



NORTH MACEDONIA //
**Reforming the Social Protection System
through the Introduction of a new Child
Benefits System and Integrated Case
Management Approach**





Issue

North Macedonia has recently made moderate gains in economic growth development. However, this progress has not been evenly distributed. The at-risk-of-poverty rate and the combined risk of poverty or social exclusion rate among children are very high: 28.6% and 46.1% respectively.⁸⁶ A 2018 Gini coefficient of 31.9⁸⁷ implies high inequality in wealth distribution. Moreover, it is the only Western Balkan country that has shown a growth in infant mortality between 2013 and 2017. It also experiences high rates of family violence, low pre-school enrolment, and poor primary and secondary school outcomes.⁸⁸ Those key aspects of the social protection system capable of reducing these challenges – the cash benefit and social care system – required much-needed reform.

Before the 2019 reform, the EU stated⁸⁹ that the social protection system did not cover many of those who were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and its cash benefits had almost no impact on alleviating poverty. The system did not provide an adequate living standard for children and often failed to reach the most marginalised children. Cash benefits for children were too low to reduce child poverty. For example, the monthly child allowance provided 740 MKD (USD13) per child up to age 15 and 1,175 MKD (USD21) for children aged 15-18, with a maximum limit of 1,870 MKD (USD33) in total. The 1,870 MKD benefit cap often worked against large families, which tend to be poorer in general, and they were worse off as a result compared to other poor households with fewer dependent children. On the other hand, they were more likely to qualify given the *per capita* threshold approach, which did not take into account the economies of size.

The pre-reform child benefits system faced both design and implementation challenges that undermined its performance. These design issues limited the targeting efficiency and contributed to issues with both the child benefit and the parental allowance (a non-means tested programme aimed at promoting demographic growth), rendering the latter very expensive. The legislation regulating child benefits is very complex, tending to create duplications and inconsistencies. The child allowance had an unusual targeting methodology for an income-based programme. Only 20% of the beneficiaries were among the poorest decile, a percentage that doubles for the second decile. Thus, the child allowance had substantially better targeting of families in the second decile than in the first one, thereby defeating poverty reduction efforts. Moreover, estimates showed that almost 14,000 households with children who were in the poorest decile were eligible for Social Financial Assistance, but not for child allowance.⁹⁰ Low benefit take-up also occurred because of a lack of entitlement awareness and discrimination. Invariably, social protection benefits were not linked with

other social care services, which generated duplications in coverage and money, and wasted time. Widespread lack of (disaggregated) data and analysis of the impact of social protection on children made implementation and impact monitoring difficult.

North Macedonia has a long history of providing social services for families. The two main providers are the Centres for Social Work (CSWs) and the Employment Service Agencies (ESAs). The 30 CSWs are the country's main social protection hubs, administering all cash benefits and delivering social support and care services, including psycho-social support. CSWs are also responsible for the administration of foster care.

However, since independence, CSWs have been over-stretched and work with obsolete methods. The administration of cash benefits has consumed much of their time, at the expense of delivering other critical social services. Frequent personnel and management changes, as well as the complexity of many programmes, have contributed to a perception that the Centres themselves act as bottlenecks. Administering benefits compromises the Centres' other responsibilities, and social workers cannot pursue preventive social work. The use of highly qualified personnel in the routine administration of cash benefits is profligate. Moreover, before the reform, CSW staff operated with outdated procedures and were overburdened with administrative demands which allowed for very limited outreach work. Mechanisms for monitoring the quality of social services for children remain weak, therefore leaving vulnerable children at risk of poverty and deprivation. Moreover, CSWs are undermined by insufficiently qualified employees to cover the population's needs. Social workers have been assessed as feeling unmotivated and unhappy, which in turn affects performance.⁹¹ While employee numbers increased from 739 in 2006 to 1,057 in 2013, 78% of the 318 newly employed staff members were administrative/non-professional and did not qualify for social outreach work.

Given these challenges, in November 2017, the government amended three laws which contributed to social protection system reform. This reform was initiated through the simultaneous adoption of a package of amended laws: the 2019 law on social protection; the 2019 amendments to the child protection law; and the 2019 law on social security for senior citizens. The amendments were intended to focus benefits on households in the lower-income quintiles, adhere to principles of unconditionality and improve the integration of a series of social services, reconfigure the child allowance, and introduce an education allowance and a transformed parental allowance.



Actions

UNICEF worked closely with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP), the World Bank, and UNDP on the comprehensive social protection system reform. UNICEF's reform engagement was two-fold comprising: 1) the reconfiguration of the child benefits system and 2) the introduction of an integrated case management (ICM) approach into social work. Given that these two policy areas are closely connected, UNICEF's engagement was therefore mutually reinforcing in terms of generating positive outcomes for children. To support the full operationalisation of the new social protection system, UNICEF collaborated with the Government to develop and adopt protocols for the implementation of cash benefits for children and to implement ICM in the CSWs.

The 2019 child benefit reform partially transpired from earlier UNICEF efforts to generate evidence and advocacy in 2013. UNICEF's 2013 study on '*Strengthening the System of Social Protection for Children*',⁹² carried out with the MLSP, was crucial in generating information on weaknesses in the system of social protection for children, particularly for vulnerable children. This was the first step towards a more comprehensive social protection reform. It showed that only a fifth of the poorest children benefited from the child allowance and that the amount was insufficient to ensure adequate living standards. The findings were leveraged by UNICEF to partner with the World Bank in supporting the Government's overall social protection reforms.⁹³

Furthermore, in 2018, UNICEF, the MLSP, and UNDP commissioned Columbia University (CU) experts from its School of Social Work to develop a detailed ICM handbook.⁹⁴ This introduced a customised ICM system and was intended to improve the case management capacity of CSW and ESA staff. The handbook was developed on local specifics and circumstances, but based upon international standards and best practices. It guides staff on practical ways to promote an effective ICM system; providing clarification on the monitoring tools to be used to ensure implementation of proposed measures for improvement. Moreover, systematisation documents for the CSWs were updated to include ICM principles. The objective was to enable social workers to better coordinate multiple services and facilitate children's or family members' increased functioning and well-being.

In 2018, UNICEF worked with the Government and civil society to ensure that all CSW staff were trained and equipped to effectively manage cases involving children at risk. Based on the ICM model developed by CU experts, UNICEF helped create a pool of local ICM experts who were tasked with imparting the model to other professionals. In 2018, these experts trained all the CSW professionals and 30% of ESA staff on the basics of ICM through a series of five-day training events implemented countrywide.



In 2019, UNICEF partnered with the National Association of Social Workers and jointly developed a comprehensive package of protocols and step-by-step guidance on ICM. These were disseminated to all CSW professionals nationwide through a set of advanced ICM training sessions. In 2020, UNICEF will roll-out an ICM mentorship programme to further assist professionals in the implementation of this approach.

As part of the overall reform, and given the low morale of CSW and ESA social workers, UNICEF commissioned an

assessment by a private firm - Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) - to identify solutions for improving staff motivation and performance using behavioural insights. The assessment identified several sectorial-relevant motivational barriers: a heavy administrative burden, invisibility of social outcomes, low salaries, limited career-progression prospects, inadequate working conditions, and lack of discretion in decision-making due to a rule-bound culture. Specific recommendations were then provided for review and incorporation by the Government.



Impact

UNICEF has played an important role in the country's reform aspirations. Since the new 2019 legislation was introduced, there has been the roll-out of a new child benefits system and introduction of an ICM system for social workers. The new child benefits system adopted a unified income-assessment approach for determining eligibility; use of the same equivalence scale to determine the benefit level of different entitlements; expansion of child allowance provisions by removing those barriers that prevent recipients receiving social financial assistance and the non-registered unemployed from accessing this entitlement, and a new educational allowance for primary and secondary education was introduced. Estimates suggest that these changes will increase the number of households receiving the child and educational allowance by a significant number of additional children, ranging from 51,500 to 63,000 (depending on whether tapering is introduced); an increase of 23.6%-28.6%.⁹⁵ The EU's projected impacts on income poverty estimate 'an 8% reduction of the at-risk-of-poverty rate (from 20.3% in 2016 to 18.7% in 2019) and a 43% reduction of the 'intensity' of income poverty, as measured by the median poverty risk gap (from 5.2% in 2016 to 3.0% in 2019)'.⁹⁶

Through the ICM manual and training of social workers, UNICEF and Colombia University (CU) have managed to disseminate ICM methodology countrywide and sensitise and skill workers regarding its principles. While this work is ongoing, UNICEF nonetheless anticipates that through ICM, vulnerable children will be better linked to appropriate local support services. Case managers are already reporting an improved and more integrated delivery of cash benefits and support services to beneficiaries.

Going forward, UNICEF remains committed to creating a more efficient social protection system that addresses poverty and promotes inclusion for all children. UNICEF will work towards strengthening the country's social protection system and ensure that it is well connected with all sectoral work. Continuous support is critical for improving child benefits, and the assessment model used identifies the support needed by children with disabilities and guarantees social workers have the capacity to provide quality services for all.

ENDNOTES

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