



# unite for children

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF UNICEF ROMANIA - NR 7, 2010



## Every Child Must Go to School



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children

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## Let's Unite for Children!

At a time when the focus is on the financial and economic crisis, there is another crisis which has drawn very limited attention. This is the crisis in education. It primarily touches two areas: one is the declining quality of education; the other is declining school attendance, or "drop-out". This issue of the newsletter focuses on school drop-out in Romania.

In this day and age, it is hard to imagine that there are children who do not go to school in Romania. But unfortunately, this is the case and the economic crisis is making it worse. It is probably hard for anyone reading this newsletter to imagine what it is like to go through life barely able to read or write, or maybe not even that much. Put yourself in that person's shoes for a moment. Then one can better appreciate how the roads of opportunity are blocked off. No chance of a decent job; unable to cope with the everyday demands of modern life such as filling out a form, opening a bank account, applying for a job or social assistance, even getting a driving license. Education provides the keys to get through the doors of life, but you don't have the keys if you don't have an education. The door is locked forever.

Lack of education means one does not have the know-how to escape the straitjacket of poverty. It excludes one from participation in regular society it means "social exclusion". The opposite of that is "social inclusion", and nothing opens the door to social inclusion more than a decent education. It levels the playing field. It gives one a chance to compete, a chance to get a decent job, a chance to enjoy a higher level of self esteem, a chance to fulfil one's potential.

Education is also a basic human right. This newsletter looks at the status of this basic right in Romania through the lens of school drop-out. It looks at the situation of those children who are destined for a lifetime of exclusion unless they get back in the classroom. It looks at the causes of why is this happening, and it looks at the solutions. It rings an alarm bell. It tries to sound a wake-up call for all of us to do something now before things get worse.

UNICEF is in the course of an awareness and fundraising campaign on school abandonment at the moment and we want to use the money raised to mobilize action at the local level; to use whatever means are possible to address the issue of school attendance before it becomes too late for some. The aim is to put basic education at the heart of the drive for social inclusion, and at the heart of the drive for justice and equal opportunity for all.



Edmond McLoughney  
UNICEF Representative in Romania

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Edmond'.

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# Giving each child the precious gift of education

by Debbie Stowe, UNICEF Consultant

**“Education is a social process. Education is growth. Education is not a preparation for life; education is life itself.”**

John Dewey

It is difficult to overstate the profound importance that education plays in a person's life. Aside from the simple aim of working hard at school to get a good job later, learning allows a child to engage with and explore the wider world, to understand and empathise with other people and peoples, to think critically and challenge, to wonder how and ask why. As American educator George Washington Carver put it, “Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.”



The indisputable value of this process to every child makes it even more incomprehensible that in a European Union member state in 2010, many children are still not taking advantage of the education to which they are entitled - and indeed required by law - to avail themselves. Poverty, family dysfunction, community traditions - all play a role in denying children their education and therefore their empowerment in shaping their future.

The state of the Romanian education system today may come as a surprise to many. Soviet Communism was known for its universal access to and championing of education. But that was not the full story. While Communist countries needed engineers, scientists and skilled workers, they did not want critical thinkers, people who would question the status quo. So schooling consisted of the transmission of

information, recalling the ethos of Thomas Gradgrind, the notorious headmaster in Charles Dickens' novel *Hard Times*, who considered his pupils pitchers to be filled with facts.

As the latest Program for International Student Assessment - a ranking system comparing 15-year-olds around the world by educational achievement - on the Commonwealth of Independent States/Central and Eastern Europe (CEE/CIS) reports, "Most countries in the region have the same legacy from Soviet times: school curriculum and teacher training mandated by the government that promoted knowledge acquisition and neglected knowledge application." While this knowledge transfer may help scholars and scientists, areas where CEE/CIS students do well internationally, it does not equip young people with life skills.

Though change does not happen overnight, it was hoped that - once the economic and social chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union had subsided - the education system would begin slowly to get better. But the reverse was largely true. "Not all countries were able to improve, primarily because of insufficient resources and other priorities. In some countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania, Azerbaijan,

## GEORGE

George was a good pupil. He got good marks, and was near the top of his class. A few years ago, when he was in fifth grade, he lived with his father and his maternal grandmother, his father's partner (who was working at the time in the school where George was a pupil) and two brothers. When the relationship between the adults broke down, the house was sold and the money divided between them. George moves in with his father who, due to his alcohol problem, quickly spends all the money leaving the family homeless. George cannot continue to go to school: he gets a job and no longer has any free time. His clothes stink and he has nowhere to wash himself. He is ashamed to get together with his former classmates.

Four years later, George goes back to school. He is still a good student. However, he faces some problems: he is much older than his colleagues and he has got used to having a job. He quits school again.

Now 18, George is living with his grandmother in a village nearby, working as a bartender in a club in his native town. He has been working for several years. He is aware that unless he gets a formal education, he has no chance of moving up in the world. However, he cannot see a way to do it. The only adult who helps him out financially from time to time is his father's former partner, now a migrant worker in Italy.

(A chaotic family life leads to early school dropout, an excerpt from **Renunțarea timpurie la educație: posibile căi de prevenire - Early school dropout: possible ways to prevent it (2009)**, a report from the project *Soluții eficiente pentru prevenirea abandonului școlar: costuri și mecanisme (Efficient solutions to prevent school dropout; costs and mechanisms*, conducted by UNICEF and the Educatia 2000+ Center)

the Russian Federation and Kyrgyz Republic, student achievement actually became worse than during Soviet times,” said the PISA report.

Even in recent years, standards have continued to fall, with reading skills among Romanian children declining between 2000 and 2006. Of the CEE/CIS countries covered in the report, only Montenegro, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyz Republic did worse than Romania in reading and science and Bulgaria, Montenegro and Kyrgyz Republic in mathematics. Aside from Bulgaria, none of these countries enjoy the advantages of European Union membership. And the deterioration in standards was not inevitable or common to all former Eastern Bloc states. Some countries were praised in the report for the advances made. A notable example is Poland, whose students' performance improved considerably after extensive restructuring of the education system, with a move away from unpopular vocational schools and the postponement by one year of the streaming of students into different school tracks.

The PISA research flags up some of what might be going wrong in the classroom. But in Romania, many children never - or rarely - even see inside a classroom. As well as poverty and family dysfunction, children having to repeat the year multiple times, the pressure to earn money, family members who have dropped out of school, involvement in crime, the effects of migration and early marriage and childbirth are some of the factors that give Romania one of the highest dropout rates in the European Union.

Remedying this is made more difficult by widespread disagreement of what constitutes dropping out. In research conducted by the Community Development Agency *Împreună (Together)* in 2009 and 2010 into education in deprived Roma areas, teachers and school directors defined it in myriad ways, from absences of two weeks to three years. With such disparity in the ways schools measure abandonment, how can society get a clear picture of the issue?

The problem is particularly acute in poor, rural and Roma communities. On top of the other factors, the latter also have the pressure of stigmatisation to contend with, along with cultural and language barriers. The PISA report found that in Romania 83 percent of Roma children do not attend secondary school at all. Schools with large Roma intakes often have inadequate material conditions and less motivated staff. And school segregation - though the word conjures up images of 1950s America rather than 2010s European Union - is thriving. Research conducted for the Romani CRISS Organization in 2008 found that of the 90 schools studied, 67% had some segregation of Roma pupils, even though this is against the law. This persistence of segregation consigns high numbers of children to a second-class education.

What can be done? Some progress has already been made in relation to the syllabus and teaching methods. Over the past



decade, the Romanian National Curriculum has been constantly updated to shift the focus away from the mechanical transmission of information and memory testing towards critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Another solution, of course, is more money. Romania's spending on education has traditionally been low compared to other European countries: 4.3% in 2006, the latest year for which Europe-wide figures are widely available, as against 8% in Denmark, the highest-spending nation. Only Slovakia and Bulgaria spent less. And while the sum spent per student rose more than four-fold between 2001 and 2008, when purchasing power is equalised Romania's education expenditure was one of the lowest in the EU. However, in 2008 the country's education expenditure reached 6%, which perhaps presages better things to come in the future.

Nevertheless, the lack of money is still evident. UNICEF research has found that lack of funding for textbooks, heating, school maintenance and qualified teachers means educational quality is falling in Romania. With a net starting salary of RON 835 (just over EUR 200 at the current rate) a month and the maximum salary for a teacher of over 40 years' experience not even double that amount, teaching is seen as an unappealing and low-status career, deterring many high-quality candidates. The resulting shortage of teachers is even worse in rural areas, and staff selection and training methods need updating and improving, enabling teachers to impart more relevant learning in the classroom.

But there are other, more affordable, solutions. Schools can be made more welcoming places for children. Running water, proper heating and spaces for play are part of it, and the UNICEF child-friendly school model outlines some of the main issues in this regard. But attitudes and actions also have a role.

Dropout can be addressed among parents, through school mediators, with staff trained to spot signs of potential school abandonment early, and address the issues proactively. Testimony from past dropouts could help those thinking of quitting school to get their options in perspective. These approaches could supplant the heavy-handed recourse to the law that some schools still employ, which fails to address the underlying causes of the phenomenon. The divisive mentality that sees children educated according to their ethnicity must also be tackled.

Most importantly, a joined-up approach must be taken to map and treat the problem, with particular effort going into the trouble spots. Authorities, principals, teachers, activists and parents must pull together to ensure that Romania's children get the education they deserve - and need.



*UNICEF Romania/ Friendly smiles in a break at school in Spantov*

# Early childhood development and school dropout

by Luminița Costache - Education Officer, UNICEF Romania

**“ECD is at the heart of the social inclusion agenda.”**

Steven Allen, UNICEF Regional Director for CEE/CIS

Research has found that increasing investment today in early childhood development (ECD) programmes leads to more educated, prosperous and peaceful citizens in tomorrow's society. Early childhood is the most important period of development in life, when the cognitive, emotional and social foundations on which the future will be built are being laid. Child brain development depends on stimuli in the environment, especially the quality of care and interaction the child experiences. Children who are

well cared for and adequately stimulated are more likely to develop their cognitive, language, emotional and social skills to their full potential, be healthier and have higher self-esteem. All these areas are crucial for our well-being as adults, as the experiences in our early childhood essentially determine what we will become later in life. Therefore, the groundwork, which can be fragile or sound, is laid in the first years of life. On it the child builds the necessary skills for later life, including in school. A robust foundation is essential for the child to acquire these skills. To use a metaphor, early childhood experiences are like the foundation of a house. The structure's stability and the number of floors that can be added subsequently depend on the strength of the foundation. So whether children reach their full potential depends on the robustness of the skills acquired during early childhood. If the development



*UNICEF Romania/ Ready to take the lunch  
in Child Friendly Kindergarten from Piatra Neamț*



process is neglected in this period, it is much more difficult and costly to recover it at a later stage. Actions taken by parents and society in early childhood have a powerful and prolonged influence on the child's individual progress and on the progress of the nation at large.

Focus on ECD programmes and pre-school years are vital to reduce the school dropout rate. Children who benefit from ECD programmes stand better chances of increased school participation and performance, planning a family and becoming productive adults with good jobs, as well as educating their own children in turn. Research has indicated that positive intervention during early child education substantially decreases the dropout rate during primary school.

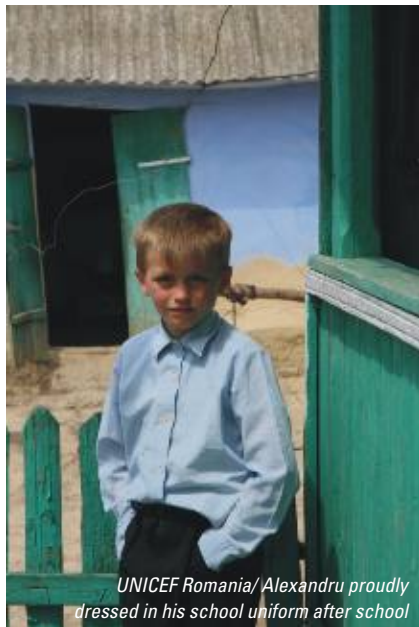
Experts consider the implementation of integrated ECD programmes one of the most powerful weapons against social inequality, poverty and social exclusion. If opportunities presented by early childhood are missed, then it becomes much more difficult for children, in terms of resources and time, to fulfil their potential in life. ECD programmes for small children may counter the effects of socio-economic and gender inequalities. These programmes are an important tool in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and exclusion and bringing about significant economic benefits. Early childhood interventions in poor communities lead to better school participation rates and performance in school and to greater success in securing and maintaining employment later in life. When children start school late and miss out on the necessary "tools" to learn, their educational progress suffers and it is more likely for them to become school dropouts. It is crucial that these children be prepared for elementary school, start school on time and receive a quality education. If children are prepared for school, they will have the necessary tools to build a fulfilled life for themselves and become productive citizens in their community. Investment in early childhood, as the first step on the educational pathway, means higher school participation and performance in 5 years, a lower school dropout rate in 10 years and less pressure on social services (fewer people on social benefits) in 20 years. So investing in children as early as possible leads to social development and a stronger implementation of the rights of the child in the long term.



# Early school dropout: causes and possible ways to prevent it

by Raluca Zaharia - Education Officer,  
UNICEF Romania

**The rarely debated issue of school dropout in the Romanian education system requires immediate action. It is a phenomenon so widespread and so serious that it should be a priority for all those involved in education: politicians, decision makers, parents, teachers and students.**



UNICEF Romania/Alexandru proudly dressed in his school uniform after school

The Educația 2000+ Center and UNICEF have developed the project *Efficient solutions to prevent school dropout: costs and mechanisms*. The project aims to offer support for strengthening the overall efforts to solve this significant issue. It follows three main directions: to extend the existing database on school dropout; to test a series of realistic solutions; and to estimate the costs of implementing at national scale the proposals submitted. Efforts also focused on better preparing those involved in education to deal with school dropout.

The research for the project was conducted in 19 schools in five geographical areas, in Argeș, Brașov, Călărași, Dolj and Neamț counties. The main findings are detailed in the report *Early school dropout: causes and possible ways of prevention*.

The report explores the causes of early school dropout, focusing on the transition from lower secondary to high school in small towns and in suburban areas near larger cities. The general causes are grouped in relation to three different levels: pupils and their families, community and school.

Factors that may cause dropout in connection with **pupils and their families** include:

- **Financial problems.** Large, dysfunctional and poor families have problems providing adequate clothing for all their children and sometimes require child labour (in the fields or in the household often to help with younger siblings).
- **Parents' educational example.** Most often students who drop out come from families where the parents themselves did not spend more than eight

years in school. Yet, there are exceptions. Quite often pupils who have dropped out still hope to complete their studies “to have at least ten years of formal education”; to get some qualifications so they do not end up like their parents, who are unskilled workers and have little chance of ever becoming successful in their lives.

- **Siblings' educational example** is much more influential. Families in which elder siblings have left school early often see the younger ones do the same.
- **Dysfunctional families** bring about material needs. Tribulations like divorce, alcoholism and domestic violence can often presage school dropout.
- **Edge-of-law activities.** Prostitution, membership of street gangs or of beggars' networks almost always lead to children dropping out of school. These demotivating factors particularly apply when a child is moving from low secondary to senior high school or at the beginning of senior high school.
- **Employment.** Making money through unskilled work, bar work, prostitution or begging during term time almost always results in early school dropout. One solution, where work is necessary for financial reasons, would be to adopt models from Western countries, such as high-school pupils taking a holiday job or working just a few hours a day, for example baby-sitting.
- **Lack of trust in the education system** is a stereotype untested in real life. However, this trust is likely to fall in the run-up to school dropout. That is why it could be useful if pupils who have already dropped out were in touch with pupils at risk of doing so to share their current perspective on school.
- **Migration** does not seem to be a risk factor per se, but there are **important issues in connection with the reintegration** of migrants' children who leave the system and then come home when they are older. The same problems arise when pupils join the education system much later than the norm.

At the **community level**, the major factors in early school dropout are as follows:

- **The early marriage custom**, which often terminates young people's education, especially in rural communities.
- **Having a child.** This tends to be a characteristic of certain communities rather than a series of isolated incidents. Not only do girls who give birth typically come from dysfunctional, poor families, but many of their peers are doing the same thing.
- **Lack of individual security in the area.** In some communities teachers are afraid to interact with parents because of the high crime rate and this lack of cooperation between teachers and parents can increase dropout risks.
- **The custom of discontinuing education after the eighth grade.** In one community, which was relatively well connected to the urban area, eighth-

grade graduates declined to continue their education in high school, saying that they did not have classmates to continue with.

In **school**, dropout may be caused by **the frequent repeating of grades, insufficient pupil integration or poor relationships with teachers and classmates**. However, at school level little action is taken to forestall school abandonment. Teachers can play an important role in this respect: because they see pupils all the time, they could identify and diagnose their problems and alert the relevant bodies (authorities or non-governmental organizations) when intervention is needed.

Even though the main factors behind school dropout lie within the family and community, recommendations to help reduce the risk focus mainly on schools. Except for the overarching goal to increase the responsibility of these institutions, there are no absolute priorities, and the recommended actions cannot replace one another, since they are complementary. The focus is on prevention, but there are also recommendations regarding the reintegration of pupils who have recently dropped out. The main areas proposed for action are as follows:

1. To increase the flexibility of “second chance” programmes - from the point of view of age groups. Although they address all dropouts, the second chance programmes are attended mostly by young people over 20. These programmes should have classes for children from the same age group (12-16 years old), who otherwise find it difficult to integrate in groups of second chance students 20 or older.
2. To increase the flexibility of “second chance” programmes - from the curriculum point of view. When students repeat a year for several times because they did not pass only one or two subject matters (usually the same ones), the passing grades for the other matters should be taken into account. Also, the professional abilities acquired by dropouts should be officially recognized.
3. To make school more appealing - promoting extracurricular activities taking place in the school, such as: periodic school painting/cleaning/decorating and sportive or artistic competitions.
4. To make school more appealing - by using school resources to encourage pupils to develop leisure activities outside.



5. To use the experiences of pupils who have already dropped out to prevent the spreading of early abandonment. It could be useful if dropouts could meet students at risk of abandonment to tell them about their life after they left school.
6. To get teachers proactively involved in fighting early school dropout. The teachers could be supported to develop means to increase the integration of students and the communication with them and with their parents, to engage the students in extra-curricular activities and to counsel them.
7. To develop a national sex education programme for pupils, focused on communities with a high risk of teenage pregnancy and where early marriage is still common.
8. To encourage the local authorities and specialized NGOs to involve eighth graders and high-school students from communities with a high risk of school dropout as volunteers in various support programmes (such as for the elderly or for families in need).
9. To keep a record of the situation of pupils from families involved in migration.
10. To put in place a system to monitor the development of school year groups.
11. To motivate teachers through awards and prizes.

As is evident from the examples given in the description of the 19 schools under analysis, the report is an important source of information on the Romanian education system and a useful tool in identifying and implementing viable solutions to prevent early school dropout.

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***Renunțarea timpurie la educație: posibile căi de prevenire - Early school dropout: causes and possible ways to prevent it (2009)***

Report coordinated by Bogdan Voicu, as part of the project *Soluții eficiente pentru prevenirea abandonului școlar: costuri și mecanisme - Efficient solutions to prevent school dropout: costs and mechanisms*, conducted by UNICEF and the Educația 2000+ Center (Project leaders: Anca Nedelcu and Sorin Coman)

Report available at: [www.unicef.ro](http://www.unicef.ro)



# School dropout among Roma children - myth and reality

by Ana Ivasiuc

Project Manager, Community Development Agency "Împreună"

**Between April 2009 and January 2010, the Community Development Agency "Împreună" (Together) conducted a survey called *O școală de nota zece? - A Grade A School?*, with UNICEF support. Carried out in 70 deprived Roma communities<sup>1</sup> in 20 counties, it examined Roma children's access to quality schooling. The survey used data from parents of Roma school-age children, Roma children both in and not in school, interviews with school directors, teachers, and educational institutions. Below we detail some of the findings.**

First it is important to define what constitutes school dropout in this context. The Rules of Organization and Functioning of School Education Units (ROFSEU) defines a school dropout as a pupil who "does not attend the daily training programme of a grade included in the mandatory education system and who is more than two years older than the age for the respective grade"<sup>2</sup>. Apart from the conceptual issue raised by this definition (the pupil who stops going to school at the age of the respective grade is not counted as a school dropout until two years after leaving the education system, which generates a cohort of pupils of undetermined status, outside the scope of public policies on this theme), the research exposed the **widespread practice of inaccurately reporting the dropout rate by educational institutions**. In the 80 interviews conducted with directors and teachers, the ROFSEU school dropout definition was applied only in two cases. Aside from these examples, either very vague definitions were used or the school gave arbitrary figures. The question "When do you think that a pupil becomes a school dropout?" produced the following answers:

"When the pupil misses school for a long period of time without giving any reason" (Sibiu, interview with a director)

"When they have missed more than 40 classes in a semester" (Sălaj, interview with a teacher)

<sup>1</sup> These communities were selected based on the research study conducted by D. Sandu, *O hartă socială a comunităților de romi (Social mapping of Roma communities)*, World Bank, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Education and Research, the General Directorate for School Education, *Regulamentul de Organizare și Funcționare a Unităților de Învățământ Preuniversitar (The Rules of Organization and Functioning of School Education Units)*, Article 68, paragraph (5), p. 18.

## VASILE and COSTEL

Vasile and Costel are brothers. The elder one, Costel, has already dropped out of school twice, once in third grade and once in eighth grade. He is now almost 18. Like his younger brother, who was his classmate in eighth grade, he is now enrolled in high school. Vasile is 16. He has never repeated a grade. He enrolled in high school and has been to class on only one occasion since. He now stays home. He says he never returned to high school because he was short of money: "I didn't have money to buy clothes to go to school!" In the first three weeks, Vasile and Costel only went to school once.

Vasile stays at home and helps with the housework. Costel has employment as a seasonal worker. He's thinking that he might go back to school "now that the winter is coming and I won't find work... I want to complete at least tenth grade and get a diploma so that I can get a better paying job." However, for the time being, he is not considering going to classes: "If I'm always at work, I'm tired. I can't get up early in the morning! If I come home from work late in the evening... am I still able to go to school in the morning?!"

(An example of early school dropout, an excerpt from **Renunțarea timpurie la educație: posibile căi de prevenire - Early school dropout: possible ways to prevent it (2009)**, a report from the project *Soluții eficiente pentru prevenirea abandonului școlar: costuri și mecanisme (Efficient solutions to prevent school dropout; costs and mechanisms)*, conducted by UNICEF and the Educația 2000+ Center)

*"When the number of classes they have missed reaches 70 or 80 a year" (Iași, interview with a director)*

*"If, despite the repeated intervention of the school mediator, the pupil doesn't attend school at all for more than two consecutive weeks" (Covasna, interview with a director)*

*"When the pupil doesn't come to school for one month" (Dâmbovița, interview with a director)*

*"When for one semester, the pupil only attends 20-25% of classes" (Suceava, interview with a deputy director)*

*"When a pupil doesn't go to school for one or two months and they are not sick" (Gorj, interview with a director)*

*"When they do not come to school for one semester and fail to show up in the first month of the following semester, and therefore cannot be graded at all" (Argeș, interview with a director)*

*“Pupils are considered school dropouts if they do not come to school for one year” (Prahova, interview with a director)*

*“After three years without any marks or after three repeated grades” (Iași, interview with a director)*

In short, everyone has a different definition of what constitutes a school dropout, ranging from two weeks to three years.

Lack of consistency in the definitions and the use of arbitrary criteria distort the dropout data reported by the schools, thereby calling into question the basis for many projects aimed at reducing the dropout rate. One consistent definition should be systematically applied by all educational institutions.

These vagaries of definition severely impact teaching practices, since how the school dropout rate is defined shapes the prospective **prevention strategies**. According to the research, school dropout is just the tip of the iceberg, the culmination of a series of events which the pupil views as a personal failure: the gradual desertion of the school environment until motivation reaches its nadir and the pupil decides to leave the education system. One efficient strategy to prevent school dropout should be to identify the pupils at risk **long before they actually drop out**.

Asked **“What does the institution do when a pupil is at risk of dropping out of school?”**, the respondents first said **there is no strategy to prevent this**, and that when the school takes action, it happens mostly **after** the child has dropped out. One measure then taken to get the child back in school is coercion, with police involvement:

*“We take special measures [...] such as notifying the police and having them provide us with support. We have recently decided with our colleagues that if we fail to reduce the truancy rate, we should ask the municipality and the police for support, to see what can be done” (Arad, interview with a director)*

*“We notify the police and the local authorities. We cooperate to try and bring the pupils to school or to guide them to special schools requiring a low level of attendance” (Argeș, interview with a director)*

*“We go to their home, talk to the parents [...] The local bodies also step in if we, as teachers, cannot convince them [...] They have really got involved [...] We also scare them with a fine here and there” (Dâmbovița, interview with a teacher)*



UNICEF Romania/ George is coming to school every day now after a short break



If school dropout is the result of a pupil feeling greatly troubled over a long period of time, then calling the police and using coercion to keep children in school is an excessive response. The fact that school administrators have identified this “solution” illustrates how pupils in distress, especially Roma ones, are perceived by the education system: as potential offenders whose redemption requires recourse to the law. Clearly police involvement will not help reduce the psychological reasons which may stop a child attending school.

Our research also highlights the **causes** of dropout. According to interviews with Roma children who have quit school, their main reason for doing so was financial hardship (24%), followed by participation in paid activities or caring for their younger siblings (20%), which is related to financial difficulties. Some 16% of the children who dropped out had done so due to unsatisfactory results in the previous years (low marks, failed grades, multiple retakes) and 12% said that they no longer wanted to attend, without specifying why. Some 9% of the children said their parents had made them leave, while in 7% of the cases, children did not go to school for health reasons. Finally, 4% replied that they had dropped out because of the distance from their home to the school, while 7% had other reasons.



An interesting aspect is the low prevalence of early marriage among children. Out of the 69 children interviewed, only one cited marriage as the reason for dropping out. According to the questionnaires completed by the parents, 10 cases of early marriage among the school-age children prompted dropout, which works out as 4.3% of dropout causes reported by parents. In the light of these data, **it is quite likely that early marriage among Roma children is less of a factor than previously thought.**

To combat school dropout, it is essential for the political decision-makers to have real data, both on the extent and causes of the phenomenon. Without such information, the programmes aimed at stopping children from abandoning their education have little chance of succeeding.

# UNICEF gears up efforts to earthquake-stricken Haiti

by Debbie Stowe - UNICEF Consultant

**On the afternoon of 12 January, Haiti was already struggling with myriad misfortunes. The poorest country in the Western hemisphere has a history of colonial interference, oppressive dictators, natural disasters, corruption, poor governance, violence and human rights abuses. Poverty, instability, high unemployment, illiteracy and malnourishment, unchecked crime, endemic corruption, unreliable public services and unsanitary conditions also beset the Caribbean state. Then the earth moved and everything got unimaginably worse.**



Just before 5pm, a devastating 7.0-magnitude earthquake struck Haiti, its epicentre 25 kilometres west of the capital, Port-au-Prince. The tremor was exceptionally catastrophic, in part because the origin was close to the surface and in the vicinity of a high-density urban area. But the tragedy was exacerbated by Haiti's pre-existing humanitarian conditions, creating what was termed a "double disaster". Grinding poverty means that many Haitians live in ramshackle slum housing that had little chance of surviving the tremor. Many buildings were weak, bribes having been paid to avoid construction safety law. And the chaotic state of Haitian society was certain to inhibit any relief effort.

The death toll was enormous. People were trapped beneath buildings, frantically hoping that rescue would come before they succumbed to injury, hunger or thirst. Thousands more had lost their relatives and homes, left desperate for clean water, food and medical treatment. Some on the ground said the disaster was worse than the tsunami.

As is the case in many catastrophes, children bore the brunt. Not only do they lack the physical strength and stamina that can make the difference between life and death, but they are also more susceptible to potentially fatal conditions such as diarrhoeal diseases caused by contaminated water supply. Post-quake, as people fought over scarce resources, lone children would have had little chance of securing what they needed. A further threat took the form of those who prey on vulnerable young people for trafficking and exploitation, already a significant problem in the stricken country. Alone and unprotected, with the authorities' focus elsewhere, Haiti's children were facing multiple dangers. And with 46 percent of the country's population



under 18 years old, the quake was shaping up to be what UNICEF called “a children's emergency”.

News teams relayed scenes of unimaginable horror. Piles of corpses polluted the air. Bodies were being unceremoniously buried in mass graves, as wave after wave of cadavers prevented even photos being taken for later identification. While people lay pinned under the rubble, waiting, praying for discovery and rescue as time, hope and life ebbed away, others fought over food, water, even funeral services. The escape of some prisoners when jails were destroyed added to people's fears, as did continuing aftershocks. And still the death toll continued to soar.

Aid agencies had immediately responded. Despite serious damage to its own offices in Port-au-Prince, UNICEF was quick to provide first aid to the suffering country in the form of sanitation supplies, therapeutic foods, medical supplies and temporary shelter materials. The organisation also made it a priority to protect children who had been orphaned or separated from their families in the confusion, and reunite the latter with relatives. UNICEF teamed up with other agencies - such as the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and World Food Programme - in an unprecedented joint relief effort. Corporate partners and celebrities also pitched in, offering direct assistance or campaigning to raise awareness and money.

An estimated three million people were affected. Children were treated for everything from broken bones to head trauma. Many underwent amputations. Screaming and wailing filled the air as hospitals were stretched to breaking point. As some people simply clung to life, others trailed the wards in a desperate search for their relatives, praying they were not among the unidentified corpses being piled into mass graves. Meanwhile, UNICEF continued its efforts, disseminating water and ready-to-eat food, providing shelter and setting up and publicising child-feeding centres and emergency health and immunisation points.

Over three months have now passed since the earthquake struck, and yet the magnitude of the tragedy means that UNICEF and other relief agencies remain in the emergency response phase, and are likely to be there for months to come. But progress has been made. Over three quarters of the 1.2 million Haitians made homeless by the quake are now in receipt of shelter materials. Thoughts are turning to the imminent rainy season, with plans to strengthen temporary shelters against potential hurricanes, move people from areas vulnerable to floods and landslides, and preposition supplies in case roads become impassable. Heavy rains could also further threaten sanitation, and over 5,000 latrine slabs have been issued to partners, providing hygienic facilities for more than a quarter of a million, as part of a multi-party effort to improve sanitary conditions. Meanwhile safe water is now reaching almost 900,000 people each day.

UNICEF has targeted its efforts at children, 1.5 million of whom have been caught up in the disaster. Nearly 60,000 children between nine months and seven years have received vital vaccinations against deadly diseases and Vitamin A supplements, as part of a wider immunisation campaign. The agency is also supporting 19 baby tents and 8 acute malnutrition

management sites, tending to an estimated 20,000 infants up to one year old, 6,500 severely malnourished children, 50,000 pregnant and lactating women and 166,000 under-fives. And it is working with partners to get nutrition supplies to even more desperate Haitians.

Efforts have also been made to keep children and women safe in the chaos that has followed the quake. Six camps are being patrolled and monitored to prevent violence against women. Nearly 80 Child Friendly Spaces are catering to 55,000 children, and registration of vulnerable children has reached 500. Support is on offer to victims of violence or trauma, while UNICEF is assisting social workers and government officials in the fight against child trafficking.

Children's educational needs have also been a priority area. UNICEF is about to deliver the first 200,000 of 720,000 backpacks containing essential school supplies. Working in conjunction with Save the Children, 900 school tents covering over 90,000 children have been deployed with more on the way. In these bags and tents is the hope for Haiti's future.

Over 200,000 people are thought to have lost their lives. Headlines and images from the disaster no longer dominate news broadcasts. But Haiti's challenge is just beginning. UNICEF and its fellow aid agencies' hope is that the world doesn't look away from the country, but turns its compassion into the resources and the will to rebuild Haiti, better than before, from the rubble.

For more information about UNICEF actions in Haiti please visit our website: [www.unicef.ro](http://www.unicef.ro).



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci/  
Jean Valvis, a UNICEF  
generous donor*



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci/  
Vlad Enachescu, Realitatea TV  
sports figure, joined UNICEF  
efforts for Haiti*

# "Haiti - Children of Chaos" Telethon



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci/ Mariana Nedelcu, State Secretary, Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Protection ready to answer calls from public*



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci personally to help children in*



*UNICEF Romania/ A special thanks to organizers and participants to George Enescu National Museum concert*



*UNICEF Romania/ Silviu Covaci UNICEF Romania Goodwill Ambassador the phones from public*

The two places might be almost ten thousand kilometres apart, but Romanians opened their hearts and their wallets to stricken Haiti in a telethon organised by UNICEF and Realitatea TV station. The event, which was supported by big names from the worlds of politics, entertainment, business and sport, managed to raise over USD 750,000, which UNICEF will put towards its efforts to feed, house and protect children in the Caribbean country in the wake of January's devastating earthquake. Local donations are helping fund UNICEF's attempts to trace missing children, place them in safe shelters and reunite them with family members, provide clean water to around a million people and immunise half a million children against potentially fatal diseases.

Haiti - Children of Chaos went out on January 25. The event marked the start of a month-long campaign by Realitatea TV, called Apocalypse after the Earthquake, covering the latest news from the country with help from Cristian Zărescu and Radu Diaconescu, the only Romanian journalists dispatched to Haiti. Throughout that period members of the public were able to give to the cause via phone call, SMS and direct bank donation. Romtelecom, Orange, Vodafone, Cosmote, Teleperformance and BRD - Groupe Société Générale were instrumental in facilitating public contributions. Almost three quarters of the sum raised was given by viewers.

Public figures and companies were at the start of the queue to donate, after host Mihai Tatulici got the ball rolling with his own contribution. President Traian Băsescu



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci Mihai Tatulici interviewing donors and her mother Dani*



*ci/ Camelia Sucu donated  
Haiti*



*ci/ Andreea Marin Banica,  
ambassador, answering*



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci/  
Ramona Ioana Chirila from BCR*



*UNICEF Romania/Silviu Covaci/ Sorin Oprescu,  
Mayor of Bucharest, with Edmond McLoughney,  
UNICEF Representative in Romania*



*ci/ Realitatea TV's,  
one of the youngest  
ela Nane*

and government ministers Adriean Videanu and Gabriel Oprea all pledged a month's pay. Corporate donors such as Valvis Foundation, BCR, the Vest6 Company, Blue Air, Petrom, International School of Bucharest and Spectrum School, Vodafone Foundation, ING Group, La Fantana, Enel and Intesa Sanpaolo Bank Romania each pitched in with donations. Camelia Şucu, Paulina and Costel Căşuneanu, Mircea Toader, Gabriela Anghelache, Honorius Prigoană and Marcel Pavel also contributed. Numerous famous faces fielded calls from big-hearted members of the public, including UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Andreea Marin Bănică.

Aside from the main event, a charity concert was held at Sala Palatului, at the behest of Bucharest mayor Sorin Oprescu, while the George Enescu National Museum also hosted a classical music concert featuring violin player Gabriel Croitoru. And Amway Romania held a company event to contribute.

Edmond McLoughney, UNICEF Romania Representative, reiterated what the star-studded occasion was really about. "Romanians' response to our appeal for Haiti has been impressive and donations will help give a new chance to children in this country. I would like to take this opportunity and thank all donors. In any emergency, children are the most vulnerable. It is in our power to help as many children, whose life was already hard, survive this devastating earthquake. Sustained efforts will be needed to rebuild this country which was considered a humanitarian aid priority even before the earthquake," he said.

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