RESULTS FOR CHILDREN
Progress Report on Together from the Kindergarten Initiative
January 2016 - July 2017
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The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Aims of Education according to General Comment No. 1 (2001) set as a key aim of education the development of the child’s personality, talents, mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. UNICEF works for the attainment of this aim by contributing to the inclusion of all children in quality early learning and education, ensuring that:

- every child goes to a kindergarten/school;
- every child learns;
- every child is trained from early childhood and is included in the educational system on time;
- every child is supported by efficient and effective government policies.

In the recent decades Bulgaria was facing difficult challenges in relation to access to education, reducing inequalities which limit it and providing an inclusive environment and high quality training in schools and kindergartens, which would ensure acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills and competences for full-fledged realization in the present and the future. Although the right to education is a fundamental human right, thousands of children in Bulgaria remain outside the educational system.
UNICEF Bulgaria works with numerous partners to ensure each child’s right to access to high quality education. Our education activities in the area of education are focused on the following:

- **Increasing enrollment in kindergartens and schools** by promoting the elimination of barriers to the access to education and approbation of flexible models and approaches to including in the educational system children from the most vulnerable groups.

- **Prevention of dropouts and reducing the share of early leavers from the educational system** through supporting institutions for the introduction and approbation of an effective national system for identification of children at risk of dropping from school.

- **Improving the quality of preschool and school education** by support for the development of educational standards centered around needs and that guarantee children’s rights; by research, analyses and generation of data of the problems and trends in education, as well as by development and implementation of inclusion approaches, practices and policies on local and national level.

- **Promotion and work for changing public attitudes** to the benefits from early learning; the right of children with disabilities to be trained in a mainstream education environment; focus not on deficits but rather on developing each child’s potential irrespective of its gender, origin, race, etc.; enhancing sensitivity to various forms of violence in school, etc.
CHALLENGES – OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION IN THE COUNTRY

- According to the latest data of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES), the educational system nationwide has only 1,062 resource teachers, 761 psychologists and pedagogical counselors, 112 speech therapists, 20 hearing and speech impairment teachers, and 8 visual impairment teachers. These specialists are concentrated in the big towns and are highly insufficient to provide the required support to all children with specific needs.

- Other challenges preventing the full-fledged inclusion of children with specific needs in the training and socialization processes in the kindergarten. The main barriers are related to the inaccessible physical environment, the unadapted content of the educational process and the unsuitable methods of work with the children, the prevailing stereotypes and stigmatizing attitudes in the community, the insufficient support and the underdeveloped capacity of existing social and healthcare services.

- Children with disabilities are the ones most excluded from the learning and socialization processes also due to deeply entrenched prejudices and stigmas in society. According to a survey conducted among 6,200 Bulgarians, 65% of the respondents did not want children with mental disabilities to study in their child’s kindergarten or class, and 20% did not want their children to study alongside children with physical disabilities (a study conducted by “G. Consulting” upon the request of the State Agency for Child Protection).

- In Bulgaria assessment of a child’s needs is still based on the medical diagnosis, rather than on the social model and the child’s functionality.

- Kindergartens are not sufficiently assisted in their task to include children with specific needs, which requires coordinated measures by various institutions and services participating in the inclusive education process.

- Those involved in the educational system clearly identify the need of acquiring and developing new knowledge and skills in the teachers and educators; of techniques and strategies for inclusion of every child; of understanding the methods and approaches to work.

The new Preschool and School Education Act (passed in 2015 and effective from August 2016) and the Ordinance on Inclusive Education (adopted in November 2016) provide a new basis for the development of an inclusive environment for all children in kindergartens and schools.

- Around 8,000 children with disabilities do not go to mainstream kindergartens or schools. According to data of the Center for Information Services in Education for 2015-2016, only 3,006 children with disabilities are included in the mainstream kindergartens.

- Children with disabilities are the ones most excluded from the learning and socialization processes also due to deeply entrenched prejudices and stigmas in society.
OUR SOLUTION

DEVELOPING A MODEL OF INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT IN KINDERGARDENS

An inclusive environment means that all children in a kindergarten, regardless of their strengths or weaknesses, should be part of the community and should actively participate in its life. Inclusion should be focused on the child and inclusive education is needed and good for all children and for their preparation for independent life.

For children with specific needs the kindergarten is as important as for any other child. Where it provides a supporting and individual-needs-oriented environment providing opportunities to communicate with their peers, the kindergarten develops the children’s abilities, assists them in mastering new linguistic, cognitive and social skills, helps them interact with other children – which prepares them for real life and is a prerequisite for intensifying the activities of children with specific needs. Where kindergarten children are together, irrespective of their differences, they grow into tolerant adults accepting individual peculiarities, and this changes the attitudes and activities of society as a whole.

In October 2015 bTV Media Group and the United Nations Children’s Fund in Bulgaria launched a joint social campaign which aims to raise awareness among the general public about the challenges that surround the inclusion of children with specific needs in kindergartens, as well as the ways to ensure appropriate support for the children, especially those with disabilities, their families and the teachers in kindergartens.

The charity concert in November 2015 was an extension of the campaign aimed at raising funds for developing an inclusive environment model in more than 30 kindergartens, which is to be tested for two years and then reproduced across the country.
The programme “Together from the Kindergarten” initiated at the end of 2015 by UNICEF with the support of bTV is aimed at facilitating the development of a supportive and inclusive educational environment in kindergartens that is to ensure the full-fledged development of the potential and talents of every child with a focus on children with specific needs.

In a longer-term perspective, the project will help establish the kindergarten as a key element of inclusive education, and will enhance its role in early identification of children at risk of learning difficulties and for early intervention. The project is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science, which guarantees synergy, alignment and multiplication of the processes for developing an inclusive environment in the kindergartens across the country.

Target audiences:
- Children with specific needs and their families;
- Children and teaching staff in kindergartens in selected settlements;
- Specialists to work with children with specific needs;
- The media and the general public in the selected settlements and in the country as a whole.

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

The programme “Together from the Kindergarten” initiated at the end of 2015 by UNICEF with the support of bTV is aimed at facilitating the development of a supportive and inclusive educational environment in kindergartens that is to ensure the full-fledged development of the potential and talents of every child with a focus on children with specific needs. In a longer-term perspective, the project will help establish the kindergarten as a key element of inclusive education, and will enhance its role in early identification of children at risk of learning difficulties and for early intervention. The project is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Science, which guarantees synergy, alignment and multiplication of the processes for developing an inclusive environment in the kindergartens across the country.

Target audiences:
- Children with specific needs and their families;
- Children and teaching staff in kindergartens in selected settlements;
- Specialists to work with children with specific needs;
- The media and the general public in the selected settlements and in the country as a whole.

For the purposes of the project the term “children with specific needs” includes all children that need additional support to be able to participate fully in the educational and social life in the kindergarten – such as children with physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities, children with communication disorders, those with specific learning disabilities, with Autism Spectrum Disorders, with emotional and behavioral problems, children with chronic illnesses and children at risk of learning difficulties.
KEY ELEMENTS OF THE MODEL

The model is a comprehensive approach to providing support centered around the child’s needs, which is implemented through the following key elements:

- **Transforming the physical environment** in a way that it stimulates the development and talents of every child;
- **Development of new skills** among the teaching and non-teaching staff in kindergartens to work with children with specific needs and to actively interact with the children, creating an overall inclusive climate in the group and in the kindergarten;
- **Provision of specialized and additional support** for kindergartens by a psychologist, speech therapist, teaching assistant, resource teacher to ensure the early intervention in case of educational difficulties;
- **Active inclusion and communication with parents**;
- **Developing a support network around the kindergarten** by strengthening relations and streamlining processes of coordination among the support institutions and services;
- **Development of supportive public attitudes** towards children with disabilities and specific needs and their right to education.
A year and a half after the joint charity and advocacy campaign of UNICEF and bTV “Together from the Kindergarten”, 35 kindergartens in 4 regions in Bulgaria – Sofia-city, Shumen, Sliven and Montana – have implemented the inclusive practices and have made their first steps towards higher quality preschool education for children with specific needs.

In the span of the 2016-2017 school year:

- 3,652 children participated in joint support activities and had daily access to a psychologist and a speech therapist;
- 394 teachers, education assistants and 72 specialists - psychologists, speech therapist, resource teachers passed a series of specialized training courses and supervision by leading training organizations in the area of inclusive education;
- 338 children aged 3 – 3.5 years were subjected to a screening test for learning difficulties, which allowed for identifying the need of support at an early stage;
- Activities of intensive support by specialists started with 396 children (over 10% of all children included in the project).
- In partnership with an international consultant from Dublin City College and the two national training organizations – Karin Dom’s Friends and the National Association of Resource Teachers – training courses were developed on 12 key subjects, which are offered through MSE and the training organizations to teachers across the country.
- In 7 municipalities capacities were developed locally for management of inclusive education processes, and in 4 regions in the country coordination mechanisms were established for supporting the inclusive education process and for maintaining inclusive practices and policies.

When they are enrolled in the kindergarten and adapt to the new situation, every child goes individually through a training game with a picture book with short stories, aimed at determining what the child already knows and selecting the children needing support. The pictures in the book are selected and tested to match the possible achievements of three-year old children.
ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT IN THE REPORTING PERIOD

SELECTION OF PARTNERING KINDE RGARTENS UNDER THE PROJECT

The support and implementation of activities in every kindergarten are based on the individual needs of the team and the children in it. The selection of kindergartens to be included in the project is based on the number of children with special educational needs; lack of such activities implemented under other projects; possibility for additional admittance of children with specific needs; motivation for inclusion of the director and the team, as well as support for the selection by the relevant municipality and the Regional Department of the Ministry of Education and Science. The selection of the regions – Montana, Sliven, Sofia-city and Shumen – is based on the territorial coverage of the work of UNICEF in Bulgaria.

The project involved 35 kindergartens from the four regions. In 32 of them the full scope of scheduled activities were implemented (appointment of speech therapists and psychologists, training of teams in the specifics of interaction with children with specific needs, modification of the environment and working with parents), and in 3 of them the teaching staff participated in training modules for work with children with specific educational needs.

Half of the selected kindergartens – 18 in total – are located in villages in municipalities Varbitsa, Novi Pazar and Boychinovtsi. For them the inclusion in the project is the only opportunity to meet the children’s additional needs, particularly the need of specialized support by a psychologist or a speech therapist.

ACTIVITIES TARGETED AT CHILDREN WITH SPECIFIC NEEDS

- Early identification of children at risk of learning difficulties by conducting a screening test of children aged 3 – 3.5 years. Kindergartens included in the project are among the first in the country where specialists were trained for conducting a screening test for learning difficulties, jointly developed by MES, the Institute for Population and Human Studies of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and UNICEF. 338 children aged 3 – 3.5 years were subjected to a screening test for learning difficulties, which allowed for identifying the need of support at an early stage.

- Providing specialized support (counseling, diagnostics and rehabilitation) of children with specific needs by a speech therapist, psychologist, special pedagogue and other specialists depending on the individual needs and the support plan.

The limited number of specialists in the country resulted in a delay in launching this project component and looking for flexible solutions by sharing specialists by several kindergartens, forming mobile teams to visit remote locations. Presently, 26 specialists are employed in the project kindergartens, and part of them are organized in mobile teams.

- Providing increased pedagogical support to children by a resource teacher and a teaching assistant according to children’s needs, to assist them for full-fledged participation in the educational process and in the social life in the kindergarten. With the appointment of 5 teaching assistants under the project a job new for the country is being tested.

KINDERGARTEN-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

- Providing accessible and stimulating physical environment – making changes and adapting the environment in the selected kindergartens, providing technical equipment and teaching aids, outfitting specially equipped rooms.

In two of the kindergartens (in the village of Letchev and in Sliven) repair works were conducted to provide a specialized room for operation of the psychologist and speech therapist. In partnership with IKEA, 10 specialized rooms were equipped with aids and the necessary equipment.

- Specialized training of specialists to conduct the screening test and programmes to facilitate the development of children with established risk of learning difficulties.

- Specialized training and on-going support for teachers and specialists for inclusive education of children with specific needs, including for the implementation of teaching methods and approaches recognizing the individual abilities and needs of each child and ensuring equal opportunities for learning and participation. 394 teachers and education assistants and 72 specialists - psychologists, speech therapist, resource teachers passed a series of specialized training courses and supervision by leading training organizations in the area of inclusive education.
ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT IN THE REPORTING PERIOD

- Work with almost 4,000 children to encourage tolerance and establish attitudes for acceptance, understanding of and respect to differences within the regular teaching activities in the pilot kindergartens.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES
- Activities for providing support and including parents in the educational process and social life in the kindergarten were launched in all the kindergartens. Practices were introduced of providing regularly feedback to parents about their children’s progress. Workshops for parents started in two kindergartens in Sliven that will be phased in the other kindergartens within the 2017-2018 school year.

ACTIVITIES ON MUNICIPAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL
- A regional coordination mechanism was established in the Sliven, Montana and Shumen regions for the implementation of the comprehensive cross-sectoral support for children with disabilities and specific needs.
- The capacity of the regional centers supporting the inclusive education process was strengthened to provide methodological support and extend the expertise in relation to early childhood.

ACTIVITIES ON NATIONAL LEVEL
- Study of attitudes of teachers and specialists in kindergartens to the implementation of inclusive education.

Within the project, the Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS) of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) conducts a representative national survey of the attitudes and practices related to inclusive education. To date around 1,300 teachers from all regions of the country have participated in the survey. The aim of the survey is to collect data of the kindergarten teachers’ knowledge and skills to meet the needs of children with specific needs.

The results show that 72.6% of teachers support inclusive education as a basis for progress for each child. According to them this can happen only if there are available the required resources, training and continuing support. Only half of the respondents believe they do not have the required professional training for inclusive education.

- Conduction a study on key elements of the environment in the kindergarten.
- Approbation of good practices and approaches to improving inclusive education policies on national level.

In 2016 UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Science signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation for the development and approbation of models and approaches for inclusive education at an early age. “Together from the Kindergarten” tests and endorses most extensively and fully the new inclusive education-related legislation.

The project “Together from the Kindergarten” is the most extensive in its scope in the area of inclusive early education and is recognized by all the partners on national and local level as a key one for improving inclusive education policies.

This is the first project initiative in Bulgaria that:
- Includes in the pilot kindergartens activities in support of all children;
- Tests the coordination mechanism on regional level for managing the inclusive education process;
- Tests an approach for coordinated and child-focused support in the kindergarten;
- Included a teaching assistant and education assistants in training activities and supervision. 
In the 2017-2018 school year work on the project initiative ‘Together from the Kindergarten’ will continue in the following areas:

- The work of UNICEF and its partners for changing attitudes among professionals, parents and the general public to the difference and the right of children with disabilities and specific needs to be taught and to socialize among their peers in a mainstream education environment.
- Upgrading training for enhancing the capacity of specialists and teaching and non-teaching staff for inclusion of all children in a high quality preschool education.
- Supervision on the work of kindergarten staff on particular cases.
- Expanding work for cooperation with and involvement of parents.
- Development of training and methodological resources for inclusive education.
- Strengthening the capacity of the regional centers for supporting inclusive education and the regional departments of education for providing methodological support on regional level and development of expertise in early child development.
- Expanding the work with universities and training centers for the development and testing of inclusive education courses and modules to be used in the education and periodic training of teachers.
- Regular meetings with government and nongovernmental organizations locally and on national level for further development and strengthening of already established partnerships, for enhancing efficiency of communication, coordination and interaction for development and supporting of inclusive practices and policies.
During the charity concert - telethon “Together form the Kindergarten” broadcast by bTV in November 2015, more than 15,000 viewers supported our common cause with monthly SMS donations of 2 or 5 leva and over 800 with one-off SMS donations of 2 BGN.

Below is a summary of expenditures for the period 1st January 2016 - 31st July 2017:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Expenses in BGN 01.2016-07.2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Direct expenses on the project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. Providing specialized and additional support (a psychologist, speech therapist, teaching assistant)</td>
<td>188.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Changing the physical environment and providing aids</td>
<td>20.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. Conducting training and supervision</td>
<td>82.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4. Development of a conceptual framework and a training program by an international consultant</td>
<td>60.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5. Activities for development of local capacities for inclusive education</td>
<td>67.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6. Research and analyses in relation to teachers’ attitudes and the environment</td>
<td>31.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7. Activities for management, monitoring and assessment of the effect of the implemented activities</td>
<td>34.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Partnership management and coordination, monitoring, advocacy (up to 15% of the total expenses)</td>
<td>50.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>552 000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total amount of expenditures include regular donations collected during the telethon “Together from the kindergarten” for the amount of 300,000 BGN, as well as UNICEF’s funds from other sources. The in-kind contribution from IKEA Bulgaria to the programme is for the amount of 14,000 BGN.