NATIONAL ACTION PLAN TO IMPLEMENT THE EU COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION ON ESTABLISHING A EUROPEAN CHILD GUARANTEE

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PREAMBLE

The National Action Plan to implement the EU Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee reaffirms the political commitment of the RC to achieving the objectives set by the EU: breaking the cycle of poverty, combating the roots of inequality, and contributing to building a just, inclusive and resilient society across the EU.

Despite the accelerated efforts and development of services, programmes and interventions based on state and local budgets, as well as EU funds (ESF, ERDF, FEAD, etc.), further action is needed to ensure that every child at risk of poverty and social exclusion has access to free health care, free education, decent housing, adequate nutrition, and quality social services in the community regardless of where they live in Croatia.

Croatia is one of the countries where the pilot programme “Phase III – Testing the Child Guarantee in Croatia” is implemented with the aim of adequate access to integrated multidisciplinary, adequately funded services in the community. It is implemented in Međimurje County – the region with the highest rate of Guaranteed Minimum Benefit beneficiaries and low access to child protection and family support services. The programme focuses on three components: access to child protection and family support services, access to early education and care and early intervention services. This Pilot Programme is a continuation of long-standing successful cooperation with UNICEF in Croatia to ensure the highest quality services throughout Croatia. In addition, the programme will contribute to strengthening the mechanisms to monitor the rights of the child and provide evidence and analysis crucial for the development of strategies related to the fight against poverty and social exclusion of children, including this National Action Plan.

It is of utmost importance to enable access to services for children at greatest risk of poverty and social exclusion in the RC, and therefore these children in need are the focus of this European Child Guarantee National Action Plan.

Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy
INTRODUCTION

At the level of the European Union (hereinafter: EU), building on the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Recommendation on Child Poverty “Investing in children — breaking the cycle of disadvantage”, on 14 June 2021 the Council of the EU adopted a recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee (hereinafter: ECG). This recommendation is an addition to the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2021–2024 and seeks to ensure that every child has access to basic rights and services. The emphasis is on free and effective access to quality services in early childhood education and care, education (including extracurricular activities) and healthcare, as well as effective access to healthy (school) nutrition and adequate housing. The recommendation focuses mainly on children under 18, primarily highlighting children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. They envisage additional investment by the EU Member States in the development of children’s services and additional support mechanisms aimed at children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. They also foresee the establishment of an adequate system for monitoring the rights of children and their access to services. For this purpose, the EU will make additional funds available to the Member States in the 2021–2027 programming period under the European Social Fund Plus (hereinafter: ESF+), where Member States recording rates of poverty and social exclusion of children higher than the EU average (in the 2017–2019 period) will need to direct 5% of funds towards tackling poverty and the social exclusion of children. Additional resources focusing on the development of services can also be sought within the European Regional Development Fund, the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe (REACT-EU) initiative, the InvestEU programme, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the Technical Support Instrument.

The ECG represents an opportunity for the Republic of Croatia (RC) to develop an integrated set of measures and policies aimed at children and to prevent and eliminate numerous sources of inequality among children through appropriate measures. In 2021, for the needs of the Government of the Republic of Croatia (RC) and the European Commission, UNICEF prepared the report “Deep Dive Analysis of Policies, Programs, Services, Sources of Financing and Mechanisms Aimed at Preventing Poverty and Social Exclusion of Children in Croatia, The Basis for the Development of the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Croatia” (deep dive) which refers to the areas of public policies important for reaching the objectives of the ECG: i) early childhood education and care (ECE), ii) education, iii) nutrition, iv) healthcare, and v) housing. Additionally addressed is the area of vi) social services in the community (SSC) aimed at children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The emphasis of the deep dive is on the organization, structure, financing and provision of services. Special attention is given to the indicators of children’s involvement in risk and the structural and institutional barriers to accessing services for children at risk in order to develop policies and institutional elements that are currently missing or are underdeveloped in Croatia, and are important for achieving the ECG objectives. The primary focus of the National Action Plan is on children at increased risk of poverty, with the inclusion of certain critical elements related to the broader concept of social exclusion (such as access to quality education). Some of the measures, especially in the area of social services in the community,
target only children beneficiaries of the guaranteed minimum benefit (GMB), which is an indication of a priority intervention aimed first at supporting those children who are at greatest risk, and some of the measures aim at extending support to all children, including children at risk of poverty and social exclusion who are not exclusively GMB beneficiaries.

The term “children” in the National Action Plan refers to all persons up to the age of 18, and they are the target age group of the European Child Guarantee.

In Croatia, the children in need and the obstacles they encounter were identified in the following groups:

- Children of the Roma national minority
- Child beneficiaries of GMB (guaranteed minimum benefit in the Social Welfare System)
- Children in underdeveloped, especially rural, areas
- Children with developmental disabilities
- Children with a migrant background (unaccompanied children, children seeking international protection, asylum seekers, foreigner under subsidiary and temporary protection who are under the age of 18)
- Children in alternative care
- Children from Ukraine and all other displaced children
- Children whose parents are imprisoned

Taking into account the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and the Porto commitment to reducing the number of people at risk of social exclusion or poverty by at least 15 million people, including 5 million children, ensuring an employment rate of at least 78% in the EU, which includes increasing the availability of childcare services (aged 0–5), decreasing the rate of young people neither in employment nor in education or training (NEETs) aged 15–29 from 12.6% (2019) to 9%, as well as increasing adult participation in training to 60% every year, which includes reduction of leaving school, the National Action Plan to implement the EU Council Recommendation on the Establishment of a European Child Guarantee (hereinafter: the National Action Plan) recognises the need for a more comprehensive, targeted and integrated strategic approach to target groups of children of the European Child Guarantee.

In doing so, the National Action Plan also contributes to the achievement of the target values of the specific objective 2 Reduce poverty and social exclusion among children of the Action Plan for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2021–2024, National Plan Against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2021–2027, which aim to reduce the proportion of children 0–17 at severe material deprivation from 5.7 to 4%, and the proportion of children at risk of poverty from 17.1 to 14.8%.

The Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Policy is responsible for the drafting of the National Action Plan. The method of drafting the National Plan is participatory, i.e., a wide range of relevant and interested stakeholders was involved in its drafting, which enables a coordinated approach to further improvement in this area.
A working group composed of representatives of central state administration bodies, international and intergovernmental organizations, the scientific community and civil society organizations and other interested stakeholders: Ministry of Science and Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, Ministry of Justice and Administration, Central State Office for Demography and Youth, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Tourism and Sports, Croatian County Association, Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities, Croatian Bureau of Statistics, Central State Office for Reconstruction and Housing Care, UNICEF Croatia, Ombudsperson for Children, Association Children First and the Study Centre of Social Work, Faculty of Law in Zagreb was established.

The aforementioned deep dive analysis served as the starting point for the development of the National Action Plan, on the basis of which the areas of action, the objectives and measures and activities aimed at reducing poverty and social exclusion of children were determined. For each area of activity (ECEC, education, nutrition, health, housing, social services), targeted priority groups of children of the European Child Guarantee were identified. Measures and activities are tailored to their needs in line with a recommendation requiring the Member States to identify children in need based on national, regional and local circumstances. In this way, the RC ensured targeted action towards those groups of children most in need of active state support.

In addition to monitoring the implementation of the National Action Plan, an external evaluation will be carried out every two years, starting in 2024, and the funds will be provided by ESF+. In accordance with the findings of the evaluation, the measures of the Action Plan will be revised, and the National Action Plan Implementation Monitoring Committee will be responsible for the development and implementation of activities that will respond to the findings of the evaluation that do not relate to the measures and activities of the Action Plan itself.

THE NATIONAL COORDINATOR

The process of drafting the National Action Plan was led by Ms Tatjana Katkić Stanić, the European Child Guarantee National Coordinator, Director-General of the Institute for Social Work at the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy.

To coordinate and monitor the implementation of the National Action Plan, in addition to the appointed National Coordinator, the RC will establish a separate body (Committee). The Committee will be responsible for comprehensive coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the National Action Plan, as well as the creation of measures for the implementation of the monitoring findings. The Committee will report annually to the Croatian Parliament on the activities carried out, and its work will be coordinated by the coordinator of the National Committee.

The members of the Committee shall be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the activities described in the plan on the basis of the presented evaluations and collected data, and shall propose measures for improvement. The Committee shall report annually to the Croatian
Parliament, bi-annually to the European Commission and to the Council of the European Union, every five years on progress in the implementation of the activities of the National Action Plan.

In addition to the national coordinator, deputy national coordinator and representatives of the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy, the Committee consists of the representatives of the Ministry of Science and Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Physical Planning, Construction and State Assets, the Ministry of Justice and Administration, who are responsible for the implementation of individual measures and activities from the NRRP at the highest level, civil servants (directors, deputy directors, heads of sector). Other partners and experts from interest groups, local self-government and representatives of children and youth shall also be involved in the work of the Committee as appropriate. The purpose of the meetings of the Committee is to create a platform for the exchange of information and provide an overview of the implementation of the National Action Plan and establish a system for monitoring the implementation. In addition, the Committee assesses the need to update the National Action Plan by monitoring indicators, target groups and related activities.


The task of the National Council for the Development of Social Policies, which is an advisory expert body of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, is to provide proposals, opinions and expert explanations to the Government for the development of social policies, especially when it comes to proposing programmes of measures and development in the field of social protection, monitoring work in the field of social planning and development direction in the social protection system, monitoring social service standards and other matters in the field of social protection, and monitoring the application of international treaties and existing regulations related to the social protection system, monitoring social protection needs.

The Council for Children was established at a high level with the aim of strengthening and improving the organisation of child protection at the national level, including giving priority to the protection of children's rights and well-being, defining short and long-term objectives of child and family policy and adopting appropriate policy guidelines. The Council for Children has an overview of reforms in the field of child protection, draft laws, amendments to acts and long-term plans of ministries, and the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy is responsible for coordinating the intersectoral cooperation.

The National Council for the Development of Social Policies and the Council for Children will be provided with an overview of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee National Action Plan in Croatia in accordance with the pace of submission of reports to the Croatian Parliament, the European Commission, and the Council of the European Union.

CONSULTATIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
To develop the National Action Plan, the RC took into account the need to involve children and young people through consultations conducted in cooperation with the UNICEF Croatia Office. In this way, children and young people were provided with the possibility of active participation in the process of drafting a public policy document and given the opportunity to express their opinion on the European Child Guarantee.

Since the RC attaches particular importance to the active participation of children in the processes of formulating and implementing public policies, consultations with children will be organised on a bi-annual basis in a form of a round table with the competent authorities and in other ways, so that children and young people can be informed about the effects of the National Action Plan and so that they can express their opinion on the need to change the planned measures and activities.

Consultations with children and young people in the drafting of the National Action Plan were carried out in several related phases, i.e., through a pyramidal approach that enabled the involvement of a greater number of children and young people. In addition, different groups of children and young people were able to participate, respecting the principles of inclusiveness and fairness. Adolescents and young people – members of The Advisory Board for Children's Participation of the UNICEF Office for Croatia, UNICEF Youth Ambassadors for Children's and Youth's Rights and young people from the Medimurje County who participated in UPSHIFT, the UNICEF programme for building 21st-century skills, discussed the proposal of objectives and priorities defined in the draft NAP. Following the consultations, the following activities were carried out:

A) **Online survey via the ZABUM voice platform where young people were able to express their opinions**

The online survey “Child Guarantee – What Children and Young People Think” was conducted by the UNICEF Office for Croatia in cooperation with the Youth Network Croatia in the period from 21 February 2022 to 27 February 2022, and it was fully completed by 183 persons aged 16–25.

Respondents were able to state their opinions on who are vulnerable groups of children and young people in Croatia; what are the problems of children and young people in Croatia in general today; what are the problems of children and young people in their community, class, school or neighbourhood; what are the problems and difficulties faced by children and young people with developmental disabilities; what are the problems and difficulties faced by children and young people growing up in conditions of poverty; what are the problems and difficulties faced by children and young people belonging to national minorities; what are the problems and difficulties faced by children and young people growing up outside their own home, such as homes for children without adequate parental care, in a correctional facility, in foster care; they expressed their opinions on what are the problems and difficulties faced by children and young migrants and refugees and gave their opinions and proposals for concrete solutions to the problems of vulnerable groups of children and young people.

B) **Consultations with different groups of children and young people through the UNICEF network of partners/collaborators**
Consultations with children and young people were conducted during February and March 2022 through group discussions, with the facilitation and guidance of adult mentors/leaders using working materials for consultations. All groups of children and young people were informed in the introductory part of the meeting about the Recommendation of the EU Council on the establishment of a European Child Guarantee.

It is important to point out that certain consultations with certain groups of children and young people focused on some specific areas and topics that were particularly important to these groups of children and young people.

Children and young people were happy and very actively involved in the consultations, which further indicates the importance and necessity of their active participation in the creation of the National Action Plan, but also more broadly in advisory processes and public policy making. Consultations took place during February and March 2022. 60 adolescents and young people aged 12 to 25 participated in the consultations.

Generally, the problems of children and young people are not sufficiently discussed in society, which is why all vulnerable groups are marginalized and groups at risk of social exclusion. They are exposed to discrimination and prejudice, which makes them even more vulnerable. They are often not accepted by peers, they sometimes face shaming, harassment, and isolation. They do not get enough adult support and often do not know who to turn to for help. The impression of children and young people is that decision-makers do not understand the problems of the most vulnerable social groups and do not respond adequately to the problems and needs of children and young people, especially those in the most vulnerable situations. For children and young people living in poverty, a problem is a number of expenses that their families cannot cover, which makes them feel labelled and excluded. Growing up in poverty is accompanied by other difficulties, too, e.g., parental unemployment, constant job search and low income make parents tense, stressed or often absent, with children not receiving the necessary attention, all of which makes communication in the family difficult and increases the risk of conflict and even domestic violence.

Through consultations, it has also been shown that children and young people from vulnerable groups are afraid to express their opinions, they find it more difficult to express their views and are often excluded from society.

**Consultations of the Ombudsperson for children with children and young people**

In the process of participation of children and young people, the Ombudsperson for Children conducted consultations with the members of the 16+ Forum, i.e., children of high school age from Pazin, Rijeka, Velika Gorica, Šibenik, Zagreb and Split, who responded to the call for consultations. The most vulnerable groups of children in Croatia were identified in a conversation with the members of the 16+ Forum and all difficulties encountered by children from vulnerable groups. Discussing how the state can help children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and children from vulnerable groups, Forum 16+ members made their suggestions: To provide them with accessible and possibly free accommodation in nurseries and kindergartens; to ensure better records of family needs when distributing assistance to the poor and to ensure that all those who really need it get it, for the different sectors to cooperate with
each other in social welfare provision (e.g. social welfare and education) and to better connect with humanitarian organisations, to make an effort so that inequalities between pupils are not highlighted in school, to ensure healthy school meals – especially in primary school, and to regularly organize education sessions on accepting diversity, tolerance and cooperation. They also pointed out that it is important that each child can get support at school when they feel unwell or face problems, and it is necessary that school educators and psychologists are accessible and willing to support pupils on such occasions, as well as that teachers generally support children in growing up. The school should be a place where children are also informed about support services outside the school. They pointed out that the protection of children’s mental health is either taboo or stigmatised, so many are ashamed to ask for it, or it is difficult to access it, or there is a shortage of it. This is partly due to insufficient public information about free counselling facilities, but also due to insufficient capacities of health institutions for the protection of the mental health of children and young people, where it is often less than necessary to wait for the appointment and services.

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES WITH KEY MEASURES

European Child Guarantee National Action Plan in Croatia (NAP) is a comprehensive national document that forms the basis for the implementation of measures and activities in key areas of intervention arising from needs and development potentials related to combating child poverty and social exclusion, with an emphasis on cross-sectoral cooperation and joint action.

In accordance with the recommendations of the Council of the European Union on the establishment of the European Child Guarantee and the recommendations of the European Commission to the Republic of Croatia, general and specific objectives have been defined with the accompanying proposals for measures and indicators of specific objectives, as well as target groups, in order to improve public policies related to preventing poverty and social exclusion of children.

In accordance with the results of the analysed areas, six general objectives were defined:

1. Improved access to early childhood education and care;
2. Ensured access to education and support for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion;
3. Ensured access to quality nutrition for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion;
4. Ensured access to health services for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion;
5. Ensured access to adequate housing for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion;
6. Improved accessibility of social services in the community to children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Within the defined general objectives, specific objectives and associated activities were determined. The monitoring of indicators contains initial and target values, as well as proposals for measures and activities.

When drafting the National Action Plan, the RC also took into account the need to establish a practical and prompt framework of action for the protection of displaced children from
Ukraine. In this context, on 28 February 2022, at its 104\(^{th}\) session, the Government of the RC appointed an Interdepartmental Working Group to carry out activities for the reception and care of the refugees from Ukraine. The Interdepartmental Working Group has placed special emphasis on assessing the needs of refugee children and developing measures to ensure their registration, temporary and/or permanent accommodation, inclusion in the educational system and the provision of health and social care, whether it is transit or permanent reception. In cooperation with the private sector, the possibility of hiring parents/guardians to meet the material needs of refugee children and their effective integration into society has also been established. The RC plans to provide these activities continuously for the duration of the war events in cooperation with relevant stakeholders from the international community. In order to respond to the growing needs of 18,004 displaced persons from Ukraine, 6,267 of whom are children (18 May 2022) residing in the RC, the National Action Plan plans a series of activities for the purpose of their effective access to high-quality early and primary education, activities in school and organized leisure, psychosocial assistance and child protection services and health services.

GENERAL OBJECTIVE 1

IMPROVED ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The ECEC system in the Republic of Croatia is an integral and fundamental part of the education system, which children are not obliged to attend. The only exception is a preschool programme, which is compulsory and organized for between 150 and 250 hours in the year before starting primary school (aged 5 or 6), and which in practice is often implemented for a minimum duration that is insufficient for children at risk. The ECEC system is fully decentralized, i.e., the responsibility for financing and providing regular ECEC programmes almost solely lies with municipalities/cities. At the central (national) level, pedagogical standards are set, guidance is given, and specialists are accredited, and the implementation of preschool programmes is monitored. Territorial fragmentation (556 municipalities/cities in the RC) is accompanied by weak fiscal capacities of certain environments and regional inequalities in the availability, affordability, and quality of programmes. Investments from three years ago came from EU funds and were primarily justified as one of the demographic measures aimed at improving the availability of ECEC to employed parents to balance their family and professional lives and to revitalize rural environments, rather than assisting families at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The inadequate regulatory and financial framework in the field of ECEC, accompanied by an underdeveloped and spatially uneven network of quality and affordable services of ECEC, primarily hinders access to ECEC programmes for children at risk. Children of unemployed parents (especially single-parent families), children at risk of poverty or from families of lower socioeconomic status, children of the Roma national minority, children growing up in less developed and populated areas and children with developmental disabilities are the most
affected. It is important to point out that all these groups are generally associated with a lower family income status and an increased risk of poverty.

The following groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion face the greatest obstacles in accessing ECEC services in Croatia:
1) Children of unemployed/one unemployed parent – 38.1% of children aged 0–14 in households with at least one nonworking adult, 7.7% in jobless households according to data from 2018 (OECD, 2021) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)
2) Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion – 126,000 children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, or 18.4% of the total population under the age of 18, according to 2020 data. (Eurostat 2021.a) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)
3) Children of the Roma national minority – 12,920 children under 16 according to data from 2018. (Kunac et al., 2018)
4) Children in rural (and less developed) areas – 8.8% of the population in rural areas at risk of poverty (compared to 4.2% in cities) according to 2020 data; data for children are not available (Eurostat, 2021.b). Insufficient places in kindergartens (more noticeable in children at risk, e.g., children of unemployed parents, children with developmental disabilities) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)
5) Children with developmental disabilities – 8.2% of children with disabilities (developmental disabilities) in the total population of children 0–19, or a total of 64,063 children as of 9 September 2021. (CIPH 2021) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

Starting from the general objective of the ECG, i.e., to ensure that every child – especially children growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion – has access to basic social services (including ECEC services), national strategic documents (National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia by 2030 and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021–2026) the following three objectives stand out:

1 Ensure the right of access to quality ECEC for every child in the RC from the age of 3 by 2030
2 Improve the budgetary and legislative framework to ensure a regionally balanced approach to affordable and quality ECEC.
3 Develop additional support mechanisms within the education system and funding mechanisms aimed at ensuring access to ECEC for children at risk and their families, especially children of lower socioeconomic status, to address the “hidden” costs of regularly attending KG.

Specific objective 1.1.1 Ensured right of access to quality ECEC for every child in the RC from the age of 3 by 2030

**MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 1.1**
1.1.1 Provide prerequisites for gradually increasing the coverage of children in early childhood education and care
1.1.2 Invest in infrastructure development and equipment in the form of constructing new and reconstructing and upgrading existing kindergartens, addressing the problem of regional differences in the availability of quality kindergartens, and developing innovative and efficient models of service provision in smaller areas with fewer children and taking into account the need to adapt the existing and new infrastructure to children with developmental disabilities
1.1.3 Improve the quality of ECEC by adopting key policies on kindergarten educators, ensuring an adequate number of teachers, professional associates and principals, strengthening their competencies and creating better conditions for their employment in areas that are below average in terms of the value of the development index

Specific objective 1.2 Improvement of the budgetary and legislative framework to ensure regionally uniform access to affordable and high-quality ECEC

ACTIVITY RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 1.2

1.2.1 Improve the funding model and strengthen the role of the central government in making a part of key decisions in ECEC

Specific objective 1.3 Develop additional support mechanisms in the educational system and funding mechanisms aimed at ensuring access to ECEC for children at risk and their families, in particular children of lower socioeconomic status, to address the “hidden” costs of regular attendance of kindergarten.

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 1.3

1.3.1 Increase the access to ECEC to children at risk of poverty and social exclusion
1.3.2 Continuously monitor the reasons why children of the Roma national minority over 3 years of age are not in the ECEC system, establishing indicative categories of barriers to access (financial reasons, distance, insufficient places in kindergartens, parents do not want to enrol the child, kindergartens delay enrolment because the child has developmental disabilities, language barriers, digital barriers – the parent does not have access to e-enrolment)
1.3.3 Implement public awareness programmes on the importance of investing in ECEC (targeting local decision-makers) and the participation of the Roma children in the ECEC programmes (with special emphasis on rural areas and other physically and culturally isolated communities)

GENERAL OBJECTIVE 2

ENSURED ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION
Under the ECG, Member States are called upon to guarantee children in need (i.e., at risk of poverty or social exclusion) effective and free access to education and school activities. In doing so, all measures aimed at this objective should be equally accessible to minority groups, children with developmental disabilities and young people with disabilities and those at socioeconomic disadvantage and must not lead to discrimination or segregation (Council of the EU, 2021a). Looking at the RC, already within the European Semester for 2019, as part of its recommendations, the Council of the EU (2019a) emphasized that Croatia should reform the education system in 2019 and 2020 and improve access to education and training at all levels and raise their quality and labour market relevance. Although the National Recovery and Resilience Plan of the RC 2021–2026 does not specifically target children at risk in terms of education, it emphasizes the importance of establishing equality of educational opportunities throughout the educational process. It is stated that the reform of education in Croatia should contribute to the construction of an educational system that enables each person, regardless of their socioeconomic origin, age and other circumstances, to acquire knowledge and skills relevant for personal development and successful labour market integration, which is in line with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which provides for inclusive, high-quality and equitable education and learning for all.

Education is recognized as one of the development priorities in the 2030 ECEC National Development Strategy. This document emphasizes the reform processes aimed, among other things, at creating equal pedagogical conditions for the achievement of educational goals, respect for the right to education under equal conditions and inclusion of all in education. Some of the priorities in the field of education stated in this strategy are ensuring equal conditions for systematic education and care by gradually introducing full-time classes for primary school children, as well as developing comprehensive support for children and pupils and preventing dropping out of school and entering the NEET group, with an emphasis on vulnerable groups and children and pupils with developmental disabilities. Ensuring free education for all children is one of the key mechanisms for preventing poverty and social exclusion and is therefore one of the important measures advocated within the ECG, especially in relation to children at risk. It is emphasized that primary education should be free for all children, while secondary education should be free for children at risk of poverty. However, although in most EU countries, including the RC, compulsory schooling is free in terms of tuition fees, families still cover a number of education-related costs from their budgets, including books, school equipment, school trips, school meals, transport to school, etc.

The following categories of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion experience barriers to quality education in the RC:
2) Children of the Roma national minority – 12,920 children under the age of 16 according to 2018 data. (Kunac et al., 2018)
3) Children with developmental disabilities – 8.2% of children with disabilities (developmental disabilities) in the total population of children 0–19, or a total of 64,063 children as of 9
September 2021. (CIPH 2021) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

4) Children with a migrant background – 2,522 children of irregular migrants; 942 children of applicants for international protection; 385 unaccompanied children – foreign nationals who were granted the right to temporary accommodation in crisis situations (data from 2020). (Ombudsperson for Children, 2021)

5) Children beneficiaries of the child allowance – 268,436 children were covered by the right to the child allowance according to the data from November 2021. (The Croatian Pension Insurance Institute, 2021)

Based on the basic principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Recommendation on investing in children 2013/112, the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021–2024, and the sustainability study that accompanies the ECG, objectives are set to create a framework for ensuring free, affordable and inclusive education for children at risk. The importance of establishing equal education opportunities throughout the education process is especially emphasized in two national documents: the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Government of the RC, 2021) and the 2030 National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (2021). The latter document emphasizes the priority of inclusion in the education process for all groups of children.

Accordingly, two key overarching objectives stand out:

1. Provide affordable and free primary and secondary education for children at risk of poverty
2. Promote inclusive educational practices and build a culture of diversity.

**Specific objective 2.1 Provide affordable and free primary and secondary education for children at risk of poverty**

**MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 2.1**

2.1.1 Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the hidden costs of participation in education for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, which will analyse in detail the structure of financial and other material support for children at risk of poverty at the level of primary and secondary education, with special emphasis on various sources of funding and the structure of the “hidden costs”

2.1.2 Provide financial support for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in the primary and secondary school system

**Specific objective 2.2 Promote inclusive educational practices and build a culture of diversity.**

**MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 2.2**

2.2.1 Professional development of teachers, professional associates and principals related to vulnerable groups in order to strengthen their competencies to ensure inclusive education.
2.2.2 Provide professional support to pupils and parents belonging to vulnerable groups to facilitate pupils’ active participation in the school environment and community
2.2.3 Promote positive and successful educational stories of pupils with disabilities, pupils living in poverty and pupils of the Roma national minority
2.2.4 Provide more extracurricular activities with greater coverage of school children and young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion of the Roma national minority and leisure programmes that follow the modern learning methods and the needs of children and young people of the Roma national minority (e.g., learning support programmes, foreign languages, IT and robotics, sports, arts, and others)

GENERAL OBJECTIVE 3

ENSURED ACCESS TO QUALITY NUTRITION FOR CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION
Access to quality nutrition is essential for the optimal development of children, starting from birth and continuing later during schooling. One of the key measures advocated within the ECG which can have multiple benefits for the welfare of children, and especially children at risk, is access to nutritional meals for all children. Research and experiences of EU countries suggest that access to quality nutrition organised under the educational system can nutritionally improve children’s diets, boost their physical development and health (e.g. reducing malnutrition or obesity, fostering healthy eating), as well as educational outcomes (e.g. the possibility of better concentration and participation in the teaching process, and improved educational outcomes, preventing “dropping out” of the education system), but it can also reduce financial expenditures for families with children. Besides, additional efforts are necessary for children growing up in poverty to ensure that they have access to adequate nutrition within the family, while attending pre-primary, primary and secondary programmes, but also outside the school environment and during weekends and school holidays.

While the Republic of Croatia has a tradition of programmes aimed at promoting and encouraging breastfeeding, there are no mechanisms to ensure access to adequate nutrition for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in general, that is outside the educational environment. Adequate support in the field of nutritionally balanced diet in the system of organized primary school nutrition is lacking. In addition, secondary schools do not ensure the nutrition of pupils. Particularly disadvantaged are secondary school pupils living in conditions of poverty. The importance of a school meal for young people is also shown by the fact that just over 50% of pupils aged 11/13/15 have breakfast at home. The situation is significantly less favourable among 15-year-old schoolgirls who least have breakfast (only 38%). As for 15-year-old boys, 50% of them have breakfast (CIPH, 2020). The 2017/18 International HBSC Survey also showed that children/young people from families of lower socioeconomic status have worse eating habits and that the Republic of Croatia is one of the countries where children eat the smallest amount of vegetables per day. In addition, the number of overweight children has increased continuously in the Republic of Croatia. The results of monitoring the state of child weight for 2018/2019 show that 33.1% of girls and 37% of boys aged 8–8.9 years are overweight or obese. At the national level, the problem of being overweight is higher in boys
(17.8%) than in girls (11.9%), where the highest proportion of overweight and obese boys is recorded in the Adriatic region which has the lowest number of primary schools with a school kitchen. An increase in obesity is also indicated among older children (11/13/15 years), and the 2017/18 HBSC survey shows that 31% of boys and 21% of girls are overweight or obese. Adolescents from poorer families are more likely to be overweight or obese and are significantly more likely to have a negative body image.

The existing regulatory and financial framework governing the issue of school nutrition, as well as the underdeveloped infrastructure within schools (e.g., the existence or equipping of school kitchens, staff shortages) are what primarily hampers access to adequate nutrition for children at risk of poverty. The risk of parents' not being able to provide children with a regular and nutritionally appropriate diet increases in children outside the educational system and in children exposed to multiple risk factors. Thus, the children at risk of poverty who are beneficiaries of GMB (children in extreme poverty), children in single-parent families, members of the Roma national minority or children with developmental disabilities are especially singled out. It is important to stress that while access to primary school nutrition is difficult for children growing up in less developed and less populated areas where the necessary infrastructure is more often missing (especially when it comes to district schools), the inability of parents at risk of poverty to provide children with adequate nutrition is more pronounced in urban areas. Since the primary risk to which all these groups of children are exposed is poverty, and given that the known barriers faced by these groups do not differ greatly.

Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion face the greatest obstacles in accessing quality nutrition in Croatia: 126,000 children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, or 18.4% of the total population under the age of 18 (Eurostat, 2021); 13,977 children of GMB beneficiaries (MLPSFSP, 2021.a).

Starting from the general objective of the ECG that each child needs to be provided with at least one nutritionally balanced meal per day, as well as the priority activities of “providing free school meals”, highlighted within the sustainability study accompanying the ECG, the following three objectives are set:

1. Develop a comprehensive system of promoting and encouraging breastfeeding at the national level.
2. Ensure free and nutritionally balanced school meals for the most vulnerable groups of primary and secondary school children.
3. Ensure access to a regular and nutritionally balanced diet for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

**Specific objective 3.1 Develop a comprehensive system of promoting and encouraging breastfeeding at the national level**

**Measures related to the specific objective 3.1**

3.1.1 Develop national breastfeeding targets through the National Breastfeeding Protection and Promotion Programme 2022–2025, based on the World Health Organization's 2025 Global Nutrition Goals
3.1.2 Develop a system of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of all specific objectives of the National Breastfeeding Protection and Promotion Programme (in preparation) from 2022 to 2025
3.1.3 Introduce monitoring of the percentage of exclusively breastfed children aged 0–5 months, in accordance with the definition of the World Health Organization
3.1.4 Adapt national legislation to ensure the consistent application of the International Code on Marketing Breastmilk Substitutes
3.1.5 Re-evaluate and strengthen the network of Baby-Friendly Hospitals including the sustainability of the breastfeeding promotion programme in the health system (maternity wards and intensive neonatal care units) by developing binding measures, to ensure the consistent implementation of this initiative in the RC
3.1.6 Establish a national reference centre for the planning, implementation and coordination of the education of health professionals and parents during pregnancy, but also before a planned pregnancy, in connection with the nutrition (breastfeeding) of the youngest children
3.1.7 Conduct a public campaign and develop educational materials on the importance and benefits of breastfeeding donated human milk, including materials in Ukrainian.

Specific objective 3.2 Ensured free and nutritionally balanced school meals for the most vulnerable groups of primary and secondary school children.

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 3.2

3.2.1 Design and conduct educational activities within the school system and develop educational materials on the importance of a healthy and nutritionally balanced diet adapted to different groups of children
3.2.2 Improve the quality of nutrition in educational institutions by implementing the National Guidelines for School Meals in Primary Schools in all schools

Specific objective 3.3 Ensured access to a regular and nutritionally balanced diet for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 3.3

3.3.1 Provision of meals in primary schools for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including children displaced from Ukraine, as well as provision of meals (including on weekends and school holidays) through food packages distributions provided by humanitarian organisations
3.3.2 Raising awareness among future parents and especially pregnant women (within the framework of parenting support programmes and/or pregnancy courses) about the importance of a healthy and nutritionally balanced diet for the health of the mother and child

GENERAL OBJECTIVE 4
ENSURED ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES TO CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Starting from the benefits of available and free access to child health protection throughout the entire period of growing up, the ECG Study on the Economic Implementing Framework (EC, 2021) highlights the need to create a national framework and draw up health policies, as well as implementing instruments within which children at risk of poverty and social exclusion can be provided with free postnatal examinations, home visits by community nurses, regular health checks during the first year of the child’s life, the monitoring of children’s health through systematic examinations, vision and hearing controls (including through the education system) and dental healthcare. Access to regular health checks and the availability of child health protection until the age of 18 ensures early detection of physical and mental health problems, chronic diseases, dental problems, risky lifestyle habits (diet, physical activity, addictions), speech difficulties, learning difficulties, neglect and exposure to domestic violence, prevention, and preserving future health.

In this sense, the healthcare system of the RC is based on compulsory health insurance thanks to which almost every citizen has access to primary healthcare. All children under 18 years of age, and older if they are included in the regular education system, have free access to health services and healthcare. Within the European Semester, the RC has received specific recommendations (CSRs, 2020) related to improving and adapting access to health services in new circumstances. The CSRs for Croatia point out that the COVID19 epidemic was a test of the resilience of the Croatian health system. It indicated that although access to healthcare in the RC is generally good (based on the principle of universality), unmet health needs due to distance (unequal regional distribution of health services) are among the greatest in the EU. The recommendations stress that a more balanced geographical distribution of healthcare facilities and medical professionals would allow easier access to health services. The distribution of responsibility for health facilities between the central government and county authorities leaves room for improvement. The use of e-health tools is particularly highlighted, as these allow for reducing direct contacts between healthcare professionals and patients, and also reduce the risk of infections. These challenges for the health system of the RC are embedded in the reforms defined in the National Healthcare Development Plan for the period 2021–2027 and are complementary to the strategic plans of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan from 2021 to 2026. The latter highlights, in particular, the objective of strengthening primary healthcare and pharmacy care to ensure the better availability of services throughout the territory of the RC, especially in isolated and rural areas, and strengthening the capacity of medical teams in primary care (Government of the RC, 2021).

Although the RC has effective and in principle free access to health services for children, there is scope for improving the health protection systems and ensuring equal access to health services, especially for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The healthcare system faces the challenges of a lack of healthcare professionals, especially paediatricians and specialist doctors, regionally unequal availability of primary and preventive healthcare, waiting lists for specialist examinations and treatments, insufficient accommodation in hospitals for treatment and/or medical rehabilitation, the underdevelopment of mental health protection
services that primarily affect children in less developed areas and on islands and those at risk of poverty and social exclusion, the affordability of health services and medicines due to “hidden costs” (e.g. transport, non-prescription medicines) and complex administrative procedures in the case of a recognised right to health care without health insurance.

In addition to the lack of targeted interventions for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, there is a need to improve the system of prevention and protection of children's health, i.e., the universal system of protection of children's health, by introducing and expanding mandatory preventive examinations (e.g., hearing and vision). Compatible with this is the need to set up a system of early detection of developmental delays in children of a young age (screening) using standardised instruments.

One of the general objectives of improving the health system should be to improve the existing and collect new indicators for monitoring the state of children's health that will be more sensitive to sociodemographic characteristics and enable the creation of evidence-based measures and access to health services. This includes a system of monitoring children at risk at an individual level that allows timely early intervention if certain undesirable outcomes are detected.

The following groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion face the greatest barriers to accessing health services:

1) Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion – 126,000 children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, i.e., 18.4% of the total population under the age of 18 (Eurostat, 2021.a); 13,977 children of GMB beneficiaries according to 2020 data. (MLPSFSP, 2021.a) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

2) Children of the Roma national minority – 12,920 children under the age of 16 according to 2018 data. (Kunc et al., 2018)

3) Children with developmental disabilities – 8.2% of children with disabilities (developmental disabilities) in the total population of children 0–19, or a total of 64,063 children as of 9 September 2021. (CIPH 2021) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

4) Children with a migrant background – 2,522 children of irregular migrants; 942 children of applicants for international protection; 385 unaccompanied children – foreign nationals who were granted the right to temporary accommodation in crisis situations according to 2020 data. (Ombudsperson for Children, 2021)

Starting from the fundamental principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017), Directive 2011/24/EU, EC Communications on Effective, Accessible and Resilient Health Systems (COM(2014) 215), on which the National Health Development Plan 2021–2027 and the strategic plan in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021–2026 rely, as well as from EU Recommendations on investing in children 2013/112, the European Strategy on the Rights of Child 2021–2024, relied upon by the ECG (2020) and the sustainability study accompanying the ECG (EC, 2021), the following objectives aimed at improving the universal healthcare system and ensuring an adequate health framework and access to health services by children at risk of poverty and social exclusion are set:
1 Ensured access to health services for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.
2 Ensured support for the mental health protection of children at risk.

Specific objective 4.1 Ensured access to health services for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 4.1

4.1.1 Establishment of an integrated early detection system for children aged 0–5 years at risk of developmental delays due to biomedical and social risks under the health, social and education systems, and develop the service “Team for Early Development in the Community” with the aim of locating, the early detection of, and supporting children at risk of developmental delays in isolated (Roma communities) and rural communities
   (I) Establishment of a national system of monitoring and early screening of children for developmental delay (0–5 years), due to biological risks and environmental and social risks, using a standardized developmental test for five developmental areas: communication, fine motor, rough motor, problem solving and personal-social development.
   (II) Establishment of an integrated early intervention system for children aged 0–5 years at risk of developmental delays due to biomedical and social risks under the health, social and education system, and ensuring regional availability of the services at home and in the local community

4.1.2 Improvement of primary health care systems to provide quality and integrated health services at home and in the local community, with an emphasis on children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and those living in remote (islands), rural and underdeveloped areas

4.1.3 Ensure a more efficient and faster system for the exercise of the right to monetary compensation to cover the costs of medicines for child beneficiaries of GMB in the event of illness; consider the possibility of replacing the allowance with direct subsidization through the existing e-Dječja kartica – Mudrica! which the users can use directly when buying (or collecting for free) medicines; this would reduce not only the level of stigmatization, but also the administrative burden (holder: Central State Office for Demography and Youth)

4.1.4 Conduct continuous training on reproductive health, especially for children and parents of the Roma national minority, in order to prevent teenage pregnancy and child marriage (monitor the trend of the number of teenage pregnancies)

4.1.5 Enhance the monitoring of health status and habits as well as the determinants of the health of children at risk in order to improve health outcomes and reduce inequality: the indicators collected by the CIPH, HBSC, ESPAD, CroCOSI are to be monitored and processed in the national context according to sociodemographic and socioeconomic features, and the findings are to be regularly updated

4.1.6 Conduct a comprehensive analysis of the barriers (spatial and financial barriers and the quality of services provided) faced by children at risk of poverty and social exclusion in accessing health services in order to contribute to the better design of programmes and interventions aimed at such children
Specific objective 4.2 Ensured support for the mental health protection of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 4.2

4.2.1 Adopt a national strategic framework for the protection of children’s mental health with a special focus on children at risk of poverty and social exclusion
4.2.2 Provision of beds for child and adolescent psychiatry in the public health service network, with the aim of increasing the quality of the treatment of children with mental health problems

GENERAL OBJECTIVE 5

ENSURED ACCESS TO ADEQUATE HOUSING FOR CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The ECG Study on the Economic Implementing Framework (EC, 2021a) highlights the importance of general European recommendations and documents to ensure adequate housing and prevent the homelessness of children at risk, and emphasizes the need to create a national framework and develop national policies aimed at improving the availability and affordability of quality housing for all, especially vulnerable groups of people.

The key characteristics of housing in the ECEC are characterized by a high share of private housing ownership and the absence of a systematic housing policy and social housing programmes. Based on the available data, individual groups of children at risk living in financial and hence housing deprivation are identified, as well as those children at risk who, due to specific circumstances, are at increased risk of homelessness (children leaving care, orphaned children who do not have secure housing, children with a migrant background, children living in extreme poverty, most often children of the Roma national minority, which is associated with precarious and inadequate housing).

The emphasis is placed on targeted interventions aimed at children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, but the basic precondition for the successful application of such interventions is the development of a comprehensive housing policy strategy. In accordance with the aforementioned, the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia by 2030 foresees the adoption of the Housing Policy Strategy of the Republic of Croatia by 2030, which must focus significantly on social housing.

The following groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion face barriers to accessing adequate housing:
1) Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion – 126,000 children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, or 18.4% of the total population under the age of 18, according to 2020 data. (Eurostat, 2021a) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)
2) Children from families of GMB beneficiaries – 13,977 children from families of GMB beneficiaries (as of 31 December 2020) (MLPSFSP, 2021.a)
3) Children of the Roma national minority – 12,920 children under the age of 16 according to 2018 data. (Kunac et al., 2021)


5) Children with a migrant background – 2,522 children of irregular migrants; 942 children of applicants for international protection; 385 unaccompanied children – foreign nationals who were granted the right to temporary accommodation in crisis situations according to 2020 data. (Ombudsperson for Children, 2021)

Based on the basic principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EU Recommendation on investing in children 2013/112, the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child 2021–2024, which the ECG and the sustainability study accompanying the ECG rely on, the following objectives are set to create a framework for ensuring adequate access to housing for children at risk and for preventing homelessness:

1. Provided adequate housing for families with children at risk of poverty and social exclusion
2. Ensured access to adequate housing for young people leaving care

**Specific objective 5.1 Ensured adequate housing for families with children at risk of poverty and social exclusion**

*MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 5.1*

5.1.1 Conduct a comprehensive situation and needs analysis in the field of social housing for families and children at risk of poverty and social exclusion

5.1.2 Develop evidence-based measures aimed at social housing for families and children at risk of poverty as one of the areas of the Croatian Housing Policy Strategy by 2030

5.1.3 Ensure access to targeted energy poverty mitigation programmes for families with children at risk of poverty and social exclusion

5.1.4 Create an incentivising environment for young people and families (a measure of the Action Plan for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion for the period 2021–2024)

5.1.5 Improve the living conditions and housing for members of the Roma national minority

**Specific objective 5.2 Ensured access to adequate housing for young people leaving care**

*MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 5.2*

5.2.1 Improve and develop care outside one’s own family as organised housing for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and young people leaving the social welfare system and the judiciary system after the implementation of the correctional measure, through organised housing with occasional support, with a simultaneous emphasis on increasing the overall and regional coverage, but also the staffing capacity

5.2.2 Ensure housing allowance for children/young people leaving care for up to 1 year in accordance with their needs (the amount of allowance should be aligned with the current state of the housing rental market in order to provide them with an adequate standard of housing)
GENERAL OBJECTIVE 6

IMPROVED ACCESSIBILITY OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE COMMUNITY TO CHILDREN AT RISK OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Social services in the community (hereinafter: SSC) broadly relate to health, correctional, educational, and social welfare services, as well as other services, when they are in the service of beneficiaries and contribute to the quality of life and inclusion in the community of people at risk. Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion are included in the social welfare system due to specific circumstances and needs, but they are primarily included in the education system and the health system.

One of the key systems involving all children aged 6/7 to 14 in the RC is the system of primary school education. In addition to the exclusively educational component, the education system (as well as the preschool system) should therefore be a place where the needs of children at (potential) risk will be recognized in a comprehensive way. Specifically, the overall population of children is reachable precisely in the primary school system, and, in synergy with the social welfare and/or health system, preventive or other necessary measures could be taken to support and assist children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The provision of SSC in the RC is generally decentralized, while their financing is mostly centralized where the level of central government investment varies in their development and functioning. ECEC services are almost entirely fiscally decentralized, while the central government is more involved in funding the school, health, and social welfare systems. Local environments play an important role in planning, financing, organizing, and providing services, but the investment is low and regionally uneven. Most local social expenditures are intended for monetary benefits (over 87%), and only a small proportion is intended for social services (less than 3% in municipalities and counties; about a tenth of social expenditures in cities). Most local expenditures are focused on family/child functions, with less developed areas having less developed services and lower benefits. Expenditures from the state budget in the social welfare system are equally focused on benefits and services, but the benefits can be used by all citizens under legally prescribed conditions, while the services are provided only to citizens in such communities where there are capacities. Funding for “new” services, in particular, services aimed at people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (e.g., teaching assistant/assistant services, learning assistance, parenting support) is predominantly provided by associations on a project basis, which leads to their instability and uncertainty.

Within the programme “Phase III: Testing the Child Guarantee in Croatia”, an assessment of the need for early childhood development services in Međimurje County has been developed, i.e. an assessment of the number of children aged 0–7 in need of early intervention services and the number of children to be closely monitored due to exposure to biomedical, social or environmental risks that can lead to developmental risks (such as teenage pregnancy, living in poverty and social exclusion, or parental addiction). It has been shown that in the area of Međimurje County there are between 378 and 547 children at risk of developmental delays or
1 Developed a comprehensive and integrated system of social services (universal, selective and indicated) in the community in accordance with the needs of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and their families
2 Expanded network of foster care services in the RC by ensuring a spatially evenly distributed network, and ensured quality support in childcare for foster parents
3 Improved existing and developed new social support services for children leaving care
4 Improved monitoring of indicators of material and social deprivation of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Specific objective 6.1 Developed a comprehensive and integrated system of social services (universal, selective and indicated) in the community in accordance with the needs of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and their families

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 6.1

6.1.1 Develop a framework for vertical and horizontal cooperation in the provision of integrated social and other services in the family and community (universal, selective and indicated), including standards, instruments and integrated protocols for early detection, referral, support planning and monitoring of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion and their families according to their needs
6.1.2 Establish a system of social planning and investment in the development of social services based on a needs assessment and mapping of services for children in local (regional) communities
6.1.3 Develop an integrated information system for data exchange with the aim of improving the integrated approach to care for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion
6.1.4 Expand the network of social services for children and young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion in areas with insufficient services based on an established social planning system
6.1.5 Develop local communication strategies for promoting positive behaviours and addressing negative social norms and behaviours within the framework of social services in the community
6.1.6 Development and improvement of the availability of high-quality and evaluated parenting support programmes for parents at risk of poverty and social exclusion, including members of the Roma national minority
6.1.7 Development of a competence framework for experts in SWC and for social service providers, and establishing a programme for introductory training, continuous training, specialization and professional support for working with children at risk and their families
6.1.8 Improve the capacity (knowledge and skills) of experts (including supervisory managers) in the social welfare system to ensure high-quality and timely early identification, referral, efficient case management, effective family interventions and the provision of services tailored to a multicultural environment, including supervision
disabilities, or are at risk due to biomedical factors, while early development services cover between 250 and 300 children aged 0–7, i.e., only 50% of children. Estimating the number of children at risk of developmental delays and disabilities due to social and environmental factors has been hampered by a lack of data. Therefore, the range of needs assessment is quite large, and a larger number of children certainly fall under more than one risk category. From 201 children exposed to neglect, abuse or violence, over 875 children whose parents due to inexperience and life immaturity may show a lack of parental competence, to as many as 1,640 Roma children living on the edge of or below the poverty threshold. Many of these children, given that their parents are less aware of the possibilities of using early childhood development services and the fact that they face additional aggravating circumstances such as poor traffic connections, poverty, lack of information and discriminatory practices, are not included in any support system. The unknown level of coverage of children at risk of poverty, social exclusion and developmental delays leads to the inability to monitor the developmental outcomes of these children by social and health services and thus prevents timely referral of children to early childhood (early intervention) development services if the need arises.

The following groups of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion face the greatest obstacles in accessing social and other services in the community:

1) Children at risk of poverty and social exclusion – 126,000 children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, i.e., 18.4% of the total population under the age of 18 (Eurostat, 2021.a); 13,977 children of GMB beneficiaries according to 2020 data. (MLPSFSP, 2021.a) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

2) Children of the Roma national minority – 12,920 children under the age of 16 according to 2018 data. (Kunac et al., 2018)

3) Children with a migrant background – 2,522 children of irregular migrants; 942 children of applicants for international protection; 385 unaccompanied children – foreign nationals who were granted the right to temporary accommodation in crisis situations according to 2020 data. (Ombudsperson for Children, 2021)

4) Children in alternative care – 3,487 children in care according to 2021 data. (MLPSFSP, 2021.b)

5) Children in less developed, especially rural areas – 8.8% of the population in rural areas at risk of poverty compared to 4.2% in cities according to 2020 data; data for children are not available (Eurostat, 2021.b) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

6) Children with developmental disabilities – 8.2% of children with disabilities (developmental disabilities) in the total population of children 0–19, or a total of 64,063 children as of 9 September 2021. (CIPH, 2021) (Proportion of a specific group of children in the total population of children)

7) Children whose parents are imprisoned – 1,135 minor children as of 31 December 2020; 2020: 1,320 averaged over the last five years.

Based on the ECG’s general objective of ensuring that every child – especially children growing up at risk of poverty and social exclusion – has access to basic social services, and the analyses presented here, and taking into account the perspectives of SSC experts, the following five objectives are set:
6.1.9 Improve the implementation of family-legal protection measures (ensuring continuous training, supervision and increasing compensation for supervisory managers, and establishing a quality system for monitoring the performance of measures)
6.1.10 Improve the digitalization of social welfare systems and connect SWCs and social service providers
6.1.11 Develop and implement a comprehensive model of support for children whose parents are imprisoned in accordance with the Council of Europe Recommendation concerning children with imprisoned parents
6.1.12 Ensure expert work with family or parents and other family members while the child is undergoing a correctional measure and while the child is in conflict with the law

Specific objective 6.2 Expanded network of foster care services in the RC by ensuring a spatially evenly distributed network, and ensured quality support in childcare for foster parents

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 6.2

6.2.1 Expand the network of social housing services for children in a foster family in accordance with the needs and to ensure the quality of the provision of the aforementioned services
6.2.2 Improve the quality of basic and additional training of foster parents
6.2.3 Develop and improve the provision of support to foster parents and children in foster families
6.2.4 Develop a system for the continuous monitoring of the quality of the service provided including the satisfaction of professional SWC workers, foster parents and children in foster families

Specific objective 6.3 Improved existing and developed new social support services for children leaving care

MEASURES RELATED TO THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVE 6.3

6.3.1 Provide a social mentor for children leaving care or after the execution of the correctional measure in all counties
6.3.2 Improve the availability of programmes for strengthening knowledge and skills in the field of teamwork, entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, practical knowledge, analysis and problem solving with mentoring support for young people

INDICATIVE FINANCIAL PLAN
The funds for the implementation of the National Action Plan will be provided from the State Budget and from the European funds in the financial perspective of the European Union for the period 2021–2027. Data on funding sources, annual and total estimated cost of implementation of each measure are presented in the National Action Plan for the total duration of the measure.

For the implementation of the General Objective 1 Access to early childhood education and care will be provided for a total of ____________, of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia, and ____________ from EU funding.

For the implementation of the General Objective 2 Ensuring access to education and supporting children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a total of ____________ will be provided, of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia and ____________ is from EU funding.

For the implementation of the General Objective 3 Ensuring access to quality nutrition for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a total of ____________ will be provided, of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia and ____________ is from EU funding.

For the implementation of the General Objective 4 Ensuring access to health services for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a total of ____________ will be provided, of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia and ____________ is from EU funding.

For the implementation of the General Objective 5 Ensuring access to adequate housing for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a total of ____________ will be provided, of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia and ____________ is from EU funding.

For the implementation of the General Objective 6 Community social services aimed at children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, a total of ____________ will be provided, of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia, and ____________ from EU funding.

The assessment of the fiscal impact of measures, activities and projects for the period of implementation of the National Plan amounts to a total of ____________ of which ____________ is from the State Budget of the Republic of Croatia, and ____________ is from EU funding.

APPENDIXES:

OVERVIEW TABLE OF THE HIERARCHY OF OBJECTIVES, MEASURES AND ACTIVITIES
Abbreviations

BD – Behavioural disorders
CBS – Croatian Bureau of Statistics
CDD – Children with Developmental Disabilities
CES – Croatian Employment Service
CHIF – Croatian Health Insurance Fund
CHIS – Central Health Information System
CIPH – Croatian Institute of Public Health
CPII – Croatian Pension Insurance Institute
CQF – Croatian Qualifications Framework
Cro-COSI – Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative
CSO – Civil Society Organizations
CSODY – Central State Office for Demography and Youth
CSODY interlocutor – Central State Office for Demography and Youth interlocutor
DD – Developmental delay
ECEC – Early Childhood Education and Care
ECG – European Child Guarantee
ESF – European Social Fund
ESF+ – European Social Fund Plus
ESPAD – European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs
ETTA – Education and Teacher Training Agency
EU – European Union
EU-SILC – EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
FEAD – Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
GMB – Guaranteed Minimum Benefit
GRC – Government of the Republic of Croatia
HBSC – Health Behaviour in School-aged Children
ICECSR – International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IEA – International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement
L(R)SGU – Local and Regional Self-Government Unit
LSGU – Local Self-Government Unit
MDFYSP – Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy
MESD – Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development
MH – Ministry of Health
MI – Ministry of the Interior
MJA – Ministry of Justice and Administration
MLPSFSP – Ministry of Labour and Pension System, Family and Social Policy
MPPGID – Ministry of Physical Planning, Construction and State Assets
MRDEUF – Ministry of Regional Development and European Union Funds
MSE – Ministry of Science and Education
MSE interlocutor – Ministry of Science and Education interlocutor
NCCEE – National Centre for the External Evaluation of Education
NEET – Not in Education, Training or Employment
NPSECEC – National Pedagogical Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care
NRIP – National Roma Integration Plan
NRIS – National Roma Integration Strategy
NRRP – National Resilience and Recovery Plan
OECD – Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development
OHRRNM – Office for Human Rights and Rights of National Minorities
PS – primary school
RC – Republic of Croatia
REACT-EU – European Regional Development Fund, the Recovery Assistance for Cohesion and the Territories of Europe
RNM – Roma National Minority
ŠeR – Školski eRudnik application
SRSP – Structural Reform Support Programme
SS – Secondary School
SSC – Social Services in the Community
SWC – Social Welfare Centre
TALIS – Teaching and Learning International Survey
TU interlocutor – trade union interlocutor
UEMC – Union of Education, Media and Culture