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UNICEF Bulgaria/2017

Pilot testing of the EU "Child Guarantee" in Bulgaria

Phase III of the Preparatory Action

In November 2015, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution that calls on the Commission and on 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, and further recommended that all children have access to good quality services at this crucial stage in their development.

The European Commission has undertaken a preparatory action in three phases: a feasibility study, consultation with EU stakeholders, and a pilot testing of the Child Guarantee at national level. For the implementation of Phase III, the European Commission has selected 7 Member States: Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain, and has provided funding for the implementation of pilot projects with the support of UNICEF.

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
- Children living in precarious family situations, including Roma children from vulnerable communities

Pilot project EU "Child Guarantee" in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the pilot project is targeted at children with disabilities and developmental difficulties as well as at children living in precarious family situations, including Roma children from vulnerable communities. The main objective of the project is to expand the access to and improve the quality of 4 types of services - ***home visiting services for families with small children; early childhood intervention for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties; quality inclusive pre-school education,*** and ***child and family-centered preventive and support services with a focus on children in precarious family situation.*** The pilot activities will be implemented in 10 municipalities on the territory of **three districts - Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora** and will reach over **6,500 children and parents**, and nearly **600 specialists** from different sectors.


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For the implementation of the project a Memorandum of Cooperation and Understanding was signed between **UNICEF**, the **Ministry of Labour and Social Policy**, the **Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science**, the **"Central Coordination Unit" Directorate of the Council of Ministers** and the three **district administrations** as well as grant agreements with the **pilot municipalities**. The project will also involve health, education, child protection and social services, NGOs, academia, research institutes, media, children and adolescents and other stakeholders.

Key Components and Activities

Home visiting and individualizes support to families with small children

Teams of home visiting nurses and midwives, health mediators and social assistants from the **Medical Health Center "Dr. G.V. Mirkovich"** in Sliven will provide counselling and information to pregnant women and families young children (0-3 years) on how to provide nurturing and quality care to their children. As part of the activities of the home visiting service, a more systematic monitoring of children's development will be applied at certain stages aiming at the early identification of developmental difficulties and the timely provision of counselling and support. All pregnant women and families with small children in **Sliven district** can benefit from the home visiting services, and the intensity of the support will be determined based to the specific needs of the families.

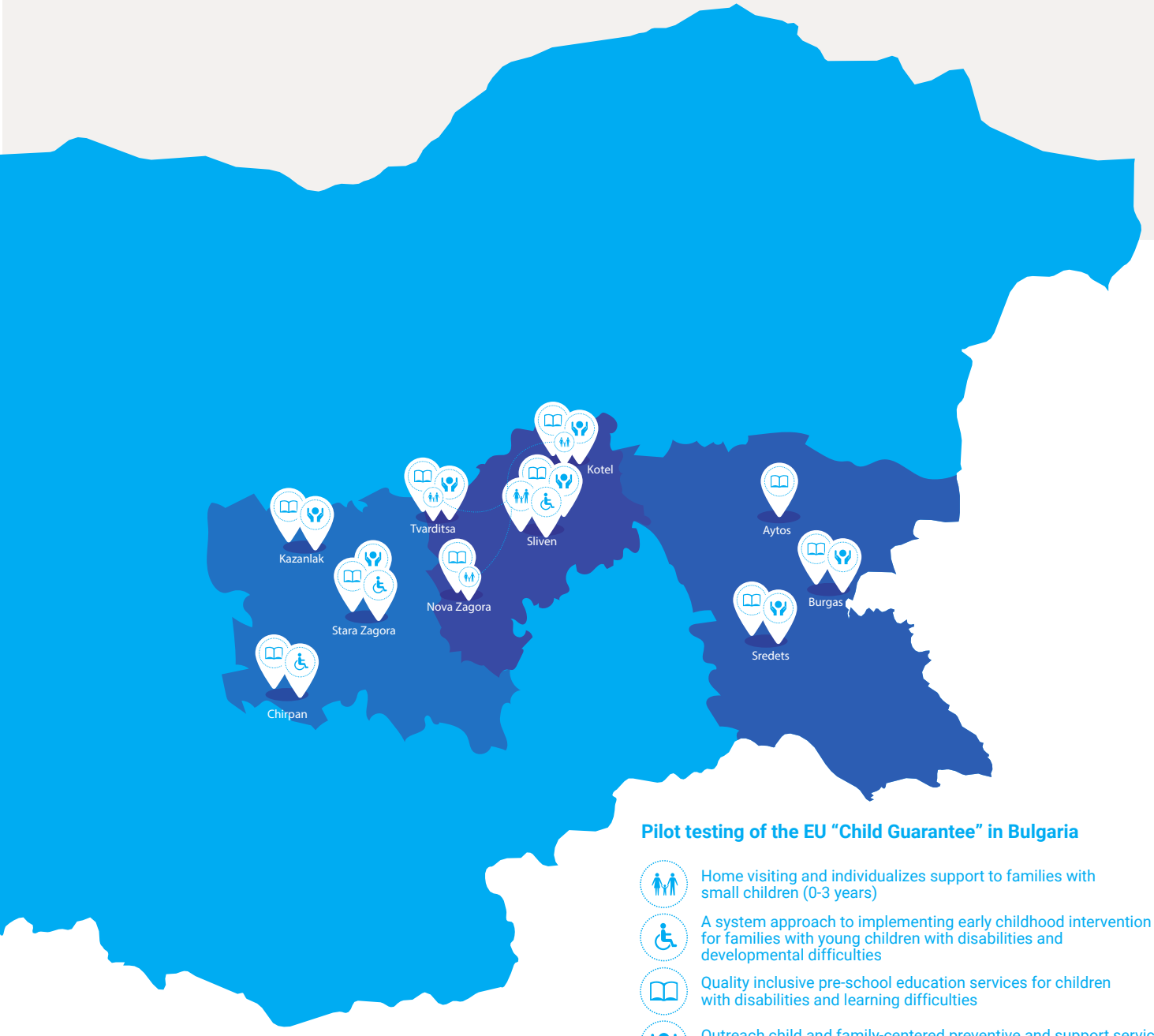
- Supporting parents for nutrition and breastfeeding, healthy lifestyle, child safety, responsive caregiving, and stimulation of child development
- Referring and facilitating the access of families to health and social services
- Group training and other forms of parenting support
- Identifying vulnerable communities and adapting the scope and type of support according to the needs
- Close collaboration and interaction with various structures and professionals from the healthcare system, educational institutions, child protection and social services to meet their complex needs.

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

The objective is to support improved, coordinated and timely interaction between specialists from the health, social and educational systems at local level. Coordinated efforts will help with early identification of children at risk of or with developmental difficulties, which will be referred for community support in a timely manner. Family-centered support will be provided to children with developmental difficulties (with a focus on children under 3 years) and their caregivers in the child's natural environment. The activities will include enhanced support to the family in the transition of the child to early education and will be implemented in the municipalities of **Chirpan, Sliven** and **Stara Zagora.**

- Seminars for general practitioners and pediatricians on current issues related to the monitoring of child development, early markers of delays in the general development of the child, as well as for visual and hearing impairments

- Trainings for the staff of the nurseries for increasing their knowledge and skills for early identification, work and support to children with disabilities
- Development of a unified mechanism for information and referral of families with children at risk of developmental delay or children with disabilities to early intervention services by general practitioners, pediatricians and other medical professionals
- Increasing the understanding among parents and professionals about the importance of early intervention for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties
- Coordinated cross-sectoral work at the local level to support the access of families to early childhood intervention and other community services
- Family-centred and individualized early intervention in the child's natural environment - home, family, kindergarten, playground
- Support for the transition family-kindergarten and inclusive environment.



Pilot testing of the EU "Child Guarantee" in Bulgaria

- Home visiting and individualizes support to families with small children (0-3 years)
- A system approach to implementing early childhood intervention for families with young children with disabilities and developmental difficulties
- Quality inclusive pre-school education services for children with disabilities and learning difficulties
- Outreach child and family-centered preventive and support services (with a focus on children from families in precarious situation)


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Quality inclusive pre-school education services for children with disabilities and learning difficulties

The teams of **30 kindergartens** from 10 municipalities - **Aytos, Burgas, Chirpan, Kazanlak, Kotel, Nova Zagora, Sliven, Sredets, Stara Zagora** and **Tvarditsa** - will receive support for better inclusion and for creating a physical, social and educational environment that enables the full participation of every child in the educational and social processes in the kindergarten. The capacities of the Regional Centers for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education, as well as of the Regional Education Departments will be strengthened as well.

- Training program for kindergarten staff and specialists on topics related to the modern understanding of applying educational approaches and practices in a quality inclusive environment and early detection of difficulties
- Hiring additional specialists and assistant educators, if needed
- Increased use of assistive technologies for complementary and alternative communication;
- "Workshops for Parents": group work with parents in kindergartens on different topics related to early childhood development
- Improving cooperation between kindergartens, social and health services to facilitate the transition family - kindergarten – school
- Strengthening the capacity of the Regional Centers for Supporting the Process of Inclusive Education for the needs' assessment of children with disabilities and for provision of enhanced support to kindergartens on individual cases
- Strengthening the role of the Regional Education Departments for facilitating the exchange of experience and good practices, and for promoting the use of assistive technologies for complementary and alternative communication.

Outreach child and family-centered preventive and support services (with a focus on children from families in precarious situation)

Expanding the work and strengthening capacity of **7 social services** in the municipalities of **Burgas, Kazanlak, Kotel, Sliven, Sredets, Stara Zagora** and **Tvarditsa**, and provision of support to **11 Child Protection Departments**. The teams of the social services will provide information, counselling, referral to services and will implement measures to prevent school dropout, facilitate access to health, education, social services and benefits. Programmes for prevention of early marriages, for family planning, and for prevention of family-child separation will be implemented in accordance with the specific needs of vulnerable communities. Social workers from the Child Protection Departments and social service teams will acquire knowledge and skills for more effective and child and family-centred work.

- Expanding the teams of social services in order to strengthen mobile work and preventive support to vulnerable children and families
- Training and support to social services teams for working on prevention and in partnership with the local services and institutions from other sectors - health, educational, social assistance and child protection
- Application of an integrated approach based on the principle "one family, one plan and one coordinator"
- Hiring additional social workers in key Child Protection Departments
- Training and support for social workers for effective case management to prevent the separation of children from their families and to improve cooperation between the social and other services for child protection and development.

Comprehensive analysis (deep dive) of the current situation and national policies to combat child poverty and social exclusion

In addition to expanding the access to quality and integrated services for vulnerable children and families, the project will support the implementation of a deep-dive analysis of the current conditions and dimensions of poverty and social exclusion among children in Bulgaria, as well as the national policies, programs and services to address it. The analysis will contribute to the development and planning of concrete and costed measures and activities targeted at children and families, with respective deadlines and indicators, to be included in the Action Plans for the implementation of the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Promoting Social Inclusion 2030. Similar deep dive analyzes will be conducted in the other 6 pilot countries: Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain.



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Child participation

With support from the National Network for Children, children and young people from the three districts - Burgas, Sliven and Stara Zagora - will be engaged in the implementation of the pilot project. They will conduct their own research on the main topics of the Child Guarantee - access to quality healthcare, education, childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition, which will be presented and discussed at national and local level. In addition, national consultations will be held with young people through the implementation of the UNICEF U-Report on topics related to poverty and social exclusion among children. The aim is to amplify the voices and take into consideration the views and opinions of children and young people in the development and implementation of concrete measures and programmes so that they are tailored to the specific needs of different groups of vulnerable children and be more effective.

Coordination and Monitoring Committees

Coordination and Monitoring Committees will be established at national, regional and municipal levels to improve the interaction and strengthen cross-sectoral coordination between all institutions and partners. They will provide strategic guidance and support for the implementation of the project, monitor progress towards the objectives, review and support data collection and information sharing, ensure the integration of policies and programmes, support the scaling-up and long-term sustainability of the innovative approaches and practices.

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