

Prevention and early intervention services to address children at risk of poverty (Dublin, 18-19 February 2016)

Comments Paper - Bulgaria¹

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1. Background and context

Bulgaria falls within the group of EU countries where child poverty is above EU average and where children have a significantly higher risk of living in poverty than the overall population. According to data from the survey "The European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions" (EU-SILC), in 2014 31.7 % of children aged 0-17 years were at-risk-of-poverty, compared to 21.8 % of the total population. The share of children with material deprivation (lacking 1 or more items from 13) was 58.4 %². In 2014, 35.9 % of children with material deprivation were at risk of poverty.

Poverty is one of the main reasons for limited access to healthcare and respectively for high infant mortality and increasing rates of childhood disease. According to the latest available statistical data, the infant mortality rate in 2014 was 7.6 ‰ which represents an increase by 0.3 ‰ compared to 2013. This rate remains twice as high as the EU average.

Poverty and exclusion are also associated with low levels of education, large household size and are heavily concentrated among ethnic minorities, in particular Roma. Poverty estimates depending on the type of household show that poverty is concentrated among households with three or more children (78.9 %) and single parents with children (42.9 %).

Although participation in early childhood education has been slowly increasing in recent years, it remains below the EU average (87.8 % compared to 93.1 % in 2013)³. The enrolment rate in preschool education (children aged 3 to 6) increased from 74.3 % in 2009/10 to 82.9 % in 2014/15. The number of children in kindergartens for 2014/2015 was 241,100, increased by 17,900 or 8.0 % more than their number in 2010/2011 and increased by 0.2 % in comparison with the previous school year⁴. Although these data clearly show that early childhood education coverage in Bulgaria is gradually expanding, the level of enrolment in preschool education is low compared to some European countries. Preschool enrolment among Roma children is much lower than the overall population. According to the World Bank regional study on "Closing the Early Learning Gap" (2012) preschool enrolment gap in Bulgaria is highly linked to issues of

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² In 2014 half of the children (52.8 %) could not afford one-week holiday (including family holidays, visiting relatives, friends, organised by the school vacation, etc.); 50.0 % - regular swimming, playing musical instruments, participation in youth organisations, etc.; 49.8 % - equipment for outdoor games (bicycle, skates, etc.). Two of five children could not be ensured place suitable for homework preparation, meat, chicken or fish meal at least once a day and books suitable for their age.

³ EU-SILC

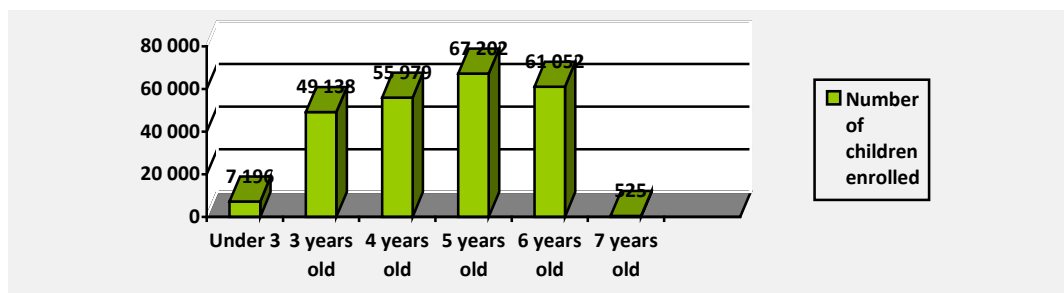
⁴ National Statistical Institute



affordability, preference for home care and lack of knowledge on the importance of preschool for subsequent education outcomes. These findings indicate the need to educate parents on the importance of early learning opportunities.

Another important trend is that the enrolment rates in early childhood care and education (ECCE) for children aged 3 to 7 years are significantly higher than the enrolment rates for children aged 0-3 years. As demonstrated in Figure 1, while children aged 3 years and older (233,927) have adequate access to early childhood care, only 7,196 children under 3 years of age have access to early childhood care.

Figure 1 Enrolment in ECCE by age (2014-15)



Source: National Statistical Institute

The table below displays the proportion of children covered by the different types of ECCE services. The existing differentiated types of ECCE services demonstrate the effort to respond to the tailored needs of young children and their families. Amongst the young children benefiting from preschool education, the majority of them attend full-day kindergartens.

Table 1 Coverage of ECCE by type of services (2014-15)

Type of kindergartens	2014/15	
	Groups	Places
Total	245,966	10,036
All-day	221,115	8,724
Weekly	1,083	46
Convalescent	330	15
Special	535	41
Half-day	22,881	1,209
of which in private kindergartens	4,861	285

Source: National Statistical Institute

2. Addressing child poverty and social exclusion through integrated approach and cross-sectoral measures

Taking into account the data mentioned 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 – supporting parents' participation in the labour market, 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, etc. A focus on promoting child well-being 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 and the Action Plan for its implementation, etc.

Supporting parents' participation in the labour market and improving the opportunities of reconciliation of work and family life is a key instrument in reducing child poverty and social exclusion. Employment for parents in Bulgaria is supported through various measures under the Employment Promotion Act and promotion programmes.

Provision of financial support is another important tool for supporting children and families. Family allowances are provided under the Family Allowances Act and are designed to reach more families in order to guarantee a favourable family environment for every child. In this context it should be noted that funds amounting to over half a billion BGN are provided from the 2015 state budget for payment of family benefits (an increase by approximately 6.16 million EUR compared to 2014).

It is important to note that the recent changes to the legislation in the field of child and family policy represent a new philosophy of provision of family benefits. The objective is to improve the current system and to ensure equal treatment of children in the family. It should be also mentioned that the improvement of the regulatory framework in this field puts strong emphasis on the interaction between different systems – social, health and education.

One of the key dimensions of the integrated approach being applied in Bulgaria is the provision of social services for children. As a result of child care reform and the implemented process of deinstitutionalisation of child care over the last years, there has been a steady rise in the number of the community-based social services for children as alternative to the institutional care. The number of the community-based social services for children in 2010 is 241, while in 2014 their number reached 464. At the same time there is a decrease in the number of specialised institutions for children from 129 in 2010 (including 31 homes for medical-social care for children (HMSSC) to 83 in November 2015 (including 18 HMSSC). The following community-based social services have been provided to support parents in bringing up their children – “Mother and Baby” units, Centres for Community Support, Centres for Social Rehabilitation and Integration, Day-care centres for children with disabilities, etc.

Protection measures under the Child Protection Act have been also implemented in a family environment. These measures include provision of pedagogic, psychological and legal assistance to parents, concerning problems with child rearing, upbringing and education; referring persons to appropriate social services in the community; consulting and assistance on issues of social assistance and services; conducting social work to facilitate child-parent relations and solution of relations conflicts and crises; studying the individual abilities and interests of a child and referring him or her to a suitable educational establishment, etc.

Development of integrated services for early childhood development

Considering the higher share of children at risk of poverty in Bulgaria, a key focus is put on preventing intergenerational transmission of poverty and supporting child in early childhood and his/her family. The aim is to prevent risks to child development, to ensure access to child care, school and to support parents in bringing up their children.

Bulgaria has well-developed policies and measures aiming to ensure the wellbeing of young children and their families. The provided access to free-of-charge health care for children, the policies protecting maternity and the paid leave for child



upbringing, the developed pre-school education and child protection systems are among the most important achievements which facilitate the full development of children in early childhood.

However, early childhood development (ECD) is a relatively new concept both in the implemented child and family policies and in the Bulgarian society. The Government of Bulgaria recognises the critical importance of ECD through the range of national laws and regulations in place to promote the provision of adequate early childhood interventions: the Health Act, the Public Education Act, the Child Protection Act, the Social Security Code, etc. The current legal framework for ECD is not specifically tailored to ECD-aged children, but rather to the age group of 0 to 18. Different ministries and institutions provide a range of services targeting young children's development. Considering this, the government's efforts are directed toward implementation of integrated approach, better coordination between all responsible institutions that are engaged in the fields of health, education and social policy, as well as toward recognising ECD as a specific policy area.

ECD programmes are established across all relevant sectors and cover a wide range of target groups in Bulgaria. The differentiated interventions target not only infants and young children, but also pregnant women and caregivers; these programmes are designed to meet the multi-sectoral needs of young children. Subsidised ECC and development programmes are established to cater to the educational needs of young children through nurseries (for children up to 3 years old) and kindergartens (for children aged 3-5 years). According to the Bulgarian legislation pre-schooling of children 2 years prior to their enrolment in the (1st) grade is compulsory but not prior to the year in which they turn 5 years old. Pre-schooling of children is carried out in preparatory groups at the kindergartens or preparatory groups at the schools and for this training parents and guardians do not pay any fees. In the health sector, pregnant women and young children are provided with essential maternal and childhood health services including pre-natal visits, maternal depression screening, immunisations, etc. Finally, in child and social protection, a wide scope of tailored interventions exists to meet the specific needs of children with special needs and vulnerable children.

Development and provision of integrated cross-sectoral services is one of the key priorities of the current government's agenda. In this context, a strong focus is put on the development of innovative integrated services for ECD to support the implemented measures to prevent child abandonment and to provide opportunities for children to grow in a family environment. Over the past years, the policy for supporting children and families has been aimed at introduction of a completely new approach to child care including focus on risk prevention in early childhood, early intervention, family support and providing family or close to family environment for all Bulgarian children.

As part of the government's ongoing efforts to develop integrated cross-sectoral services to meet the complex needs of vulnerable persons, amendments to the Health Act were adopted by the National Assembly in September 2015. They regulated the integrated health and social services.

Considering the complex needs of children and their families, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy has been implementing Social Inclusion Project (SIP) since 2010. The project implementation is funded by a loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and it is aimed at preventing social exclusion and reducing child poverty by investing in early childhood development. Under the Project new types of services for children and families have been established in 66 municipalities throughout the country. 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, etc. Since the launch of the Project the services have been provided to over 20,000



children and their parents. A total of 1,867 new places in nurseries and kindergartens have been opened in 31 municipalities. During the summer of 2015, the beneficiary municipalities conducted school readiness tests for children from vulnerable groups, enrolled in kindergartens as a result of the implementation of SIP. The success rate of the test results is 80 %.

The main innovative feature of SIP services is that they are integrated in terms of joint work between different specialists and in terms of the nature of the services (social, health, educational). The services are divided into two groups regarding the age of the target groups of children – services for parents and families of children up to 3 years of age and services for children aged 3 to 7 years. The focus of the services for children up to age 3 is mostly placed on formation and development of parenting skills and supporting parents in raising their children. The main emphasis of the approach towards children between 3 years of age and pre-school age is their inclusion into larger peer groups to promote socialisation and development of skills to guarantee equal start at school.

The following services have been financed under the project:

- **Integration of children into kindergartens and preparatory groups/classes** – establishment of places in kindergarten; (full or partial) reduction of kindergarten fees; individual and group work with children and parents; providing transport to kindergartens;
- **Additional preparation for equal start at school** by attending summer schools;
- **Children's health consultation and disease prevention activities;**
- **Crèches fee reduction;**
- **Early intervention for children with disabilities** through medical staff training, direct work with children with disabilities and their parents from the moment of child birth, including specially established rehabilitation centres, as well as counselling, training, mobile work with the child at his/her home;
- **Individual pedagogical support for children with disabilities to join first class;**
- **Formation and development of parenting skills** through group and individual work with expectant and current parents;
- **Family counselling and support** including group and individual sessions for family planning and individual work to solve specific problems in raising children;
- **Family centres for children from 0 to 3 years and from 3 to 7 years,** provided in case of insufficient capacity of existing kindergartens and nurseries.

It should be noted that the development of early intervention services in Bulgaria is closely related to the current process of deinstitutionalisation of child care aimed at closing down all specialised institutions for children until 2020, prevention of child abandonment and development of alternative services. Therefore, the service "Early intervention for children with disabilities" provided under SIP includes various activities designed to prevent child abandonment or institutionalisation of children with disabilities and to build specific skills that help parents to raise their children: physiotherapy visits to hospital's maternity wards, visits to the early intervention centre for children with disabilities (individual activities with parents participation and integration of the child into a peer group work, counselling services), regular visits of mobile teams at parents' homes. It is important to clarify that early intervention services can also be provided to children with disabilities between 3 and 7 years of age. These activities include supervision of the kindergarten integration process, monitoring of the child development, etc.



The Social Inclusion Project is a considerable step in developing ECD services and supporting the inclusion of disadvantaged children. Its implementation will serve as the basis to popularise this relatively new concept and the importance of ECD services as an integral part of the overall policy for children and families. In order to ensure sustainable delivery of the services established under SIP, "Early Childhood Development Services" operation under the OP "Human Resources Development" 2014-2020 has been launched on December 4, 2015. The operation will contribute to meeting the needs of children and families.

In recent years, the civil society sector in Bulgaria has started developing various programmes targeting young children in the early intervention field. These programmes aim to support the actions for development of community-based services targeting young children and families taken by the Bulgarian government under the deinstitutionalisation process. Karin Dom Foundation, which is an active civil organisation with the mission to support the social inclusion of children with special needs and their families, has made a valuable contribution to the development of ECD services. The Foundation shared its expertise in the field of early childhood development in the activities under the Social Inclusion Project. In 2010, the organisation developed and launched an Early Intervention Programme (EIP) with the aim to introduce a new model of services, provided in the natural environment of the child, and based on partnership and family-centred approach. This model of early intervention works to support and strengthen parent capacity as well as child outcomes and provides parents decided to abandon their child with alternative to institutionalisation forms of support.

The Programme includes the following services – home visits, parent-toddler play groups, family support network and breastfeeding support. The Programme provides services to families of children aged 0 to 4, who are either with disability, delay in one or more of the developmental areas or are at risk of developmental delay (e.g. social factors, low birth weight, etc.). Through early assessment combined with active intervention, EIP increases the chances of children to participate in inclusive mainstream educational settings. The Home Visitation Programme includes identification (e.g., screening); needs assessment; development of individualised service plans; delivery of specific interventions and regular monitoring of the child's progress. The specialists plan and implement interventions in partnership with the family by focusing on child's strengths. The EIP team comprises of a physiotherapist, speech therapist, psychologist, social worker, breastfeeding consultant and paediatrician.

The EIP is a good model for an integrated approach. It is implemented in partnership with the Varna Municipality, the local Child Protection Department, the maternity wards in Varna and an NGO supporting breastfeeding. The aim is to establish a good coordination to prevent the abandonment of children with disabilities and include the family in intervention services as early as possible. Additionally, the EIP collaborates with nurseries and kindergartens in order to support the transition of the children to these settings. Thus, the EIP has social, health and educational components that respond to the needs of the child and his/her family.

The financial sustainability of the Programme is ensured through municipal funding, project-based funding and donations. As a training centre, Karin Dom Foundation has successfully piloted EIP in different regions in Bulgaria and by different types of social services providers (NGOs). The contract signed with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy provided the opportunity to disseminate the model by elaboration of methodological tool and provision of trainings to 47 municipal Early Intervention Centres, as part of the Social Inclusion Project. EIP was included in the UNICEF compendium of promising practices to ensure that children under the age of 3 years grow up in a safe and supportive family environment.

