

## **Peer Review: Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty (Belgium, 13-14 January 2015)**

### **Bulgaria<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Child poverty and social exclusion. The Bulgarian context**

Bulgaria is one of the countries where the risk of poverty or social exclusion for the population is above the EU average. According to data from the survey “The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions” (EU-SILC) in 2013 the share of people living at risk of poverty was 21.0% or 1.528 million.

Children are specific vulnerable group since they are more at risk from poverty and social exclusion than adults. According to data from EU-SILC the risk of poverty in 2013 was highest for children under 18 years of age - 28.4% compared to 17.1% of adults aged 18-64 years and 27.9% of adults aged 65 and older. The share of children (age group 1 - 15) with material deprivation (lacking 1 or more items from 11) was 70.2%<sup>2</sup>. In 2013, 34.5% of children with material deprivation were at-risk-of-poverty. Social transfers decrease considerably children’s poverty rate. In 2013 the share of children at-risk-of-poverty was 42.2% if the income from pensions and the rest of the social transfers are excluded from household income, and reached 38.1% if the income from pensions is included into the household’s income.

Poverty and exclusion are associated with low levels of education, large household size and are heavily concentrated among ethnic minorities, in particular Roma. According to data<sup>3</sup> during the academic year 2012-2013 13,500 students have left the mainstream schools for different reasons. 11,600 of them are students in primary education. The largest share belongs to students who have left for family reasons – 6,500, or 47.9% of the total number of the school leavers. The level of educational attainment and professions of the parents is important factor for children’s future progress. The share of children at-risk-of-poverty increases if the education level of their parents is low. In 2013 every seven of ten children (71.5%) were at-risk-of-poverty and the highest level of education attained by their parents

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<sup>2</sup> In 2013 almost half of children could not afford a meal, including meat, chicken or fish at least once a day (45.4%), fresh fruit and vegetables once a day (42.8%) and books suitable for their age (47.4%). More than half of the children could not afford at least two pairs of shoes according to the season (54.5%). For any two of five children could not be ensured purchasing new clothes.

<sup>3</sup> National Statistical Institute.



was lower secondary (0 - 2 ISCED<sup>4</sup>). Only 4.0% of children living in households which members had high level of education (5 - 6 ISCED) were at-risk-of-poverty. This is 17 times less than children at-risk-of-poverty whose parents had lower secondary education. The risk of poverty among children in households with parents with secondary education (3 - 4 ISCED) was four times higher than for those with parents with higher education (5 - 6 ISCED).

Poverty varies with household size. According to data the risk of poverty is highest in households with three or more children - 68.1% in 2013 compared to 19.2% in households with two children and 16.4% in households with one child.

## **2. Providing complex support to children and families – a political priority**

Taking into account these data and the main objectives of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Bulgarian government adopted a National target for reducing the number of people living in poverty by 260,000 persons by 2020. One of the sub-targets is to reduce the number of children aged 0-18 living in poverty by 78,000. For the implementation of this target the efforts are aimed at providing complex support to children and families - investing in early childhood education and care, provision of financial support to families with children, providing community-based services and services in family and close to family environment; deinstitutionalisation of child care, etc. A focus on reducing child poverty and social exclusion is put in many strategic and programme documents at national level – National Reform Programme of the Republic of Bulgaria, National Development Programme: Bulgaria 2020, National Strategy for the Child 2008-2018, National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020, etc.

### **The role of early childhood education and care institutions**

Early childhood is crucial in proactively preventing and fighting poverty. Investment in early childhood education and care is one of the key priorities of the Bulgarian government. As it was already mentioned Bulgaria is one of the member states of EU with the highest risk of poverty among children. In this regard the efforts are aimed at preventing the transmission of poverty between generations and supporting child in early childhood and his/her family. It should be noted that the concept of Early Childhood Development is relatively new both for applied policies for children and the Bulgarian society as a whole. Therefore, a key focus is put on the active cooperation and interaction in the development and provision of integrated services for early childhood development (social, educational and health services for children up to 7 years of age and their parents).

Bulgaria's efforts to develop and implement integrated policies for early childhood development for children from 0 to 7 years of age are supported by the Social Inclusion Project (SIP) launched in 2010 and funded by a loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank). Under the Project a new type of services for children and families are being established in 66 municipalities on the territory of the country and they are aimed at: early childhood development, risk prevention in early childhood, better coverage and improvement of the readiness of children for inclusion in the educational system, improvement of the family environment. The main feature of SIP services is that they are integrated - through a combination of social, health and educational element in a service both in terms of collaboration of various professionals in working with the target groups and in terms of the character of the services - social, health, pre-school preparation services, etc.

<sup>4</sup> International Standard Classification of Education.



Since the launch of the Project a total of 1,889 new places in nurseries and kindergartens have been opened in 31 municipalities. Currently 23 municipalities have already put into operation the crèche and garden groups under the Project – a total of 1,415 new places in nurseries and kindergartens.

The following services have been financed under the project: integration of children into kindergartens and preparatory groups/classes – work with children, parents, providing transport and etc.; additional preparation for equal start at school; health consultation for children; crèches fee reduction; early interventions for children with disabilities; individual pedagogical support for children with disabilities; formation and development of parenting skills; family counselling and support; family centres for children from 0 to 3 years and from 3 to 7 years.

The successful implementation of the Social Inclusion Project will provide for the development of this new concept of the importance of services for early childhood development as an integral part of the overall policy for children and family. It should be noted that one of the main measures envisaged in the new Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" 2014-2020 are related to provision of services for early childhood development. In order to be effective these measures and policies the efforts will be focused on establishing a clear mechanism for provision of integrated and cross-sectoral services, improving intersectoral coordination and cooperation between all stakeholders, improving the financial sustainability and ensuring equal access to quality services to support children and families.

#### **Financial support to families with children**

Provision of financial support is an important tool for supporting children and families. Funds amounting to over half a billion BGN (approx. EUR 255,650) are envisaged by the State Budget for 2015 for payment of family benefits.

In order to support children and families a number of measures were undertaken in 2014 – the amounts of different payments were increased (the compensation for maternity leave for raising a child between the ages 1 and 2, the amount of the monthly allowance for permanently disabled children below 18 years of age, the one-time target benefit for schoolchildren enrolled in the first grade of state or municipal schools during the school year 2013/2014, the monthly benefit for a child until graduation from high school – for second child in the family).

#### **Deinstitutionalisation of child care and provision of social services for children in community and in family and close to family environment**

One of the key priorities of the policy for improving the welfare of children in Bulgaria is the process of deinstitutionalisation which will provide long-term and sustainable solutions to the problem regarding the children placed in specialised institutions. Deinstitutionalisation of childcare is an irreversible process, which has already been implemented since the very adoption of the Child Protection Act in 2000. This process is accelerated by the adoption of the National Strategy "Vision for Deinstitutionalisation of Children in the Republic of Bulgaria" in 2010 and the Action Plan for its implementation. The documents set a clear and categorical objective: closure of all child-care institutions within 15 years. The objective is being realised through the implementation of five projects covering Children's Medico-Social Care Homes (CMSCH), Homes for Children with Disabilities and Homes for Children Deprived of Parental Care, development of foster care and social workers' career development. As a result of the implementation of this process there is a constant increase in the number of the community based social services for children and at the same time decrease in the number of specialised institutions. In 2010 the number of the community based social services for



children is 241 compared to 393 in November 2014. There is also decrease in the number of the specialised institutions - in 2010 their number is 129 including 31 CMSCH; as of November 2014 their number is 99 including 29 CMSCH<sup>5</sup>.

Providing quality support to children and families is also a policy priority in the new programming period 2014-2020. The funding of the process of deinstitutionalisation will continue through the Operational Programme "Human Resources Development" as well as through the application of the model of cross-funding since the process of deinstitutionalisation is entering a decisive phase. The aim is to achieve sustainable and effective results in order to improve the quality of life of children and to create the best conditions for their development.

Concrete measures and activities for prevention, rehabilitation, placement with relatives, foster care and adoption have also been implemented. As a result of the implementation of these measures which are stipulated by law there is a constant decrease in the number of specialised institutions for children. As of the end of November 2014 the total number of the children accommodated in a family of relatives or close friends is 6 736; the total number of the children accommodated in foster families is 2,258 (133 children in volunteer foster families and 2,125 children in professional foster families). Since the beginning of 2014 the total number of the successful cases of prevention of abandonment is 2,653; the total number of the successful cases of reintegration is 1,068. For the same period the number of children adopted in terms of full adoption is 618.

### **3. Cooperation and involvement of the stakeholders in the fight against child poverty**

Child poverty is multidimensional phenomenon and its addressing requires implementation of a comprehensive approach and complex measures in different policy areas. In this regard, the approach applied in Bulgaria allows the stakeholders to participate not only in consulting and monitoring the implementation of policies, but also in their development. The application of this approach in the development of legal and strategic documents in the field of social policy is an established practice in Bulgaria.

A good example of this practice is the development of the National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020 with the participation of all stakeholders – the key ministries and agencies, social partners, NGOs and representatives of the academic society. The Strategy was adopted in early 2013 by the Council of Ministers and it is based on the conception that anti-poverty policies are more likely to be effective, sustainable and inclusive if they are result of participatory processes. The participation of the NGOs in the process of development of the Strategy contributed to testing of different ideas and developing solutions. It is well-known that are in close contact with people living in poverty and their daily problems and thus they can express in the most effective way their ideas, comments and proposals. With regard to the implementation of the National Strategy for Reducing Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion 2020 it should be noted that one of the key priorities set out in the Strategy is "Working in partnership to tackle poverty and social exclusion and their consequences". The realisation of this priority includes implementation of various initiatives aimed at mobilising all stakeholders in the implementation of the policy to combat poverty and social exclusion with special focus on initiatives at municipal and regional level that promote the social responsibility and the partnership with the social partners, NGOs and people living in poverty.

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<sup>5</sup> According to data of Agency for Social Assistance.



The implementation of the policy in the field of poverty has been monitored by the National Council on Social Inclusion within the Council of Ministers in order to involve all stakeholders in the implementation and evaluation of the policy – ministries, regional and local authorities, agencies, social partners, NGOs, etc. The Council is a body for coordination, cooperation and consultation in the process of development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the state policy in the field of social inclusion.

In addition, it should be noted that there are many NGOs in Bulgaria engaged in children and families issues which have an active role in promoting child well-being. Good examples of this practice are the activities of the Alliance for Children and Youth. The organisation implements a complex of social services. Its' goal is to ensure an integrating and stimulating the personal development environment for independent and descent life for children and families at risk. The Alliance provides prevention of child abandonment in institutions and dropouts of school. It also works with children out of the official educational system. The organisation offers professional daily support and care in poor communities in its Centre for Social Rehabilitation and Integration. The team of the Alliance through their regular daily outreach works exclusively with communities in Sofia, where children and families live in extremely poor and risky conditions. That's why the mobile work is the most efficient approach to them. Annually more than 300 children, young people and families receive professional answer to their problems and questions by applying suitable and individual programmes and services. The team works together with families of children at risk, establishing permanent connections between them and the representatives of the official authorities in Sofia. The sequence of all these serial activities is the so-called Mechanism of Interaction:



#### **4. Relevance of the Belgian consultation platforms and good practice approaches**

Since many EU member-states face similar challenges regarding child poverty the positive Belgian experiences provide an important example of good practice in promoting child well-being and reducing poverty. The key transferable lessons and learning opportunities that arise from the Belgian experience and in particular the activities of the local consultation platforms for prevention and detection of child poverty can be summarised as follows:

- The fight against child poverty requires a strongly integrated approach and coordination between all stakeholders at all levels – national, regional and local.
- Help children out of poverty by helping the entire family – applying family-based approaches by encouraging a wide coordination of services that could help both parents and children receive support.
- Implementation of innovative approaches to addressing child poverty.

All these essential elements of the fight against child poverty should be applied in order to promote child well-being. Of course, when applying such approaches, the specific national characteristics and situation should be taken under consideration. The above mentioned Social Inclusion Project which is being implemented in Bulgaria is innovative by its nature and it is focused on improving the coordination between different actors in the field of early childhood development. The Project's focus on disadvantaged children and the cross-sectoral nature of the planned interventions can be considered as good practice and have the potential for replication and transfer to other contexts in developing and implementing children and family policies.

