



ESPN Thematic Report on Progress in the implementation of the 2013 EU Recommendation on “Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage”

Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

2017

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of Macedonia**

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Summary

Children in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are a vulnerable category, as they experience a higher chance of being at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) (46.1% in 2015) than the population overall (41.6% in 2015). The main factors affecting child poverty in the country include: composition of the household in which children live, the labour market status of the parents, and parental level of education. According to Eurostat data, in 2015 those most at risk of poverty or social exclusion were dependent children living with a single person (an AROPE rate of 71.2%), closely followed by households of two adults with three or more dependent children (65.9%).

The policy framework for tackling child poverty and social exclusion, as well as for promoting child well-being is fragmented across different ministries. While synergies exist between relevant policy areas and players, this is fairly sporadic and does not result in an integrated multi-dimensional approach to poverty and social exclusion.

In relation to access to resources, no particular progress has been made since 2013, and policies are not fully in line with the approach suggested in the Recommendation on "Investing in children". While there has been an increase in the number and amount of financial transfers to families, these have had no impact on the overall high poverty rate among vulnerable households (i.e. with three and more children). The main challenges in relation to children's access to adequate resources may be found in the generally poorly funded and increasingly targeted child benefit system. Similarly, access to the labour market for parents from vulnerable households lacks adequate financing and tailor-made labour market support.

More positive developments related to access to affordable quality services may be noticed in relation to increasing the scope and coverage of early childhood education and care. However, other services, such as education, health, housing, family support and alternative care have changed negligibly and have had little impact on child poverty and social inclusion. In particular, the lack of a more visible emphasis on the social inclusion of disabled children has led to large public protests by their parents (April 2017), who insist on a long-term strategy for their children, with particular focus on early intervention and support, educational inclusion, and adequately equipped day-care centres catering to the particular needs of these children.

The least visible policy agenda and actions may be detected in relation to children's right to participate, particularly in making decisions that affect children's lives. Various sources consulted in this report show the lack of a legislative basis for greater child participation, as well as lack of institutional efficiency and capacity to provide vulnerable children with the scope to utilise their rights fully in different domains.

Analysis of the country's EU accession documents and processes shows very limited emphasis on child poverty and social exclusion. While the Economic Reform Programme (2017) does not stipulate concrete budgetary measures and programmes to tackle child poverty and exclusion, the Employment and Social Reform Programme is more comprehensive in indicating ongoing government measures in this area. Also, there are currently very few EU financing instruments with an explicit focus on child poverty and exclusion.

In light of the Commission's Recommendation on "Investing in children", the following aspects seem to be priorities: improving synergies between relevant policy areas and players, leading to an integrated, multi-dimensional approach to poverty and social exclusion; undertaking regular assessments of the impact of policies related to child well-being; increasing the funding of child benefits to make access to resources meaningful; increasing the funding of services targeted at children in risk; and increasing policy emphasis on the rights of children to participate.

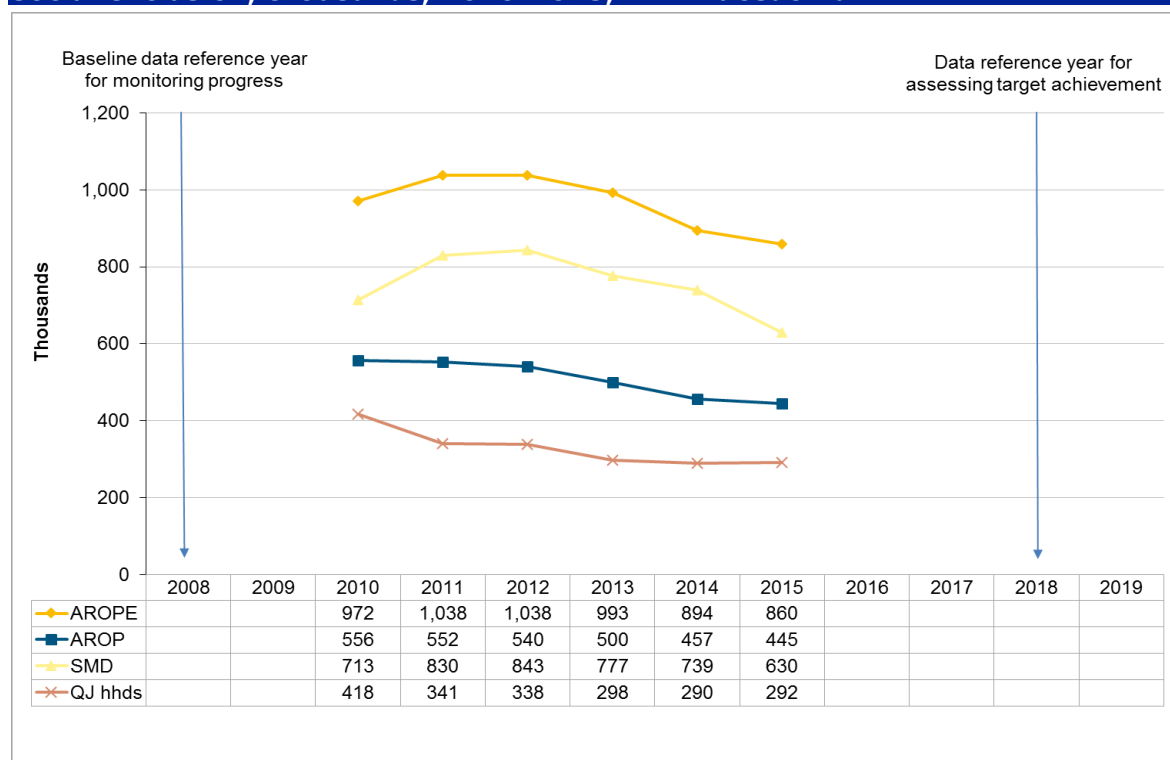
1 Overall situation with regard to child poverty and social exclusion

Children in the Former Yugoslav Republic (FYR) of Macedonia experience a greater chance of being at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) (46.1% in 2015) than the population overall (41.6% in 2015). On the basis of Eurostat data for people living at risk of poverty or social exclusion by household type in 2015, it may be seen that in FYR Macedonia, those most at risk are dependent children living with a single person (an AROPE rate of 71.2%), closely followed by households of two adults with three or more dependent children (65.9%). On the whole, almost half of children aged 0–17 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while a third of children are affected by severe material deprivation (SMD).

Comparison of the different risks that children face shows that children in FYR Macedonia are mostly affected by the risk of SMD (12.8%), followed by the risk of income poverty (7.3%). This differs from the situation (risks) faced by children in the EU-28 generally, where most affected are those living at risk of income poverty (11.6%), followed by the risk of living in jobless households (3.1%). Also, while 9.4% of all children in Macedonia suffer from all three risks (income poverty, material deprivation and living in jobless households), in the EU-28 only 2.7% face all three risks.

Throughout 2010–2015, poverty and social exclusion rates across the whole population have varied. While the AROPE and SMD rate grew between 2010–2011, AROP and quasi-jobless (QJ) households have witnessed a declining trend throughout the period analysed (with the exception of 2015, when there was a negligible increase in people living in jobless households). Since 2012, we also see a continuous decline in the AROPE and SMD rates (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Trends in number of people (whole population) at risk of poverty or social exclusion, thousands, 2010–2015, FYR Macedonia

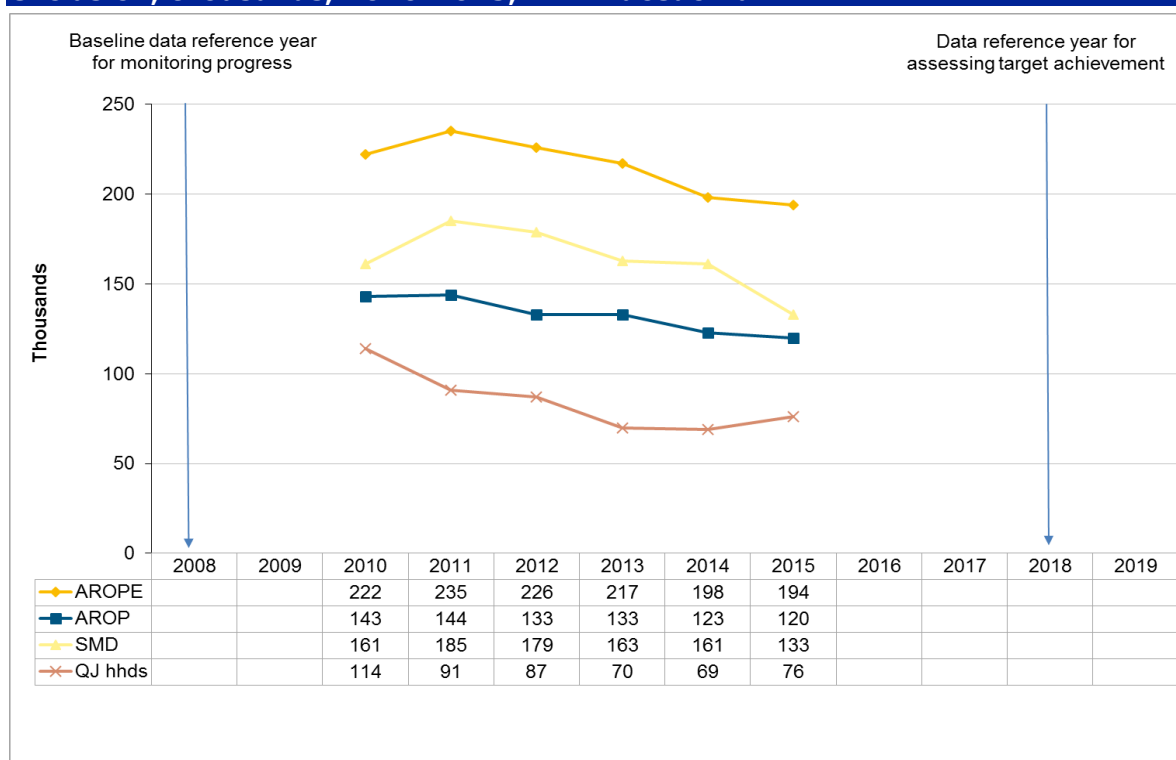


Source: EU-SILC, Statistical annex to ESPN Synthesis Report (Frazer, H. and Marlier, E. (2017).

Among children aged 0–17, during 2010–2015 we find an increase in AROPE, AROP and SMD rates in 2010 and 2011, after which there is a continuously declining trend. Somewhat different is the situation of children living in QJ households, whose numbers

show continuously declining trends in the period 2010–2014, after which there is a slight increase in 2015.

Figure 2: Trends in number of children aged 0-17 at risk of poverty or social exclusion, thousands, 2010-2015, FYR Macedonia



Source: EU-SILC, Statistical annex to ESPN Synthesis Report (Frazer, H. and Marlier, E. (2017).

Male children had higher (income) poverty rate in the period 2010–2014 (the exception being 2011), while in 2015, both male and female children experienced the same AROP rate. Analysis according to detailed age group in 2015 shows that poverty increases with age, as most at risk of poverty were children in the age group 12–17 (30.9%), followed by the age group 6–11 (27.6%). Those aged below 6 years had a poverty rate of 26.8%.

Beside the composition of the household in which children live, strong determinants affecting child poverty in Macedonia are the labour market status of the parents and parental level of education.

In 2015, dependent children who lived in households with very low work intensity (i.e. where the adults worked for 20% of less of their time in a year) had a poverty rate of 73.6%, followed by children who lived in households with low work intensity (40.6%). The higher the work intensity, the lower the poverty risk; hence children living in households with very high work intensity had an AROP rate of 5.9%.

Educational attainment of parents has a significant impact on child poverty. In 2015, children whose parents had less than primary, primary or lower secondary education had a risk of poverty of 49.6%, which is almost double that of children whose parents had upper secondary and post-secondary education – 25.5%. Children whose parents had tertiary education (levels 5–6) had the lowest rate of poverty (7.2%).

2 Assessment of overall approach and governance¹

The policy framework for tackling child poverty and social exclusion, as well as for promoting child well-being is fragmented across different ministries. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is in charge of benefits and services related to child protection (i.e. child allowances, kindergartens, centres for early child development). The Ministry of Education is in charge of compulsory education (primary and secondary education), as well as inclusive education (inclusion of children with disabilities). The Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Transport and Communications also have an impact related to specific rights, such as health, housing, etc. In addition, there is a National Commission for Children's Rights, which is composed of government officials (state councillors from various ministries), the ombudsman and members of civil society organisations. The main responsibility of the Commission is to evaluate implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the country. At the local level, the main responsibility for supporting children's rights and well-being is borne by the local municipalities (80 in the country). In almost all of the municipalities there is a separate unit for social and child protection, which is responsible for the creation of a local programme for child protection. Alongside the state institutions, there is a large number of civil society organisations working on children's rights and child well-being. The majority of these are part of the National Coalition of Non-Governmental Organisations working for children's rights, which produces an Alternative Report on the condition of children's rights in the country (supported by UNICEF). While synergies exist between relevant policy areas and players, it is quite sporadic and does not result in an integrated multi-dimensional approach towards poverty and social exclusion.

The children's rights approach as a principle is part of almost all important legal acts within national legislation. However, implementation of this principle is very often dependent on the capacities and resources of the public institutions responsible for implementing children's rights. The annual report by the ombudsman for 2016 (Ombudsman of RM, 2017: 77) notes some shortcomings, such as: "No visible progress related to Social Work Centres' efficiency in realising the parental right to maintain contact with the child; vulnerable categories of children, i.e. street children, children living in juvenile-correctional facilities and children of homeless parents, cannot realise their rights to adequate living standards, education, health and housing." Also, evidence from the Children's Hotline² (managed by the non-governmental organisation Megjasi) indicates that in 2016, 40% of phone calls were related to violation of children's rights in divorce proceedings.

Analysis of policies towards children, as well as child protection benefits and services, shows an uneven balance between universal and targeted measures, with a preference for targeted measures. Of the five child protection benefits and rights, two are universal (lump-sum financial aid for the first born, and parental allowance), while three are targeted (child allowance, special child allowance and participation). Even in the case of universal benefits, such as parental allowance, households that are beneficiaries of social financial assistance (minimum income) are not in a position to apply, due to the low income threshold stipulated as a criterion for social financial assistance. In addition, the social protection transfer introduced in 2009 (conditional cash transfer) is also targeted only at children in secondary schools whose parents are social assistance beneficiaries. A UNICEF (2013) analysis of social and child protection benefits shows that child allowance has unusual targeting, as only 20% of the beneficiaries are among the poorest. In addition, the estimates show that almost 14,000 households with children who are in the poorest deciles are eligible for social financial assistance, but not for child allowance (UNICEF, 2013: 29). The tendency towards greater targeting might increase the risk of

¹ This part builds on and updates the Report "Investing in children – breaking the cycle of disadvantage - FYR Macedonia" (2013).

² <http://denesen.mk/web/?p=498214>

those most vulnerable failing to gain access to the benefits, as there are greater costs involved in the procedure (application, required documentation, etc.) and greater chance of lower take-up of benefits.

Apart from the formal ex-ante regulatory impact assessment (RIA) which forecasts budget implications, there is no practice of regular assessment of the impact of policies related to child well-being. A rare example includes impact evaluation of the conditional cash transfer programme for secondary school attendance in Macedonia (Armand and Carneiro, 2016), which was actually undertaken after the continuation and extension of this policy measure into the sphere of employment. Lack of more systematic evidence-based policy making and implementation leads to an ineffective social protection system, particularly in relation to tax-financed social benefits and social services.

Also, the migrant/refugee crisis of 2015/2016 has shown up the limited capacity of the responsible institutions to manage and coordinate registration, as well as to ensure the humane and dignified treatment of children, especially unaccompanied minors (Ombudsman of RM, 2017).

3 Pillar 1 – Access to resources

Measures that support a parent's participation in the labour market, especially among households at particular risk, are mostly part of the active employment policy. In this respect, the Operational Plan for active programmes and measures for employment in 2017 indicates the following groups to be included in the employment programmes: parents with three or more children; and members of households that are social assistance beneficiaries.

Measures aimed at unemployed parents comprise: employment subsidy programmes, grants and loans for self-employment, and services related to active job search (assistance in writing CV, writing a business plan, etc.). However, coverage by active labour market measures is very low, at around 7% of all registered unemployed persons (in 2016). Also, existing evaluations of these programmes (Mojsoska-Blazevski and Petreski, 2015: 69) indicate that eventually there was no effect on improving employability afterwards and no evidence that the program brought effects in terms of employment after the program ended.

Measures that provide support for the living standards of parents and children are mainly part of the Child Protection Law and the Law on Social Welfare. Rights to benefits provided by the Law on Child Protection (2010), include: 1) child allowance (CA); 2) special child allowance (SCA); 3) lump-sum financial aid for a newborn; 4) participation; and 5) parental allowance (PA) for the third child. The Social Protection Law (2009) stipulated two additional benefits for parents: financial assistance to a mother with a fourth child; and salary compensation for reduced working hours due to care for a disabled child.

The amount of most of the child benefits (with the exception of the parental allowance) is too low to provide adequate living standards. Also, there is a lack of an optimal balance between the available cash and benefits in kind, leading to a greater risk of social exclusion among children from more vulnerable households. For example, children whose parents are unemployed are unlikely to gain a place in a kindergarten in municipalities where there is higher demand, as places are allocated to children whose parents are employed.

Overall, it can be said that no particular progress has been made since 2013, and that policies are not fully in line with the approach suggested in the Recommendation on "Investing in children". While there has been an increase in the number and amount of financial transfers to families, these have not had an impact on the overall high poverty rate among vulnerable households (i.e. with three or more children). The main challenges in relation to children's access to adequate resources may be found in a generally poorly funded and increasingly targeted child benefit system. Similarly, access

to the labour market for parents from vulnerable households lacks adequate targeting and more tailor-made labour market support.

4 Pillar 2 – Access to affordable quality services

According to the Child Protection Law, children are entitled to early childhood education and care (ECEC), namely: care and upbringing of children in pre-school facilities; vacation and recreation of children; and other forms of childcare arrangements. The new Law on Early Childhood Development (ECD) adopted in February 2013 introduced the possibility of diversified ECD services (not just kindergartens, but also public, private and civil society ECD centres).

According to the State Statistical Office (2017), in 2016 there were 66 public kindergartens in the country, located in 54 local municipalities, plus 30 private kindergartens. In the period 2013–2016, the number of children enrolled in kindergartens/ECD centres increased by 18%.

The shortage of public kindergartens has been tackled through favourable government benefits supporting public-private partnerships in opening new kindergartens. Hence, in 2014, as part of its active labour market policy, the government introduced favourable benefits to support the opening of new private kindergartens/ECD centres. The support includes: reduced costs for utility taxes for construction, as well as affordable loans with a subsidised interest rate of 5.5%.

Despite the fact that important progress has been achieved in the field of Roma education, still there are many challenges remaining. According to the State Statistical Office (2017), in 2016 only 886 Roma children were enrolled in public kindergartens (meanwhile, around 1,500 Roma children are born/registered each year). In the regular primary and lower secondary schools, in the school year 2014/2015, the number of Roma students had decreased by 5.40% compared to 2013/2014. In the upper secondary schools, in 2014/2015 the number of Roma students had decreased by 7.58% compared to 2013/2014 (Eptisa, 2016). Some of the reasons for this decrease may be due to Roma emigration or seasonal work abroad. Additional challenges related to Roma education include: the high number of Roma children in schools for children with special educational needs, the lack of Roma teachers and the lack of teaching materials in the Roma language.

Also, most vulnerable in relation to access to health insurance and healthcare are children from Roma households. A recent UNICEF study (2016) indicates that around 9% of all Roma households are not covered by health insurance. The most common reason for this is lack of identification documents. Although the introduction of Roma Health Mediators (since 2011) has improved some of the barriers to healthcare, many vulnerable Roma households still lack access to health services.

Inadequate and substandard housing is characteristic of most of the municipalities inhabited by Roma. Many of their housing challenges are connected with difficulties of obtaining rights from responsible institutions. An earlier report (CAHROM, 2012: 9) indicates that "about 80,000 [Roma] households lack long-term housing solutions, and 12 per cent of the housing stock is sub-standard. The average age of buildings in the country is 30 years, and because of poor maintenance, most are in need of immediate replacement or renovation."

In relation to family support, during 2013, 11 regional counselling centres for families and marriage were opened. Although the counselling that these centres provide is free of charge, the centres lack adequate training and resources (human and financial) to assist with more tailored support related to new family risks (e.g. support for reconciliation of family/work balance, support for lone parents who are on low incomes, counselling for victims of family violence, etc.).

In April 2017, the parents of children with disabilities organised public protests to express their dissatisfaction with the attitude of public social services towards inclusion of these children in society. The majority of their concerns were related to lack of early intervention and support, lack of adequate education support and inclusion of these children, lack of adequately equipped day-care centres catering to the particular needs of these children, and the lack of a long-term strategy for children with disabilities.

In general, it may be assessed that while there has been a stronger improvement related to access to early childhood education, other services – such as education, health, housing, family support and alternative care – have seen negligible change and impact on child poverty and social inclusion.

5 Pillar 3 – Children’s right to participate

The system of social and child protection involves a number of support mechanisms related to the participation of all children in play, recreation and sport. As a result, each year children from low-income households (beneficiaries of social financial assistance) and also disabled children (beneficiaries of special child allowance) are given the opportunity to have a one-week winter and a one-week summer holiday in public recreation facilities. According to the Annual Programme for Child Protection (2017), during the school year 2016/2017, around 3,000 children benefited from this programme.

However, mechanisms that promote children’s participation both in legal decision making in areas that affect their lives, and in afterschool activities – particularly for vulnerable groups of children – are less in evidence. The involvement of children in decision-making processes is very limited. A recent special report by the Ombudsman’s office (2016: 31) shows that the limited participation of secondary-school children in decision making in the schools is due to: “lack of legal provision in the Law for secondary education recognising the children’s right to participate in the decision making, unclear format of students’ associations and their right to participate in the decision making, and lack of vision for student involvement in school bodies”.

Children’s right to participate is least visible in the overall policy agenda. There are no particular changes in policies or mechanisms since 2013, related to children’s right to participation.

6 Addressing child poverty and social exclusion and child well-being in the European Semester

Issues related to child poverty and social exclusion are very modestly encompassed in the Economic Reform Programme (2017) and in the Employment and Social Reform Programme (2016). The Economic Reform Programme (2017) includes only a one-page section on issues related to social inclusion, poverty reduction and equal opportunities. Within this, there is only a reference to Roma children and children with disabilities as the most marginalised groups. No budgetary packages or reforms are envisaged in this Programme to tackle child poverty and exclusion directly.

The Employment and Social Reform Programme (2016) addresses issues related to child poverty and exclusion more directly. Among the main identified objectives related to children’s inclusion are:

- implementation of measures to stimulate the inclusion of children from marginalised groups, mainly within primary and secondary education;³

³ A budget of approximately EUR 160,000 annually is allocated for scholarships for pupils from socially disadvantaged families and for children without parents. Over 4 years, this amounts to EUR 640,000.

- implementation of specific measures to stimulate and support the education of Roma pupils;
- introduction of conditions for greater inclusion of children with special needs in pre-school education;⁴
- improving the participation of pupils with disabilities in regular (mainstream) primary education;⁵
- increasing the coverage and participation of pupils with disabilities in secondary education;⁶
- measures to improve the type and adequacy of the financial social protection benefits provided to address poverty and to assist and support the most vulnerable categories of the population;⁷
- the commencement and gradual realisation of the process of deinstitutionalisation of the PI Protection and Rehabilitation Institute Banja BANSKO, which accommodates children and youths with physical disabilities at Strumica;
- establishment of a centre for rehabilitation and work for organised living with support, within the Institute of Rehabilitation of Children and Youth in Skopje;
- the further development and expansion of the network of services and alternative forms of care and protection, such as new day-care centres (DC) for children with disabilities, children with autism, children with Down syndrome and children with visual problems;
- day-care centres for early interventions (0–3 years); and
- the establishment of forms of service for support to children and young people at risk with asocial manifestation to facilitate their social integration (ESRP Annexes, 2016).

Overall, the national documents related to the EU accession process of FYR Macedonia are used to underline already ongoing programmes and funds related to child poverty and inclusion. These documents do not envisage new approaches, programmes or reforms aimed at children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

7 Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments

The financial assistance under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) II plans to allocate EUR 664.2 million in the period 2014–2020. Only 8% of these funds are earmarked for the field of employment, social policies, education, promotion of gender equality, and human resources development.

Currently there are few IPA projects, and none are directly targeted at tackling child poverty and social exclusion. The IPA project "Promoting Alternative Childcare Services" (2015–2017, budget EUR 1 million) aims to support the employability of parents, by offering alternative forms of childcare. The project "Improving Roma Employment through Education and Training" (2015–2017) focuses (among other things) on increasing access to quality ECEC.

⁴ EUR 6,200,000 (the budget is in accordance with the draft Education Strategy 2020).

⁵ EUR 2,070,000 (the budget is in accordance with the draft Education Strategy 2020). Financial assistance through IPA II is planned in this field, as well.

⁶ EUR 1,035,000 (the budget is in accordance with the draft Education Strategy + EUR 80,000 budget for 4 years for scholarships for pupils with disabilities – MES Budget).

⁷ EUR 17,600,000 financial means will be allocated from the state budget of the RM (Ministry of Labour and Social Policy). Some of the measures will also be financed by the Local Self Government Units and other sources.

A component of the Europe Aid project on “Local Integration of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Minority Groups” focused on identifying the specific needs, challenges and measures for institutional support in targeting Roma street children and the delivery of training.

In addition, there is an ongoing Europe Aid project involving technical assistance support for the deinstitutionalisation process in the social sector which is not directly targeted at children, but looks at forms of sustainable community care for people with disabilities who are currently in institutional care.

A non-exhaustive list of EU projects currently being implemented is published by the Central Financing and Contracting Department on the Ministry of Finance website.⁸

⁸ <http://cfcd.finance.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/IPA-HRD.pdf>

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Annex: Summary Table – Progress since February 2013

Policy area or approach	Overall have policies/ approaches been strengthened, stayed much the same or been weakened since February 2013 (in the light of the EU Recommendation)?		
	Stronger	Little Change	Weaker
Governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multi-dimensional strategy with synergies between policies Children's rights approach & effective mainstreaming of children's policy and rights Evidence-based approach Involvement of relevant stakeholders (including children) 		x x x x	
Access to resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents' participation in the labour market Child & family income support 	x x		
Access to services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ECEC Education Health Housing & living environment Family support & alternative care 	x	x x x	
Children's right to participate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> in play, recreation, sport & cultural activities in decision making 		x x	
Addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester		x	
Mobilising relevant EU financial instruments		x	

