

## Introduction speech by Regina Castillo, Representative of UNICEF CO Croatia to the first meeting of the National Steering Committee Meeting for the Implementation of the Phase III: Testing the Child Guarantee Programme

Dear Members of the National Steering Committee for the implementation of the “Phase III: Testing the Child Guarantee” programme,

On behalf of UNICEF, I am pleased to greet you to our **first meeting**.

As you know, the “Child Guarantee” is an initiative of the European Commission which aims to ensure that the most vulnerable children in the European Union have access to healthcare, education, childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition.

Today one out of every four children in the EU is living in poverty and we all know the consequences of poverty and social exclusion on children's health, education and prospects for the future. **Poverty and social exclusion have become intergenerational**, and this has only been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

**The Testing of the Child Guarantee Programme is a part of the two-year initiative, financed by the European Commission and implemented with the technical and financial support from UNICEF.**

The goal of the Programme is **to test interventions** for combating child poverty and social exclusion.

In the case of Croatia, it entails the modelling new services and best practices for children and their families in Medjmurje county - a region with the highest number of beneficiaries of the guaranteed minimum income in Croatia and low access to family support services.

If we look at the data, 40% of the children in Medjmurje county between the ages of 3-6 do not attend kindergarten, the great “equalizer” in the educational system which allows children to set up the foundation for their later years. Out of the 770 potential users of early childhood intervention services between the ages of 0-7, only 101 children have access to ECI services.

We hope that that thanks to our partnership, Medjmurje county will an example of what needs to be done to combat child poverty and social exclusion in the European Union.

Today, seven countries (Croatia, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania and Spain) are part of the Testing Phase of the Child Guarantee and are focusing on innovative approaches to break the cycle of disadvantage. The EU is also planning to invest additional funding for the Child Guarantee once the models in the selected countries have been implemented and evaluated as good practices.

**The National Steering Committee** (composed of all of you) has an important role in the success of the Testing Phase of the Child Guarantee. It provides strategic direction and oversight for the implementation of planned interventions.

Our role is to advocate for and ensure **cross-sectoral cooperation** at the local and national level given the multidimensionality of child poverty and exclusion so that we can implement the programme successfully.

The Steering Committee will also provide general guidance and feedback for an “in-depth” policy analysis, which will compile effective policies and good practices to combat child poverty and social exclusion in Croatia.

Upon the completion of the programme, the Steering Committee will support further access to the Child Guarantee funds at EU level. It should also help enable the replication of positive models of social and parenting services, access to pre-primary education and access to early childhood interventions for children with disabilities in other parts of the country. The activities planned through the Child Guarantee will inform and guide the development of a new national plan for combating poverty and social exclusion and a new national plan on development of social services which are critical to access future EU funding and achieve the sustainability of the results.

Your involvement and support could not be more important!

What are some of the main steps that we have taken since September 2020 when the Programme started?

- With the support of the municipalities in Medjmurje county, we are preparing the documentation and the licenses for the construction of 5 resource centers in 5 municipalities with a large number of poor families where social services are lacking. We are also defining how the provision of services will continue after the programme ends in July 2022.
- Together with the Centre for Social Welfare in Čakovec, we are conducting counselling, parenting support and preventive activities with children, adolescents and their parents. So far, there were 120 users and 65 services provided to them.
- We are also strengthening the capacity of different professionals and establishing cross-sectoral teams in 6 municipalities together with the Croatian Association of Social Workers. Also, two new experts were employed at the Family Centre in the Center for Social Welfare Čakovec as a result of this programme.
- The parenting programme “Growing up together”, developed in Croatia and exported to many countries of the region, is being adapted for parents at-risk and Roma families. We also began the education of new professional associates and teachers for implementing the parenting programme in 10 kindergartens, 2 associations and the Family Center.
- The first capacity building programme on “Living diversity” for representatives of local and regional communities, kindergartens and all other institutions in the pre-primary education is under development and will be held in the spring.

- The Play Centre in Orehovica continues to operate with the support of UNICEF from February 2021. Ongoing consultations on the establishment of two new locations for Play Centres in Medjmurje are underway.
- In cooperation with the Faculty of Teacher Education in Čakovec, we are preparing the organization of playrooms in Roma settlements.
- A mapping of needs and services of early childhood intervention and other support services for children aged 0 to 7 in the system of health, education, social welfare in Međimurje County is underway. An intersectoral working group which will develop the relevant Action Plan for the provision of integrated and coordinated ECI services is also being established.
- With the NGO MURID we are piloting a Model of comprehensive, affordable, and quality early childhood intervention service in Medjmurje.

We are all proud of the initial results (since September and with at least two major earthquakes in between) and we look forward to continuing with the same energy and dedication.

We will rely on your strong support in the development of a detailed overview of specific interventions designed to reduce child poverty and social exclusion. That analysis will provide evidence-based and concrete recommendations for developing the National Plan on Combating Poverty, specifically, the interventions for children.

The actions for reducing child poverty and social inclusion will be an integral part of this strategic document and it is also a prerequisite for Croatia to apply for future funding for the Child Guarantee from ESF Plus.

**UNICEF is really at your disposal** for helping devise interventions which will address poverty and social exclusion of all girls and boys in the country and which can further contribute to achieving results planned under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

I am sure that together we will be able to achieve long-term sustainable results for children in Medjmurje and ensure that every girl and boy in Croatia has **timely and equal** access to integrated child protection, early childhood education and early intervention services in the future.

I thank for being part of the National Steering Committee and for our strong partnership.