**4. Exploring the links between socio-economic background and educational attainment / completion**

***Problem statement***

In most countries, statistics show a clear correlation between a low socio-economic background (ie, pupils and students living in poverty and social exclusion) and poor educational attainment and completion. Such a situation only perpetuates the intergenerational transmission of poverty, as children born in poor families are likely to stay poor, being denied equal opportunities in education from a very early stage in life. The disadvantage is further compounded for children who, in addition to facing poverty, belong to an ethnic minority, are migrants, or have a disability.

Parents in poverty cannot afford fee-paying schools, whereas attendance in such schools is usually correlated to better professional integration and higher incomes later in life. They also cannot afford to enrol their children in schools situated far from their homes, which reduces access to quality educational providers, especially for those living in disadvantaged areas. An inability to afford high-quality education materials and extra-curricular activities means that poor children can’t take advantage of the full benefits school has to offer, and miss out on diverse learning opportunities. As schools are underfunded and hit by recent austerity cuts, more and more expenses for such materials, and activities are passed on to parents. Furthermore, poverty often leads to poor housing, living conditions, nutrition, and health, all of which act as deterrents to educational success.

Children coming from low-income families further face bullying and discrimination based on their socio-economic status. Some are known to refuse free school meals for fear of being ridiculed by their peers – much like non take-up of benefits among adults is often motivated by fear of stigma. Their social inclusion and ability to socialise and build friendships is also impaired by not being able to afford the right clothing or popular pastimes with their colleagues. As their educational performance is lower, they are more likely to repeat school years, which leads to further social exclusion. This leads to a lack of faith in the education system and the incentive to get a low-paying, low-skilled job which ensures immediate income, which is one of the main reasons behind high drop-out rates among poor pupils.

More awareness on socio-economic background as both an objective deterrent to academic performance (and even attendance), as well as grounds for bullying and social exclusion is needed for systemic solutions to tackle the problem. Measures must not translate into further segregation and isolation of those learners into non-mainstream establishments. Instead, public education needs to be free and accessible, with additional targeted support for poor children to benefit from free materials and activities, as well as school meals, including over the holiday period. Comprehensive, wrap-around support should be provided to families in need, through the provision of adequate income and in-kind support, fostering better sensitivity and training on poverty and social exclusion among staff and pupils, and strengthening cooperation between parents and schools.

***Quotes from people experiencing poverty***

*"I often experience parents who are living in poverty being ashamed of their situation not being able to provide their children with enough resources for school. Especially in rural areas we have the problem that society isn´t willing to face poverty as a reality but prefers to keep silent towards it." (Austria)*

*“I'm studying for hairdresser because that's the only thing that's offered in my neighbourhood in the special schooling system that interests me a bit. I would much rather do child care because in the school holidays I am a monitor and I have learned there that it is much better for me. But that direction is not offered here, and then I would have to go to school 20 kilometres away and that is practically not feasible.” (Belgium)*

*“The education system is still the mirror of a society where there is still discrimination and has a high monetary cost especially for those who want to take a higher education.” (Portugal)*

***Policy recommendations***

**National level**

* There are no poor children in rich families! Tackle family poverty by ensuring adequate income support, including minimum income schemes and other subsidies, to ensure decent living standards (housing, nutrition, clothing, healthcare etc).
* Ensure sufficient funding for schools not to have to transfer most of the costs for materials and activities to parents.
* Provide more and better trained personnel, such as social and outreach workers, to assist schools in liaising with low-income families and to foster better cooperation with parents in finding solutions.
* Raise awareness on socio-economic background as cause for bullying and social exclusion, including by improving the awareness of other pupils of the realities of poverty and social exclusion.

***Good practices***

**NETHERLANDS** – The regional approach to early school leaving in the Netherlands is divided into 39 regions. Within such a region, schools and municipalities make agreements together about measures to prevent early school leaving. And about counseling young people in a vulnerable position. Each region has a contact municipality for the Regional Reporting and Coordination Function (RMC) early school leaving. Each region also has a contact school, which represents the other schools.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/vsv/regionaal-samenwerken-tegen-schooluitval>

**PORTUGAL** – ***Escolhas Program (Choices Program)***. This is a national government program, established in 2001, promoted by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and integrated in the High Commissioner for Migration (ACM, IP), whose mission is to promote the social inclusion of children and youth from vulnerable socio-economic contexts, with a view to equal opportunities and the reinforcement of social cohesion. Escolhas Program is now in its 7th generation. Recently it was approved: 103 projects (93 applied for measure I (education, training and qualification); 50 to measure II (employment and entrepreneurship) and 95 to measure III (community dynamization, participation and citizenship). Through Escolhas Program it was recently presented, by the High Commissioner for Migration (ACM, IP) the Program ROMA Educa (ROMA Education) which aims to allocate 100 scholarships for support to attendance and stay in secondary education for students from the Roma communities for the 2019/2020 school year. Students from Roma communities who are enrolled and attending the 10th, 11th and 12th years of schooling can access this program, preferably in territories covered by the local projects funded by the Escolhas Program.