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| **TANJUG**  **by Vera Raskov – Djurovic** |

**“Save the children, all of them”**

BELGRADE, Nov 16 (Tanjug-spec)  – The realisation of the rights of the Roma, particularly the inclusion of the Roma children in the society’s educational system, represents a crucial step in improving the status of this most numerous community in Serbia which consists of more 450,000 people.

Unfavourable economic conditions, as well as a poor understanding of educational institutions for the specific position of the Roma, reduce the possibility of the education of these children, who begin to work and earn money when they are still very small by begging in the streets or searching garbage. Many of these children, even though there are only six or younger, spend their time strolling the streets, they are left to themselves and have no care or protection of the grown ups.

Although they have a family, a certain number of Roma children are put in institutions for children without parental care, institutions for mentally disabled children or those for juvenile delinquents.

This is why the project Protection of Roma Children – Follow Up and Representation, which was realised by the Children’s Rights Centre and Save the Children organisation in Vranje and Pirot, was aimed at developing the mechanisms and skills for a follow up of Roma status and for the protection of their rights.

In scope of this project, the violated human rights of Roma children have been defended on seven occasions up to now - 19 Roma children from three elementary schools and 18 children from the special school Mladost, with the participation of the children’s parents.

Most of the relatives said on the occasion that they wanted their children to work once they finished elementary school, their explanation being that they did not have enough money for their further education.

Representatives of the Children’s Rights Centre and Save the Children organisation worked on motivating the parents and make them understand that their children needed further education, and corresponding centres for social care also took part to this end by providing one-time material assistance so as to cover the costs of private math and Serbian language teachers who were preparing the children for admission tests.

All the children attended the classes regularely until the very end of the programme, which lasted almost a year, and they all passed the secondary school admission test.

The Roma Cultural Centre in Vranje pointed in particular to the poor social and economic status of the Hiseni family and their six children, who were internally displaced from Kosovo and Metohija.

The Hiseni family lived in poor living conditions, their civic and legal status was not resolved, so that their children had no health insurance or right to education.

The aim of the participants of this project was to help that the members of this family, particularly the children, be given the right to health insurance and that they enrolled in school.

Through the action of representing the rights of Roma families, the activists worked on obtaining the documents required for health insurance and the children’s enrolling in schools, an operation which took some time and which parents also took part in later on.

The efforts were not in vain, and the all the children, as well as their parents, got health insurance booklets.

When it comes to the Hiseni children’s inclusion into the educational system, the problem was the enrollment itself, because the children, especially the younger ones, had never been part of any educational system before that, or had never gone to school ever since they had fled Kosovo.

In the end, they succeeded in enrolling the eldest child, who was too old for school, in an evening school. As for the other children, the procedure has not been completed yet, because the children have to enroll different classes.

A Roma boy (17) from Vranjska Banja, in Southern Serbia, had a problem because he did not have the right to work and had no health insurance. None of the other four members of his family worked.

The activists helped the young man to be registered in the National Employment Service, and they even succeeded in verifying his work record card which shows that he was looking for work even before this, but for some reason he was not on the official list of the unemployed.

With the help of the activists, and in cooperation with local structures, Roma families, who did not have money to pay for birth certificates, managed to enroll their children in kindergartens. The action included 22 Roma children who obtained their birth certificates free of charge, and all of them were enrolled in kindergartens till September.

The activists also helped five other Roma young people, aged from 16 to 18, to be registered as unemployed persons, which was a condition for the financing of their further education.

The programme on representing and assisting the Roma also included the case of a Roma girl, who was sent back to Serbia during the readmission process in Germany and who, once in Novi Sad, managed to graduate from the local School of Philology with excellent marks.

The problem she was faced with was that she could not enroll in faculty she wanted because her family could not afford to pay traveling costs. After contacts with the Vranje mayor, the girl was given financial assistance and she passed the entrance exam. Owing to the special facilitations for the Roma population, the girl achieved the status of student financed from the budget.

According to the system of so-called positive discrimination, assistance was also given to a young man from Vranje who, although he did not have enough points to pass the entrance exam at the faculty he wanted to enroll, was included in the group of students financed from the budget.

All these examples, according to the Protection of Roma Children - Follow Up and Representation, prove that such models of assistance to the Roma community should be further developed, that its members should be encouraged on their path, as well as that the local community, the authorities in the health and educational field should be constantly reminded of their obligation to observe the rights of the Roma, as one of the most jeopardised ethnic communities.