1. Background and Context

The early childhood period encompasses several quite distinct phases: from ‘conception to birth’ and from ‘birth to 3 years’, with emphasis on the first 1,000 days (from conception to 24 months), followed by the pre-primary years (3 years to 5 or 6 years, or the age of school entry). Early childhood development is the continuous process of acquiring skills and abilities from conception to the age of school entry across the domains of cognition, language, motor, social and emotional development which help individuals to think, solve problems, communicate, express emotions and form relationships. It is also considered the foundation of health, learning, productivity, well-being and the foundation for future human capital formation.

Globally, almost half of all children under the age of 5 years are at risk of not realizing their developmental potential, as a result of the risks of poverty and poor nutrition and a lack of access to basic services and early learning opportunities. Juxtaposed against these challenges is the invaluable evidence gained from advances in biological and behavioral sciences that show that a child’s development can be protected and promoted through simple actions and interventions in the earliest years of their life. ECD interventions can help narrow the wide gaps in outcomes and opportunities between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, geographical locations and ethnic groups. ECD interventions can contribute to reducing the gender gap among caregivers, empowering women to take on formal, paid work by offering the support and flexibility of quality childcare and family-friendly policies. Typically, investments in early childhood are extremely low and countries that invest in children tend to do so in favor of older children missing thereby the most cost-effective window of opportunity for laying strong foundations for the future health, education and economic productivity of their citizens. The inclusion of early childhood development (ECD) in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), represents a unique opportunity to galvanize efforts for the development and wellbeing of young children.

ECD in Montenegro

The past two decades in Montenegro have been characterized by political stability, social and political reform and economic growth. Although Montenegro is an upper-middle-income economy and a candidate for accession to the European Union (EU), many inequalities remain, and child wellbeing is compromised by insufficient recognition of the importance of early child development. Underlying reasons include a broad spectrum of economic, social, cultural, as well as public policy challenges, all of which contribute to less than optimal parenting skills and limited preventative measures and opportunities that could enhance child development. Some key gaps in ECD are as follows:

- Only 20% of newborns are exclusively breastfed within the first 6 months, while 45% of children up to 5 years do not receive the minimum acceptable diet in order to reach optimal development. These poor nutrition practices lead to poor health outcomes including stunting.

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2 The Lancet, 2016. These data have been estimated using globally comparable metrics in low-and middle-income countries.
3 UNICEF’s Program Guidance for Early Childhood Development, 2017
5 Ibid.
(7%) and overweight (7%) in children under 5, with disadvantaged children being most affected (e.g. 21% of Roma children are stunted)⁶.

- Montenegro struggles with low immunization coverage, particularly for some vaccines. Coverage rate for the first dose of measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) decreased from 90% in 2010 to 42.1% in 2018⁷.
- Almost one third of 3 – 6 years old children in Montenegro are not enrolled in kindergarten and do not have the opportunity to receive quality education and systemic care when it is most needed. In several municipalities in the North coverage by preschool education is still below 50% on average.
- 66 percent of children aged 1–14 years are subjected to at least one form of psychological or physical punishment by their parents or other adult household members⁸. Children aged 3-9 are most affected, where four in ten are subjected to any physical punishment.
- One third of children in Montenegro (32%) live in income-poor households; 40% of children 0-17 are at risk of poverty or social exclusion and 18% of children live in households which experience severe material deprivation⁹.
- Children with disabilities remain one of the most socially excluded and deprived groups, especially if they are also affected by poverty. Children with disabilities are also over-represented in institutional care (60% of children in institutional care are with disabilities¹⁰).

In partnership with the Government of Montenegro and the support of the European Union, UNICEF Montenegro is implementing “EU and UNICEF for Early Childhood Development in Montenegro” (2020-2023). One of the expected results of the Action is to raise awareness of the importance of child development at national level, in order to positively influence behaviours and stimulate demand for quality ECD services. Based on a baseline Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices (KAP) survey with caregivers, a communication strategy will be developed and implemented in partnership with the national and local authorities, civil sector and media. Its impact will be assessed, inter alia, through a second KAP survey at the end of the Action (in 2023). Furthermore, qualitative data on attitudes towards breastfeeding and preschool enrolment needs to be collected to feed into the activity related to capacity building of relevant professionals on promoting the importance of early childhood education and care and key ECD services.

A Consultancy (research) Agency is required for this assignment.

2. Purpose and Objective

The purpose of the consultancy is to contribute to raising awareness of the importance of ECD at national level, and to inform a forthcoming communications strategy aimed at positively influencing behaviours and stimulating demand for quality ECD services.

The objectives of the consultancy are:
- To provide technical assistance in the design and implementation of a quantitative KAP survey in relation to ECD in Montenegro.

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⁶ Ibid.
¹⁰ UNICEF Montenegro data, from various administrative sources.
- To complement the above KAP survey by diving deeper into (a) breastfeeding practices in Montenegro (enablers and barriers to breastfeeding) and (b) preschool enrolment (motivation/concerns/obstacles for enrolling children) using qualitative research methods.

3. **Methodology and Technical Approach**

A quantitative KAP survey needs to be conducted and be complemented by a deeper dive into breastfeeding and preschool enrolment using qualitative research methods (focus groups and/or in-depth interviews).

The quantitative survey should provide detailed information on the knowledge, attitudes and practices of the general public in general, and parents in particular, in relation to different aspects of ECD and the use of ECD services. The survey questionnaire should cover ECD as a whole (as a concept) and all relevant ECD domains: health, nutrition, early childhood education and learning, responsive (positive) parenting, social and child protection, early intervention. The length of one interview should be up to 30 minutes hence the size of the questionnaire should be conceptualised accordingly. The questionnaire should allow for comparison of data with key indicators from previous KAPs, such as Montenegro’s 2009 ECD KAP, KAP on violence against children, and KAP on early childhood education and should draw on MICS 2018 findings. The KAP survey should be conducted on a nationally representative sample of mothers/primary caregivers of children younger than 6 years. The findings of the research should enable disaggregation, at minimum, by mother/other caregiver, urban/rural areas, north/centre/south of Montenegro, etc.

The complementary deeper dive should relate to:
- **Breastfeeding**, with the aim to provide information on influencers, enablers and barriers to breastfeeding, focusing on continued and exclusive breastfeeding. The methodology may include focus groups and/or in-depth interviews with those who practice breastfeeding (positive deviants) and those who do not, e.g. breastfeeding mothers and non-breastfeeding mothers, and family members and health professionals.
- **Preschool enrolment**, with the aim to provide information on parents’ motivation/concerns/obstacles (not only COVID-19-related) to enrol children in preschool. The methodology may comprise focus groups and/or in-depth interviews focusing on the north of Montenegro where kindergartens do not operate to full capacity.

The Consultancy Agency will ensure that the research process is in line with the UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, and Data Collection and Analysis. Special measures should be put in place to ensure that the assessment process is ethical and that participants in the survey process can freely express their opinion. The sources of information will be protected, and known only to the contracted Consultancy Agency. The Consultancy Agency has to ensure that it is clear to all subjects that their participation in the assessment is voluntary. All participants should be informed or advised of the context and purpose of the assessment, as well as the privacy and confidentiality of discussions.

Consultants are required to clearly identify any potential ethical issue, as well as the processes for ethical review and oversight of the research/data collection process in their proposal. To ensure quality and accountability in the evidence generation process, especially when it involves children, UNICEF Country Office in Montenegro established an independent Ethical Review Committee in 2016, which reviews and approves research methodologies and final research reports, before their publication. The
committee is multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral in composition. UNICEF Montenegro will submit the detailed research methodology as well as the research results (slide decks/research reports) to the aforementioned Ethical Review Committee for clearance.

4. **Activities and Tasks**

The following tasks need to be accomplished:

a) **Qualitative survey:**
   - Design of the questionnaire for the baseline KAP survey based on the technical expertise of the Consultancy Agency and in line with instructions and feedback from UNICEF.
   - Data collection for the KAP survey on a nationally representative sample.
   - Data analysis.
   - Producing a slide deck on the findings of the survey in English and Montenegrin.

b) **Complementary deeper dive into breastfeeding using qualitative methods:**
   - Design of the methodology (incl. focus group/interview protocol) based on the technical expertise of the Consultancy Agency and in line with instructions and feedback from UNICEF
   - Data collection
   - Data analysis
   - Producing a report and additional slides to complement the above KAP slide deck with key findings in English and Montenegrin.

c) **Complementary deeper dive into preschool enrolment using qualitative methods:**
   - Design of the research (incl. focus group/interview protocol) based on the technical expertise of the Consultancy Agency and in line with instructions and feedback from UNICEF
   - Data collection
   - Data analysis
   - Producing a report and additional slides to complement the above KAP slide deck with key findings in English and Montenegrin.

5. **Deliverables and Timeframe**

The following deliverables need to be produced by the following tentative deadlines.

- First draft of the methodology incl. Questionnaire and Focus Group/Interview protocols, by 23 November 2020.
- Final draft of the methodology incl. Questionnaire and Focus Group/Interview protocols based on received feedback and comments from the Ethical Review Board, by 3 December 2020.
- Complete data set (data tables) and a draft slide deck in English or Montenegrin (as agreed between UNICEF and the Consultancy Agency) on the results of the quantitative survey and draft reports from the complementary qualitative research submitted to UNICEF, by 11 January 2021.
- Final slide decks and reports (as above) in English and Montenegrin based on feedback received by UNICEF, by 25 January 2020.
6. **Management and Organisation**

**Management:** The consultants will work in close consultation and under the supervision of UNICEF Early Childhood Development Officer.

The evaluation of the contractor(s)’ performance will be based on:
- Quality of produced outputs;
- Compliance with the established timelines;
- Responsibility and communication.

**Organization:** Institutional (international or national) consultancy is required for this consultancy.

**Schedule:** This assignment is expected to commence by 16 November 2020 and end on 31 January 2021.

7. **Qualifications and Requirements**

UNICEF is seeking proposals from experienced research institute, consultancy research agencies, university department and analysis centres with experience of working in and on Montenegro or South East Europe, experience in ECD, and with focus on social policy, social statistics or similar.

The team leader must:
- Hold an Master/PhD in social sciences;
- Have extensive work experience in the production of similar studies including for different international agencies (especially UN);
- Have outstanding skills in statistical analysis;
- Have a very good knowledge of participatory research;
- Have excellent analytical and writing skills in English and local language;
- Familiarity with UNICEF’s mandate and goals is desirable;
- Cultural sensitivity.

The research team must:
- Have members with University Degrees in social sciences;
- Have a member who is an expert in early childhood development;
- Have a member who is a professional methodologist;
- Have relevant work experience in the production of similar studies including for different international agencies (especially UN), in the field of social development;
- Have very good skills in statistical analysis;
- Have very good analytical and writing skills in English and local language;
- Familiarity with UNICEF’s mandate and goals is desirable;
- Cultural sensitivity.
8. Application procedure

The potential contractors are expected to submit a proposal based on these Terms of Reference. The proposal should consist of:

i. **Technical Proposal including:**

   a) Portfolio of the organisation/institution/agency with examples of previous work on similar projects and clients in the last 5 years (i.e. KAPs, particularly related to Early Childhood Development, enablers and barriers to breastfeeding, ECE enrolment)

   b) Detailed description of the methodology and technical approach;

   c) Tentative work plan with number of days and timeframe in line with the above deadlines for deliverables

   d) Supplier Profile Form

ii. **Financial Proposal (Budget) including:**

   a) Price for quantitative KAP survey on early childhood development.

   b) Price for the complimentary qualitative research on breastfeeding enablers and barriers (in total and itemized per interview/focus group).

   c) Price for the complimentary qualitative research on preschool enrolment (in total and itemized per interview/focus group).

The financial proposal shall indicate budget estimated in EUR.

9. Proposal Evaluation

Each proposal will be evaluated against a weight allocation of 70 for the technical proposal and 30 for the financial proposal. The total maximum obtainable points is 100.

The proposal will be evaluated as follows:

1) **Technical components (total of 70 points)**

   - Professional profile - 10
   - Proposed Methodology and Approach – 25
   - Quality of Personnel and Suitability for the assignment - 35
2) Financial component (total of 30 points)\textsuperscript{11}

- Technical proposal evaluation. Proposals passing the minimum technical pass score (49 points\textendash{}70\% of the maximum points obtainable for technical proposal) will continue into the Financial proposal evaluation.
- Financial proposal evaluation. The lowest price proposal will be awarded the full score assigned to the commercial proposal.
- Recommendation. The recommendation for award of contract will be based on best combination of technical and financial score.
- Final award and contracts. Based on verified nominations and final scores, contract negotiations could be initiated with one or more successful Proposers.
- The UNICEF evaluation team will select the Proposal which is of high quality, clear and meets the stated requirements and offers the best combination of technical and financial score.

10. Remarks

- UNICEF Montenegro Office holds copyrights for all reports. The documents (including raw materials, etc.) may not be reproduced, distributed or published without the written permission from UNICEF.
- All personal data should be accessible to team members, but no one else. The consultants need to set up secure systems (a) to ensure that other staff within their institutions cannot access their data via the shared staff drives, and (b) to ensure secure data transfer between institutions. Cloud based storage with limited sharing rights could be considered in this instance. Different personal data files need to be linkable, they need to be held separately so that they can only be linked purposely, by researchers who are authorised to do so. There is also a need to ensure that data cannot be removed from secure systems in ways that might compromise data security.
- UNICEF Montenegro Office will share with the selected consultants all the relevant materials it has and provide required expertise.
- UNICEF Montenegro Office will review and provide feedback on reports prepared by consultants.

\textsuperscript{11} Financial offer will be reviewed only if Technical proposal meets minimum required quality standards.
• All information from produced reports cannot be shared with the media without the written approval of UNICEF Montenegro Office.

11. **Budget and Remuneration**

• **Consultancy fee**
  Proposals are invited based on these Terms of Reference.

• **Payment schedule**
  The payments will be made upon successful completion of the deliverables and submission of invoices.

• **Recourse**
  UNICEF reserves the right to withhold all or a portion of payment if performance is unsatisfactory, if work/outputs is incomplete, not delivered or for failure to meet deadlines.