

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN MONTENEGRO

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Introduction

Inclusive education policy emerged in the 20th century, with its roots tracing back to the 1970s, when various changes in the educational and upbringing process began as a means of combating the segregation of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties (Bećirović, 2003). The key principles on which inclusive education is based were adopted in 1994 in Spain, at the World Conference on Special Needs Education sponsored by UNESCO, when the Salamanca Statement was adopted. The Salamanca Statement emphasized the idea that “those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools” (The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action, 1994:8). The transformation of the education system was also driven by scientific criticism directed at special education, as well as by efforts from parents' associations advocating for the inclusion of their children with developmental difficulties into mainstream education. Furthermore, the inclusive education model received significant support from the NGO sector and international child-focused organizations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, and others (Macura, 2015).

By ratifying international documents such as the World Declaration on Education for All, the Dakar Framework for Action, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Salamanca Statement, and others, even before its independence, Montenegro committed to creating conditions for the application of their guidelines to improve inclusive education policies. Today,



the commitment towards inclusive education in Montenegro can be reconstructed starting with the country's Constitution from 2007 (rev. 2013), which allows positive discrimination "which is directed towards creating conditions for realizing national, gender and overall equality of persons who are, by whatever basis, in an unequal position" (Art. 8, Par. 2). The Constitution also guarantees "special protection to persons with disabilities" (Art. 68), as well as a general "right to education under equal conditions" (Art. 75, par. 1). That education in Montenegro is to be inclusive is also defined in The General Law on Education and Upbringing Montenegro (2024), which regulates the basic structure and purpose of education in this country. It determines that education and upbringing in Montenegro serve the purpose of, among other things, "securing the possibility for an all-encompassing development of an individual, regardless of his gender, age, disabilities, social and cultural origin, national and religious belonging and bodily or physical constitution" – (Art. 2, Par. 1, Point 1). Commitment towards inclusive education is also made in specific legislations dealing with preschool (2017), primary (2025), vocational (2025), gymnasium (2025) and higher education (2024), which all contain a determination that education is available to all individuals and access to it cannot be directly or indirectly restricted, among other things, based on disability.

In Montenegrin educational institutions, inclusion is principally implemented by teachers and preschool educators, school principals, professional associates (pedagogues, psychologists, special education teachers, speech therapists, intellectual disability specialists, healthcare and social workers), personal assistants, teaching aides, and other individuals. The quality of educational inclusion depends on the readiness of the school system to provide the necessary conditions for effective educational practice, that is, on the competencies of teachers acquired through formal education (Ainscow, 1994), the organization and implementation of inclusive practices, as well as the cooperation of schools and families with the local community (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

If we confined our study to the legislation above dealing with education on the state level, we would find no mention of NGO's or their role in shaping and implementing inclusive education in Montenegro. Hence, to get a better understanding on how NGO's in Montenegro shape inclusive education, one must take a look in other sources of law, primarily at the Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (2024), as well as the Law on Public Administration (2018, rev. 2022) and the Decree On The Election Of Representatives Of Nongovernmental Organizations Into The Working Bodies Of The State Administration Bodies And Conducting Public Consultation In Preparation Of Laws And Strategies (2018).

The Law on NGO's defines non-governmental organizations and associations as "voluntary, non-profit organizations" that may be founded by "domestic and/or foreign natural and/or legal persons for the purpose of achieving certain common or general goals and interests" (Article 2 and 3). Such a definition is in accordance with the general understanding according to which NGO's are citizens' associations

that operate independently of the government, mainly for social or political purposes, focusing on areas where state initiatives are limited or absent, and through their engagement, they contribute to vulnerable categories of society, thereby attaining significant status (Adamuthe & Mishra, 2017).

In Montenegro, NGO's can operate in any field of general interest as long as their objectives are in line with the Constitution and the legislation (Article 18a, par. 1). The state supports NGOs by allocating budgetary funds and providing tax benefits, and allowing them to use state-owned property (Article 31). Each year, the state allocates a portion of its budget to NGO's for them to realize projects in "areas of public interest," among which — relevant to this paper — are education, protection of persons with disabilities, and the promotion and protection of human and minority rights (Article 32). Funding is carried out through public calls for proposals in areas previously defined as these of priority (Article 32v). Of special significance to this paper is the fact that, according to the Law on NGO, the state allocates at least 0,3% of the annual budget to NGOs for pursuing goals in the areas of public interest (Article 32, Par. 1-2). On top of this 0,3% - additional 0,1% is specifically allocated to NGOs pursuing projects aimed at improvement of rights of persons with disabilities (Article 32, Par. 5). Thanks to this support, as well as thanks to the international projects which both domestic and foreign NGO's can conduct in Montenegro, NGO's are left with substantial resources which can be directed towards both shaping and implementing inclusive education in Montenegro, which remains an area of permanent public interest in the country.

The role of NGO's in shaping and implementing inclusive education in Montenegro does not stop there. NGO's play a much more subtle, but far-reaching, role in shaping Montenegro's inclusive education policies through their influence in drafting the state's strategies and legislation. This role of NGO's, although it existed since 2003 in the form of a "soft" obligation of state actors to consult with NGO's when preparing relevant acts (Reianu, 2024), only became systematized on a state level with the adoption of the 2018 Law on Public Administration (rev. 2022) and the 2018 Decree On The Election Of Representatives Of Nongovernmental Organizations Into The Working Bodies Of The State Administration Bodies And Conducting Public Consultation In Preparation Of Laws And Strategies, which introduced a standardized form of NGO participation in drafting legislation and strategies. In general, NGOs shape both legislative drafts and strategies of the Government either through their delegated representatives in ad-hoc working groups which prepare these drafts, or through taking part in public discussions once the drafts have been presented to the public (Article 79). Each year, respective Ministries announce regarding which legislative or strategy drafts, public discussion will take place (Decree, Article 11). Once the draft of the legislation or strategy is presented to the public, the general public is invited to provide feedback (Article 12, Par. 3). Public discussion can take the form of: round tables, forums, presentations, submission of remarks, proposals, and suggestions in either written or electronic form (Article 14).



The public discussion begins on the day of the publication and can last from 20 to 40 days, depending on the importance and complexity of the subject matter of the draft being put up for public debate (Articles 15, Par. 1). In relation to this, the feedback of NGO's representing persons with disabilities is especially significant in shaping the sectorial analyses on protection of rights of persons with disabilities, which are prepared by ministries (Law on NGO, Article 32a). Based on these sectorial analyses, the Government decides the manner in which the aforementioned allocation of budgetary resources to NGO's will be made. By participating in the shaping of sectorial analyses, NGO's have the opportunity to direct the allocation of budgetary resources specifically towards the goal of inclusive education.

In addition to their role in shaping governmental strategies and legislative drafts, NGO's have the opportunity to influence governmental policies through participation and cooperation with various governmental bodies. The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (2015), states that the Ministry under whose jurisdiction the befalls the matter of human and minority rights, conducts activities aimed at „improving rights of the disabled persons and the promotion of their equality with other persons“, among other ways, through: „establishing cooperation with non-governmental organizations in the field of protection of people with disabilities from discrimination and the promotion of their equality with other people“ (Article 6, Par. 1, Point 8). A recent measure taken by the Montenegrin Government was the founding of the Council for Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This Council, initially formed in 2021, due to organizational difficulties (Information, 2024), had to be formed anew in 2024, this time successfully (Decision, 2024). Out of 21 members of this Council, 13 are incumbent ministers in the Government, 4 are representatives of relevant public bodies, such as the Paralympic Committee, and 4 are representatives of organizations of persons with disabilities. The role of this Council is to oversee the implementation of international standards regarding persons with disabilities in Montenegro and suggest means of their improvement, as well as “improve(s) the cooperation of nongovernmental organizations, state administration, local administration and local government” (Article 6, Par. 1, Point 6).

Methods

This paper aims to examine, analyze, and highlight the importance of the assistance and support provided by NGOs in the implementation of inclusive education in Montenegro, namely: to identify specific NGO activities in this field; to analyze legal frameworks, examples of good practice, and completed projects; to emphasize NGOs as a bridge between the education system, institutions, society, and families; to map the role of NGOs in the creation and implementation of strategic documents; and specifically to determine whether NGOs contribute to staff training,

the development of manuals and guides for working with children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, as well as with children from Roma and Egyptian communities.

In the remainder of the article, we will demonstrate, through concrete examples, the manner in which NGO's have influenced (I) the shaping of the governmental strategies on inclusive education in Montenegro and (II) implemented projects in relation to a) children with developmental disabilities and b) the Roma and Egyptian population. After having conducted this overview, we will enter a discussion and critically examine these results, also consulting comparative practice.

A theoretical-descriptive approach will be applied in this paper. The method of theoretical analysis was used, specifically the technique of content analysis, which enabled the identification of reliable facts relevant to understanding the research subject, that is, the analysis of available documentation. Accordingly, the paper includes a review of strategic and legal documents, which will be compared to the inclusive education NGO practice in Montenegro. In addition, a review and analysis of secondary sources (publications of international organizations, manuals, guides, and scientific articles) was conducted. In order to describe the state of inclusive education and the contribution of NGOs over time, the descriptive method was also applied.

Literature Review

The Role of NGOs in the Creation and Implementation of Strategies for Inclusive Education

As was explained, representatives of non-governmental organizations contribute to fostering inclusion by participating in the development and revision of education strategies and legislation, as well as in public consultations discussing key documents related to inclusive education. As an example, the Inclusive Education Strategy for the period 2008–2014, which defined the basis for inclusive education in Montenegro, was adopted and conducted with significant help from NGO's. Before the adoption of the Strategy, numerous training programs and workshops were conducted in cooperation with NGOs such as the Pedagogical Center, UNICEF, OECD, and Save the Children, through which a large number of preschool teachers and professional associates were trained, along with many primary school teachers, and to a lesser extent, subject teachers (Inclusive Education Strategy in Montenegro 2008–2014). Representatives of one NGO—the Union of Associations of Parents of Children and Youth with Developmental Disabilities *Naša inicijativa* (Our Initiative)— participated in the development of this Strategy. In order to achieve the specific goals and tasks set by the Strategy, in addition to the competent ministries, certain NGOs were



designated as implementers of specific activities. According to the Strategy, these NGOs were responsible for:

- Training of teaching assistants (Several NGOs in Montenegro have been actively involved in training and empowering teaching assistants, particularly in the areas of inclusion and support for people with disabilities – e.g., Zračak Nade);
- Creating a database of students with special educational needs (Establishing a working group composed of representatives from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, NGOs, and the Association of Parents of Children with Developmental Disabilities);
- Transforming special institutions into resource centers (NGO partnerships through: expert knowledge – educators, coordinators; training and capacity building of staff in institutions; project writing and implementation);
- Developing a list of criteria and standards for the work of educational institutions following the inclusive model;
- Ensuring physical accessibility of institutions (NGO Mozaik – Nikšić created the first social club for people with disabilities in Nikšić in cooperation with the EU/ UNDP ReLOaD2 program. NGO Nova Šansa – Herceg Novi has, since 2009, introduced school assistants for children with developmental difficulties with the support of Save the Children and the EU.
- Developing classroom assistance programs;
- Raising awareness about the importance of education for persons with developmental difficulties;
- Cooperation with the media to promote inclusive education (Inclusive Education Strategy in Montenegro 2008–2014).

Representatives of non-governmental organizations also participated in the development of the subsequent policy document – Inclusive Education Strategy 2014–2018 – including the Association of Parents of Children and Youth with Developmental Disabilities “Staze” and UNICEF in Montenegro. Like the previous one, this Strategy went through a public consultation process that included various NGOs. Within this Strategy, NGOs were involved in:

- Assessing the need for early intervention and support for children with developmental difficulties and their parents;
- Training staff in preschool institutions and social work centers for social inclusion;
- Designing and distributing promotional and informational materials for healthcare workers, referral commissions, and parents;
- Training on drafting and implementing Individual Educational Development Programs (IEDPs);
- Developing Individual Transition Plans (ITPs) and cooperating with employers for students after completing secondary school;
- Monitoring and coordinating the work of teaching assistants (Inclusive Education Strategy in Montenegro 2014–2018).

Through the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and with the support of UNICEF, the current Inclusive Education Strategy in Montenegro 2019–2025 was developed. Within this Strategy, NGOs—acting as partners of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare—are engaged in several tasks:

- Establishment of a monitoring and evaluation team for the Strategy;
- Establishing cross-sector cooperation (NGOs play a key role in connecting stakeholders from different sectors by organizing round tables, workshops, and public campaigns. (For example, the Association of Youth with Disabilities of Montenegro (UMHCG) has, through its projects, involved the Ministry of Education, the Employment Agency, and schools. This enables knowledge transfer, good practice sharing, increased transparency, and accountability.
- Researching attitudes toward children with developmental disabilities;
- Early identification, intervention, and protection of these children;
- Training staff to work with children with disabilities (The Center for Adult Education, in cooperation with NGOs, has conducted training for teaching assistants in accordance with the new legal procedures since 2019);
- Improving physical accessibility of educational institutions;
- Providing appropriate teaching aids and materials;
- Facilitating children's transition between different levels of education and developing Individual Transition Plans (ITPs);
- Protection from violence and discrimination;
- Promoting employment;
- Implementation of assistive support (NGO Zračak Nade implemented training in assistive technology for teachers, teaching assistants, and professional staff in schools and social institutions during 2018–2019, with the support of the Ministry of Education and FAKT/EU. The project included the following municipalities: Bijelo Polje, Plav, Berane, Rožaje, Mojkovac, and Pljevlja. They received support from several NGOs: Naše Sunce, Human Rights Action, The First Association of Parents of Children with Disabilities, Center for Civic Education, Center for Women's Rights Juventas, Safe Women's House, ANIMA, and Equivalent.
- Professional development of teachers in the field of inclusive education;
- Improving the quality of internal and external evaluation with a focus on inclusive education (Internal evaluation: training and development of professional competencies, creation and distribution of tools, support to inclusion teams, students, and parents. External evaluation: defining evaluation criteria, impartial monitoring and reporting, support in accreditation and monitoring (Inclusive Education Strategy in Montenegro 2019–2025).

Aligned with the current Inclusive Education Strategy is the ongoing Strategy for Early and Preschool Education in Montenegro 2021–2025, one of whose goals is to increase the inclusion rate of children with developmental difficulties, as well



as Roma and Egyptian children, in preschool educational institutions. The Strategy states that NGOs contribute to ensuring accessibility of preschool institutions for children from vulnerable groups, employee training and empowerment, early intervention, and cross-sector cooperation. NGOs are also involved in the Working Group for Monitoring the Implementation of the Strategy. Just like in the Inclusive Education Strategies, NGOs act as partners to institutional stakeholders and are responsible for specific activities related to inclusion. For instance, NGOs support the implementation of the Parenting for Lifelong Health program, which targets parents of children from vulnerable groups, and work on improving parenting competencies. They also foster partnerships between resource centers, kindergartens, and health institutions (Strategy for Early and Preschool Education in Montenegro 2021–2025).

Support from NGOs Focused on Children with Developmental Disabilities

According to the Law on Upbringing and Education of Children with Special Educational Needs, the category of children with developmental disabilities includes: “children with physical, intellectual, and sensory disabilities, children with multiple disabilities, and children with autism spectrum disorders.” The term children with developmental difficulties refers to: “children with speech and language difficulties, behavioral disorders, severe chronic illnesses, long-term illnesses, and other children with learning difficulties and other challenges caused by emotional, social, linguistic, and cultural barriers” (Art. 4). The terminology corresponds to that proposed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and is applied within the European Union. It is used at the school level and includes both children with disabilities and children with developmental difficulties (Strategy for Inclusive Education 2008–2014).

According to the General Law on Education and Upbringing, children with special educational needs are educated in preschool institutions, schools, and resource centers (Art. 27, par. 10). It should be noted that educational institutions include students with various developmental disabilities, which are defined differently from one country to another. Nevertheless, most countries define between six and ten types of disabilities and difficulties. In Montenegro, the common classification includes students with sensory, intellectual, and psychomotor difficulties, including multiple disabilities. In recent years, however, the term special educational needs has been increasingly used in contemporary education policy documents (Veljić, 2012). According to MONSTAT data (2025), 1186 students with special educational needs attend regular primary school classes, while 116 are placed in special education classes, and 158 children are enrolled in resource centers. Data from the Ministry of Education for the 2024/2025 school year indicate that 216 children with special educational needs are enrolled in preschool institutions, and 328 are in secondary

schools, all of whom have official placement decisions (according to the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro, 2024).

The first steps toward developing an inclusive education environment in Montenegro began in 1997, with the implementation of the project Kindergarten and School for Every Child, realized by the NGOs Pedagogical Center of Montenegro, UNICEF, and Save the Children, with support from the Ministry of Education and Science of Montenegro. At that time, children with developmental disabilities gradually began to be included in mainstream preschool groups. Additionally, the Pedagogical Center initiated the Step by Step project, which focused on the child and respected the characteristics of the child and their family. In 2001, at the initiative of Save the Children, a comprehensive public opinion survey on inclusion was conducted in Montenegro. A year later, the Ministry of Education and Science, in cooperation with the Pedagogical Center, explored primary school teachers' attitudes toward the inclusion of children with special educational needs in mainstream classes. These studies formed the foundation for the pilot project Inclusive Education in Primary Schools (Šakotić, 2017).

The international non-governmental organization Save the Children UK has been continuously supporting the development and promotion of inclusion in education, as well as assisting and supporting partners striving to advance this practice. For this purpose, the organization published a handbook in 2000, which its Montenegro Program later translated and published in 2007 under the title „Škola za sve – Uključivanje djece sa razvojnim teškoćama u obrazovanju.” This publication serves as a practical guide containing directions, practical advice, and recommendations for the effective functioning of an inclusive education system. It is intended for teachers, as well as all those working with children with developmental difficulties. It includes examples of workshops addressing educational opportunities for children with disabilities, children's rights and inclusive education, barriers to inclusion, and planning of inclusive activities (Save the Children, 2007).

In Montenegro, the work on DAISY (Digital Accessible Information System) textbooks began in 2013. Aimed at enabling access to textbooks for students with visual impairments and reading comprehension difficulties, the Resource Center for Children and Youth in Podgorica—supported by the Ministry of Education, UNICEF, the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids, the Bureau for Education Services, and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Cetinje—organized the conversion of the first textbooks from print to audio format, i.e., multimedia content combining sound and text. Two years later, UNICEF analyzed the results from using these textbooks, which showed a more than favorable reception among teachers. In cooperation with the Institute for Textbooks and Teaching Aids, UNICEF published the Handbook for Using DAISY Textbooks in Teaching in 2017 to make these resources more accessible to students, teachers, and parents (Radulović, Marić, Milić, Vešović-Ivanović & Janković, 2017).

With the support of Save the Children, the Ministry of Education implemented the project Strengthening Social Inclusion – Equal and Quality Education to Support



the Successful Development of Children in the Northwestern Balkans from 2016 to 2018. The project aimed to improve inclusion and the quality of education, as well as to increase the number of children from marginalized groups in preschool education. Funds were provided to equip twelve early childhood classrooms with didactic materials and appropriate furniture. In addition, through workshops and round tables, educators and professional staff were trained to work with children with specific developmental disabilities, while parents participated in thematic workshops. This directly supported the implementation of the Strategy for Inclusive Education in Montenegro 2014–2018 (Save the Children & Ministry of Education, 2017).

The Pedagogical Center and the Center for Civic Education, in cooperation with the Center for Monitoring and Research (CeMI) and with the support of the Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro, conducted a study titled *From Integrative to Inclusive Education in Montenegro: Keeping Pace with Needs*, aimed at analyzing the application of legislation and implementation of the Strategy for Inclusive Education, as well as identifying barriers to effective implementation of the inclusive education concept. The study used examples of good practices from the region and Europe and provides concrete guidelines and recommendations to offer conclusions and solutions applicable to Montenegro's educational system (Coalition for Social Change, 2017).

The Association of Parents of Children and Youth with Developmental Disabilities – Staze, in cooperation with NGOs from Austria and Moldova, implemented the project *Inclusive Vocational Education*. The result was the publication of the *Guide for Career Guidance and Counseling of Children and Youth with Special Educational Needs*. The guide aimed to improve career guidance and counseling services for students with special educational needs during the transition from general to vocational education and into the labor market. The focus was on communication and coordination among key actors in education, employment, and social support. It contributed to the rationalization of career guidance services by outlining mechanisms that ensure an effective transition to vocational education and eventual employment for young people with special educational needs (KulturKontakt, Staze & Speranta, 2018).

The Association of Youth with Disabilities of Montenegro (UMHCG), together with the Ministry of Education, implemented the project *Equal Education for All – It Concerns Us!* According to Miličić & Radovanović (2019), the project aimed to help create a more supportive environment for greater inclusion of students in secondary education, improve teachers' competencies, and raise public awareness about children with disabilities and their rights within secondary education. As part of the project, a handbook titled *Access to Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Secondary Education in Montenegro* was developed. The handbook provides an overview of Montenegrin and international legal frameworks, explains relevant terminology, and offers recommendations for working with children with specific types of disabilities. It is intended for current and future teachers, professional associates, and parents of children with disabilities.



With the support of the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights of Montenegro, the Center for Civic Education is implementing the project For Equality of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)! Aimed at “raising awareness, promoting social inclusion of PWDs, and combating prejudices and stereotypes that further marginalize the position of PWDs in Montenegro” (Četković, Radulović, Kaluđerović & Milaš, 2020:5). Within the project, the study On the Same Track? was developed to analyze the legislative framework and various aspects of life for persons with disabilities—including their treatment, education, social and healthcare services, and accessibility of facilities. The study seeks to identify the status and condition of persons with disabilities in the aforementioned areas. It includes recommendations for necessary steps and activities to improve the status of PWDs across various spheres of society (Četković et al., 2020).

The Ministry for Human and Minority Rights supported the development of the Inclusive Guide for Full, Dignified, and Guaranteed Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Everyday Life Activities in 2020, prepared by the Association of Parents of Children and Youth with Developmental Disabilities – Staze. The motivation for creating the guide stemmed from the fact that many parents of children with disabilities are unaware of the rights their children are entitled to. As part of the guide’s development, a study was conducted involving children with disabilities and their parents, relevant ministries, and non-governmental organizations. Based on the reliable data obtained, the guide presents the current situation across various aspects of life and work for persons with disabilities. It includes examples of specific procedures (such as the referral process) and lists contact information for various important organizations and institutions that can provide support (Milić & Dulović, 2020).

Between 2021 and 2023, the regional project Equality, Respect for Rights = Social Satisfaction was implemented, involving partners from Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Republic of Croatia, and Montenegro, represented by the NGO Association for Assistance to Persons with Mental and Physical Disabilities Nikšić (UZPD). The project directly focused on children with developmental disabilities through occupational therapy, while also supporting institutions and organizations working with these children. In Nikšić, Borderless Sports Games were organized to provide sports programs and activities adapted to the capabilities of children with developmental disabilities. As part of the project, a Manual for Occupational Therapy for Children and Adults with Developmental Disabilities was created. Its purpose is to inform and educate society—especially those in direct contact with children and adults with developmental disabilities—about occupational therapy, offer guidance for its implementation, and help overcome the barriers and challenges these vulnerable groups face (Ugarak, Mahalbašić, Varnica & Žugić, 2021). Similar activities are carried out through the Young Athletes program, which involves joint participation of children with intellectual disabilities and children without such disabilities. It is implemented in preschool institutions in cooperation with the NGO Special Olympics. The program includes children aged 2 to 7 and aims to develop basic and advanced sports skills—walking and running, jumping, balance, catching, and throwing a ball.



As part of the program, an Activity Manual was developed, containing descriptions of games and activities for school, home, or community use, instructions for adapting activities to the child, and observation methods. It is designed for teaching staff, parents, and anyone interested in this field (UNICEF & Special Olympics Young Athletes & Special Olympics Montenegro, n.d.).

The Union of the Blind of Montenegro and the Organization of the Blind for Nikšić, Šavnik, and Plužine, with the support of the Ministry of Capital Investments, carried out the project *Breaking Down Prejudices Through Knowledge* in 2023. As Bigović-Kulić (2023) states, the project aimed to reduce discrimination against persons with disabilities in the country through education on their rights and raising public awareness of the importance of respecting those rights. The publication *Analysis with Recommendations for Persons with Disabilities, Institutions, and Citizens in the Exercise and Advocacy of Guaranteed Human Rights in Transport* offers an overview of the (then) current state of marginalization of persons with disabilities in various areas, a review of national and international legislation, and recommendations for overcoming existing challenges.

The Role of NGOs in the Inclusion of Roma and Egyptian Children and Youth

In addition to children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, educational inclusion in Montenegro also encompasses children from marginalized groups, mainly members of the Roma and Egyptian populations. The Roma Education Fund (2009) states that the main problems related to the education of Roma and Egyptians include low enrollment rates and segregation. Furthermore, it highlights the lack of qualified teachers from the Roma community, as well as the small number of Roma employed in key educational institutions. Data for the 2023/2024 school year show that there are significant differences in the participation of Roma and Egyptian children in the education system compared to children from the general population. Namely, only 16% of these children are included in the preschool education system, while as few as 7% continue schooling after completing primary education. The current Education Reform Strategy further states that, in the 2023/2024 school year, 161 children from this population were enrolled in preschool education, 1,104 in primary education, and 457 in secondary education (Education Reform Strategy for the period 2025–2035).

Through various projects, Montenegrin educational institutions have established effective cooperation with NGOs in areas such as teacher training, adapting and equipping school facilities, reducing prejudice against children with developmental difficulties, and including Roma and Egyptian children in the education process (Milić, Marić, Bošković & Šćepović, 2009).



In order to ensure the fundamental human rights of Roma and Egyptian children and to support their inclusion in the Montenegrin education system, in 2013, UNICEF, with the support of Ipsos⁴, conducted a comprehensive study on barriers to education in Montenegro. The research addressed access to preschool and primary education for children from the RE population, financial difficulties, cultural beliefs, and parental support for continued schooling. The study offered examples of good practices and, based on these and empirical indicators, provided recommendations for systemic and intersectoral solutions to eliminate discrimination and stigmatization of these children and to encourage them to pursue education (UNICEF, 2013).

Although there had been, in the meantime, a noticeable progress in the enrollment rates of Roma and Egyptian children in educational institutions, data from 2017 remains concerning, showing that only 56% RE children at the time completed primary education and just 3% completed secondary education (UNICEF, 2022). These statistics served as an alarm and a call to action for all relevant stakeholders to focus on increasing the inclusion of RE children. To improve the position of the RE population, the Government of Montenegro adopted the Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians for the period 2021–2025. One of its key tasks is to increase the number of Roma and Egyptian children in the primary and secondary education system. In the context of this paper, it is important to note that the Strategy foresees the involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the creation of public policies addressing issues relevant to the RE population. Additionally, the Strategy aims to increase the number of Roma and Egyptians enrolling in and completing primary and secondary education, as well as continuing their education. This is to be achieved through various presentations and campaigns in both the official and Roma language, providing specific benefits to RE students (free transportation, scholarships, free accommodation in student dormitories), literacy programs for parents, teacher training, and the enhancement of teacher competencies for working with RE children (Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptians 2021–2025).

The NGO ALFA Center (2024) conducted a monitoring analysis of the work of the local government of the Municipality of Nikšić for the period 2021–2023, with a special focus on the socio-economic status of Roma and Egyptians. The analysis results show that the Municipality maintains ongoing cooperation with NGOs working to improve the status of the RE population. Efforts to increase the inclusion of Roma and Egyptian children in educational institutions and to provide higher-quality education are evident. These efforts included ensuring transportation, organizing workshops with parents, informing families about the legal obligation to attend primary school and the right to free kindergarten and other rights, encouraging parents of RE children to participate in school bodies, and providing classroom assistance to overcome language barriers. In addition to the local government, educational institutions, and relevant ministries, NGOs have been key stakeholders in these activities. The Municipality's commitment to collaboration



is also demonstrated by continuous financial support to various NGOs engaged in this field when implementing diverse activities.

One such NGO focused on the inclusion of Roma and Egyptians is CAREP – the Center for the Affirmation of the RE Population from Nikšić. Their work focuses on education, social inclusion, employment, and human rights and freedoms. In their 2024 Annual Report, they highlight projects aimed at improving the skills and competencies of young people from the RE population, connecting them with youth from the general population, cooperation with schools, promoting activism, involvement in the community's cultural and social activities, increasing the representation of RE youth in the media, media and digital literacy, and greater participation in the labor market. These activities are supported by the relevant ministries (CAREP, 2024).

Discussion

The analysis of adopted legislation, implemented strategies, projects, and programs presented in this paper shows that inclusive education in Montenegro has undergone significant development over the past two decades, during which NGO's played a significant role. Concrete, tangible results are evident at several levels. Based on this overview, it can be concluded that the role of NGO's in Montenegro corresponds to the one stated by Rollan (2024), who described their role as contributing to policy advocacy, teacher training, parental support, inclusive education initiatives, and research. In order to achieve better results, they cooperate with one another and build partnerships with various stakeholders, including state institutions, local authorities, international organizations, and businesses.

One of the most tangible results of NGO involvement in shaping the inclusive education policy and legislation in Montenegro is the transformation of special institutions into resource centers, which was an important result of the 2008-2013 period. Inclusive Education Strategy, as it had resulted in the adoption of the 2010 amendments of the Law on Upbringing and Education of Children with Special Needs, which introduced resource centers in the educational system of Montenegro. It can be concluded that, much like in neighboring Serbia, resource centers emerged with a wide range of educational services, primarily in the field of compensatory education, enabling this expertise to be integrated in mainstream education (Grbović, Jablan & Korica-Tošović, 2008).

The same 2010 amendments to the Law on Upbringing and Education of Children with Special Needs brought with them another important improvement by introducing teaching assistants to children with disabilities and difficulties. The number of teaching assistants has increased over time, directly influencing the quality of education and the adaptation of teaching content to children with different types of disabilities and difficulties. The general experience points to the conclusion

that teaching assistants are a great support to students with special educational needs, as they work with them individually, helping them to master teaching content, establish interaction with other students, and socialize. They also provide support to parents, teachers, and other professionals through consultations, joint planning, and co-teaching (Knight, 2007).

Among practical results of NGO engagements, one must highlight the innovative didactic resources that have been developed and are in use, such as DAISY textbooks, which have made teaching content accessible in a multimedia format to children with visual impairments and reading difficulties. No less important is the support of international organizations – UNICEF and Save the Children, as well as domestic NGOs – through whose training and workshops, teacher and professional staff competencies have been strengthened. This is particularly important since, as Greenspan (2004) points out, inclusive education requires additional training, effort, and motivation from teachers. A competent teacher helps every student reach their full potential, respects their abilities and capacities, and encourages their progress.

Finally, the prior efforts towards inclusive education resulted in several children from the Roma and Egyptian (RE) population enrolling in the education system, with their numbers increasing and continuing to grow, indicating progress in reducing discrimination against this marginalized group. The prevailing view is that in supporting the developmental opportunities of Roma and Egyptians, education should be given priority, with the main goal being to achieve equal access to educational opportunities. In this sense, educational inclusion is the main tool for achieving equal opportunities (Srđić & Cvjetičanin, 2012). However, issues concerning the willingness of RE population to integrate into formal education remain open, as the question whether the relatively low number of RE children enrolled into schools can also be attributed to an inherent distrust present towards formal state education which could be present with RE population remains open, especially because it had been recorded in other post-socialists states alike to Montenegro, such as Slovakia. (Miňová, 2025).

Returning to the described projects, the following table presents which of the mentioned projects and training programs affected specific groups of children and what results were achieved.



Special educational needs	Projects and trainings	Activity implementers	Outcomes
Children with developmental disabilities and difficulties (general category)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child-Centered Kindergarten and School; • Step by step • Strategies of inclusive education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pedagogical Center, UNICEF, Save the Children (199) • Pedagogical Center (1997) • Ministry of Education (with participation of NGO representatives; 2008–2014; 2014–2018; • 2019–2025) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties in regular classrooms; • Training of educators, teachers, and teaching assistants; • Development of resource centers; • Greater physical accessibility of schools; • Introduction of IROPs
Children with intellectual disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Young Athletes</i> Program + Activity Manual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UNICEF and Special Olympics (2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of motor skills; • Development of social skills through joint play with children of typical development. • Support for teachers and parents through practical guidelines from the Manual
Children with psychophysical disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Equality, Respect for Rights = Social Well-being + Occupational Therapy Manual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UZPD Nikšić (2021–2023) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization of Sports Games Without Borders; • Introduction of occupational therapy into education; • Education of institutions and society on occupational therapies
Children with visual impairments and reading difficulties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DAISY Textbooks + DAISY Textbooks User Manual 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Center, UNICEF, Ministry of Education (Textbooks – 2013; Manual – 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of textbooks and teaching materials in multimedia format, making them more accessible; • Training of teachers and parents on the proper use of textbooks



Special educational needs	Projects and trainings	Activity implementers	Outcomes
Persons with disabilities (PwD) in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Publication School for All; Project Strengthening Social Inclusion – Equal and Quality Education to Support the Successful Development of Children in the Northwestern Balkans; Equal Education for All – It Concerns Us! + Manual on Approaching Children with Disabilities in Secondary Inclusive Education in Montenegro; Project For Equality of Persons with Disabilities! + Study on the Same Line Inkluzivni vodič za puno, dostojanstveno, zagarantovano učešće lica sa invaliditetom u svakodnevnim životnim aktivnostima; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Save the Children (2007); Save the Children (2016–2018); UMHCG (2019) CGO i Ministarstvo za ljudska manjinska prava (2020) NGO STAZE and Ministry of Human and Minority Rights (2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Guides and tools for teachers; Classroom equipment and procurement of didactic materials; Training for teachers and professional staff; Direct support for inclusion in practice; Raising awareness and reducing prejudices; Improving teacher competencies; Greater inclusion of children with disabilities in secondary education; Informing parents about the rights of children with disabilities; Identification of the status of persons with disabilities in education, social, and health care; Recommendations for improving the legal and educational framework; Familiarizing parents with the rights of their children; Examples of specific procedures relevant to these children (e.g., referral processes)



Special educational needs	Projects and trainings	Activity implementers	Outcomes
Youth with special educational needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Project Inclusive Vocational Education + Guide for Career Guidance and Counseling of Children and Youth with Special Educational Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• NGO STAZE and NGO from Austria and Moldova (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support for the transition from general to vocational education and employment;• Development of counseling mechanisms and linking education with the labor market
Roma and Egyptian children (RE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Study on Barriers in Education in Montenegro;• Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma and Egyptian Communities;• Various projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• UNICEF (2013)• Government of Montenegro (with participation of NGO representatives);• NGO CAREP and ALFA Centar (2021–)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater inclusion of RE children in the education system;• Workshops and literacy programs for parents;• Elimination of language barriers;• Scholarships, free transportation, and dormitory accommodation;• Increased activism and enhanced media visibility

In general, it can be concluded that the drivers of change have largely been international organizations, particularly UNICEF, Save the Children, and UNESCO, which initiated the first pilot projects, provided funding for project implementation, developed methodologies for evaluating the effects of inclusive education, created manuals and guides, and promoted international standards and conventions. On the other hand, the role of domestic NGOs in the operationalization and sustainability of inclusive policies is indispensable. This has been achieved through direct work with children and their families, advocating for changes in legal frameworks through participation in public consultations, producing guides and manuals, and raising social awareness. Thus, international organizations act as initiators, providing funding and expertise, while domestic NGOs, being more familiar with the local context and needs, act as intermediaries between the education system, institutions, and the local community. Together, they play a significant role in implementing inclusion, adapting it to existing conditions, maintaining current achievements, and reaching new results and progress.

Despite the evident progress, there are still certain shortcomings and areas requiring further effort and engagement. Inclusive practice is not evenly developed across the entire country – results are more visible in urban areas, while rural areas generally face problems with the physical accessibility of institutions and a lack of professional staff. A large number of schools do not have professional associates such as psychologists, special educators, and speech therapists. In addition, although the number of teaching assistants has increased, it is still insufficient compared to actual needs. Their status in the education system should be improved, and they should be required to attend additional, appropriate training.

Although the effects of inclusive education have been monitored through strategies since 2008, and individual studies – such as those conducted by UNICEF or Save the Children – have addressed specific aspects of inclusion, Montenegro needs to provide additional mechanisms through longitudinal studies and systematic evaluation. This would ensure continuous insight into the impact of various measures on the educational outcomes of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, as well as Roma and Egyptian children.

Questions also remain regarding the scope in which NGO voices are truly heard when preparing appropriate strategies and legislation. Despite having a clear normative framework which enables and calls for such involvement of NGO's, reports state that many NGO's perceive these public discussions to be superficial, often leaving NGO's without a true possibility to shape the „predefined concept“ of state and local government. A skeptical tone is also present in the way state support is allocated to NGO's, as it is reportedly perceived to be more of a „political support“ rather than support for „tangible support for real change and improvement“ (Reianu, 2024)



Conclusion

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a key role in the development of inclusive education in Montenegro. Although their role in inclusive education is not thoroughly regulated on a statutory level, in practice, they present indispensable actors in creating the preconditions necessary for the implementation of inclusive policies. Their flexibility, expertise, partnerships, and direct engagement with local communities enable them to act in areas where institutional systems show weaknesses, thereby providing crucial support and strengthening the process of inclusion in education. NGOs often lay the groundwork, initiate key changes, prepare the environment, and compensate for gaps in areas where official institutions either fail to respond or are not yet ready to do so adequately, thus significantly contributing to improving educational opportunities for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties.

The conducted analysis shows that the role of NGOs is multifaceted, going beyond conventional project-based interventions and encompassing strategic partnerships with institutions, advocacy for legislative change, education of key stakeholders, as well as direct support to children and youth with developmental difficulties. NGOs act as a crucial link between different sectors, serving as a bridge that enables coordination and cooperation among actors from education, social protection, healthcare, and the broader community. Through partnerships with international organizations such as UNICEF and Save the Children, NGOs transfer European standards and inclusive practices, develop tools for assessing children's needs, and introduce digital tools into teaching. In addition to advocating for the right to education for all children—including those with developmental disabilities and members of minority groups—NGOs influence decision-makers by advocating for an appropriate legal framework and financial support for inclusion. Their activities also include the professional training of teaching and support staff—teachers, educators, assistants, and professional associates. One of the important functions of NGOs is monitoring the realization of the right to inclusive education. They play an essential role in achieving cross-sector cooperation and in connecting the systems of education, healthcare, social protection, and employment.

Despite the significant progress achieved, inclusive education—as an ongoing process—still requires continuous support and adaptation to changing social conditions. Therefore, it can be concluded that, in this context, a sustainable partnership between the NGO sector and the state, supported by institutional and financial backing, remains of great importance for improving the quality, inclusiveness, equity, and accessibility of education for children and youth from vulnerable groups in society.



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