

THE CASE FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION:

Reducing poverty through support for children with disabilities and their families

Nearly 10.8 million children in Europe and Central Asia have disabilities, accounting for 1 in 17 children across the region. Their opportunity to lead fulfilling lives and fully and fairly participate in society depends on the extent to which they are supported and included in their homes, schools and communities.

The exclusion of people with disabilities has a significant cost for individuals, households and societies. The World Bank has estimated that people with disabilities may account for as many as one in five of the world's poorest people. Families raising children with disabilities are more vulnerable to poverty due to disability associated costs and lost earning opportunities from having to care for their children.

Children with disabilities experience higher rates of multidimensional poverty compared with children without disabilities. Around 38% of children aged between 2 and 4 years old with more than one functional difficulty experience three to five deprivations, compared with 12% of children without functional difficulties.

Globally, children with disabilities are almost four times more likely to experience violence and up to 17 times more likely to enter institutional care. This is mainly because of insufficient support for families, additional costs and lack of access to education and other essential services. Inadequate social protection to offset the additional costs of support can lead to a higher risk of poverty.

A COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM SHOULD ENSURE:



Income security for children with disabilities and their families that supports an adequate standard of living on an equal basis with others, including through effective access to disability-specific cash benefits for children and their carers.



Access to **adequate healthcare**, including disability-related medical care and rehabilitation.



Financial coverage of disability-related costs and access to care services and/or assistive technology.



Access to the comprehensive services needed throughout life, such as care services, education, vocational training, support with employment and generating income.



An inclusive social protection system **guarantees equitable access to support and benefits** for all children with disabilities, considering specific needs based on age, gender, and ethnicity.

FIRST 1,000 DAYS:

For families of children who are born with disabilities or are at risk of developmental delays, early identification and support are critical to ensure that children thrive. Their right to immunization, accessible and affordable health care and community-based services is essential. Their ability to enjoy recreational activities, playgrounds and full participation in community life is equally important. The experiences of children and their families differ greatly depending on the availability and accessibility and affordability of quality support.



PREGNANCY

In utero screening can help families prepare for the birth of a child with disabilities and help initiate support for the whole family, including access to information about support services. The attitude and capacities of health professionals is crucial to detecting and providing adequate support in the early days after birth, which are also critical for the parents' decision to keep the child within the home and prevent family separation, ensuring the child's right to a family environment.

Financial resources such as maternity benefits, cash transfers for caregivers and coverage of costs for healthcare, along with assistive technology, can help families to meet the diverse developmental needs of a child with disabilities.



BIRTH

In the days and weeks after the birth of a child with special needs, quality healthcare, exclusive breastfeeding and financial support to families are crucial to providing a healthy start. It is critical to foster

the emotional ties of a child and family by encouraging skin-to-skin contact between parents and the baby, providing emotional support and building confidence and skills.



EARLY YEARS

In the first 1,000 days, access to holistic services, including health and social services, is critical for development monitoring to help identify developmental delays and disabilities. Having access to family-centered early childhood intervention services at the earliest opportunity supports families in understanding their child's unique needs and helps create the nurturing, stimulating and safe environment for children with

disabilities to thrive. It supports their development and learning, while improving the whole family's quality of life.

Early childhood intervention and timely support – including adequate financial support – significantly reduces the risk of family separation and helps prevent institutionalization and poverty.





EARLY EDUCATION AND CARE:

Participation in quality early education and care supports children's social and emotional development and learning and helps support a smooth transition to school.



INCLUSIVE LEARNING

From preschool onwards, children with disabilities must have support from qualified teachers and teacher aides who can understand and address their unique needs and provide positive and welcoming social interactions. Adequate financial investment is needed to

ensure there are enough trained teachers, that infrastructure is accessible, and that quality and appropriate assistive technology is available. These factors are vital for enhancing a child's development and learning.

CARE

Availability of early childhood education and care services, along with adequate financial support to help families to manage the cost of services, is critical at this stage and as they move towards school age.



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION:

Inclusive education ensures that children with disabilities participate fully in learning. They need to be provided with equal learning opportunities in a safe, protective environment that embraces their diversity and accommodates their needs. These environments also need to support their well-being, helping them thrive and participate fully in society.



PRIMARY SCHOOL

Confronting education segregation (special schools and special classes) and making schools truly accessible and inclusive for children with disabilities is beneficial for all children. Celebrating diversity and fighting discrimination and stigma helps to ensure support for effective transition from pre-primary education to primary school and effective learning. This also involves ensuring accessibility both in free transport, and school environments including buildings, classrooms, school spaces and toilets.

Communication and information barriers need to be broken down by providing accessible textbooks in Braille and other formats, helping teachers deliver classes in sign language. Providing additional support

for learning in collaboration with other school professionals and service providers. Teachers need to be fully trained to support children with disabilities, from attitudinal shifts to prevent bullying and stereotyping of children's expectations and abilities, as well as ensuring access to the curriculum through inclusive teaching strategies, the application of Universal Design for Learning and the use of assistive technology, as well as the involvement of parents and communities. There must also be a system for identification of disabilities, as some learning disabilities become visible at this age. Schools are platforms for cross-sectoral coordination, bringing the required support and services together in a child's natural environment.

SECONDARY SCHOOL:

For children of secondary-school age, learning becomes more complex, alongside the evolving need for socialization and the formation of relationships with peers. It is more likely for children with disabilities at this age to be excluded, as there is less investment in inclusive secondary education.

Adequate investment is needed for flexible learning opportunities to ensure that children with disabilities have access to the long-lasting quality education. Investment in education systems as well as financial support to families is critical to ensuring children with disabilities learn and develop skills for future employment, receive career guidance to transition to work, independent living and full participation in their communities.

The transition to adulthood is another unique moment in a child's life. For children with disabilities, transition planning with a trained professional can support independent living, continued education or training, and access to employment. This requires sustained investment in vocational training programmes and employment support. To address their holistic needs, disability benefits should be complimented with adequate investment to ensure access to assistive technology, essential services, sexual reproductive health, mental health social services and protection.

