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Access for children in need to the key services covered by the European Child Guarantee

North Macedonia

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Summary

On 14 June 2021, the Council of the European Union adopted a Recommendation establishing a “European Child Guarantee”, with a view to guaranteeing access to six key services for “children in need”:

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities; at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which low-income children in North Macedonia do indeed have effective (or effective and free) access to these services.

Effective access to high-quality ECEC is not guaranteed for low-income children in North Macedonia. Due to the limited ECEC infrastructure, particularly in rural and isolated locations, priority in access to some kindergartens where the number of applications is higher than the number of places is given to dual-earner families. Children from households with unemployed parents are therefore more at risk of lack of access to ECEC. Free access to ECEC is guaranteed only for some low-income households, such as single-parent households that are beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum assistance (GMA); and to children whose household financial condition has been disrupted due to natural disasters, such as earthquake, flood, or fire. Local authorities can decide upon additional criteria for free access to ECEC, and this in many municipalities includes Roma children.

Access to education and school-based activities is free of charge in North Macedonia. The actual school costs are only covered for books (for all students, including low-income students) and free transport for pupils with a permanent residence at least 2 kilometres away from the nearest school.

There is no free provision of school meals in North Macedonia. There are occasional governmental project-based activities designed to provide healthy school meals, but these are sporadic and not offered during each school day.

Most primary healthcare – such as vaccinations and care from a general practitioner or infant nurse – is free of charge for all, through services provided by the personal doctor covered by the Health Insurance Fund. Children from households in receipt of GMA are exempt from co-payments for specialist care and hospital treatment. There are no exemptions from co-payments for out-patient medicines and medical products for low-income households.

A publicly funded measure that directly supports access to healthy meals (outside of school meals) for low-income children is public kitchens. These are organised through the centres of social work and located in various dispersed delivery locations. There are no direct public cash or in-kind benefits that support healthy nutrition of low-income children at the national or local level.

The housing allowance is provided only to beneficiaries of GMA and people who up to age 18 have had the status of children without parents and parental care. Priority for social housing is given to beneficiaries of GMA, households belonging to the Roma community, and single-parent families with minors. Actual access to the housing allowance and social housing varies and depends on the location of residence, which reinforces geographical disparities among low-income households.

Introduction

On 14 June 2021, the EU Member States unanimously adopted the Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a “European Child Guarantee” (ECG).¹

The objective of the ECG is to offset the impact of poverty on children and to prevent and combat their social exclusion. To this end, it is recommended that Member States guarantee for “children in need” (defined as people **under 18** who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion – AROPE):

- effective and free access to four services: high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC); education and school-based activities;² at least one healthy meal each school day; and healthcare; and
- effective access to two services: healthy nutrition and adequate housing.

According to the ECG Recommendation, **effective access** means “a situation in which services are readily available, affordable, accessible, of good quality, provided in a timely manner, and where the potential users are aware of their existence, as well as of entitlements to use them” (Article 3d). **Effective and free access** means “effective access” to the services, as well as free-of-charge provision – either by organising and supplying such services or by providing “adequate benefits to cover the costs or the charges of the services, or in such a way that financial circumstances will not pose an obstacle to equal access” (Article 3e).

The Recommendation directs the Member States to prepare action plans, covering the period until 2030, to explain how they will implement the Recommendation.³ These plans are to be submitted to the European Commission.

The purpose of the present report is to assess the extent to which children AROPE have effective and free access to four of the six services covered by the ECG and effective access to the other two (see above). Given that the eligibility criterion (or criteria) for accessing those services in individual Member States (at national and/or sub-national level, depending on how the service is organised) is/are not based on the EU definition of the risk of poverty or social exclusion,⁴ the report focuses on access for **low-income children** to each of these services, using the national low-income criterion (or criteria) that apply (e.g. having a household income below a certain threshold or receiving the minimum income). Throughout this report, “low-income children” is to be understood as children living in low-income households.

In North Macedonia, all six services covered by the ECG are primarily regulated at national level. Therefore, the report seeks to provide a general picture of the (effective/free) access for low-income children in the country.

The report is structured by service:

¹ The full text of the ECG Recommendation is available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.L_.2021.223.01.0014.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AL%3A2021%3A223%3ATOC.

² According to the Recommendation (Article 3f), “school-based activities” means “learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community”.

³ Once they have been submitted to the European Commission, the plans are made publicly available online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>.

⁴ According to the EU definition, children are AROPE if they live in a household that is at risk of poverty (below 60% of median income; hereafter AROP) and/or severely materially and socially deprived, and/or (quasi-)jobless. For the detailed definition of this indicator and all other EU social indicators agreed to date, see: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=756&langId=en>. In 2021, EU Member States agreed a target to be reached by 2030: a reduction in the number of people AROPE in the EU by at least 15 million, including at least **5 million children**.

- effective and free access to high-quality ECEC;
- effective and free access to education and school-based activities;
- effective and free access to at least one healthy meal each school day;
- effective and free access to healthcare (e.g. free regular health examinations and follow-up treatment, and access to medicines, treatments and support);
- effective access to healthy nutrition;⁵ and
- effective access to adequate housing.⁶

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to ECEC services.

1.1 Mapping accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is not compulsory in North Macedonia. As can be seen from Table 1.1, there is no entitlement or priority for low-income children related to access to ECEC. According to the Child Protection Law, if the number of children registered exceeds the number of places available, priority is only given to children with disabilities (Article 60, 2022).

Table 1.1: Accessibility and affordability of ECEC

Childcare (usually under age 3)		Pre-school setting (usually age 3 to compulsory school age)	
Accessibility	Affordability	Accessibility	Affordability
NO	FREE-POOR9months	NO	FREE-POOR3years

Note: "NO" in the accessibility column means no entitlement or priority for low-income children. "FREE-POORxxx" means free for low-income children from the age of xxx. If the information differs between centre-based and home-based care, the information provided applies to centre-based care.

In relation to affordability, as indicated in Table 1.1, children from single-parent households who are beneficiaries of guaranteed minimum assistance (GMA) are provided with free access to kindergartens (Child Protection Law, Article 40). In addition, free access to ECEC is provided to children whose family's financial condition has been disrupted due to natural disasters, such as earthquake, flood, or fire. In both cases, free access refers to ECEC as a whole (including crèches).

Local municipalities can also stipulate additional categories to be provided with free access to ECEC. To support the return to kindergartens after COVID-19, some municipalities (Kavadarci and Gradsko) have decided to provide free access to ECEC for all children whose family income does not exceed the national average wage. In addition, the donor-based "inclusion of Roma children in public pre-school institutions" project has since 2006 provided continuous

⁵ According to the Recommendation (Article 3g), "healthy meal" or "healthy nutrition" means "a balanced meal consumption, which provides children with nutrients necessary for their physical and mental development and for physical activity that complies with their physiological needs".

⁶ According to the Recommendation (Article 3h), "adequate housing" means "a dwelling that meets the current national technical standards, is in a reasonable state of repair, provides a reasonable degree of thermal comfort, and is available and accessible at an affordable cost".

support to over 6,400 Roma children aged 3-6 to gain free access to pre-school education (Roma Education Fund, 2022). Based on the success of this project, the government adopted a “conclusion” (28 December 2019) recommending that the municipalities consider the possibility of exempting 450 Roma children aged 3-6 from kindergarten fees for 2020. Of the Roma children targeted, a total of 273 were exempted from fee payment. According to the regional Roma survey, the enrolment of Roma children aged 3-6 was 14% compared with 29% of non-Roma (Government of North Macedonia, 2021).

1.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

The conditions for qualifying as being on low income for free access to kindergartens (ECEC as a whole, including crèches) involve the following.

- (i) For single-parent families: Monthly income below the GMA threshold. For a single parent, the equivalent scale increases by a coefficient of 0.5; and for a child member of the household, the threshold increases by a coefficient of 0.1.
- (ii) For children whose family’s financial condition has been disrupted due to natural disasters, such as earthquake, flood, or fire: Confirmation from the centre of social work noting the damage/loss of property due to natural disaster.
- (iii) Selected municipal support: Income below the national (monthly) average wage.
- (iv) Donor projects targeting Roma pre-school children: Roma households that are at social risk (i.e. beneficiaries of GMA).

The level of the low-income criterion for having free access to ECEC for children from single-parent households (i.e. the GMA threshold for a single parent with one child) is MKD 6,400 (€104) per month, which is lower than the AROP national threshold (for a single parent with one child under 14) of MKD 11,927 (€194).

There are no official or administrative data related to the total number of low-income children using free access to pre-school education in North Macedonia. Based on Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) data from the cash benefit management information system, in 2022 there were 982 children from single-parent family beneficiaries of GMA, who have a right to free access to ECEC. This represented 2% of the AROPE population of children in 2021.

1.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to ECEC for low-income children

1.2.1 Financial barriers

Existing studies/data are not sufficient to address the issue of whether the out-of-pocket costs for accessing ECEC in North Macedonia represent a financial barrier for low-income children.

In general, the cost of public ECEC is affordable in North Macedonia. The state (via municipalities) supports parents in covering expenses for childcare in public ECEC institutions. Parents pay only part of the price for the child’s stay in the kindergarten: the costs for child nutrition, and part of the materials costs.

The state covers 77% of the costs for children’s attendance in kindergartens. The monthly fee for full-time stay that parents pay, including meals, is MKD 1,490 (€24) (i.e. 10% of the minimum wage and 33% of the market price). However, according to the World Bank, geographical disparities in access to ECEC services exist because of highly regressive financing, depending on user fees that the poor cannot afford (World Bank, 2018, p.14). According to the Eurydice information network, the funding formula for ECEC uses a coefficient based on the number of staff employed and on the used capacity of the pre-school institution.

The current formula treats all pre-school institutions in the same way, irrespective of where they are located. It assumes that the per child costs of pre-schooling are the same in large cities and in small villages. This lack of flexibility in the formula potentially creates even greater disparities in the standards of the ECEC system within the country.⁷

1.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Access to ECEC is not guaranteed for all children in North Macedonia, mainly because of lack of infrastructure (kindergartens), particularly in rural areas. Due to this, children living in isolated and rural locations are deprived of access to ECEC. This is also a barrier for Roma children as identified in the Regional Co-operation Council report, which noted the “*lack of organised or public transport to kindergartens from Roma settlements, which are usually far from educational institutions*” (Regional Co-operation Council, 2020, p. 11). In addition, in some kindergartens where the number of applications is higher than the number of places, priority is given to dual-earner families, thus leaving children from households with unemployed parents at greater risk.

Participation in early childhood education (children aged 3 and over) before the pandemic (in 2019) stood at 42.3%, while in 2020 it fell to 30.0%. According to MLSP administrative data, the ECEC coverage by municipalities varies noticeably. While in 28 mainly rural municipalities public kindergartens do not exist, coverage is over 60% in six urban municipalities. There are fewer kindergartens in the western part of the country and in rural municipalities, and the urban enrolment rate in pre-schooling is over six times higher than that in rural areas. Poorer children attend pre-primary schooling at far lower rates than wealthier children – a mere 0.3% of children from the poorest quintile are enrolled in a pre-primary programme (compared with 36% in the total population). According to MLSP administrative data, enrolment rates are 2.6% for Roma and 7.5% for children from the Albanian ethnic community.

The new loan agreement with the World Bank (2018) – entitled “social services improvement project” – is designed to overcome barriers related to ECEC access and improve the quality of pre-school services, and will focus on children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (that is, poor children, children with disabilities, and Roma children). Due to the lack of physical infrastructure, this project’s activities focus on increasing access to high-quality and energy-efficient pre-school settings. In addition, the project is designed to overcome the barrier of the transition from ECEC to the early grades of primary education. Activities for younger children – from birth onwards – focus on empowering parents and families to support children’s holistic development through increased knowledge about the importance of the early years (including adequate health and nutrition, early stimulation and learning opportunities, and nurturing and protection from stress) and about the relevant services available in the community. Improvements in infrastructure (increasing the number of pre-school classrooms) take place in parallel with improvements in the quality of pre-school services (World Bank, 2018, p. 15).

1.3 Free meals provision for low-income children in ECEC

All children who are provided with free access to kindergartens (i.e. at national level): children from single-parent households that are beneficiaries of GMA and children whose family’s financial condition has been disrupted due to natural disasters, are also automatically provided with free meals during their stay. The daily free meal includes breakfast, lunch and a snack.

⁷ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/republic-north-macedonia/early-childhood-and-school-education-funding>

2. Education and school-based activities

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to education and school-based activities.

Section 2.1 maps the main school costs in public primary and secondary education, distinguishing between the following:⁸

- compulsory basic school materials (schoolbag, pens, glue, scissors, etc.);
- compulsory school materials (textbooks, school supplies, notebooks, etc.);
- compulsory specific clothing (uniform, sports clothing);
- IT equipment requested by the school;
- sports equipment or musical instruments requested by the school;
- compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum;
- other compulsory fees or costs; and
- transport costs to or from school.

Section 2.2 briefly describes the cash benefits specifically intended to help meet educational costs.

Finally, Section 2.3 seeks to identify the main barriers that prevent low-income children from having effective and free access to “school-based activities” as defined in the Council Recommendation establishing the ECG (see “Introduction” section). Given that the distinction between these activities and some of the activities covered above – especially the “compulsory extramural activities (e.g. school trips, sport, culture) that are part of the curriculum” – may not always be clear-cut, the focus of Section 2.3 is specifically on school-based activities which are not part of the curriculum.

2.1 Mapping the main school costs in public primary and secondary education

As regulated by the constitution, compulsory education (comprising primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary levels) is free of charge in North Macedonia. Despite this legislative stipulation, as indicated in Table 2.1a, actual school costs are only covered for books (for all students, including low-income students). This in practice means that all students are provided with (used) books at the beginning of each school year. The Law on Primary Education also provides guarantees for free transport for pupils with a permanent residence at least 2 kilometres away from the nearest school. All other school costs indicated in Table 2.1a are borne by the families themselves.

Table 2.1a: School costs of primary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	ALL	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	ALL

Note: “ALL” means that this category is free for all children. “NO” means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.

⁸ Tuition fees charged by private schools are not covered.

School costs for secondary education are covered for the books and transport of all children, including low-income children. All other school costs indicated in Table 2.1b are borne by the families themselves.

Table 2.1b: School costs of secondary education (free for all/low-income children)

Basic material	Books	Clothing	IT	Sports or music equipment	Extra-mural activities	Other fees or costs	Transport
NO	ALL	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	ALL

Note: "ALL" means that this category is free for all children. "NO" means that most/all items in the category are not free for low-income children.

2.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a "low-income child"

As already indicated in Tables 2.1a and 2.1b, some costs are waived for all children, and some are not waived for any child.

2.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet educational costs

In North Macedonia, the only cash benefit whose purpose is specifically to help low-income children to meet some of the educational costs is the educational allowance.

According to the Child Protection Law (Article 39-b), the educational allowance is targeted at children attending primary and secondary schools in the country.

Criteria related to the educational allowance include the following.

- **Income criteria:** The total average monthly incomes of all members in the household should not be higher than a threshold set at MKD 6,800 (€110), which increases for each additional member of the household by a coefficient from the equivalent scale (i.e. for the second, 0.5; for both the third and fourth, 0.4; for the fifth, 0.2; for the sixth and seventh, 0.1; and for the eighth and ninth, 0.1). For a single parent, the equivalent scale increases by 0.5.
- **Attendance criteria:** Attendance at 85% of the realised teaching hours for each of the four measuring periods (1 September to 31 October; 1 November to 31 December; 20 January to 31 March; and 1 April till the end of the school year).

The educational allowance is paid during the school year (September through June) and the monthly amount is MKD 737 (€12) for a child in primary education, and MKD 1,053 (€17) for a child in secondary education. According to MLSP administrative data for 2022, 32,403 children were beneficiaries of the educational allowance, which represented 29% of children AROPE aged 6-17 (Eurostat, EU-SILC [ILC_PEPS01N], downloaded on 17 January 2023).

There are insufficient studies of the adequacy of the educational allowance, introduced for the first time in 2019. The amount of the educational allowance is low and does not sufficiently contribute towards the real educational costs of children.

In addition, the Ministry of Education and Science runs an annual competition for scholarships for the social support of children in secondary education, which targets low-income students (among others). The highest number of points are received by children from families where the total family income is below or equal to 35% of the average wage paid in the country. For the most recent academic year (2022/2023) 900 scholarships have been paid out, although the exact number of low-income children (with family income below or equal to 35% of the average

wage) is not available. The amount of the scholarship is MKD 3,500 (€57) per month, paid during nine months of the school year.

Municipalities in North Macedonia also have a practice of supporting the educational costs of low-income children. The municipal support varies in nature (school supplies, financial support) and the amount depends on the fiscal capability of the municipality concerned.

2.3 Main barriers to effective and free access to school-based activities for low-income children

2.3.1 Financial barriers

Low-income households with school-age children are faced with direct costs for obtaining sports equipment, or participating in leisure or cultural activities that require financing or co-financing. Existing studies/data are not sufficient to determine whether the out-of-pocket costs for accessing school-based activities represent a financial barrier for low-income children.

2.3.2 Non-financial barriers

As reported in the UNICEF study on multidimensional poverty in North Macedonia (UNICEF, 2021), limited access to education among poor and socially excluded children in North Macedonia is mainly because they live in predominantly rural areas of underdeveloped regions and are at greater risk of remaining isolated. Amongst them, Roma children are even more vulnerable. For Roma children, additional barriers include a shortage of teachers/instructors in the Romani language, as well as a lack of central and local government initiatives for school integration/registration of child returnees, who have migrated abroad and then later returned (Regional Co-operation Council, 2020).

According to the national education strategy for 2018-2025 (Ministry of Education and Science, 2018), there are barriers hampering the integration of pupils learning in a language other than their mother tongue; pupils learning in different instruction languages in multi-language schools are mainly separated by shifts, buildings, floors or even by school administration. At the same time, the motivation of the schools in general, and the teachers in particular, to ensure inter-ethnic integration and inclusive education is low due to the absence of any incentives or financial support (*ibid.*, p.39).

3. Free meals at school

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to at least one free healthy meal each school day.

3.1 Mapping free provision of school meals

There is no free provision of school meals in North Macedonia. Primary schools, through their teaching and parental boards, usually select and contract with private food operators, who provide a meal plan for the school. Parents have the option to choose whether they will enrol their children for the existing meal plan and pay for it if they do. Secondary schools do not have a practice of contracting with food operators for the provision of school meals. One example, which is outside the scope of this section, is the occasional governmental project-based activities designed to promote healthy school meals. One such recent activity in 2022 was conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture (a project called "A healthy snack for every student"), which provided 4 kilos of apples to each student in primary education.

3.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Not applicable: access is not free for low-income children.

3.2 Main barriers to effective and free access to school meals for low-income children

3.2.1 Financial barriers

The existing studies/data are not sufficient to address the issue of whether the out-of-pocket costs for school meals represent a financial barrier for low-income children.

3.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Not applicable.

4. Healthcare

This section describes the situation regarding effective and free access for low-income children to healthcare, focusing on vaccinations, care from a general practitioner (GP) or infant nurses, specialist care, dental care (not orthodontics) and prescribed medicines.

4.1 Mapping the provision of free healthcare services and products

As indicated in Table 4.1, most primary healthcare is free of charge for all, through services provided by the personal doctor covered by the Health Insurance Fund. For children from certain low-income households, there are governmental programmes that exempt them from co-payments for specialist care and hospital treatment.

Table 4.1: Healthcare costs (free for all/low-income children)

Vaccination	GP	Infant nurses	Specialist care	Dental care (not orthodontics)	Prescribed medicines
ALL	ALL	ALL	POOR	MOSTS&P	NO

Note: “ALL” means that all services/products in the category are free for all children. “POOR” means that they are free for low-income children. “MOST S&P” means that most but not all services/products in the category are free for low-income children. “NO” means that most/all services/products are not free for low-income children.

Dental care services are free of charge under the basic scheme if provided by dentists who are contracted by the Health Insurance Fund. Regular and periodical examinations are provided for children according to the special programmes. These mainly refer to children up to age 14 (children in primary education), while preventive programmes and periodical dental examinations for children over 14 (i.e. children in secondary education) are not provided. Prescribed out-patient medicines require user charges (co-payments) up to a maximum of 20% of the price (50% for medical products). There are no exemptions from co-payments for out-patient medicines and medical products for low-income households.

4.1.1 Conditions for qualifying as a “low-income child”

Children are exempt from co-payments for specialist care and hospital treatment if their household benefits from GMA. For other children, there is an upper annual limit on co-

payments. For children aged 1-5, the limit is 20% of the previous year's national average monthly net salary; and for children aged 5-18, it is 40% of it.

The number of children entitled to free access to specialist care and hospital treatment (i.e. the number aged 0-18 who were members of households benefiting from GMA) was 14,166 in 2022, which represented 29% of the AROPE population of children in 2021.

4.2 Cash benefits whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs

In North Macedonia there are no cash benefits at the national level whose specific purpose is to help meet healthcare costs. There is a policy of exemption from co-payments based on income (for people receiving social benefits) or certain conditions, and an annual cap on co-payments for out-patient visits, dental care, diagnostic tests and in-patient care, which is linked to household income and age group. However, protection against co-payments for out-patient prescribed medicines is weak (World Health Organization, 2021).

At the local level, municipalities have annual programmes for social protection, which stipulate financial support for healthcare costs or fee payments for prescribed medicines. Beneficiaries of such financial support are usually people on low incomes or registered beneficiaries of social assistance.

However, despite national and local programmes targeted at improving the accessibility and affordability of healthcare for low-income households, low public health spending (5.4% of GDP, according to COFOG,⁹ Ministry of Finance, 2023) contributes to high out-of-pocket payments for healthcare. A World Health Organization study showed that nearly 7% of households were impoverished, further impoverished or at risk of impoverishment after out-of-pocket payments in 2018; 6.5% of households experienced catastrophic out-of-pocket payments in 2018, with such payments heavily concentrated among the poorest households (in the two lowest consumption quintiles); and catastrophic spending was largely driven by out-of-pocket payments for out-patient medicines (World Health Organization, 2021). There are no studies or other evidence regarding the specific situation of children.

4.3 Non-financial barriers to effective and free access to healthcare

The non-take-up of free primary healthcare services among children is particularly evident among those living in rural and isolated locations. According to a recent study (Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women, 2022a) the majority of children from rural areas (67.4%) were treated by general family doctors or specialists in family medicine, due to the insufficient number of family paediatricians. Unsatisfied need for healthcare from a family doctor was also present among children under 15: almost 20% of children were not taken to a family doctor when they needed to be. The same study indicated that, in terms of access to medicines, one third of the residents from rural areas (32%) bought the medicines prescribed by a doctor privately, because they could not find them in the pharmacies financed by the Health Insurance Fund.

Low-income children from Roma families face an even worse situation. According to a recent study (Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women, 2022b), almost 40% of Roma children under 15 were not taken to a family doctor when they needed to be.

⁹ Classification of the Functions of Government.

5. Healthy nutrition

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to healthy nutrition.

5.1 Main barriers to effective access to healthy nutrition

5.1.1 Financial barriers

In the absence of relevant studies and data related to financial barriers that hinder access for low-income children to healthy meals, and based on the administrative data provided in this report, it may be said that financial barriers include low family incomes, low adequacy of social transfers, and a lack of direct financial transfers for meal costs.

5.1.2 Non-financial barriers

Based on existing research (Bogoevska *et al.*, 2019), non-financial barriers that hinder access for low-income children to healthy meals include: a lack of public kitchen points for the distribution of free meals, which makes them inaccessible to potential beneficiaries, especially those from rural areas; the large distances between food kitchens and the place of residence of beneficiaries (due to which there is under-utilisation, as on average about two thirds of beneficiaries come to pick up their meals on a daily basis); and in some municipalities a lack of home delivery services for beneficiaries who are sick or disabled.

5.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to healthy nutrition

A publicly funded measure that directly supports access to healthy meals (outside of school meals) for low-income children is public kitchens. These are organised through the centres of social work and run from dispersed delivery locations. Based on MLSP data from 2020, there were 61 delivery locations of public kitchens, functioning in 49 municipalities (out of 80) in the country. They provided one cooked meal daily during the week, while on Fridays they provided cold food packages for the weekend.

Beneficiaries need to submit an application at the centre of social work, along with an ID and birth certificate for all members of the household. There are no other criteria required.

There are no direct public benefits that support healthy nutrition of low-income children at the national or local level.

6. Adequate housing

This section describes the situation regarding effective access for low-income children to adequate housing.

6.1 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Housing allowances

The Law on Social Protection (Official Gazette No 104/19) stipulates the right to the housing allowance. This cash benefit can only be provided to beneficiaries of GMA and people who

prior to age 18 had the status of children without parents and parental care – that is, following the termination of guardianship and up to the age of 26 (Article 57). However, the Law on Social Protection specifies that the housing allowance for low-income households (i.e. beneficiaries of GMA) is provided by the local municipality, while only the housing allowance for people who up to the age of 18 have had the status of children without parents and parental care is provided at national level. Given the different fiscal capacity of the municipalities, the beneficiaries of GMA are in a less favourable position.

An examination of local municipalities' programmes for social protection showed that there were differences among local municipalities in terms of the provision of housing support (Social Services Platform, 2022). In most municipalities there was no separate housing allowance for beneficiaries of GMA, as stipulated in the Law on Social Protection. Instead, housing costs at the local level were provided in two ways – either as part of the one-off financial assistance that could be claimed for housing costs (among other things), or as in-kind support, which could be claimed in the case of housing damage due to natural disasters. One of the rare examples is the municipality of Kumanovo, which adopted a “decision” for housing assistance to materially and housing insecure people benefiting from GMA (16/2022). According to this decision, low-income households who are GMA beneficiaries are provided with a monthly subsidy for utility costs in the amount of MKD 1,200 (€19) and a monthly subsidy for rent costs in the amount of MKD 2,000 (€32). This support does not adequately cover the real housing costs of households. However, this example also shows that the housing support for beneficiaries of GMA in the country varies and depends on the location of residence, thus reinforcing geographical disparities among low-income households (Municipality of Kumanovo, 2023; Social Services Platform, 2022).

The low-income criterion for accessing the housing allowance is being a beneficiary of GMA. More specifically, this relates to households whose total average income in the previous three months was below MKD 4,080 (€66) per adult equivalent per month (which is 27% of the minimum net wage). The amount of GMA is established in the Law on Social Protection. This is a differential benefit subject to means-test according to the composition of the household and household income. In case of children in the household, the equivalence scale increases by a coefficient of 0.1.

Given that the housing allowance was introduced with the amendments to the Law on Social Protection in 2019, there are still no studies/data analysing whether the housing allowance adequately covers the housing costs for low-income households with children. In addition, the lack of a harmonised database of beneficiaries at the level of local municipalities hinders an estimation of the number of low-income households with children receiving this allowance. Given the scarcity of municipalities that provide this benefit at the local level, it may be safely assumed that the number of beneficiaries is negligible.

Low-income households who are beneficiaries of GMA receive an energy subsidy as a top-up allowance. The amount of the monthly energy subsidy is MKD 1,000 (€16), paid from October through March.

6.2 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Social housing

6.2.1 Mapping the provision of social housing

The Law on Housing (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia Nos 99/09, 57/10, 36/11, 54/11 and 13/12) regulates non-profit housing (Article 91). According to this law, rights related to non-profit housing include rent, purchase or housing subsidies. People at social risk are given priority for non-profit housing. These are defined as: “*low-income households, young*

people, young married couples, single parents, pensioners over the age of 60 who do not have an apartment in their ownership and others” (Article 91).

An additional provision regulating social housing is the annual governmental decision for the distribution of social apartments, as well as the conditions for their use, built according to the programme for the construction, sale and maintenance of the housing space owned by the Republic of North Macedonia. The last published annual governmental decision (Official Gazette No 37/2022), lists the following vulnerable groups as a priority: (a) children without parents or parental care – people who, up to age 18, were in residential or other forms of care; (b) beneficiaries of GMA; (c) people affected by natural disasters, regardless of the legal status of their existing (primary) habitats; (d) disabled people and people who need help and care from another person, and families with disabled people; (e) people belonging to the Roma ethnic community who are socially vulnerable (in accordance with the national strategy for the Roma); and (f) single parents with minor children (Article3).

In this respect, the low-income criterion is the same as indicated in Section 6.1 (i.e. being a beneficiary of GMA) – household income below MKD 4,080 (€66) per adult equivalent per month. Apart from the low-income criterion, eligibility also extends to households belonging to the Roma community and single-parent families with minors.

6.2.2 Main barriers to effective access to social housing

6.2.2.1 Financial barriers

Existing studies/data are not sufficient to address the issue of whether the existing eligibility criteria for social housing represent a financial barrier for low-income households with children. One financial barrier may be seen in the income and property criteria related to GMA access, which indirectly can prevent low-income households (i.e. those that are close to, but not below, the GMA threshold, and those with property income) accessing social housing.

6.2.2.2 Non-financial barriers

Based on reports from the Roma NGOs, the national social housing programme fails to reach those areas where the Roma population need these measures most. In addition, they indicate that there is not enough social housing to cater for all those in need. Even in regions where the volume of available social housing is proportionate to the number of Roma, the latter are often unaware of these options and the procedures involved in applying for them. In addition, some local authorities have not developed detailed urban plans, further hindering the implementation of social housing programmes (Minority Rights Group International, 2018).

6.3 Publicly funded measures supporting access to adequate housing – Other measures

Since 2018, the government has adopted an annual programme for protecting vulnerable energy consumers, which for 2022 stipulated bill discounts where total household disposable monthly net income did not exceed a threshold depending on household size – ranging from MKD 15,194 (€246) for single people to MKD 30,000 (€486) for households with five members or more. An energy bill discount of MKD 600 (€10) is provided to eligible applicants from households with up to three members, while MKD 800 (€13) is provided to eligible applicants from households with four or more members. This is provided as a monthly discount for 12 consecutive months. The programme does not guarantee all eligible applicants access to this benefit. Article 1.3 states that the selection is based on two criteria: (a) the principle of lowest income; and (b) the availability of the allocated budget for the energy bill discount (until it is

exhausted). Regarding the latter point, the government adopted quotas per household size, based on which the earmarked budget is allocated.

A specific feature of the housing sector in Macedonia, especially among low-income communities, particularly Roma, is people living in illegally constructed buildings. For this purpose, the government adopted a Law on the Treatment of Unlawful Constructions (2013), which regulates the conditions, manner and procedure for registering and sanctioning illegally constructed buildings. A by-law provides that illegal buildings can be legalised if they are not contrary to the conditions in the urban planning documentation and if they meet all urban and construction standards.

Under the national Roma strategy, the strategic goal in the area of housing is to improve the housing conditions and the infrastructure of Roma settlements. According to social mapping data, about 20 Roma settlements were identified as not urbanised and not having basic infrastructure, while about 28% of them had not been legalised. By 2030, it is envisaged that 80% of the settlements identified will have been urbanised, and will have the basic infrastructure needed to satisfy technical criteria for legalisation.

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