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Dear Mr. Matthes,

Dear Participants,

Thank you very much for the invitation and for the privilege to address you at the third international conference of the Alliance for Childhood.

One of the most defining attributes of a "Childhood in Balance" is obviously the quality of education that children have access to. In Europe however, there are great disparities in accessing proper education, affecting the children of various groups in European societies. In contrast to other minority groups however, such as people with disabilities, linguistic minorities, religious, and even other racial and ethnic groups, the barriers that Roma children encounter in accessing quality education are even more intolerable in view of the extreme extent of poverty and deprivation they suffer.

Strengthening the early education of Roma is at the same time a necessary investment and is financially profitable in the long run: on a scale of a 20-30 years period it actually costs less to integrate the Roma population than sustaining their substandard socio-economic conditions. The benefits of investing into the education - and especially into the early education - of Roma children include the promotion of social equity, increased individual and broader social productivity, reduced levels of poverty, as well as the elimination of discriminatory attitudes and social exclusion. As Roma children become more educated, they increase their chances of transcending social exclusion and becoming productive members of the workforce. While they earn money and contribute to the national budget through taxes on both income and consumption, they begin to influence the way in which non-Roma view them, thereby facilitating the broader social issues as well. Also, as Roma become more productive and their poverty level decreases, they become contributing members of society instead of beneficiaries of public aid. The combination of the increased contribution and the decreased benefits paid out by the government is the net budgetary benefit to the national budget.

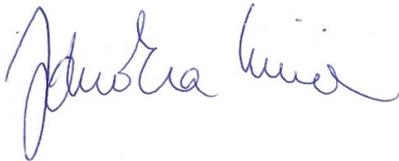
A recent research in Hungary has also proved that integrated education - when accompanied with suitable pedagogic support - will enhance the educational performance of Roma students, and at the same time will not block the progress of majority students. Underprivileged students make remarkable

progress in integrated classes, given that children learn at least as much from each other as from the teachers, while segregation would block this channel of education.

We must welcome all good and effective initiatives that can help fulfilling the above premised goals, given the extreme rarity of real "good practices" in the EU and with most projects being "self-advertised" by the overoptimistic reports of national and local governments and project-lobby groups. It is indispensable to measure up the real needs and the real objectives of the communities in the target area. Therefore, it would be beneficial on the one hand to do extensive surveys on the demands of local target groups and on the other hand to build up a strong cooperation with Roma NGOs. The participation of Roma in projects and decision-making procedures affecting their own communities still lags far behind the extent of representation of any other interest group. Roma must be let to set the discourse about themselves, to reveal the roots of the problems and articulate what actions and measures they need.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a fruitful conference.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Livia Jaroka', written in a cursive style.

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