



Country strategy paper:

Romania country programme 2024 – 2028

Introduction

Romania is an upper-middle-income country with a population of about 19 million, including 3.64 million children, ranking at 53 out of 191 on the 2022 Human Development Index. Since joining European Union in 2007, Romania's economy has grown significantly, reaching an annual average growth rate of seven percent before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite making significant progress on most of the Sustainable Development Goals and having a robust legislative framework, the annual budgets allocated to education, health and social protection are among the lowest in Europe, while certain societal groups, including Roma ethnics, face severe poverty and material deprivation. Rural-urban disparities are seen both in accessing quality education, but also health care services. Children from communities affected by severe poverty experience inadequate nutrition, overcrowded hous-

es, and poor sanitary conditions. Limited access to health education results in a high rate of birth among girls and increasing concerns on substance abuse among adolescents. Children left behind by migrating parents are particularly vulnerable from a child protection perspective, while violence against children, including bullying is another area of concern, as the authorities lack resources to prevent and respond adequately. As a frontline country in the humanitarian crisis prompted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Romania is hosting a large number of refugees, that requires additional mobilisation of resources in the education, healthcare and social systems.

ERIKS has been operating in Romania since the beginning of 1990s. During the country programme 2019-2022, ERIKS worked in three thematic areas (education, health, protec-

tion), promoting an integrated approach to achieve the most sustainable results, though education was prioritised and seen as an entry point for the other programme components. ERIKS continued to focus on Roma inclusion and improving the overall situation for Roma children in the western parts of Romania, in both rural and urban areas with compact settlements of Roma ethnics. Since the overall risks of humanitarian crisis were considered low in Romania, this has not been part of the country strategy until early 2022.

This country strategy has been developed by ERIKS' Regional Office team, using as sources of information the recent research, state and alternative reports, direct consultations and ongoing monitoring of partner interventions. The perspectives of boys and girls have been integrated in the strategy through partners' reports and by analysing available child-informed reports.

ERIKS will continue to focus on Roma inclusion and four thematic areas – education, health, protection and humanitarian assistance, with additional changes to further strengthen the child rights-based approach. First, there will be an increased

focus on developing legal duty-bearers' capacities to prioritise resources and deliver quality services for the most affected populations, thus better fulfilling their responsibilities according to UNCRC. Secondly, parents from marginalized communities, that demonstrate limited life skills, capacities and resources to provide adequate care for their children, will be supported to understand and access their own rights as a means to achieve outcomes in the realisation of their children's rights. Thirdly, a limited humanitarian component is added in the current strategy, in parallel with development of long-term solutions, to enable a more intentional approach in communities affected by overlapping vulnerabilities, where urgent responses are needed to ensure the survival of children. Gender, environment, religious and conflict sensitivity, as cross cutters, will be highlighted in all the interventions and capacity development of partners. ERIKS will continue to strengthen the capacity of partners to better understand the child protection system in Romania, proactively prevent and report cases of abuse in the communities, and work with duty-bearers to increase their capacity to react efficiently.

Strategic orientation

The role and contribution of ERIKS

With a long-term presence in Romania, ERIKS is a predictable and consistent donor for local partners working with Roma inclusion programmes. While these partners have a long history of grassroots work that started on a needs-based model, ERIKS brings to Romania its focus on child rights programming and a strategic view on sustainable changes.

By adding to the portfolio new partners with expertise in advocacy, ERIKS will increase the possibilities to influence policies and practices at local and national level. Although not intending to take on a more active role in advocacy in its own name, ERIKS' contribution will primarily be to facilitate networking and transfer of data documented within the current grassroots interventions, thus making the advocacy efforts more rooted in reality.

ERIKS builds progressively, through its partners portfolio and constant presence in the country, a larger awareness regarding the rights of the child and the challenges faced by children from the most marginalized communities. Based on previous and current work, ERIKS has an important added value when it comes to fostering dialogue between Roma communities, legal duty-bearers and the majority society to combat discriminatory structures and social norms.

Main learnings from Romania country programme 2019-2022

Ensuring the access of Roma children to education, protection and health services remains a complex mission, despite multiple efforts and models developed over time. Legal duty-bearers find it difficult to take full responsibility for



implementing interventions aimed at supporting the most vulnerable ones. As a result, residential and school segregation continues, access to services is limited, and Roma ethnics are discriminated against. At the same time, Roma civil society has limited resources and capacity to carry on campaigns for sustainable changes. For this, long-term support, flexibility of funding, and a combination of grassroots work and advocacy actions are needed. Promoting rights-based approach in the work with partners is a difficult mission in an environment in which charity and direct actions have been the main approaches for a long period of time. This transition requires gradual changes in understanding and practices, beyond organisational policies.

ERIKS' strategic choices for Romania country programme 2024-2028

A. Geographical focus

ERIKS will continue to focus on the **North-Western** part of Romania, where the current partners are working with compact settlements of Roma population. Although the South and East of Romania is traditionally considered poorer, the gap between Roma and non-Roma neighbours is higher in the wealthier North-Western parts of the country, making Roma inclusion even more difficult to achieve. Mostly **rural communities**, more prone to social exclusion, and those where **vulnerabilities overlap** will be prioritized. The geographical concentration will also facilitate the networking and learning between partners.



B. Thematic focus and targeted rights-holders/duty-bearers

ERIKS will support partners to have an **integrated approach of all the thematic areas** in their programmes to achieve the most sustainable results – education, health, protection, and humanitarian assistance.

Local legal duty-bearers will be prompted to understand their responsibilities and become accountable for what happens in their communities.

Since in the previous strategic periods, **Roma parents** have been granted with a lot of responsibility for fulfilling children's rights, without always having the needed resources, the current strategy is tackling parents primarily from a moral duty-bearer role. In this respect, the partner organisations will focus on developing the capacity of parents to understand and access their own rights, to be able to care and provide for their children.

Working with non-Roma population and authorities' attitudes towards Roma are increasingly important for their integra-

tion and will be highlighted in the coming strategy period.

In the area of **education and leisure**, ERIKS will encourage partners to advocate for **schools, as legal duty-bearers**, to take more responsibility in ensuring **quality education for vulnerable children**. Compared to the previous period, the focus of afterschool programmes developed by partners will be moving towards complementing school curricula and offering children the opportunity to develop life skills, exercising rights, preventing bullying and discrimination, and organising meaningful leisure time in a secure space. In parallel, partners will work to increase the capacity of schools to provide appropriate teaching and customized support for vulnerable children. A special attention will be paid to **pre-school children** and their inclusion in educational programmes that ensure a smooth start of their school life.

The **health area** will be strengthened by including components of health education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and mental health for **vulnerable adolescents**. Access to healthy food and nutrition education will be prioritized for **young mothers and infants**, aiming at giving children a good start in life. Awareness raising activities related to the right to decent health services will continue, including ensuring adequate sanitation facilities and access to safe drinking water for families from the most vulnerable communities.

Partners will be supported to better understand the **child protection system** in Romania and proactively prevent and report child abuse cases. The work with **legal duty-bearers** will be prioritised to ensure an efficient way of tackling cases of abuse and strengthening the application of best interest of the child. **Parents**, as moral duty-bearers, will be supported in developing parenting skills and creating a nurturing environment for their children.

Humanitarian programmes will focus on the communities affected by multiple, overlapping vulnerabilities and will include gap filling components with direct actions to ensure children's rights to survival. Humanitarian assistance will also be considered when unexpected crises or threats, such as floods, fire or other natural disasters will affect the respective communities.

C. Partners

ERIKS will seek to expand its country portfolio with at least one additional partner experienced in implementing advocacy programmes and developing the capacity of duty-bearers. This partner will complement and provide valuable input to the other partner organisations in this area, while using the results of the existing partners' grassroots programmes to advocate for long-term structural changes.

At the same time, ERIKS will expand its reach in extremely vulnerable communities in North-Western Romania by adding to its portfolio new organisations working at the grassroots level, with a proven understanding of the rights-based approach.

During this strategic period, ERIKS will evaluate the opportunity of phasing out from certain intervention components, implemented by the longer-term partners, that do not fit with ERIKS' approaches.

D. Aid efficiency

Most interventions in ERIKS' portfolio are programme based, acknowledging the need for continuous long-term support to achieve sustainable changes in the vulnerable communities. To prevent the risk of creating dependency, ERIKS will encourage partners to focus on empowering communities and develop appropriate exit strategies. During 2024-2028 period, ERIKS will investigate the possibility to provide core funding to at least one partner organisation, as a way to increase aid efficiency.

E. Implementation strategies and approach

In relation to ERIKS' theory of change and strategic approaches, there will be an increased focus on developing **legal duty-bearers' capacities** to prioritise resources and to deliver quality services on education, health, protection for the most affected areas and populations, thus better fulfilling their responsibilities according to UNCRC. Both at local and national levels, ERIKS will take a more active role in **advocating for children's rights** through bringing on board new partners with expertise in advocacy and policy changes and by participating in joint initiatives and relevant networks on child rights and Roma issues.

At the same time, strengthening the **capacity of rights-holders** to understand and access their rights will continue to be prioritised as a strategy to improve the position of Roma in the society. Examples of **meaningful participation**, demonstrated in the previous strategic period, will be promoted,

multiplied and complemented with approaches that **facilitate Roma inclusion** in the surrounding communities and prevent segregation.

As a complement to working with duty-bearers and rights-holders, ERIKS will support **limited direct actions** to address gaps in provision and violations of children's rights in the areas affected by high level of poverty and/or multiple vulnerabilities. These activities will focus on responding to immediate needs of children, where a relevant response from duty-bearers cannot be expected within a reasonable period of time.

F. Sustainability

ERIKS' country priorities are very much in line with the objectives set by the National Strategy on children's rights 2023-2027 and the National Strategy for the inclusion of Romanian citizens belonging to the Roma minority 2022-2027 in the areas of education, health and protection. With increased presence in advocacy, ERIKS, together with partners, will raise the profile of the interventions implemented in these vulnerable communities and draw government's attention to areas which are not covered by the strategies. A more active participation in relevant networks working with children's rights and Roma issues, regular dialogue with other international NGOs, and increased efforts in identifying additional sources of funding for partners' interventions will strengthen ERIKS' efforts for increased sustainability.



Country outcomes

The following outcomes have been defined for ERIKS' work in Romania during this strategy period, based on the country analysis and ERIKS' role and contribution:

- 1.1.1** Partner organisations adhere to the Child Rights Based Approach. They integrate in a contextualized manner, gradually and organically, elements of the **Child Rights Based Approach and the UNCRC principles** at the level of their organisational strategies, staffing policies (institutional ownership) and programme development.
- 1.1.2** Partner organisations are continuously open to **learning** from their own and others' experiences, as well as from new approaches. This allows them to be sensitive to the context, emerging risks and changes, and to plan and adapt their strategies accordingly.
- 1.1.3** Partner organisations integrate elements of **gender transformative approach** in their organisational strategies and programmatic work.
- 1.1.4** ERIKS and partner organisations have appropriate **governance** structures and systems for **management and internal control**.
- 1.1.5** ERIKS and partner organisations participate in relevant **networks** and have skills and opportunity to **advocate** for the rights of the child.

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- 2.1.1** **Girls and boys enjoy** their rights to **quality and inclusive education** at all mandatory school levels. They learn about their rights, develop life skills and self-esteem through meaningful leisure time activities.
 - 2.1.2** **Newborn and infant girls and boys** enjoy access to **healthy food, quality care** and medical services for a good start in life.
 - 2.1.3** **Adolescent girls and boys** enjoy their right to health, including **sexual and reproductive health and rights** (SRHR), menstrual health and mental health.
 - 2.1.4** **Girls and boys** understand their rights to be **protected from violence**, neglect and exploitation. They know how and where to report child abuse and take part in preventing abuse and discrimination.
 - 2.1.5** **Girls and boys enjoy** their rights to **assistance in the humanitarian context**.

2.2.1 Local authorities, school management and school staff ensure **inclusive quality education** for all children at all levels. They understand their responsibilities and the particular challenges faced by children from vulnerable communities, thus they allocate necessary resources and cooperate effectively to facilitate all children's access to quality education.

2.2.2 Health care units, social protection and education institutions work together to ensure adequate **health care for mothers and children** from the most vulnerable communities. They are pro-active in reaching out to most vulnerable girls and boys and prevent discrimination on any ground when delivering health services.

2.2.3 Legal duty-bearers at local level work to ensure girls and boys from the most vulnerable communities are protected from **abuse, neglect and exploitation**. The **social housing and relocation** programmes are designed and implemented taking into account the CRC principles, including the best interest of the child.

2.3.1 ERIKS' partner organisations develop afterschool activities that **complement schools' programme** and offer girls and boys from the most vulnerable communities the opportunity to build life skills, exercise their rights, prevent bullying and discrimination in a safe and inclusive environment.

2.3.2 ERIKS' partner organisations develop health programmes for the most vulnerable girls and boys, as a complement to public services.

2.3.3 ERIKS' partner organisations are active to **prevent and protect** girls and boys from **abuse, neglect and exploitation**.

2.3.4 Parents understand their role and act responsively in ensuring an adequate environment for children's development in accordance with children's rights.

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