Final Project Evaluation

“Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children”
(May 2011 – October 2013)

RFP 10/201

Final Evaluation Report (vol.1)

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¹ Later on called “Kindergartens without Borders – Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Young Children” in the Agreement between UNICEF and the Center for Interactive Pedagogy (its main implementing partner).
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<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>CRC</td>
<td>Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIP</td>
<td>Center for Interactive Pedagogy</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAC</td>
<td>Development Assistance Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC</td>
<td>European Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECEC</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education and Care</td>
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<td>ECED</td>
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<tr>
<td>EQ</td>
<td>Evaluation Question</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>EUR</td>
<td>Euro</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross Domestic Product</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMPRES</td>
<td>Improvement of Preschool Education in Serbia (EU Project)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LSG</td>
<td>Local Self-Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MICS</td>
<td>Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoESTD</td>
<td>Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoU</td>
<td>Memorandum of Understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NYHQ</td>
<td>New York Headquarters</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>PI</td>
<td>Preschool Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td>PPP</td>
<td>Preparatory Preschool Programme</td>
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<td>RSD</td>
<td>Republic of Serbia Dinar</td>
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<td>SIPRU</td>
<td>Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit</td>
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<td>ToR</td>
<td>Terms of Reference</td>
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<td>ToT</td>
<td>Training-of-Trainers</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<td>USD</td>
<td>United States Dollar</td>
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document represents the Final Evaluation Report of the Project "Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children". The first chapter of the report provides an overview of the context and describes the main features of the Project. The second chapter is devoted to the presentation of the purpose, objectives and scope of the evaluation. It also details the used methodology and describes the evaluation design. The third chapter of the report presents the findings of the evaluation team and analysis based on specific evaluation questions. It provides an assessment of the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of the Project as well as an analysis of the way the project addressed the human rights and gender issues. The final chapter of the report presents the conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation as well as a number of lessons learnt.

Project Description

The development objective of the Project “Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children” is to provide better access to quality preschool education for children aged 3-5, with the focus on most vulnerable. The Project Document specifies that the immediate objective is to increase coverage and improve quality of preschool education for 1,500 children 3-5 years old in 10 municipalities.

The Project planned to achieve two main results:
1. To increase coverage with preschool education for children aged 3-5 with the focus on the most vulnerable
2. To improve quality of preschool education for children aged 3-5 with the focus on most vulnerable

Project activities included assessment of needs and capacities for preschool education; adaptation of facilities for implementation of diversified programmes; development and piloting of two models of alternative (special) programmes; design and accreditation of training modules and instructive materials/manuals; training of trainers for capacity building of local partners; training for preschool staff, parents’ associations and parents.

The target groups of the project is composed of 300 professional staff, 500 parents, preschool institutions and local self-governments in the project municipalities. The direct beneficiaries are 1,500 girls and boys aged 3-5 years, who are out of preschool education services, living in rural, economically-disadvantaged or remote areas, especially Roma, children from poor families and children with disability and other developmental difficulties. Indirect beneficiaries are 3,000 children benefitting from improved teaching and child development skills of trained teachers.

The Project under evaluation has a budget of 517,483 EUR, of which IKEA provided 409,483 EUR while UNICEF contributed complementary funds amounting to 108,000 EUR. The Project was implemented from May 2011 to October 2013.

Context of the Project

Serbia has made significant progress on a wide-ranging reform agenda, including progress towards achieving the national Millennium Development Goals, and modernisation of the legal framework. The opening of negotiations for EU membership will trigger more intense reforms, especially in public administration and justice. Meanwhile, the country is facing serious economic difficulties. The
vulnerable groups of population have been disproportionately hit by the current economic crisis. Among them are families with children, especially those living in southern Serbia, in rural areas and in the municipalities considered “devastated”.

Preschool education covers children up to 6.5 years and is organised in both public and private preschool institutions. Until the age of 3, children go to the crèche, while between ages 3 and 5.5, children go to the kindergarten. Between 5.5 and 6.5 years, children attend compulsory Preparatory Preschool Programme (PPP), which is free of charge. Expenses for preschool education prior to the PPP are covered by parents and local Governments. The coverage rate of children in preschool education is low compared to European benchmarks. There are over 50% of children from 3 to 5.5 years not covered by the preschool education. Survey data and various studies reveal that preschool education covers only 29% of rural, 25% of children with disabilities, 22% of poor and only 8% of Roma children, leaving those who need it the most not covered. The preschool education access in the fifth quintile (20% the richest) is three times higher than in the first quintile (20% the poorest. There are also sharp territorial differences. Two thirds of municipalities with very low coverage rates belong to the group of the most under-developed municipalities.

The main reasons for low coverage of children by the preschool education in Serbia, particularly in the age group from 3 to 5.5 years, are the following: insufficient preschool physical capacities to cover the total number of children left out from the preschool education; lack of parents’ awareness as to the benefits of preschool education; cost of preschool education services and other associated costs, transport etc. which cannot be afforded by parents from vulnerable groups; insufficient knowledge of the local language, lack of personal documents and of proof of citizenship and lack of family capacities to send the child to school impede the access to pre-school education by children of returnee families and internally-displaced persons.

The National Millennium Development Goals (2006) specify that 70% of children from 3 to 7 should be in preschool education by 2015, with a special focus on children from marginalized groups. The National Strategy for Education Development in Serbia until 2020 (2012), aims that 75% of children from 3 to 5.5 years should be in preschool education by 2020, meaning that Serbia needs to make significant progress in increasing access, especially for vulnerable children.

Over the past ten years, the country has undertaken extensive changes and reforms of its educational system. Improvement of coverage, quality and efficiency of education, including preschool education, were among the top priorities of the reform. In general, the legal framework in Serbia is largely synchronized with European and international human rights standards, and the prospect of EU integration is driving the comprehensive reforms of the education and social sectors. However, their implementation continues to be hampered by gaps and inefficiencies. Ethnic origin, disability and poverty continue to act as obstacles in the access of children from disadvantaged groups to education.

Purpose and objectives of the evaluation

The purpose of evaluation is to evaluate the project outcomes and achievements in relation to the project strategy. The specific objectives of the evaluation, as per ToR, are the following:

1. Provide feedback to UNICEF and its national counterparts (MoESTD, and other stakeholders) on the soundness (defined as relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability) and impact of the project approach in increasing coverage of children from 3 to 5.5 and improving quality of preschool services: a) Evaluate Project Impact following Project Outputs; b) Reveal good practices and gaps in approaches.
2. Provide the IKEA with information on impact of their specific support to expanding preschool services for vulnerable children in Serbia.
3. Based on the experience from the project implementation, extract general lessons learned and recommendations aimed at further enhancement of the preschool education and further UNICEF interventions in this area.

The evaluation covers the entire implementation period (May 2011 – October 2013) and all selected municipalities, following the way how the project has been conceptualized in the Project Document, Theory of Change and the Agreement signed between UNICEF and the Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP Center), the main implementing partner. The evaluation has been carried out during by a team of experts from Promeso Consulting (Romania), selected following competitive tender.

**Evaluation methodology**

The evaluation has been carried out in three consecutive phases: Inception/Desk Phase, Field Phase and Synthesis Phase.

In the Inception/Desk Phase, the team reviewed the entire project documentation and the national policy papers, legislation, strategies and action plans in the area of preschool education. The desk phase also included extensive review of European strategies and EU accession-related documents as well as reporting to international bodies and against human rights conventions ratified by Serbia.

The Field Phase has been devoted to the collection of data from key stakeholders at national and local levels, based on the evaluation instruments developed during the Inception/Desk Phase. The semi-structured interviews with UNICEF country office and representatives of national project partners took place in Belgrade in the period 11 -15 November 2013. For the site visits, which took place during the same week, the evaluation team has developed a set of criteria for representative sample selection based on rural/urban regional balance, territorial distribution and development level of municipalities, pilot-non-pilot nature of municipalities and representation of vulnerable parents in the governance structures of the targeted preschool institutions. Out of 10 project municipalities, the team has visited two municipalities (Smederevo and Aleksinac), two kindergartens (Lipogradic/Lipe and Green Bunch/Aleksinac) and two preschool institutions located in the cities of the two visited municipalities, conducting two discussion groups with preschool principals, regional school administrations and LSGs representatives as well as four focus groups with specialists (educators and expert associates) and beneficiary parents.

In the Synthesis phase, the team has applied the standard evaluation criteria analysis (relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability) in combination with Human Rights-Based Approach in order to assess the achievement of planned results, draw informed conclusions and lessons as well as to provide meaningful and practical recommendations.

**Main Findings and Conclusions**

The Project “Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children” is **highly relevant**2 for Serbia’s preschool education reforms and national policies for improving the early childhood education and development, as it addressed important gaps and challenges of the current preschool system. The Project is in line with Serbia’s National Strategy of Education Development until 2020 and the Plan of Action for Children while its primary objectives are tied to the implementation of the Law on Preschool Education and recently adopted by-laws, regulations and standards on prioritising access

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2 Based on the Performance Scoring detailed in the methodology of the evaluation.
and implementation of special and specialised programmes in preschool education. It is highly relevant for Serbia’s international commitments deriving from the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its status of EU candidate country. The Project remained relevant over its entire lifetime, as documented by the annual progress reports of the EC. The multi-pronged approach (including working on policies, developing methodologies and tools, rehabilitation of space, capacity building) and highly-participatory approaches used by UNICEF and its partners to implement the project were appropriate in view of the underlying Theory of Change and its key assumptions.

The Project was effective in achieving the results and objectives as outlined in the Project Document and Theory of Change. UNICEF’s partnership with the MoESTD and CIP Center, an experienced and professional think-tank in preschool education, as well as engagement of other key stakeholders, including parents, allowed for effective and coordinated implementation of the project at municipality level and connection with legal and policy developments at national level. The planned number of direct beneficiaries (children and parents) was only partially achieved due to an over-estimation of the targets for the given time and available resources of the Project, lack of more effective mapping methodologies based on cooperation with centres for social work and possibly resistance of some parents to enrol their children due to cultural or financial reasons. Adaptation of preschool facilities and capacity building actions prepared effectively the LSGs, PIs and preschool educators for their new roles in preschool education provision. LSGs and PIs commitment to support the introduction of special and specialized programmes, as new modality of preschool education for children aged 3-5.5 years, has enhanced the Project effectiveness as did the mentoring approaches and exchanges of experience between municipalities which helped address challenges by peer-to-peer learning.

Most of the planned Project activities have been delivered in an efficient and generally in a timely manner. The feedback from all stakeholders confirm that activities and management of the Project were conducted professionally and with high quality. The concept of 4-hour special programmes adapted to be used for groups of children of mixed ages worked very well for cost-effectiveness in rural and remote areas, but with challenges in terms of utilization rate of the premises. Efficiency has been facilitated by the excellent training methodology (horizontal learning approaches and cascaded trainings) which enlarged considerably the number of professionals who benefitted of training, the efficient cooperation between LSGs and PIs and outstanding cooperation and synergy with other donors’ projects, interests and resources. Overall, the efficiency of this Project is ingrained in its very nature, as education and development returns in the future will exceed by far the initial investment. Project monitoring and evaluation would have been facilitated by more detailed financial reporting for the overall Project, disaggregation of expenditures and monitoring of targets in accordance to a Theory of Change that should have been developed at the beginning of the Project.

Considering its rather limited resources, the Project had a good impact level, making an important contribution to increasing the coverage of children aged 3-5.5 years benefiting from preschool education, especially of children living in rural areas of project municipalities. Self-evaluations conducted by the Project capture a very positive feedback from educators and parents on the developmental results of the newly-introduced special programmes upon beneficiary children. Evaluation findings indicate a positive trend in expanding and diversifying child-centred educational services within the project municipalities, which would enable higher enrolment of children from vulnerable groups in preschool education in the future, on the background of the current supportive legal framework. This would however require more effective mapping of vulnerable children (especially Roma, children with poor parents or children with disabilities) and better prioritising of access by preschool institutions compared to what they achieved during the Project. It would also require increased awareness of parents as to the role of preschool education and complementary social support for the poorest families to cover associated costs of school attendance by their children.
Impact would have been higher in case the planned number of direct beneficiaries was achieved.

Effects and outcomes of the Project are most likely sustainable. The capacity building tools, accredited training programmes, guides, practicums and self-evaluation methodologies developed by the Project’s partners are already in use or could easily be used for future establishment of similar special programmes in other municipalities. Local commitment, ownership and buy-in of the results of the Project nurtured by UNICEF and CIP Center throughout its entire cycle, close connection and cooperation with the national decision-making bodies, in particular the MoESTD and its institutes, implementation of activities aimed to multiply and scale up the practices used in the Project are excellent ingredients for long-term sustainability. All project municipalities ensured sustainability of the established programmes for 2014, with strong commitment of permanent financing; however, the least developed municipalities might face difficulties to secure funding on long-run given the current funding model of preschool education in Serbia, on the background of a decreasing donor support for education system generally.

The Project had a major contribution to the promotion and realisation of child rights through opening access to preschool education services and early learning development to children left out of the system, empowering them, as rights-holders, to make informed choices and have their opinion heard. It had a positive contribution to the strengthening of the capacity of a wide range of Serbian duty-bearers to protect and fulfil the child right to early childhood education and development. The Project has paid particular attention to capacitating parents, as rights-holders, to organise themselves and advocate for child rights and better local governance. The Project contributed to women empowerment and it managed to ensure an equity focus especially in case of rural children and by orienting investment to municipalities with lowest coverage of children in preschool education.

Recommendations

The Report provides a number of key recommendations for the Serbian Government and LSGs, UNICEF, IKEA and other donors, based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation, as follows:

**Strategic Recommendations (S):**

S1: Further invest in the expansion and diversification of country-wide, flexible early learning programmes for children aged 3-5.5 years to ensure higher and more inclusive coverage of vulnerable children in preschool education

S2: Ensure high quality standards of preschool education on the basis of a transparent national accreditation system and capacity building of teachers. Promote innovation in the development of preschool programmes to respond to the complexity of needs of their beneficiaries.

S3: Secure the financial sustainability on long-run of early learning childhood education programmes in least developed municipalities, based on the principles of equity, territorial cohesion and social solidarity.

**Operational Recommendations (O):**

O1: Carry out a country-wide identification of vulnerable children who are left out of the preschool education for evidence-based policy making and integrated support action

O2: Improve monitoring and reporting practices in future projects and the evaluability of impact

The evaluation of the Project led to the following Lessons learnt:
1) Investment in preschool education should be long-term, until the country gets closer to European benchmarks.

2) Local commitment and good cooperation between relevant local stakeholders is key to inclusive and sustainable results.

3) The importance of locally-generated solutions is not to be underestimated.

4) Expansion of early learning opportunities, especially in rural areas, requires both hard and soft investment.

5) Complex needs and scarce available resources require innovative coping strategies.

6) Any action targeting early childhood education and development must engage the parents and, to the extent possible, the grandparents of beneficiary children from start throughout the whole process.
1. **CONTEXT AND PROJECT BACKGROUND**

1.1 **Project Context**

Serbia is an upper-middle income country which got the status of EU candidate country on 1 March 2012, on the basis of the Commission Opinion on Serbia’s membership application adopted in 2011. The accession negotiations will start as soon as the country achieves the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria, in line with the conditions of the Stabilisation and Association Process. Serbia has made significant progress on a wide-ranging reform agenda, including progress towards achieving the national Millennium Development Goals, and modernisation of the legal framework. The opening of negotiations for EU membership will trigger more intense reforms, especially in public administration and justice.

Meanwhile, the country is facing serious economic difficulties due to the global economic crisis. In 2012, Serbia had a negative economic growth (-1.5 %), high inflation (11%), rising unemployment (up to 26 %) and a double digit current account deficit. A proportion of 9.2 % of Serbian population lives under the absolute poverty line (2010). The vulnerable groups of population have been disproportionately hit by the current economic crisis. Among them were families with children. The poverty rate of children below the age of 14 almost doubled from 7.3 in 2008 to 13.7% in 2010. Most disadvantaged were the children living in the southern part of the country, in rural areas and in the municipalities considered “devastated”.

Preschool education covers children up to 6.5 years and is organised in both public and private preschool institutions. It is not obligatory for children up to 5.5 years. Until the age of 3, children go to the crèche, while between ages 3 and 5.5, children go to the kindergarten. Between 5.5 and 6.5 years, children attend compulsory Preparatory Preschool Programme (PPP), which is free of charge. Preschool education is organised in programmes of different length, most frequently longer than 8 hours a day or from 4 to 8 hours a day, but much less in programmes shorter than 4 hours a day.

The Budget of the Republic of Serbia covers expenses for the PPP, together with other expenses for primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Expenses for preschool education prior to the PPP (for children younger than 5.5 years) are covered by parents and local Governments, such that the local Governments cover 80% of the cost per child, while the parents cover the remaining 20% of expenses. In general, expenditures for preschool education were 0.43% out of 4.53% of GDP earmarked for education, which is lower than in OECD countries (0.5%).

The PPP was introduced in 2006 which boosted the participation in preschool education for children between 5.5 and 6.5 years. However, apart from EU and UNICEF projects, other initiatives related to promoting non-compulsory preschool education attendance for children up to 5.5 years were fairly limited. The coverage rate of children in preschool education is low compared to European benchmarks: it grows with age from 21.8% in crèche to 48.1% for 3 to 5.5 years old, and 96% in compulsory PPP (see Table 1). It means that there are still more than 50% of children from 3 to 5.5 years not covered by the preschool education in the form of kindergarten.

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3 Municipalities with average GDP per capita at least 50% of the national level (40 out of 174 municipalities)
4 Coverage of children in preschool education (4 to 5.5 years) was 85% in EU in 2010 (Government of the Republic of Serbia, “The First National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction in the Republic of Serbia”, 2011). The Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training “ET 2020”, one benchmark specifies that “By 2020, at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.”
5 The coverage rate varies from 43.8% (MICS4) to 47.7% (Statistical Office) to 48.1% (MoESTD).
Table 1. Children enrolled in Preschool Education, 2010/2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Crèche (up to 3 years)</th>
<th>Kindergarten (3-5.5 years)</th>
<th>PPP (5.5-6.5 years)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of live births</td>
<td>137,777</td>
<td>176,557</td>
<td>77,731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment (no. of children)</td>
<td>29,969</td>
<td>84,923</td>
<td>74,681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolment rate</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
<td>96.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Plan of Action for Children\(^8\) (2004), a strategic document of the Government of Serbia which defines the general policy of the country towards children until 2015, calls for action to “Increase the proportion of children covered by quality preschool education and take special measures to include children from population groups that are currently not enrolled in preschool”. The National Millennium Development Goals (2006) specify that 70% of children from 3 to 7 should be in preschool education by 2015, with a special focus on children from marginalized groups. The National Strategy for Education Development in Serbia until 2020 (2012), aims that 75% of children from 3 to 5.5 years should be in preschool education by 2020, meaning that Serbia needs to make significant progress in increasing access, especially for vulnerable children whose present coverage is much lower.

Survey data and various studies\(^9\) reveal that preschool education covers only 29% of rural, 25% of children with disabilities, 22% of poor and only 8% of Roma children, leaving those who need it the most not covered. The preschool education access in the fifth quintile (20% the richest) is three times higher than in the first quintile (20% the poorest) - 22% of children from the first quintile of the poorest families attend preschool education compared to 75% of children from the fifth, the richest quintile\(^10\). This is very much worrying all the more since early learning has the biggest impact on the poorest children. According to James Heckman, the Nobel Prize Laureate in economics, investment in learning in the early years yields much higher returns than investment later in life\(^11\), having an enhanced effect on children from low socio-economic background (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Rate of Return of Early Learning

\(^8\) Republic of Serbia, “Plan of Action for Children”, Belgrade, 2004
Data on coverage indicates that preschool institutions have not invested sufficient efforts in developing inclusive enrolment practices and that they are not sensitive enough to children and family needs, especially those from vulnerable groups. There are also sharp territorial differences. The highest preschool coverage of children aged 3-5.5 years is recorded in Belgrade and Vojvodina, which have a development level above the average. At the same time, two thirds of municipalities with very low coverage rates belong to the group of the most under-developed municipalities.

The main reasons for low coverage of children by the preschool education in Serbia, particularly in the age group from 3 to 5.5 years, are the following:

1) **Insufficient preschool physical capacities** to cover the total number of children left out from the preschool education. The network of preschool institutions is unevenly distributed across the country, lacking primarily in under-developed and rural areas. Although the Statistical Office data indicate a decreasing trend over the last 4 years, still in 2011/2012 school year a number of 4,901 children were not accepted in public preschool education due to the lack of capacity, while 3,881 children were accepted over capacity; there was a shortage of 8,782 places. The number of private institutions which are registered as preschool institutions is still very low: 47 institutions in 2010/2011 with 131 children’s groups in total.

2) **Lack of parents’ awareness as to the benefits of preschool education.** According to UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2010 (MICS4) data\(^2\), 59% of parents (54% among Roma) of children from 3 to 5 years who did not attend kindergarten think that there is no need to send children to kindergarten as there is someone at home to take care of them. This figure indicates the fact that parents see preschool education through its *custodial function* rather than the benefits for the development of their children.

3) **Cost of preschool education services and other associated costs, transport etc.** which cannot be afforded by poor parents (44%), Roma and parents of children from rural areas. Insufficient funds have been provided to date by the municipalities/cities for preschool allowances (a measure aimed at supporting the inclusion of children into preschool education) for children from economically vulnerable families, children without parental care and children with disabilities\(^3\); the system for granting these benefits is ineffective and needs revision\(^4\), as the Local Self-Governments (LSGs) have the legal responsibility to cover 100% of preschool costs in cases of socially disadvantaged children. LSGs are also obliged by the law to provide and fund children’s transportation to the nearest preschool education facility.

4) **Insufficient knowledge of the local language, lack of personal documents and of proof of citizenship and lack of family capacities** to send the child to school impede the access to pre-school education by children of returnee families and internally-displaced persons.

Over the past ten years, the country has undertaken extensive changes and reforms of its educational system. Improvement of coverage, quality and efficiency of education, including preschool education, were among the top priorities of the reform. An important piece of legislation was the **Book of Regulations of Fundamentals for Preschool Programmes** (2006) which defined the goals and the curriculum for preschool education, focusing in particular on the PPP. Important changes in the

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\(^3\) Only 300 children without parental care and a similar number of children with disability received the preschool allowance in 2010 (source: UNICEF Serbia, "Child Protection Situation Analysis", draft 9 August 2013).

\(^4\) According to the law, preschool allowance is provided only if children with disability are enrolled in special, segregated educational groups within preschool institutions. In case a child with disability also meets the means-tested criteria for receiving child allowance, it can receive preschool allowance even if attending the regular group (source: UNICEF).
education legal framework in 2009 and 2010 allowed for more inclusive education\textsuperscript{15}. A significant step forward has been done in 2009 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD) with the adoption of the \textit{Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System} (with Supplements and Amendments made in June 2011). Practical implementation of inclusive education was supported through the Network for Inclusive Education, providing expert advice to schools and parents, developing best practices by problem solving and facilitating horizontal learning. Efforts to support functioning of Inter-Sectoral Commissions\textsuperscript{16} continued, with commissions functional in 50% of municipalities. To facilitate continuity of reforms, UNICEF lobbied for further implementation of policy frameworks to prioritize equal access to quality education and initiated new strategic partnerships aimed at advancing inclusive education\textsuperscript{17}. Progress was made towards developing a monitoring framework, notably through UNICEF’s strategic partnership with the National Education Council and other national stakeholders.

In 2010, the \textit{Law on Preschool Education} introduced major changes in the functioning of the preschool education system in Serbia, most notably in the area of equitable coverage of children, opening of special and specialised short-term programmes for children who are not covered by the preschool education system, standard child to adult ratio in the classroom, quality monitoring with the participation of parents and children.

Serbia has ratified the \textit{United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)} in 2001 and the \textit{Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities} in 2009. It has therefore committed to ensure the promotion, respect and realisation of children’s rights to education, without any discrimination and in a manner conducive to the child's achieving the fullest possible social integration and individual development. As mentioned above, too many children with disabilities, Roma, poor children aged 3-5.5 are not enrolled in preschool education. The CRC Committee has urged the country to “Strengthen its efforts to remove discrimination and to continue developing and implementing - in close collaboration with the Roma community itself - policies and programmes aimed at ensuring equal access to culturally appropriate services, including early childhood development and education”\textsuperscript{18}. Serbia has also ratified the \textit{Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)} which calls the country to end discrimination against girls and women in all forms and take measures to ensure equality between women and men.

In general, the legal framework in Serbia is largely synchronized with European and international human rights standards, and the prospect of EU integration is driving the comprehensive reforms of the education and social sectors. However, their implementation continues to be hampered by gaps and inefficiencies. \textit{Ethnic origin, disability and poverty continue to act as obstacles in the access of children from disadvantaged groups to education}, as mentioned above. According to the EC Progress Report for 2012\textsuperscript{19}, “children’s rights, particularly the rights of those belonging to vulnerable groups such as Roma, poor children, children with disabilities, children without parental care and street children, are unevenly protected. (...) Inclusive education is still not fully developed. The school drop-out rate is high among Roma children, children with disabilities and children living in remote areas”. In 2013, the EC Progress Report\textsuperscript{20} reiterates concern on the over-representation of Roma in the state care system, who “are at higher risk of living in poverty, of leaving school early, of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{15} e.g. assessment of a child enrolled in school conducted in the mother tongue, delivery of preschool education in minority language in certain conditions, provisions for inclusion of children with learning difficulties in the mainstream education, etc.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Local mechanisms to provide additional support to children for education inclusion.
\item \textsuperscript{17} UNICEF Serbia, “Country Office Annual Report 2012”, Belgrade, January 2013
\item \textsuperscript{18} UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, “Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child: Republic of Serbia”, 6 June 2008, art.75, point b
\end{itemize}
being victims of domestic violence and of being placed into care”. The steady high school drop-out rate for Roma is also mentioned. At the same time, the report highlights that “the sustained support provided to 170 teaching assistants resulted in a further increase in the enrolment rate for Roma children in the education system, notably at preschool level”. Still, the coverage rate of 8% remains extremely low.

To conclude, the country needs to expand the preschool education coverage which would require three main areas of action, as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Action Areas for the Expansion of Preschool Education in Serbia**

- Increase of the physical capacities for pre-school education network (especially in rural areas)

- Definition of a funding model allowing out-of-pre-school children to engage in pre-school education through the minimum of 4-hour programs (especially children of poor families, children from rural areas)

- Increase of the parental awareness of the benefits of pre-school education for the development of their children

Serbia is supported in its efforts by many international organisations, most notably UNICEF, EU, Switzerland and the World Bank. UNICEF has supported in the expansion of alternative programs of good quality in under-served areas and in the increase of parents’ awareness on the importance of early childhood development and quality preschool education. It also carried out a preschool costing study which analysed the financial feasibility of providing universal access; together with the experience gained through modelling alternative programs, the study will inform the completion of the regulatory framework for preschool education, currently under development by the Government.

As far as EU is concerned, IPA assistance for the education sector has been focussed over the last years on the following main areas:

- support to education system at all its levels to improve its quality and to enable equal participation of every citizen as well as to ensure their full involvement in the economic, political and social life;
- development of the legal framework and capacities for the implementation of the National Education Strategy; vulnerable groups preschool and primary education;
- improvement of infrastructure in preschool, vocational and higher education.

UNICEF and EU have closely co-operated in the area of preschool education and social inclusion of vulnerable children.
1.2 Project Description

The Project Document and the Theory of Change developed by UNICEF (see Annex 1) provide an overall picture of the main features of the project to be evaluated, its logic and results chain, which we resume below.

Project objectives

The development objective of the Project “Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children” is to provide better access to quality preschool education for children aged 3-5, with the focus on most vulnerable.

The Project Document specifies that the immediate objective is to increase coverage and improve quality of preschool education for 1,500 children 3-5 years old in 10 municipalities.

Results, Outputs and Activities

According to the Theory of Change, the Project planned to achieve two main results:

3. To increase coverage with preschool education for children aged 3-5 with the focus on the most vulnerable
4. To improve quality of preschool education for children aged 3-5 with the focus on most vulnerable

In line with the intervention logic, the Theory of Change further develops the two overarching results into six expected outputs, as follows:

Linked to Result 1

1.1 Preschool facilities in 10 municipalities adapted and equipped with didactical materials
1.2 1,500 children from target groups covered (enrolled into) by organised early learning and care services

Linked to Result 2

4.1 Two types of alternative preschool services developed, piloted, documented and ready for scaling up
4.2 Training modules for the 2 alternative early learning services developed and accredited at the national level
4.3 300 preschool professional staff trained for implementation of alternative services
4.4 500 parents and 5 parents’ associations have benefited from training on how to support children’s early development and sustain demand for quality services

For the achievement of outputs and expected results, core activities were envisaged following the logic of intervention: assessment of needs and capacities for preschool education of 3-5 years old children in 10 project municipalities (situation analysis); adaptation of facilities (physical upgrading, small repairs of premises) and conversion into preschool in 10 municipalities for implementation of diversified programmes followed by provision of didactic materials and equipment; development and piloting of two models of alternative (special) programmes in 5 of the 10 municipalities; development and accreditation of training modules as well as instructive materials/manuals for the implementation.

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21 They are called “outcomes” in the Theory of Change
22 According to legal provisions passed during the implementation of the project, they are called “special programmes”. Initially, they were called “alternative” or “diversified” programmes.
and dissemination of alternative (special) programmes; training of trainers for capacity building of local partners; training for preschool staff, parents’ associations and parents.

**Target Groups and Final Beneficiaries**

The Project Document does not distinguish between the target groups and beneficiaries. Based on the analysis of the overall project documentation, implemented activities and interviews with key informants, it is the opinion of the evaluation team that the target groups of the project is composed of 300 professional staff, including preschool educators and associate experts, representatives of regional school administrations and LSGs; 500 parents in the 10 project municipalities; PIs and LSGs in the project municipalities. The direct beneficiaries of the Project are 1,500 girls and boys aged 3-5 years, who are out of preschool education services, living in rural, economically-disadvantaged or remote areas, especially Roma, children from poor families and children with disability and other developmental difficulties. Indirect beneficiaries are 3,000 children benefitting from improved teaching and child development skills of trained teachers throughout the country.

**Strategic Approach to implementation**

In order to implement the Project, the following strategies were planned to be used:

- Out of the 30 municipalities with the lowest coverage of preschool education, 10 municipalities will be selected based on their expressed willingness to improve the situation in preschool education and give enrolment priority to children from vulnerable groups.
- Assessments of existing institutions will be carried out in selected municipalities to identify immediate needs that would improve both their quality (through provision of toys and didactic materials) and capacities (adaptation of facilities available in municipalities and their conversion into preschool facilities).
- On the basis of the needs assessment and past experience, alternative services (programmes) will be developed with expert institutions and MoESTD, in consultation with local partners, parents’ associations, NGOs and local kindergartens.
- Alternative services will be piloted in 5 municipalities. They will be closely monitored, costed and documented in order to enable later scaling up in other municipalities in Serbia. Standards for alternative services will be developed in cooperation with the MoESTD.
- Trainings will be organized for professional staff working in preschool institutions on delivering alternative services and working with children from vulnerable groups to support their inclusion.
- 5 partner parents’ associations will be identified and trained on the importance of early childhood stimulation and development and of preschool education, as well as on developing action plans to increase coverage of preschool education and work in partnership with LSGs.
- Parents’ associations will conduct trainings for parents on the importance of early childhood stimulation and development, positive disciplining and parenting skills.
- Functioning of alternative services will be standardised in cooperation with the MoESTD and shared with other municipalities.

**Financing and Duration**

The total budget of the project is 517,483 EUR, of which IKEA provided 409,483 EUR while UNICEF contributed complementary funds amounting to 108,000 EUR. The Project was implemented from May 2011 to October 2013. The evaluation took place after the project came to an end.

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23 The document makes the distinction between direct and indirect beneficiaries only.  
24 IKEA is a the world's largest furniture retailer, [www.ikea.com](http://www.ikea.com)
**Role of UNICEF**

UNICEF’s role in the Project was two-fold: it ensured the technical and financial management of the Project, while also bringing in the technical expertise and policy advocacy leverage, which brought about invaluable contribution to the attainment of the overall results of the Project.

UNICEF was in charge of the technical and financial management of the Project and achievement of its objectives and estimated results. In order to do that, it supported the MoESTD in the selection of the target municipalities based on pre-defined selection criteria and ensured the institutional commitment of the LSGs in the selected municipalities for technical and financial participation in the setting up and running of the new services during the project implementation and after its end. In this respect, Memoranda of Understanding were signed by UNICEF with the selected LSGs. UNICEF has also provided technical support for the adaptation and conversion of existing premises into proper preschool facilities, ready to implement alternative services (programmes). An architect has been commissioned to oversee the works at each of the 10 project sites.

For the development of alternative services and training of professional staff for their implementation and delivery, UNICEF has partnered with the Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP Center), a highly regarded NGO for its expertise and experience both by the national education bodies and within the preschool institutions network. UNICEF has monitored its work, provided technical expertise and support and was responsible for the quality assurance of CIP Center’s deliverables. UNICEF was also in charge of oversight of the relevance, efficiency and quality of the processes that the Center initiated and run at local level.

At the same time, UNICEF’s technical expertise was an important value-added to the capacity building and policy work that the project included. Through its in-house specialists, it provided significant expert contributions in the processes of planning of approach, strategic guidance of the Project in all its phases and quality assurance. UNICEF has closely liaised with the MoESTD and other relevant education bodies and donors at national level for keeping the Project abreast with legal and strategic developments in the sector and for synergising the project resources with similar projects and interests of other donors (EU, Novak Đjoković Foundation).

Partners that cooperated with UNICEF on policy and pre-school education reform issues (CIP Center, MoESTD, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, Parliamentary Child Rights Committee, National Education Council, SIPRU, EU IMPRES project, Regional Schools Administrations, preschool institutions) agree that UNICEF is a valued partner, as its technical expertise, neutrality and mandate to work on child rights have been important leverage for changes to happen and to be accepted by decision-makers. Important support was provided for parliamentary public hearings, development of standards and relevant guides and manuals to be used by decision-makers and also practitioners in the area of preschool education. Continued, long-term engagement of UNICEF with national partners facilitated results achievement. This continued relationship allowed for a better understanding of the needs, capacities, and challenges faced by the respective partners. It also allowed UNICEF to be part of, support, and be able to add value to the reform of the preschool education system in Serbia. This is relevant both in view of project accountability as well as in view of learning and knowledge building on the dynamics of reform processes.

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Implementation partners

As mentioned above, the Project has been implemented by UNICEF Serbia in close collaboration with the MoESTD and in partnership with the Center for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP Center). The CIP Center was mainly in charge of carrying out a baseline study in the selected municipalities, development and piloting of alternative (special) programmes and corresponding training modules and materials, delivery of trainings and engagement of parents in promoting the importance of early childhood development and education.

In addition, other important stakeholders and partners which contributed to the Project included:

- **Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation** – through the development of instruments for external evaluation of the quality of preschool institutions.
- **Institute for Advancement of Education** – through the accreditation of programmes for professional development of teachers and development of foundations of preschool programme.
- **Institute of Psychology (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade)** – through the development of self-evaluation methodologies.
- **LSGs and preschool institutions in 10 municipalities** – through active participation in the selection of facilities for adaptation, financial contribution to reconstruction works, training activities, community mobilization of parents and other actors, employment of new teachers and commitment to sustainable funding of new programmes as per the Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) signed with UNICEF.
- **Preschool teachers** from 10 preschool institutions - through participation in training activities, development, implementation and documentation of programmes, mobilization of parents and wider community.
- **Regional school administrations** (branch offices of the MoESTD responsible for professional support and oversight of education institutions) – through active participation in trainings.
- **Parents’ groups** from 5 pilot LSGs - through participation in training activities, development and implementation of new programmes and through small parental initiatives aimed at improving conditions for early childhood development.
- **NGO(s)** – through their work with preschool education and vulnerable groups of children.
- **Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU)** - through its efforts to co-ordinate activities of different stakeholders within the preschool sector.

The role of IKEA was to provide the needed funds for the implementation of the Project, in line with the Project Document and agreement with UNICEF. Of significant benefit to the project implementation was UNICEF collaboration with the EU-funded project “Improvement of Preschool Education in Serbia” (IMPRES) which aimed to broaden access to preschool education through support in optimisation of the preschool network, improvement of the legal framework, increased access for the most vulnerable children and improved preschool quality in 15 municipalities.

Implementation arrangements

All main decisions on the implementation of the Project were supposed to be made in consultation with the MoESTD. It was envisaged that the main Project partners will meet on a quarterly basis and make all decisions important for the course of the Project.
The MoESTD and UNICEF would jointly select 10 municipalities in order to coordinate the Project with complementary activities funded through IMPRES and would participate in the selection of particular services that need to be developed, piloted and standardised.

Project activities were planned to be closely monitored by UNICEF and CIP Center on the basis of the monitoring plan developed at the beginning of the project, through meetings, field visits and regular progress reports.
2. EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

2.1 Purpose, Objectives and Scope

According to the Terms of Reference (ToR), appended as Annex 1 to this report, the Purpose of this summative evaluation is to evaluate the project outcomes and achievements in relation to the project strategy. The Project has finished its implementation in October 2013, according to the plan.

The results of the evaluation are aimed to inform the MoESTD in the further operationalization of the Action Plan for the implementation of the National Strategy of Education Development in Serbia until 2020 and Preschool Education Law, especially as concerns the inclusion of children from vulnerable groups. The knowledge generated by the evaluation is also aimed to be used by LSGs and PIs for the planning of educational services in a more cost-effective manner, but also for identifying innovative solutions to broaden access and improve quality of education provision. At the same time, it is assumed that the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation and the Institute for Advancement of Education will benefit from this evaluation, too, as far as their work on the evaluation of the quality of PIs and development of the foundations of preschool programs are concerned. The lessons learnt and good practices identified by the evaluation are hoped to be useful for professional NGOs working in the area of preschool education and/or representing vulnerable groups (Roma, children with disabilities) in their further work on creating supportive conditions for preschool education in general as well as on broadening its access and quality for vulnerable children.

Last but not least, this evaluation is a forward looking one as it aims to inform discussions among key stakeholders on future areas of action in preschool education in terms of full enforcement of relevant legislation, better planning of educational services, broadened access and improved relevance and quality of preschool education for children aged 3-5.5. The evaluation is also aimed to inform the potential future support of UNICEF and other international organisations, such as the EU, for the continuation of reforms in early childhood education and care, particularly for vulnerable children. The main evaluation findings and recommendations will be presented to the project partners and key stakeholders in January 2014 for consultation and validation.

The specific Objectives of the evaluation are as follows:

**Specific Objective 1**
Provide feedback to UNICEF and its national counterparts (MoESTD, and other stakeholders) on the soundness (defined as relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability) and impact of the project approach in increasing coverage of children from 3 to 5.5 and improving quality of preschool services:
- a. Evaluate Project Impact following Project Outputs,
- b. Reveal good practices and gaps in approaches

**Specific Objective 2**
Provide the IKEA with information on impact of their specific support to expanding preschool services for vulnerable children in Serbia

**Specific Objective 3**
Based on the experience from the project implementation, extract general lessons learned and recommendations aimed at further enhancement of the preschool education and further UNICEF interventions in this area.
As far as the **scope** of the evaluation is concerned, the Project evaluation covers the entire implementation period (May 2011 – October 2013) and all selected municipalities, following the way how the project has been conceptualized in the Project Document, Theory of Change and the Agreement signed with CIP Center. These documents have been used as main reference documents for the evaluation, as they capture the activities undertaken, the expected changes they were to produce and the intended impact, described also through outlined baselines and targets (output and outcome indicators). Progress reports and other data sources listed in the ToR and in Annex 2 as well as the interviews with key stakeholders listed in Annex 3 informed the evaluation and enabled systematic assessment of the project achievements.

Given the fact that the Project has worked in 10 municipalities and considering the available resources and time, field consultations, interviews, focus groups and discussion groups have been carried out only in a selected number of sites, representing 20% of the municipalities targeted by the Project. This sample is described in the following section.

The evaluation has addressed the reducing equity gaps in access to preschool education by the most vulnerable children aged 3-5.5 years.

### 2.2 Methodology

#### 2.2.1 The Methodological Approach

The methodology model which has been used for this evaluation aimed to utilize the best mix of data gathering tools to yield the most reliable and valid answers to the evaluation questions within the limits of resources and availability of data. The evaluation has been carried out in three consecutive phases: Inception/Desk Phase, Field Phase and Synthesis Phase, as described below.

#### I. Inception/Desk Phase

The evaluation commenced on 30 October 2013, after the conclusion of the contract between UNICEF and Promeso Consulting. The Inception Phase has coincided with the Desk Phase as per our technical proposal. UNICEF Serbia and project partners have kindly provided a comprehensive set of documents, relevant for this evaluation.

The initial documentation review was understandably used to inform the evaluation team on the background and basic aspects of the project in order to establish its link with the national policies and Serbia’s international commitments in early childhood development and education. In that respect, the evaluation team reviewed the project documentation (Project Document, Theory of Change, Agreement with CIP Center, baseline study, progress reports of CIP, final report of the architect, key project deliverables) and other relevant information provided by UNICEF, as specified in the ToR. It also reviewed the EC Progress Reports 2010-2013 and other accession-related papers, such as the “National Programme for the Integration of the Republic of Serbia into the European Union” and the Government’s “Needs of the Republic of Serbia for International Assistance in the Period 2011-2013”. Attention was also given to a number of EU education policy documents, notably the EU “Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020)”, and the overarching “EUROPE 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”. The full list of documents reviewed for the purpose of this evaluation is appended as Annex 2 to this report.
This documentation review phase was also used for the development of data collection and evaluation instruments to be used in the field and synthesis phases of the evaluation, including:

- Evaluation Matrix, grouping the evaluation questions under the five evaluation criteria (Annex 4)
- Interview Guides for semi-structured interviews, focus groups and discussion groups (Annex 5)
- Performance Rating scale for Project’s relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability as well as for the overall Project performance
- A Sample of project municipalities for in-depth review, drawn up on the basis of several sampling criteria

The data collection and evaluation instruments were so designed in order to allow the evaluation team check if the main project hypothesis hold true i.e. preschool coverage of excluded children with early childhood education and care will be increased if physical capacities and tailor made programs are made available to children and their parents. They have also enabled the analysis of the further logic behind the project, according to which physical capacities can be increased through low cost reconstruction of existing spaces; new programs, if developed in cooperation with parents and children, will respond to their needs and will facilitate higher interest and enrolment rates; once parental awareness on importance and benefits of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is raised, they will be more interested to enrol their children; once capacitated in the area of ECEC planning and provided with evidence that this approach yields cost-effective results, municipalities will sustain it and expand it to other areas (ToR, page 11).

The Inception/Desk Phase (30 October-5 November 2013) ended with the drafting of the Inception Report, which included a revised methodology, a detailed work plan, the proposed Sample and the full set of data collection and evaluation tools. The Inception Report has been submitted to UNICEF Serbia on 5 November 2013.

II. Field Phase

This phase has been devoted to the collection of data from key stakeholders at national and local levels, based on the evaluation instruments developed during the Inception/Desk Phase. More specifically, the following activities have been carried out:

a) semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders: UNICEF project staff; MoESTD (Preschool Department, Regional School Administrations, Preschool institutions in Smederevo and Aleksinac); CIP Center, as main implementing partner; IKEA, as project donor; Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation; Institute of Psychology (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade); Parliamentary Child Rights Committee; National Education Council; SIPRU; EU Delegation; IMPRES team; relevant NGOs;

b) 3 site visits to Lipe village (Smederevo municipality), Smederevo city and Aleksinac for an in-depth review of the selected municipalities in the Sample, including visits to preschool institutions and kindergartens and observation of the beneficiary children;

c) 2 discussion groups with preschool principals, representatives of Regional School Administrations and representatives of LSGs during the site visits;

d) 2 focus groups with parents in Lipe (Smederevo municipality) and Aleksinac during the site visits;

e) 2 focus groups with preschool educators and expert associates during the site visits in the selected municipalities.

The following methodological aspects need to be highlighted:
• It is common knowledge that each data collection method has its own limitations and can't stand alone; therefore, the evaluation team included in the data collection process a wide array of sources to triangulate the findings and inform the analysis.

• Semi-structured interviews with key informants at national level have been used to collect qualitative data and capture various perspectives on the way the project addressed the complexity of issues in early childhood education reform, how the project worked and how could have been worked better for advancing the implementation of reforms.

• Beyond the interviews at national level, the evaluation team designed a representative sample of municipalities for site visits out of the 10 municipalities in which the project was conducted. The site visits were necessary to conduct interviews with stakeholders and beneficiaries at local level as well as to obtain factual evidence by visiting the respective kindergartens i.e. technical capacities (location, physical adaptation, functioning conditions, working, materials and equipment) and contact with beneficiaries (general mood and satisfaction of children and teachers, current numbers of beneficiaries and employees, etc.). The sampling criteria and justification for the selection of the two municipalities (Smederevo and Aleksinac) can be found below in section 2.2.3.

• The evaluation team wanted to receive in-depth feedback from as many stakeholders as possible during the site visits to the 2 municipalities and therefore it was often not possible to conduct semi-structured interviews with individual respondents. Therefore, the team organised focus groups with teachers and specialised staff working in PIs as well as discussion groups with principals, regional school administrations and LSGs representatives to collect as many different views as possible for assessment of project's functioning and results at local level.

• Contact with direct beneficiaries is crucial for the impact assessment. Given the timeframe for data collection and available resources, it was not feasible to conduct a survey of beneficiaries at the national level. Instead, the evaluation team used the focus groups with parents/families during the site visits to collect vital sample of impressions as well as the self-evaluation survey carried out by CIP Center through the Department of Psychology (Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade) - an excellent source of information and cost saving opportunity.

The Field Phase ended with a debriefing of UNICEF concerning the preliminary findings, conclusions and recommendations of the evaluation team. The debriefing took place on 15 November 2013.

**III. Synthesis Phase**

Information and facts collected during the first two phases have been analysed and integrated in this draft Evaluation Report in line with the "UNICEF Evaluation Report Standards" (Evaluation Office, UNICEF NYHQ, September 2004). The analysis was based on the Evaluation Matrix and the Performance Rating scale developed during the Inception/Desk Phase of the evaluation process. More specifically, the five standard OECD/DAC evaluation criteria, set in the ToR, have been endorsed by the evaluation team in the Inception Report for several reasons:

- they are sufficient to provide a sound assessment of the quality, value and significance of the aid intervention, are all necessary and equally important;
- they are fully appropriate for the evaluation purpose, after careful examination of the project's strategy and theory of change;
- they are in line with internationally recognised best practice for the final evaluation of a project and also consistent with recommended methodologies for evaluating external assistance.

The project evaluation criteria have been approached as follows:

a) **Relevance:** The assessment of the project relevance was based on the analysis of the national and local context, the challenges of the preschool education reform, the international
commitments of Serbia and the needs and priorities of various stakeholders and beneficiaries (e.g. preschool programs, access and quality, capacity building, etc.).

b) **Effectiveness:** Using the Project Document and Theory of change, the evaluation team analysed to what extent the results obtained following the implementation of activities have contributed to the attainment of the planned objectives. Based on evidence collected during the first two phases of the evaluation, the report explains the factors that contributed or hampered the achievement of results in terms of mobilisation and capacity building of selected municipalities for improvement of preschool education, expansion of physical capacities for preschool education in the respective municipalities, development of models of diversified alternative preschool programs, increase of access for the most vulnerable children and influence of parents on the development of new services or further expansion of existing ones. Analysis of coordination and synergy between activities on national and local levels was also done. In addition, the report discusses the indirect effects (positive or negative) of the Project.

c) **Efficiency:** The report analyses how well UNICEF organized itself in delivering its work with regard to managerial and budget efficiency. Analysis of efficiency was based on the assessment of outputs/activities in relation to project inputs, costs and planned timelines. The report also incorporates discussion of issues related to the assessment of cost-effectiveness of funds management. Synergy with similar interventions and projects (most notably the IMPRES project) have been reviewed as well.

d) **Impact:** In the case of impact assessment, the key task of the evaluation team was to examine to what extent the project contributed to changes in the final beneficiaries’ well-being and social inclusion and how it increased local capacities to ensure that more children from vulnerable groups benefit from preschool education in a way which contributes to their social inclusion. The team also assessed if the project has accelerated the pace of change and if it gave direction to reforms in the area of sustainable development of preschool services and early childhood education opportunities for vulnerable children.

e) **Sustainability:** The evaluation team reviewed the sustainability factors in terms of project design, process, implementation and national context. Sustainability was analysed from various perspectives: legal, institutional, capacity building, financial. The report highlights the factors that facilitated or decreased the sustainability prospects of the results of the project.

The Draft Evaluation Report has been released on 5 December 2013. The feedback received from UNICEF and external reviewer has been incorporated in the Final Evaluation Report, submitted on 24 December 2013. The evaluation team will also prepare a paper with the key evaluation findings and recommendations for presentation, consultation of validation by the project partners and main stakeholders in January 2014.

### 2.2.2 The Evaluation Questions and Performance Rating

The ToR specify:

- 26 Evaluation Questions (EQ) linked to the five evaluation criteria (relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability);
- 4 EQ linked to human rights-based approach and several cross-cutting issues.

Based on this, a comprehensive Evaluation Matrix has been developed (Annex 4). All EQs – formulated as in the ToR or slightly reformulated - have been assigned to a specific evaluation criterion (see Table 2 below). In order to streamline the analysis of results and evaluation reporting, several EQs in the ToR have been merged into broader questions. As a result, a number of 27 EQs
have been included in the Evaluation Matrix. For each EQ, one or several judgement criteria have
been included as well as related quantitative and qualitative indicators, as the case. Sources of
information and methods of data collection have been also introduced in the Matrix.

Table 2. Grouping of Questions and Issues in the Evaluation Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>No. of EQ</th>
<th>EQ</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EVALUATION CRITERIA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Relevance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>EQ 1-5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Effectiveness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>EQ 6-11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Efficiency</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>EQ 12-14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Impact</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>EQ 15-19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Sustainability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>EQ 20-24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Child rights, equity, gender and ethical issues</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>EQ 25-27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall rating of the Project performance has been determined by separately evaluating and
ranking the five evaluation criteria specified in the ToR. Each criterion was assigned a scale point
between 0 and 3. A descriptor corresponding to each scale point was also assigned. The average of
the values for the evaluation criteria ratings was the overall project assessment rating. Fixed cut-off
points were used to assign appropriate descriptors (highly satisfactory, satisfactory, moderately
satisfactory, moderately unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory and highly unsatisfactory) to the aggregate
numeric rating. Table 3 below summarizes the approach and shows the relationship between the
evaluation criteria, rating descriptors and scale points.

Table 3. Performance Rating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation criterion</th>
<th>Definition according to the ToR</th>
<th>Rating descriptor</th>
<th>Scale point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relevance</td>
<td>The extent to which the Project responded to the needs of stakeholders and beneficiaries.</td>
<td>Highly relevant Relevant Partly relevant Irrelevant</td>
<td>3 2 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Effectiveness</td>
<td>The extent to which the Project met its outcomes as defined in the Project Document and Theory of Change.</td>
<td>Highly effective Effective Moderately effective Ineffective</td>
<td>3 2 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Efficiency</td>
<td>The extent to which the management of the Project ensured timeliness and efficient utilization of resources.</td>
<td>Highly efficient Efficient Moderately efficient Inefficient</td>
<td>3 2 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Impact</td>
<td>The extent to which the Project increased system’s capacities to ensure that more vulnerable children benefit from diversified preschool services in a way which contributes to their social inclusion.</td>
<td>High impact level Good impact level Low impact level No impact</td>
<td>3 2 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Sustainability</td>
<td>The extent to which the achieved Project outcomes are sustainable.</td>
<td>Most likely Likely Less likely Unlikely</td>
<td>3 2 1 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Highly Satisfactory: overall weighted average is 2.5 or more.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The overall rating was used:

- **Highly Satisfactory** (overall weighted average of 2.5 or more) = The project achieved at least acceptable progress toward all major relevant objectives; very good cost-effectiveness level; high probability that the outcomes and impact will be sustainable; the project has been relevant over its lifetime; no major shortcomings identified.

- **Satisfactory** (overall weighted average between 2.0 and less than 2.5) = the project achieved acceptable progress toward all major relevant objectives; no major shortfall has taken place; outcomes and impact will, on the whole, be sustainable; the project has been relevant over its lifetime and its implementation and operations have been efficient.

- **Moderately Satisfactory** (overall weighted average falls between 1.5 and less than 2.0) = the project achieved acceptable progress toward most of its major relevant objectives; even though there was a shortfall in achieving the estimated outcomes and impact and full sustainability is unlikely, some Project components achieved major benefits, for example, equivalent to at least half the level originally expected; the project has been relevant over its lifetime; no major shortcomings were identified.

- **Moderately Unsatisfactory** (overall weighted average falls between 1.0 and less than 1.5) = the project did not make acceptable progress on most of its major relevant objectives; low probability that achievements will be sustainable; (possibly) changes occurred throughout the life of the project, but no corresponding change of focus has been operated.

- **Unsatisfactory** (overall weighted average falls between 0.5 and less than 1.0) = the project did not make acceptable progress toward most of its major relevant objectives; very high costs; no or very low impact level; unsustainable achievements; major shortcomings were identified.

- **Highly Unsatisfactory** (overall weighted average is less than 0.5) = the project did not make acceptable progress toward any of its relevant objectives; negative effects may be apparent; major shortcomings were identified.

### 2.2.3 Evaluation sample

The Project has been implemented in 10 municipalities in Serbia with the lowest coverage of preschool education. These municipalities were selected by MoESTD in co-operation with UNICEF. Out of the 10 municipalities, 5 were selected as pilot municipalities where preschool educators and expert associates (psychologists, pedagogues, etc.) were provided mentoring and advisory support for the implementation of high quality child-centred educational practices. Apart from desk review of relevant documentation, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and focus/discussion groups, the evaluation methodology includes site visits to a sample of municipalities and preschool institutions for in-depth review. Indeed, given the time constraints of this evaluation and in line with usual evaluation practice as well as based on the ToR and further agreement with UNICEF, a sample of municipalities has been constructed, based on several sampling criteria, as follows:

1. **Pilot LSG** i.e. representation in the sample of both pilot and non-pilot municipalities
2. **Rural/Urban regional balance** i.e. kindergartens located in the targeted municipalities which have been set up with the support of the project in rural and urban areas
3) **Territorial distribution of municipalities** supported by the Project i.e. located in various regions of Serbia (target municipalities are located in Central Serbia, Eastern Serbia and Southern Serbia)

4) **Development level of municipalities** i.e. inclusion of projects implemented by municipalities which belong to various development groups, according to the Serbian legislation\textsuperscript{26}, from Group 1 (most developed, with GDP/capita above the national average) to Group 4 (the most underdeveloped, with GDP/capita below 60% of the national average)

5) **Representation of vulnerable parents in the governance structures of the targeted preschool institutions** i.e. in Boards, Parents’ Councils, etc.

The Sample which resulted after the screening of all municipalities against the sampling criteria above was composed of 2 municipalities (20% of the targeted municipalities): Aleksinac and Smederevo. The features of the sample are presented in Table 4.

### Table 4. The Evaluation Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampling criteria</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Smederevo</th>
<th>Aleksinac</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pilot LSG</td>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural/Urban Regional Balance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Kindergarten in Urban area</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Kindergarten in Rural area</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial distribution of municipalities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Central Serbia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- South-Eastern Serbia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Western Serbia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development level of municipalities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Group 1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Group 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Group 3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Group 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation of vulnerable parents in governance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>structures of the preschool institutions</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 2.2.4 Evaluation constraints - missing

There have been a couple of constraints which were faced by the evaluation team, as follows:

- Lack of availability of the Institute for Advancement of Education for interviews, the national body in charge of the accreditation of programmes for professional development of teachers and for the development of the foundations of preschool programme. The evaluation team has therefore relied on the interviews with UNICEF, MoESTD, CIP Center and the National Education Council to capture to the extent possible the perspective of this important project stakeholder.

- There has been only one LSG representative participating in the discussion groups organised for the purpose of this evaluation; the perspective of LSGs was important to capture, especially related to the sustainability of newly-set up programmes. The evaluation team has therefore relied on the review of MoUs signed with the LSGs and the progress reports of CIP.

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\textsuperscript{26} The Republic of Serbia Government Regulation on Regional Development of Regions and Local Self-governing units for 2013
2.3 Evaluation Design

The evaluation was designed to assess the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of the Project based on the Project Document and Theory of Change, including indicators that the Project planned to use for monitoring performance and attainment of estimated results.

The evaluation used a non-experimental design, as requested by the ToR, whereby the vulnerable children (the so-called “treatment group”) were compared before and after the project implementation. A counterfactual evaluation design has been impeded by the lack of sufficient baseline data both at the level of ‘treatment’ and ‘control’ groups, as explained in various sections of this report, and thus by the difficulties in constructing groups of reasonable numbers to mobilise the power of statistics.

The design of the evaluation methodology combined a Results-Based Management with a Human Rights-Based Approach to programming and evaluation i.e. achievement of planned results through morally-acceptable processes to realise human rights.

The Human Rights-Based Approach applied by the evaluation team was guided by five core principles: normativity, participation, non-discrimination, accountability and transparency, and by the Common Understanding on Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development Cooperation and Programming, approved by the United Nations Development Group in 2003:

- All programmes of development cooperation, policies and technical assistance should further the realization of human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.
- Human rights standards contained in, and principles derived from, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments guide all development cooperation and programming in all sectors and in all phases of the programming process.
- Development cooperation contributes to the development of the capacities of ‘duty bearers’ to meet their obligations and/or of ‘rights-holders’ to claim their rights.

According to the ToR (page 11) of this evaluation, the “rights holders” of the project are children, aged 3 to 5 years, living in rural, economically disadvantaged and border regions, particularly vulnerable children (from Roma communities, poor, children with developmental difficulties and disabilities), parents and parents’ associations.

Attention was also given to the evaluation of the gender mainstreaming and gender equality in the project, in line with Serbia’s international commitments, most notably CEDAW and UNICEF Gender Policy (2010) which states that UNICEF aims to work with partners to pursue gender equality and the equal rights of girls and boys “to contribute to poverty reduction and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals through results-oriented, effective and coordinated action that achieves the protection, survival and development of girls and boys on an equal basis.”

The Evaluation assessed the extent to which the project outcomes contributed to the achievement of children’s rights and addressing of gender sensitive issues. In this respect, the Evaluation Matrix included specific evaluation questions, as follows:

- Does the project actively contributed to the promotion of child rights?
- Does the project reflected gender mainstreaming issues?
- To what extent and how the project ensured an equity focus? Was the design of the Project ethical? How was the balance of cost and benefits to participants (including possible negative impact) considered during the project implementation?

The evaluation used to the extent possible disaggregated data by gender and deprivation profiles.

The evaluation team encouraged active participation and gave the opportunity of all key stakeholders in the evaluation process to provide data and information, indicate the top priorities for the continuation of reforms in the area of early education of vulnerable children as well as to validate the findings and recommendations of this evaluation report. Given evaluation constraints, some stakeholders (e.g. Institute for Advancement of Education) have not been directly involved in the evaluation process; however, their perspective has been considered using indirect forms of assessment and consultation, as explained in chapter 2.2.4 above. Overall, there has been a high level of participation of stakeholders in the evaluation process.

During data collection, the evaluation team ensured that the evaluation process is ethical and that participants in the process can openly express their opinions, protecting the confidentiality of their answers. All interviewed people were informed in advance about the purpose and the themes of the interviews, focus groups and discussion groups, as the case. A special attention was given during the focus groups with parents of vulnerable children to ensure that the questions were well understood and that the evaluation team is sensitive to beliefs, emotions and customs of participants. The evaluation results will be sent to all key stakeholders and presented to project partners and stakeholders in January 2014.
3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

4.1 Relevance

The relevance of the project has been assessed using baseline data and facts, official statistics as well as relevant legal and strategic documents of the Government and Serbia’s international commitments to comply with human rights standards. The basic shortcomings in the area of enrolment of children aged 3-5.5 in preschool education have been already presented in Chapter 1 and they were also clearly highlighted in the Baseline Study carried out by CIP Center at the beginning of the project (see Box 1).

**Box 1. Project Baseline Study**

In 2011, the coverage rate of children aged 3-5.5 enrolled in preschool education was around 24.8% in the 10 target municipalities, with the lowest rate in Novi Pazar and Sjenica (approximately 10%). The average number of children enrolled in kindergartens above available capacity was 94 children.

The number of children paying full price was much higher than the other children, indicating that children enrolled in preschool education were from better-off families, in the belief that “kindergartens primarily serve as places where parents leave their children while they are working”. Data on children registered on waiting lists did not distinguish the most vulnerable ones, being an indication that those children were not given enrolment priority in line with legal provisions.

The main reasons for low coverage were uneven distribution of kindergartens (lack of physical access and affordable transportation) and limited capacities of preschool institutions. “The majority of LSGs see solutions of their problems in building new spaces for children, which is usually very unrealistic since funds are very limited. There is no elaborate idea on how to use existing spaces in more efficient way”. Other reasons were lack of parents’ interest for enrolling children in kindergartens in case there was a family member at home to take care of children, too high cost of services (parents could not pay) and lack of diversity of educational programmes (only whole day programs). Preschool institutions in the 10 municipalities targeted by the project had no experience in the development, organization and implementation of special and specialized programmes.

According to information collected for the purpose of this baseline study, project preschool institutions had very traditional ways of cooperation with families/parents, merely consisting of meetings with parents, whereby parents usually just listen to what preschool teachers have to tell them. On the level of local community, preschool education institutions rarely cooperate with parents associations, where they exist.

*Source: Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, “Baseline Study. Project Kindergartens without Borders”, Belgrade, February 2012*

In the light of the above, the strategy applied by the Project for broadening access to early learning opportunities was highly relevant for the ten target municipalities (Kladovo, Zaječar, Bor, Novi Pazar, Sjenica, Aleksinac, Loznica, Smederevo, Prokuplje and Vranje) which have the lowest average rate of participation of children aged 3-5.5 in preschool education in the country: 24.8% compared to 48.1% at national level. Most of the project sites within these municipalities were located in rural areas where children did not have access to preschool programs before the start of the project. Where kindergartens existed, large number of children of pre-school age were on the waiting lists. Vulnerable children (Roma, children from poor families, children with disabilities) with a much lower participation rate in preschool education, were not given priority despite legal provisions and parents were not that
interested in bringing their children to kindergartens, where these existed. The Project addressed these challenges and needs through increasing the physical capacities for preschool education and developing tailor made education programmes in cooperation with children and parents as well as through improving capacities and skills of the teaching staff and raising the awareness of parents on the importance and benefits of early childhood education and development. Indeed, as highlighted by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency, “high-quality pre-school education brings major benefits both by providing all children with a good basis for lifelong learning and by helping to close the educational gap for children at risk. Investment in pre-primary education is the most efficient tool to address those issues both in term of long-term results and cost-benefit ratios”. It would have been also relevant if the Project targeted the children belonging to IDPs and refugee families living at the outskirts of cities, who are faced by many deprivations and under high risk of exclusion from the education system.

The project was in line with the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System (2009) and the Law on Preschool Education (2010) which provides the possibility to open special and specialised short-term programmes (art.19) for children who are not covered by the preschool education system as well as enrolment priority to children from vulnerable groups (art.13) – a legal provision further strengthened through the By-law on detailed criteria for the determination and prioritising of enrolment of children in preschool institution (2011). The law also states that "Preschool program shall deploy methods for development of a personalized approach in performing educational activities, in order to provide additional support to children, especially to children with disabilities, hospitalized children, children from socio-economically or otherwise disadvantaged areas in the educational group, with special consideration to developmental, educational, health care and socio-cultural needs of the children" (art.16).

The Serbian system of preschool education still has a predominantly social (custodial) perspective of looking after children of employed parents, and as such does not extensively offer diversified programmes that would respond to the developmental needs of children aged 3-5.5. The project was thus very relevant as it provided opportunities and models for diversified preschool programmes, at the same time responding to the need for extended education and capacity building of teachers to apply and organise quality preschool education. “Quality of teachers is undoubtedly a key factor in the quality of education” (National Strategy of Education Development in Serbia until 2020) and the Project made sure that adequate investment was done in developing their knowledge and skills, in cooperation with the IMPRES project. According to the feedback received from the focus groups with teachers and interviews with principals of preschool institutions, the accredited training courses which they attended have been also relevant to prepare the preschool management and teaching staff for creating an inclusive learning environment for all children, regardless of cultural, ethnic or socio-economic status.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, LSGs, as key local duty-bearers, have the primary responsibility for preschool education system, while PPP is covered from the state budget. This funding system raises an important challenge for the LSGs, especially of poor municipalities, such as the ones targeted by the project. Providing resources for capital investment in physical space, for paying the teachers, for covering the running costs of the kindergartens, the transportation of children from remote areas to the nearest preschool facility as well as payment of preschool allowances for vulnerable children is “an extremely demanding task for a poor municipality”, as mentioned by the participants in the discussion group (principals, regional school administrations and municipality representatives). The Project thus responded to the need to equip LSGs with knowledge and options.

for expanding the preschool network at municipality level and thus the coverage of preschool education in a cost-effective manner. It defined a funding model allowing out-of preschool children to engage in preschool education through shorter, 4-hour programmes. The Project was done in close cooperation with the LSGs of ten municipalities, thus taking the needs and opportunities into account within the preparation and implementation of the project and being consistent with the local plans for the development of preschool education.

At policy level, the Project supported the MoESTD, key national duty-bearer, to become aware and work on increase in the coverage of inclusive preschool education as one of the national priorities and long-term objective for the development of education. As put it by a key informant interviewed for the purpose of this evaluation: “It targeted a very important part of the education system”. The Project provided important building blocks for the development of future standards of alternative and inclusive services of preschool institutions, thus assisting the Ministry of Education to implement the provisions of the Law on Preschool Education (art.16 and 19). We refer to descriptions of special and specialized programmes, guidelines for preschool institutions for the development and implementation of new programmes, a booklet with examples, accreditation of training packages, etc. The support provided for the implementation of Standards for self-evaluation in preschool education was an additional value of the Project in operationalizing policies and strategies adopted at national level.

The Project has thus been in line with national strategies, in particular the Plan of Action for Children (2004) and the National Strategy of Education Development in Serbia until 2020, which states that “all children from 4 to 5.5 years of age should be provided with free use of shortened (half-day) high-quality educational programmes during the school year”. It also addressed the shortcomings identified by the CRC Committee and European Commission in its Progress Reports, which urged the country to ensure equal access of children belonging to vulnerable groups, i.e. Roma, poor children, children with disabilities, children without parental care to inclusive and culturally appropriate services, including early childhood development and education. Indeed, the Project has been so designed to provide early learning opportunities to vulnerable children, as identified in the baseline study and various national strategies and reports. The Project has been also consistent with current European strategies, most notably the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) which calls for "increasing participation in early childhood education as a foundation for later educational success, especially in the case of those from disadvantaged backgrounds".

Last but not least, the Project was relevant for the priorities of UNICEF Serbia, implementing body, as addressed in the Country Programme Action Plan 2011-2015 (outcome 1, output 1.1). It was also relevant for the mission of IKEA, the main donor of the Project, whose representative in Serbia stated the following: "We believe that every child deserves a place to call home, a healthy start in life, a quality education and a sustainable family income. Therefore, the Project is very aligned with our view on developing local communities and supporting children".

As far as parents are concerned, the Project responded to two main challenges of the preschool education in Serbia. Firstly, parents so far had few opportunities to be consulted in the process of developing plans and programmes for the work of Preschool Institutions (PIs). The kindergarten was mainly perceived as a social service for working parents, and even though strong educational perspective was present in PIs, the programmes were still developed exclusively by the PI staff. The Project responded to this challenge by actively involving the parents in the 10 target municipalities in

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the design and implementation of programmes. From the very beginning of the Project, the parents were asked to respond to a questionnaire related to their needs and interests of children as well to their willingness to participate in the design and implementation of programs. According to the CIP Center's Progress report February/May 2012, information obtained from parents was the starting point for planning activities, but also for the organization of operation of kindergartens. This has been confirmed by the feedback received from the focus groups with parents organised during the site visits. The second important challenge was the lack of awareness and motivation of parents to enrol their children in preschool education, particularly those from vulnerable groups. The Project addressed this challenge by training and raising awareness of parents, as duty-bearers, on the value of preschool education. In the case of unemployed parents, the support was tailored based on their various needs and interests, as detailed in Box 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2. Relevance of the Project for Unemployed Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During the site visits and focus groups with parents in Lipe and Aleksinac and on the occasion of interviews at national level with key stakeholders, as well as based on CIP Center's Baseline Study, the evaluation team identified three categories of unemployed parents whose needs were addressed by the Project in a targeted and tailored way:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Unemployed parents who wanted to enrol their children in preschool education, but whose access was denied by the respective municipality PI (before the project), which gave priority to employed parents: the Project provided opportunities for enrolment of children of these parents in the new kindergartens set up during its implementation; it also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Unemployed parents who did not want to enrol their children in preschool education (before the project), motivated by the fact that they can stay with their children at home: the Project increased their awareness concerning the benefits of early education for child development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Unemployed parents who enrolled their children in 4-hour programmes (during the project), but rather wanted full-time programme: the Project raised their understanding about the fact that parents have a fundamental role in the education of their children and should not delegate this role entirely to the kindergarten.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main factors which facilitated the high relevance of the Project were its strategy to engage in the design and implementation of the Project a wide range of key stakeholders at national and local levels (Government, LSGs, PI's, professionals, parents, Parliamentary bodies, think tanks, academia, donors, NGOs); engagement of UNICEF Project staff in policy and legal framework development in the education sector, which enabled the Project to keep abreast and adjust to emerging national priorities and to new standards, procedures and rules; design based on solid studies and researches commissioned in the past by UNICEF Serbia, academia and think tanks as well as on European-level evidence and facts concerning the importance of early childhood education and development.

4.2 Effectiveness

The Project envisaged to achieve two results and six outputs which were assessed by the evaluation team and results presented below.

Result 1: To increase coverage with preschool education for children aged 3-5 with the focus on the most vulnerable
Output 1.1 - Preschool facilities in 10 municipalities adapted and equipped with didactical materials

This output has been fully achieved through rehabilitation and adaptation of available premises provided by the target municipalities and through their endowment with necessary furniture, equipment, didactical materials, toys and consumables. In one municipality (Loznica), an additional space has been adapted due to the initiative of parents from Lešnica in cooperation with the PI and the parents from Jadranka Lešnica. Premises meet the accessibility standards for persons with disabilities and are equipped in most cases in accordance with the needs of children and their families. The environment created is safe and stimulating for the development and learning of children aged 3-5.5 years. Courtyards in 8 project locations/municipalities have been decorated and equipped with swings, slides and seesaws due to a donation of Novak Đoković Foundation, which was approached by the Project implementation team to join forces and contribute to the arrangement of playgrounds. There are however two issues identified by the evaluation team:

- the capacity utilization rate of the adapted premises is only 88%, as reported by CIP Center, given the fact that in some cases there is only one group of children using the space for 4 hours a day;
- the quality of rehabilitation works has not always been optimal.

Output 1.2 - 1,500 children from target groups covered (enrolled into) by organised early learning and care services

This output has been only partially achieved, as only 713 (47.5%) out of planned 1,500 children were enrolled in the new programmes (see Box 3).

Box 3. The Net Enrolment Effect of the Project

As a result of the Project, 713 children aged 3-5.5 years were enrolled in the school years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 in the alternative (special) programmes developed by the Project and benefitted for the first time of preschool education.

This is a clearly net effect of the Project. According to the data provided by the CIP Center to the evaluation team, 60.4% of the beneficiary children are from rural areas, 6% are Roma children, 4% are children from very poor families and 1.5% are children with disabilities. As far as education of their parents is concerned, the same report specifies that 69% of parents have secondary education, while 22% have primary education or have not completed primary education.

It might well be that these figures were over-estimated from the very beginning, as also acknowledged by UNICEF and CIP Center, all the more since the actual enrolment of children commenced one year after the project started, due to the need to first finalise the physical adaptation of premises. At the same time, the likely insufficient local knowledge on how to map these children correlated to some parents’ or even grandparents’ reservation to put the child in the kindergarten might have impeded their full identification for admission purposes. It is also to be mentioned that there was no proper correlation between the estimated enrolment figures and available budget. Indeed, enrolment of 1,500 children would have required much larger facilities and probably 2-3 times higher investment in the rehabilitation works, which the project budget did not allow it.

31 This aspect has been also signaled by UNICEF in its second donor report: “Some LSGs have not yet maximized the utilization of their new capacities (such as Vranje, Prokuplje and Veliki Izvor)” (Progress Report June 2012 – June 2013, page 6).
32 In Lipe (Smederevo), for instance, the premises suffer of persistent damp, bathrooms odours, unsecure entrance tiling, vicinity of cattle breeding neighbour with associated hygienic problems.
33 If rehabilitated capacity is used 88% (for 464 children enrolled in 2013-2014), it means that full use would allow a maximum number of 527 children, which is almost three times less the envisaged number of 1,500 children.
Result 2: To improve quality of preschool education for children aged 3-5 with the focus on most vulnerable

Output 2.1 - Two types of alternative preschool services developed, piloted, documented and ready for scaling up

This output has been fully achieved, as the Project developed, piloted and documented models of alternative (special) preschool programs and prepared the ground for their scaling up. The models of alternative preschool programmes are recognised in the Law on Preschool Education as "special programmes" and are part of the so-called Model A (child-centred programmes). The system of PIs traditionally implements whole-day group work with children, with standard methodology of working with "mainstream" children.

The Project contributed significantly to the development of new special programmes, targeting larger and more diversified groups of children of mixed ages, with a duration of four hours. According to various European researches, such programs are the most effective in relation to the overall child development and lifelong education, especially when it comes to children from most vulnerable groups. The Project tested whether LSGs in poor areas can financially support these programmes.

Two models have been developed and tested in 5 pilot municipalities:

- **M1 Kindergartens as family centres and local community centres** – creating opportunities (in villages or small towns with no or very limited preschool programs, piloted in Zaječar/Veliki Izvor and Loznica/Lešnica)
- **M2 Playroom** – expanding the offer / choice (in towns with whole-day preschool programs, piloted in Vranje, Aleksinac and Sjenica)

The model programmes put the child in the centre of educational activities and applied individualized, culturally-diverse approaches. They were designed on the basis of a survey conducted before the beginning of the first enrolment school year (2012/2013) on the interests and needs of children and parents. The model programmes are accompanied by Protocols created to assess the children in terms of independence, companionship and accepting rules in a group. The implementation of these new programmes brought important lessons learnt that were presented in the form of two manuals (developed in cooperation with the IMPRES project) for professionals and LSG employees and distributed to all 160 PIs across Serbia: a) Guide for Creating Diversified Preschool Programs for Children from Vulnerable Groups, and b) Practicum of Good Practices in Developing and Establishing Special and Specialized Programs. Video, photo and other project documentation were produced to document the implementation of the 2 model programs in the project locations/municipalities.

Output 2.2 - Training modules for the 2 alternative early learning services developed and accredited at the national level

This output has been fully achieved. Three training modules "Expanding competences of professionals to develop, implement and document alternative (special) preschool education programs for children aged 3-5.5 years" have been developed in cooperation with the expert team of IMPRES. The evaluation team has been provided with the full set of training materials and was able to check the curriculum content and the training methodology, aids and learning evaluation tools. These training modules offer the possibility to develop several services for children and their families, in accordance with the Standards of requirements for implementation of special programs in preschool education (2012) and the Regulation on detailed requirements concerning types, methods of implementation and
funding of specialized programs and other forms of work and services implemented by the Preschool Institution (2013). All 3 training models were accredited by the MoESTD (54 hours of professional training).

In addition, PI Harvard brochures were disseminated (lifelong health, the importance of early childhood reading, brain development), as well as leaflets containing information on the high-quality educational practice (International Step-by-Step Association’s Principles of Quality Pedagogy).

Output 2.3 - 300 preschool professional staff trained for implementation of alternative services

This output has been overly achieved as 314 professionals benefitted of direct training through the Project. It empowered the LSGs in 10 project municipalities to improve access and quality of preschool education for children from marginalized groups. According to CIP Center’s draft Final Report and interviews on site, LSG representatives participated in several meetings, trainings and conferences, having the opportunity to learn about the importance of LSG support for early childhood development from the perspective of high returns for the community on long run. Attendance of training "Optimization of Preschool Institution Network", conducted in cooperation with IMPRES, enhanced their knowledge on practical solutions that could be employed for increasing the coverage of children aged 3-5.5 years in preschool education. These trainings were also attended by PI principals, centres for social work, community health centres and NGOs (37 participants overall), with the goal of mobilising and capacitating the municipalities for the improvement of preschool education provision. Following these overall capacity building activities, PIs gained an instrument to collect data on the interests and needs of children and parents and got empowered to plan programs for children on the basis of needs assessment. A database for each project location was formed and analysis of availability of services for children aged 3-5.5 years and their families was performed using LSG and PI questionnaires. Municipalities ensured space and funds for rehabilitation of premises and functioning of diversified (special) programmes, which have become part of 10 PI networks, respectively included in the annual PI work plans approved by the LSGs, thus accountable for their quality.

A number of 281 preschool educators (10 training courses), crucial duty-bearers, were trained in the use of diversified (special) programmes developed by the Project, the course being entitled "Begin from the Beginning – the Beginning is Important – Support Early Growth, Development and Learning" CIP Center's accredited training programme. All participants received certificates of participation for 24 hours of accredited professional training. The courses were rated with the average score of 3.94 (out of maximum 4), which was confirmed by the educators, associate experts, PI principals and other participants who were interviewed by the evaluation team during the site visits to Lipe, Smederevo and Aleksinac. Trainings were perceived as very useful for acquiring practical knowledge and skills on the use of new learning methods and engage parents:

"I learnt the apple and the blue rabbit play exercises"
"Each day I start the programme with the self-presentation of children. This is an example of practical things that I learnt at the training and it works wonderfully"
"Step-by-step principles and methods are extremely useful for my work"
"We are now much better prepared to work with children from various ages and individualise our approach based on their interests"
"I know how to engage parents and make them interested in the education of their children"
"I understood that children and parents are our partners!"

A network of local trainers was established, composed of 33 preschool teachers, expert associates and principals who participated in a Training-of-Trainers (ToT) course on the same subject. The
quality of the training was highly valued by the participants - the average rating was 3.83 out of maximum 4. The value of the offered contents to improve their own practice was particularly emphasized (3.96). Feedback from focus groups during the site visits confirmed the high level of satisfaction of participants. Using the horizontal learning principle and cascaded training, these 33 trainers carried out additional training courses for professionals from other 19 municipalities, as detailed later in the report. Out of them, 26 preschool educators have been further trained on the newly-created training modules “Expanding competences of professionals to develop, implement and document diversified preschool education programs for children aged 3-5 years” and became special programmes’ mentors. Mentors have provided support to peers from other municipalities for creating a learning environment which encourage child development, based on a holistic approach of the needs and interests of the child and on parents’ engagement in all aspects of the educational process.

PI expert associates attended all trainings and disseminated the acquired knowledge and experience on the occasion of their regular activities and during the professional councils/panels, thus empowering the preschool educators working in their overall network to deliver high-quality education to other 2,500 children (indirect beneficiaries of the Project).

Output 2.4 - 500 parents and 5 parents’ associations have benefited from training on how to support children’s early development and sustain demand for quality services

This output has been partially achieved as only 224 (44.8%) parents directly benefitted from training and only informal groups of parents were formed in the pilot municipalities.

A number of 5 trainings for parents were delivered on the topic “Parents as agents of child’s best interest” in cooperation with the MoESTD. The training was attended by a total of 105 parents from pilot municipalities (Loznica/Lešnica, Vranje, Aleksinac, Zaječar/Veliki Izvor and Sjenica). Another training for 119 parents was conducted, having as main topic the advocacy for the importance of early growth and development of children. Although the training target was not achieved and no parents’ associations were set up, it is worth mentioning the intensive efforts of the Project team to engage parents, as duty-bearers and rights-holders at the same time, in the implementation of the Project and provide empowering opportunities to take part in the education of their children, advocate for the importance of early childhood development and take actions directed at creating supportive environment for children at early age, all the more since in Serbia, parents are rarely involved in the decision-making or programme development in PIs. The Project’s innovative approach included parents in the process of development of programmes, which brought relevance and value added to the intervention and raised awareness of all stakeholders (LSGs, PIs and parents) that such cooperation may bring significant results. The project initiated cooperation and exchange between parents, professionals and NGOs from 26 towns, towards representation of interests of children and improvement of conditions for early childhood growth in their communities.

Review of project documentation and deliverables, interviews and sites visits provided a number of significant examples and facts on parents’ engagement and empowerment:

- consultation of parents prior to the design of the diversified (special and specialized) programmes; working hours, priority aims and task of the programs, topics to be addressed were defined based on consultations with parents;

34 Each PI coordinates several kindergartens in the respective municipality.
35 It might have been estimated in relation to the planned number of 1,500 children (direct beneficiaries). The underachievement of the latter probably influenced the underachievement of the planned number of parents, too.
- creation in each kindergarten (project location) of a parent corner or notice boards for communication with parents, where suggestions/desires are collected, joint agreements are exhibited and parents’ interests to take over tasks in joint work are registered;

- organisation by the kindergartens of workshops where both parents and children took part: making toys, spending time with pets, using natural materials, and the like;

- participation of parents in the focus group during which the causes for limited participation of children from vulnerable groups were discussed;

- development in partnership with PIs of mini-projects aimed at creating a supportive environment for early childhood education and development - ECED (playgrounds created in 3 municipalities, media library in 1 municipality and forming a similar children’s group in the neighbouring village);

- exchange of experience with parents from other 20 municipalities during an event organized by CIP Center "Parent (inter) Action";

- participation in the special programme evaluation during the project implementation (material "Voices from the Field"), as well as in the self-evaluation process conducted by the Institute of Psychology (University of Belgrade);

- three brochures for parents were produced on the importance of game at an early age and learning through play; the importance of early childhood development programme (especially for children from vulnerable groups) and the messages that children send to their parents.

Based on the statements of 119 parents, involved in the survey within internal project evaluation, parents recognize the importance of the program that promote early childhood development and see socialization of children and learning in the company of peers as the greatest benefit. Project reports state that about 25% of parents of children enrolled in diversified (special and specialized) programs in pilot municipalities organised themselves in informal parent groups and were directly involved in creating programs, planning and implementation of activities with children and creating stimulating environment for child growth.

Overall, 300 families (around 600 parents) of children enrolled in special and specialized programs were involved in some activities through meetings, participation in planning work with children, space decoration, participation in information events. The focus groups with parents in Lipe and Aleksinac confirmed both their engagement in the implementation of various activities as well as their satisfaction concerning the empowerment opportunities which also enable them to get organised and advocate for their children’s rights.

Box 4 presents significant additional (unplanned) contributions and unexpected effects of the Project towards improvement of preschool education at local and national level.

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36 Since September 2013, 40 children are enrolled.
Box 4. Unexpected Results of the Project

A significant unexpected effect was **job creation** i.e. 16 jobs for preschool teachers in the kindergartens set up by the Project. The educators and principles interviewed during the site visits have confirmed that another unexpected effect of the Project was also the **retention of current jobs** in the existing underused preschool facilities, where 17 new groups of children aged 3-5.5 years from 27 different villages belonging to Aleksinac, Bor, Kladovo and Smederevo municipalities were formed, as a result of Project dissemination activity and multiplication of developed special and specialized programmes.

The ToTs and the informal network of trainers which were spontaneously created during the Project have led to the **training of additional 440 professionals** (preschool educators, expert associates, LSGs, community health centres, centres for social work representatives), apart from the ones who were the target of the Project.

Other unplanned effect of the Project was the **adaptation of an additional place for 2 educational groups** in Jadranska Lešnica following a parent initiative, thus raising the total of rehabilitated locations to 11 compared to 10 according to the Project Document. Also, as a result of good contacts between the implementation team and Novak Djoković Foundation, **playgrounds in 8 project locations** were designed and equipped (swings, slides, seesaws) for out-door activities with children and parents.

But probably the most significant unexpected result of the Project was the **continuation of the educational route** by the first ‘generation’ of graduates of diversified programmes implemented by the Project. Indeed, the first 249 children aged 3-5.5 years, who benefitted of the Project in the school year 2012-2013, enrolled in the PPP in the following 2013-2014 school year, most of them being from rural areas and who would have otherwise run the risk of being left out of the compulsory preschool education system.

The main factors which increased the effectiveness of the Project were the top-level expertise and experience of CIP Center and its excellent connections with the preschool network, MoESTD, UNICEF and other donors; the in-house technical expertise of UNICEF which ensured strategic guidance and quality assurance of the overall Project; the training and mentoring approaches which addressed the existing challenges and introduced novelties in a much larger milieu than the one directly targeted by the Project; exchange of best practices and experience between municipalities which helped address the challenges by peer-to-peer learning; LSGs and PIs commitment in the project municipalities to support the introduction of new modalities of preschool education delivery. Over-estimation of the number of direct beneficiaries (children and parents) for the given time and resources for implementation, possibly combined with ineffective mapping processes of vulnerable groups in some municipalities and parents’ resistance to enrolment, have led to the under-achievement of planned beneficiaries.

### 4.3 Efficiency

UNICEF implemented the Project in partnership with CIP Center, a highly experienced organisation not only in ECED, but also in project management, which was in charge of conceptualisation and implementation of thematic segments of the project.

The partners have succeeded in implementing all activities in a generally timely manner and the feedback from all stakeholders confirm that activities and management of the project were conducted professionally and with high quality. There have been only slight delays in the finalisation of the rehabilitation works due to more time needed for tendering and slower release of required funding (e.g.Kladovo, Novi Pazar) as well as in the finalisation of the two new models given later than expected adoption of the Rulebook on special and specialized programmes. Trainings of trainers were
also postponed until Pirot municipality (on the initial list of 10 municipalities) has been replaced with Smederevo.

CIP Center was required to submit progress reports on a regular basis, while reports were also collected from the local level relating to the rehabilitation of preschool premises. Monitoring went smoothly and assisted adaptation of project strategies to meet the arising needs in the field. UNICEF, at its turn, released annual reports to the donor concerning the overall Project.

UNICEF has carried out the results monitoring of the Project on the basis of the Project Document, Agreement concluded with the CIP Center and regular progress reports. The Theory of Change was produced retrospectively for the purpose of this evaluation, while the Project Document did not include a logframe either. Project monitoring was also done through regular meetings with the CIP Center aimed to discuss strategic developments, achievements and challenges; coordination meetings with the MoESTD, IMPRES project team, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation as well as other key preschool education stakeholders; field visits to several project localities; meetings with parents and principals of PIs; and last but not least, direct involvement in the resolution of challenging situations. Annex 6 provides a list of results monitoring.

Financial monitoring was based on regular financial reports and visits to the main implementing partner.

As far as financial reporting is concerned, there were financial reports, with expenditures denominated in RSD, attached to each of the six progress reports of the CIP Center. UNICEF has also included budget utilization reports, with expenditures denominated in USD, within the yearly donor reports. The financial reports of both organisations had a very general format, with expenditures broken down per broad groupings of activity and no narrative budget expenditure report attached. The evaluation team has however been informed that UNICEF and its implementing partner have strictly followed the donor requirements for budget reporting and breakdown. In order to allow a more informed analysis of the financial aspects of the Project, the evaluation team was provided with a detailed budget of the CIP Center-implemented components of the Project (284,077 USD, 39.6% of the project budget), reflecting the allocated funding and expenditures (October 2011-September 2013) per various types of budget categories, with unit costs and number of units evidentiated in a detailed way. UNICEF has also provided the evaluation team a financial overview of the entire Project (status November 2013), with money allocated/committed per activities and sub-activities (see Annex 7). This different approach in presenting financial data has raised some difficulties in the analysis of the use of financial resources, since there is no clear and straightforward correspondence between the CIP Center and UNICEF budgets37. Uniform and more detailed budget breakdowns and reporting are areas in need of reflection and improvement in the future projects.

The financial data provided by the CIP Center nevertheless indicates that there was pretty straightforward spending as per approved budget from the donor and according to the agreement signed with UNICEF38, with funds spent in a cost-effective manner. For instance, the unit cost of training per trainee per day was within the range of 105-180 USD, in line with usual rates on the Serbian market for similar types of courses, as testified by various key informants interviewed for the purpose of this evaluation. The daily fee rates paid to short-term local consultants and trainers

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37 For instance, both CIP and UNICEF budgets include a budget line called “Web and media presentation”; however, CIP budgets 2,400 USD, while UNICEF an amount of 7,895 USD. The same applies to budget category “Establishing Local Parents’ Groups for providing Support for Children of Early Age”, the figures being 560 USD, respectively 3,960 USD.

38 There is one exception i.e. a monthly fee paid to the CIP Center Executive Director whose role in the Project is unclear in the light of the composition of the project team described in the agreement concluded between UNICEF and CIP (point 11. Project management and coordination)
involved in the CIP Center-managed components were maximum 120 USD, which is below the fees usually paid in other donor-financed projects.\textsuperscript{39}

The financial data provided by UNICEF for the overall Project demonstrate that the expenditures were in line with the Project Document, agreed budget and contractual obligations to the donor. The evaluation team noted that 25.8\% of funds were used for “project support, technical support, office work and logistics” (see Annex 7). The breakdown provided by UNICEF to the evaluation team\textsuperscript{40} indicate that this budget line mainly financed programmatic support (e.g. preschool costing study, reconstruction consultancy fee, additional costs of preschool facilities adaptation, project promotion activities, in-house technical expertise). The same budget line has also covered management and operational support, which represented 11.3\% of the overall budget of the Project. This is in line with the usual thresholds for administrative costs in internationally-financed projects.

The evaluation team has identified several efficiency features of the Project, such as the rehabilitation of existing unused premises belonging to the municipalities to be converted in preschool facilities, financial contribution of most of LSGs to the cost of rehabilitation works (41\%, see Table 5) as well as payment of salaries of the newly-employed preschool educators and the running costs for the functioning of kindergartens set up by the Project by the municipalities from the very beginning.

Table 5. Contribution of LSGs to the Rehabilitation Works

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>LSG (USD)</th>
<th>UNICEF (USD)</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Aleksinac</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bor</td>
<td>-\textsuperscript{41}</td>
<td>8,400</td>
<td>8,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kladovo</td>
<td>5,600</td>
<td>16,640</td>
<td>22,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Loznica</td>
<td>9,960</td>
<td>15,801</td>
<td>25,761</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Novi Pazar</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>18,800</td>
<td>44,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Prokuplje</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8,400</td>
<td>8,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Sjenica</td>
<td>3,700</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>13,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Smederevo</td>
<td>26,230</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>36,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Vranje</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Zajećar</td>
<td>6,650</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>16,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>82,140</td>
<td>118,041</td>
<td>200,181</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A distinct efficiency feature of the project was the development of models of 4-hour special programmes adapted to be used for groups of children of mixed ages. These models were much appropriate for (remote) localities where the number of children would not justify the formation of a group or setting up a kindergarten, and for allowing the possibility to enrol 2 groups in the same premises (in two shifts) for a better use of premises (although the overall utilization rate is 88\%). This approach has been clearly evidentiated in the Project Document (page 7): “The main risk is related to underdeveloped fiscal decentralization schemes that are needed to support local governments in delivery of pre-school services. In order to take that into account, the modelling of alternative services will document different financing possibilities and will explore cost-effectiveness of traditional public

\textsuperscript{39} The Team Leader of this evaluation has also conducted in February-May 2013 a large evaluation of the Official Development Assistance provided by the foreign donors to Serbia in the area of education, health, social inclusion, labour, employment and youth policies. According to various donors who were interviewed, the daily fee rate for local short-term consultancy is around 150-200 USD.

\textsuperscript{40} E-mail of UNICEF dated 18 December 2013.

\textsuperscript{41} According to the Memoranda of Understanding signed by UNICEF with each LSG and PI, LSGs were not obliged to contribute funding to the rehabilitation works, but just to provide and maintain the space for the realisation of pre-school programmes and get the necessary permits for the adaptation of the kindergarten/ space and playground that is being used.
pre-school services vs. more flexible alternative services that would potentially cover more children for the same amount of available resources”.

It is to be mentioned that research and practice have shown that a 4-hour preschool education per day is enough for the normal development of the child and that putting together mixed ages (also allowed by the Law on Preschool Education, art. 31) is natural, since children anyhow use to live with their younger or older bothers and sisters, let alone the other benefits. It is also much cheaper than the other programmes functioning in the Serbian preschool education system, as documented by a recent study commissioned by UNICEF with EU support and carried out in almost all municipalities of Serbia by a team of specialists from the Yale University, University of Bath and University of Belgrade (Department of Psychology), see Table 6 below.

Table 6. Unit Costs of Preschool Education per Child per Year by Type of Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of preschool</th>
<th>Government in RSD</th>
<th>Parents in RSD</th>
<th>Total in RSD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 hours (4 hours or less)</td>
<td>37,584</td>
<td>9,196</td>
<td>46,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half day (4-8 hours)</td>
<td>75,169</td>
<td>18,792</td>
<td>93,961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full day (8 hours or more)</td>
<td>112,753</td>
<td>28,188</td>
<td>140,941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of preschool</th>
<th>Government in EUR</th>
<th>Parents in EUR</th>
<th>Total in EUR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 hours (4 hours or less)</td>
<td>392</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half day (4-8 hours)</td>
<td>783</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full day (8 hours or more)</td>
<td>1,175</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>1,468</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As seen in the table, the unit cost/child of the shortest program that lasts 3-4 hours is maximum 500 EUR per year. The unit cost of the half-day program (6-8 hours) is about 1,000 EUR, while the cost of full-day programme (more than 8 hours) is about 1,500 EUR per year. The use of local experts has also increased the efficiency of the Project, as already explained above. The strategy of using trained trainers for horizontal learning and of using mentors for peer support has been most efficient.

The most significant efficiency characteristic of the Project is however given by its objective, i.e. investment in early learning and development which brings about enormous returns in the future for the individuals, communities and society generally. The initial investment in premises and the development of special programmes and training modules would be quickly recovered in the coming years as more and more children will enrol in the kindergarten and benefit of child-centred, high quality programmes. In other words, education and development returns in the future would pay for initial investment. This has been already demonstrated during the lifetime of the Project not only in terms of steady enrolment of the same cohort of children in the new programmes (kindergartens), but of an amazing increase of 86% in the number of enrolled children from school year 2012-2013 (249 children) to school year 2013-2014 (464 children)!

The Project encouraged synergies with other interventions in the area of preschool education. The Project cooperated closely with the EU IMPRES project, which resulted in multiplication of good practices in larger number of communities and in coherent and mutually reinforcing approaches and methodologies (see Box 5).

42 According to self-evaluation results and feedback from the site visits: tolerance development, raised sensitivity for the needs of others, better group coherence, faster adaptation of children to kindergarten, faster mental progress, developing responsibility to others and to duties, increase of self-esteem, etc.
The Project attracted funds from Novak Đoković Foundation for reconstruction/rehabilitation of courtyards for children and provision of outdoor equipment, which was a welcome addition of 22,658 USD to the funds available for the project. Moreover, trainers and mentors disseminated their acquired knowledge and practices to LSGs and PI employees involved in the Project “School of Life – Together for Childhood” of Novak Đoković Foundation, where the CIP Centre is the implementing partner.

The main factors which increased the efficiency were the Project strategy to use existing premises for rehabilitation/adaptation; the special programmes design which increased coverage and better use of physical capacities; the training methodology (horizontal learning approaches and cascaded trainings) which enlarged considerably the number of professionals who benefitted of training; local commitment and efficient cooperation between LSG and the PI which speeded up the implementation of the project in the respective municipality; excellent cooperation and synergy with other donors’ projects, interests and resources. Efficiency has been hampered, at the same time, by some delays in the adaptation of space and later approval of the Rulebook governing the development of diversified programmes. More detailed financial reporting for the overall Project, disaggregation of expenditures

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**Box 5. "Kindergartens without Border“ – "IMPRES": An outstanding practice of synergy and cooperation between projects**

The Project “Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children” achieved important synergies with the EU IMPRES project, which aimed to broaden access to preschool education through support in optimisation of the preschool network, improvement of the legal framework, increased access for the most children and improved preschool quality in 15 municipalities. The two projects agreed on the ‘distribution’ of municipalities in order to optimise the interventions and extend good practices to as many as possible municipalities across Serbia.

Synergy and efficient use of resources have been achieved by involving common experts in joint activities (national experts provided by UNICEF and international experts provided by IMPRES), same approach and same materials in all 25 municipalities, joint meetings and training courses, joint mentoring of PIs and educators; free trainings provided either by the Project or by IMPRES to all 25 municipalities on the importance of early education, respectively in-service education for preschool educators. Thanks to IMPRES, the Project had the opportunity to learn from EU countries’ experience in developing early learning opportunities. Experts from both projects were part of the government expert group for developing diversified programmes.

According to interviews with both implementation teams, cooperation was done at four levels: a) cooperation between experts; b) joint development of training modules and guides; c) joint trainings; d) strengthening PIs and preschool educators to cooperate among themselves. As interviewed IMPRES expert put it: “There were 25 municipalities, not 10 plus 15”, functioning as a micro-network for diversified educational services for vulnerable children. At local level, both projects are well-known as a good practice example of cooperation: “It is the first time in Serbia when 2 projects with similar objectives cooperated so closely and successfully” (interviewee from Aleksinac). At its turn, UNICEF project team confirmed that without cooperation, the two projects might have sent different messages to local stakeholders, creating confusion and methodological implementation flaws.

However, the time wasted for adjustment and adaptation of the 2 projects to each other, could have been avoided in case this was done from the very beginning; gaps would have been easier to identify and cover, sensitivities of donors and partners would have been catered more easily.

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43 For instance in Smederevo, where the project started much later than in other locations, given the fact that Smederevo replaced Pirot municipality which declined participation in the Project. Commitment of LSG and PI in Smederevo overcome the late start of the project and implementation was done according to agreed calendar. In Aleksinac, a very poor municipality, managed to find the money for own contribution to the Project and even expand the network with 2 additional groups of children from remote areas.
and monitoring of targets in accordance to a theory of change developed at the beginning of the Project would have facilitated the monitoring and evaluation of the Project.

4.4 Impact

The Project has contributed to the overall increase of the coverage rate of children aged 3-5.5 in preschool education in the project municipalities, from 24.5% in 2011 to 33.1% in 2013, as illustrated by Table 7 below.

Table 7. Coverage rate of Children aged 3-5.5 years in Project Municipalities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Coverage rate of 3-5.5 children (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Aleksinac</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Vranje</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Zaječar</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Loznica</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Sjenica</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Bor</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Prokuplje</td>
<td>19.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Kladovo</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Smederevo</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Novi Pazar</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average: 24.5% in 2011, 33.1% in 2013

Sources: Information provided by the CIP Center based on: * Data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and ** Data collected from Preschool Institutions from project municipalities; Average calculated by evaluators.

Since the enrolment in the new kindergartens running special programmes developed by the Project actually started in October 2012, after the finalisation of rehabilitation works, the contribution of the Project to an increase of 8.5% of the coverage rate in just one year seems to be a significant value added.

In terms of net impact (attribution), the Project increased the enrolment rate in the PIs of project municipalities by 13% on average, with big variations between municipalities i.e. from 5% in the PIs in Veliki Izvor (Zaječar municipality) and Bor to 181% in the PI in Sjenica, the detailed figures being presented in Table 8.

Table 8. Enrolment of Children 3-5.5 years in Preschool Institutions before and after the Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>No. of children enrolled before the project (October 2011)</th>
<th>No. of children enrolled at the end of the project (October 2013)</th>
<th>Increase in enrolment rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aleksinac</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loznica (Lešnica)</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sjenica</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>181%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vranje</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaječar (Veliki Izvor)</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prokuplje</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kladovo</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Beneficiaries</th>
<th>3-5.5 years</th>
<th>Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smederevo (Lipe)</td>
<td>923</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bor</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novi Pazar (Mur)</td>
<td>945</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,621</strong></td>
<td><strong>713</strong></td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Information provided by CIP Center based on data collected from Preschool Institutions and internal project monitoring data

Significant increase in the number of children benefitting of preschool education in project municipalities was registered in the case of children from rural areas, representing over 60% of the total number of newly-enrolled children. As for the access of other vulnerable children, the main rights-holders for the focus of the Project, the impact was much lower (Roma - 6.2%, children from poor families - 4%, children with disability - 1.5%), most likely due to insufficient local knowledge on mapping the most disadvantaged children. In this respect, better cooperation with centres for social work might have been beneficial; the experience of another project implemented by UNICEF Serbia on community-based services for children with disabilities might have provided useful tools and hints on the matter.

Apart from 713 direct beneficiary children, an additional number of 2,500 children attending whole-day programs have indirectly benefitted of child-centred programmes encouraging active participation of parents, as a result of training and professional empowerment of 281 preschool educators. Overall, 4,621 children aged 3-5.5 years enrolled in the beneficiary preschool institutions have benefitted of improved preschool policies at local level given participation of principals, expert associates (pedagogues, psychologists, etc.) and LSGs representatives in trainings and other capacity building events organised by the Project.

The results of self-evaluation conducted by the Institute of Psychology (contracted by the CIP Center) and the feedback from focus groups indicate that the Project has increased the knowledge and skills of preschool educators for simultaneously working with children of various ages, tailoring their approaches to the needs of each child and organising a child-friendly environment in the kindergarten. They have also enhanced their abilities to engage parents in the everyday programme of the kindergarten. Last but not least, they have increased their professional self-esteem and willingness for further upgrade their skills as well as their network with colleagues from other municipalities. Indeed, professionals from pilot PIs have supported colleagues from other PIs in the expansion and development of diversified (special) programmes in other occasions, especially in rural areas. As a result, 17 new groups have been formed due to peer-mentoring and learning, exchange of experience and dissemination of know-how. According to the interviews on site, the Project allowed horizontal learning at the institutional level among pilot and non-pilot municipalities and also with partner institutions and experts (UNICEF, CIP Center, mentors, IMPRES), while the effects are visible at the level of professional competencies of teachers and parents, and also at the level of kindergarten as a whole.

As far as the Project impact on PIs is concerned, they expanded and improved the quality of their educational offer, allowing increased and inclusive coverage policies in preschool education of children aged 3-5.5 years as well as active engagement of parents in the decision-making process.

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44 The respective project partner, NGO Amity, developed a methodology on mapping the most disadvantaged children with disability and trained the centres for social work to apply it. As a result, a number of 246 children with disabilities were identified in 10 target municipalities who were kept hidden in their families and not registered in any social, health or educational system.

45 Source: Data collected by CIP in 2011 in the preschool institutions located in the project municipalities for the purpose of the Baseline Study.

They have also understood that the kindergarten does not have a custodial function for employed parents, but an educational and development function for all children. Better knowledge of mapping methodologies would have enhanced the relevance and inclusiveness of admission practices.

LSGs of project municipalities have understood that investing in preschool education will yield great returns for the community on long-term and that will effectively address inequity in the realisation of the child right to education. They have therefore committed important funds for the rehabilitation works and running costs of the newly-set up kindergartens during and after the Project.

The self-evaluation results\(^\text{47}\) also indicate that parents valued their increased role in the work of kindergartens, since it allowed them gain new insights about their children and enhance their abilities to better communicate with them. The feedback from focus groups during the site visits confirm that the Project had a significant impact on the improvement of parental skills. They are much able to recognise social, emotional and cognitive changes with their children, engage with them in meaningful activities, communicate in a friendly and efficient way and react adequately to the development needs of their children. Interviews with educators during site visits and with the Department of Psychology (Belgrade University) which did the self-evaluation of the Project by its various local stakeholders, also confirm some important impact aspects of the Project on the beneficiary parents: "They are able to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant activities for their children, and to describe them, using an appropriate vocabulary". Parents recognize the importance of encouraging early education: according to an internal project survey among 119 parents, socialization of children, building the children’s self-esteem and learning in the company of peers are seen as the biggest benefit of the Project. These changes are very significant compared to the state of play at the beginning of the Project, as reported by UNICEF to the donor: “Parents are still not seen as equal partners by preschool institutions and LSGs and neither do parents see themselves as a powerful force which can influence changes in the preschool education system” (Progress Report May 2011 – June 2012, page 5).

While it is difficult to measure the impact of the Project on beneficiary children, given the lack of comprehensive and specific baseline data as well as the lack of a "control group", as acknowledged in the ToR as well\(^\text{48}\), we have used the site visits and the results of the self-evaluation to identify a number of significant effects of special programmes on attending children. From the perspective of teachers, there are notable effects of asymmetric peer interactions in faster adaptation of children and the development of social-emotional and cognitive competence reflected in the way older children care for younger children, and vice-versa, the younger children wish to learn from the older children. Teachers also perceive that the greatest progress was made in the development of social competences of children. Parents consider, at their turn, that their children improved a lot their hygiene and eating habits as well as their socialising skills, are able to focus, listen, better communicate and use their creative skills. A particular impact of the Project on Roma children was the learning of Serbian language which would much help in the coming schooling years.

The main factors which increased the impact of the Project are a supportive legal framework for development of special programmes, tailored capacity building approaches for key local stakeholders, and multiplication of expertise and experience across the PI network with impact on larger cohorts of educators and children. Impact would have been higher in case prioritising of access in preschool education of the vulnerable children was more effective and if the planned number of direct beneficiaries was reached. Assessment of impact has been hampered by the lack of sufficiently specific baseline data on children.

\(^{47}\) ibid

\(^{48}\) "... it will be difficult to assess impact of newly developed programs on development of children’s abilities, skills and knowledge. The project introduced instruments to measure development of children attending newly developed programs but did not have any control groups of children enrolled into other preschool education programs" (ToR, page 14).
4.5 Sustainability

The current legal framework governing the education system in Serbia is supportive for the further development of special programmes and approaches put in place by the Project. As already explained in the relevance section, the Project goes in line with the existing legislation in the area of education, particularly the Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System, adopted in 2009 and the Law on Preschool Education, adopted in 2010, which provides the possibility to open special and specialised short-term programmes (art.19) as well as enrolment priority to children from vulnerable groups (art.13) – a legal provision further strengthened through the By-law on detailed criteria for the determination and prioritising of enrolment of children in preschool institution (2011). The Standards on Requirements for Implementation of Special Programs in Preschool Education (2012) and the Regulation on Detailed Requirements on Types, Methods of Implementation and Funding of Specialized Programs and Other Forms of Work and Services Implemented by the Preschool Institution (2013), adopted during the implementation of the Project, have also opened up legal possibilities for LSGs and PIs to provide various programs and services to meet the needs of children not covered by the preschool education system and their families. The presentation of the Project in the Serbian Parliament at the Public hearing (April 2013) on the importance of investing in early childhood education was another step forward towards ensuring a favourable legal environment for preschool education in Serbia.

The Project assisted the MoESTD and IMPRES to develop the “Guide for self-evaluation in preschool institution”, a document which contains information on the importance of quality of early childhood development and preschool education, as well as the understanding that a good preschool education is one that is constantly evolving, changing, improving. It is thus a very useful tool for practitioners in kindergartens (educators, associate experts) as it encourages good practice and facilitate professional development, both in the standard programmes and special programmes such as the ones developed by the Project. The self-evaluation report shows that the professionals have already integrated the new knowledge and skills acquired during the Project’s various capacity building activities to a great extent, as indicated by Figure 3 below. They use individualised approaches, adjusted to the needs of children, know how to plan in a flexible way the daily activities with children, also based on cooperation and team work with colleagues, children and parents.

Figure 3. Contribution of Trainings to Mastering Specific Aspects of Group Work

![Figure 3](image-url)
Parents in Lipe and Aleksinac also confirmed that educators are “kind, accepted and loved by children” and that they “give full attention to children” and “listen to parents”. The feedback received from the focus groups and interviews with educators, expert associates and mentors during the site visits confirm the self-evaluation results, all staff being highly motivated to continue using the methods and approaches learnt and practiced during the Project as well as promote the special programmes approach to their peers from other PIs. The “Guide for creating diversified preschool programs for children from vulnerable groups” and the “Practicum of good practices in developing and establishing special and specialized programs developed in cooperation with IMPRES, the networks of highly motivated local trainers and mentors, the availability of tested special programmes and accredited training modules, backed by a supporting legal framework could act as important triggers for scaling up, at national level, of inclusive early childhood education practices developed by the Project: “Establishing mentoring instructional pedagogical work and horizontal learning between the practitioners and PIs as institutions, opened an opportunity to build leaning communities of reflexive practitioners in the field of preschool education, as a good precondition for increasing equity in the system” (CIP Center's draft Final Report).

The sustainability prospects of the results of the Project are enhanced by the systematic involvement of a large range of key national and local stakeholders in all its phases, from the design phase through to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. As mentioned in various sections of this report, the Project has actively involved the MoESTD and its institutes throughout the project cycle. The Ministry took the lead in the selection of municipalities and monitoring of activities, through the Regional School Administrations (whose educational advisers were part of the PI teams) from the perspective of quality assurance and observance of standards of work by professionals. LSGs were consulted and involved in the process of selection of premises to be rehabilitated as well as in overseeing the rehabilitation works. PIs have been in charge of identification and enrolment of children in the special programmes and in mobilising the educators and associate experts for participation in capacity building events. The Project has also actively engaged with parents, especially during the implementation and evaluation phases. Academia, think tanks, NGOs, donors, Parliament were all mobilised by UNICEF and its main implementing partner, CIP Center, in various activities of the Project.

As far as the financial sustainability is concerned, the LSGs have already recognised the positive impact of innovative and inclusive preschool education services that were accompanied by rehabilitated premises for kindergartens. These rehabilitated/adapted premises were verified by the LSG and have become part of the respective PI network in the municipality. Project records show that, on average, LSGs and PIs allocate 80,000 – 100,000 RSD per month per educational group for the functioning of special programs (salaries for preschool educators, running costs, transportation costs for children from remote areas, etc.). By approving the Annual Working Plans of PIs for school year 2013-2014, the LSGs in all project municipalities assumed the obligation of funding these programmes, in line with the commitments embedded in the tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by UNICEF on one side and by LSG and PI from the respective municipality on the other side:

"Upon the project expiry, starting from October 2013, the responsibilities of partners shall be as follows: (...) The Local Self-Government shall continue to provide for the maintenance and running costs for the new premises, teacher salaries and use the space and equipment provided by this project exclusively for the purpose of the realization of pre-school programmes, and shall

49 Around 964 - 1,205 USD (exchange rate 2 December 2013)
ensure that the capacities that were jointly built in through this project become a part of the network of local pre-school institutions” (MoU).

At their turn, the preschool institutions committed themselves, through the same document, to continue the special programmes and provide free-of-charge access to vulnerable children:

“Upon the project expiry, starting from October 2013, the responsibilities of partners shall be as follows: (…) The preschool institution shall continue to use the space and equipment provided by this project exclusively for the purpose of the realization of pre-school programmes; it shall continue to provide a free-of-charge programme for children from vulnerable groups (children with disabilities, poor families, Roma children, etc.) avoiding any form of possible segregation of children from vulnerable groups; newly developed programmes are expected to be integrated into regular plans of preschool institution” (MoU).

During the site visits, the evaluation team checked the annual working plans and had discussions with PI and LSG representatives. It is the opinion of the team that they fully respected their obligations enshrined in the MoU at least for the school year 2013-2014. Parents have also confirmed that their children are provided with free access to the kindergarten (the focus groups with parents took place in November, after the Project expired!). However, poor municipalities might run difficulties in securing funding for the next school year which raises questions about the feasibility of the funding model in force by which all LSGs, irrespective of their development level, should entirely cover the preschool education of children below 5.5 years of age.

The factors which contributed to good sustainability prospects of the achievements of the Project were local commitment officially secured from the very beginning of the Project, engagement of all key stakeholders throughout the entire project cycle ensuring ownership and buy-out of the results of the Project, close connection and cooperation of UNICEF with the national decision-making bodies, in particular the MoESTD and its institutes, implementation of activities aimed to multiply and scale up the practices used in the Project. Sustainability of the functioning of the special programmes at local level might be endangered in the poorest municipalities given the funding model of preschool education in Serbia which relies entirely on local budgets. At the same time, there is apparently a decreasing donors’ interest in supporting the education sector due to other priorities, which is likely to pose a significant challenge in terms of available funding for the continuation and expansion of current reform efforts. On a positive side, the Serbian office of the current donor, IKEA, is interested in supporting this initiative further.

4.6 Human rights and cross-cutting issues

The Project had a major contribution to the promotion and realisation of child rights. It did so through: opening access to pre-school education services and early learning development, well tailored to the needs of children; empowering of beneficiary children, as rights-holders, to make informed choices as to the daily programme in the kindergarten, to have their opinion listened and to participate together with their parents in various activities, thus developing not only knowledge and socialisation skills, but also their self-esteem50; developing the understanding of the parents, as duty-bearers, on their role in the education of children and the importance of enrolling children as early as possible in school;

50 This is based on the perspective of teachers and parents. As explained in the impact section, it is difficult to measure the impact of the Project on beneficiary children, given the lack of comprehensive and specific baseline data as well as the lack of a “control group”, hence the use of discussions with teachers and parents during the site visits and the use of results of the self-evaluation to identify the effects of special programmes on attending children.
strengthening the capacity of parents, as rights-holders, to organise themselves and advocate for child rights at local level, while holding the LSGs accountable.

Over the Project lifetime, UNICEF together with its partners and jointly with IMPRES team has influenced significant shifts in thinking in Serbia about the importance of early childhood education and development, the need for inclusive enrolment policies in preschool education which give priority to vulnerable children or with unemployed parents and the importance of child-centred education programmes, as acknowledged by the numerous stakeholders consulted for the purpose of this evaluation. However, sustainable outcomes require changes of practices and ingrained cultural norms and values which cannot be easily achieved in a 2-year time frame, especially at municipality level, and which take time to happen. The higher coverage rate of children from better off families, parents with higher education and from urban areas indicate that preschool services are still not used by those who need it most. The main hurdle is the ineffective mapping mechanisms to allow timely identification of eligible children belonging to vulnerable groups combined with reservation of some parents to enrol their children. The Project had nevertheless a positive contribution to the strengthening of the capacity of a wide range of Serbian duty-bearers (MoESTD with its Regional School Administrations, pre-school institutions, educators and associate experts, LSGs, centres for social work, community health centres, NGOs) to protect and fulfil the child right to early childhood education and development.

The Project has been guided by the overarching human rights principles of non-discrimination, equality, participation, rule of law and inclusion. The principles of progressive realization of human rights and use of maximum available resources were implicit in the implementation of the Project. The empowerment principle worked very well at the level of duty-bearers, notably for parents and professionals engaged in the preschool education.

As far as gender is concerned, the Project Document and the indicators in the Theory of Change are gender-blind. The progress reports are neither gender mainstreamed. It is therefore difficult to assess to what extent equal opportunities were provided to boys and girls to enrol in the preschool programmes implemented by the Project. In the particular case of Roma girls, equality in access to education is a major challenge, given the cultural model of Roma families which do not value education generally, let alone the education of girls who are forced to marry at early ages and take care of children and the household. According to disaggregated figures provided by the CIP Center at the request of the evaluation team, the participants in the trainings delivered to professionals were women in a proportion of 98%! It confirms the fact that the preschool education sector is female-dominated, rather than a particular gender-sensitive training strategy of the Project. This is also evidentiated by the fact that all jobs created in the newly-set up kindergartens were occupied by female preschool educators. As far as parents are concerned, 62.4% of participants in various trainings and events were mothers who are usually more engaged with school and children. From this perspective, it could be assessed that the Project contributed to women empowerment, but without necessarily having a gender mainstreaming approach.

The Project planned to ensure an equity focus by orienting the funds and domestic investment towards the municipalities with a coverage of children aged 3-5.5 years by preschool education below the national average (many of them very poor) as well as by focusing its intervention on the vulnerable children. The evaluation team considers that the Project has succeeded to do so, especially in relation to children from rural areas, who represent more than 60% of the total number of beneficiary children.

51 For most Roma parents, education does not represent a value. For poor parents, enrolment of their children brings about other costs (school supplies, transportation, etc.) which they are cannot afford.
In the case of other vulnerable children, the proportions were much lower as already mentioned in the impact section of this evaluation report: 6.2% - Roma, 4% - children from poor families, 1.5% - children with disability. The educational structure of parents of children enrolled in special programmes in the 10 project municipalities were the following: without or with only primary education: 22%, secondary education: 67%, college or university education: 11% (draft Final Report of CIP Center). The employment status of parents of beneficiary children: with one or both parents employed: 69%, both parents unemployed: 31%, single parents: 7%. These data show confirm the fact that the children enrolling in kindergartens come from better-off families, indicating that the admission policy needs improvement.

This is not about creating kindergartens for the poor or kindergartens for Roma. However, since the focus of the Project was on vulnerable children, more attention should have been given to prioritising access, as lack of access to preschool education could further increase the existing inequities: in Serbia, preschool education access in the fifth quintile (20% the richest) is three times higher than in the first quintile (20% the poorest) - 22% of children from the first quintile of the poorest families attend preschool education compared to 75% of children from the fifth, the richest quintile (MICS4). The current legal framework is facilitating the enrolment with priority of children from vulnerable groups.

However, given the fact that the share of vulnerable children among all enrolled children in Project kindergartens has been higher compared to other kindergartens, it could be concluded that the benefits of brought about by the Project outweigh the costs of an imperfect admission policy to beneficiary children.
4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

Relevance

The Project “Expanding Early Learning Opportunities for Vulnerable Children” is highly relevant for Serbia’s preschool education reforms and national policies for improving the early childhood education and development, as it addressed important gaps and challenges of the current preschool system. The Project is in line with Serbia’s National Strategy of Education Development until 2020 and the Plan of Action for Children while its primary objectives are tied to the implementation of the Law on Preschool Education and recently adopted by-laws, regulations and standards on prioritising access and implementation of special and specialised programmes in preschool education. It is highly relevant for Serbia’s international commitments deriving from the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its status of EU candidate country. The Project remained relevant over its entire lifetime, as documented by the annual progress reports of the EC. The multi-pronged approach (including working on policies, developing methodologies and tools, rehabilitation of space, capacity building) and highly-participatory approaches used by UNICEF and its partners to implement the project were appropriate in view of the underlying Theory of Change and its key assumptions.

Effectiveness

The Project was effective in achieving the results and objectives as outlined in the Project Document and Theory of Change. UNICEF’s partnership with the MoESTD and CIP Center, an experienced and professional think-tank in preschool education, as well as engagement of other key stakeholders, including parents, allowed for effective and coordinated implementation of the project at municipality level and connection with legal and policy developments at national level. The planned number of direct beneficiaries (children and parents) was only partially achieved due to an over-estimation of the targets for the given time and available resources of the Project, lack of more effective mapping methodologies based on cooperation with centres for social work and possibly resistance of some parents to enrol their children due to cultural or financial reasons. Adaptation of preschool facilities and capacity building actions prepared effectively the LSGs, PIs and preschool educators for their new roles in preschool education provision. LSGs and PIs commitment to support the introduction of special and specialized programmes, as new modality of preschool education for children aged 3-5.5 years, has enhanced the Project effectiveness as did the mentoring approaches and exchanges of experience between municipalities which helped address challenges by peer-to-peer learning.

Efficiency

Most of the planned Project activities have been delivered in an efficient and generally in a timely manner. The feedback from all stakeholders confirm that activities and management of the Project were conducted professionally and with high quality. The concept of 4-hour special programmes adapted to be used for groups of children of mixed ages worked very well for cost-effectiveness in rural and remote areas, but with challenges in terms of utilization rate of the premises. Efficiency has been facilitated by the excellent training methodology (horizontal learning approaches and cascaded trainings) which enlarged considerably the number of professionals who benefitted of training, the efficient cooperation between LSGs and PIs and outstanding cooperation and synergy with other donors’ projects, interests and resources. Overall, the efficiency of this Project is ingrained in its very nature, as education and development returns in the future will exceed by far the initial investment.

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52 Based on the Performance Scoring detailed in the methodology of the evaluation.
Project monitoring and evaluation would have been facilitated by more detailed financial reporting for the overall Project, disaggregation of expenditures and monitoring of targets in accordance to a Theory of Change that should have been developed at the beginning of the Project.

**Impact**

Considering its rather limited resources, the Project had a **good impact** level, making an important contribution to increasing the coverage of children aged 3-5.5 years benefiting from preschool education, especially of children living in rural areas of project municipalities. Self-evaluations conducted by the Project capture a very positive feedback from educators and parents on the developmental results of the newly-introduced special programmes upon beneficiary children. Evaluation findings indicate a positive trend in expanding and diversifying child-centred educational services within the project municipalities, which would enable higher enrolment of children from vulnerable groups in preschool education in the future, on the background of the current supportive legal framework. This would however require more effective mapping of vulnerable children (especially Roma, children with poor parents or children with disabilities) and better prioritising of access by preschool institutions compared to what they achieved during the Project. It would also require increased awareness of parents as to the role of preschool education and complementary social support for the poorest families to cover associated costs of school attendance by their children. Impact would have been higher in case the planned number of direct beneficiaries was achieved.

**Sustainability**

Effects and outcomes of the Project are **most likely sustainable**. The capacity building tools, accredited training programmes, guides, practicums and self-evaluation methodologies developed by the Project’s partners are already in use or could easily be used for future establishment of similar special programmes in other municipalities. Local commitment, ownership and buy-in of the results of the Project nurtured by UNICEF and CIP Center throughout its entire cycle, close connection and cooperation with the national decision-making bodies, in particular the MoESTD and its institutes, implementation of activities aimed to multiply and scale up the practices used in the Project are excellent ingredients for long-term sustainability. All project municipalities have ensured sustainability of the established programmes for 2014, with strong commitment of permanent financing; however, the least developed municipalities might face difficulties to secure funding on long-run given the current funding model of preschool education in Serbia, on the background of a decreasing donor support for education system generally.

**Human rights and Cross-cutting issues**

The Project had a major contribution to the promotion and realisation of child rights through opening access to pre-school education services and early learning development to children left out of the system, empowering them, as rights-holders, to make informed choices and have their opinion heard. It had a positive contribution to the strengthening of the capacity of a wide range of Serbian duty-bearers to protect and fulfil the child right to early childhood education and development. The Project has paid particular attention to capacitating parents, as rights-holders, to organise themselves and advocate for child rights and better local governance. The Project contributed to women empowerment, but without necessarily having a gender mainstreaming approach. It managed to ensure an equity focus especially in case of rural children and by orienting investment to municipalities with lowest coverage of children in preschool education.
## 4.2 Recommendations and Lessons Learnt

### 4.2.1 Recommendations

Table 9 below provides a number of key recommendations based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation as well as based on consultation with all key stakeholders that were interviewed during the field phase. Each interview, focus group and discussion group has checked the perceptions of various stakeholders (UNICEF, CIP Center, MoESTD, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, Parliamentary Child Rights Committee, National Education Council, Department of Psychology, donors, SIPRU, municipalities, PIs, professionals, parents, NGOs) concerning the top priorities of the preschool education reform in Serbia that needs to be addressed in the coming years and consequently the role each of these stakeholders should play (see also Interview Guides in Annex 5).

Validation of recommendations was planned to be done in two phases: 1) by UNICEF and the MoESTD, as key stakeholders, following submission of the draft report; and 2) by other stakeholders, during an event planned to take place in January 2014. Participants will be provided with a summary of the evaluation report and the Team Leader will make a presentation in the plenary on the main conclusions, recommendations and lessons learnt. The participants will thus have an additional opportunity for comment and buy-in. The Final Report will incorporate all these perspectives.

Recommendations are divided into two categories, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strategic recommendations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational recommendations</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each recommendation has an addressee and a proposed timing.
Table 9. List of Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Strategic Recommendations (S)</strong></td>
<td>MoESTD, LSGs, Pls, with the support of UNICEF, IKEA, EU and other donors</td>
<td>2014 - 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| S1 | **Further invest in the expansion and diversification of country-wide, flexible early learning programmes for children aged 3-5.5 years to ensure higher and more inclusive coverage of vulnerable children in preschool education**  
   The support provided by UNICEF, IKEA, EU and other donors for the development of early childhood education opportunities for vulnerable children should continue in order to assist the Serbian authorities at central and local level reach the national and European benchmarks as well as cope with a number of challenges during the years to come, as follows: a) expansion of alternative/special programmes to all municipalities across the country in parallel with ensuring the adequate physical infrastructure at local level; b) diversification of the range of special programmes and services (e.g. ECD centres, traveling kindergartens, visiting educators, etc.) according to the needs of the vulnerable children while increasing their quality and flexibility; c) mainstreaming of the most successful programmes across the country; d) promote inter-municipality exchange of experience and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for the development of such programmes to ensure a multiplier effect; e) systematic and culturally-sensitive awareness raising of parents and grandparents on the benefits of early learning, but equally on their role in the education of children, followed by adequate empowering actions (parental and advocacy skills, material support). The most at-risk children (Roma, children of IDPS and refugee families, children from poor families, children with disabilities, children living in remote rural areas, street children) should remain the focus of any future early childhood education and development projects. | MoESTD, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, Institute for Advancement of Education, higher education/ research institutions, CIP Center, | As from 2014  |
| S2 | **Ensure high quality standards of preschool education on the basis of a transparent national accreditation system and capacity building of teachers. Promote innovation in the development of preschool programmes to respond to the complexity of needs of their beneficiaries.**  
   It is the opinion of the evaluation team that the expansion of the network of preschool institutions and of the early learning programmes suggested above requires the rapid introduction of a national accreditation system for pre-school institutions and programmes. There are a number of quality standards and a procedure of self-evaluation by pre-school institutions/programmes with the participation of parents, which were developed by the MoESTD in cooperation with the UNICEF/IKEA Project and | MoESTD, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, Institute for Advancement of Education, higher education/ research institutions, CIP Center, | As from 2014  |
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<td>IMPRES and which constitute an excellent basis for the design and implementation of the accreditation system. Support is now mainly needed for developing the control system for the implementation of the procedure and of the institutions responsible for carrying out the accreditation. Continuous training of educators would support the maintenance of high quality education services. At the same time, innovation needs to be promoted for the development of new models of preschool education programmes, by operationalising the concept of “model centres” stipulated by the Law on Preschool Education and nurturing partnership between preschool institutions, universities and research organisations. Such model centres would design, test and instrument new approaches in preschool education that might cater for the very particular and multiple needs of vulnerable children, while preparing the ground for their scaling up and increased coverage rates towards national and European benchmarks.</td>
<td>with the support of UNICEF and other donors</td>
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<td>S3</td>
<td><strong>Secure the financial sustainability on long-run of early learning childhood education programmes in least developed municipalities, based on the principles of equity, territorial cohesion and social solidarity</strong>&lt;br&gt;The evaluation assessed the sustainability prospects of the Project to be very high for 2013-2014, but at the same time drew attention to the significant risk of discontinuation of the special programmes (kindergartens) during the next schooling years in the under-developed municipalities. Policy makers are therefore advised to revisit the current funding model of preschool education whereby the LSGs are solely responsible for financing the preschool education of children until the age of entering the PPP. Given the current large discrepancies in the development level of municipalities, there are good reasons for the central Government to intervene and earmark funding for increasing the preschool coverage rates of children in the under-developed municipalities. At the same time, a fair distribution of responsibilities should be worked out between the public sources (central and local governments) and private sources (parent participation) and based on solidarity principles (subsidies or free attendance for socially-marginalised children) in line with the National Strategy for the Improvement of Education until 2020.</td>
<td>Ministry of Finance, MoESTD, Ministry of Regional Development and Local Self-Government</td>
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<td><strong>Operational Recommendations (O)</strong>&lt;br&gt;&lt;br&gt;O1 <strong>Carry out a country-wide identification of vulnerable children who are left out of the preschool education for evidence-based policy making and integrated support action</strong>&lt;br&gt;Various data sources, studies and researches indicate that there are significant numbers of children who</td>
<td>MoESTD, MoLESP, preschool institutions, centres for social work,</td>
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<td>are not enrolled in preschool education. Most difficult is to accurately identify the vulnerable children: who are they, how many, where do they live, what is the education level and occupational status of their parents, what is the social-economic status of their family? The MoESTD should make use of the mapping tools and training modules developed in other projects (notably IPA 2008 project “Developing community-based services for Children with Disability and Their Families”) and launch a country-wide initiative, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Policy (MoLESP) and possibly with UNICEF assistance, to identify the vulnerable children (Roma, children from poor families, children with disabilities, refugee children, children of IDPs families, street children) and assist their parents in enrolling their children in preschool education. In this process, engagement of preschool institutions, centres for social work, community health centres and local civil society organisations is of utmost importance, not only for learning how to do the mapping in the future, but also for promoting inter-sector cooperation for better planning of support and for the development of integrated programmes and services in the community with customised offers to the child and family.</td>
<td>community health centres with assistance from UNICEF</td>
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| O2 | **Improve monitoring and reporting practices in future projects and the evaluability of impact**  
The Theory of Change for this Project has been developed retrospectively for the purpose of the evaluation. It is much more useful to construct the theory of change at the beginning of a project, as outcomes and processes are viewed differently with hindsight. A theory of change approach can sharpen the planning and implementation of a project. In its design phase, it increases the likelihood that stakeholders will have clearly specified the initiative's intended outcomes and outputs, the activities that need to be implemented to achieve those outcomes, and the contextual factors that are likely to influence them. Financial reporting needs to be harmonised between various implementing partners with inputs unified in an overall, detailed budget at the entire project level. A project should be designed from start in a way which allows impact evaluability, with clear baseline indicators and targets, disaggregated by gender, and with established “control” and “treatment” groups. | UNICEF | For future projects |
4.2.2 Lessons learnt

1) **Investment in preschool education should be long-term, until the country gets closer to European benchmarks.** Long-term investment in preschool education and in education generally, based on participative planning, well established priorities and sequential projects that build upon previous results, tested practices and models, will yield tremendous rates of return in the future. There is a rich body of evidence at national and European levels which demonstrates the benefits of investment in early childhood education in particular in the case of vulnerable children. Developmental effects of special programmes designed, tested and implemented through this Project represent an excellent additional example.

2) **Local commitment and good cooperation between relevant local stakeholders is key to inclusive and sustainable results.** Early childhood education and development is in its essence a multi-dimensional process and result of a concerted effort of educators, parents, teaching assistants, preschool institutions, LSGs, community health care centres, centres for social work, NGOs. Strategies to boost preschool enrolment of vulnerable children require tailored capacity building approaches and inclusive decision-making processes, based on locally-generated solutions, to ensure commitment and ownership. The Project engaged a wide range of stakeholders in its capacity building activities and nurtured joint decision-making (notably between LSGs and PIs) which contributed to timely implementation and sustainability of results. Better cooperation with the centres for social work and engagement of NGOs might have helped the identification and enrolment of more vulnerable children (Roma, poor children or children with disabilities) whose coverage rates in preschool education are extremely low.

3) **The importance of locally-generated solutions is not to be underestimated.** Consulted stakeholders strongly emphasized the relevance and usefulness of locally-generated solutions in the implementation of the Project at the municipality level. Thus, finding space to be adapted for the educational process, the rehabilitation works, recruitment of the new teaching staff or reallocation of existing teachers and teaching norms within the respective PIs to cope with the delivery of new programmes, the formation of preschool groups of beneficiary children, ensuring physical access to kindergarten, engagement of parents were areas where local initiatives were born and flourished. These locally-developed solutions complemented by the commitment and good stakeholders’ cooperation at local level, as mentioned under the lesson learnt above, have been crucial for ensuring the buy-in and support to newly introduced ways of work at PIs.

4) **Expansion of early learning opportunities, especially in rural areas, requires both hard and soft investment.** The strategy used by the Project to invest in the rehabilitation and adaptation of preschool facilities in parallel with the development of special programmes and capacity building actions was a good mix and a feasible solution for Serbia’s particular context. As explained in chapter 1 on Project Context, there are insufficient preschool physical capacities, especially in under-developed rural areas, to cover the total number of children left out from the preschool education. Any attempt to expand the preschool education to children aged 3-5.5 years should consider the investment in physical infrastructure, too.

5) **Complex needs and scarce available resources require innovative coping strategies.** The Project developed, tested and documented cost-effective alternative preschool services for children aged 3-5.5 years, based on findings of a qualitative survey on the interests and needs of children and parents in pilot municipalities as well as based on local available resources. Accordingly, families were interested in short daily programmes; research has also
indicate that short, high quality programmes are most effective in contributing to overall child development, especially of vulnerable children. Building new spaces for enrolling new groups of children would have been unaffordable for poor municipalities. Forming educational groups of children with the same age would have been impossible in some remote villages. Faced by these challenges, the Project developed alternative preschool education models which create opportunities in villages or small towns without any available pre-school programmes and expanded the pre-school choice in small towns where the pre-school service already existed but offered only whole day pre-school programmes. Mixed age groups, 4-hour duration programme, use of existing buildings, parents’ engagement in programme planning and implementation and strong LSGs commitment were features of the newly-developed programmes which addressed the needs of the children and their families, while ensuring efficient use of available resources at local level.

6) Any action targeting early childhood education and development must engage the parents and, to the extent possible, the grandparents of beneficiary children from start throughout the whole process. Parents are both duty-bearers and rights-holders. They have a fundamental role in the education and upbringing of their children, being key partners of the education and social welfare systems. The participation of parents in various Project activities increased its relevance, while their empowerment in terms of parental and advocacy skills will yield sustainable effects on children’s educational attainment and development in the coming years. Working with parents needs to be culturally-sensitive, especially in the case of Roma parents, but also in the case of parents living in rural areas, given the traditional family roles and more influential community norms and values than for urban parents. The role of grandparents should not be underestimated, as they can substantially facilitate or impede the enrolment of their grandchildren in preschool education.