

Kosovo* plans expanded access to early childhood education and care

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Description

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is drafting a new law on early childhood education and care, aiming to improve access through the facilitation of community-based kindergartens and introduction of means-tested fees in public kindergartens. The development of a new curriculum for pre-school education will help attain quality standards in new kindergartens.

Despite substantial and consistent progress, access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Kosovo is well below Western Balkans and EU levels. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) reports only 4.9% attendance in public pre-school education (0-4 years) and 92.4% enrolment in pre-primary education (5-6 years) in 2018 (MEST, 2018). The reasons for the low attendance in pre-school education (PSE) include the limited number of public kindergartens (only 42, distributed unevenly across the country), the limited number of subsidised places for children from vulnerable groups (such as the unemployed), and a dominant policy and public view that PSE is a care service for employed parents rather than something to which a child is entitled for his or her care and education (UNICEF, 2017).

In March 2019, the MEST established a working group to draft the new law on ECEC. This law aims (among other things) to facilitate the work and licensing of various pre-school entities (especially community-based and public-private partnership kindergartens) and make public kindergartens more accessible to poor families through the introduction of means-tested fees. If passed, the new law will replace the current Law 02/L-52 on Pre-School Education from 2006. The law is supported by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, in an effort to design an

integrated approach to child development that should improve the accessibility and quality of ECEC services. The working group also includes organisations such as UNICEF and Save the Children; these bring their substantial experience with community-based kindergartens that have mostly focused on disadvantaged children in Kosovo. Other national and international NGOs are also involved in the process.

Access to ECEC programmes, which the new draft law is specifically targeting, is already improving in Kosovo. The National Development Plan 2016-2021 foresees universal inclusion in pre-primary education and an increase in the number of children attending PSE, by 5,000 children annually, until 2021. In response to the National Plan, the MEST built five new public kindergartens in 2018, and is in the process of building seven additional kindergartens with EU funds in 2019. These kindergartens will become increasingly available to poorer families through the affordable fees that the new law aims to introduce. At the same time, the municipalities of Pristina and Fushe Kosove have piloted innovative approaches to increasing enrolment: they have established community-based and public-private partnership kindergartens, which involve partnering with parents and private investors respectively to provide subsidised ECEC. In both models, municipalities provide public premises, books and other learning materials, and cover 50% of the fees for children. The remaining 50% is paid by parents - a practice already applied in public kindergartens. Community-based kindergartens are registered as NGOs

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and have considerable autonomy (including financial autonomy) that allows them to generate alternative funding from international or private donors.

To ensure standardised and quality education and care in all ECEC institutions, the MEST is simultaneously developing a new PSE curriculum. A working group established by MEST and assisted by UNICEF drafted the PSE curriculum in 2018. However, various NGOs have voiced complaints about its heavy focus on children aged 4-5, the lack of targeted activities for 0-3s, and the overall lack of development activities for children. This forced MEST to initiate a re-development of the curriculum and hire new experts to complete this work. The redrafted curriculum was circulated for comments in May 2019.

Outlook and commentary

A UNICEF-commissioned study (FISCUS, 2017) concluded that a 90% PSE coverage can be reached in Kosovo within 5 years, through a combination of public, private and community-based kindergartens. If only public kindergartens are used, this will limit the coverage to 40%, due to the higher average running costs of public kindergartens and lack of investment by the private and NGO sectors. 90% coverage is possible if the new law introduces a publicly-funded minimum entitlement of 10 hours per week of ECEC for every child in Kosovo, which in the current context is highly unlikely due to budgetary constraints (implementing the minimum entitlement would cost nearly €150 Million annually, an immense increase compared with the €6.5 Million that the MEST is currently spending on public PSE in Kosovo).

However, embedding community-based kindergartens in the new law

will facilitate their expansion and increase access to ECEC even without a minimum entitlement. These kindergartens are in any case subsidised by municipalities. The model has many other advantages: kindergartens are smaller and easier to maintain; they can be established in each larger neighbourhood, thus improving accessibility and reducing traveling distance to the institution; they involve direct management by the community, thus guaranteeing sustainability and proper maintenance of kindergartens; they have greater autonomy (including financial), thus helping them to diversify their funding sources; and their start-up costs are lower since they mostly utilise unused public premises, which are reconstructed for the purpose of ECEC provision.

The expansion of this model, along with other models (private, public-private partnerships) should, however, be well-planned, since fast growth could affect the quality of services. This is particularly true given the current limited monitoring capacities of the MEST. The risk can be partially mitigated if other aspects of the reform are properly implemented. For example, the new law will ask all kindergartens to initially obtain a license from the MEST and then register as a business (private kindergarten) or as an NGO (community-based kindergarten) - a practice that is not currently in place in Kosovo. At the same time, the adoption of the standardised PSE curriculum, which will be mandatory for all institutions, coupled with adequate teacher training guided by the MEST and offered to all ECEC institutions (public, private and community-based), will help attain quality standards.

In addition, the introduction of means-tested fees for enrolment in public kindergartens is a positive development that was supported

by most stakeholders. Given that only 3% of public and no private childcare providers offer full-day care for free (WB, 2015), the introduction of lower fees for poorer families will help reduce the current enrolment gap between the poorest and wealthiest quintiles in Kosovo.

Further reading

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