



DO YOU SEE ME?  
DIKHES LJİ MAN?  
DA LI M VEZ?

# HOW DOES POVERTY AFFECT CHILDREN?



The word 'Roma' or 'Romani' refers to Romani, Travellers, Sinti and other groups (Manouche, Gitano, Resande, Romer, Romanlar, Domlar, Lomlar, Kaale, Egyptians, Ashkali, Tattare, Gypsies, Scottish Travellers, Mandopolini, Ghurbeti, Beyash (Rudari/Ludari), Jevgjit and many others), most of whom adhere to notions of common origins, shared cultural practices and similar traditions.

Translation of these documents into English was supported by the International Step by Step Association and the Romani Early Years Network.

Gender specific words include all the people belonging to the listed groups regardless of their sex.

**CHILDREN LIVING IN LOW INCOME FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES LACK MOST OF THE THINGS ESSENTIAL FOR THEIR DEVELOPMENT, WHICH REFLECTS NEGATIVELY ON THEIR MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING AND EDUCATION.**

Poverty is much more wide-spread among the Romani population than among other groups or in society as a whole. As many as 8.9% of Romani (compared to 5.5% of other population) live in conditions of absolute poverty, whereas almost all Romani, i.e., 92.3% of them (compared to 42.0% of other population), live in relative poverty. The poverty of Romani in its essence is often deep-rooted and persistent and affects almost all aspects of the standard of living (housing, education, nutrition, health...). Around 50% of pre-school Romani children live in families receiving social assistance for their upkeep. Three out of four Romani families receiving social assistance with pre-school children live in longterm poverty.

**IN FAMILIES LIVING IN POVERTY AND IN EXTREMELY POOR COMMUNITIES – AS ARE MOST OF THE ROMANI COMMUNITIES – SCHOOL CHILDREN ARE FACED EVERY DAY BY EXTERNAL FACTORS AND OBSTACLES THAT HAVE A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON THEIR WILLINGNESS AND ABILITY TO LEARN. EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS HAVE THE POWER TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF THESE FACTORS AND HELP EACH CHILD TO REALIZE THEIR POTENTIALS.**

Their poverty rates sometimes can be as much as ten times higher than the poverty rates of other population.

Parents and children living in poverty face a significantly higher risk of:

- ▶ health and security issues
- ▶ acute and chronic stress
- ▶ emotional and social difficulties
- ▶ limited functioning of cognitive capacities.

<sup>1</sup> UNDP, Regional Bureau for Europe and Commonwealth of Independent States (2005) Faces of poverty, faces of hope. UNDP, Bratislava, Slovak Republic. <http://vulnerability.undp.sk>. The report presents the profile of vulnerability of Romani population in the countries participating in "The Decade of Romani Inclusion 2005-2015" (Bulgaria, The Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, and Serbia and Montenegro).

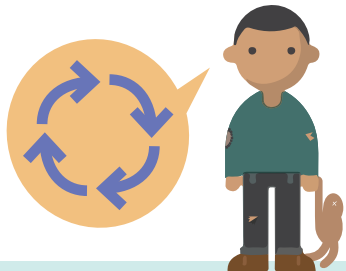
„Romska svakodnevnica u Hrvatskoj: prepreke i mogućnosti za promjenu" (Everyday Life of the Romani in Croatia: obstacles and opportunities for change), UN Agencies in Croatia: UNDP, UNHCR and UNICEF

The results of the research „Siromaštvo i materijalna dobrobit djece predškolske dobi u Republici Hrvatskoj", (Poverty and the material welfare of pre-school children in the Republic of Croatia) carried out for UNICEF in 2013 by a team of experts headed by dr Zoran Šućur from the Social work study center of the Faculty of Law of University of Zagreb

<sup>2</sup> Relative poverty is poverty of those people who are not able to participate in the minimum of a decent standard of living of the society they live in (i.e., they are not able to buy supplies or take part in the usual social activities). Absolute poverty includes situations where the families are unable to cover with the available financial resources those basic needs that enable their survival, health and work ability (food, clothing, housing, transportation etc.).

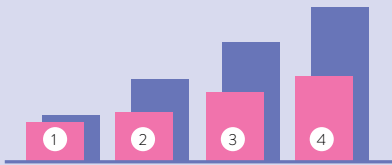
## THE VICIOUS CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ Children living in poverty, compared to children from better-off families, due to their living conditions (bad nutrition, frequent illness, less interaction with adults, exposure to a restricted vocabulary, lack of toys and picture books, exposure to stress) start to fall behind in their cognitive and socio-emotional development at an early age.
- ▶ When attending low quality schools, they fall behind their peers even more and they do not achieve good results at school.
- ▶ Due to poor results at school, there is a high probability of dropping out of further education.
- ▶ They enter adulthood with a low level of education and with no qualifications.
- ▶ The lower level of education and the health issues they suffer from, along with other factors, e.g., discrimination and poor social contacts, result in unemployment, poorly paid employment and 'black market' jobs.



**GOOD QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATION CAN BREAK THE CYCLE OF POVERTY. CHILDREN AND PARENTS LIVING IN POVERTY NEED ADDITIONAL EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.**

Research has shown that, with all other conditions being equal:

- 1 **Children living in poverty**, compared to **children from better-off families**, due to their living conditions (bad nutrition, frequent illness, less interaction with adults, exposure to a restricted vocabulary, lack of toys and picture books, exposure to stress) start to fall behind in their cognitive and socio-emotional development at an early age.
- 
- 2 When attending low quality schools, they fall behind their peers even more and they do not achieve good results at school.
  - 3 Due to poor results at school, there is a high probability of dropping out of further education.
  - 4 They enter adulthood with a low level of education and with no qualifications.

**GOOD SCHOOLS** are those where the teachers are well-versed in the content of the subjects they teach and whose students achieve good results thanks to the teaching process within the classroom. Good practice is based on developmental appropriateness, individualized approach and the awareness that learning occurs through interaction and dialogue between children and adults, as well as children among themselves, in the spirit of acknowledgement, encouragement and autonomy of the learner. Good teachers build on the belief that each child is a capable and complete being in need of help and support of adults.

**MISCONCEPTION!**  
**'It is their culture.'**

### REALITY.

Sometimes the effects of poverty are attributed to cultural properties instead to their real cause – poverty. This is especially true of the Romani culture, to which bad hygiene, no education and avoiding work and begging are attributed. Despite the distorted view about the existence of 'a culture of poverty', there is a lot of research that has shown that there is no such thing and that the difference in beliefs and behaviours between people living in poverty and in wealth are equal to the differences in beliefs and behaviours among people living in wealth. Hypotheses attributing poverty to cultural properties are false, associating caus-

es of social problems and inequalities to the individuals and groups, themselves victims of poverty.

## RISK FACTORS THAT CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY FACE

### Stereotypes and prejudice.

Due to the distorted view that consequences of poverty are properties of Romani culture and of other cultures with a high exposure to poverty, the children face stereotypes of them and their parents being 'lazy, disinterested, wanting to spend time in the streets, not caring about personal hygiene'. Due to these stereotypes, children develop a negative image of themselves and their abilities, which influences negatively their learning.

## SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ Work on professional training of their staff in order to jointly recognize the effects of poverty on their schools' students and create a plan to overcome these effects.
- ▶ Do not attribute effects of poverty to certain cultures and by that break the cycle of sustaining stereotypes and prejudices against the Romani and other extremely poor communities.
- ▶ Work on breaking the myth about people living in poverty being that way because they have not worked hard enough and that 'where there's a will, there's a way'.

## MISCONCEPTION!

**Poor parents do not value education. Children from poor families are lazy and disinterested. 'Where there's a will, there's a way!'**

Many believe that children living in poverty are disinterested and do not apply themselves because they are – just like their parents – lazy. Due to this misconception, educational staff has lower expectations from children coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds compared to other children. They believe, as they have been taught growing up, that 'where there is a will, there is a way'. This and similar beliefs are false and attribute the causes of problems and inequalities to the victims' characters, i.e., to the characters of children and adults living in poverty, not to the circumstances of their upbringing and living.

## REALITY.

There is no proof that there is a difference in attitudes towards education between parents from poor families and those from better-off families. Moreover, when it comes to Romani parents, research has shown that these parents, just like all others, recognize the importance of education and want the best education for their children. Educational staff often forgets that parents may express their interest for their children's education outside the schools, too. Parents from poor families are more likely to work in the 'black market' and/or in double shifts, which prevents them from meeting the requirements set by the schools. Furthermore, if they have a lower level of education, they often believe that they cannot help their children with school work or con-

tribute to their education and have complete trust in school staff. Parents living in poverty are usually stigmatized and left-out and know that their children will be unemployed after finishing school.

**PARENTS NOT COMING TO SCHOOL IS NOT ALWAYS A SIGN OF THEIR DISINTEREST FOR THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATION. RECONSIDER THEIR REASONS.**

## RISK FACTORS THAT CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY FACE

### Health problems.

Children growing up in poverty eat food of a lower nutritive value. Bad nutrition affects negatively the brain function of children. When they eat poorly, it is harder for children to listen, concentrate and learn. Bad nutrition affects the behaviour, too. Children are often fatigued (have low energy) or 'hyperactive' (too high energy). Due to bad living conditions, children are more frequently ill. Higher frequency of health issues among school children living in poverty leads to more frequent and longer absence from school, as well as undiagnosed and untreated illnesses. Due to frequent absence, such children miss the opportunity to follow lessons and cannot join further school activities, which adults often interpret as disinterest.

**HOW CAN CHILDREN LEARN WITH THEIR STOMACHS EMPTY? CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY ARE ILL MORE FREQUENTLY THAN OTHER CHILDREN. WHEN WE ARE NOT HEALTHY IT IS HARD TO LISTEN, FOCUS AND LEARN.**

## SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ Have good cooperation with health care providers specializing in treating school-age children. Instead of children going to their offices, the doctors see the children at school, if necessary.
- ▶ Schedule regular visits to the dentist for all the children who need them.
- ▶ Organize help for students who missed lessons.
- ▶ At staff meetings discuss the children's living conditions and how they affect their health and learning.
- ▶ Provide the children with the opportunity for light work-out and active breaks, realizing that exercise accompanied with deep breaths can improve the body's oxygen and glucose levels. Oxygen reacts with glucose creating energy for cell function. Appropriate levels of glucose in the blood are associated with better memory and cognitive functions.

## High levels of chronic stress.

Children living in poverty face higher levels of chronic stress than their better-off peers. Though low amounts of stress are not harmful, chronic stress, also called permanent stress, is. Chronic stress has a negative effect on behaviour, reduces attention control, stimulates impulsiveness and damages the working memory. Research has shown that exposure to chronic stress changes the neuron structure in the frontal part of the brain, which is in charge of thinking, decision making and planning, and that it can cause damage to the hippocampus and decrease learning capacity. Chronic stress impairs attention and concentration, decreases memory and creativity and affects negatively social relationships. Stress has a negative effect on motivation and increases the probability of depression. A child living in intensive stress causing environment tends to channel the stress through unacceptable behaviour at school. Children exposed to permanent stress usually demonstrate anger or are withdrawn and passive. To adults such a child might seem out of control, rude or lazy.

**TEACHERS TEND TO PUNISH CHILDREN BY FORBIDDING PHYSICAL EDUCATION CLASSES OR BREAKS IN THE FRESH AIR. BREAKS SHOULD NEVER BE DENIED IN ORDER TO DISCIPLINE. CHILDREN NEED PHYSICAL EDUCATION TO ACHIEVE BETTER RESULTS AT SCHOOL.**

## SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ Staff continuously actively works on building positive relationships with pupils and their parents to make them feel accepted and reduce the stress.
- ▶ Organize fun lessons! That also reduces stress.
- ▶ Support the pupils in assuming more control over their everyday life. Encourage responsibility and initiative at school, give children a possibility to choose, include them in projects, organize team work and foster a culture of decision making on class level. The feeling of control helps children reduce the effects of chronic and acute stress.
- ▶ Teachers can recognize the symptoms of stress in their pupils.
- ▶ Organize activities through which the pupils can reduce their frustration and stress, e.g., sports activities, yoga, excursions etc.
- ▶ Attempt to reduce the stress caused by school requirements. For example, they enable the pupils to do their homework immediately after or before class.
- ▶ Actively teach the pupils conflict resolving skills.
- ▶ Actively teach the pupils how to deal with rage and anger.

## Low expectations from themselves.

Poor results at school often lead to lower expectations, which has a negative effect on the children's confidence. If the pupils believe that failure or bad result is expected, they will probably not put in any effort. Similarly, they will not apply themselves if they believe they are not smart enough and cannot succeed – which adults interpret as laziness. Research has shown that the lower socio-economic status is often associated with the perception of the future as being more negative than positive. Low or no expectations ('helplessness') are also associated with low socio-economic status. In short, poverty is associated with lower expectations from the future. If teachers and children believe that there is a pre-set amount of 'smart', which the pupil cannot increase with putting in extra effort, which will certainly affect the learning and effort put into teaching and learning.

- ▶ Have introduced the institution of restitution to develop the feeling of responsibility in pupils.
- ▶ Actively teach the pupils how to set goals and how to achieve them.
- ▶ Connect teaching with solving real life problems.
- ▶ Focus actively on developing social skills in pupils, not only on academic achievements.

## SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ Staff do not talk to children implying that an average achievement is enough for them, but encourage them and motivate to achieve better results.
- ▶ Set high goals for the children and make them believe that they have a chance to achieve them.
- ▶ Make an effort on a daily basis to encourage curiosity, excitement, risk and competitiveness in children.
- ▶ Point out to children the ways in which people from poorer backgrounds contributed to our society.
- ▶ Praise the children and let them know how much good they see in them. When teachers praise more than they criticize (3 to 1 ratio is the best), learning and development are optimized, too.

## MISCONCEPTION! People living in poverty have poorly developed language skills.

Since children living in poverty know fewer words and generally have less developed linguistic skills than the children of the same age from wealthier families, it is unduly believed that children living in poverty have innately lower linguistic skills.

## REALITY.

There is no difference in linguistic abilities between children from poor families and children from wealthy families. The difference in acquired linguistic skills is caused by the difference in the circumstances under which the children live and grow up. Furthermore, this is the language of the so-called elite culture, to which they themselves do not belong.

## RISK FACTORS THAT CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY FACE

### An environment that does not encourage linguistic development.

Children living in poverty know fewer words. This is due to the fact that children living in poverty on average hear half as many words by the age of four as middle-class children and four times fewer than children from wealthy families. Furthermore, lower-income parents and guardians speak in shorter and simpler sentences, ask fewer questions and give fewer explanations. Since the families living in poverty have no picture books at home, the children are seldom read to. As a consequence, children born in poverty can fall behind in the development of linguistic skills. The vocabulary a child uses is part of the tools they use for learning, memory and thinking. Words help children understand, reproduce and handle information. When the children are not familiar with the words they do not wish to read and often withdraw or feel like the school is not a place for them.

## IQ TEST



Children living in poverty have the same cognitive abilities as other children.

## MISCONCEPTION!

People living in poverty have poorly developed cognitive abilities.

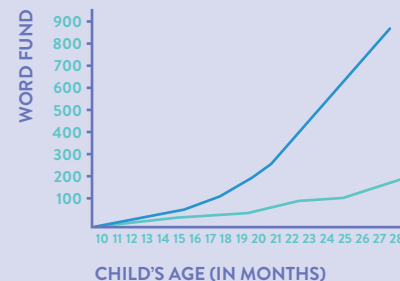
## REALITY.

It is true that children coming from families of lower socio-economic status achieve lower scores in IQ tests and school assignments than the children of a higher socio-economic status. However, the tests used are not culturally neutral; they test concepts children are unfamiliar with and are frequently verbal and not in the language that is the child's mother tongue, and one in which they are not well versed. Research has shown that the ability to achieve results is variable under the influence of the quality of nutrition, the child's living conditions, early childhood experiences, educational experiences and the duration of education. This means that children living in poverty have the same cognitive abilities as other children, but some of them have not developed fully due to the living conditions.

## SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

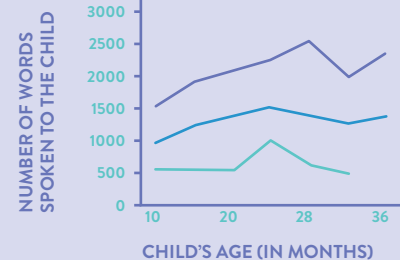
- ▶ Regardless of the subject they teach, teachers plan and teach new vocabulary acquisition within their daily lesson plans.
- ▶ Encourage reading of picture books, singing of nursery rhymes, conversations with peers and adults, theatre and other activities that contribute to language capacity development.
- ▶ Teach children fast recollection of words, phrases and finally, whole sentences, too.

ALTHOUGH THE FIRST THREE YEARS IN A CHILD'S LIFE ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT, THE CHILD IS STILL IN DEVELOPMENT DURING SCHOOL YEARS AND HAS A GOOD CHANCE TO MINIMIZE THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF GROWING UP IN UNFAVOURABLE LIVING CONDITIONS, IN WHICH THE SCHOOL CAN PLAY AN INVALUABLE ROLE.



— Mothers talking to their children frequently  
— Mothers talking to their children less frequently

Source: adjusted from Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer and Lyons (1991) „Early Vocabulary Growth Relation to Language Input and Gender“



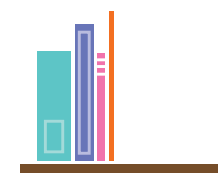
— High socio-economic status  
— Middle socio-economic status  
— Low socio-economic status

Source: according to Hart and Risley (1995) „Meaningful differences in Everyday Experience of Young American Children“

## RISK FACTORS THAT CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY FACE

An environment that does not encourage the development of cognitive abilities.

Children living in poverty have fewer books at home and rarely visit the library and the theatre, do not have as many toys at home and are less frequently involved in extracurricular activities. Moreover, they spend significantly more time watching TV and have less access to computers and the internet. All this affects unfavourably the realisation of their cognitive potential. Children of lower socio-economic status more frequently display cognitive difficulties including shortened attention, high level of distractedness, difficulties with following and solving new/unknown problems. These difficulties can make the experience of education hard for children living in poverty.



Children living in poverty have fewer books at home and rarely visit the library.





**POOR ACHIEVEMENT AT SCHOOL OF CHILDREN FROM POOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES IS THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE CONDITIONS THEY GROW UP IN, AND NOT THEIR ACTUAL COGNITIVE CAPACITIES. COGNITIVE CAPACITY, JUST LIKE INTELLIGENCE, IS VARIABLE. WHETHER THEY INCREASE OR DECREASE, DEPENDS ON OUR APPROACH TO CHILDREN.**

When children feel accepted they learn more easily.



**CHILDREN NEED SYMPATHY, NOT PITY.**

### SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ In such schools among the teachers and among the pupils there is no use of language determining a child's capabilities as a given and unchangeable trait, for instance, in the traditional categories of 'she is smart, he is lazy and problematic'; but the language of possibility is encouraged, aiming at concrete challenges and tasks. Children are taught that progress is possible.
- ▶ Develop a rich learning environment by creating classrooms where children can read, study, explore, design and create.
- ▶ Teach children the basic academic skills: how to be organised, how to study, make notes, prioritize and memorize the key terms. Afterwards they teach problem solving, processing and mnemotechnics.

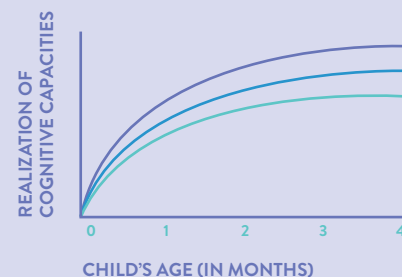
**MISCONCEPTION!**  
**Children living in poverty are not socialized.**

### REALITY.

When children feel accepted they learn more easily. Unfortunately, there is a common stereotype of children from poor families not having well-developed social skills, due to which they are not accepted among their peers. Pupils need security and it is best that they find it with their parents, teachers and peers. If the children do not feel emotionally and physically safe at school, they will look for that security among the friends that the society marks as 'suspicious'.

**EDUCATIONAL STAFF MEMBERS SOMETIMES PERCEIVE SOME BEHAVIOURS TYPICAL OF CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY AS THEIR PERSONALITY TRAITS, FORGETTING THAT THESE BEHAVIOURS ARE TYPICALLY A RESULT OF POVERTY AND INDICATIVE OF THE CHILD'S LIVING CONDITIONS.**

### HOW EXPERIENCE INFLUENCES COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT



- Life in normal conditions
- Exposure to toxic substances
- Low socio-economic status

*Adjusted from „Environmental Risk Factor in Infancy“ by A. Sameroff, 1998, Pediatrics, 102(5) (5)*



### RISK FACTORS THAT CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY FACE

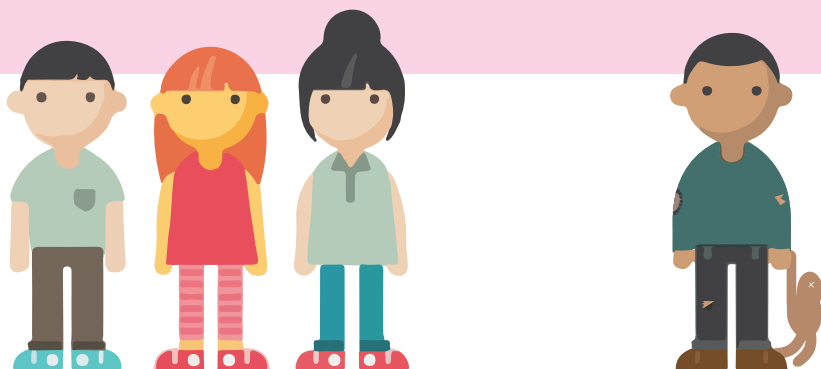
#### Emotional relationships.

Children are aware of the poverty they live in and often feel ashamed because of it. Their peers also notice that the child comes from a poor family, so they exclude them from joint games, like they learned to do from the society they live in. This leads to the loss of self-respect in the children living in poverty. If the parents/guardians are under pressure to provide housing and food, and have other survival worries, they are more likely to be bad-tempered and less prepared to address their children with positive words. In the homes of families living in poverty children typically get criticised twice as often as they get praised, compared to three positive remarks to one negative in middle-class homes.

On the other hand, if we force children to study more and more in order to achieve better educational results, this affects negatively their emotional and social development – and, consequently, their learning. Both emotions and cognition are equally important for learning.

## SCHOOLS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

- ▶ Focus equally on socio-emotional development of children and on their cognitive development.
- ▶ Show interest for their pupils and their families and what they consider important.
- ▶ Work on building positive relationships between the pupils and adults.
- ▶ Make every child feel special by highlighting the role that makes them stand out (e.g. athlete, comic, story teller, leader, explorer).
- ▶ Work on strengthening positive relationships among peers. This enables the pupils to feel accepted and to follow their peers' positive examples. Children want to belong.
- ▶ Do not tell pupils what not to do, but teach them how to do what is expected from them.



**THE STAFF IN SOME SCHOOLS TRY TO IMPROVE THE RESULTS OF CHILDREN FROM DEPRIVED COMMUNITIES BY OFFERING THEM MORE CONTENT (E.G., ADDITIONAL LESSONS, CLASSES, MORE TIME AT SCHOOL). CHILDREN GROWING UP IN POVERTY DO NOT NEED ADDITIONAL CONTENT; THEY NEED A DIFFERENT APPROACH.**

**FOR CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY SIMPLY 'GOING TO SCHOOL' IS NOT ENOUGH. ONLY HIGH-QUALITY EDUCATION AND CARE CAN MAKE UP FOR THE DELAY IN A CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT CAUSED BY POVERTY.**

DO YOU SEE ME?  
DIKHES LJI MAN?  
DA LI M VEZ?







### **Open Academy Step by Step**

Ilica 73, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

tel: +385 1 4854 935

fax: +385 1 4854 022

[www.korakpokorak.hr](http://www.korakpokorak.hr)

More info about REYN-Croatia at:

[www.reyn-hrvatska.net](http://www.reyn-hrvatska.net)

[www.facebook.com/reyn.hrvatska](https://www.facebook.com/reyn.hrvatska)

### **ISSA –**

#### **International Step by Step Association**

Kinderrechtenhuis/Child Right Home

Hooglandse Kerkgracht 17-R,

2312 HS Leiden, The Netherlands

tel: +31 (0)71 516 1222

fax: +31 (0)71 516 1220

[www.issa.nl](http://www.issa.nl)

#### **REYN – Romani Early Years Network**

<http://reyn.blog.issa.nl/>