

ROMA EDUCATION FUND ROMANIA

2009 – 2023

DEDICATED TO STRENGTHENING ROMA
COMMUNITY RESILIENCE IN ROMANIA FOR 14
YEARS

This document aims to showcase REF ROMANIA's **strengths**, including its capacity to execute projects for the benefit of Roma communities. Additionally, it emphasizes REF ROMANIA's ability to enhance **quality education** services through innovative approaches. Lastly, the document highlights the organization's effective **donor relations** and the positive impact of its funding on the Roma communities it serves.



ROMA EDUCATION FUND NETWORK & ROMA EDUCATION FUND ROMANIA

Roma Education Fund (REF) is an international organization that was founded in 2005 by the World Bank and Open Society Foundations. REF influenced systemic changes in education systems and fostered Roma participation and documented best practices for policy reforms and programs. With an active and growing network of representative offices across Central, Eastern, Southeastern Europe and Turkey, REF provides support to entities and individuals who share its belief in quality and inclusive education. Roma Education Fund Romania (REF RO) is part of the REF network, championing the education services in Romania and around its neighboring countries.

Over the past almost 20 years since its founding, REF network invested around 150 Mil. Eur. in diverse educational projects, benefiting over 100,000 Roma of all ages across 16 countries.

Among REF's Donors there are: Open Society Foundations, World Bank, Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ), the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants, the Austrian Development Agency (ADA), the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the German Government – Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the European Union through the European Social Fund (ESF), European Commission through the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), the VELUX Foundations etc.

The present document is meant to highlight the strengths of REF RO in terms of capacity to implement projects in the benefit of Roma communities; ability to foster quality education services and innovate in education approaches; as well as in terms of donor relations and funding impact for the Roma communities it serves.



ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AS A FUEL FOR STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITIES

REF network has almost 20 years of experience in grant-making and the direct implementation of EU funds since its establishment in 2005. REF implements educational projects according to five models for all levels of education – early childhood education and care, primary education, secondary school education, tertiary education, and adult education.

By the same token, REF RO is set to implement the REF network agenda in Romania, as well as in Romania's neighboring countries. Through its network, REF covers more than 16 countries in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, as well as the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Founded in 2009 by the Roma Education Fund in Switzerland, the Roma Education Fund (REF) Romania is a non-governmental organization dedicated to quality education and education services for Roma children, students, and parents.

Since its founding, REF RO has been implementing and promoting educational projects and activities focused on the developing models of quality education, reaching out, through its project and actions, to around **300 communities**, involving the Roma communities in those areas, as well as the education establishments (more than **550 education establishments**). REF Romania has, thus, become an important factor in the field of Roma education in Romania, focusing on developing constructive dialogue and cooperation with stakeholders and with relevant state institutions in the field of education, both at the central and the local levels.

Since 2009, REF Romania has implemented over **30 projects**, 14 of them being funded through the European funds, placing REF RO as one of the most relevant actors among the REF network to substantially fundraise, especially through the European Social Fund (ESF). In 14 of these projects, REF Romania acted as the main applicant, rendering it into a key player for both mobilizing partnerships and resources in the interest of Roma communities. The resources mobilized through the ESF funding are amounting to around 19 Mil. Eur., whereas the entire resources fundraised by REF RO since its founding are amounting to 27 Mil. Eur. of projects contracted in the country. In addition to that, the total revenues of REF RO since its establishment raise to approx. **38 Mil. Eur.** (including grants fundraised, as well as resources for core support).

Romanian President Klaus Iohannis was an honored guest at the tenth anniversary celebration of REF Romania.



ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AS A FUEL FOR STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITIES

Among the major donors of the entire REF network, apart from the ESF, the following ones have also become non-competitive awarding and recurrent donors of REF and, consequently, of REF RO as well: European Commission through the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations - DG NEAR (approx. 8.3 Mil. Eur.); Norway Grants (approx. 3 Mil. Eur.); VELUX Foundations (approx. 4.5 Mil. Eur.), and EVZ Foundation (2.7 Mil. Eur.)

For these latter 4 major donors of the organization and the resources provided along, it has to be noted that they contributed to both non-competitive and restricted funding (which represents an institutional recognition of both the capacity and the impact of the organization in the field of education), as well as recurrent funding (which is an acknowledgement of the impact of the organization).

Thus, apart for the ESF-type of fundraising, REF RO became a major key player in mobilizing non-competitive funding (Norwegian Fund, DG Near Funds, VELUX Foundations, EVZ funding), totaling approx. 10 Mil. Eur. fundraised on its behalf out of the total of 18.5 Mil. Eur. that these donors have provided as funding for the entire REF network.

In a nutshell, for REF RO, as compared to its total revenues since 2009, which is approx. 38 Mil. Eur., a portion of around 19 Mil. Eur. is represented by ESF funding, and a portion of approx. 10 Mil. Eur. is represented by non-competitive, recurrent funding (which amounts to more than 25% and which is a testament for both effective implementation, as well as impact acknowledgement of the work of REF in the service of Roma communities).

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AS A FUEL FOR STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITIES

In terms of measurable impact, over the past 14 years since its founding, REF Romania has supported over 1.800 preschool children; 3.200 primary school children; 5.000 students of secondary education, over 500 students of tertiary education, over 10.000 parents and around 2.000 individuals part of adult education programs, and almost 4.000 Teachers, Mentors, and Tutors, as well as other beneficiaries from the communities it served.

Given the organization's extensive experience in implementing projects on a large geographical scale, its network of schools and experts at the national level (covering all eight development regions: North East, North West, Centre, South East, South Muntenia, Bucharest Ilfov, South West, and West), as well as its national visibility (REF Romania being a benchmark organization in Roma education), the organization is seen as a partner capable of contributing to the achievement of the project's objectives.



ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AS A FUEL FOR STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITIES



The total budget obtained in these years from external donors was around 27 Mil. Eur. (ESF funds 19 Mil. Eur.). In total, REF RO implemented over 30 projects, with several donors, involving over 30.000 beneficiaries, with more than 550 education establishments, working with around 300 communities all over Romania, in which, cumulatively, there were implemented at least 4 intervention cycles, mobilizing ESF-based resources.

At the international level, REF is part of the "First Years First Priority", a Europe-wide campaign set up to advocate for prioritization of early childhood development in public policies, with a particular focus on families and children who are at greater risk of discrimination and exclusion. The campaign focuses on prioritizing children from birth to 6 years, with a special attention to the first 1,000 days. The Campaign is rooted in an understanding that, from the day they are born, all children are rights holders despite their dependency status.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AS A FUEL FOR STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITIES

In Romania, the foundation is a member of the Roma Sounding Board (RSB), established at the World Bank initiative. RSB is a network of competitively selected civic society organizations with expertise in Roma social and economic inclusion. Through the RSB, the World Bank provides Roma organizations a platform through which the needs and concerns of the communities are voiced. These are further reflected in the World Bank's strategic engagement on social inclusion which aims to help reduce poverty in the country and foster sustainable income growth for the bottom 40 percent of the population.

REF is also a prominent member of the Romanian Coalition for Education, a federation established by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) actively involved in the field of education. The Coalition's mission is to unite energies and resources to realize a bold vision of learning in Romania. Comprising NGOs with extensive experience spanning over a decade, the coalition serves beneficiaries across various educational levels, including preschoolers, pupils, students, educators, and parents.

Also in Romania, REF is a member of the Monitoring Committee for the Operational Program for Education and Employment 2021-2027 (POEO 2021-2027), the Operational Program for Inclusion and Social Dignity 2021-2027 (PoIDS 2021 - 2027), and for the National Recovery and Resilience Program (PNRR 2021-2027). The monitoring committees are national partnership structures, without legal personality, with a strategic decision-making role in the implementation process of operational programs, which will meet throughout the entire programming period to examine the implementation of programs and the progress made in achieving their objectives.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY AS A FUEL FOR STRENGTH OF THE COMMUNITIES

The financial capacity of the foundation can be assessed through the lens of its annual recorded revenues. Over the period 2018–2023, REF Romania’s total revenues are as such:

Total revenues 2018 = 849.734 Eur.

Total revenues 2019 = 1.972.966 Eur.

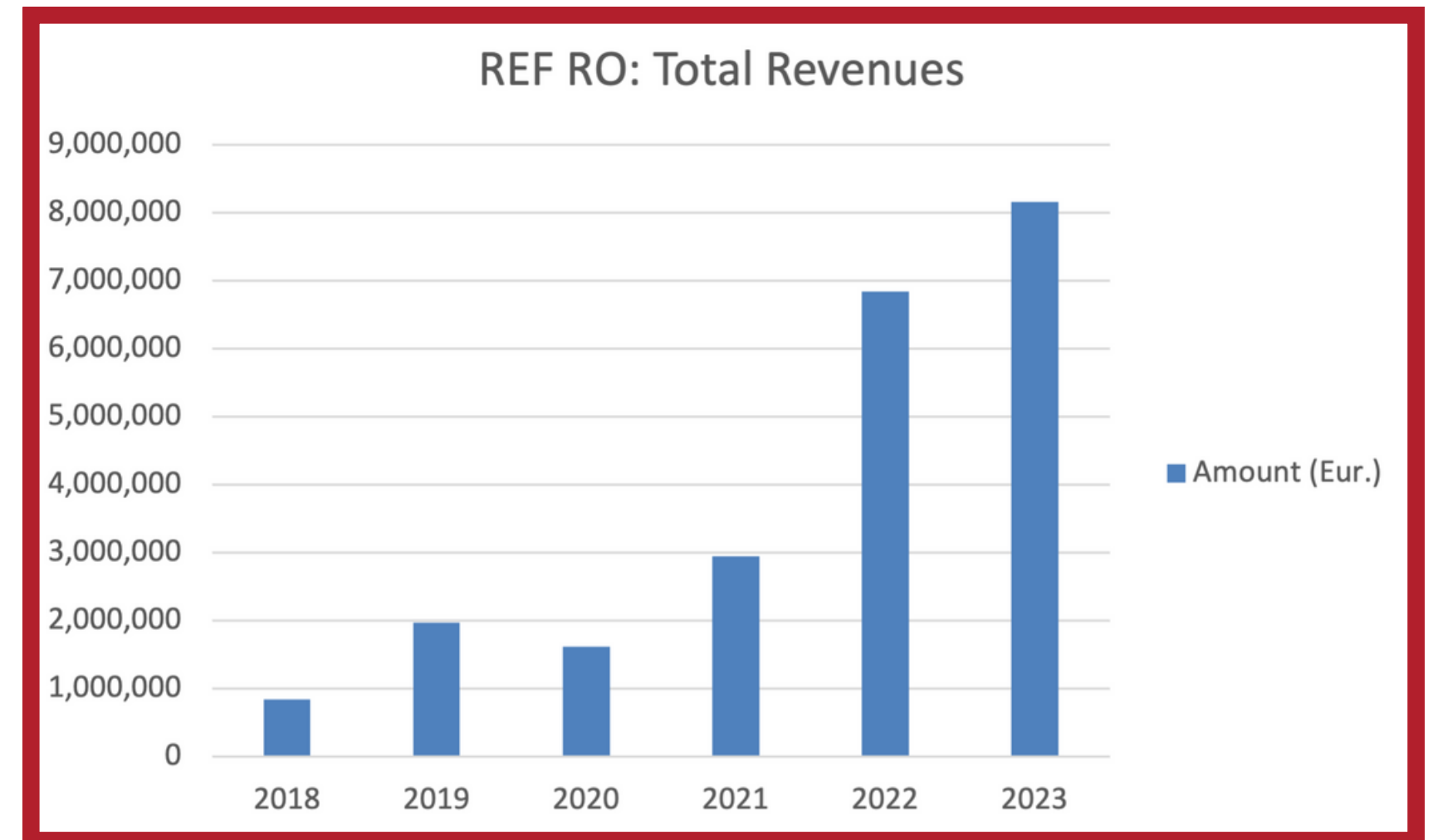
Total revenues 2020 = 1.618.098 Eur.

Total revenues 2021 = 2.950.035 Eur.

Total revenues 2022 = 6.849.075 Eur.

Total revenues 2023 = approx. 8.163.800 Eur.

In a nutshell, in terms of fundraising from 2018 to 2023, the organization grew around 10 times than the baseline of 2018. When comparing the same period with the entire network’s fundraising capability, REF RO amounted for around 45% of the global fundraising capabilities of the entire network of REF. The fundraising efforts of REF RO during 2018–2023 amounted to approx. 22 Mil. Eur. whereas the efforts of the entire REF network (in which REF RO is included) were at around 50 Mil. Eur. for the same period.



REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

Since its founding in 2009, REF RO was committed to contribute to closing the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma, through substantial educational services. Through its projects since the founding, REF was committed in investing in the development of the capabilities of the Teachers, to make them know how to interact with Roma children and how to respect their individuality.

Also, with the educational interventions, REF always bases its support through the involvement of the community – throughout its projects, it established more than 100 local support groups (formed of parents & local stakeholders) and involved them to act related education and to demand from the local authorities to solve the needs to the community related to education (and, consequently, for authorities to invest better in communities when it comes to representing the problems of Roma communities). Related to infrastructure, REF is always committed to invest in buildings, refurbishments, renovations etc. and it has done so, especially via funding from the Norway Grants.

The entire infrastructure is done with a focus to have something left for the community once the intervention is completed, thus creating a long-lasting effect for the communities. REF developed various models and projects that certainly made some positive contributions. As an indication, some progress could be registered in education, as opposed to other priority areas, during the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015. Scholarships for Roma students were one of the most visible activities, supporting over 8.000 beneficiaries with more than 35.000 scholarships provided.

REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

In the past years however, the organization made a switch to its approach, building upon the hitherto gains and results over its interventions and putting education to work at the next level. In a nutshell, REF currently works towards increasing the resilience of Roma communities in the face of social, economic, environmental, and political changes and crises through education.

All of the above-mentioned approaches to education amounted to a series of quality education initiatives in the communities REF has served since its founding.

REF Romania has significant experience and specific competencies in project management targeting Roma communities. In almost 15 years since its establishment in Romania, the organization has implemented educational projects worth of around 27 Mil. Eur. in all development regions of the country. Educational programs served a wide range of beneficiaries, including preschool and school children, students, adults and communities. Through these educational programs, REF has successfully piloted, tested, and consolidated successful educational models for Roma communities. The organization has mobilized resources and individuals to support these communities, consistently incorporating innovation, digitalization, interculturality, diversity, and resilience in all its programs, essential elements for sustainable development.

Another key characteristic of the organization is its integrated community-level intervention, aiming to involve as many stakeholders (children, educators, parents, institutions) as possible in interventions to ensure their long-term sustainability.

REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

Ready Set Go! – RSG (2014–2017) – along with this project set-up in 2014, Roma Education Fund Romania introduced innovative educational tools and setups. The project (i.e. Ready Set Go! – RSG/Ro: Pe locuri, fiți gata, start!), funded by the Norwegian Financial Mechanism 2009–2014, aimed to improve Early Childhood development outcomes for Roma children.

In addition to the primary objective, the project enhanced the competence of its beneficiaries, community cohesion and integration in the targeted localities, and the quality of Early Childhood Development (ECD) services provided by public institutions. The project covered 11 localities in Romania.

The RSG project (2014–2017) successfully achieved its results through creating access for Roma children in kindergarten facilities (i.e. 14 kindergarten groups), involving children in institutional quality ECD services, and through improving parental skills and practices. From the perspective of the achieved results, the RSG project constituted itself as an integrated approach to enhancing the quality of ECD services in Romania – it started from renovating/rehabilitating 14 kindergarten places and additional rooms for Toy Libraries; it continued with establishing quality ECD services for children in 11 localities (kindergarten program for 14 kindergarten groups), being accompanied by innovative means of developing children' learning outcomes (Toy Libraries and Community events); and it also correlated the development of the learning outcomes for children with the improvement of parenting skills and practices (involving caregivers in reading sessions – Your Story, and Educator-for-a-day sessions – Home School Community Liaisons).



Bringing a lot of innovation in education through the above-mentioned services, the project had the following impact:

- it ensured access to ECD services and provided improved learning environment for children;
- it complemented the institutional ECD services with the establishment of an innovative means of quality ECD service – Toy Library;
- it offered quality ECD services for 14 kindergarten groups and it involved the parents in the process;
- it offered parental assistance and support in order to complement the ECD institutional services with improved parental practices and community outreach;

REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

Another innovative intervention was made through the project Together for a better life! (2018-2021). The innovation of this project was brought about by the integrated approach to education services (targeting both education services and community development).

The objective of the project was to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion for 620 individuals living in marginalized areas with Roma population in Varasti commune, Giurgiu county, through the implementation of measures aimed at integrated local development, focusing on a multisectoral approach, correlating and ensuring complementarity between investments in infrastructure and those aimed at developing human capital. Within this project, REF Romania has the role of a partner responsible for implementing the educational component: developing educational program methodologies and implementing educational measures for preschool and ante-preschool children, primary school children and lower secondary school children, providing didactic mentoring to teachers, and support measures for children to participate in project activities.

REF has always had an integrated approach to educational services at the community level to act as a catalyst from multiple directions and to involve as many stakeholders as possible in a child's education - from parents and educators to local institutions and the community as a whole, contributing to a child's education.



REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

Additionally, alongside the integrated approach, REF considers in-depth, complex, and integrated intervention concerning the ages of beneficiary children, with integrated intervention programs starting from early childhood (0-3 years), preschool, primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

For **preschool education & ECD services**, REF offers a personalized kindergarten program tailored to the needs identified in each community where intervention takes place: either an extended kindergarten program (subsequently taken over by state institutions) or friendly kindergarten sessions (educational program after the normal kindergarten program). In each of these possibilities of organizing the service, adapted and innovative educational materials are used. Within the implemented projects, REF has innovated the following educational programs complementary to the kindergarten program: Toy Library (a space equipped with games, toys, and books, where children from project localities can borrow and use educational materials), Your Story Program (a series of discussions through which caregivers learn how to read stories to children and support their educational development), and Home School Community Liaisons (HSCL - a program aimed at building trust in the educational processes by empowering children's families to become educators and present lessons to children in kindergartens).

For **primary education**, REF provides a School after-school program (SaS) - incorporating tailored, needs-based methodologies for children from vulnerable communities, inspired by Montessori pedagogy, and equipped with spaces containing quality educational materials. A parenting program for parents and caregivers is also being introduced in actions for the primary level, offering sessions on methods to provide support. Other additional services introduced in the customized program include play-and-stay sessions, designed to promote learning through playing, scholarships and meals for participants/children, reading & playing centers/reading corners set up in project locations where children can read, play, and engage in educational activities.



REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

For **secondary education**, REF offers a range of interventions under the program named Intensive Educational Support (IES/SEI), which entails tutoring sessions on various subject matters, with a focus on the main subjects for national exams, aiming to improve chances of success in high school admission. Mentorship sessions based on role models, where young Roma act as educational models for students, promoting education, self-esteem promotion, and personal development play an extremely important role for this age group. Other additional services introduced in the customized program include counseling sessions, self-esteem development, organizing camps and social events, scholarships, school supplies, digitalization classes, storytelling sessions, reading & playing centers/reading corners, mentoring and pedagogical assistance, etc.

For **tertiary education**, REF provides an intervention based on mentoring and tutoring, complemented by courses in foreign languages, IT, Romani language and culture, small project competitions between students, internship opportunities, scholarships, advocacy camps. The programs for tertiary education are customized according to the specificity of the educational projects and adapted to the identified needs. Apart from the above-mentioned services, the organization also provided scholarship support in all of its countries of intervention, including in Romania.

For **adult education**, REF offers educational programs that operate on two levels: either the complementary program to the conventional education system - the Second Chance Program, which includes primary and lower secondary education support, or vocational training courses for acquiring a profession and getting the first job on the labor market. Other additional services introduced in the customized program include provision of school supplies, parenting and nutrition programs, parent initiative groups to empower them, counseling services, vocational and employability support for beneficiaries, job fairs and employability sessions, scholarships, initiatives promoting intercultural and friendly environments in schools.

REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

ROMANIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS RECOGNIZED SOME OF REF ROMANIA'S PROJECTS AS MODELS OF BEST PRACTISES

Several of the organization's projects have been nominated as good practice projects and included in the National Reform Program, assessing the impact of several interventions, which granted our organization the status of a relevant NGO in the Romanian market. The services provided within the three projects are aimed at the most vulnerable communities and children belonging to the Roma minority, with interventions proving to be genuinely beneficial to them, in accordance with the findings of the report, page 22.

"School after school - the first step towards academic and professional success" ID 55876 (2010-2013) - The project was focused on reducing the rate of early school leaving by increasing access to quality primary education for Roma children. Specific objectives: preventing early school leaving for a total of 2.269 children from 50 schools in the three targeted development regions; improving academic results and school attendance for 2.269 children; developing integrated programs to increase access and participation in primary education for children belonging to vulnerable groups; increasing awareness among 20.000 Roma students and parents about the importance of education. The sound results of the implemented project rendered it into becoming a good practice model of intervention. The reference to the mentioning of REF's project as a good practice can be found here, at page 85.

REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

ROMANIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS RECOGNIZED SOME OF REF ROMANIA'S PROJECTS AS MODELS OF BEST PRACTISES

"Formal and Non-Formal Education for Sustainable Development in the Center Region" - ID 106443 (2018-2021) - The project had an integrated, double-impact approach that included both preventive measures (providing a mentoring, guidance, school and vocational counseling package, including support services for parents), as well as remedial measures (providing Second Chance program for 200 adults). The educational activities for children were integrated from the point of view of their delivery (i.e. education coupled with mentoring, counseling, and support services), as well as formal, non-formal, and informal from the point of view of methodologies and approaches used to education. The activities for parents were related to the Second Chance program and parenting sessions. In addition, the project aimed to improve the skills of 260 teachers involved in measures to tackle early school leaving through training sessions, pedagogical assistance and exchanges of good practices.

Through the period of the implementation of the project, 1207 children, aged 0-14, benefited from the educational programs of the project (exceeding by 40% the planned target group); 516 tablets were provided for children taking part in the project educational programs distributed in the schools in the project; 1044 Montessori-type of educational materials for the children taking part in the educational programs were distributed and used during the activities; 820 backpacks and school supplies were provided for the participating children. The sound results of the implemented project rendered it into becoming a good practice model of intervention. The reference to the mentioning of REF's project as a good practice can be found [here](#), at page 8.

REF'S PRIMARY FOCUS: DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION

ROMANIAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS RECOGNIZED SOME OF REF ROMANIA'S PROJECTS AS MODELS OF BEST PRACTISES

CONNECTED to Education – Integrated Approach for Children Whose Parents Work Abroad ID 138823 (2021-2023) - The aim of the project was to provide individualized educational support and psycho-social support in order to stimulate participation in education for 270 children whose parents are working abroad from 5 communities in the North East and Center through integrated interventions of formal, non-formal and informal learning in education and development. Target group was formed of 53 children of preschool age; 159 school pupils of primary school age; 136 school pupils of lower secondary level; 219 parents. It is to be mentioned that, along with this project, for the first time since its founding, REF started to be engaged in offering tailored education services for children whose parents are abroad and working. Roma families who are facing these situations in Romania have not yet received proper support and, hence, with this project REF started to be focused on these types of services. Apart from the education services (which were offered for remedial actions and for creating inclusive environments, conducive for substantial learning for children), the project had a component of psychological support (offering the children the support in order to cope with the situation through which they are going). At the same time, the project also entailed support for the caregivers of the children (including counselling and support). The sound results of the implemented project rendered it into becoming a good practice model of intervention. The material highlighting the project as best-practice example is currently in its final stages of editing prior to be published.

REF ROMANIA: NURTURING ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION AND STRENGTHENING DONOR RELATIONS

For nearly twenty years, Roma Education Fund has served as a reliable partner for both private and public institutions. These institutions have generously funded REF initiatives, contributing nearly 150 Mil. Eur. since its founding in 2005, benefiting over 100,000 Roma of all ages across 16 countries. Notably, the Romanian branch alone has absorbed around 27 Mil. Eur. of this support through fundraising for grants.

Among the public institutions that have financed REF's educational programs, scholarships or grants are Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, European Commission and European Union through the European Social Fund, the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Netherland, KfW - Development Bank and the German Government, Council of Europe Development Bank (CEB), DFID Department for International Development, Government of Austria and Austrian Development Agency, Canadian International Development Agency, Department for International Development United Kingdom, Ministry of Human and Minorities Montenegro, Ministry of Finance Macedonia, The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Government of Spain, Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Finance from Slovenia, Government of Finland etc.

REF's top donor is also one of the organization's founding entities: Open Society Foundations that has supported the organization with more than 75 Mil. Eur. for the past two decades. Additionally, the foundation has a lengthy list of other private institutions that have generously supported REF's activities, strategy, mission, and vision, which is a great honor for the organization: Velux Foundations, Network of European Foundations, Help Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe V, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ), ERSTE Group AG, Bernard Van Leer Foundation, Sandor Demjan Foundation, Lego Fonden Denmark, Volkswagen Foundation etc.

REF ROMANIA: NURTURING ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION AND STRENGTHENING DONOR RELATIONS

Roma Education Fund has achieved remarkable returns on its investments. Its quantitative and, more importantly, qualitative outcomes have led numerous public institutions to incorporate it into various non-competitive and restrictive funding initiatives models. In 2022, the European Commission Directorate-General European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR) has funded the second phase of the project “EU Regional Action for Roma Education: Increased Education Support and Opportunities for Roma Students in the Western Balkans and Turkey (RARE). Additionally, the Austrian Development Agency has included the Roma Education Fund in their roster of trusted organizations for non-competitive funding.

