Children’s earliest years represent a critical phase of development. In the first years of life, starting with conception, and with a focus on the first 1,000 days (until two years of age) and into the next 1000 days, a child’s brain forms neural connections at a speed and complexity never repeated again[[1]](#footnote-1). These connections are triggered by nurturing care, or the conditions characterized by good health, adequate nutrition, protection from harm and responsive stimulation, including warm and rich communication and playful early learning opportunities[[2]](#footnote-2). Caregivers and parents have a very important role to play in the development of their children, as their responsive and playful interactions with their children positively and permanently strengthen the actualization of developmental potential. Parents are they key architects of a child’s early environment by enabling the provision of the core ingredients for early brain development – nutrition, stimulation and protection.

A recent study by the Association of Paediatricians and the Institute of Psychology, which aimed to standardize and develop an instrument for early childhood development screening instruments indicates that around 8-12% of children aged 0-6 exhibit developmental risks, while an additional 5% already demonstrate developmental delays or disabilities. Notably, the difference in child development between the poorest and richest quintiles corresponds to a 16-month gap. Based on these findings, it is crucial to focus on providing special attention and support to vulnerable children in Serbia. Various unfavourable indicators for children from the Roma population in Serbia cause particular concern, especially for those who live in marginalized settlements and low-income families. Children from the poorest families (particularly in Roma settlements) in Serbia are involved in early development programs and later education in a significantly lower percentage comparing to general population. At the same time, every 5th child form that population is stunted, they are more exposed to violent disciplinary practice, and they have the least stimulating materials (MICS 6, 2019)[[3]](#footnote-3). Major disparities have been observed between the mortality rates, nutritional status, and education among Roma children and other children. Roma children under the age of 5.5 are far less involved in preschool education. While the coverage of children aged 3 to 5.5 in preschool education amounts to about 50% in the general population, the rate in the Roma population is only 6%.

The services that are provided to Roma families are desegregated, meaning there are communities and places with variety of services (besides the basic ones provided by the government) and in some smaller cities there are none. Additionally, the services and service providers are not coordinated. Certain problems also require the establishment of integrated services or at least precisely defined cooperation protocols, information exchange, and the formation of joint bodies/commissions. There is a gap in the knowledge and skills of staff working in government institutions and CSOʹs. The knowledge that should be improved refers to the culturally competent practice, how to support parenting skills and promote early development of children in vulnerable Roma families. Existent organization of local community teams in securing and providing early development services to Roma families, doesn’t effectively respond to their needs due to various cultural, language, and legal barriers. Having that in mind, it is necessary to encourage and develop a social innovation approach to get better responses for the needs of Roma children’s parents in general, especially during periods of early development.

Raising awareness at all levels and aligning messages to parents about the importance and benefits of positive parenting practices and nurturing, responsive parenting during early development is crucial. Additionally, it emphasizes the need to strengthen existing support systems and introduce new ones accessible to parents from vulnerable groups.

University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Sciences is a partner in Erasmus+ KA220-VET - Cooperation partnerships in vocational education and training project from December 2022. Learning and Innovation Labs project, led by Research and development centre Linkoping from Sweden, brings together partners (universities and departments for social work) from Spain, Norway, Latvia, Slovenia, Serbia and the European Social Network from Belgium. The overall aim of this project is to develop and test a new 'Learning and Innovation Lab' model and approach to developing new, more holistic and person centered approaches to the delivery of services to a range of vulnerable users of health and social care services and to the development of the new competencies and skill sets required by stakeholders and front line professional staff to implement innovation. A core feature of the project is that it will create new tools and products which will enable staff/stakeholders both to address systemic and organizational barriers to change and innovation and to develop and implement new more collaborative working methods with vulnerable client groups. In addition to the Lab model, the key products will include a dedicated transnational Learning & Knowledge Platform and an online/blended Learning to Innovate Competency Framework and Learning Programme with supporting learning materials. Lab methodology involves set of actors and stakeholders (including target group) that together explore and experiment with matters of importance outside of existing hierarchical and organizational structures. Innovations are anchored in shared realities, needs and possibilities of the involved families, social service providers and other key stakeholders. This implies active and meaningful participation, acknowledge and respect of skills, competencies, needs and difficulties each actor brings into the collaboration in change process to go from challenges to solution.

Within this project, the Faculty of Political Sciences is developing a Learning and Innovation Lab to support the early development of children from vulnerable Roma communities with partners in the municipality of Zemun, given that there is a well-established multidisciplinary early development support team. Starting from June 2023, a partnership was established with Municipality Zemun, UNICEF office in Serbia, City Secretariat for Social Welfare, Preschool institution from Zemun, Health care centre in Zemun (including development centre, pediatric and home visiting nurses service), Center for Social Work Zemun and City Center for Social work Belgrade, and with several NGOs (Center for Youth Integration - CIM, The Belgrade Psychological Center, SOS Children Village Serbia and Roma Women Center Bibia). As a result of baseline study, stakeholder mapping activity, consultation with target group and extensive consultation with relevant stakeholders and partners, Lab named “Zemunsko čavororo” (Zemun tad) was established; objectives and scope of activities are agreed and outlined.

1. Research indicates that these connections occur at a pace of at least 1,000 per second. However, recent research indicates that the speed could be up to 1 million per second. Early Moments Matter for Every Child Report, UNICEF, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Lancet (2016): Special Series on ECD: Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale. Available at <http://www.thelancet.com/series/ECD2016> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. MICS 2019, Republički zavod za statistiku i UNICEF. 2019. *Istraživanje višestrukih pokazatelja položaja žena i dece u Srbiji i Istraživanje višestrukih pokazatelja položaja žena i dece u romskim naseljima u Srbiji, 2019, Izveštaj o nalazima istraživanja.* Beograd, Srbija: Republički zavod za statistiku I UNICEF.

   https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/16056/file/MICS%206%20Istra%C5%BEivanje%20vi%C5%A1

   estrukih%20pokazatelja%20za%202019.%20godinu.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)