Policy Options for Cross-sector Collaboration on Early Childhood Development in Montenegro:

A Policy Brief
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Coordination and integration of early childhood development (ECD) policies and services are critical for nurturing care, which refers to a stable environment that provides for children’s health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. The nature of ECD is holistic, and all children need all five dimensions of nurturing care to achieve their maximum potentials. The landmark publication produced by the WHO, UNICEF and the World Bank Group, “Nurturing Care for Early Childhood Development” (the Nurturing Care Framework – NCF), promotes coordination between different sectors and, where appropriate, integration of their “policies, services and information systems” to ensure that all families receive the highest standard of services. According to the NCF, at least 68 countries have adopted a national policy instrument for ECD, based on multi-sector coordination between the education, health, nutrition, protection and welfare sectors, but not all of them have established functional multi-sector coordination mechanisms or a broad roadmap that facilitates coordination and implementation in practice. The NCF highlights the need for joint planning, implementation by sector and by the level of government, and joint monitoring and accountability. It also calls for the introduction of coordinating mechanisms, which are essential at all levels of the system, and appropriate funding necessary for systems, infrastructure and the workforce.

Leadership and collaboration in ECD

Within the “Lead and Invest” strategic actions proposed in the NCF, governments are expected to:

- Convene a high-level multi-sector coordination mechanism with a budget and official authority to lead across relevant sectors and stakeholders.
- Assess the current situation and identify the opportunities within and across different sectors for strengthening support for nurturing care.
- Develop a common vision, goals and targets, and a coordinated plan of action, supported by a national, integrated policy on ECD.
- Assign clear roles and responsibilities for implementing the national plan, at all levels of government, and give sub-national and local authorities the means to act.
- Prepare a long-term financing strategy that builds on any available funding streams that support the components of nurturing care.
A fragmented approach to ECD does not provide the desired level of quality of services, nor the greatest return on investment. In addition, it fails to meet the needs of children and families, in particular the most vulnerable, who are otherwise likely to benefit the most. Disadvantaged and socially excluded groups require “a multidimensional and integrated approach, including access to adequate resources, affordable quality services and the right to participate.” The added value of integration within the ECD systems, with benefits for families, professionals and the policy level, is presented in Table 1.

| For families and children | • Higher accessibility, easier to find what you need  
|                          | • Services better linked to needs and diversity of issues  
|                          | • More community cohesion  
|                          | • Smoother transitions from one service to another  
|                          | • Shared ownership and strengthened partnerships  
| For professionals and organizations | • Combining strength and capacities in dealing with challenges  
|                          | • Co-learning and professional development  
|                          | • Higher efficiency  
| For the policy level | • Less overlap, fewer gaps and less fragmentation  
|                          | • Better use of scarce resources  

### The Montenegrin policy context

Montenegro has a comprehensive legislative policy framework at the national level, supported by the National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSSD) adopted in 2016, which integrates the requirements of the UN SDGs agenda into the national context through an Action Plan until 2030. In 2019, the government adopted the Strategy for Exercising the Rights of the Child (2019–2023), which is another cross-sector document that addresses the realization of the rights of the child and includes improved support for the ECD in one of its operational goals. However, there is concern that only having three monitoring indicators and three actions dedicated to achieving the objective is insufficient. In addition, Montenegro has adopted an array of strategic documents since 2015 in response to a growing awareness of the importance of providing all children with nurturing care across the home and learning environments, which are either fragmented by sector, focused on specific target groups, or not concerned with ECD. The Strategy for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities (2016–2020) envisaged the development of the national Strategy on Early Childhood Development.

Establishing a comprehensive centralized system for ECD planning and the coordination and monitoring of government policies would be an important step forward for policy harmonization in Montenegro. At the conference “Investing in the Early Years – Conference on Fiscal and Public Administration Imperatives for Early Childhood Development,” held in 2019, participants suggested that the government, rather than a particular ministry, should have a key role in coordinating the ECD strategy. The operationalization of this idea would require the identification of a model of cross-sector collaboration relevant to the ECD policy sector in Montenegro.
Potential models of cross-sector collaboration

International experience suggests that the success of early development policies, given their complex cross-sector character, depends on the capacities for strong coordination that calls for clearly defined responsibilities of all stakeholders. Three prominent models of ECD policy coordination that could be relevant for the Montenegrin context are described in Table 2, including their relative advantages and disadvantages.

Table 2: Models of ECD policy coordination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Pros and cons of the approach</th>
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<td>Establishment of a dedicated agency or other type of organization to deal exclusively with horizontal and vertical coordination of defining policies, implementing measures and monitoring their outcomes.</td>
<td>This is an effective solution, but the most expensive one. If the agency has adequate resources to finance ECD policies and the ability to sign contracts with service providers, the impact could be significant. If resources are inadequate then the impact of the model is limited and, to some extent, it falls with the role of the existing quality assurance organizations.</td>
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<td>Establishment of a coordination unit in one of the line ministries, or at the centre of the government (General Secretariats of the Government).</td>
<td>This could be an effective and efficient solution. However, the approach would entail a change to the legislative framework on the part of the organization of public administration, by which certain jurisdictions would be added to a line ministry or the Government Secretariat. It would also require the adoption of a specific strategic document, or ECD programme, following the rules for developing strategic documents.</td>
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<td>Coordination through a council led by one of the line ministers, with the involvement of all key partners – service providers, non-governmental organizations and international organizations engaged in the areas covered by ECD policies.</td>
<td>It proposes a type of coordination that currently exists in Montenegro, represented by the Council for the Rights of the Child. According to the Evaluation of the Child Rights Monitoring System in Montenegro in 2019, at the time, this arrangement had “limited... authority to ensure the coordination of various ministries in the implementation of the Convention” and it recommended “reforming the institutional structure of the National Council on Children’s Rights by having the multi-sector committee chaired by the deputy prime minister and by including representatives from all the line ministries involved in children's matters.” The Government of Montenegro at the 26 March 2021 session passed a decision about the Child Rights Council, which established the council as a temporary working body of the government, chaired by the deputy prime minister, and determined its composition and scope of work.</td>
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A vision for the process of establishing the ECD policy in Montenegro

The establishment of the ECD policy would entail a fully participatory consultation process, with the involvement of stakeholders outside of the public sector. The Decree on the Methodology and Procedure for Strategy Paper Development, Alignment and Monitoring enables an enhanced policy-making process with the obligation to: conduct inter-sector consultations and public discussions; establish a set of goals, objectives and accompanying performance indicators; and a specified methodology for evaluation and reporting, as well as an action plan providing costing for each proposed action, and the sources of funding.

In addition to government leadership, the policy development process should be a participatory one. Local self-governments in Montenegro participate in the process of adopting policies and laws that regulate areas with an impact on their operations. In addition to this, municipalities plan their work locally. The involvement of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the policy dialogue is equally important, but it has been assessed as insufficient so far. The Evaluation of the Child Rights Monitoring System in Montenegro found that the majority of NGO participants viewed their involvement in the working groups as largely token, that their opinions have not been seriously considered and they have not been kept abreast of the developments following their participation in the consultations. The NCF also recommends incorporating families’ voices, beliefs and needs into local and national plans, and involving community groups and leaders in planning, budgeting, implementing and monitoring activities, and generating accountability for the results.

The value of bringing together and coordinating professionals from different sectors

Quality services are driven by competent, motivated and satisfied professionals, which makes the development of the ECD multi-professional expertise base critical. The NCF recognizes the need to update the profile of competencies of the ECD workforce, strengthening their capacities and establishing a system for motivating and retaining employees.

The imperative in the field of ECD is the coordination of professionals and actions. The ECD workforce goes beyond the role of a classroom teacher, and includes home visitors, parent educators, mentors or coaches, family childcare providers, and a range of professionals from different ages and disciplines. Because ECD professionals often work with the same children and families, they should be encouraged to get to know each other and share their experiences.

Furthermore, the INTESY project stresses that, at the national level, there needs to be recognition for professional development across sectors, and for services to incentivize dialogue between professional cultures, shared learning, group reflections and smooth cooperation among practitioners. Building a relationship of trust between partners regarding the integration of services and professionals can be time-consuming, but it is a necessary step towards integration.

In Montenegro, case management led by Centres for Social Work (CSWs) provides an opportunity for cross-sector collaboration in the ECD sector. CSWs have an internal model of multi-professional coordination based on the different professional backgrounds of their staff. CSWs can also schedule case conferences or convene multidisciplinary teams with the representatives of other sectors, and they are among the lead institutions applying the Inter-Sector Protocol on Treatment, Prevention, and Protection in Cases of Violence against Women and of Domestic Violence. However, based on the 2018 assessment findings, their support is most often offered to citizens in a situation of high or moderate risk, when the beneficiaries have already suffered significant damage or harm. They also have a limited presence at the community level and insufficient connections with community organizations.

The analysis of the multi-sector response to the needs of children with disabilities in Montenegro, which assessed the health, education, social welfare and justice sectors, found insufficient joint training opportunities across sectors and fragmentations in the strategic documents related to data collection practices, and in-service provision, which may result in inefficiencies and duplication of interventions, or families falling through the cracks of the system.
Service packages and integration of services

The implementation of nurturing care requires the continuous analysis and strengthening of service packages, which promotes the identification of opportunities for strengthening the existing services in a range of sectors and for updating national standards and service packages to reflect the domains of nurturing care. Striving towards integrated services is a staged process that requires formal agreement among professionals on a shared vision, values and culture. This should imply agreed outcomes for children and families, and a decision on having one lead agency to coordinate programmes, services and funding. One form of such services is integration under one roof or a one-stop shop that brings multiple benefits to families. However, according to the INTESISYS project, this model may not be the best option in every country or the ultimate goal, and sometimes it is not even doable. There are multiple other forms of integration, which systems should strive to develop. Examples of various forms of service packages can be found in Colombia (where an integrated parenting programme and nutritional supplementation was found to have positive effects on children’s development, including improved cognition, receptive language and gross motor scores), or in Chile (Chile Crece Contigo, a comprehensive child-protection system for children from the prenatal period to 4 years, through universal and targeted support services).

Integrated services are not common in Montenegro, with preschools, day-care centres for children with disabilities, and some NGOs possibly offering the closest models with their internal challenges. There is a need for a closer investigation of the service coordination and referral mechanisms to avoid duplication of services or families falling through the cracks in service provision. Involving local self-government in all segments of service delivery remains critical.

Focus on families

Major achievements in developing family-centred and cross-sector policies and services for young children in the region would not have been possible without civil society engagement and, in particular, the efforts of the united parent-led organizations that became the government’s main partner in building the national system in some countries. The family is “the first and most important place for children to grow and develop” and parents are responsible for their children’s wellbeing, which calls for the provision of support to parents and a partnership model in collaborating with them. ECD policies and services need to be child- and family-centred, so they recognize parental choices in all segments of the provision planning for their children. ECD professional development systems have mainly focused on how to work with children. While there has been a long history of including family engagement as a core element of quality in an early childhood programme, there has been less attention on preparing people for this role. New efforts should be made to bring about authentic engagement with families, to empower their voices.

In regards to the participation of vulnerable families, this principle has critical traction. In Montenegro, the assessment of the work of CSWs found that the centres are not empowering their beneficiaries in some cases, or providing families with the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the protection process, which is incompatible with the case management methodology. This kind of conduct on the part of professionals is likely to be related to insufficiently developed competencies, as well as to time constraints linked to staff shortages and division of responsibilities.
The power of evidence for cross-sector ECD

The importance of evidence for the development of policies and programmes for the ECD sector cannot be overstated. In most administrations, data collection and monitoring systems are underdeveloped and focus on inputs rather than results, while the systems are predominantly used for data storage. The NCF recommends a comprehensive process for data generation that includes agreement on the indicators for tracking progress, their alignment with the national plan and relevant SDG targets, and utilization of data for decision making about programming in order to ensure accountability.

The evaluation of the child rights monitoring system in Montenegro has identified several challenges, including the availability of mainly quantitative, insufficiently disaggregated data by key equity aspects. Additionally, data is not being analysed or shared in a systematic way, resulting in large volumes of unused data, which could contribute to influencing child-related policies or programming, or holding duty bearers to account. The Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the combined second and third period reports expressed concern about weaknesses in the information management systems of the various government institutions, and recommended that Montenegro strengthen its efforts to integrate the information systems of relevant ministries and institutions into one centralized system, and ensure data sharing and its use for the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes, for the effective implementation of the Convention. The recently established database on domestic violence, which aligns the data of the Ministry of the Interior with the information system of the Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, is a promising practice.

Financing and budgeting at the national and local levels

Stable financing remains a precondition for the development of ECD policies and high-quality services. Given that ECD is predominantly funded from public sources, the budgetary allocations for financing ECD policies are limited and they are rarely prioritized. Additionally, ECD budgetary expenditures could be more transparent and adequately disaggregated, which would improve tracking of both expenditures and results. A significant shortcoming of the current budgeting process in Montenegro is the absence of indicators for monitoring budget spending against the original goals, which was identified in the 2016 government report, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child’s recommendations. The report requests the establishment of a budgeting process that includes a child-rights perspective, and specifies allocations to children in the relevant sectors and agencies, including specific indicators and a tracking system to monitor and evaluate the adequacy, efficacy and equitable distribution of resources, in particular for health, education, child protection and for children in disadvantaged or vulnerable situations.

This situation is complicated further with insufficient overall funding to the ECD sector, as stated in the recent report on investing in ECD, which concluded that the public investment in ECD policies and programmes was €51.88 million in 2016, representing 1.3% of GDP or 2.4% of the 2016 state budget. Without social protection expenditures, the percentage of GDP investment would be as low as 0.68%. Spending of 1.3% of GDP is below the targeted 2% of GDP recommended by the ECD Action Network (ECDAN), and the amount required to operationalize the G20 ECD initiative. The level of investment without social protection expenditures is also below the estimated 0.8% of GDP required to provide the World-Bank-defined ‘basic package of services’, which excludes social protection, and is significantly lower than the estimated 3% of GDP needed for middle-income countries to offer the enhanced package of services.

In Montenegro, in sector-specific strategy papers, the costing of actions is often missing, or the source of funding is only given in general terms. In the largest number of cases, the sources of funding for specific actions are not envisaged. The ECD sector would benefit from a programme budgeting reform and the introduction of cross-sector financing of programmes, which could be introduced through a pilot budgeting programme.

Public administration reform

In 2016, the government adopted the Public Administration Reform Strategy, (PAR Strategy) aimed at creating an efficient and service-oriented public administration intended to increase citizens’ trust. The PAR promotes a new paradigm of public administration organization and work that is based on the provision of quality and timely services, and demands the use of digital platforms to facilitate the provision of administrative services and contributions to the reform of other government institutions. The strategy should contribute to the efficient and economical management of public funds and the improvement of diversification and quality of services. The PAR strategy is very timely for the potential development and success of the ECD policy, and could be extremely helpful if it delivers on its promises to improve interoperability and data availability. The key potential benefits for the ECD sector are: improved data for better targeting ECD services, which can also serve as a basis for establishing real-time collaboration, and data exchange protocols for timely actions. The PAR could also provide a basis for monitoring individual cases and designing adequate measures, especially for marginalized and socially disadvantaged families.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations is proposed based on the study findings:

- To develop and adopt a national cross-sector ECD Policy, based on the Strategy for Exercising the Rights of the Child, through a broad consultation process with different stakeholders, including families and communities;
- To prioritize investment in the ECD Policy and services, which can contribute to closing some of the glaring equity gaps, and potentially yield a high rate of return on investment, based on plans for short- and medium-term ECD budgets;
- To establish an adequate, efficient and effective mechanism for regular monitoring of policy implementation, including the impact of new and scaled-up services;
- To support local self-governments to plan, deliver and monitor services that promote and enable ECD, with a particular focus on disadvantaged or socially excluded families;
- To evaluate and strengthen the existing coordination mechanisms, or create new ones, to foster cross-sector cooperation in service delivery and, where feasible and meaningful, to deliver integrated services in line with the Strategy for Exercising the Rights of the Child (2019–2023) and Montenegro Inclusive Education Strategy (2019-2025).
• To update national standards and service packages to reflect the five components of nurturing care;

• To review job descriptions and staff profiles, and create a collaboration roadmap, and referral mechanisms at the service and system levels, to reduce duplication and inefficiencies, and allocate adequate resources for professionals to collaborate and work together;

• To promote cross-sector training, mentoring and exchange of experiences between professionals belonging to different sectors;

• To empower families and civil society to demand quality services and to involve families in the planning, implementation and monitoring of policies and services based on the family-strength model;

• To continuously invest in strengthening evidence and research, as well as in the capacities of policymakers and professionals to analyse and publish the data and use it in policymaking.

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9. More details can be found at: https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/stories/investing-early-childhood-development-imperative-every-society, while Conference Conclusions can be found at: https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/reports/investing-early-years.


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