



INTERNATIONAL
STEP by STEP
ASSOCIATION

ISSA MEMBERS' COVID-19 RESPONSES

‘Walk the Talk’ in Times of Crisis

NOTEWORTHY PRACTICES FROM THE EARLY CHILDHOOD FIELD

The COVID-19 pandemic and its mitigation measures have created an extra burden for grass-roots organizations and the communities they serve. Although ensuring sustainability of their programmatic work and finding innovative ways to meet the diverse needs of the families and children, especially of those living in vulnerable and adverse contexts, have always been at the core of their everyday work, the shock caused by COVID-19 is unprecedented in terms of speed, scope, and intensity.

ISSA Members have been proactive in tackling the challenges of the pandemic at the institution/program level but also at the level of the populations they serve. Organizations had to work hard to sustain their programs and at the same time to rethink their theory of change. Given the amplified diverse needs the pandemic and its mitigation measures created to families and children, organizations had to find innovative ways to support them, to rethink their modalities, to work in collaboration with other sectors in order to create a safe and supportive environment around the families and to intensify their efforts towards fighting stigma and discrimination.

This brief provides an overview of ways in which five ISSA Members across Europe have responded to limit the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable people they serve.

Adopting Bottom-Up Approaches



Frequently, parenting support and educational interventions are criticized for not being responsive to the actual needs of those whom they serve. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ISSA Member organizations adopted bottom-up approaches to ensure that they design and provide interventions that are responsive to families and children's needs.

For instance, before providing **online learning support** to Roma children in grades I to IV of one primary school, our Serbian member **Group for children and youth "INDIGO"** started by assessing the situation of the children and their families to ensure that the intervention addresses the changed circumstances, the new challenges the families may face and their difficulties in providing the basic sustenance for their children. Acknowledging the importance of participatory approaches, INDIGO involved parents in the design of the support.

ISSA Member from Italy – **Associazione 21 luglio** – prior to designing their **intervention** also conducted surveys via telephone with the aim to assess the needs related to food deprivation and malnutrition among Roma infants and toddlers living in settlements. In addition, the Association personalized the food aid program by conducting face-to-face interviews with all mothers to learn about their specific needs.

Involving Volunteers



The role of volunteers in implementing the emergency interventions was paramount for many organizations. For example, **Associazione 21 luglio** involved volunteers to **help children with doing their homework**. The organization also strengthened and coordinated a network of volunteers to monitor the hygienic and health conditions of those living in the shantytowns and to orient people with symptoms.

Group for children and youth "INDIGO" involved volunteers (students) who worked alongside professionals (educators and mediators). These **volunteers were supporting children in doing their homework** and other school related activities, like checking the homework with the child.

The pandemic caused difficulties for the families at various levels. To address holistically their needs, ISSA Members pursued the development of supportive networks with other organizations from various fields. For instance, ISSA Member in Bulgaria, **Trust for Social Achievement Foundation (TSA)**, **partnered with several businesses and their network of partners** from the local communities to provide children in need not only with educational opportunities, but also with the equipment (laptops, PCs) needed to have access to education. In addition, given that children's needs were not only related to educational supplies, TSA extended its partnership with local partners to prepare and disseminate food supplies and hygiene products.

The Greek ISSA Member **Refugee Trauma Initiative (RTI)** adopted a **network approach** to address the needs of refugee children and families. RTI collaborated with its network to co-create interactive resources and videos for families drawing on partners' different strengths and the combined collaborative power of the network.

NGO KHAM, ISSA Member in Macedonia, used the method of "Social accountability and Legal Empowerment" to empower Roma community. In line with this method, they organized **trainings for the community** and after the trainings they pursued accountability from responsible institutions.

Given that face-to-face program delivery was disrupted in most countries, ISSA Members have shifted into interactive and online modes of program delivery. For example, for **Refugee Trauma Initiative** it was important to continue supporting the families who attended the early childhood program *Baytna* so that they continue feeling cared for, connected to a community, emotionally and socially supported, and still had activities to do that were *Baytna*-aligned. To respond to that need, RTI used text messages and calls with parents to share ideas of psychosocial activities suitable for them and their children. In addition, in collaboration with its network they developed **interactive resources and videos** of *Baytna* activities (storytelling, dance and movement, and interactive songs) which families can watch at home and interact with, as well as PDFs with ideas for activities in different languages and for different ages.

Establishing Networks of Support



Shifting to Online Modes of Delivery



Depending on the needs of the families and the children, ISSA Members developed different types of responsive interventions in order to address these needs.

Food Deprivation

Food aid program comprised of 5 types of baby packs differentiated based on the size of the baby and the dietary needs for baby food and semolina, and according to the need for powder milk.



On-line Educational Support

The online learning support was addressed to Roma children in grades I to IV of primary school.

The support included doing the homework and other school-related activities with the help of the volunteer, checking the activities and submitting them to the teacher.

In addition, psychosocial support was provided to children and their families when the mediator considered it important and when the family situation was considered to be affecting the learning process.



Educational Supplies

TSA's distribution of emergency educational kits to children in remote locations, enrolled in their alternative access to quality early education services (interrupted due to the pandemic). The kits included:

- provision of equipment (laptops, PCs);
- provision of educational supplies (e.g. pencils, coloring books, etc).



Health and Hygiene

NGO KHAM cooperated with health professionals and local governments from three municipalities in Macedonia and they visited all Roma families who have children under 1 year old. The intervention included:

- check-list of immunization;
- donation of hygiene packages;
- educating mothers on how to use preventive measures in case of COVID-19



Stigma and Stereotypes

Combating stigma and stereotypes by putting an emphasis on the dire effects of food deprivation of children under 3 years old, regardless of their ethnicity.



Support to Parents

- ▶ Parenting support provision via Whatsapp groups



- ▶ Educational support to families for supporting their children's education, primarily through play, using social media, individual phone consultations and text messages



Support to Children

- ▶ Educational support to children using different apps, such as Viber, Skype, etc.



- ▶ Language acquisition activities for children via phone
- ▶ Psychosocial support to children so as to process the lockdown period



Advocacy

- ▶ **Associazione 21 luglio** reinforced the pressure and advocacy actions with an appeal to the Mayor and Prefect of Rome for urgent measures to protect the right to health and school continuity

ISSA Members also developed and implemented interventions which aim at supporting children and families and at the same time raise awareness about the importance of investing in families.

ISSA Members had to work hard not only to address the needs of children and families, but also to sustain their programs.

Associazione 21 luglio tried to ensure their programmatic and financial sustainability by:

1. Launching an appeal to the citizens of Rome to buy the products needed for baby parcels.
2. Asking additional funds to Foundations who supported them in different projects.
3. Elaborating an operational strategy post-COVID-19 to empower women and children.

Along the proactive approach for supporting families, **Refugee Trauma Initiative** understood the importance of building up local capacity so that the partners themselves could develop their own ideas for supporting the communities that they know best. The capacity building happens alongside RTI continuing to send out ideas of activities, and to create online resources that hubs can also share with their communities. The aim is for members of the refugee community, such as caregivers and Baytna facilitators, to produce themselves videos and ideas thereby helping to ensure that the content is identity-informed and community-led.

As communities and governments around the world are putting all their efforts to contain the spread and the impact of COVID-19, ISSA Members are working to support and bring their community of families and professionals closer together. They are especially concerned of the burden placed on families and communities, particularly on the most vulnerable ones, as we move into a period of increased uncertainty at all levels. From the very beginning, ISSA Members were proactive and acted in solidarity with network organizations and partners to share relevant solutions and resources for families and professionals. Members are on the frontlines of the efforts to protect the wellbeing of young children and their families, and they played and continue to play an important role in mitigating primary and secondary threats, such as health related threats, worldwide surge on domestic violence up to 200%, limited access to humanitarian support, etc.

ISSA Members underscored and proactively addressed the need to enhance our capacities as communities to address the long-lasting flaws brought up by the pandemic, such as investing in child protection to reduce violence against children, providing mental health and psychosocial support to families, reaching and supporting the most vulnerable in the most fragile places, recognizing the gendered impacts of crises like COVID-19, developing child and adult safeguarding policies, and many others.

With the efforts taken by its member organizations to address these challenges, ISSA contributes to the wider ECD dialogue around timely and sustainable solutions, while at the same time is committed to continue supporting its members to better work in the frontlines in times of crisis and its aftermath.

ISSA Members are working to support and bring their community of families and professionals closer together.

Webinars related to COVID-19 hosted by ISSA and its partners.

[CLICK TO ACCESS.](#)

[Color the World: An Urban Approach to Supporting Babies, Toddlers, and Their Caregivers in Times of COVID-19](#) ▶ *ISSA and Bernard van Leer Foundation*

[The Role of Parenting Support Programs in Promoting and Sustaining Playful Parenting](#) ▶ *ISSA and LEGO Foundation*

[The Early Childhood Workforce in times of COVID-19: Are they adequately supported?](#) ▶ *Early Childhood Workforce Initiative*

[Supporting the most vulnerable children and families: Concrete examples of responses to the COVID-19 crisis](#) ▶ *ISSA and Bernard van Leer Foundation*

[Early childhood educators: Supporting professionalism during COVID-19: Examples from Albania, Croatia and the Netherlands](#) ▶ *ISSA*

ISSA MEMBERS FEATURED IN THIS BRIEF



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Associazione 21 luglio

Based in Rome, Associazione 21 luglio is engaged in the promotion of the rights of Roma and Sinti communities in Italy and focuses mainly on the protection of children's rights and the fight against any form of discrimination and intolerance.

Recent article:

- ▶ **Lockdown: Time to wait or moment of opportunity?**

Group for children and youth "INDIGO"

The Group for Children and Youth "Indigo" was founded in September 2013 by a group of dedicated professionals with a long-term experience in the civil sector in Serbia and the vision of serving and advocating for children and youth, especially from the poor backgrounds and communities.

Recent articles:

- ▶ **Live Contact can Never be Substituted with the Virtual One. Part 1 and Part 2**

NGO KHAM

NGO "KHAM" is a Macedonian civil organization that through information, education, influence policies and providing services helps Roma and marginalized groups to engage to achieve their health rights, to provide better educational level and a better economic position.

Refugee Trauma Initiative

Refugee Trauma Initiative, provides vital psychosocial support to refugees experiencing trauma of war, torture and displacement. As part of our stated mission, we also train and support humanitarians, helping them to provide the best possible care for those in need.

Recent article:

- ▶ **Caring at a Distance – Psychosocial Support for Refugee Children in Greece**

Trust for Social Achievement Foundation

Based in Sofia, Trust for Social Achievement Foundation tests and supports innovative, results-driven approaches that increase self-sufficiency and improve life outcomes for Bulgaria's poor, with a focus on the Roma, who comprise a large segment of the poor.

Recent article:

- ▶ **Member in Focus: TSA and Worldwide Foundation for Vulnerable Children**