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Interim Report

Pilot Project

European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria

Phase III of the Preparatory Action of the European Commission

October 2020 – March 2022



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List of Acronyms

ASA – Agency for Social Assistance

BPA – Bulgarian Paediatric Association

CMCH – Centre for Maternal and Child Health

CPD – Child Protection Department

CSC – Community Support Centre

DSA – Directorate for Social Assistance

ECI – Early Childhood Intervention

EO – Employment Office

GP – General Practitioner

MES – Ministry of Education and Science

MH – Ministry of Health

MLSP – Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

NNC – National Network for Children

PMU – Project Management Unit

RCSPIE – Regional Centre for Support the Process of the Inclusive Education

RDE – Regional Department of Education

RDSA – Regional Directorate for Social Assistance

RHI – Regional Health Inspectorate

Introduction

In November 2015, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution that calls on the Commission and on the Member States to "introduce **a child guarantee** so that every child in poverty can have access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition, as part of a European integrated plan to combat child poverty". The following four specific groups of socially vulnerable children have been identified as particularly exposed to poverty and well-being risks: "Children residing in institutions", "Children with disabilities and other children with special needs", "Children of recent migrants and refugees" and "Children living in precarious family situations".[1]

A Preparatory Action was initiated by the European Commission, which included three phases, and for Phase III seven Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain) were selected for pilot testing the Child Guarantee with the support from UNICEF.

In Bulgaria the pilot testing is focused on children with disabilities and developmental difficulties, and children living in precarious family situations, including Roma children from marginalized communities.

The overall objective of the project is to expand the access to and improve the quality of 4 types of services:

- ***Home visiting*** *for the provision of individualised support to families with children (0-3 years)*
- *A system approach* ***to early childhood intervention*** *for families with young children with disabilities and developmental difficulties*
- *Quality* ***inclusive pre-school education*** *for children with disabilities and learning difficulties*
- *Provision of outreach child- and family-centred* ***preventive and support services*** *to children in precarious family situations and their families, including Roma children from marginalized communities.*



The pilot activities are implemented in 10 municipalities on the territory of 3 dsitricts – Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora.

The project implementation started in October 2020 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation between **UNICEF, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the Ministry of Health (MH), the Ministry of Education and Science (MES),** ***Central Coordination Unit*** **Directorate with the Council of Ministers and the three district administrations** – **Burgas**, **Sliven** and **Stara Zagora**. Between November and December 2020 meetings and consultations with the 10 pilot municipalities – **Aytos**, **Burgas**, **Chirpan**, **Kazanluk**, **Kotel**, **Nova Zagora**, **Sliven**, **Sredetz**, **Stara Zagora** and **Tvarditza** took place, as well as with the other partners at regional and municipal levels. In the first quarter of 2021 Grant Agreements with the 10 pilot municipalities were drafted and signed, which marked the launch of project activities at local level.

Between October 2020 and March 2022, the project supported **13,180 children and 5,357 parents** and has strengthened the capacity of **768 professionals** from the health, education, social and child protections sectors.

1 This group includes children who live in an income-poor household or in a low socio-economic status household; precariousness related to the household composition: i.e. children living in single-adult households and "left-behind" children; precariousness related to social risk factors: i.e. children living in a household where there are mental health problems, substance abuse, domestic violence; Roma children from vulnerable communities.



*In June 2021 the Council of the European Union adopted Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004 establishing a **European Child Guarantee**. Member States are recommended to guarantee effective and free access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities, at least one healthy meal each school day, and healthcare, as well as effective access to healthy nutrition and adequate housing.*

Component 1: Home visiting for the provision of individualised support to families with children under 3 years of age

Main activities and results

The home visiting service is provided by the **Centre for Maternal and Child Health (CMCH)**, established at the D-r G. V. Mirkovich Health Centre in Sliven. The service is provided on the territory of the entire region, with main office in the town of Sliven and remote offices in Nova Zagora and Tvarditza. The team consists of a manager, 13 nurses and midwives, one social worker and two health assistants.

The team of home visiting nurses and midwives provides ***counselling, advice and information to pregnant women and families with children 0 to 3*** on healthy upbringing of children, adequate nutrition, healthy and safe environment, activities promoting early childhood development and nurturing bond between parents and children. The intensity of support depends on the needs of families. Each family is entitled to *a universal package* consisting of two home visits during pregnancy and a total of five home visits until the child turns three. Higher-risk families are entitled to an *intensive package* providing for more active monitoring and facilitation of the access of parents and children to health, social and other services. The *extra package* is designed to provide support for extremely vulnerable families facing complex risk factors concerning the health and the development of the child, such as poor living conditions, absence of regular income, absence of housing or overcrowdedness, underage mothers. The package includes intensive home visits, engagement of specialists for counselling, referral to specialised services and information.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic situation, during the reported period the home visiting nurses carried out **15,734 house visits**, including 2,803 counselling sessions over the phone, managing to reach out to **48% of the child population** in the region of Sliven. A total of **3,206 families with 3,879 children (0-3 years)** received individualised support, including **602 families and 1,277 children** in precarious family situations who were provided with intensive assistance. In addition, 459 children were referred to specialists, 148 children received assistance to register or get in contact with a general practitioner (GP) or paediatrician whereas 87 families received support for accessing to social services.



Within the home visiting service, a systemic monitoring of child development milestones started for early detection of developmental difficulties and timely support to address them

Visiting nurses and midwives actively identify **uninsured pregnant women and assist them for accessing** check-ups under Ordinance No 26/14.06.2007 on the provision of pre-natal care to uninsured women as well as an extra check-up and package of blood tests, financed from the budget of the CMCH. During the reporting period **804 pregnant women** received assistance for access to prenatal care including 467 pregnant women in precarious family situations and/or women with no health insurance. To address complex cases with multiple risk factors and to respond to multidimensional needs of families, the CMCH cooperates closely with municipal administrations, the Regional Health Inspectorate (RHI), the Regional Department of Education (RDE), the Employment Office, the Directorate for Social Assistance (DSA), Child Protection Department (CPD), the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Interior – Sliven, kindergartens, general practitioners, community support and early childhood development centres and non-governmental organisations in the region.

In the framework of the project, **the home visiting service started a systemic monitoring of child development milestones for early detection of developmental difficulties** and timely support to address them through counselling and referral to early childhood intervention (ECI) services. Home visiting nurses or midwives conduct a screening test during the home visit with the help of the newly introduced screening tool "The Ages & Stages Questionnaires" (ASQ-3). Should a risk be established, the family is referred to one of the two available ECI services in Sliven or in Nova Zagora, with whom a good coordination has been established. The CMCH team attended additional trainings on the following topics: *Support for Families with Children with Developmental Difficulties* (Eurlyaid), *Early Signs of Developmental Difficulties* (Bulgarian Paediatric Association – BPA) and *Support for Children and Young People with Complex Needs* ("Karin Dom" Foundation).

Results

- **48% of children** (0-3 years) covered by the home visiting service in Sliven district
- **15,734** home visits conducted including 2,803 phone consultations due to the measures against COVID-19 pandemic
- **3,206 families** with **3,879 children** (0-3 years) received individualised support, including **602 families** and **1,277 children** in precarious family situations who received intensive support
- **804 pregnant women** received access to prenatal care including **467** pregnant women in precarious family situations and/or with no health insurance
- **491 babies** (9 months) and **538 children** (18 months) underwent ASQ-3 child development screening
- **31 hours of additional training** provided to the home visiting team

Component 2: A system approach to early childhood intervention for families with young children with disabilities and developmental difficulties

Main activities and results

The pilot project supports the development of *a system approach to early intervention* for children with developmental difficulties or children at risk of developmental difficulties due to social or biological factors, with focus of children from 0 to 7 years. The approach includes: 1) screening to identify developmental difficulties within the primary health care system (general practitioners, nurses, paediatricians), screening of eyesight and hearing; 2) referral of children at risk of developmental difficulties and disabilities to specialised healthcare and community-based services; 3) providing family-centred support in the child natural environment by early intervention teams. The activities are implemented in three municipalities – **Chirpan, Sliven** and **Stara Zagora.**

Monitoring child development with screening tools to identify developmental difficulties

The "The Ages & Stages Questionnaires" (ASQ-3) developmental screening tool was used under the pilot project. Trained specialists talk to parents or principal caregivers of the child when the child is at the age of 9 and 18 months.

Nearly 100 general practitioners, home visiting nurses and members of staff of community centres from the three pilot municipalities were trained by the Bulgarian Pediatric Association (BPA) to detect early signs of developmental difficulties and to use the ASQ-3 screening tool. The training included the following topics: "Specific conditions of early childhood – cerebral, neuromuscular and metabolic – congenital or acquired", "Epilepsy and early signs of the disorder", "Cognitive development and early signs of difficulties", "Socio-emotional and language development, early signs of autism and delays in speech development", "Early manifestations of child developmental disorders with a focus on general psychomotor development."

The BPA conducted also workshops for parents of young children on the following topics: "Motor development", "Socio-emotional development," "Cognitive development", "Language development", "Specific early childhood conditions" with more than 150 attendees.



Mobile ECI teams provide family-centred support in the child natural environment

Provision of family-centred early intervention in the child natural environment

Under this activity the capacity of existing *Community Centres for Early Childhood Development* in Chirpan, Sliven and Stara Zagora was strengthened with the establishment of early childhood intervention (ECI). Each ECI team includes three additional specialists, hired under the pilot project to provide family centred early intervention through mobile work and enhanced support in the child natural environment. The outcomes of the screening to identify developmental difficulties serve as entry in the early intervention service. Once developmental delays are identified, the team conducts interviews with parents and prepares an individualised Family Support Plan.

The staff of Community Centres went through 75 hours of basic training on contemporary approaches for the provision of family-centred early intervention in the child natural environment which covered the following topics: “Early intervention” (Eurlyaid), “Early childhood intervention, needs assessment, drafting of individualised plan and engagement in the family environment” (Karin Dom Foundation), “Specifics in the delivery of ECI services for preterm children and their families” (“Our Premature Children” Foundation), application of the ASQ-3 screening tool. *Methodological Guidelines* have been developed for the application of the system approach for ECI, and the latter is already operational in the Community Centres. Between June 2021 and March 2022, the newly established ECI teams reached out to **119 families, 33 of which** receiving continuing intensive support. The teams worked actively to raise the awareness about the benefits of involvement of the family and the imporance of working in the natural environment.

Results

- **9 additional specialists** hired and 3 mobile teams for ECI established
- **31 specialists** from 3 Community Centres received 84-hour intensive training in ECI
- **196 parents and 186 children** were covered by the Early Childhood Intervention teams, and 33 of those families received intensive support
- **99 specialists** in the area of ECI, including general practitioners, home visiting nurses, healthcare professionals trained to conduct development screening
- **150 people** participated in workshops for parents on ECI, including specialists, healthcare professionals and parents of young children

Component 3: Quality inclusive pre-school education for children with disabilities and learning difficulties

Main activities and results

Strengthening the capacity of kindergartens for the provision of quality preschool education services for children with disabilities and learning difficulties

30 kindergartens **6,586 children, including 193 children with special educational needs** from 10 municipalities – Aytos, Burgas, Chirpan, Kazanluk, Kotel, Nova Zagora, Sliven, Sredetz, Stara Zagora and Tvarditza - participate in the pilot project. Kindergartens receive support for more effective inclusion of children with disabilities and special educational needs through training, counselling, strengthened methodological support and financing of small-scale projects for inclusive environment.

In 2021 the staff of kindergartens participated in **a multi-modular training programme on inclusive education** with introductory, specialised, and targeted modules. The introductory modules were organised as webinars for self-training between March and December 2021. The specialised modules were carried out by Karin Dom Foundation and UNICEF as online trainings on the following topics: *"Supportive and enabling classroom environment", "Effective interaction within the team to support personal development", "Support for transitioning from the family to kindergarten and primary school", "Parent engagement and empowerment", "Interpreting the results of screening tests to identify children at risk of developmental difficulties".* The targeted modules were designed for teachers who work with children with special needs and included webinars on specific topics (such as "Intellectual difficulties", "Emotional and behavioural disorders", "Problems in development of gifted children", "Physical difficulties and sensory disorders", "De-velopmental disorders – autism and Asperger's syndrome", as well as additional supervision on specific cases provided by Karin Dom Foundation.

Additional trainings needs were identified for engagement with children from bilingual environments, for supporting children living in poverty, and for more effective communication and engagement of parents. The training on working with children from bilingual environments took place in June 2021, with the participation of 178 education specialists. The other two topics are planned for 2022. The difficulties with the organisation of trainings due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been overcome through flexibility in scheduling and through recordings of the training sessions.

Between March and June 2021, **44 additional specialists** were hired – speech therapists, psychologists, and special education teachers to provide additional specialised support for children with disabilities in the pilot kindergartens. For some of the smaller municipalities, recruitment of specialists was a challenge due to shortage of supply, and some specialists with less experience received additional support from the UNICEF experts in inclusive education and the Regional Centres for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education (RCSPIE). Also, the teams of kindergartens benefited from methodological support and developed small-scale projects for adapting and equipping the relevant premises, funded under the project. The implementation of the small projects included the creation of soft corners for better adaptation of children with developmental disorders; providing spaces with equipment for children to promote sensory integration; procurement of specific materials promoting the development of children with special needs; silent corners and corners for music therapy.



Strengthening the capacity of the Regional Centres for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education (RSCPIE)

The project provided support to the RCSPIE in Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora with the aim to strengthen their capacity with functional needs assessment of children with disabilities, to provide methodological support to kindergartens and supervision on specific cases, as well as to strengthen the role of the RCSPIE in exchange of knowledge, experience and good practices among kindergartens.

65 specialists from the RCSPIE teams took part in several training modules on the following topics: *"Support for transitioning from the family to kindergarten and primary school" (*Karin Dom Foundation), "*Assistive technologies for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) for children with more severe difficulties*" (Assist Foundation), *"Interpreting the results of screening tests of children 3-3.5" (*UNICEF), "*Educational and social profiles of children with special educational needs," "Training of trainers in AAC"* (UNICEF). In July 2021, representatives of kindergartens and the RCSPIE in the region of Burgas visited Karin Dom in Varna, where they met face-to-face with specialists and exchanged experience and good practices for working with children with special needs.

Between April 2021 and March 2022, the RCSPIE teams conducted 76 meetings for methodological support to the specialists in the pilot kindergartens. As a result of this, the pilot kindergartens engage more closely with the RCSPIE specialists and have strengthened their cooperation with schools that receive the children after they finish kindergarten. In some municipalities, kindergartens work in close collaboration with the social services, Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection Departments on specific cases of children with developmental difficulties.

Results

- **489 directors, teachers and specialists** participated in a multi-modular training programme
- **44 additional specialists** hired – speech therapists, psychologists and special education teachers
- **30 kindergartens** implemented small projects to improve the environment for children
- **65 staff** of three RCSPIE participated in additional trainings
- **6,586 children from wich 193 with special educational needs** in 30 kindergartens with access to improved inclusive education

Component 4: Provision of outreach child- and family-centred preventive and support services to children in precarious family situations and their families

Main activities and results

The objective of this component is the implementation of a new model of social service – "Community work", focusing on children and families in precarious situations through mobile work and through strengthening the capacity of existing community-based social services (Community Support Centres or others) in seven pilot municipalities – Burgas, Kazanluk, Kotel, Sliven, Sredetz, Stara Zagora and Tvarditza, as well as support for the Child Protection Departments (CPD) in the three pilot districts.

Improving the capacity of CSC for effective engagement with the most marginalised communities

Mobile teams have been established in the social services in the pilot municipalities in order to strengthen the outreach work as well as the preventive support for children and families in precarious situations. In 2021, 22 new staff were recruited in the pilot services – 7 social workers and 15 social assistants and seven vehicles were purchased and provided to the mobile teams. As there was no CSC on the territory of Tvarditza municipality, a mobile team was established as part of the municipal administration. Based on a signed cooperation agreement between the municipalities of Tvarditza and Sliven, the new service receives additional support from the CSC in Sliven, which is a good practice of inter-municipal cooperation and of improving access to social services.

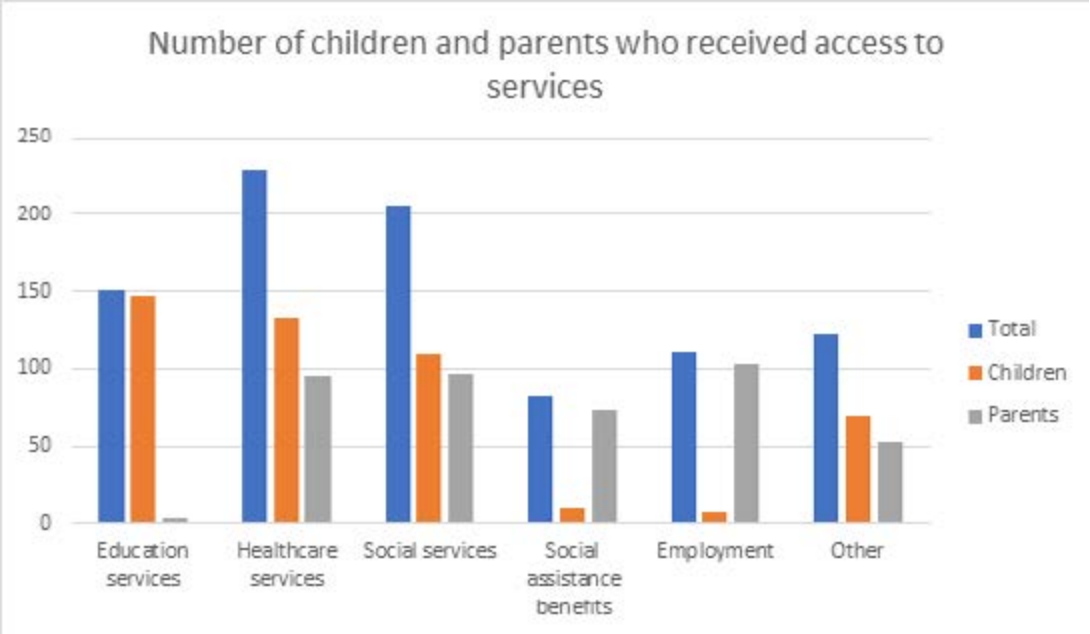
The task of the mobile teams is to provide integrated support to hard-to-reach children and families, to map their specific vulnerabilities and to undertake measures to address them. The support includes providing of information, counselling, referral to services, measures to prevent school dropout, facilitating access to health, educational, social services and social benefits, designing and implementating programmes for prevention of early marriages, family planning and prevention of family separation.

Between April 2021 and March 2022, the newly appointed mobile teams and the other specialists from the social services participated in an **intensive training programme,** developed by C.E.G.A. Foundation. The programme focused on improving the knowledge, practical skills, attitudes, and sensitivity of teams in reaching out to and engaging with the most vulnerable children and families. It included the following topics: "Introduction in the specifics of integrated mobile services for prevention", "Basic knowledge of the social system and social services", "Roma communities, concentrated in closed neighbourhoods and marginalised groups", "Mapping of families at risk in the Roma communities", "Social work with children and families from vulnerable communities", "Programme approach, programmes and services for family planning in vulnerable communities", "Access to personal identification documents, civil registration and public services for vulnerable families from isolated communities", "Specifics of mobile services and prevention programmes at CSC".

Additional trainings were conducted on the implementation of the methodology for the "Community work" social service in the context of the new Social Services Act, as well as additional supervisions for discussion of intensive family support and programmes to address risk for the children in vulnerable communities. The mobile teams received support for the implementation of a new instrument for risk identification in mapping families in isolated communities. Regular online and face-to-face meetings took place where the teams of the pilot services discussed their work, experience and shared good practices.

Support and access to services for children and families in vulnerable situations

From April 2021 to March 2022, a total of **2,066 children and 1,482 parents** in vulnerable situation were mapped and the mobile teams worked actively with the families for whom the risk was assessed as medium and high; families with low risk received support for access to educational, health, social and other services. Intensive case work started for **381 children and 238 parents.**



Number of children and parents receiving assistance for access to services: education services – 147 children and 4 parents; healthcare services – 134 children and 96 parents; social services – 109 children and 97 parents; social assistance bene its – 9 children and 73 parents; employment services – 7 youngsters and 103 parents; other services (legal assistance, housing, etc.) – 70 children and 53 parents. As part of the support for families in precarious situations, an Emergency Financial Assistance Fund was established under the project and assistance was provided to 33 children and parents.

Upon identifying the key problems in the communities, the mobile teams developed and implemented programmes for support in the areas of healthcare and education, involving **107 children and 39 parents**. The programmes included: in the area of education – support for children transitioning to kindergarten or school, support for families that failed to have their children enrolled in the education system, support for children during the measures against Covid-19 in schools and for switching to online schooling, support for young people aged 14-18 to finish secondary education and obtain information on opportunities for em-ployment; in the area of healthcare – family-planning and contraception, prevention of early marriages and underage pregnancies, information for underage mothers that would help them prepare for caring after the infants, prevention of child abandonment.

In the context of the military conflict in Ukraine and the influx of refugees in Bulgaria, some of the pilot ser-vices under Component 4 have been engaged with the provision of support to Ukrainian families with chil-dren. Since the beginning of March, they have provided information and counselling, material assistance (food and medicines), psychological support, legal aid, and facilitated access to healthcare, administrative services and accommodation for Ukrainian refugee women and children.



The mobile teams developed and implemented programmes to support the readiness of Roma children for kindergarten or school and to help them adapt faster to the new environment

Strengthening the capacity of the child protection system

In parallel with strengthening of the capacity of social services, the project also supports the child protection system for enhancing the prevention of child-family separation and for providing integrated support to vulnerable children and families. To this end, an agreement with the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA) was signed, and in 2021 **11 social workers** were hired additionally to join key Child Protection Departments in the three pilot districts: for the dsitrict of Burgas – in Burgas, Karnobat, Sredetz, and Tzarevo; for the district of Stara Zagora – in Kazanluk, Maglizh and Stara Zagora, for the district of Sliven – in Kotel, Nova Zagora, Sliven, and Tvarditza. A good practice is the establishment of a remote workplace of CPD Burgas in the municipality of Sredetz.

The newly-appointed social workers participated **trainings** and received **supervision** from “Know-how Centre for Alternative Care for Children”, New Bulgarian University, on the following topics: legislative and methodological framework of exercising the role of CPD in the child protection system; building trust-based relationships with children at risk and their families; attachment and separation – what the child is going through; strengths of families at risk, pros and cons of prevention; prevention work styles; the role of helping professionals and the importance of team and multidisciplinary work; the role of CPD in working with the strengths of families. To strengthen coordination in supporting vulnerable families and children and in order to improve access to services, regular working meetings between the pilot services and CPDs were introduced.

In addition to the above, a study of different **software tools** supporting the integrated provision of services was conducted, including a feasibility analysis of implementing software tools in the Bulgarian context and of upgrading the integrated information system of the ASA with relevant additional functionalities.

Results

- **7 mobile teams with 22 newly hired social workers and assistants** established
- Intensive training for **67 social workers and assistants** (22 newly hired mobile teams, 34 core teams of services and 11 newly hired social workers in CPD)
- **2,066 children and 1,482 parents** in vulnerable situations mapped
- Intense case work with **381 children and 238 parents**
- Provided access to education and healthcare to **281 children**, provided access to social benefits and services to **435 parents**
- **11 addi ional social workers in** 10 CPDs and trained
- **333 cases** opened by newly hired social workers in CPDs

Deep Dive in Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria

A key activity of the pilot project for implementation of the European Child Guarantee was conducting a deep dive analysis of the causes and drivers of poverty and social exclusion of children in Bulgaria and of the national policies, programmes and mechanisms to address them. The Terms of Reference for the Deep Dive analysis was prepared by UNICEF in coordination with the MLSP and the actual work on the analysis started in March 2021. To this end, an agreement was signed with a research consortium comprising three organisations – "For Our Children" Foundation, the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the National Network for Children (NNC). The methodology included a desk research, interviews with representatives of key stakeholders as well as a quantitative study among local structures of state administration. The MLSP established an inter-institutional working group, which provided guidelines and opinions on the draft report from the analysis during this process. The main conclusions and recommendations of the Deep Dive analysis has informed the drafting of the National Action Plan for the implementation of Council Recommendation for establishing a European Child Guarantee.

Child Participation

Child participation is a key element in reaching out to the most vulnerable groups of children and their engagement in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes. Two instruments for child participation were implemented under the pilot project with the support of the NNC: through a Child Researchers Programme and through the U-Report platform consultations.

The **Child Researchers** Programme seeks to enable young people from vulnerable communities to explore problems that they themselves identified as key. In late 2020 with the support of the NNC and their members at the local level – Regional Roma Union Foundation (Burgas), National Network of Health Mediators (Sliven) and Mission "Wings" Foundation (Stara Zagora), 3 teams were established consisting of 15 girls and boys aged between 13 and 18 from the three pilot regions. Following inception training on the principles of the programme and the objectives of the European Child Guarantee that took place in March 2021, the youth teams conducted studies on two topics: access to healthcare and access to education.

Between April and July 2021, the young people explored the challenges in connection to access to health-care for specific groups of children in need: the Sliven team worked on the topic 'Access to regular health check-ups for Roma children from Nadezhda Neighbourhood'; the Stara Zagora team delved into the topic of 'Access to healthcare for children with Down syndrome', and the Burgas team researched the aspects of 'Prevention and support in cases of substance dependence among children from minority communities'. The outcome of the research was presented at the annual meeting of the NNC in August 2021 and during the event entitled "The European Child Guarantee – a reality for children in Bulgaria: The Voice of Youth" which took place on 21 October 2021.

Between September and December 2021, the young researchers studied issues related to access to education: the Burgas team chose the topic 'Causes for early school leaving among the young people from Roma communities', the Sliven team – "The inter-schools segregation related to the schools to which have access the children from Nadezhda Neighbourhood", while the young people from Stara Zagora examined the 'Challenges related to access to education of children with Down syndrome.' The outcomes are due to be released in 2022.

With the **U-Report** application – a digital platform for online surveys developed by UNICEF, three national consultations were carried out on the access of children from disadvantaged backgrounds to healthcare (June 2021), to education (August 2021) and to adequate food (October 2021) that included more than 200 young people aged 14-29 from across the country. The survey outcomes were published on the web-sites of UNICEF, U-Report and NNC, and some of the conclusions were incorporated in the report *Deep Dive in Child Poverty and Social Exclusion in Bulgaria*.



On 21 October 2021 UNICEF, jointly with the Embassy of Slovenia, and the Representation of the European Commission in Bulgaria organised a public forum entitled "The European Child Guarantee – a reality for children in Bulgaria: The Voice of Youth". The event was under the auspices of the Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Labour and Social Policy, with the participation of the National Coordinator for the European Child Guarantee, the Chair of the State Agency for Child Protection, representatives of the MES and the Ministry of Health (MH), NNC, children and young people. The progress of the pilot testing of the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria was reported, and young people expressed their views and recommendations on the national policies in support of children and families as well as on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

Communication Activities



In late 2020 a dedicated website of the pilot project on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in Bulgaria was created, along with an online brochure. The website features news and details on the progress of the project and sections such as "Humans of the European Child Guarantee" as well as stories of children and families supported under the project. The pilot services also developed their own brochures and materials reflecting their activities under the project.

In 2021 more than 70 articles with stories, news and details on the implementation of the project were published reaching 162,800 people through the channels of UNICEF alone. Four stories showcased children and families that received support from the pilot services and two of those stories had videos. The publications feature the support for Alexander from Burgas, Galin from Stara Zagora, the inclusion of young Kristian in kindergarten with the assistance of the home visiting nurses in Sliven, and Maria Magdalena from Sredetz, who is a first-grader thanks to the support of the mobile team with the CCS.

The child participation in the project was demonstrated with 4 videos with children and young people from the Child Researchers Program, and the outcomes of the national consultations with young people through the U-Report were posted on the website of the project.

Coordination and Monitoring Committees

Coordination and Monitoring Committees were established at national, district and municipal levels for the improvement of interactions among all institutions and partners and for strengthening cross-sectoral cooperation. The key task of the Committees is to provide strategic guidance and support for the implementation of the project, to monitor the progress towards meeting the objectives, to facilitate data collection and exchange and to promote the dissemination and sustainability of the innovative approaches and practices.

The National Coordination and Monitoring Committee was established with order of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy and had its first session on 31 March 2021. The National Committee is chaired by the Minister of Labour and Social Policy, and the members comprise representatives of the MH, MES, Ministry of Finance, Central Coordination Unit Directorate with the Council of Ministers, State Agency for Child Protection, ASA, the National Association of the Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria, NNC and UNICEF.

District Committees were established with orders of the district governors of Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora, whereas Municipal Committees – with orders of the mayors of pilot municipalities. District governors and mayors are chairs of the relevant committees which at the district level include representatives of regional structures of line ministries and agencies (Regional Directorates for Social Assistance (RDSA), RDE, RCIE, Regional Health Inspectorate), the mayors of the pilot municipalities, civil society organisations and UNICEF, while at the municipal level they comprise representatives of social service providers, health and educational institutions, CPD, DSA, local NGO and UNICEF. The first sessions of the three Regional Committees were held in April 2021, and the sessions of the Municipal Committees took place between June and November 2021. At the sessions the operation of the relevant services in the pilot municipalities was presented, the latter being the primary implementing agents of the project activities. In every municipality there is a dedicated member of staff responsible for the overall coordination of pilot activities, and an extra coordinator at service level is assigned for each of the individual components.

The pilot project is implemented with the support of the Project Implementation Unit (PMU), established by UNICEF in September 2020 consisting of a project manager, six experts and two regional coordinators.

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