



BULGARIA //
Engaging the Agency for Social Assistance to Adopt, Implement, and Scale Up Enhanced Child and Family Support Service Provision





Issue

Bulgaria faces significant child wellbeing challenges, especially regarding abandoned children and those living in care. Eurostat states that 41.6% of children are living at risk of poverty and social exclusion.³⁶ One particular area of concern is the continuing occurrence of child abandonment, neglect, and inappropriate care of these children. While the deinstitutionalisation process in the country, which includes the closing down of the outdated institutions for children, is widely recognised as a success, some 2,000 children continue to be separated annually from their families and approximately 11,000 children are in public care, away from their birth families.³⁷ The main reasons for this are the weak prevention mechanisms and insufficient family support services, the limited quality of care, and the capacity of the workforce. Teenage pregnancies and child marriages in some Roma communities also account for this, as well as discrimination towards Roma families who are more likely to be identified as 'neglectful' than non-Roma. Moreover, children from marginalised communities and those with disabilities face the highest risk of separation from their families.³⁸

While Bulgaria has developed a comprehensive system of essential services and social benefits to improve the wellbeing of the population, the system is overregulated and highly fragmented. The system's shortcomings are further compounded by a management approach lacking incentives for coordination or integration. There are substantial adequacy and quality gaps in social services and benefit coverage. Many families and children are not able to access the services and benefits that are available, or the support they are offered is not necessarily adequate for their needs. About 16% of households do not receive any social benefit and 14% of households from the poorest quintile do not receive any cash allowance, in spite of being entitled to this allowance.³⁹ Considerable deficits in accessing health services and education also characterise the lives of children in marginalised communities and remote areas.

Actions



To address family support and childcare deficits, UNICEF in partnership with the national Government, local authorities, NGOs, and local communities supported the development and testing of a new social service – the Family Consultative Centre (FCC) – in a pilot district. This was intended to assist children and families in the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. In 2016, and building on earlier work, two FCCs were set up in the towns of Montana and Berkovitsa,⁶ with one branch in Varshets. The eleven staff working in the FCCs consisted of social workers, social assistants, nurses, and psychologists.

The FCCs established by UNICEF and its partners offered an integrated package of programmes and social services tailored to the specific needs of the communities and families. The FCCs identified vulnerable families and conducted a family needs assessment to detect all the risks related to childcare and protection, unemployment, homelessness, disability, access to education, et cetera. They provided personalised support to families through individual counselling, information, and support regarding how to access relevant services and on the social benefits to which the family was entitled. The

FCCs also monitored the situation of the family through regular home visits and by providing follow-up, when needed, in close interaction with other local services.

To address the prevailing childcare risks in marginalised communities, the FCCs provided training and support for parental skills development for caregivers of young children – feeding, nurturing care, stimulation, and education. Awareness-raising activities on preventing early marriages and teenage pregnancies were conducted to change community norms and to identify girls at risk. This was coupled with the provision of knowledge and information, mediation, and support for family planning, and the development of knowledge and skills for sexual and reproductive health. Motivational activities to improve education and health outcomes were delivered to increase knowledge on the benefits of staying in education longer and to underscore the harmful effects of child marriage and teenage pregnancies. Relatedly, motivation, assistance, and support for enrolling in education services were delivered in conjunction with focussing on preventing school dropout, and options for facilitating a return to the education system. Activities on the prevention and identification of violence against children and women were also conducted.

⁶ This was built on work done earlier in 2011, when 3 FCCs were set up in the Shumen District – in the towns of Shumen, Novi Pazar, and Veliki Preslav, together with three branches in Kaolinovo, Venets, and Varbitsa.

Critically, UNICEF worked with the Agency for Social Assistance (ASA) and other key partners to adopt the FCC model to increase their prevalence. UNICEF provided technical assistance to the ASA to revise the national guidelines and methodology for the provision of social services. The new guidelines include the outreach-based approach, advanced by UNICEF, and a stronger

focus on prevention through intersectoral programmes for family support to the most vulnerable families and children, especially those in isolated ethnic communities. Supporting the integration of benefit provision and wider social service through the ASA is important as it increases the likelihood of a more positive impact on the wellbeing of children.



Impact

Through the work of all five FCCs,⁷ supported by UNICEF, 11,300 people have benefitted from support programmes and services, 5,500 of whom were children.⁸ The FCC teams have mapped more than 4,300 families since the initiative began, in the Montana District and through earlier 2011-work in the Shumen District, and have been providing services in 18 municipalities and 171 settlements, which equates to 70% of all municipalities/settlements in the two districts.

The FCC services also provide tailored support to children and families to address their specific needs and prevent family separation. Support has been provided to over 4,600 vulnerable and poor families for parenting skills development to help raise young children. This development of skills focusses on nutrition, hygiene, child development, education, and upbringing. The FCCs have accounted for the prevention of 724 potential cases of children being neglected or separated from their families. Moreover, UNICEF estimates that roughly 390 children benefit from improved access to education on an annual basis. Approximately 4,300 children have received individual counselling and participated in different support programmes which have improved their chances for social inclusion. Furthermore, efforts to improve gender outcomes include a total of 800 women being covered by family planning services and 275 young girls from targeted Roma communities being covered by programmes for the prevention of child marriages and early childbearing. On average, 1,000 families are involved annually in programmes for the prevention of social exclusion; from these families, 550 were referred to the FCCs by the child protection system and received more intensive support to address identified risks related to childcare and protection.⁴⁰

UNICEF and its partners, such as the Agency for Social Assistance, ensured the FCCs were successful and delivered results by designing an approach that differed from the existing social services in Bulgaria in several distinct ways: One, it is proactive in tracking and reaching out to vulnerable families and communities – utilising on-going mapping, provision of field services, and work in remote villages and municipalities. Two, it works with the entire families and their environment rather than with an individual child from the family. Based on needs assessments of the whole family, FCC teams prepare and implement support plans with activities targeted to the whole family as well as its individual members. Three, it offers a solution for a range of problems in vulnerable communities related to long-term poverty and social exclusion. Four, it promotes change within the community and addresses community-specific rules and practices that pose a risk to children. Five, it works in partnership with and actively engages local communities – the FCC teams always include representatives of the ethnic communities who help build trust between the service and the excluded communities. FCCs are located very close to the marginalised communities and they maintain direct contact with the children and families thus they can provide on the spot timely support when needed. Six, the FCC work preventively and in partnership with the remaining services and institutions operating in the district – health, education, social services, employment services, and housing. This ensures complementarity and synergy and prevents duplication of efforts and activities. Children and families at risk are referred to child protection departments.

⁷ Here, we combined recent FCC work with FCC work in three other districts (see previous footnote) to give a sense of the totality of the project's impact.

⁸ Data from the annual reports of the Family Consultative Centres for the period 2011 – 2018.

Looking towards the future, UNICEF's long-term objective is to support the rollout and scale up the established FCC work model among the support services for children and families throughout Bulgaria. Currently, the FCCs' experience and practice are being used to inform national policies and programmes for preventing family separation and improving childcare in marginalised communities. The FCC approach has already been introduced in the national guidelines for social services, which will support its nationwide scale-up.

UNICEF-supported FCCs have been gradually transformed into official State delegated services with an updated profile

since 2018. The FCCs' methodology and approach are in line with the provisions of the new Social Services Act, adopted in 2019. The new Act, which was developed with technical support from UNICEF, is expected to change the landscape of social services in Bulgaria in terms of their definition, planning, accessibility, quality, and funding. It introduces a significant shift towards prevention of family separation and social exclusion and provides a basis for the provision of integrated support, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable children and families. UNICEF is currently supporting the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Agency for Social Assistance with the development of the bylaws, which will ensure the effective implementation of the Act.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD //

Bulgaria — Family Consultative Centre

"It is the first time in my life that I have felt appreciated for who I am", says 12-year old Filka, with tears of joy in her eyes, after winning a traditional dance competition in the Roma community of Novi Pazar, a small town in the North-Eastern part of Bulgaria.

There were people cheering, clapping their hands, smiling, applauding the little girl who only months before had been completely isolated and ridiculed by the people in her own community. And this is because Filka and her 7 siblings belong to a sub-group of the Roma community – an ethnic minority within the minority. Her family is extremely poor and they suffer from social exclusion and discrimination, both due to their social status and their ethnic background.

"No one, absolutely no one, wanted to lend a helping hand or to even speak to Filka and her family", remembers Maria Nikolova, director of the Family-Consultative Centre in Novi Pazar, which is supported by UNICEF in Bulgaria. "No institution, no community member, no child protection, or educational institution has made the slightest effort to reach out to these vulnerable children and their parents. There were cases when they were deliberately rejected, and they had no one but themselves to rely on. This attitude of the community and the professionals had turned them into scared people, with very low self-esteem, no motivation to study or work, completely abandoned. Until we arrived..."

The UNICEF-supported Family Centre started working with Filka and her family over a year ago. "The first steps were difficult; we had to build trust in those people and to convince them to start attending the family centre activities." Filka and her siblings had a lot to catch up on. They had not been exposed to any learning opportunities before, and the family centre was their first chance to start developing their skills. "I have learned how to draw pictures, how to write letters. I received toys for the first time in my life. I made new friends and I also started having fun", says Filka.

"If it wasn't for us, these young boys would be doing hard physical work in the woods and these young girls would have probably ended up in child marriages or sexual exploitation", explains Maria Nikolova. The UNICEF-supported family centre continues working with Filka and her family, and with many other families, too. They are part of a team of professionals in various regions of Bulgaria who support the inclusion of Roma children and families, as well as their access to health, education, and social protection services as a means to break up the circle of poverty, exclusion, and deprivation, in addition to challenging community stereotypes and prejudices around Roma. "The best is yet to come, for Filka and for so many other children", Maria Nikolova concludes.

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ENDNOTES

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