organized at Cafe bar 16. This event later that day merged with an event

¹⁵ Number of children who were supported through the program from the school year 2009/10 until school year 2019/20. The researchers could not reach all of them (over 70% of those that couldn't be reached have left the settlements, for example).

organized by MODS 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 program were shared through MODS and the Child Hub platform in their newsletters and through network contacts.

In the past 12 months, the program published 59 posts on Facebook and 47 posts on Instagram, reaching more than 200,000 people.



ADDITIONAL PROGRAM RESULTS

This program offers extracurricular activities for children, in addition to the educational support. There were 13 activities of this type during the project.

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; visits to cinema where children watched cartoons; other children's plays; and a comic book exhibition. In the last week of October, eight participants joined children from the Drop-in shelter for a trip to Belgrade's Ada lake park to participate in organized outdoor activities and learned climbing on artificial rock. Every year CYI organizes a New Year's children's play for all program participants.

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Due to the coronavirus pandemic and declaration of the state of emergency in Serbia, after consultations with CWS, CYI put all direct activities with program participants on hold on March 16, 2020.

CWS monitored the developments in the country and in the program (weekly reports and constant telephone contact with those working directly with participants) and advised on program adjustments and activities. Since all preschool and school institutions in Serbia were closed, program 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 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 challenge was that some families do not have TV sets; those that do have commented that the pace of lectures was too fast for most of the children, especially those who even in regular circumstances need extra support.

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 pandemic measures, program staff shared phone numbers and Facebook groups offering free psychosocial support to citizens.

At the beginning of March, one of the team members tested positive for COVID-19. She was hospitalized, and all other team members were in mandatory preventive isolation. By the end of the month, she was discharged on household isolation her health improved. Due to this case, and in consultation with CWS, CYI stopped field work or direct contact with the program participants until mid-May when they were sure all staff were healthy.

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. 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.

Once the activities resumed in mid-May, it was necessary to apply safety measures during activities. The maximum number of children or adult participants per workshop has been reduced to five. Reducing the number of children per workshop created a challenge since that meant organizing more workshops to reach the same number of children, which results in increased number of shifts of taking/returning children to and facilitating workshops.

Another challenge is to ensure that children in workshops wear masks and maintain physical distance. The educators have enough masks, which are given to children if they do not have one. Children are often not comfortable wearing the mask all the time, so it is important to be persistent and go over with them why it is important and often remind them to put on the mask.

The new school regime is also a challenge, because in most schools, classes are organized in two shifts, with up to 15 children per class. If educators are present in a particular school, it can happen that program participants are in different shifts, which can affect the provision of support due to capacity to cover both shifts.

Regarding living conditions in settlements, in case of infection, it is not possible to completely isolate the infected person from the rest of the family since most of them are living in houses with only one room. In that case, the whole family is exposed to infection. In situations where the whole family needs to be isolated, most are unable to procure food and supplies for that period.

In order to ensure that families stay in isolation, the program team supported four families whose members tested positive for coronavirus. Families were supported with packages containing food and hygiene products. During the visit to the families, it was noticed that the members did not adhere to the isolation measures completely, that they moved outside the house and spent time with the neighbours, especially children. The usual maintenance of personal hygiene is a challenge due to the lack of water and poor hygienic conditions.

STORY OF CHANGE

When she became part of Protection through Education program, A. was only 5 1/2 years old. Born abroad, she had difficulties adjusting to new environment when her family had to return to Serbia under the Readmission agreement. Her mother tongue is Romani and she was also exposed to German in her early years, making Serbian language a completely unknown territory to her. Upon the return to Serbia, her mother was not able to exercise her right to social welfare assistance and use of public soup kitchens due to bureaucratic issues. The father left the family, so A.'s elder brother (who was still a minor at the time) took the role of taking care of the family who live in extreme poverty.

A.'s preschool enrollment was accompanied by a number of challenges. She was lacking a birth certificate, so the team put her mother in touch with a local NGO providing legal assistance pro bono, and they managed to get her papers from Germany. She also didn't have a vaccination record, which is also needed for enrollment, but with the help of medical nurse from the team, this issue was sorted out, as well.

When A. became one of the program participants over a year ago, it was agreed with her mother that she would bring A. to the meeting point, where all other parents bring their children and team members take over and accompany children to workshops. At first, A. cried and refused to leave her mother. At the time, she was still using a pacifier. She would usually keep to herself at the workshops and did not want to participate in plays and activities. Gradually, she began to take part in activities where it was not necessary to speak (clay modeling, assembling cubes, drawing, coloring, etc.). She did not answer the questions, so it was not clear whether she was just shy or was not able to understand them. After several months, A. began replying to the questions in a non-verbal manner, with facial expressions, nodding or shaking her head.

Once the program paused its activities because of declaration of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, A. was staying at home with her family. When the activities resumed after couple of months, a little miracle has happened – A. spoke in Serbian clearly for the first time. And from September she even started speaking fluently and forming entire sentences. This was also time for A. to enroll into first grade. The nurse provided her mother with intensive assistance in scheduling and taking her to medical appointments (A.'s mother is illiterate and only knows how to sign her name). As all other parents, her mother was offered to choose in which regime her child would attend classes because of the pandemic – in person or online. Since school does not provide free meals for pupils (again COVID-19 measures), the mother decided that A. will attend classes online despite the fact they do not have conditions for that at home. (It costs more for the family to provide lunch at school than if she stays home.) It is assumed that A. would be able to go to school regularly if the family had a steady income, and thus being able to afford a meal for A. while at school. The project team, together with other NGOs dealing with vulnerable groups, is working on finding a job placement for A. elder brother.

The only education A. is getting now are workshops in the Protection through Education program. She attends them regularly, now with a great dedication and joy. The plan of the educators is to make an agreement with A.'s teacher for her to come to school once a week to

socialize and adapt to the school environment. That would happen on same days when the educators provide support to other participants at school, so A. could see a familiar face and feel less stressed.

VOLUNTEERING PROGRAM

This year, the volunteer response was excellent. A total of 78 volunteers answered the first call, 38 answered the second call and 21 answered the third 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. However, even during the state of emergency, the program was supported by 26 volunteers, who were mainly creating online material for program participants.

New volunteers were quickly involved in the realization of activities. In the first outreach visits, they were accompanied by CYI staff 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.

On average, 22 volunteers participated in activities monthly. There were 590 outreach visits done by the volunteers with the support of the program team and 425 outreach visits performed without the supervision of the team. They also took part in workshops on 116 occasions.