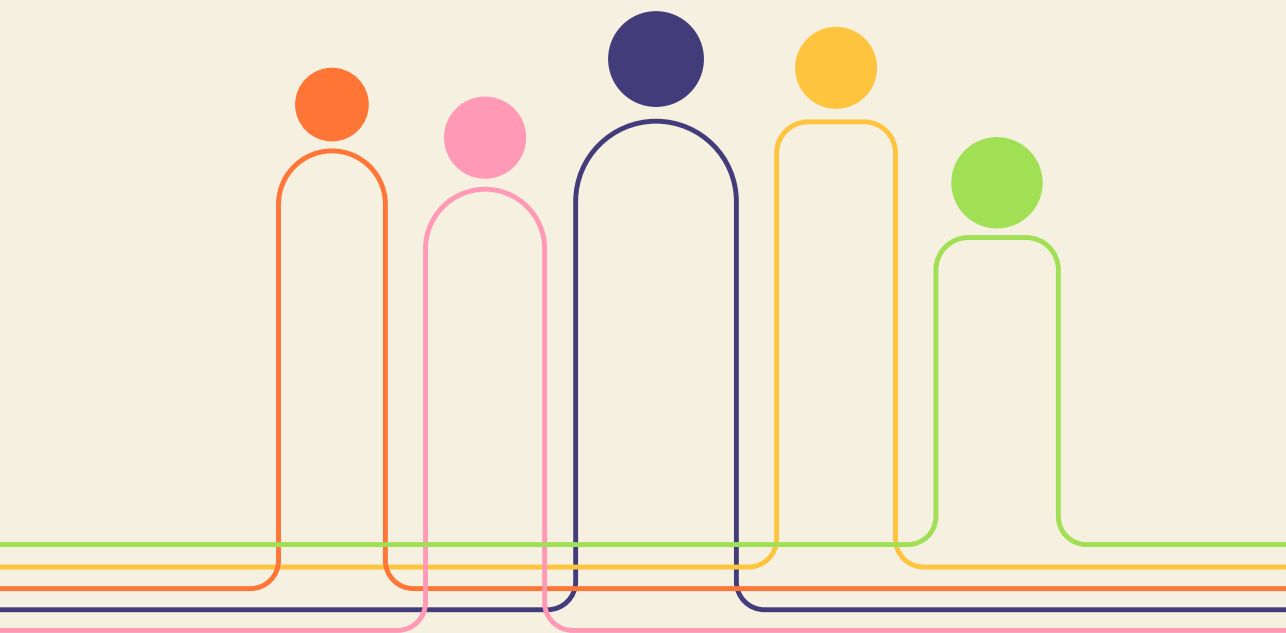


FROM SUPPORT TO SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT

Improving the Approach to the Inclusion of Roma Men and Women

KEY FINDINGS, PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS
BASED ON THE EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT “ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
INCLUSION OF ROMA AND RETURNEES”.



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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full name	Note
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency	International humanitarian organization
BDP	Bruto domaći proizvod	Gross domestic product
BMZ	Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany
CV	Curriculum vitae	Resume
EU	Evropska unija	European Union
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
FRS	Forum Roma Srbije	Roma Forum of Serbia
LAP	Lokalni akcioni plan	Local Action Plan
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey about position of women and children (UNICEF methodology)
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training	Youth who are not employed, in education, or in training
NSZ	Nacionalna služba za zapošljavanje	National Employment Agency
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council	Regional Cooperation Council
RŽM	Romska ženska mreža	Organization from Serbia; publisher of the reference publication
RZZS	Republički zavod za statistiku	Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia
SODI	Solidaritätsdienst International e.V.	German development organization; lead implementation partner of the project
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund	United Nations Children's Fund
URBO	Udruženje Roma Braničevskog okruga	Braničevo District Roma Association
VET	Vocational Education and Training	Vocational Education and Training

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Executive Summary

Despite years of aligning its normative and strategic framework with European social inclusion approaches, Serbia’s operationalization and consistent application of prescribed support measures remain limited. Consequently, the inclusion of Roma and returnees is not progressing at the rate expected based on existing policies—particularly in the field of employment—while certain segments of educational and social inclusion show stagnation or limited reach.

The project “Economic and Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees,” was implemented from July 2022 to April 2026 with the support of the BMZ and in partnership with SODI, Roma Forum of Serbia, URBO, and Romanipen, tested and validated a model demonstrating how this gap can be bridged. The starting logic was clear: the obstacles faced by Roma and returnees do not appear in isolation but are interconnected; therefore, the solution cannot be reduced to a single service, institution, or support measure.

Through three local career and community centres in Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Požarevac, approximately 2,200 beneficiaries—including around 600 returnees from Western European countries—received comprehensive support tailored to their specific life situations. Legal and administrative aid, psychosocial support, career counselling, and labour market mediation were integrated into a single, continuous process, with a special focus on the unemployed without required qualifications, youth in NEET status, Roma women, and families in acute crisis.

The results confirm the value of this approach: over 130 beneficiaries were placed into employment, internships, or self-employment; around 400 students continued their education with the support of the centres; over 120 parents were empowered to more actively support their children’s edu-

cation; approximately 1,000 beneficiaries received individual legal support and over 800 beneficiaries submitted applications to exercise social and other rights. Furthermore, three local action documents formally recognized the work of these centres and incorporated elements of the model into local inclusion policies.

The project's experience demonstrates that existing support measures can be made significantly more effective when they are cantered around the actual needs of the beneficiaries. This model, given the appropriate institutional prerequisites, is scalable and applicable more broadly within local and national employment and social inclusion policies for Roma and returnees in Serbia.

Introduction: Why This Publication and Who It Is For

In the last decade, significant strides have been made in Serbia regarding the educational inclusion of Roma men and women, particularly concerning increased enrolment in primary and secondary education. These advancements hold long-term importance not only for individuals and their families but for society as a whole: they demonstrate that through targeted support measures, continuous support, and community engagement, visible results can be achieved even in areas marked by decades of deep inequality.

However, this progress is neither uniform nor consolidated, and above all, it has not translated into economic inclusion. The employment rate of Roma in Serbia is either stagnating or worsening. Many young Roma remain outside the flows of both education and employment while the employment rate for Roma women remains significantly lower than that of Roma men and women in the general population. Returnees under readmission agreements continue to face complex obstacles to reintegration. Where employment does exist, it is predominantly informal, unstable, and low-paid. This pattern is not the result of individual failure, but of deep-rooted structural exclusion in which educational, administrative, gender, class, and discriminatory barriers reinforce and reproduce one another.

The fact that this structural gap persists is no accident. It reveals a disconnect between what the normative framework mandates and what institutions actually deliver to beneficiaries facing multiple challenges.

The project “Economic and Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees” was designed as a response to this gap. From July 2022 to April 2026, with financial support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany (BMZ), the project was implemented in partnership by the organizations SODI, Roma Forum of

Serbia, the Braničevo District Roma Association (URBO), and Romanipen. During this period, a model of career and community centres was developed and tested in Novi Sad, Požarevac, and Kragujevac. As unique entities, these centres combine professional career counselling and labour market training with individual and group psychosocial support and coordination with local institutions, thereby ensuring the sustainable inclusion of Roma men and women into the labour market. The centres were not designed as a new service alongside existing ones, but as a mechanism that makes what already exists—support measures of the National Employment Service, the education system, social and health care systems, and the anti-discrimination framework—accessible and functional for those furthest from them. Through a clearly defined “beneficiary journey”, from the initial needs assessment to monitoring after employment or continued schooling, the centres have operationalized integrated support that has proven to be measurably more effective than partial interventions.

This publication is the result of careful monitoring of that process. Its purpose is not merely to document the activities and results of a single project, but to demonstrate how a holistic model was created, how it was tested in practice, what challenges it faced, and what lessons can be drawn from it. In this sense, the publication contributes to the development of new approaches in the field of socio-economic inclusion of Roma at the local and national levels, addressing the question of how these processes can be improved and adapted to the real needs of Roma men and women in Serbia. Its fundamental value lies not only in recording what has been achieved, but in enabling concrete experiences to provide relevant lessons for other local communities, other organizations, and—equally importantly—for public institutions and policymakers who wish to translate existing norms and strategies into functional support mechanisms.

Consequently, this publication is intended for a broad range of stakeholders. It addresses local Self-Governments seeking operational models to implement local inclusion plans, offering a concrete guide on how to translate local policies from strategic documents into functional support mechanisms with clear professional profiles, cooperation protocols, and measurable outcomes; relevant Institutions in the fields of employment, education,

social protection, and administration that aim to improve coordination and the accessibility of existing support measures; donors supporting socio-economic inclusion programs—offering an evaluation framework that highlights which elements of an integrated approach yield sustainable results and the minimum requirements for their replication; employers interested in more inclusive hiring practices—providing insight into a partnership model that reduces discriminatory barriers and has already led to employment that standard selection processes would not have facilitated and Civil Society Organizations developing or planning similar initiatives, for whom this publication offers a methodology and experiences adaptable to different contexts. At the same time, and perhaps most importantly, it serves as a guide for public actors considering how to effectively combine existing support measures to ensure they truly deliver results.

The value of these experiences is further amplified by the broader social moment in which they emerged. The issue of successful labour market integration for Roma men and women has long transcended the framework of mere minority policy. Amidst demographic aging, emigration, and an increasingly acute labour shortage, Serbia is increasingly faced with the need to activate the labour potential of groups long left on the margins of economic flows—including women, youth, members of minority communities, and other vulnerable categories. In this sense, the inclusion of Roma is not only a matter of social justice but also a question of societal development, institutional rationality, and the state's ability to ensure that existing human resources are not permanently left untapped. Precisely because of this, the findings of this publication are vital not only for understanding a specific project but for a broader reflection on how inclusion policy can be transformed into a policy of effective labour market engagement and sustainable income generation—as prerequisites for full participation in social life.

Methodologically, the publication is based on an analysis of the project's three-year implementation, its design, working methods, and the results achieved through three local centres. It bridges an insight into the context of Roma and returnee employment in Serbia, a presentation of the organization and logic behind the career and community centre model, an analysis of services provided and the project's institutional effects, the relevance,

added value, and sustainability of this approach, as well as the possibilities for its application in other environments. Thus, the model is viewed not just as a collection of individual indicators, but through the lens of how results were achieved—specifically through the architecture of support, the quality of cross-sectoral cooperation, and the relationship between direct work with beneficiaries and the impact on local inclusion mechanisms. As such, the study does not assume that a successful approach can be mechanically copied; rather, it attempts to illuminate the operational logic, key principles, and the conditions under which an integrated model yields results.

The structure of the publication follows this approach. After the introductory section, it outlines the broader socio-economic status of Roma in Serbia and the barriers they face in the labour market. It then presents the project itself, its conceptual framework, theory of change, locations, and the organizational structure of the career and community centres. Subsequent chapters analyse the services provided, examples of beneficiary support, key results and outcomes, as well as the sustainability and replication potential of the model. The final section summarizes key findings and offers recommendations for actors wishing to further develop, adapt, or integrate this approach into existing public and local support mechanisms.

1. Between Strategy and Practice: Structural Challenges in the Employment of Roma and Returnees in Serbia

1.1. Socio-economic Status of Roma in Serbia: A General Empirical Profile

Roma men and women in Serbia continue to face deep and multifaceted exclusion from the formal labour market. Despite the lack of perfectly precise and harmonized administrative and statistical data, available international and domestic sources clearly indicate that this disadvantaged position is not limited to lower employment rates but also includes higher exposure to long-term unemployment,¹ lower economic activity² and hindered access to support measures.³

The latest data from the 2024 FRA Roma Survey, conducted in 13 European countries, show that 54% of Roma/Travellers aged 20–64 were in paid employment. Although this represents an improvement compared to 43% in 2016, this share remains significantly lower than the employment rate of the general EU population, which stands at 75%.⁴ In Serbia, however, there is no unambiguous progress compared to the previous comparative wave: the participation of Roma women in paid work rose from 31% to 34%, while the participation of Roma men fell from 73% to 70%, indicating limited and gender-uneven movement.⁵

1 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2025. *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

2 Žunić, V., S. Milutinović and V. Simunović. 2025 "Education and Employment of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia." In *"No Room to Run Fast": Growing Up and Education in Substandard Settlements*, edited by S. Milutinović, D. Mitrović, and V. Simunović, 101–120. Belgrade: ADRA Serbia and the Institute of Psychology.

3 Kurtić, V. 2021, *Inclusion, Trends, and Employment Policies for Roma Women in the Republic of Serbia*. Belgrade: Roma Women's Network (RŽM).

4 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2025. *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

5 For Serbia, the comparison does not refer to 2016, but to the previous comparative wave of 2021/2019.

The unfavourable position of Roma men and women in the labour market cannot be reduced to a matter of individual choice or insufficient activation. It is a pattern of deep-rooted structural inequality in which educational, gender, class, and ethnic disadvantages overlap and produce a permanent distance from formal employment. This is particularly true for women, youth, and returnees under readmission agreements.

The gender gap in Roma employment remains exceptionally high. According to the 2024 FRA survey, across all covered countries, 38% of Roma women aged 20–64 were in paid employment compared to 69% of Roma men in the same age group, representing a gender gap of 31 percentage points; in 2016, this gap was 27 points.⁶ In Serbia, the gap is even more pronounced: in the previous comparative wave (2019/2021), it stood at 42 percentage points (31% vs. 73%), while in 2024, it was 36 percentage points (34% vs. 70%). Although the gap has narrowed slightly in that sense, it remains very high and confirms the markedly disadvantaged position of Roma women in the labour market. Recent domestic analyses confirm the same pattern: Roma women are less present among the economically active population, more frequently face long-term unemployment,⁷ and are excluded from the formal labour market to a greater extent.⁸

A significant reason for this is an extremely unfavourable educational structure. For instance, according to a 2019 UNICEF study, 59% of surveyed women in Roma settlements in Serbia cited primary education as their highest level of schooling, while 10% are completely illiterate⁹ (UNICEF, 2020).

6 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2025. Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

7 Kurtić, V. 2021. Inclusion, Trends, and Employment Policies for Roma Women in the Republic of Serbia. Belgrade: Roma Women's Network (RŽM).

8 Citing 2019 data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS), Kurtić states that men make up 77.5% and women only 22.5% of the active Roma labour force, representing a higher gender differentiation compared to the total population, where men account for 57.9% and women 47.1% of the total active labour force.

9 UNICEF. 2020. Statistical Snapshot: Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019. UNICEF Belgrade. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/16056/file/MICS%206%20Istra%C5%BEivanje%20vi%C5%A1estrukih%20pokazatelja%20za%202019.%20godinu.pdf>

These members of the Roma population wait the longest for employment.¹⁰

Behind these figures lie multiple, intertwined mechanisms that exacerbate the position of young Roma women. UNICEF's regional overview shows that in Serbia, 56% of women aged 20–24 from Roma settlements were married before the age of 18.¹¹ Early marriages, combined with unpaid domestic work, childcare, and poor access to support for balancing family and work responsibilities, directly narrow the opportunities for completing education¹² and later entering the labour market.¹³ Therefore, the status of Roma women cannot be understood merely as part of the general problem of Roma employment, but as an expression of a specific accumulation of gender and ethnic barriers, requiring gender-sensitive responses within support measures.

The position of young people is particularly unfavourable. According to FRA data (2025), every second young Roma/Traveler aged 16–24 falls into the NEET category (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). While the overall European sample shows a slight decrease in this rate compared to the previous wave, Serbia records either a stagnant or negative trend, indicating that the progress registered in other countries has not reached the domestic context.¹⁴

Research indicates that the disadvantage faced by young Roma cannot be viewed in isolation from educational interruptions, early school leaving, and limited access to support measures during the transition from education to work. UNICEF findings for Serbia show that in Roma settlements, only about one-third of children aged 3–5 attend early childhood education programs, while only 28% of children of high school age attend upper sec-

10 Stanković, A. 2022. Analysis of the Employment of Roma Men and Women in the Labour Market in Serbia and the Western Balkan Countries. Roma Education Fund.

11 UNICEF. 2024. Breaking Barriers: A Rights-Based Regional Analysis of Roma Children and Women in the Western Balkans and Türkiye. Geneva: UNICEF.

12 Ibid.

13 Kurtić, V. 2021. Inclusion, Trends, and Employment Policies for Roma Women in the Republic of Serbia. Belgrade: Roma Women's Network (RŽM).

14 For Serbia, the comparison does not refer to 2016, but to the previous comparative wave of 2021/2019.

ondary school.¹⁵ — the educational gap widens with age, and the transition from primary to secondary education represents one of the critical points of later labour market exclusion.¹⁶

Returnees under readmission agreements from European Union countries—among whom Roma men and women constitute a significant portion—represent a particularly vulnerable category. Their position should not be viewed as a separate issue, but as a specific and further intensified manifestation of the same structural barriers that shape the status of the Roma population as a whole. For returnees, educational, administrative, housing, linguistic, and employment obstacles often converge within a short period, making the reintegration process especially complex and uncertain.

For many, returning marks the beginning of a new cycle of insecurity, requiring them to simultaneously renew or obtain personal documents, regulate residency, re-establish access to education, healthcare, and social protection, and only then attempt to enter the labour market. For children and youth returning from abroad, additional problems include interruptions in education, difficulties integrating into the school system, and a loss of learning continuity—all of which directly impact their future employment prospects.

The European Commission's 2021 Progress Report for Serbia explicitly states that returnees under readmission agreements are in a particularly difficult situation regarding social and economic inclusion and that mechanisms for addressing their needs must be strengthened.¹⁷ Where support remains sectoral, short-term, and poorly coordinated, the risk of re-exclusion remains high. For this reason, the reintegration of returnees cannot be reduced to one-time assistance or administrative registration; it requires coordinated and continuous support across education, social protection, employment, and anti-discrimination protection simultaneously.

15 UNICEF. 2024. *Breaking Barriers: A Rights-Based Regional Analysis of Roma Children and Women in the Western Balkans and Türkiye*. Geneva: UNICEF.

16 Žunić, V., S. Milutinović, and V. Simunović. 2025. "Education and Employment of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia." In *"No Room to Run Fast": Growing Up and Education in Substandard Settlements*, eds. S. Milutinović, D. Mitrović, and V. Simunović.

17 European Commission. 2021. *Serbia Report 2021*. Brussels: European Commission.

1.2. Structural Causes for Exclusion

The structural causes of the disadvantaged position of Roma men and women in the labour market are multifaceted and interconnected. The educational structure of the Roma population remains unfavourable, and low levels of formal education directly limit access to more stable and better-paid jobs. Recent analyses indicate that Roma employment is strongly correlated with the level of education attained: the higher the level of education, the shorter the job-seeking period. Simultaneously, poor educational outcomes, combined with poverty and unfavourable living conditions, are among the key mechanisms for the reproduction of unemployment¹⁸ and social exclusion.¹⁹

However, the relationship between education and employment is not linear. Research warns that even those who complete secondary school or attain higher education often face serious difficulties in finding employment, demonstrating that educational progress, while necessary, is not sufficient on its own to close the gap in labour market access.²⁰

In addition to educational barriers, administrative and spatial hurdles play a significant role. The lack of personal documents, unregulated residency, limited access to information, and poor availability of services represent serious obstacles to entering formal employment. A study conducted in four substandard Roma settlements in Belgrade states that 91.9% of respondents do not consider job advertisements easily accessible, while they highlight childcare support, proximity to employers, and information on where and how to find a job as the most important forms of assistance.²¹ These findings show that the problem lies not only in formal qualifications but also

18 Žunić, V., S. Milutinović, and V. Simunović. 2025. "Education and Employment of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia." In *"No Room to Run Fast": Growing Up and Education in Substandard Settlements*, edited by S. Milutinović, D. Mitrović, and V. Simunović, 101–120. Belgrade: ADRA Serbia and the Institute of Psychology.

19 Kurtić, V. 2021. *Inclusion, Trends, and Employment Policies for Roma Women in the Republic of Serbia*. Belgrade: Roma Women's Network (RŽM).

20 Ibid.

21 Žunić, V., S. Milutinović, and V. Simunović. 2025. "Education and Employment of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia." In *"No Room to Run Fast": Growing Up and Education in Substandard Settlements*, edited by S. Milutinović, D. Mitrović, and V. Simunović, 101–120. Belgrade: ADRA Serbia and the Institute of Psychology.

in the absence of intermediary mechanisms that would allow beneficiaries to access work opportunities in the first place.

A study conducted in substandard Roma settlements in Belgrade further illustrates the psychosocial dimension of this exclusion: 87.5% of respondents do not feel a sense of control over their employment situation, the average length of work experience is only 2.27 years, and 61.3% of respondents have never been employed.²² This data is crucial as it shows that long-term absence from the workforce affects not only material status but also the perception of one's own capabilities and how beneficiaries perceive institutions and support measures, which has direct implications for the design of activation approaches.

When viewed together, these obstacles do not act in isolation but cumulatively. Low education increases the likelihood of long-term unemployment and work in the informal sector; early educational interruptions and the burden of unpaid labour further restrict the position of Roma women; administrative hurdles and spatial segregation hinder access to services and information. This is precisely why the problem of Roma employment cannot be solved through sectoral support measures aimed at only one point of exclusion; rather, it requires linked and cross-sectoral interventions that simultaneously address education, access to services, labour market mediation, and protection against discrimination.

BOX 1: Education and employment- Progress not yet
Translated into Outcomes

During the “Decade of Roma Inclusion” (2005–2015), measurable progress was achieved: the share of Roma children completing primary school rose from 28% to 69%, and enrolment in secondary school increased from 10% to 28% (Žunić et al., 2025).²³ However, according to the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey,²⁴ a 5% decline in the primary school completion rate has

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 UNICEF. 2019. *Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 (MICS 6)*. UNICEF Belgrade.

been recorded compared to 2014—only 64% of children who enrol in primary school actually complete it.²⁵ Secondary school enrolment stands at 55%, but only 28% of children of high school age actually attend, with the coverage for girls (15%) being significantly lower than for young men (28%). Although some research indicates that Roma with completed secondary or higher education have unemployment rates close to the national average—confirming a direct link between educational status and employability—other data suggest this is not the case across all categories. For instance, according to the latest FRA analysis, Serbia is recording a stagnant or negative trend in the NEET rate among young Roma.²⁶ These figures indicate that the effects of earlier policies have begun to wane and that structural factors of exclusion continue to persist within the educational system.

1.3. Discrimination as an Autonomous Barrier

Discrimination in hiring and at the workplace is not merely one of many obstacles; it is often considered a key challenge in employment. According to 2024 FRA data, 36% of Roma/Travellers over the age of 16 stated that they had experienced discrimination due to their Roma background while looking for work in the previous 12 months, while 22% reported discrimination at the workplace.²⁷ Both indicators are dramatically higher than in 2016, when they stood at 16% and 5%, respectively. This suggests that the increased visibility of Roma in the labour market has been accompanied by a rise, rather than a decrease, in discriminatory experiences. In Serbia, the number of respondents reporting experiences of discrimination fell from 37% to 21%.²⁸

25 Žunić, V., S. Milutinović, and V. Simunović. 2025. "Education and Employment of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia." In *No Room to Run Fast: Growing Up and Education in Substandard Settlements*, edited by S. Milutinović, D. Mitrović, and V. Simunović, 101–120. Belgrade: ADRA Serbia and the Institute of Psychology.

26 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). 2025. *Rights of Roma and Travellers in 13 European Countries: Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

27 Ibid.

28 For Serbia, the comparison does not refer to 2016, but to the previous comparative wave of 2021/2019.

Nevertheless, findings from the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality confirm that discrimination is not a peripheral but a central part of the problem. Research on the Roma community's perception of discrimination shows that 67% of respondents believe that Roma are "very much" or "mostly" discriminated against in the field of labour and employment, while a significant number cite personal or family experiences of discrimination when seeking work, during the hiring process, or at the workplace.²⁹

In a special report by the Protector of Citizens (Ombudsman) on the implementation of the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma, it was noted that ethnic distance among employers is not decreasing, despite existing incentive support measures. Employers often avoid hiring Roma by justifying their refusal with a lack of qualifications or the alleged uncompetitiveness of the candidates, even when these reasons are not objectively grounded. In the same context, it is noted that 68.36% of surveyed Roma have never received a job offer from the National Employment Service and that retraining and additional qualification programs have not yielded the expected results.³⁰

These findings have concrete implications for the design of interventions: support measures aimed exclusively at raising the competencies of beneficiaries will not, by themselves, close the employment gap if the demand side- namely employers, institutions, and local communities- is not simultaneously addressed. In short, the formal existence of an anti-discrimination framework is insufficient on its own without effective mechanisms for its implementation and monitoring in practice.

1.4. Normative Framework and Institutional Gaps

The Republic of Serbia possesses a normative and strategic framework for improving Roma employment, defined by the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia for the period

29 Commissioner for the Protection of Equality. 2023. *Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination*. Belgrade: Commissioner for the Protection of Equality.

30 Protector of Citizens. 2019. *Special Report of the Protector of Citizens on the Implementation of the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma with Recommendations*. Belgrade: Protector of Citizens.

2022–2030,³¹ which serves as the key document for advancing inclusion in all social spheres, including employment. This Strategy establishes a series of support measures aimed at increasing Roma participation in the labour market and reducing socio-economic inequalities.

One of the primary strategic components concerns the development and consistent implementation of Roma employment programs. These are designed to improve the accessibility and visibility of programs addressing different groups within the Roma population (e.g., youth, women, and qualified personnel) through active employment support measures, the promotion of inclusion, and partnership initiatives with the civil sector and local communities.

The Strategy places particular emphasis on the need to institutionalize local mechanisms that support Roma inclusion—such as health mediators, Roma coordinators, and social inclusion teams—to increase the effectiveness of programs directed toward formal Roma employment. These roles are envisioned as a bridge between the Roma community and state structures; however, their full institutionalization has yet to be realized. The Strategy also addresses the fight against antigypsyism, as a form of racism and discrimination that manifests in the labour market through stereotypes and unequal treatment, providing recommendations for education and sensitization within both the public and private sectors.

However, the gap between normative goals and operational practice remains visible. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) implemented by the National Employment Service—such as career counselling, training, subsidies, public works, and self-employment support—formally include Roma as a priority category, but in practice, they often fail to reach beneficiaries facing multiple barriers.³² Training programs are also not always aligned with local labour market needs. The inclusion of Roma men and women in local employment policy support measures remains very low, with the main reasons cited being a lack of a systemic approach at the local level, weak

31 *Official Gazette of the RS*, No. 30/18. 2018. *Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2022–2030*. Belgrade: Official Gazette.

32 Furthermore, budgetary allocations for active labour market support measures remain stagnant below 0.1% of GDP, despite the target of 0.16% established by the Action Plan for Chapter 19, and were even reduced in 2025 (European Commission, 2025).

cooperation with civil society organizations, the absence of formal monitoring, and insufficient financial resources.³³

In short, despite a relatively robust normative framework, there are significant limitations in the operationalization of the planned support measures. The problem lies not only in the fact that certain support measures are underdeveloped, but also in the fact that they are often poorly connected, insufficiently adapted to multiply vulnerable beneficiaries, and have limited reach among those furthest from institutions.

BOX 2: Framework of Public Policies and Operational Gaps

Intervention framework	Intended effects	Observed limitations in practice	Implications for intervention
Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women 2022–2030	Increased labour market participation of Roma; development of targeted programs; strengthening of local inclusion mechanisms.	Insufficiently developed operational mechanisms for working with beneficiaries facing multiple barriers; uneven implementation at the local level.	The need for operational models that link the strategy with individualized beneficiary support.
Active Labour Market Policies (NES) — training, subsidies, public works, self-employment	Increased employability and employment of hard-to-place categories.	Limited reach toward the most vulnerable; insufficient adaptation to local needs; lack of continuous beneficiary monitoring/follow-up.	Development of an integrated and continuous support flow that follows the beneficiary from registration to stable employment.
Local Inclusion Mechanisms (Roma coordinators, mediators, social inclusion teams)	Improved communication between the Roma community and institutions; facilitated access to rights and services.	Partial institutionalization; insufficient integration with the employment and education systems.	Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and functional linking with employment support measures.
Anti-discrimination Framework and Commissioner's Recommendations	Reduction of discrimination and advancement of equal access to the labour market.	Lack of operational mechanisms for monitoring and sanctioning discrimination in hiring practices.	Introduction of preventive and intermediary mechanisms that reduce institutional distance and the risk of discrimination.

33 Kurtić, V. 2021. *Inclusion, Trends, and Employment Policies for Roma Women in the Republic of Serbia*. Belgrade: Roma Women's Network (RŽM).

1.5. Economic Argument: Unused Labour Force as a Developmental Loss

The inclusion of Roma men and women into the labour market should not be viewed merely as a matter of minority inclusion, but as part of Serbia's broader developmental need to activate those segments of the working-age population that remain pushed to the margins of the formal economy. This approach is already recognized in domestic and European strategic documents, which indicate that employment challenges in Serbia cannot be considered in isolation from the status of women, youth in the NEET population, and minority groups, including Roma. In this sense, supporting their employment is not merely a social support measure³⁴ but also a component of a rational developmental policy³⁵ aimed at expanding the country's labour potential.³⁶ This argument gains additional weight in the context of long-term demographic changes, depopulation, and increasingly acute labour shortages in specific sectors. Serbia has long faced population decline, an aging population, and labour market pressures that make it difficult to maintain the labour supply in certain industries and regions. The Roma population has a younger age structure than the general population, yet it simultaneously records lower employment rates, higher representation in informal and unstable forms of work, and a greater distance from institutional support channels. When this potential is not activated through education, mediation, employment support, and protection against discrimination, the consequences are not only individual and familial but also developmental, thus resulting in higher dependence on social support systems, lower tax revenues, and reduced intergenerational mobility. It is precisely this logic that underscores the importance of the project "Economic and Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees," which approaches exclusion as a multidimensional problem requiring an integrated response.

34 Republic of Serbia. 2021. *Employment Strategy in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2021 to 2026*. Belgrade: Government of the Republic of Serbia.

35 European Commission. 2024. *Annex VII – Reform Agenda: Serbia*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. Available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/>.

36 European Commission. 2024. *Serbia Report 2024 (Commission Staff Working Document; 2024 Enlargement Package)*. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. Available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/>

2. Project Objective and the Career and Community Centre Model: How the „Holistic Package“ Works

The project “Economic and Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees” was established as a response to the cumulative barriers that Roma and returnees face in accessing the labour market and basic public services—barriers that directly impact their ability to exercise basic and human rights. The project is financially supported by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of the Federal Republic of Germany (BMZ), while implementation is carried out through the organization Solidaritätsdienst International e.V. (SODI), in partnership with Forum Roma Serbia (FRS) and local Roma organizations URBO and Romanipen. The project duration was from July 2022 to April 2026.

2.1. Main Objective of the Project

The primary objective of the project is to enable a total of 2,200 Roma and returnees in and around Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Požarevac to improve their access to employment opportunities, education, and qualifications, as well as public services, while simultaneously strengthening their capacity to advocate for socio-economic inclusion issues at the local and regional levels. Operationally, the project is structured to combine direct services to beneficiaries with institutional networking and community work. This is based on the premise that unemployment and broader socio-economic exclusion are the results of the cumulative effects of educational, administrative, institutional, and discriminatory barriers, and that partial support measures do not yield sustainable progress.

In terms of output/outcome logic, the immediate results (outputs) of the project are reflected in the establishment and operational functioning of local

support mechanisms through three centres; the provision of integrated services and mediation between beneficiaries, institutions, and employers; the strengthening of individual competencies and the formal status of beneficiaries as prerequisites for formal employment. At the outcome level, the project strives for increased employability and actual employment; more stable job retention; greater inclusion into the system of public support measures and services; reduced reliance on informal work; strengthening the institutional inclusion of Roma and returnees, with the long-term goal of reducing socio-economic exclusion and the negative effects of discrimination.

2.2. Locations and Work Organization of Career and Community Centres

The project is implemented through three centres in Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Požarevac, covering the South Bačka District (Vojvodina), Šumadija District (Central Serbia), and Braničevo District (Eastern Serbia). These centres were established with the aim of contributing to the improvement of access to employment, education, professional qualifications, and public services for 2,200 Roma and returnees in these three regions. Approximately 25–30% of the beneficiaries, or about 600 individuals, are returnees from Western European countries who are particularly exposed to risks of social exclusion.

In organizational terms, the model involves a partnership between an international implementation framework (SODI) and domestic and local actors, where the Roma Forum of Serbia plays a central role in carrying out activities, while the local organizations URBO and Romanipen provide immediate field-based grounding and community work. All three centres function as local hubs for support, information, empowerment, and advocacy.

The advisory services of the centres are open to all residents of the districts, regardless of ethnic affiliation, gender, age, or legal and social status; however, by design and practice, they are primarily directed toward the most vulnerable categories of the Roma population and returnees. This includes the unemployed without market-demanded qualifications, youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET), students at risk of dropping out of school,

Roma women and their families, individuals unable to exercise their rights before institutions on their own, as well as returnees in need of reintegration support. This setup allows the centres to maintain an inclusive character of service (openness) while simultaneously focusing on the target group facing the greatest barriers, which is crucial from an evaluative perspective when considering the effectiveness and fairness of the intervention.

The operational basis of the work consists of a multidisciplinary team in each centre, which typically includes coordination, legal counselling, psychological support, social mediation, and administrative support—further strengthening the capacity of project staff through training, exchange of experiences, and joint workshops. This work organization ensures that beneficiary needs are treated comprehensively and that support is adapted to the actual obstacles beneficiaries face in their daily lives.

2.3. Services and Support Flow (“Beneficiary Journey” – from first contact to outcome)

The support model in the centres is not designed as a one-time activity, but rather as a continuous process encompassing an initial needs assessment, the development of an individual plan, the acquisition of competencies, mediation toward the labour market, and outcome monitoring. The starting point of the work with beneficiaries is individual counselling, where formal education, informal skills, previous work experience, and interests are assessed, but barriers to employment are also identified—barriers that often transcend the labour market domain and include administrative, legal, family, and psychosocial factors. Based on the assessment, individual support plans are developed, which may include registration in the employment system and linking with relevant support measures, inclusion in training and employability programs, or direct application for jobs, while simultaneously resolving obstacles that are prerequisites for formal employment.

In the next phase, beneficiaries are provided with support in developing employability through the preparation of CVs and motivational letters, understanding advertisements, interview preparation, and the strengthening of basic

work and communication skills. This dimension also has an important empowering effect, as it increases self-confidence and enables beneficiaries to participate more independently in the labour market. When necessary, the centres refer beneficiaries to or organize vocational training and qualification programs in accordance with local needs, thereby directly addressing one of the most common barriers — the lack of formal qualifications or competencies required by local economies.

A key component of the support flow is individualized mediation between beneficiaries and employers. The centres establish contact with local employers, present candidate profiles, organize interviews and trial work, and, if needed, provide support during the workplace adaptation phase, which increases the likelihood of sustainable employment. In parallel, the centres also mediate with institutions, particularly the National Employment Service and other relevant agencies, acting as a bridge between beneficiaries and the system, and facilitating the understanding of procedures and administrative requirements. This type of connection reduces institutional distance and contributes to overcoming obstacles that are often generated by a combination of socioeconomic and discriminatory factors.

2.4. What Makes a Model “Holistic”

The key characteristic of the model is that employment is not treated as an isolated goal, but as part of a broader set of prerequisites and supports that collectively increase the probability of sustainable outcomes. The holistic package rests on the integration of career and employability support, educational and qualification support, legal and administrative assistance, psychosocial stabilization and empowerment, as well as institutional cooperation and advocacy.

The career and employability dimension encompasses individual counselling, skill-strengthening, and active job searching, along with mediation toward employers and monitoring integration into the work environment. The educational dimension includes learning support, the prevention of school dropouts, and the strengthening of competencies among children

and youth, thereby exerting a long-term influence on employability and reducing the risk of intergenerational poverty. The legal and administrative dimension refers to resolving obstacles that directly affect the possibility of formal employment and access to services, including assistance in obtaining personal documents, exercising rights within social and health protection, and providing referrals and administrative support in contact with institutions. The psychosocial dimension includes work on motivation, self-confidence, and stabilization, which is particularly relevant for the long-term unemployed and returnees, among whom experiences of discrimination, social isolation, and eroded trust in the system are often more pronounced.

Institutional cooperation and advocacy represent the dimension that connects individual work with beneficiaries to the broader context of community change. The centres actively cooperate with local self-governments and public services responsible for Roma inclusion, including schools, centres for social work, health institutions, and employment services, with the aim of improving coordination and the more efficient realization of rights. Simultaneously, the centres encourage the empowerment of beneficiaries and the community to recognize and articulate problems, organize, and advocate for rights at the local and regional levels, alongside activities aimed at reducing discrimination and improving neighbourly relations.

Holistički model podrške (operativna logika intervencije)



The next chapter examines whether and to what extent this model has succeeded in producing measurable and sustainable results. The focus shifts from the conceptual rationality of the intervention to empirical findings—on employability, employment, educational and administrative outcomes, as well as changes in institutional cooperation—in order to assess whether the integrated approach has indeed narrowed the gap between strategy and practice identified at the beginning.

3. What Has Been Implemented and What Has Changed: Key Activities, Results, and Outcomes

This chapter analyses the effectiveness of the project model, focusing on the question of whether the integrated, people-centered “holistic model” of support has produced measurable results and relevant outcomes in areas that decisively influence the socioeconomic inclusion of Roma and returnees. The starting premise of the model is that barriers to employment, education, access to rights, and social participation are interconnected and require a coordinated response instead of partial interventions.

The findings are presented cumulatively by areas of work (employment, education, legal support, and institutional networking) and follow the logic of the theory of change: activities that lead to immediate results (outputs), which then produce outcomes and broader changes in the lives of beneficiaries and in the functioning of local support mechanisms.

Special attention is paid to distinguishing between results and outcomes. Results encompass the implemented activities and beneficiary coverage (e.g., training, counselling, legal support), while outcomes indicate the change arising from them (e.g., increased competencies, transitions to employment, continuity of schooling, realized rights, empowerment, and greater use of institutional mechanisms).

In methodological terms, results are interpreted primarily at the level of the unique beneficiary—that is, according to the number of distinct individuals who achieved a certain result or outcome, rather than the total number of services provided. This evaluative approach is particularly important in integrated models, as one beneficiary typically utilizes multiple services within the holistic package; therefore, counting “services” could inflate the volume of activities without providing clear information on reach and change.

The analysis covers the project implementation period from July 2022 to April 2026 and reviews cumulative progress in relation to the baseline state defined by the project document.

Table 1. Achieved Result

Area	Planned Result (Output)	Indicator (Target Value)	Quantitative Achievement (Approximate)	Achieved Result
Employment (with integrated psychosocial support)	60 beneficiaries completed professional vocational training (VET)	60 persons	60 persons completed training	Fully achieved
	At least 120 adults improved job-seeking knowledge and skills (CV, motivational letter, applications)	120 persons	Approximately 190 persons improved competencies	Exceeded
	At least 150 Roma received individual employment counselling (applications, interviews, business plan, NES registration)	150 persons	Approximately 150 persons covered by individual counselling	Fully achieved
	Psychosocial support as employment support (motivation, self-confidence, interview preparation)	Integrated into all employment support measures	Hundreds of beneficiaries covered by individual and group psychological interventions	Fully achieved
Education (with psychosocial and mentoring support)	500 students received psychological support, additional classes, and skill development training	500 students	Approximately 500 students covered by support	Fully achieved
	150 students successfully passed final exams and/or continued secondary education	150 students	Approximately 130–135 students achieved the transition	Fully achieved
	50 secondary school-aged students received career guidance	50 students	Approximately 40 students covered	Fully achieved
	100 parents/guardians empowered to support children in their schooling	100 parents	Approximately 120 parents covered	Exceeded
	Psychosocial support as a factor in dropout prevention	Integrated into educational interventions	Psychological support and group work implemented continuously	Fully achieved
Legal Support	1000 Roma received individual legal counselling	800 beneficiaries	Approximately 950–960 beneficiaries received legal aid	Exceeded
Institutional Networking and Community Work	Inclusion of staff in local bodies and adoption of local documents recognizing the work of the centres	5 staff included; 2 municipalities adopted relevant documents	7 staff included; 2 municipalities adopted relevant documents	Exceeded
	60 representatives of local institutions participated in dialogue processes (Community Days)	60 representatives	Approximately 65 representatives participated	Exceeded

Table 2. Achieved Outcomes

Area	Outcome	Indicator (Target Value)	Assessment of Achievement
Employment	Transitions toward employment, internships, or self-employment following integrated support	At least 130 persons achieve an internship, short-term or long-term employment, or self-employment (20% returnees)	Fully achieved
Access to Rights and Services	Beneficiaries utilize institutional mechanisms and submit requests to competent authorities	At least 800 beneficiaries submitted requests (personal documents, social and health rights, legalization, etc.) (20% returnees)	Exceeded
Education	Continuity of schooling and reduced risk of dropout among children and youth covered by support	At least 400 students continue regular schooling after psychological, educational, and mentoring support (8% returnees)	Fully achieved
Institutional Networking	Strengthening of local inclusion mechanisms and formal recognition of the centres' work	At least 2 municipalities adopt relevant documents; at least 60 representatives of institutions participate in dialogue processes, and at least 5 project team members are included in local bodies and contribute to the adoption of local documents recognizing the work of the centres	Exceeded

3.1 Employment and Transitions Toward the Labour Market

The starting point for the intervention in the field of employment was extremely unfavourable and structurally determined. In the three covered districts, more than three thousand Roma were officially registered as unemployed, while simultaneously, the dominant portion of the adult population lacked formal vocational qualifications. This baseline state confirms that this is not a matter of short-term cyclical unemployment, but rather multi-year, structural exclusion from the formal labour market.

Precisely for this reason, the intervention was not designed as a classic “job mediation” program, but as an integrated mechanism acting simultaneously on multiple risk points. In such a context, employment could not

be treated as an isolated support measure, but as a process requiring simultaneous action on qualifications, skills, motivation, administrative barriers, and institutional distance.

Vocational Training (VET): Transitioning from Informal to Formally Recognizable Work Profiles

During the project implementation, five cycles of certified vocational training (VET) were realized, covering a total of 60 beneficiaries with evenly distributed capacity: 20 participants each in Kragujevac, Požarevac, and Novi Sad—thereby fully meeting the planned goal.

The thematic profiles of the trainings were aligned with the assessment of local labour market needs in each centre. Alignment with the labour market is not just a useful assumption for employment—it is also the condition under which an employer has any interest in participating in such programs at all.

The logic of the intervention involved a VET implementation model directly at the employer's workplace. The employer, who monitored the participant during the training and witnessed their professional development and competence in a real work environment, makes employment decisions based on personal insight. This structurally bypasses the discriminatory barrier that systematically places Roma candidates at a disadvantage during standard applications. It is particularly important to emphasize that vocational trainings did not function in isolation. They were integrated into a broader process that included soft skills development and individual counselling. Without this integration, formal qualifications might remain unutilized. It is precisely this connection with other components that explains the high rate of transition toward employment.

Skill Development Trainings: From Passivity to Activation

In addition to vocational training (VET), the project implemented an extensive program of skill development trainings aimed at increasing the level of employability. Through multiple cycles of workshops organized in all three centres, at least 15 thematic cycles of active job searching and soft skills development were conducted, along with additional shorter informative and preparatory sessions.

Cumulatively, approximately 200 beneficiaries across the three centres confirmed that they improved the knowledge and skills necessary for job searching, whereby the planned indicator in this segment was significantly exceeded. These activities included CV and motivational letter drafting, interview simulations, understanding registration procedures with the National Employment Service, familiarization with labour rights and obligations and combating discrimination in the workplace, as well as the basics of financial planning in the case of self-employment. Furthermore, the thematic framework included training in the field of social entrepreneurship for Roma employment and skills in the service and craft sectors. None of these trainings were standardized courses applied by procedure—each was a response to an identified pattern of needs that the teams monitored during field work.

One of the key results of these activities is the initiation of active job searching, which was realized through multiple sessions, where participants prepared a concrete job application as a result. It is precisely in this phase that a key change in behaviour occurs. The trainings acted as a reactivation mechanism—beneficiaries began to apply, seek information, and communicate with institutions and employers.

Community Days: Collective Mobilization and Institutional Networking

Community Days represented an important operational mechanism in the field of employment, as they simultaneously expanded outreach and strengthened the institutional networking of beneficiaries. During the project's duration, 12 events were held, thematically focused on employment, economic activation, and cooperation with institutions, with approximately 360 participants. In addition to direct beneficiaries, these events were attended by representatives of the National Employment Service, local self-governments, and other relevant actors.

The thematic focus included public calls for employment and self-employment, business start-up grants, local support programs, as well as specific administrative procedures and obstacles that beneficiaries encounter in practice. The direct participation of institutional representatives enabled

open dialogue, clarification of procedures, and a reduction in institutional distance, which is particularly significant in the context of long-term marginalization and distrust toward the system.

Community Days functioned as a bridge between collective mobilization and individual intervention. They enabled new beneficiaries to enter the support system while also allowing existing beneficiaries to transition more quickly toward concrete steps—enrolling in training, individual counselling, or registering with competent services. In this way, community work became an integral part of the mechanism connecting information, activation, and the formal transition toward the labour market.

Individual Counselling: Personalization and Closing the Circle

Individual career counselling covered 150 beneficiaries, whereby the plan was fully realized. In practice, counselling involved activities such as detailed competency assessments, identification of barriers, the creation of personalized employment plans, support during registration with the National Employment Service, and assistance in applying for specific positions.

This component deepens the outcomes of previous activities by focusing on the needs and risks of each individual beneficiary. While group trainings develop general competencies, individual counselling addresses the specific obstacles of each beneficiary—whether it concerns a lack of documentation, limited mobility, family obligations, or unrealistic expectations regarding the labour market. Counselling also functioned as a checkpoint to verify whether the beneficiary was ready for the transition to employment, i.e., whether previous interventions had produced an operational effect.

The Psychosocial Dimension: Stability as a Prerequisite for Sustainable Employment

Across all phases of the employment process, it is evident that psychosocial support has a significant, though often not directly measurable, effect. Long-term unemployment produces low self-confidence, fear of rejection, and internalized stigmatization. Psychosocial counselling, as a horizontal project activity, contributed to the stabilization of beneficiaries during transitional phases—particularly during trial work or the first months of

employment—as well as the strengthening of motivation and readiness for interaction with employers and contact with competent institutions.

Outcomes: Transitions Toward Employment as an Indicator of Functional Change

Cumulatively, more than 130 beneficiaries transitioned into internships, short-term or long-term employment, or self-employment, representing the full realization of the planned outcome and the significance of the intervention at its most critical point—the transition to the labour market. Outcomes in the field of employment show that the integrated model functions precisely because it intervenes in multiple dimensions simultaneously. Neither vocational training, employability training, nor counselling would have produced the near-complete realization of outcomes on their own. Their interconnectedness allowed beneficiaries to complete the entire journey—from activation to sustainable work engagement.

Table 3. Outcome in the Field of Employment

Outcome	What it measures	Goal	Status
Transitions toward internships, employment, or self-employment	Beneficiaries who entered work engagement through integrated support	130	Achieved

3.2 Educational Support: Educational Continuity as a Foundation for Long-term Inclusion

The educational component of the project represented a long-term developmental lever within the holistic model. In the context of a high risk of school dropouts and low transition rates to secondary education, the intervention was focused on stabilizing the students’ educational pathways, as well as strengthening the familial and psychosocial framework that sustains those

pathways. In this sense, education was not treated as an isolated field, but as the foundation for future employability and social inclusion.

Psychological Support, Additional Classes, and Skill Development Training

The most extensive segment of the intervention concerned a combination of psychological support, additional classes, and training for the development of work and classroom skills. Cumulatively, approximately 500 students were covered by this type of integrated support, whereby the planned result was fully achieved.

This component was preventive in character. Individual and group sessions allowed students to overcome specific academic difficulties, while skill development training strengthened work habits, concentration, time organization, and responsibility toward school obligations. Simultaneously, psychological support addressed demotivation, a drop in self-confidence, and pressures that often precede dropping out of school. This framework and scope of intervention created a stable basis for achieving the outcome of educational continuity.

Final Exams Passed and Transitions to Secondary Education

One of the most critical moments in an educational pathway is the transition between levels of education. In this segment, approximately 150 students successfully passed their final exams and/or continued into secondary education, effectively fulfilling the planned result.

This result was achieved through intensive individual and group preparations for final exams, monitoring the progress of each individual candidate, and providing additional individual work during periods of increased pressure. Within the broader framework of the theory of change, activities leading to a successful transition to higher levels of education directly impact the level of future employability through formal qualifications recognized in the labour market.

Career Guidance for Secondary School Students

Career guidance covered more than 50 secondary school students.

Through individual counselling and information regarding educational and professional options, students connected their schooling with concrete market perspectives.

Analytically speaking, this component represents an early intervention in the domain of professional orientation and directly bridges educational support with the field of employment. This closes the logical circle between these two areas: education becomes consciously directed toward future economic activation.

Empowering Parents/Guardians as a Factor in Educational Continuity

Working with parents represents one of the key innovative dimensions of the intervention. More than 120 parents/guardians were empowered to actively support their children's schooling, significantly exceeding the planned result.

In practice, this involved a combination of activities that "translated" the educational system into concrete, applicable steps for parents: individual and group consultations in the Centres; thematic workshops on school obligations, enrolment, and transitions between educational levels; support in communication with schools (class teachers, professional services, parent meetings); as well as practical guidance on how to monitor a child's progress, recognize early warning signs of dropout risk, and activate support in a timely manner (additional classes, psychological counselling, mentoring). Where necessary, this work also included mediation in situations of conflict or misunderstanding with the school, as well as strengthening parental competencies for the daily organization of learning.

In the context of socio-economic vulnerability, parental support often represents a decisive factor in a child's survival within the educational system, as it directly affects the continuity of attendance, motivation, and the family's ability to bridge "critical points" (exams, absences, transitions, administrative procedures).

Psychosocial Support as a Horizontal Mechanism for Dropout Prevention

Psychosocial support was not a separate entity, but rather an integrated component of all educational activities. In situations of family conflict,

peer issues, or demotivation, psychological work enabled the stabilization of students during critical phases. Consequently, this dimension directly influences the relatively high level of educational continuity achieved within the goals of this project. Academic assistance without psychological stability would have a limited effect. The integration of these two dimensions, therefore, represents a key innovation in this model's approach.

Community Days in Education: A Horizontal Component of Activation and Dropout Prevention

In the field of education, Community Days functioned as a horizontal activity connecting individual services with community and family outreach, while also serving as a practical “bridge” toward institutions. Through at least three events dedicated to educational themes, with a total of approximately 50 participants, the project team combined information sharing, motivation, and practical guidance for beneficiaries at “critical points” of schooling, involving cooperation with schools and relevant local actors whenever necessary.

Thematically, these events focused on the continuation of schooling, understanding educational options and procedures (especially during the transition from primary to secondary school), and strengthening the role of parents/guardians in supporting the child. Simultaneously, through direct communication and coordination with schools, this activity resulted in earlier risk detection, faster referral of students to additional classes or psychological support, and the strengthening of families' trust in institutional mechanisms.

Outcome: Educational Continuity as a Functional Change

Viewed collectively, approximately 400 students continued their schooling with the support of the project, representing the full realization of the planned outcome.

The outcome is the result of synergy between multiple components: academic support, psychological stabilization, work with parents, and targeted interventions at moments of transition, with the additional contribution of community work. As in the field of employment, the effect was not produced

by a single instrument, but by their interdependence. Thus, the educational component of the project confirms the validity of the holistic model: educational continuity becomes a developmental outcome that directly feeds into future employability and reduces the risk of long-term social exclusion.

Table 4. Outcomes in the Field of Education

Outcome	What it measures	Goal	Status
Continuity of schooling with support	Students who, with educational and psychosocial support, continued their schooling (without interruption)	400	Achieved

3.3 Legal and Administrative Support: Access to Rights as a Prerequisite for Formal Inclusion

Legal and administrative support was directed toward removing specific procedural obstacles that keep beneficiaries outside the formal flows of employment, education, and the social protection system. During the implementation period, approximately **1,000 unique beneficiaries** received individual legal support, indicating an extensive range of administrative and status-related issues within the target population, as well as a high degree of resolution.

The support included an analysis of the beneficiary's legal status, assistance in obtaining and regulating personal documents, drafting and submitting requests for social and health rights, resolving residency issues, utility debts, and other administrative procedures. In a significant number of cases, the legal advisor participated in preparing documentation and communicating with institutions, monitoring the process until the submission of the request or the issuance of a decision. This operational approach reduced the risk of the process being interrupted due to procedural barriers.

Legal support was coordinated with employment and education activities. A regulated status and submitted requests were prerequisites for registration with the National Employment Service, access to active employment policy measures, and household stability, which in turn enables the continuity of children's schooling.

From a horizontal perspective, thematic training and Community Days were organized with the aim of providing additional information to beneficiaries regarding the procedures and conditions for exercising various rights. These formats contributed to a better understanding of institutional mechanisms and increased beneficiaries' readiness to initiate formal procedures, as well as to establish initial contacts with institutions within the framework of organized events.

Outcome: Submitted Requests and Activated Use of Rights

More than **800 unique beneficiaries** across all three centres, with the support of the Centres' legal advisors, submitted various types of requests

to the competent authorities to exercise their rights. This result has been translated into an outcome that manifests a transition from administrative inactivity to the formal use of rights and services. Thus, it functions as a prerequisite for sustainability in other areas: without a regulated status and activated rights, it is difficult to achieve formal employment, stable schooling, or long-term social security.

Table 5. Outcomes in the Field of Access to Rights

Outcome	What it measures	Goal	Status
Submitted requests and access to rights	Beneficiaries who, with support, submitted requests to competent authorities (documents, social and health rights, legalization, etc.)	800	Exceeded

3.4 Cooperation with Institutions and Advocacy: From Dialogue to Local Changes

Cooperation with institutions was one of the key prerequisites for the project's effectiveness. In practice, this component relied on the continuity of contacts and work meetings with representatives of local institutions responsible for the social inclusion of Roma and returnees, the active participation of project team members in local bodies and working groups tasked with developing local action plans for Roma inclusion, as well as the creation of mechanisms for information exchange and active dialogue with the local community—specifically the project's service beneficiaries.

The horizontal value of these activities is reflected in two connected dimensions: the strengthening of cooperation networks between local institutions, the project team, and the Roma community, and the concrete transfer of the integrated support model into local policies, procedures, and practices.

Two-Way Cooperation with Local Institutions: Participation of Project Team Representatives in Local Bodies and Dialogue with Institutional Representatives

During the project's duration, seven employees from the three centres were involved in the work of local bodies and working groups relevant to Roma inclusion, thereby significantly exceeding the planned indicator. This result is important as it demonstrates that the centres have been recognized in local environments as operational actors with multi-year experience in implementing innovative models of socio-economic inclusion for Roma and returnees—not just as service providers, but as partners who can contribute to planning and coordination based on concrete insights from field work and institutional cooperation.

On the other hand, representatives of local bodies and institutions were systematically involved in joint work activities within and with the community. Specifically, approximately 70 representatives of local administrative structures and institutions responsible for the social inclusion of Roma participated in dialogue formats such as Community Days and thematic meetings, as well as in operational coordination for specific cases. During Community Days, institutional representatives engaged in direct exchanges with the Roma community and service beneficiaries regarding topics that practically spilled over into key project areas—employment and active support measures (registration, public calls, self-employment), educational “critical points” (transitions, exams, family support), and legal-administrative issues (procedures, documentation, exercising rights).

Local Action Plans and Other Relevant Policies for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees

The position of the centres within local working bodies and the continuous dialogue with institutional actors have resulted in the formal adoption and improvement of local policies in the field of socio-economic inclusion for Roma and returnees.

During the implementation period, three local documents were adopted, with the active participation of centre representatives in their preparation and subsequent policy planning. The City of Kragujevac adopted the Lo-

cal Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma for the period 2022–2025,³⁷ in which the centre’s professional profiles—psychologist, legal advisor, and social mediator—were defined as concrete support measures. Preparations for the next Local Action Plan in Kragujevac began in February 2026, and members of the Kragujevac Centre team (Romanipen organization) are participating in the working group for its drafting.

In Požarevac, the Local Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma was adopted in the previous cycle, for the period 2021–2023,³⁸ with the participation of the Požarevac Centre team members in its definition. This strategic framework recognized the role of the Centre and envisioned local support for its work, thereby establishing a basis for continuous cooperation. During the project’s duration, Centre representatives further participated in the drafting and contributed to the adoption of the Local Action Plan for Employment of the City of Požarevac for 2024,³⁹ linking experiences from field work with beneficiaries to the planning of active employment policy measures.

Simultaneously, the Municipality of Beočin adopted the Local Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma for the period 2025–2027,⁴⁰ and representatives from the Novi Sad Centre participated in the preparation of this document.

These results demonstrate that the integrated support model has been translated into local policies through clearly defined support measures and roles. Furthermore, the participation of representatives from the three centres in working groups has allowed direct field experiences with beneficiaries to be translated into local policies, particularly in segments that require multidisciplinary support and the coordination of diverse services.

37 City of Kragujevac. 2022. *Local Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the City of Kragujevac for the Period 2022–2025*. Available at: <https://kragujevac.ls.gov.rs/extfile/sr/4901/NACRT-LAP-ZA-SOCIJALNU-INKLUZIJU-ROMA-I-ROMKINJA-U-GRADU-KRAGUJEVCU-ZA-PERIOD-2022%E2%80%932025.pdf>

38 City of Požarevac, 2020. *Local Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women from the Territory of the City of Požarevac for the Period 2021–2023*. Available at: <https://pozarevac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/LAP-Romi-2021-2023.pdf>

39 City of Požarevac. 2024. *Local Action Plan for Employment of the City of Požarevac for 2024*. Available at: https://pozarevac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/LAP_2024.pdf

40 Municipality of Beočin. 2025. *Local Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Roma Men and Women in the Field of Housing in the Municipality of Beočin for the Period 2025–2027*. Available at: <https://www.beocin.rs/sr/?m=d17&p=left/StrateskaDokumenta>

Outcome: Institutional Networking as a Sustainability Mechanism

Cumulative results in the field of cooperation with institutions show that the project has surpassed the threshold of formal coordination and achieved a structural shift in local mechanisms for the socio-economic inclusion of Roma and returnees. The three adopted local action plans that recognize the role of the centres, participation in the drafting of future local action plans, approximately 70 institutional representatives involved in dialogue processes, and seven project team members actively involved in the work of local bodies confirm that the integrated support model is institutionally recognized and operationally embedded in local policies and practices. This outcome has a direct implication for sustainability: the work of the centres is no longer solely reliant on the project framework but is linked to local planning, budgeting, and coordination. Consequently, the results achieved in employment, education, and access to rights rest upon a broader network of institutional support.

Table 6. Outcome in the field of institutional cooperation and advocacy

Outcome	What it measures	Planned Threshold	Status
Strengthening of local inclusion mechanisms and formal recognition of the centres' work	Adoption of relevant local documents; participation of institutional representatives in dialogue processes; inclusion of project team members in local bodies and working groups	2 municipalities adopt relevant documents; 60 representatives of institutions participate in dialogue; 5 project team members included in local bodies	Exceeded

4. Sustainability and Scaling of the Project Model

The sustainability of the career and community centre model is based on the logic of developing interconnected mechanisms that encompass: empowering beneficiaries to independently utilize existing support measures and services on their path through schooling, toward the labour market, and in resolving administrative issues; creating channels for cooperation and interaction between institutions and beneficiaries, i.e., the Roma community; and mechanisms for influencing the development of local policies in the field of Roma social inclusion and recognizing elements of the project model and practices that have proven functional within the policies themselves.

The foundation of sustainability is formed by the multidisciplinary team and a standardized “beneficiary journey”—a support flow that connects employment, education, legal-administrative assistance, and psychosocial stabilization into a single, coordinated intervention. The minimum operational capacity for such a model implies centre coordination (partnerships, planning, and quality control), legal-administrative support (status issues, documentation, and procedures), psychosocial support (motivation, stabilization, and support during critical phases), social mediation and field work (activation, referrals, work with families and the community), as well as administrative support for record-keeping, logistics, and case monitoring. This composition is crucial for sustainability because it ensures the continuity of the beneficiary pathway and reduces the risk of the beneficiary “dropping out” at points where barriers are typically encountered: documentation, school transitions and exams, drops in motivation, procedural delays, and communication with institutions.

The second pillar of sustainability is institutional networking as a daily work practice rather than occasional coordination. Throughout the project,

the centres have built a role as stable points of contact, dialogue, and cooperation between the Roma community and local institutions across various sectors (employment, education, social protection, legal and administrative affairs), thereby reducing the distance that often discourages beneficiaries from initiating procedures in practice. The continuity of work meetings, the inclusion of teams in local bodies and working groups, as well as joint community work formats (Community Days, thematic meetings, and operational coordination in specific cases) have created permanent communication channels and clearer referral “routes.” The effect is twofold: beneficiaries understand procedures faster and persevere more often when steps are clarified in advance and when they have mediation at critical points; institutions, on the other hand, gain direct insight into the actual obstacles Roma and returnees face, as well as a reliable partner who translates community needs into operational requests, moving cooperation from general messaging toward concrete practical solutions.

The third pillar of sustainability is the “translation of practice into local policies.” Through this, the model is linked to local planning and potential budgeting, ensuring that the centres do not remain merely project-based support points. The experience of the centres in Požarevac and Kragujevac clearly demonstrates how a local framework can explicitly recognize the work of the centres and provide for local support. This is an important indicator of sustainability because it legitimizes the approach and opens space for the continuation of work through local mechanisms.

Furthermore, the developed system for collecting data on services provided and beneficiary needs represents a practical prerequisite for project sustainability, as it allows for a reliable demonstration of the intervention’s reach, the types of barriers encountered, and the outcomes achieved at the level of unique beneficiaries. Such data enables the planning of future steps based on the recorded needs of the Roma community and provides a sufficiently clear basis for local actors to plan resources more realistically and continuously improve the approach to the socio-economic inclusion of Roma and returnees.

Finally, scaling the model involves expanding the innovative approach and work methodology with beneficiaries that the project developed and

validated in practice. In conditions where BMZ/SODI funding ceases and there is a general decline in investment in the socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable groups, a sustainable direction for replication involves the adoption of key model elements by competent local actors and their application through local public policy frameworks—particularly through local action plans—via clearly defined support measures, roles, and coordination mechanisms. The minimum conditions for implementation include the existence of a local carrier with credibility in the community, stable inter-sectoral cooperation with relevant institutions, and established protocols for referral, coordination, and data exchange, ensuring that the methodology functions as a continuous practice rather than a temporary project intervention.

BOX 3. Successful story examples

Children enrolled in school, mother finds employment.

D. P., a returnee from abroad, faced challenges very common among returnee families: after spending a long period in another country, she had to adapt to life in Serbia within a very short timeframe. The two biggest problems she encountered were integrating her children into the educational system and securing a stable source of income.

The Career and Community Centre team in Kragujevac—consisting of a social mediator, a legal advisor, and a psychologist—first assisted D. P. in establishing contact with the school in Germany to obtain the documentation necessary for school enrolment. Simultaneously, the team contacted a school in Kragujevac to find the best solution for the children’s temporary inclusion in the educational process.

Given their years of experience in supporting returnees, the team was aware that without proper support in adapting to a new environment, children can easily feel helpless and drop out of education. Therefore, individual psychosocial support and academic assistance were organized for the two girls. This support was particularly vital in preventing potential learning gaps and ensuring the children felt more secure in their new school environment.

At the same time, the mother received support and information regarding

employment and job searching, which is often the most difficult step in reintegrating returnees from abroad into daily life in Serbia. This example demonstrates that for the successful reintegration of returnees, it is crucial to provide appropriate support to every family member, enabling them to cope with the challenges of arriving in an environment where they sometimes lack family members or a circle of friends to rely on.

Experience shows that a lack of support for returnee families often leads to children dropping out of school, while parents—unable to secure a livelihood in Serbia—enter a vicious cycle of repeated migration attempts. The mentioned example is just one of many cases where the three career and community centres succeeded, thanks to a well-designed and holistic approach, in enabling returnee families to overcome the challenges they faced at the beginning of their new lives in Serbia.

Knowledge, Perseverance, and Support: The Path to Independence

The case of D. R., a single mother of five from Kragujevac, illustrates the situation of many women from the Roma community who strive to provide income for their families under conditions of limited employment opportunities, low formal education, and constant childcare responsibilities. However, despite such circumstances, D. R. demonstrated determination from the very beginning to change her situation through her own efforts. On her own initiative, she began developing skills and creating a source of income: she learned the basics of manicure and pedicure via the internet and then started providing services within her community.

The Career and Community Centre in Kragujevac supported her efforts and enrolled her in professional vocational training, through which she could enhance her previously informally acquired knowledge and supplement it with new professional skills. This provided D. R. with the opportunity to learn from professionals and expand the range of services she could offer. Thanks to this support, she managed to organize work within her own space, allowing her to earn an income while simultaneously caring for her children. The support brought her not only a new work opportunity but also additional self-confidence and confirmation that invested effort can lead to economic independence and a more stable future for her and her children. This case ill-

ustrates the importance of well-designed assistance for single mothers from the Roma population, who often face obstacles that make it difficult to escape the vicious cycle of dependence on family and social support.

At the same time, this example points to the importance of ensuring that active employment support measures are accompanied by other forms of support for young women, who require targeted assistance to formalize informally acquired knowledge and transform it into a sustainable form of economic independence.

Breaking Out of Isolation and First Steps Toward Economic Independence

Dž. B. from Novi Sad faced obstacles that affect many young Roma women: social isolation, limited independence, lack of contact with institutions and the labour market, and the strong influence of family constraints on educational and career choices. As a beneficiary of the Career and Community Centre in Novi Sad, she first received continuous psychosocial support through the work of a social mediator and a psychologist, particularly through individual and family counselling. Through this process, the Centre's team recognized her motivation and included her in the vocational training program. When she expressed a desire to attend a hairdressing course, it became clear that the obstacle was not just a lack of qualifications: her parents were hesitant to let her leave the Roma settlement alone, and a specific challenge was that she had never previously travelled by city bus independently or left the neighbourhood where she lived. Therefore, the Centre team worked step-by-step: they sought a salon willing to accept her for an internship, the psychologist assisted her in mastering the theoretical portion, the legal advisor resolved administrative issues—including securing a monthly bus pass—and the social mediator initially travelled with her to help her master the basic routine of navigating the city.

Dž. B. completed the course and earned her hairdressing qualification, and then she made an even more significant leap—she gained employment in a retail chain with a formal labour contract and now travels to work independently every day. This example clearly demonstrates the importance of holistic intervention: the problem was not just finding an occupation that

matched the skills of young Roma girls but simultaneously resolving other problems they face. It was precisely this comprehensive approach that led to successful labour activation.

Education as a Turning Point for Mother and Children

The case of M. D., a mother of four from Novi Sad, demonstrates how deeply education, parental roles, and economic empowerment are interconnected, especially for women who remain outside the education system and formal labour market for long periods. As a beneficiary of the Career and Community Centre in Novi Sad, M. D. was initially involved in family psychological counselling; she first became acquainted with the benefits of the centre through her children, who were receiving academic support.

Through regular work with a psychologist, she began to consider completing her own primary education, which she had previously been unable to finish. With the support of the centre's psychologist and social mediator, she enrolled in the "Sveti Sava" school for adult education, where she completed the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades and earned her primary school diploma. Recognizing her motivation, the centre's team then included her in a professional vocational training program, allowing her to choose the course that suited her best; she decided on a seamstress course.

During her internship, a very practical problem arose: the work hours were not aligned with her childcare responsibilities, so she often arrived at her practice with her children, who would wait for her outside the salon. Despite this, she completed the training as one of the most successful participants. As recognition for her hard work, her instructor gifted her a sewing machine, which enabled her to start working from home and providing small tailoring services within her settlement.

This story shows that for women in the Roma community, sustainable progress often occurs only when educational support, psychological empowerment, practical training, and an understanding of the beneficiary's family obligations are combined.

From Domestic Violence to Independence and Security

S. B. from Požarevac faced a multifaceted crisis involving domestic violence,

urgent social needs, a lack of basic means for survival, and the absence of personal documents. In such situations, employment is not the first step, but the final one; prior to that, it is necessary to establish basic legal and life security. Support was provided to her at the Career and Community Centre in Požarevac through the work of a legal advisor, a psychologist, and a social mediator.

The Centre helped her exercise her right to one-time financial assistance and then guided her through the complex process of obtaining documents, as she did not have a registered residence. Following communication with the police and the Centre for Social Work, residency registration was enabled, which allowed for the acquisition of an ID card, passport, and health insurance card.

Only once these fundamental obstacles were overcome was the next step initiated: enrolment in adult education, registration with the National Employment Service, attendance at business plan development training, and the completion of documentation for establishing employment.

In addition, the psychologist provided support to both her and her daughters, who also required academic assistance after enrolling in school in Požarevac. The final outcome was employment and a stable income to support herself and her two children. This case convincingly demonstrates the importance of comprehensive support: parallel work on resolving legal status, education, psychological stability, and labour activation led to employment and a sense of security and independence.

Even the Toughest Situations Do Not Have to Be Hopeless

M. P. from Požarevac represents an example of a beneficiary whose employment challenges cannot be separated from a deep familial, legal, and existential crisis. He lived with his wife and five young children in conditions of severe financial insecurity, without having exercised his rights to various social benefits, while simultaneously facing interventions from competent authorities regarding child protection. He received support at the Career and Community Centre in Požarevac through free legal and psychological assistance. The intervention began with an assessment of possibilities for exercising rights within the social protection system, but it quickly became clear that the family did not have immediate access even to one-time assistance, which

further intensified the sense of helplessness. Psychological support was therefore focused on stabilizing the beneficiary and providing empowerment in a situation of acute stress and uncertainty. In parallel, the legal advisor contacted the relevant authorities to check on parental allowances, social assistance, and food packages, and later intervened when the children were removed from the family and proceedings were initiated before the Centre for Social Work and the court.

The legal advisor drafted requests, appeals, and petitions, attended case conferences, and worked to ensure the family received information, protection of their rights, and visitation opportunities with the children. Additionally, the family was provided access to a soup kitchen as a minimum level of existential support. This example demonstrates that for families in a multifaceted crisis, a holistic approach is of decisive importance: before labour activation can even be discussed, it is necessary to simultaneously protect the legal position of the family, maintain psychological stability, and ensure basic living conditions.

5. Conclusion

The project “Economic and Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees” intervened in a space where the gap between strategic commitments and their operational application is most evident—overcoming the multiple barriers that beneficiaries face in the processes of socio-economic inclusion, to which existing public policy implementation mechanisms often fail to provide an adequate response. The relevance of such an intervention was not a project assumption but an empirically confirmed necessity.

In this context, the project results confirm the operational efficiency and value of an integrated approach. More than 130 beneficiaries transitioned toward employment, internships, or self-employment; approximately 400 students continued their schooling with continuous educational and psychosocial support; more than 800 beneficiaries submitted requests to exercise various rights before competent institutions; and three local documents formally recognized the work of the centres and incorporated elements of the model into local social inclusion policies. All planned outcomes were fully achieved or exceeded.

Equally important as the indicators themselves is the manner in which these results were achieved—the application of a coordinated approach within an integrated support model. Vocational training conducted directly in the work environment reduces the barriers encountered in standard employment processes; educational continuity becomes sustainable when academic support is linked with the psychological stabilization of students and the active involvement of parents; the transition to formal work presupposes a regulated administrative status and access to rights as fundamental prerequisites. It is precisely this architecture of integrated support, rather than just the volume of individual activities, which explains the model’s effectiveness.

The sustainability of the model is based on three interconnected elements: empowering beneficiaries to independently utilize existing institutional mechanisms, establishing stable cooperation between the centres and local institutions, and translating experiences from direct field work with beneficiaries into local public policies. The experiences of Kragujevac and Požarevac show that local self-governments can recognize such an approach and operationalize it through specific professional profiles, support measures, and coordination mechanisms, thereby opening space for its inclusion in local inclusion policy planning processes. In this sense, scaling the model does not involve a simple transfer of project procedures, but rather the institutionalization of the approach. Its application requires minimal operational conditions: a local carrier with credibility in the community, stable inter-sectoral cooperation between key institutions, and clearly defined protocols for referral and coordination, within which the project methodology can function as a permanent practice of local policies rather than a time-limited project intervention.

Overall, the project “Economic and Social Inclusion of Roma and Returnees” demonstrates that an integrated support model focused on the multifaceted needs of beneficiaries can produce measurable and sustainable shifts in employment, education, and access to rights for those furthest from institutional mechanisms. Its significance transcends individual project results: the project has demonstrated an operational model that connects strategic public policy goals with concrete support mechanisms at the local level. In the context of stagnant Roma employment despite educational investments and persistent labour market barriers, such an approach represents an empirically grounded direction for improving socio-economic inclusion policies and practices in Serbia.

6. Support Measures for Improving Public Policies

6.1 National Level

1. Support Measures for Improving Public Policies

The experience of this and other projects shows that the challenges faced by local Roma and returnees cannot be successfully resolved through separate support measures in the fields of education, employment, social protection, and legal aid. It is necessary to develop and institutionally recognize a model of integrated, targeted support that accompanies the beneficiary in resolving various interconnected problems—from securing documents and providing support to remain in primary, secondary, and higher levels of education, to labour activation and family stabilization.

(The experience of this and similar projects demonstrates that the challenges of local Roma and returnees cannot be successfully resolved through isolated sectoral support measures. It is necessary to develop an institutionally recognized model of integrated support that follows the beneficiary through key stages of inclusion—from resolving administrative status and access to education to employment and family stabilization.)

At the national level, this approach should be incorporated into relevant strategies and programs for the social inclusion of Roma, with the establishment of multidisciplinary teams and clear cooperation protocols between the educational system, employment services, the social protection system, and other competent institutions. The introduction of a case management model for beneficiaries with multiple barriers is of particular importance, ensuring that support is coordinated and continuous.)

2. Adapt active employment policy support measures for beneficiaries with multiple barriers.

Existing support measures often do not reach the most vulnerable beneficiaries, as they are not sufficiently linked to other forms of support nor do they always correspond to the actual needs of the local labour market. There-

fore, it is necessary for employment programs to be based on a prior assessment of the barriers beneficiaries face and to be linked to an individual support plan, mentoring during training or employment, and post-placement support. This approach increases the likelihood of sustainable employment, while significantly reducing the risk of formal participation in programs without a lasting effect. Existing employment support measures often fail to reach the most marginalized beneficiaries because they lack integration with other support services and do not always align with real-world local market demands. Consequently, employment programs should integrate a preliminary barrier assessment, individual support planning, mentoring throughout the training and hiring phases, and follow-up support once the beneficiary is employed. Such a structure ensures that interventions move beyond being merely procedural and instead foster long-term socio-economic stability.

3. Develop a clear intersectoral protocol for the reintegration of returnee families from abroad.

Experience from this project shows that, upon arriving in Serbia, returnee families often face the need to simultaneously resolve issues regarding children's schooling, obtaining documentation, accessing social and health rights, and securing sources of income. Therefore, it is necessary to improve existing cooperation mechanisms between schools, centres for social work, police departments, health institutions, and employment services through more clearly defined coordination and referral protocols. In this process, it is important to systematically involve civil society organizations that have experience collaborating with returnees and other vulnerable groups, both in improving institutional solutions and through the development and licensing of community support services.

4. Reduce administrative barriers as a prerequisite for inclusion in education and work.

In a series of cases, unresolved residency, lack of personal documents, or difficult access to rights still represent the first and greatest obstacle to the inclusion of returnees from abroad into the system. Despite significant

progress in this area, field experience shows that there is still room for the state to simplify and accelerate procedures for issuing documents, registering residency, and exercising basic rights for high-risk beneficiaries, as without these, neither education nor formal employment is realistically accessible.

5. Improve the fight against discrimination of Roma men and women in the labour process through intensified cooperation with employer organizations and individual employers.

In the preceding period, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality took important steps in sensitizing employers to the issues of vulnerable groups and discrimination. It is necessary to further strengthen mechanisms for protection against discrimination during the hiring process and in the workplace. This includes supporting Roma men and women, as well as other vulnerable groups, through mediation with employers and developing clearer institutional responses to ethnic and gender discrimination in the labour market at the national, local, and corporate levels. This is particularly crucial given the current labour shortage and the opportunities for the activation of vulnerable groups.

6. Specially adapt support measures to the needs of young Roma women and single parents.

The success stories highlighted in this project demonstrate that women often progress only when support is adapted to their real-life circumstances, including childcare, limited mobility, family pressures, experiences of violence, or long-term social isolation. This applies to Roma individuals as well as other vulnerable groups. Therefore, active employment policy programs must provide for more flexible forms of training, support for balancing family obligations, and additional empowerment mechanisms for women from multiply excluded groups.

6.2 Local Level

1. Institutionalize local support centres or similar integrated community points.

One of the most important lessons of the project is that sustainable results occur where there is an easily accessible local support site that beneficiaries trust and which can guide them through different support systems simultaneously. It is therefore recommended that local self-governments recognize such centres as part of the local infrastructure for social inclusion and support them through local action plans, other local policy instruments, and appropriate budget lines.

2. Provide for specific professional profiles in local action plans and budgets.

The experiences of this and similar projects show that successful intersectoral cooperation largely depends on the existence of multidisciplinary teams of experts—such as psychologists, legal advisors, and social mediators—who have direct access to vulnerable communities and enjoy their trust. Local self-governments are therefore recommended to clearly plan for these professional profiles in local action plans and secure funding for their work through regular budget lines dedicated to supporting vulnerable groups.

3. Formalize referrals and cooperation between schools, centres for social work, the National Employment Service (NES), local administration, and community organizations.

The successes of the project relied on beneficiaries being guided through various institutions, rather than attempting to navigate complex procedures on their own. It is therefore vital for local self-governments to establish clear cooperation and referral protocols between key institutions and community organizations, with defined roles and responsibilities, to reduce the risk of beneficiaries “falling out” of the system at critical transition points.

4. Focus special attention on critical transitions in the lives of beneficiaries.

Local policies should particularly support those moments when the risk of exclusion is highest: returning from abroad, transitioning from school to the labour market, escaping violence, entering adult education, or the first attempt at formal employment. It is precisely at these transitional points that integrated local support has the greatest impact.

5. Ensure fieldwork, mediation, and direct support within the community.

Many beneficiaries cannot independently access institutions, training, or the labour market without prior trust, mediation, and practical support. Therefore, local self-governments should support fieldwork, accompanying beneficiaries, mediation with institutions, and activities within the communities themselves—especially regarding young girls, women, returnees, and families in acute crisis.

6. Link local vocational training with actual labour market needs and the life circumstances of beneficiaries.

The experiences of local self-governments show that the best employment results are achieved when training is linked to real market needs. It is necessary for local self-governments, in cooperation with employers and employment services, to select programs that correspond to local demand, while also considering whether beneficiaries can realistically attend them given transportation, family obligations, and other barriers. Otherwise, training remains merely a formal outcome without a transition into employment.

7. Recognize psychosocial support as an integral part of improving employability.

Experiences from this and numerous other projects show that motivation, self-confidence, family stability, experiences of violence, or long-term isolation directly affect a beneficiary's readiness to enter education, training, or a job. Therefore, psychosocial support should not be viewed as a second-

ary social service, but as a vital part of the pathway toward inclusion in education and work.

8. Support measure actual outcomes per beneficiary, not just the number of services and activities.

It is particularly important for local self-governments to track whether a beneficiary obtained documents, enrolled in school, completed training, found employment, or stabilized their family situation—especially after short-term donor-supported programs end. Only such an approach allows for the true impact of the support provided by local self-governments during the implementation of donor projects to be seen.

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