

Formative Evaluation of Key Areas of Preschool Education Policy in Serbia (2012-2022)

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Acronyms

CIP	Centre for Interactive Pedagogy
CO	Country Office
CSW	Centres for Social Work
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EQ	Evaluation Questions
ERG	Evaluation Reference Group
ET	Evaluation Team
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEROS	Global Evaluation Reports Oversight System
IIE	Institute for Improvement of Education
JISP	Unified Information System of Education
LSG	Local Self Government
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
MLEVSA	Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoPALS	Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self Government
NEET	Young people who are not in employment, education, or training
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee
PCF	Preschool Education Curriculum Framework
PI	Preschool Institution
PPP	Preparatory Preschool Program
PSE	Preschool education
SDC	Swiss Development Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SORS	Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SCTM	Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities
TOC	Theory of Change
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

1. Introduction

1. The UNICEF Country Office and the Ministry of Education¹ (MoE) of the Government of Serbia commissioned an evaluation of national preschool education (PSE) reform initiatives in Serbia between 2012 and 2022. The evaluation is an independent assessment of the results of the Government of Serbia's preschool education reform. The evaluation also provided an opportunity to analyse UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, Local Self Governments (LSG), donors, professional associations, civil society organisations etc.) contributions to those results.
2. In line with the Terms of Reference (ToR) (Annex 1), the evaluation was formative in nature and aimed to identify results of the reform and map bottlenecks and potential mitigation measures, to generate recommendations towards policy improvements, and targeted areas where additional support was needed and ways it could be provided.
3. As per the UNICEF evaluation policy, an Evaluation Reference Group (ERG) was established to act as an advisory and provide inputs on key reform initiatives, and to participate in elaboration of recommendations through active contribution during debriefing meetings and by providing feedback to the draft final report. The immediate users of the evaluation findings and recommendations include both internal and external stakeholders. Primary users are the MoE and UNICEF. Secondary audiences included the Institute for Improvement of Education (IIE), the Institute for Evaluating the Quality of Education (IEQE), professional associations of preschool practitioners and others as relevant, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs (MoLEVSA), the Republic Institute for Social Protection and Centres for Social Work (CSW), implementing and development partners and donors.

1.1 Context

Demographics

4. Serbia, located in the Western Balkans, has a population of 6.7 million (2022 Census)², down 6.9 percent from 2011. Except for Belgrade region, which grew by 1.6 percent, all areas witnessed this decline due to factors like aging, low fertility, and youth emigration. The average age is 43.5 years (42 years male, 44.9 years female) with an old-age dependency ratio of 33 percent (2022). Children (0-17 years) constitute 17.4 percent (2021) with a 6.2 percent drop since 2012, especially in ages 0-6 (-4.6 percent). Newborns decreased from 67,257 (2012) to 62,180 (2021, -7.5 percent)³.
5. From 2013-2021, Serbia saw more emigration than immigration. For instance, Serbian first residence permits in the EU nearly doubled from 23,770 (2013) to 44,078 (2021), peaking at 62,373 (2019)⁴. Immigrant population increased, too. In 2012, 6,893 foreign citizens, mostly from China and Russia⁵, received Serbian permits. By 2021, 17,560 foreigners got permits (36.7 percent China, 22.6 percent Turkey, 5.9 percent Russia).⁶ Serbia hosted third-country nationals post the 2015 migrant crisis, though many left. Global Competitiveness Index (2017-2018) ranked Serbia 134th in retaining and 132nd in attracting talent⁷. Post the

¹ In 2022, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development was separated into the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation. In this document, we only use the name Ministry of Education.

² SORS (2022). First results of the Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, 2022.

³ Ibid

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_RESFIRST_custom_5802405/default/line?lang=en

⁵ CRM, Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2012

⁶ CRM, Migration Profile of the Republic of Serbia for 2021

⁷ World Economic Forum (2018), Global Competitiveness Report 2017-2018,

<https://espas.secure.europarl.europa.eu/orbis/sites/default/files/generated/document/en/TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2017percentE2percent80percent932018.pdf>

Russian-Ukrainian war, over 100,000 Russians and 18,000 Ukrainians⁸ reportedly immigrated in Mar-Nov 2022.⁹

6. Population regression challenges Serbia's human capital. Solutions include enhancing access, quality, and equity in preschool education to build human capital¹⁰. These have been focal points of Serbia's PSE initiatives and support during the period between 2012-2022.

Economy

7. Serbia is an upper-middle income country and witnessed a 53 percent rise in per capita GDP from USD 6,013 (2012) to USD 9,180 (2021)¹¹. The European Commission's 2022 report noted a slight narrowing of the income gap with the EU, as Serbia's per capita GDP in purchasing power standards increased to 44 percent of the EU average (2021) from 41 percent (2019) and 39 percent (2009)¹². The European Commission assessed Serbia's preparation for a functional market economy as moderate to good.¹³
8. Unemployment dropped significantly from 23.9 percent (2012) to 9.4 percent (2022), marking a record low. In 2021, the overall unemployment rate was 11 percent, with youth aged 15-24 at 26.4 percent and youth aged 15-29 at 20.0 percent. Young women faced higher unemployment than men (29.5 percent for ages 15-24, 21.2 percent for ages 15-29)¹⁴. Serbia's NEET rate declined from 28.6 percent (2012) to 19.5 percent (2021), though it still exceeds the EU average (14.3 percent in 2021)¹⁵. A UNECE and UN Women study¹⁶ linked women's employment access to PSE use, highlighting childcare availability, placement criteria, flexible hours, and care quality¹⁷. Factors affecting women's labour participation include maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, financial support, and services¹⁸.

Poverty

9. Over the 2012-2021 period, poverty remained a significant problem with average absolute poverty rate around 7 percent of the population, even when the at-risk-of-poverty rate decreased¹⁹. Non-urban areas had a 1 percent poverty rate in 2020, while Eastern and Southern Serbia had 11.1 percent. Vulnerable groups included children (10.6 percent under 13 years, 7.9 percent 14-18 years), and youth (10.3 percent 19-24 years) in 2020.²⁰ The most vulnerable were those with low education and unemployment.
10. According to the latest Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia (SORS) survey data on Poverty and Social Inequality, the at-risk-of-poverty rate was 21.2 percent in 2021²¹, lower by 3.3 percentage points compared to 2013²². At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate lowered to 28.5 percent, a 13.5 percent decrease from 2013²³. Poverty risk was highest for ages 18-24, individuals 65+, families with 2 adults and 3+ kids, and the unemployed²⁴.

⁸ In March 2022, Serbia decided to grant temporary protection for one year to Ukrainian nationals, which was prolonged for one year more in March 2023.

⁹ https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/drustvo/5021_133/rusi-ukrajinci-srbija-stanovi-skole.html

¹⁰ UNICEF, Thematic Note on Adequacy and Efficiency of the Preschool Education Spending

¹¹ IMF, World Economic Outlook Database, April 2023.

¹² EC (2022), Serbia 2022 Report, page 68,

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/240003020304?languageCode=sr-Latn>

¹⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_20/default/table?lang=en

¹⁶ UNECE (2021); UNECE - UN Women series: Rethinking the Care Economy and Empowering Women for Building back Better Childcare, Women's Employment and COVID-19 Impacts: The Case of Serbia

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 16

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (2021), Statistics on absolute poverty, <https://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/rs/socijalno-ukljucivanje-u-rs/statistika-siromastva/apsolutno-siromastvo/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia(2022), Poverty and Social Inequality 2021, https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=8870&a=01&s=0_102?s=0102

²² SORS (2015), Poverty and Social Inequality 2014, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2015/Pdf/G20151083.pdf>

²³ SORS, SDG indicators, <https://sdg.indikatori.rs/sr-latn/area/no-poverty/?subarea=SDGUN010202&indicator=01020102IND01>

²⁴ <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=8870&a=01&s=0102?s=0102>

Inequality decreased (33.3 percent in 2021 vs. 38 percent in 2013) but remained above EU average (30.1) ²⁵.

11. The pandemic hit vulnerable groups hard. Serbian government provided universal cash transfers ²⁶ but lacked targeted measures for the vulnerable or improved social assistance ²⁷. In addition, public expenditure on social assistance has been decreasing in recent years. ²⁸ However, there were additional pressures on vulnerable and marginalized population groups, including higher food and energy prices, and higher rent expenses caused by the Ukraine crisis. UNICEF's Country Office Annual Report 2022 noted that 'preliminary projections of the impact of the Ukraine crisis in Serbia indicate a likely increase in child poverty, with between 25,000 and 50,000 additional children falling into absolute poverty (i.e., monthly expenditures below US\$150), with those living in households depending on agriculture the most likely to be affected' ²⁹.
12. Stateless and unregistered children in Roma settlements lack access to various services, such as education, health care, and social welfare. However, according to Article 14 of the Law on Preschool Education those children can enrol in Program preschool institutions. Participation of children from Roma settlements, or children living in poverty in PSE programs is lower than average levels of children participation in PSE programs. While laws, including the Regulation on Hazardous Labour of Children and various guidelines for coordination between social services providers and labour authorities address child labour ³⁰, 18.8 percent of 5–14-year-olds work, 20.6 percent balance work and school ³¹. Worst forms persist, including forced begging and exploitation due to trafficking ³².

Preschool education context

13. The intended right holders of preschool education are girls and boys aged between 6 months and age of the start of primary education. This also includes children belonging to vulnerable groups (children with disabilities, children from rural areas, children from poor families and children of Roma national minority). On the other side, the participants of initiatives aimed at increasing access, quality, and equity of preschool education are the MoE and other relevant ministries, IIE, and the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (IEQE), LSGs, preschool institutions, practitioners, academic institutions, and associations.
14. As regards number of rightsholders, demographic data indicates a 5.5 percent drop in children aged 0–6 and a 6.7 percent decrease in newborns (2012–2022) in Serbia. Further decline in the number of preschool-age children is predicted. To foster human capital amid this trend, effective resource management is essential. LSGs play a vital role in enhancing Preschool Institutions (PI) networks and creating conditions for realisation of PSE programs. Diverse preschool forms and programs tailored to the needs of children and families and the needs and capacities of PIs and LSGs, backed by various PSE initiatives, are crucial for ensuring access to PSE to all the children.
15. Progress has been made in preschool quality and coverage, with 30 percent coverage for ages 6 months to 3 years. SORS data reveals a 21.6 percent growth (40,000 children) in preschool education enrolment (2012–2022). Notably, coverage of children aged 3 to 5.5 rose from 58.1 percent (2012/2013) ³³ to 63.7 percent (2020/2021) ³⁴, with variations among age groups. Enrolment of children up to 3 years increased from 15.9 percent (2012) to 34.3

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_di12/default/table?lang=en

²⁶ E.g., universal cash transfer of EUR 100 to each citizen over the age of 18; a one-off payment to all pensioners.

²⁷ EC (2022), EC Serbia 2022 report.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ UNICEF (2022), Country Office Annual Report 2022,

³⁰ US Department of Labour (2021), Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labour for Serbia

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ SORS (2014), Statistical Yearbook 2014, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2014/PdfE/G20142013.pdf>

³⁴ SORS (2022), Statistical Yearbook 2022, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2022/PdfE/G20222055.pdf>

percent (2021) ³⁵, surpassing the 30 percent target set for 2020 (achieved at 31.8 percent in 2020) ³⁶. Serbia achieved the Barcelona target of 33 percent for children below 3 years in 2021 (34.3 percent) ³⁷, albeit slightly lagging the EU's 2019 attainment (35 percent) ³⁸.

16. The DevInfo database indicates that coverage for children aged 3 to 5.5, the start of compulsory education, was 65.8 percent in 2021, rising by 11.3 percentage points since 2012³⁹. Enrolment in the mandatory Preparatory Preschool Program (PPP) for ages 5.5 to 6.5 increased from 92.7 percent in 2012 to 97.3 percent in 2022⁴⁰. At the same time, on the EU level in 2021, ECEC participation was 91.8 percent for ages 3 to the start of primary education ⁴¹ and 94.9 percent for ages 4 to the start of primary education ⁴². Key reasons for some children 3 -5 years old not to be enrolled in preschool education in Serbia are the lack of parental awareness of the importance and role of ECEC (ECEC is often perceived as a "childcare system" rather than part of the educational system), and access problems (e.g., facility is overcrowded, service is too expensive, or too far away). Various PSE interventions targeted issues of low enrolment of children aged 3-5.5 years, particularly from vulnerable groups.
17. As regards equity, children from rural areas, poor families, and children of Roma national minority (Roma Children ⁴³) still encounter substantial obstacles concerning access to preschool education, even though the legislation on preschool education ⁴⁴ stipulates that children from vulnerable groups should have priority in enrolment. For example, the results of the MICS 2019 and 2014 study indicate that while the number of children aged between 3 and 5 years who attended early childhood education has increased (from 50.2 percent in 2014 to 60.6 percent in 2019), the coverage of Roma children remains below 10 percent (5.7 percent in 2014, 7.4 percent in 2019). In addition, (MICS) 2019 study shows that there is also significant gap in the coverage of children aged between 3 and 5 years from rural areas (45.9 percent), and poorest family (10.5 percent) compared to general population. ⁴⁵ However, there was an increase in coverage of these groups compared to MICS data from 2014 (27.3 percent of children aged between 3 and 5 years from rural areas and 8.6 percent of poorest families)⁴⁶. Similarly, the enrolment rate of mandatory PPP remained very high for the general population (97 percent in 2019), while being significantly lower for Roma children (76 percent in 2019). While this is an improvement as their coverage rate was 63 percent in 2014 (MICS 2014), further efforts are needed to increase their enrolment rates.
18. The network of preschool institutions has been growing, among other things, due to increase of verified private preschool institutions in the period 2012 -2021.⁴⁷ SORS data for 2022 shows that ECEC has been organized in 461 preschool institutions (163 public and 298 private) and in 2,835 facilities (2417 public and 418 private). The number of children enrolled in private preschool institutions is eight times higher than in 2012, partially linked to introduction of the voucher system in some municipalities (e.g., Belgrade, Kragujevac, and Nis). Despite an increase in the capacity of preschool institutions, available SORS data

³⁵ DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/home.aspx>.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ JRC, EC (2022), Indicators for early childhood education and care, JRC Science for Policy Report, page 6

³⁹ DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/home.aspx>.

⁴⁰ SORS (2023), Preschool education and care, in 2022/23 school year, 2023.

⁴¹ EUROSTAT (2021), Pupils from age 3 to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level by NUTS2 regions - percent of the population of the corresponding age

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ For the purpose of brevity "Roma children" will be used throughout the report

⁴⁴ The law on preschool education (2010, revised in 2017, 2019 and 2021) and relevant by-laws (e.g., Rule book on specific conditions for determining the priority enrolment in preschool institutions).

⁴⁵ SORS, UNICEF (2019), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys on Status of Women and Children.

⁴⁶ SORS, UNICEF (2014), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys on Status of Women and Children.

⁴⁷ According to MoE data, in 2021, there were 360 registered private kindergartens; <https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/spisak-verifikovanih-privatnih-predskolskih-ustanova-15092021.pdf>.

shows that in 2021, 5,736 children remained unenrolled due to full capacity.⁴⁸ The issue of capacity occupancy and accessibility has been targeted by “The Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care Project” which aims to improve the accessibility of ECEC through the building new kindergartens, adaptation and/or renovation the existing other available spaces in municipalities.

19. Serbia has reformed its legal and strategic framework in the area of preschool education. A target under UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (sub-goal 4.2) was defined as ‘by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education’⁴⁹. This commitment is evident in the Strategies for Education Development till 2020⁵⁰ and Education and Care Development till 2030⁵¹. Besides, since 2012, Serbia has significantly fortified its legal framework for ongoing ECEC reform. A significant impulse to the reform in the area of preschool education was the adoption of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (PCF) – The Years of Ascent⁵² and its successive implementation (between 1st September 2019 and 1st September 2022), based on the expert support provided under the Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care Project, which was a significant novelty and a step forward in creating conditions for the high-quality implementation of the new concept. The new Preschool Curriculum Framework was systematical developed according to a plan, based on the contemporary theoretical knowledge in this area, international education policy documents, good practice examples from the Republic of Serbia and the international context; in partnership with relevant institutions (IIE, IPA, UNICEF and MoE), the draft concept was piloted and revised and enhanced according to the feedback received from practice.

The adoption of the new PCF and the provision of support in its implementation required the adoption of the new and the synchronisation of the existing secondary legislation, especially in the areas of: the spatial organisation norms and the norms regarding PI furnishing and didactic equipment; PI quality assessment; registering and pedagogical documents; preschool teachers and PI expert associates competence standards; all forms and program of work of expert associates, and the realisation of different preschool programs and forms of work.

20. PSE reforms initiated in 2012 were aimed at enhancing access, quality, and inclusivity by means of investing in infrastructure, diversification of programs and forms of work, adoption of the new PCF and strengthening the capacities of all the stakeholders. These efforts were backed by the instrument for EU pre-accession assistance, World Bank loan and various donors. The implementation of reforms in 2020–2022 was seriously affected by COVID-19 pandemic. In order to mitigate this effect, UNICEF supported MoE in developing a preschool education response plan in the context of COVID-19, which contributed to empowerment of practitioners and parents to support or organize learning through play at home. Around 127,250 families and 142,022 children (79 percent of children enrolled in preschool education) benefited from this support during the lockdown⁵³.
21. Public education funding in Serbia was 3.8 per cent in 2012, only to decrease to 3.6 percent of GDP in 2019.⁵⁴ A baseline study revealed 2014's public expenditure on preschool

⁴⁸ SORS (2022), Preschool education and care, in 2021/22 school year. Note: the SORS research did not cover all PIs

⁴⁹ <https://serbia.un.org/en/sdgs/4>

⁵⁰ https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/STRATEGIJA_OBRAZOVANJA.pdf

⁵¹ Note: The new Education Development Strategy in RS until 2030 was not only based on the national planning documents and legal framework, but also an array of international documents significant for the area of education, such as the Goals of the Sustainable Development Agenda until 2030. In the area of preschool education, the subgoal 4.2 envisages the universal coverage of all girls and boys with the quality preschool education in the early childhood (more details available at: https://prosveta.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/1_SROVRS-2030_MASTER_0402_V1.pdf)

⁵² The Rule Book on the Preschool Curriculum Framework (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – Educational Gazette 16/18))

⁵³ UNICEF (2020), Country Office Annual Report 2022

⁵⁴ UNESCO Institute

education was 0.5 percent of GDP. Preschool expenditures increased by 1 percentage point per year in the period 2007 to 2018.⁵⁵

22. Local self-governments cover 80% of the economic price in public PIs, while the remaining 20% are collected from parents. The 4-hour mandatory preparatory preschool program in duration of 9 months in the year before entering a primary school, preschool services for children with disabilities and hospital-based education (MoE), and free preschool education for children without parental care and children from households receiving financial social assistance (MoLEVSA), are funded from the public budget. LSGs cover the preschool expenses of children from poor families (see Finding 19)

1.2 The Evaluation Subject

23. Serbia is committed to ensure that by 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality ECEC and pre-primary education; its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target is in line with the UN SDG 4.
24. PSE reform efforts included in this evaluation, implemented within the period of 2012 - 2022 were marked by two consecutive strategies, the Strategy of the Development of Education until 2020 and the subsequent Strategy of the Development of Education until 2030. The vision for ECEC, as defined by the Strategy for the Development of Education by 2030 in the Republic of Serbia, is 'further development of the ECEC system to meet the needs of children and families as well as being support and comprehensive development of children of preschool age, and in accordance with the principles of ECEC (accessibility, democracy, openness, authenticity, development)'. This is in line with the vision of the previous Strategy of the Development of Education until 2020.
25. Three-year Action Plans for the implementation of those strategies and several normative documents, provided guidance for the reform intervention, and/or concretisation of measures and activities directed at :
 - Advancing the capacities of local self-governments for planning and managing the network of preschool education with the aim of **increasing coverage**
 - Support to advancing preschool education **quality** (with a focus on the transformation potential of support provided for strengthening the capacity of preschool institutions)
 - Support to advancing preschool education **equity**.
26. Under these strategic directions, initiatives were implemented under the guidance of MoE and in partnership with the development partners, notably the World Bank, EU, and UNICEF.

Strengthening coverage and equity of PSE

27. The strengthening of coverage and equity of PSE services have been important government priorities over the period 2012 -2022. To influence the increase in coverage of children in ECEC, the MoE in cooperation with its partners have provided support to ensure conditions for expansion of spatial capacities of institutions and their furnishing through the construction of new facilities, adaptation and/or repurposing existing facilities in numerous municipalities across Serbia (e.g. under the 'Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care' project (ECEC project), IPA 14, IPA 90 - IMPRESS S, Kindergartens Without Borders).
28. Several initiatives supported further development of the legal framework and capacity building to municipalities and preschool institutions in the development of diversified PSE programs, with special focus on increasing enrolment rate and the inclusion of vulnerable children ages 3 -5.5. Support has been provided to LSGs for strengthening their strategic planning capacities program on the local level, promotion of the significance of this educational service and its advocacy program. Collaboration of local actors to support the most vulnerable families and include their children into PSE has been also in focus.

⁵⁵ Thematic Note on Adequacy and Efficiency of the Preschool

Quality of PSE

29. The improvement of quality of PSE services have been an important government priority. At the initiative of the MoE, the IIE led the process of developing the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (PCF) in the period 2016 -2018. Key systemic changes to PSE were fundamentally initiated by introduction of this new PCF, adopted in 2018. In the course of 2018–2019, the standards and indicators of the quality of work in PIs were revised. The new Rule Book on the Preschool Quality Standards was adopted (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 14/2018) and the Rule Book on Preschool Quality Evaluation (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia no. 10/2019). Under the ECEC Project Component 2, an array of activities was realised focusing on improving the quality assessment system (self-evaluation and external evaluation, see Annex 10).
30. The PCF is a framework for: 'design and development of a preschool program at the level of preschool institution and/or a preschool group; development of various programs and types of preschool education and care; establishing the criteria for monitoring and evaluation of the quality of preschool education and care; improvement and development of the preschool institution and activity in general (as envisaged by Law on the Fundamentals of the Education System). To support its national roll-out, relevant regulations, professional instructions, guides, and manuals were harmonised. Development of the legal framework in line with PCF is presented in Annex 10. Timeline and Finding 2. Application of the new PCF in public and private preschool institutions and/or elementary schools that implement preschool programs, was done gradually starting from 2019 by 2022, when it became mandatory of all preschool institutions.
31. In parallel to the harmonisation of the legal framework, several activities are being implemented aiming at: a) increasing physical capacities through building new and/or adapting existing facilities; b) provision of adequate equipment; c) improvement of capacities of LSGs to plan local inclusive preschool education policies; d) promoting the importance of quality inclusive ECEC for every child through the national campaign on the importance of early learning.
32. The reform focused on strengthening the professional capacities of educators by the partnership development of professional capacity building programs for the implementation of the new PCF. This coherent program combines a five-day combined (in vivo and online) training in implementing PCF; mentoring support to PIs over a six-month period (five days of mentoring support in the field and seven days of online support); support by means of two models of horizontal learning: Joint Learning through Modelling (JLM) for the staff in five PIs – centres of clusters (Zemun, Novi Sad, Čačak, Pirot and Loznica), and the Professional Learning Community (PLC), operating between practitioners from different PIs that are in the same phase of PCF implementation. (more detailed presentation in Finding 4).
33. The state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic hindered capacity strengthening efforts as the in vivo trainings, the finalization of mentoring support to the preschools that started the implementation of the new PCF in September 2019, and the guide for mentors that should incorporate best practice examples from the first phase of PCF implementation were postponed in line with the current epidemiological situation. The time during the emergency was used to expedite the development of the online version of the trainings to be ready in case of a second wave of pandemic, or a protracted pandemic situation.
34. The initiatives and support targeting the preschool reform in Serbia involved key stakeholders at the national, regional, and local levels. The MoE has been the main institution in charge of programming and implementation of the preschool reform over the period 2012-2022. A range of actors have also been included in different segments of the reform, according to their competencies and mandates (the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, the Institute for the Improvement of Education, the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy of the Faculty of Philosophy, the University of Belgrade, the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP), EU, UNICEF, World Bank (WB), the Novak Djokovic Foundation,

and the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), PIs, LSGs, professional associations, etc, see Annex 3).

35. Moreover, PSE interventions have been sensitive to minority issues (e.g., enrolment of Roma children in PSE) by improving access to PSE for children from disadvantaged families (e.g., rural areas) and including children from vulnerable groups into diversified preschool programs (children 3–5.5 years). The geo-analysis of PSE interventions that targeted municipalities showed that most interventions were implemented in the most underdeveloped regions of Serbia (regions of Southern and Eastern Serbia, See Annex 3). Regarding gender equality, there have been few initiatives where attention was also paid by interventions to address gender stereotypes in PSE. For example, the handbook 'The Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment'⁵⁶ guides preschool teachers on how to promote gender equality in PSE.
36. Regarding the period of the initiatives, the equity of PSE was dominant as an objective of interventions in the period 2012–2014 but continued to be in focus after 2014. Enhancing the quality of PSE by piloting the draft, further development and the finalisation of the Preschool Curriculum Framework were particularly topical in 2016–2018, while with the PCF implementation the focus was on providing expert support to its implementation in 2018–2022 as part of the second component of the ECEC project. Increasing coverage was emphasized by various interventions, including the first and the third component of the ECEC project (See Timeline in Annex 10). This evaluation analysed initiatives conducted in the period 2012–2022, however, the PSE reform is still ongoing.

Intervention logic

37. The Evaluation team (ET) reconstructed the PSE reform logic for the period between 2012–2022 to serve as the foundation for the evaluation design. The draft reconstructed intervention logic (was shared with the MoE, which elaborated it further). The final Intervention logic was agreed with ERG, and its links in the chain of results at output, outcome and impact levels were used as elements of the evaluation matrix (See Intervention Logic in Annex 10).

Budget and overview of expenditure

38. Several MoE initiatives and donor funded projects have been implemented in support of the reform over the period 2012–2022. During this period, approximately 55 million EUR has been invested in the reform of preschool education in Serbia, according to an analysis of targeted PSE interventions of the MoE (See Annex 3: List of Projects and Activities implemented under the ECEC reform). In addition, there was approximately 9 million EUR investment in inter-sectoral interventions, including PSE, and at least 15 million EUR invested by other development partners. The largest proportion of investment is related to ECEC project (World Bank loan of 50 million US \$/~ 47 million EUR). There were also significant EU investments in PSE, such as IMPRESS (IPA 09) project with 5 million EUR, and as a part of the action program 'Towards Lifelong Learning' (IPA 14)⁵⁷ – 'Support to Preschool Education System Reform in Serbia' (SUPER) with 0.87 million and 1.06 million EUR dedicated to equipping preschool institutions. Other investments include the Novak Djokovic Foundation investing 15 million EUR through the project 'Schools of Life',⁵⁸ covering the period 2013–2020.

⁵⁶ The handbook was produced as a part of the Integrated Response to Violence against Women and Girls in Serbia II Project, implemented by UNICEF, UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP in partnership with the Government of the Republic of Serbia, headed by the Coordination Body for Gender Equality.

⁵⁷ <https://europa.rs/files/ipa-2014/ipa%202014%20AD%20Education%20towards%20LLL%2006042016.pdf>

⁵⁸ <https://novakdjokovicfoundation.org/schools-of-life/> <https://novakdjokovicfoundation.org/schools-of-life/>

1.3 Purpose, Objectives and Scope of the Evaluation

39. The purpose of this evaluation is to provide the MoE and UNICEF, among other actors, with an independent assessment of the Government of Serbia's preschool education reform initiatives between 2012 and 2022. Furthermore, this evaluation is formative in nature and aimed to inform areas where additional support in the reform process is needed and ways it could be provided by the MoE and UNICEF. Based on this broad purpose, the ToR for this assignment laid out five specific objectives for the evaluation:

- To assess the impact of the preschool education reform on children of preschool age in the Republic of Serbia towards the possibility of their inclusion in the high-quality preschool education.
- To determine measures for providing greater access of children to PSE, including children with disabilities, children living in Roma settlements and rural areas, both boys and girls.
- Identify the risks, challenges, obstacles, and any problems that emerged during the implementation of the reform measures that may call for adjustments or adaptation.
- Understand which elements of the reform worked and which did not and why. Identify those elements of the reform that have the potential of further advancing preschool education and sustainability of the results of support provided by means of reform initiatives.
- Understand UNICEF and other actors' contribution to the results (outcomes and impact) if any, as well as added value and comparative advantage in supporting national PSE reforms in Serbia.

Evaluation scope

40. **The evaluation scope** was included in the ToR, and it was confirmed during the inception phase as presented below.

41. **The thematic scope of the evaluation** covers the entirety of PSE reform initiatives, with focus on three aspects of the reform:

- Advancing the capacities of LSG for planning and managing the network of preschool Pls with the aim of increasing coverage.
- Support to advancing preschool education quality (with a focus on the absorption of support provided for quality and change achieved); and
- Support to advancing preschool education equity.

42. **Time period:** During the inception phase, the time scope was reconfirmed as 2012-2022, except for the thematic area of quality that refers to the period 2018-2022.

43. **Geographic scope:** The evaluation has national coverage.

2. Methodology

44. The evaluation methodology was guided by the Norms and Standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG)⁵⁹ and the 2018 UNICEF [Evaluation Policy](https://www.unicef.org/evaluationpolicy),⁶⁰ and employed a theory-based approach, whereby the primary focus of the assessment was on understanding cause-effect interactions between individual aspects of the reform and the reforms desired outcomes. The theory-based approach aimed to generate both an understanding of what has worked, but also an understanding of why it had worked. To set the foundation for a theory-based approach to the evaluation, the Evaluation team reconstructed the intervention logic of the PSE reform over the reference period between

⁵⁹ <http://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/1914>

⁶⁰ <https://www.unicef.org/evaluationpolicy>

2012-2022. The intervention logic diagram can be found in Annex 10. The reconstructed intervention logic forms the foundation for the qualitative and quantitative research, as laid out in the Evaluation matrix (Annex 2). In The evaluation matrix reflecting the intervention logic allows for data to be collected and analysed, as well as the findings to be tested against the theory of change to see whether the hypothesised mechanisms did indeed work, and if so, under what conditions.

45. The evaluation applied a mixed-method approach⁶¹, i.e., a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The evaluation framework followed the OECD -DAC criteria and UNEG standards responding to effectiveness, impact and sustainability and efficiency and coherence. The evaluation prioritized human rights, equity, and gender equality as key criteria that were mainstreamed across all evaluation questions (EQ). This allowed assessment of the extent to which human rights, child rights, vulnerability, disability inclusion and gender equality and equity had been addressed within the reform interventions.
46. The primary qualitative and quantitative collected by the ET related to four dimensions: i) Qualitative information from a wide range of stakeholders at the central level (national level institutions, UNICEF, UN agencies, development partners, civil society and other central level stakeholders); regarding the reform and its contributions; ii) Interviews with regional and local level stakeholders (regional and local PSE authorities), PIs and LSGs as founders of public PIs; iii) focus group discussions with PI practitioners and final beneficiaries; and iv) site observations of PIs. Field data collection covered eight out of nine planned LSGs to collect views of authorities, PIs and LSGs (see Figure 1 with overview of visited communities and Table in Annex 3). Throughout the whole evaluation, the ET spoke with a total of 114 persons (99 women, 15 men). This included 66 persons (55F, 11M) included in key informant interviews, 48 persons (44F, 4M) included in 8 focus groups made up of PI professionals and parents and site observations of 8 PIs in all 8 visited communities (see Annex 4 with the list of stakeholders).
47. The sampling of stakeholders to be consulted through interviews and focus groups followed a **purposive sampling**, selecting the most relevant stakeholders against the following criteria: 1) Level of engagement in and familiarity with interventions implemented within the framework of the reform; 2) Understanding of main themes, methodologies, activities and results of reform interventions; 3) Familiarity with actors and synergies between different reform areas; and 4) Ability to share perspectives and priorities to be considered in future reform interventions. The process of recruiting stakeholders from different institutional and beneficiary levels followed a standard procedure to ensure an informed consent to participate in the evaluation.
48. For both interviews and focus groups, semi-structured interview and focus group guides were used to ensure consistent formatting of the interviews.⁶² Evaluation notes were compiled into a standardized template for each focus group and interview – labelled by stakeholder and activity.
49. The evaluation also included an online survey for PIs and LSGs. Both surveys collected the views and experiences of personnel working in PIs and LSGs respectively on the reform, including their relevance, effectiveness, and impact (See online survey questionnaires in Annex 6). The sampling for the online surveys (quantitative data) was universal, with questionnaires distributed across the whole network of PIs in Serbia (both public and private). The second survey was distributed across all LSGs with the aim to collect their feedback on the reform interventions, targeting coverage, equity, and quality of PSE.
50. A total of 100 respondents of public preschool institutions and 51 respondents of private preschool institutions completed the survey, and 63 public preschool institutions and 249 private preschool institutions did not answer the question. Response rate of public

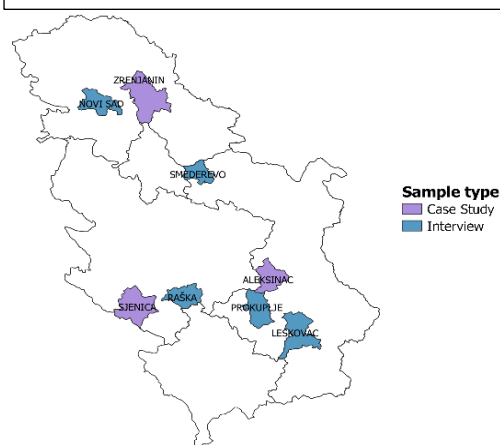
⁶¹ See Stern et al (2012), "Broadening the range of designs and methods for impact evaluations", DFID, Working Paper 38.

⁶² Annex 7: Interview guides

preschool institutions is high (61 percent). As regards survey with local self-governments, a total of 34 out of 174 local self-governments responded to the survey (19 percent). Detailed survey results are in Annex 5. Analysis of quantitative data collected from the online surveys was done using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Statistical analysis with cross-tabulation of data helped to analyse quantitative data to better understand relationships between interdependent sets of values.

51. The evaluation also included three (3) case studies to support the data pool. These three case studies included a review of PSE in Aleksinac, Sjenica and Zrenjanin (See case studies in Annex 9). The selection of the case studies followed purposive sampling and was based on the criteria related to the ability of the sampled case study community to provide inputs to the following: i) assessing the reform contributions to short-term results, their likely contribution to broader ones, and the main influencing factors; and ii) identifying good practices and broader lessons for future reform interventions while factoring in prevailing political economy conditions, and sustainability challenges. Besides, the evaluation sample also included five LSGs that the Evaluation team added in order to ensure wider coverage and diversity of PIs. The process of selecting additional LSGs adhered to the same meticulous sampling methodology employed for the three case studies. While data gathered from these five communities significantly informed the analysis, it is important to note that a comprehensive, case-study-style examination was not conducted for each PI within an LSG. Instead, their specific insights were amalgamated and cross-referenced to enrich the overall findings.

FIGURE 1. SAMPLED COMMUNITIES



2.1 Data Analysis

52. The ET undertook a comprehensive data analysis exercise with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous exercises, including using interactive record management to help organize the main findings and evidence. The analysis of collected data included descriptive and comparative quantitative analysis, thematic narrative analysis, qualitative iterative data analysis, and contribution analysis. All methods were triangulated both internally and across methods as feasible.
53. In line with the participatory approach, the ET held a debriefing session with the ERG at the end of the field mission on 16 June 2023, and then followed up meetings to check facts and further validate the findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Key ERG stakeholders had the opportunity to comment on the draft report before it was finalized.

2.2 Data Reliability and other Limitations

54. Some stakeholders were not available to engage in the evaluation for various reasons. The ET closely collaborated with the MoE and UNICEF to inform identified key informants about the evaluation. An invitations letter and evaluation brief were sent to each identified key stakeholder.
55. A lack of institutional memory was another limitation. The long period covered by the evaluation (2012 -2022) and in some cases, staff turnover reduced institutional memory at stakeholders' organizations (e.g., in PIs, LSGs). The ET mitigated this risk by using multiple methods, such as document analysis and information obtained from other sources in triangulation with data gathered from interviews, focus groups and surveys.

56. Small sample size of survey respondents from local self-governments (19 percent response rate) created difficulties in collecting their views on implemented reform initiatives. The survey link was sent to local self-government s by The Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (STCM) , which is the national association whose members are LSGs in Serbia , which was considered as a good way to mitigate the risk of low response . The STCM was asked to follow up with reminders to LSGs .

2.3 Ethical considerations

57. **Adhering to the United Nations Evaluation Ethics Principles:** The ET abided by the 2016 UNEG norms and standards, the 2007 UNEG Ethical Guidelines and Code of Conduct and the principles of 'do no harm' , UNICEF Procedure on Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluation, Data Collection and Analysis 2021 . The practical operationalisation of ethical considerations included measures such as: a) at start of each interview/group discussion, the ET explained the purpose of evaluation and confidentiality measures and asked the key informants to provide their consent to participate in the evaluation; b) no individuals were named as the source of any information or opinion while the list of names of interviewed persons was not included in the report; c) the ET ensured confidentiality of all data and information received and did not use audio or videos to record interviews and focus groups , while all notes taken by ET were stored on a password protected folder, etc. The ET ensured that the gender lens of the evaluation was integrated by ensuring adequate representation of gender considerations in the evaluation processes and assessment of results. The humanitarian principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence were safeguarded in the development of findings and recommendations.

3. Key findings

58. The first years in a child's life are crucial. There is no other phase in life in which children grow, learn, and change so much, so fast and in so many ways. Hence, the investment in the early education and care is of critical importance. In that respect, children at an early age have opportunities and possibilities to gain life experience that will have positive influences on the rest of the child's life, both in the short and the long term.
59. The reform of PSE over the period between 2012 -2022 was guided by this idea, bringing in important innovation and a changing paradigm to ensure all children have access to quality and inclusive PSE in line with Serbia's SDG commitments.
60. The main findings of the formative evaluation present the extent to which the main actors of the reform led by the MoE succeeded in achieving their objectives, as reconstructed in the Intervention logic (See Annex 10). The findings were generated through a comprehensive analysis of documents on reform initiatives , projects and activities implemented over the period between 2012-2022; stakeholder interviews; focus group discussions and online surveys. Following a theory-based approach, this report is structured to present the analysis of the reform's results and their transformative potential as set forth in the evaluation matrix (Annex 2).

3.1 Effectiveness

EQ1.1 To what extent have the reforms contributed to strengthening of the PSE system?

FINDING 1. OVERALL, THE REFORMIST APPROACHES TOWARDS PARTICIPATORY AND EVIDENCE-BASED DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN SERBIA HAVE RESULTED IN A BETTER CONCEPTUALIZATION OF A NEW PARADIGM OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION. THESE APPROACHES HAVE NOT ONLY IMPROVED THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION BUT HAVE ALSO DEMOCRATIZED THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS, MAKING IT MORE INCLUSIVE, TRANSPARENT, AND RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF THE SERBIAN SOCIETY.

61. A regulatory basis was set up, supporting the adoption of contemporary pedagogical approaches in PSE practice, building from the joint vision of the system development created in the consultation process including all the relevant actors (decision makers, academic community, implementers, partner institutions and organisations). This segment included the development of strategic and legal framework (laws and bylaws, expert instructions, etc.), that resulted in a sound framework regulating the new approaches to PSE, as found through document review, and confirmed by consulted stakeholders (find the list of regulatory and policy documents in Annex 6, Annex 10 Timeline).
62. The main shift in this process, as raised by consulted stakeholders, was towards ensuring a more participatory approach to the drafting of such documents, with broad participation of stakeholders in provision of inputs and reflection of how the new approach to PSE should be. As cited in documents and by stakeholders, working groups, consultations, information sessions were organized around this purpose while the MoE also collected inputs through different channels. All stakeholders agreed that, by adopting a participatory approach, policymakers and stakeholders have recognized the importance of including various voices and perspectives in the decision-making process. This has allowed for a more inclusive and representative system, where educators, experts, and community members actively contribute their insights and experiences. Through open dialogue and collaborative efforts, these approaches have facilitated the identification of key challenges, priorities, and innovative solutions in preschool education.
63. Moreover, the emphasis on generation of evidence-based approaches ensured that policies and measures are grounded in empirical research, best practices, and thorough evaluations. In other words, this has helped policymakers make informed decisions, backed by data and expert knowledge. This evaluation found evidence of consistent efforts to integrate research findings into policy formulation, which has helped the reformist approaches and enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of preschool education initiatives overall. Please see detailed timeline in Annex 10.

FINDING 2. THE CURRICULUM REFORM INITIATED A SIGNIFICANT PARADIGM SHIFT IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION, FOCUSING ON SUPPORTING A NEW PROGRAM CONCEPT THAT PROMOTES THE HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD AND SUPPORTS THEIR WELL-BEING THROUGH HIGH-QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS AND ADULTS IN THE STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT. THIS REFORM CULMINATED IN THE ADOPTION OF THE NEW CURRICULUM IN 2018, DEVELOPED THROUGH A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH AND INCORPORATING VALUABLE LESSONS LEARNED IN THE PILOTING PROCESS, ENSURING ITS RELEVANCE IN THE SERBIAN CONTEXT. THE NEW PCF POSITIVELY AFFECTED CHANGES IN THE ORGANIZATION OF SPACE AND APPROACH TO WORKING WITH CHILDREN AND TURNING PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS MORE TOWARDS FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES, ALTHOUGH STILL LEAVING ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT. A VARIETY OF FACTORS, SUCH AS FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS, ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES, AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE, HAVE HINDERED THE FULL REALIZATION OF THE NEW CURRICULUM. NOT ALL PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SEAMLESSLY ADOPT THE NEW APPROACHES, PROMPTING THE NEED FOR MORE ROBUST AND TARGETED CHANGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES.

64. The curriculum reform IMPRESS PIs focused on overcoming the lack of consistency in PSE approaches⁶³ and contributed to the articulation of the need for drafting a co-curricular concept. As part of this process, the Institute for Improving Education established a working group to develop a new PCF. The PCF draft was open to public input and was intended to reconcile the differing 'schools of thought' associated with the two original models⁶⁴. Despite this inclusive process, agreement on the best model proved challenging due to entrenched differences in philosophy and practice. The Rule book on Foundations of Preschool Education Program, enforcing a phased approach to its implementation by 2022, was a good step forward. However, full implementation has not yet been achieved due to various challenges, including resistance to change and contextual limitations such as financial constraints,

⁶³ More information on the previously used models can be found in Annex 11.

⁶⁴ A Working Group consisted of 26 participants including representatives of the MoE, academia, professional associations of preschool practitioners, public preschool institutions, experts, UNICEF, etc. A draft of the new PCF was also widely shared for inputs with the public by the end of 2015.

human resources, and organizational capacity as corroborated by consulted stakeholders and survey results (See paragraph 69, Finding 4, Hindering Factors, Finding 19, Annex 5, Annex 9: Case Studies).

65. Concerns about the feasibility of a newly designed model led to a decision to review the model as presented in the draft PCF and to pilot it in three different contexts - urban, semi-urban, and rural, with UNICEF's support. These contexts were represented by three preschools from Novi Sad, Čačak and Zemun. The Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy closely monitored the pilot, with support from an interdisciplinary team involving academia, Institute of Improving Education, the MoE, and UNICEF. The insights received from the pilot were documented and informed the elaboration of the final PCF draft, which after positively assessed by the National Education Council and as a part of the Rule Book on PCF entered the adoption procedure.
66. The Rule Book on Preschool Curriculum Framework (the Official Gazette of RS – Educational Gazette, no. 16/2018) for the first time introduced a phased approach in the mandatory implementation of the new program concept by 2022, in order to systematically organise support to PIs in the PCF implementation. Implementation of PCF based on the carefully conceptualised Support Program rule book acknowledged the time required for change management, capacity building, and infrastructural changes, as discussed in different sections of this report. According to the evaluation findings, this was the first time the PCF was introduced coupled with a comprehensive capacity building program.
67. Alongside the Rule Book on PCF, the Rule Book on the standards of competences for preschool teachers and their professional development was adopted (the Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – The Educational Gazette, no. 16/2018). This was followed by the adoption of two more rule books: one on standards of competences of expert associates in preschool education and their professional development Rule book⁶⁵ and the Rule Book of all areas of work of expert associates in preschools other on all areas of work of expert associates in pre schools⁶⁶. The adoption of the act on the network of public preschool institutions⁶⁷, strengthening capacities for optimisation of this network, and the development of professional instructions for creating a preschool program (e.g. through SUPER project Guidelines for the Alignment of the Document on Public Preschool Institution Network with the Strategy for the Promotion of Preschool Education in the Local Community was developed in 2021; the Guidelines for developing a preschool program in a PI) were also undertaken as part of the broader efforts in the field (see more on this in respective Finding 4 and its related sub-findings below). The introduction of an electronic application for pedagogical documentation (supported by the SUPER project) provided support to PIs in electronic filing of pedagogical documentation, although its full swing has been hampered by technological constraints (inadequate IT infrastructure, the level of digital competencies of staff and competencies regarding pedagogical documenting in line with the new PCF, as pointed out by several interviewed stakeholders).
68. Notably, shifts in the approach to child development and learning focused on participation and relationships have contributed positively to reviewing the culture of a PI as a place of joint living of children and adults and a place of democratic inclusive practice. As per feedback from practitioners, the general perception of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework is largely positive. Consulted stakeholders corroborated reported findings pointing to a general appreciation of the new PCF's value-based approach, clear structure, child-centric focus, stakeholder involvement, and its applicability and inspiration for practice development. Document review of available reports and data collected within the framework of this evaluation shows that, as perceived by the practitioners participating in the evaluation, the PCF provides a sound foundation for the development of competencies

⁶⁵ "The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – The Educational Gazette", no. 3/2021

⁶⁶ The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – The Educational Gazette, nos. 5/2012 and 6/2021

⁶⁷ The Regulation on the criteria for passing legislation on the public preschool network and the public primary school network ("The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", no. 21/2018).

for lifelong learning , and that the change is especially present in creating the communal spirit between children and adults and in peer community by nurturing the sense of belonging, respect and acceptance of differences, and caring about the others . The curriculum requires practitioners to change their understanding of the child's development and learning, from understanding the child as a being of needs and an isolated individual to understanding the child's competencies and powers and the social nature of their development and learning, a new value that was appreciated by consulted stakeholders (practitioners and parents alike). The Curriculum Framework encourages community engagement and expert involvement in kindergartens, fostering innovative solutions and driving change (e.g., in including families and local communities in the program development), as emphasised by consulted stakeholders. For illustration, in Aleksinac, students from PI 'Lane' learned about robot navigation through a 'Labyrinth' project led by a local professor. In Zrenjanin, the local PI is promoting sustainability by creating diverse programs in partnership with local organizations and parents. The PI in Sjenica enhanced community engagement by organizing public events, recognized as rare community happenings by various stakeholders (See detailed case studies in Annex 9).

69. Supporting the development of high-quality practice in line with the new PCF is still necessary. The transition to the new curriculum, despite being systematically planned and implemented, has not been without obstacles, as detailed in Finding 4 below. A variety of factors, such as financial constraints, organizational challenges, and resistance to change, have hindered the full realization of the new curriculum. Not all preschool institutions have been able to seamlessly adopt the new approaches , prompting the need for more robust and targeted change management strategies. Overcrowded groups undermine the new curriculum's effective implementation, a concern echoed by 45% of public PIs that responded to the survey . Further, 50% cite human resources scarcity, and 64% point to lack of space as issues. Private PIs face similar obstacles, with 58.8% highlighting staffing issues and 45% reporting insufficient educational advisors (See Annex 5, Figure 15 with full overview of survey findings). Surveys show financial constraints hampering new curriculum application, as reported by 81% of public PIs, 66.7% of private PIs, and 44.8% of LSG respondents.

FINDING 3. THE REFORM'S NATIONAL AND LOCAL PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN BY MoE, THE INSTITUTES, AND PARTNER INSTITUTIONS WERE INSTRUMENTAL TO UNDERSTANDING AND IMPLEMENTING THE COMPLEX FRAMEWORK OF THE NEW CURRICULAR CONCEPT BUT FACED CHALLENGES DUE TO RESOURCE, TIME, AND SKILL REQUIREMENTS. MISALIGNMENT BETWEEN CURRENT PRE-SERVICE EDUCATION AND LICENSING PROCEDURES ADDED ANOTHER CHALLENGE, COMPELLING THE MoE TO INVEST IN INITIATIVES FOR COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY-STRENGTHENING, UPDATING AND ADOPTING TEACHER COMPETENCY STANDARDS, AND ASSESSING THE COMPATIBILITY OF PRESCHOOL TEACHER PRE-SERVICE TRAINING WITH THE NEW STANDARDS. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THESE INITIATIVES IS YET TO BE DETERMINED AS THEY ARE STILL IN INITIAL STAGES.

70. The reform included promotional events and activities as a kind of support to implementing PCF, aimed at PI management, practitioners, LSGs, and university professors who served as trainers /mentors for PIs in the implementation of PCF . Such activities were considered as relevant and valuable to understand the concept and building capacities for its implementation . However, stakeholders and survey respondents expressed the need for more time, promotion, and resources to increase awareness and apply the new concept , as it demands high analytical skills and reflection on daily work organization. The promotion of the model relied mainly on experienced preschool teachers to share knowledge and practices, which proved challenging for those motivated to do so, as emphasized by interviewed stakeholders and practitioners participating in focus groups .
71. Another challenge for utilization of the new PCF that was revealed by the evaluation is the fact that the current pre-service education and licensing procedures do not align with the new PCF and standards for preschool teachers , thus hindering the pace and extent of institutional change and its sustainability over time (See Finding 8 and Hindering factors). The MoE, and its partners, acknowledge this gap between pre-service training and the new

PSE concept, and have initiated reform interventions. One mitigation measure involved bringing together university professors and practitioners to develop and conduct capacity strengthening activities, facilitating a smoother rollout of the new concept and with a vision that such experiences would help bridge the gap between practices and pre-service training.

72. Additionally, the MoE adopted the new Rule Book on the standards of competence of preschool teachers and their professional development. This is expected to influence what is taught to future ECEC teachers and improve understanding of the new paradigm, thus strengthening the link between the academic community and practitioners. Since 2022, under the ECEC project, activities have been carried out on assessing preschool teacher training programs' compatibility with the Standards of Competence for Preschool Teachers, and the recommendations have been piloted towards alignment of preschool service training programs with the PCF. This process involves counselling sessions with deans and principals of public Higher education (HE) institutions that provide preschool teacher education. However, as these initiatives were underway during the evaluation period, the outcomes could not yet be assessed.

FINDING 4. PIs CAPACITY STRENGTHENING EFFORTS PROVIDED VALUABLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, RESULTING IN IMPROVED COMPETENCIES AND THE PROMOTION OF HIGHER-QUALITY, MORE INCLUSIVE, AND DIVERSIFIED APPROACHES TO PSE. TEACHERS' COMPETENCES WERE POSITIVELY AFFECTED BY THE REALISED SUPPORTING ACTIVITIES, THUS CREATING A SOUND BASIS FOR MORE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW PCF. HOWEVER, CHALLENGES RELATED TO RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND ORGANISATIONAL, FINANCIAL AND MANAGERIAL RESOURCE LIMITATIONS WERE FOUND AS DETAILED IN SUB-FINDINGS BELOW. DESPITE THESE CHALLENGES, THE OVERALL IMPACT OF THE CAPACITY STRENGTHENING INITIATIVES HAS BEEN POSITIVE IN ADVANCING THE QUALITY OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN SERBIA

73. Over the reference period of this evaluation, all reform activities and supporting projects included at least one capacity development component for practitioners, which resulted in covering all PSE staff across the country in at least one training or networks / platforms for exchange or consultation regarding new concepts or approaches. Guidelines, manuals, checklists, etc. were developed as tools to assist practitioners to apply new concepts and use them as self-learning tools in their day-to-day work. Analysis of capacity development streams and their contributions to the quality of PSE is provided below.

SUB-FINDING 4.1. THE SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF PROFESSIONALS FROM PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS DEMONSTRATED A HIGH UTILITY IN HELPING PROFESSIONALS UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE PCF AND ITS APPLICATION IN THEIR DAY-TO-DAY WORK. WHILE THE PROGRAM ACHIEVED ITS TRAINING GOALS, CHALLENGES PERSIST, INCLUDING THE VARYING LEVEL OF MOTIVATION OF MANY PROFESSIONALS AND PI, LIMITED INDIVIDUALISED OR MENTORING SUPPORT TO PRACTITIONERS, WHICH HAMPER PRACTITIONERS' ABILITY TO FULLY APPLY PCF.

74. The capacity-building program for preschool professionals was a fundamental pillar of the reform. During the ECEC Project implementation, 21,230 (or 95%) practitioners were trained, compared to the planned 12,000 practitioners. This was achieved in close cooperation between MoE, World Bank PIU, and UNICEF, as an implementing partner in the Project Component 2⁶⁸.
75. Implemented in planned stages, the program involved training of trainers/mentors and PI professionals, followed by PI mentoring support. Post-training evaluations revealed high satisfaction levels, with 91-97% of trainees rating the quality highly and feeling prepared for implementation, although 17% wanted further preparation in certain areas. Roughly 90% of mentor trainees also evaluated their training highly⁶⁹. Interviewed stakeholders and focus

⁶⁸ MoE, UNICEF (2023) Report on monitoring the realisation of the program of support to building the capacities of professionals working in PIs for the implementation of PCF 'Years of Ascent' (2019–2022), June 2023

⁶⁹ MoE, UNICEF (2023) Report on monitoring the realisation of the program of support to building the capacities of professionals working in PIs for the implementation of PCF 'Years of Ascent' (2019–2022), June 2023

group participants reported good quality of the trainings and their utility overall. Nevertheless, one-third of trainees indicated the need for additional support when dealing with unmotivated practitioners.

76. As of June 2022, all 163 public PIs received mentoring support on five key topics to initiate change in preschool practice, supervised by The Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy of the Faculty of Philosophy⁷⁰. In the same period, 225 expert associates also received specialized training themed Expert Associate as a Torch-Bearer of Change in a PI under the ECEC project⁷¹. Despite this support, reports pointed to challenges in implementing the new Preschool Curricula Framework, primarily due to lack of organizational, technical, and professional support at individual preschool institutions⁷², as confirmed by consulted stakeholders.
77. To foster further development of partnership between two levels of education system, preschool and primary, towards child-centred approaches, 1,800 elementary school expert associates and teachers participated in an online training course, 'On the Joint Learning Path,' in December 2022.⁷³ The first cycle of this course, aimed to ease the transition from preschool to primary school, already exceeded initial participant expectations of 1,300, with plans to reach 3,000 participants by mid-2023.⁷⁴ Stakeholders view the course, available online on the IIE Teachers Learning Platform, as valuable for further activities in this area.
78. In later stages of project activities realisation, the support was provided to PI and primary school principals to promote change and invest in more comprehensive change management. Support encompassed 8 regional two-day counselling meetings with educational advisors and PI principals and heads of municipal activists in primary schools, and preparatory trainings for new principals (about 60 participants)⁷⁵. At the time of the field data collection for this evaluation, both these processes were underway, so this it was not possible to collect data on effectiveness of these efforts.
79. UNICEF's "Learning Passport" initiative, a preschool online learning community developed with MoE, the IIE, and the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, was perceived by consulted stakeholders as catering to the specific needs of Serbian preschool education. Despite stakeholders' concerns over a required digital skillset that could limit its use, both public and private PIs acknowledge its value and support its continued development, although not ranked as a top three priority in the survey conducted within the framework of this evaluation (See Annex 5).
80. A training program titled "Supporting the Development of Digital Competencies of Practitioners in PIs," initiated in 2023, aims to improve digital skills among 12,000 preschool practitioners. Early feedback from participants confirms the necessity of this training to promote digital competencies and innovation. Good initiatives, as revealed during the analysis of case study communities, include the PI 'Lane' from Aleksinac and PI 'Radosno detinjstvo -Novi Sad' which boosted their digital competencies via investment in ICT equipment and training.
81. The shift from solely traditional training to a focus on regulatory changes, such as passing by-laws for the PCF implementation and the development of learning communities was appreciated by stakeholders, signifying the reform's initial progress towards more comprehensive approach to PSE reform. In order to support horizontal learning, the Ministry

⁷⁰ UNICEF (2022), Development and Implementation of the Capacity Building Program for Preschools (Part of Subcomponent 2.1. Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care Project), Third Progress Report 30 June 2022.

⁷¹ [UNICEF \(2022\) Development and Implementation of the PIs capacity building program](#) (part of the sub-component 2.1 of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care project), the third Progress Report, 30th June 2022

⁷² Some PIs report the insufficient number of expert associates.

⁷³ The Ministry of Education (2023); PROGRESS REPORT on the activities carried out under the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Project until 24th March 2023, p. 2; <https://zuov.gov.rs/onlajn-obuka-na-zajednickom-putu-ucenja-za-strucne-saradnike-pedagoge-i-psihologe-u-osnovnim-skolama-i-rukovodiocje-strucnih-veca-nastavnika-razredne-nastave/>

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ ECEC Monitoring Report 2023, p. 2

and its partners selected five kindergartens from five PIs as cluster centres to facilitate quality peer-learning from colleagues from other PIs with less experience in implementing PCF. Ninety professionals (principals, expert associates, preschool teachers) from these kindergartens underwent a training program, 'Joint Learning through Modelling,' developed by the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy of the Faculty of Philosophy. All public preschool institutions benefited from 'Joint Learning through Modelling,' which was proof to be useful for knowledge sharing of the new PCF. Most respondents from public PIs were satisfied with the support provided to building capacities for the PCF implementation: 69% were of the opinion that thanks to the support received their team considerably improved their knowledge for implementing PCF, while 68% stated it offered them opportunities for professional development (Annex 5, figure 8). Private PIs had limited access to these initiatives, which they saw as a downside.

82. While training programs have proven useful for interviewed participants of the trainings and mentors in understanding and applying the PCF, in-person sessions were found to be more effective than online. Limited mentor support was flagged by consulted practitioners as a challenge, hindering the ability of practitioners to fully apply PCF Rule Book. A one-size-fits-all approach to mentoring and support was found not to be well placed to adequately address individual challenges and contextual factors.

SUB-FINDING 4. 2. A NETWORK OF PRACTITIONERS TO SUPPORT AND MENTOR PRESCHOOLS, WITH THE GOAL OF IMPROVING QUALITY, EQUITY, AND ACCESS FOSTERED SELF-REFLECTION, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT, AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AMONG EDUCATORS. THE PROCESS OF CAPACITY BUILDING FOR EDUCATIONAL ADVISORS HAVE BEEN LAUNCHED TO SUPPORT INSTITUTIONAL SELF-EVALUATION AND EXTERNAL EVALUATIONS. WHILE PUBLIC PRESCHOOLS WERE GENERALLY SATISFIED, GAPS IN MENTOR ENGAGEMENT, ADVISOR EDUCATION, LIMITATIONS IN IMPLEMENTING SELF-ASSESSMENT, PERSISTED. LIMITED ACCESS TO TRAININGS FOR PRIVATE PRESCHOOLS WAS ALSO HIGHLIGHTED AS AREA FOR IMPROVEMENT.

83. The MoE, IPA, IIE, IEQE and UNICEF supported the establishment of a network of practitioners for support for preschool education (initially started as a separate project initiative in 2016–2018). This was done by strengthening professional capacities of 50 practitioners to engage in collaborative mentoring with kindergarten/preschool teams, and to continue networking and public action in the local community. The aim of the network of practitioners was to contribute to improving the quality and introducing innovation in preschool education and to provide support to institutions to further develop different segments of quality and fairness in preschool education and education as well as to provide support for the development of inclusive practices at the preschool institution/educational group level, as well as at the local level. Most members of the network were further trained to become members of the pools of trainers/mentors for the PCF implementation, self-evaluation, external evaluation, and support to the development of inclusive practice in PIs. The network of practitioners for support for preschool education has been growing over the considered period, also including members from the academic community.
84. The PCF in preschool education necessitated reflexive practitioners, leading to the development of two forms of horizontal exchange as a support to the development of reflexive practice (Joint Learning through Modelling (with cluster centres), developed by the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy, and Professional Learning Communities (PLC) (between institutions in the same phase of implementation)), developed by UNICEF and MoE⁷⁶. As of June 2023, 158 public preschool institutions or 97 percent of a total received training in the PLC model of horizontal learning, enhancing their reflexive practice capacities⁷⁷. The review of available documentation and stakeholder consultations showed that practitioners who had an opportunity to benefit from this support reported an increase in their capacities for development of reflexive practice.

⁷⁶ Horizontal exchange models were supported under the ECEC project implemented by MoE.

⁷⁷ UNICEF data. Five public preschools that have kindergartens-centres of clusters was focused on preparation for implementation of JLM model.

85. Evaluation findings reveal that investment in these initiatives fostered self-reflection, continuous improvement, and professional growth among educators, improving teaching methods in educational practice (i.e. learning by playing, developing themes/projects, creating spatial areas in classrooms). The PLC promoted collaborative learning and critical discussions. Despite initial challenges of adopting a critical friend role in the model, there's an increasing acceptance. According to UNICEF's 2022 Report, based on the results of longitudinal monitoring of implementation in six PIs that started implementation of PCF in September 2019, the training for PLC implementation and the support to preschools during the model implementation have resulted in improved competencies of preschool teachers and contributed to building the professional community⁷⁸. PI practitioners cited that the model promotes experiential learning – both learning through mistakes and critical insights into practices (See Annex 9: Case Studies). According to stakeholder feedback, at the onset, and still today, it has been quite difficult and often unpleasant and demanding to maintain the role of a critical friend that the structure of the model requires, but there is an increasing understanding of why it is needed. However, there is also a resistance to this, which some stakeholders explained this through a "*habit of PSE practitioners to promote appreciative inquiry and feedback which is difficult to change*" as emphasized by one interviewed stakeholder.
86. The evaluation revealed that monitoring visits by associates for socio-reflective practice and reviews of material prepared for meetings with colleagues from other PIs were helpful for practitioners as they offered opportunities for feedback from associates on developing PLC, improved understanding, and peer exchange. Coordinators (professional associates or in some cases experienced educators) played a vital role in offering support and sharing experiences. According to stakeholder feedback, the implementation of the PLC model was challenging and required 'stepping out of the comfort zone' – they had the opportunity to automatically reflect on practice but also to be able to contribute to changes in practice. Learning from the good practices of other kindergartens, as illustrated by experiences from PI 'Lane' Aleksinac or PI 'Maslačak' in Sjenica case studies, was crucial for practitioners in grasping the idea behind introducing changes in space where learning takes place by structuring spatial units (e.g., in Aleksinac, space for exploration of light and shadows).
87. The Rule book on quality standards of work in an education institution ("The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia – The Educational Gazette", 14/2018)⁷⁹ stipulates the development of self-evaluation culture and the development of plans based on the results of self-evaluation and external evaluation processes. To aid PIs in preparation, in 2022 'Self-evaluation in preschool institutions – Guide for employees in preschool institutions'⁸⁰ was developed in collaboration of the IEQE, CEPy and MoE, under the ECEC project in 2022. Stakeholders found this guide useful but noted limitations in its implementation and instrument selection for self-assessment.
88. According to the available data, self-evaluation teams from all 162 public preschool institutions underwent a two-day training, followed by the mentoring support and the collection of good practice examples⁸¹. Stakeholder responses about this support were mixed; some found the efforts insufficient for promoting a culture of self-assessment within the institutions. However, 49% of public PIs' survey respondents were largely satisfied with the provided support, with 26% mostly satisfied (Annex 5, Figure 7). Stakeholders cited mentor engagement as an area for improvement.

⁷⁸ UNICEF (2022); Development and Implementation of the Capacity Building Program for Preschools (part of Subcomponent 2.1. Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care Project): Third Progress Report 30 June 2022, p. 13

⁷⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/11631/file/Rulebookpercent20ofpercent20Qualitypercent20Standardspercent20ofpercent20Evaluationpercent20ofpercent20Schools.pdf>

⁸⁰ <https://ecec.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/SAMOVREDNOVANJE-U-PREDpercentC5percentA0KOLSKIM-USTANOVAMA.pdf>

⁸¹ ECEC Monitoring Report 2023, p. 2

89. Capacity building for the educational advisers to support PIs in developing high-quality practice and evaluate the practice in PIs was implemented via four cycles of professional counselling meetings⁸², engaging 107 educational advisors from 16 regional school administration units. This process helped the advisers revise instruments and harmonise criteria for the quality of work in PIs. Survey responses, interviews and focus groups revealed significant challenges when it comes to external evaluation, including the fact that only a few educational advisors have initially worked in PIs, leading to a limited understanding of preschool institution operations. Stakeholders indicated a need for ongoing education (refresher or induction trainings) for these education advisers. The analysis of survey results shows that 45.1 percent of private PI respondents and 27 percent of public PI respondents considered that there is an insufficient number of educational advisors as professional and advisory support that could hinder further implementation of the PCF (Annex 5, Figure 15).

SUB-FINDING 4.3. THE REFORM FOCUS WAS WELL PLACED TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVENESS AND EQUITY AND STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS TO DEVELOP PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS IN LINE WITH THE NEW PCF. THESE CAPACITY-BUILDING EFFORTS SIGNIFICANTLY ENHANCED THE COMPETENCES OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS, PARTICULARLY IN AREAS RELATED TO SUPPORTING THE PARTICIPATION OF ALL CHILDREN, INCLUDING THOSE THAT NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT. ONGOING EFFORTS IN THESE AREAS HAVE COMPLEMENTED OTHER INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION.

90. The reform of PSE in Serbia emphasized inclusiveness and equity, with multiple initiatives aiming to enhance teachers' competences in these areas. Horizontal initiatives of the reform through various projects (including Development and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in PSE, Kindergartens without Borders, The Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment Project⁸³, Initiative to support the development and learning of early-age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia, etc.) significantly helped preschool teachers improve their competences in all these areas, reporting the improvement in the area of supporting the participation of all children, including those that need additional support and promoting equality, equity, and social inclusion. For instance, the baseline assessment done for the project *The Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment* indicated that between 81.3 percent and 93.2 percent of preschool staff assessed they felt very confident or confident that they could teach children different aspects of SEL⁸⁴. By the end of the project, this percentage increased to between 93.3 percent and 99 percent⁸⁵. However, this evaluation could not establish or externally corroborate the increase, since most of PIs in which the project was implemented were not included in the sample for this evaluation.
91. Based on the project reports, in PIs in which the Roma Early Childhood Development and Education Initiative was implemented by the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP) in cooperation with a PI and Roma NGOs, more inclusive enrolment policies were developed and communication with Roma families enhanced, as well as inclusive diversified programs developed⁸⁶. However, these improvements could not be externally corroborated since PIs in which the project was implemented were not part of the sample for this evaluation. The recent ECEC Monitoring Report 2023 reported that 30 practitioners benefited from pilot

⁸² These professionals were engaged through trainings and visiting PSE units (in Nis, Novi Sad, Vranje and Belgrade)

⁸³ The Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment Project was implemented in cooperation with Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP), and UNICEF, from January 2017 to September 2019. It is part of a broader initiative titled "Integrated Response to Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls in Serbia – Phase II", realized by UNICEF Serbia, UNICEF, UN Women, UNFPA, and UNDP, in partnership with the Government of Serbia.

⁸⁴ Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment Project, Evaluation Report

⁸⁵ Ibid

⁸⁶ CIP, Infographic "Description and results, Initiative to support the development and learning of Roma children of early age in Serbia", https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x7ygTITUScEdLF_0g1OYGZkkRe5ap_-F/view

training on improving inclusivity⁸⁷. As a challenge in developing best inclusivity practices and implementing the new Preschool Curriculum Framework, PIs identified the insufficient number of expert associates, teachers and personal assistants (see Finding 6). This is in line with survey results as 39 percent of public PI respondents are to some extent satisfied with received support to enhancement of inclusive practice in their PI, while 25 percent were satisfied to a great extent (Annex 5, Figure 7).

SUB-FINDING 4.4 IN REFORM PROCESSES REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PSE POLICIES AND BUILDING CAPACITIES FOR PLANNING, MANAGING AND OPTIMISING PI NETWORK, LSGs PLAYED KEY ROLES, BUT WERE NOTABLY ABSENT IN CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES RELATED TO THE NEW PCF IMPLEMENTATION. PROACTIVE LSGs BENEFITED MORE FROM INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS AND PROJECTS SUPPORTING DIVERSIFICATION OF PROGRAMS. HALF OF THE PRESCHOOL INSTITUTIONS FELT THAT THESE EFFORTS INCREASED LOCAL AUTHORITIES' AWARENESS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION.

92. Local government authorities are crucial for implementing educational reforms, including preschool education, as they manage resources, infrastructure, and the network of public PIs, as specified in the Law on the Education System Foundations. From 2012-2022, LSGs were involved in several reform policy initiatives supporting planning, management and optimization of the network of PI (IMPRESS, KwB); planning and implementation of local policies on ECEC development⁸⁸, including harmonization of the Act on the Network of Public PIs with the local ECEC plans (KwB 2 and SUPER); analysis of different forms of public-private partnership and its feasibility, including horizontal learning between LSGs, together with the analysis of decentralisation of PSE, etc. The evaluation found LSGs were not directly involved in capacity-building activities related to the new PCF implementation, which was in line with the planned trainings coverage, but the interviews showed that such activities would be useful having in mind their significant role in preschool education's planning and financing.
93. Over the reference period, several LSGs were selected to benefit from infrastructure projects (see Finding 7 below) and projects promoting diversification of programs (Finding 5). Interviews with representatives of LSGs in sampled LSGs and PIs as well as other interviews pointed to the difference between more proactive and less proactive authorities, leading to uneven reform results in terms of infrastructure development, financial and human resource availability, and coverage across different LSGs. Survey data reveal that half of the public PI respondents believed that these efforts increased local authorities' awareness of quality inclusive preschool education, and little more than one-third of respondents believe that support to a great extent had an impact on awareness of LSG (See Annex 5, Figure 8). Meanwhile, every second respondent from local government authorities reported receiving support in preschool education planning and management (Annex 5, Figure 22). The evaluation also revealed low awareness among local government respondents about diversified preschool programs, with 40% of LSGs respondents being unaware if support contributed to that (Annex 5, Figure 23). These results should be interpreted cautiously, as only 34 out of 174 local government authorities responded to the survey.

FINDING 5. THE INTRODUCTION OF DIVERSIFIED PROGRAMS TAILORED TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN SOME LOCAL COMMUNITIES LED TO INCREASED COVERAGE OF CHILDREN, PARTICULARLY IN LESS DEVELOPED AREAS AND AMONG VULNERABLE GROUPS. IT ALSO CONTRIBUTED TO CHALLENGING THE PREVAILING NOTION OF PRESCHOOLS PRIMARILY SERVING EMPLOYED PARENTS TOWARDS PROMOTING A SHIFT TOWARDS OFFERING DIVERSE OPTIONS FOR FAMILIES. HOWEVER, CHALLENGES RELATED TO SPACE, SUSTAINABILITY, AND FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS IN SOME COMMUNITIES REMAIN, ALONG WITH THE NEED FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS IN THE REFORM PROCESSES.

⁸⁷ ECEC Monitoring Report, p. 2

⁸⁸ 30 local self-governments adopted Strategies for the improvement of preschool education with support of SUPER project. Source: <https://super.euzatebe.rs/en/news/promotion-of-preschool-on-local-level>.

94. The 2020 Serbian Education Strategy acknowledged challenges in preschool access for children, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds and proposed diversification of programs as a part of the solution. The strategy endorsed inclusive policy planning and multi-disciplinary approaches, tailoring services, and programs to the specific needs of children and families. Projects like 'Kindergartens without Borders' and 'IMPRESS' demonstrated the benefits of this approach, successfully piloting programs that allowed integrating Roma children through diversified programs. The '*Initiative to support the development and learning of early -age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia*' (Romanipen, CIP, OSF) and Roma integration component of DILS (Ministry of Education, World Bank) succeeded to further promote enrolment of children from Roma community into half-day and shorter PI programs (e.g., in Kragujevac, Leskovac). Document review and interviews showed that these diversified programs redefined preschool structures, promoting flexibility and inclusivity, showing the potential of what a PSE institution can do and the outreach it can have if it becomes more flexible and agile in its functioning and organization of work and with a clear intention of becoming more inclusive. The evaluation found that the implementation and evaluation of diverse, high-quality preschool programs in rural areas also provided alternatives to PIs and local governments to address insufficient child coverage. As consulted stakeholders cited, the understanding emerged that enhancing preschool provision was not confined to building more kindergartens or offering full-time preschool programs, but also involved designing shorter, adaptable programs catering to children, parents, and communities' needs. Over 40% of surveyed PIs confirmed the support's contribution to the development and expansion of such 4h /or shorter programs, particularly for children aged 3 -5.5 years.
95. As an example, the municipalities of Aleksinac and Prokuplje exemplify diversified preschool programs. Aleksinac ran the 'Creative Club' for 20 rural children not enrolled in preschool, and Prokuplje created 50 new slots for children from two rural areas. These initiatives proved effective in reaching children outside the system, but their long-term viability is uncertain. Zrenjanin's project, 'Inclusive Preschool Upbringing and Education', established short programs and ensured continued employment for the newly hired teachers, transforming these groups into a full-time program, as corroborated by consulted stakeholders in these communities (See Annex 9: Case Studies).
96. During the field interviews with LSGs representatives, the costing of diversified programs was discussed as one of the important dimensions of sustainability. According to LSG's feedback, the support provided by various projects has been helpful to renovate and equip available premises (mostly space in schools or LSG facilities) and to provide didactical material for functioning of the diversified programs.
97. The expansion of diversified preschool models in rural or semi-urban areas contributed to increased coverage and equity. It saw enrolment rates rise significantly in less developed areas of Serbia from 2012 to 2021. According to available data, the diversification of the PSE programs to some extent contributed to increase the coverage of children age 3 to 5, which increased from 38.4 percent in 2012 (38.5 percent male, 38.4 percent female) to 51 percent in 2021 (51.3percent male, 50.7 percent female) in the Region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, and from 41.1 percent in 2012 (male, female) to 56.3 percent in 2021 (56.3 percent for male and for female) in the Region of Šumadija and Western Serbia, as less developed areas of Serbia.⁸⁹ Diversification also helped change the current dominant opinion that PIs only serve to provide support to the employed parents, implicitly defining its economical function as dominant over social and educational functions. It also helped shift the thinking away from whole day programs as a fit-all solution towards offering options for families to choose from. Despite the benefits, surveys and interviews highlight challenges in space and sustainability of programs in certain communities: LSGs struggle to prioritize preschool education amid other concerns, while financial and spatial challenges

⁸⁹ Source: DevInfo database, Coverage of children aged from 3 to the age when they start attending PPP, by region.

also persist. Despite interest in expanding PSE, local governments struggle to prioritize it among other needs. For illustration, inclusion of Roma children remained low, with challenges ranging from ambiguous local government criteria to lack of support for Roma communities. According to data from MICS Study 2019, only 7 percent of Roma children aged 3 to 5 years living in sub standard settlements attended a preschool program, compared to 61 percent of children from the overall population. Some interviewed stakeholders pointed out that challenges with Roma inclusion stemmed from the fact that children from Roma community were not clearly defined in PI criteria for the priority enrolment of children in PIs, despite provisions of the related Rule book (adopted in 2011). There are also other factors such as lack of pedagogical assistants that provide support to children from Roma settlement in preschool institutions, lack of coordination with all relevant local actors that can build relations with parents from Roma communities, etc.

98. While LSGs are interested to expand the coverage of PSE, they struggle to prioritize PSE among other priorities, as was particularly highlighted by stakeholders from smaller and less developed LSGs. The lack of engagement of local self-governments as a partner in the PSE reform process (overall as discussed in Finding 4.4 above) does not help raise their awareness of the importance of investing into PSE and specific needs of children and their families as well as innovations in the PSE domain which have been supported by the reform, and hence hinder a more effective prioritization in the LSG.

FINDING 6. THERE IS VISIBLE PROGRESS IN INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN PIS, AS A RESULTS OF VARIOUS INITIATIVES, ALBEIT EFFECTIVENESS OF INCLUSION VARIES. CHALLENGES ARE RELATED TO A LACK OF ADEQUATE NUMBER OF PERSONAL ASSISTANTS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES, CHALLENGES WITH ENROLMENT OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES WHEN THERE IS LIMITED PLACES, AS WELL AS OVERCROWDED GROUPS IN PIS. HOWEVER, THE BENEFIT OF INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IS EVIDENT, BOTH FOR THEIR DEVELOPMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF OTHER CHILDREN IN THE COMMUNITY.

99. An example of the visible progress in the inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool institutions in Serbia is the various initiatives and projects that have been implemented (Inclusive preschool education, development, and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC, Family oriented early interventions, Playful Parenting). These initiatives and projects, although their effectiveness may vary, have contributed to promoting inclusive practices and creating opportunities for the inclusion of children with disabilities. Survey data indicates around 76 percent of public PIs believe that the support they received enabled them to some extent or to great extent enrol children from vulnerable groups not previously enrolled in kindergarten (See Annex 5, Figure 8). Examples of successful implementation include Zrenjanin and Sjenica, where they respectively created conditions for blind and visually impaired children in regular programs and established a special sensory room within the PI (See Annex 9: Case Studies).
100. One of the key challenges for full inclusion of children with disability was reported to be the shortage of personal assistants, who play a vital role in offering individualized support⁹⁰. Evaluation revealed that the procedures for hiring new assistants, provided by social work centres, are complex and often lead to inadequate staffing, with parents sometimes bearing the cost of private assistants, as corroborated by consulted parents and practitioners. Another challenge is the lack of clear criteria for prioritizing the enrolment of children with disabilities when demand exceeds capacity as pointed out by interviewed stakeholders from PIs⁹¹. The absence of clear criteria can lead to inconsistencies and inequalities in the

⁹⁰ For example, PI Lane Aleksinac has a pedagogical assistant who besides working with children from Roma settlements, also covers the task of personal assistance to children with disabilities. As PI Aleksinac does not have any personal assistant engaged, interviewed stakeholders and focus group participants pointed to the great value of having a pedagogical assistant who could at least partially cover this position as well. In contrast, the town of Zrenjanin has a total of 54 personal assistants covering all levels of education (preschool, primary and secondary schools) which was considered as suboptimal.

⁹¹ This refers to the issue of enrolling children with disabilities in PIs when there are more children with disabilities than places for their accommodation due to the limited number of such children that can be included in a preschool group and

enrolment of children with disabilities, potentially limiting their access to quality preschool education, which was perceived as a big obstacle by interviewed stakeholders.

101. The inclusion of children with disabilities in preschools is also hampered by the disregard for the prescribed norms regarding the number of children in a preschool group in certain communities. Stakeholders agree that overcrowding strains resources, hampers the provision of individualized attention, and inhibits the successful inclusion and development of children with disabilities.

102. Stakeholders cited UNICEF's 'Family oriented early interventions' as a timely and effective model for early childhood support to children with disabilities. Besides, by June 2023, six parenting fairs were organized under the ECEC project to raise parents' awareness of local early childhood services available to children and families⁹². These fairs have been replicated by other local governments, such as Zrenjanin and Titel, providing parents access to a range of experts and information, thus fostering a supportive and inclusive environment.

FINDING 7. INVESTMENTS IN INFRASTRUCTURE AIMED TO OVERCOME THE PERSISTENT CHALLENGE OF INADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE AND OVERCROWDING OF PRESCHOOL CLASSROOMS, WHICH HAS NEGATIVELY IMPACTED THE COVERAGE, QUALITY, AND EQUITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION. THESE INVESTMENTS, DEVELOPED AND IMPLEMENTED IN COOPERATION WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES, HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO ALLEVIATE THE INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES AND IMPROVE ACCESS TO QUALITY PRESCHOOL EDUCATION.

103. Persistent issues with infrastructure of PIs and overcrowding of preschool classrooms remain a significant concern in Serbia's PSE sector, affecting coverage, quality, and equity. To alleviate this, different modalities for increasing physical capacities that were introduced over the period 2012 -2022 were included in design of ECEC project. ECEC project has been expanding number of preschool places through a mixture of building new facilities, expanding the existing preschools facilities, and repurposing the existing public facilities, as well as through financing furniture, teaching-learning materials, equipment, and arrangement of playgrounds. In addition, creation of diversification programs has been supported by ECEC project in line with the good practice of previous projects (See Figure 11 in the Coherence section). Preschool facility construction and renovation were prioritized based on factors like preschool space demand, socio-economic conditions, families receiving social aid, and percentage of Roma children aged 0 -14⁹³. This strategy was designed for effective resource allocation, focusing on the most vulnerable local communities and preschool institutions, and has been deemed appropriate by interviewed key informants.

104. The evaluation revealed that municipalities actively participated in selecting sites for new facilities, contributed financially to reconstruction works, and ensured teacher employment and sustainability. The 'Kindergartens without Borders' project necessitated financial contributions from LSGs, as affirmed by stakeholders. Evaluation found that parents were also involved in the planning and implementation stages. As per the ECEC Project data, three preschool facilities were built by 2020, and another nine in eight municipalities will be completed by 2023, creating 2,110 new places for children⁹⁴. Bidding procedures were underway for further facilities, expected to provide an additional 1,900 spaces^{95,96}. Despite initial slow progress due to procedural hurdles, stakeholders anticipate the creation of

the limited number of groups in PIs. In such case, PIs lack clearly defined criteria for prioritizing these children, eg. children with moderate or severe disabilities.

⁹² These fairs were organised in Čačak, Sombor, Vranje, Loznica, Novi Pazar and Kragujevac

⁹³ ECEC, Ranking of municipalities: https://ecec.mpn.gov.rs/?page_id=2863&lang=en

⁹⁴ Evaluation Team's own calculation based on ECEC monitoring data

⁹⁵ ECEC Monitoring Report 2023, p. 1

⁹⁶ According to available ECEC Project data, three preschool facilities were built by 2020 in Doljevac, Žitorađa and Sremska Mitrovica; while construction and extension works on nine preschool facilities will be finalized by the end of 2023 in additional 8 municipalities (Kruševac, Merošina, Loznica, Vladičin Han, Prokuplje, Smederevo, Šid, and Tutin). In addition, at the time of the evaluation, bidding procedures for the construction of preschool facilities in Novi Pazar and Petrovac na Mlavi were announced while the documents for announcing the bidding procedure for the construction works in Čičevac, Leskovac, Kragujevac, Prijepolje, Aleksandrovac, Čačak, Alibunar, and Aranđelovac were ready for announcement.

16,000 new places. This includes the ECEC Grant Scheme (component 3) awarded to 34 LSUs, focusing on vulnerable children inclusion. Evaluation found that infrastructure development efforts ensured environmental and social sustainability. Each participating municipality was required to have an environmental and social management plan, guiding facility constructions and renovations. A guide for kindergarten space arrangement was also disseminated. This was considered by stakeholders as important added value of reform.

EQ1.2: To what extent did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?

FINDING 8. THE INVESTMENTS MADE IN LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN THE AREA OF PSE, HUMAN RESOURCES, INSTITUTIONS, AND MATERIALS, ALONG WITH EFFORTS TO ENGAGE CHILDREN AND PARENTS HAVE YIELDED POSITIVE OUTCOMES, INCLUDING INCREASED READINESS OF THE SYSTEM TO EXPAND COVERAGE, PROMOTE EQUITY, INCLUSIVENESS, AND IMPROVE OVERALL QUALITY. HOWEVER, CHALLENGES PERSIST, INCLUDING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AND A RANGE OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND TECHNICAL ISSUES WITHIN PIs, AT LSGs AND HIGHER ADMINISTRATIVE AND GOVERNANCE LEVELS NECESSITATING CONTINUED SUPPORT AND INVESTMENT TO SUSTAIN AND ENHANCE THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THESE INITIATIVES.

105. The evaluation revealed that substantial investments in training, mentoring, and guideline development have enhanced the competencies of practitioners in PIs, enabling them to apply new concepts in their practice. The trainings provided through relevant reform capacity strengthening initiatives generally received high ratings by participants, indicating that they felt prepared to implement the PCF. This finding was corroborated by survey data which indicated a shift towards more professional development and effective support for all children (See Survey results related to main changes in human resource capacity in Survey results in Annex 5). However, despite the documentary evidence based on the respondents' opinion and monitoring reports that 10-20% of practitioners fully apply the new curriculum and an additional 50% implement certain elements, stakeholders cautioned about persisting resistance to change and administrative hurdles at various levels, which hinder further improvements in preschool education quality, inclusivity, and diversity (See Section on hindering factors below).
106. Efforts to enhance the PIs ability to perform monitoring and evaluation of their work (inter alia, through reflexive practice modelling and PLCs) have transformed the approaches to reflexive practice, albeit such practice is more present in kindergartens –nucleus of change than in other kindergartens (e.g., in rural areas, See Annex 9: Case Studies)⁹⁷.
107. Despite progress, some areas, such as self-evaluation and external evaluation, are still in initial phases of implementation and require continued support to strengthening of skills, experience, or support, as noted by stakeholders. Revision of legal framework supported the shift to more inclusive, professional practice communities. However, stakeholders highlighted that the Rule book on the Work License for Teachers, Educators and Professional Associates ⁹⁸ is not in sync with the new curriculum, leading to issues with trainee teacher integration and licensing. See section on hindering factors below.
108. The diversification of preschool programs, particularly for vulnerable and less developed areas, has strengthened the PSE system, as confirmed by survey responses and stakeholder interviews, enabling a more diverse range of options for families. Survey responses of public PIs show that received support by reform initiatives contributed to development and running of the diversified preschool programs to a great extent (31 percent) or to some extent (40 percent, Annex 5, Figure 8). As noted in Finding 5 above, stakeholders note persistent challenges related to space, sustainability, and financial constraints, and emphasize the need for more local government engagement in reforms.
109. Improvements have been made in inclusivity system for children with disabilities benefiting all children's development, but these changes remain inconsistent, and case based.

⁹⁷ As public PIs respondents to the survey stated, 'Strengthening of competences and horizontal exchange in and outside the institution enabled change to occur', and 'Learning communities outside the institution by "cluster centres" and mentoring support are the most positive change'.

⁹⁸ Official Gazette of RS", no. 22/2005, 51/2008, 88/2015, 105/2015, 48/2016 and 9/2022

Stakeholders identify a shortage of personal assistants for children with disabilities and unclear selection criteria for prioritizing when enrolment spots are scarce and classrooms are overcrowded, which is not ideal for full inclusion (See Finding 9). Furthermore, issues persist with including 3–5.5-year-old children from Roma settlements. The need for systemic solutions to these issues is paramount, as many Roma children remain unenrolled in preschool education, except the year before starting school. As a survey respondent notices *'There is a need for a systemic solution to these issues, as many children living in Roma settlements are not included in PSE, except in the year before starting school, in PPP, and even then, there are exceptions'*.

Addressing the issue of insufficient spatial capacities for enrolling children in line with the needs of families has partly been made possible by significant infrastructure investments. Several new preschools are now available, with more in the pipeline, offering thousands of additional places as discussed in Finding 7. However, stakeholders point to hindrances to the results relating to slow implementation speed and competing priorities for national and local governments' financial resources in particular.

EQ1.3. What are the enabling factors (necessary and/or sufficient) and barriers for the PSE reforms to give results at different levels?

Drivers

110. Drivers of PSE reforms that were identified through the desk review, stakeholder interviews and focus groups include the following:
111. ***Ownership and commitment of policy makers to push the reform forward.*** Reform in preschool education was unequivocally led and supported by the government and the MoE. The key actors saw the strong support for the reform initiatives and participatory approach as strong drivers of change in the system.
112. ***Participatory and evidence-based approach to PSE reform.*** Conceptualization of a new paradigm of PSE was driven by participatory and evidence-based approaches as confirmed by various interviewed stakeholders (e.g., national institutions, associations, donors). The interviewed key actors noticed that this approach enabled reform initiatives to be responsive to the needs of the Serbian society.
113. ***Investment in monitoring and evaluation.*** Effective reforms incorporate robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure progress emerging from different projects⁹⁹ and identify areas for improvement. Regular assessments, data collection, and analysis enabled decision makers and practitioners to track the impact of reforms (ex-post analysis of the implementation of the strategy till 2020; project evaluations), identify successful practices, and make evidence-based decisions. Monitoring and evaluation provided accountability and drive continuous improvement.
114. ***Donors/development partners support.*** The reform was strongly supported by donors and development partners active in the field of PSE, which was seen as an important driver of success. Open discussions, consultations and joint efforts by donors and national institutions was evidenced to have helped joint definition of framework and/or measures and activities for the implementation of the reform. In particular, the World Bank Loan was considered as an important factor to enable the provision of the comprehensive support to improving the PSE system.
115. ***Strong expertise of key actors.*** Strong expertise of all key actors involved in the reform process and their long-term collaboration was viewed as an important driver of results. Involvement of academia, civil society, professional associations, as well as development partners (UNICEF, World Bank, EU, etc.), enabled the identification of best international

⁹⁹ Illustrative examples of evaluations: Project evaluation report "Establishing a network of practitioners for preschool support upbringing and education" (2018); Evaluation of Kindergartens without Borders; Monitoring and evaluation of the application of the Model inclusion of children with developmental disabilities; in the system of preschool education and of education. Research report (2019) The Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment – Research report (2020).

- practices, highlighting areas of needed improvement and inspired changes in further creation of competent PSE system for all children of preschool age and their families.
116. **Motivation of practitioners.** The motivation of directors, expert associates, and preschool teachers to take part in capacity -building activities and the application of new ways of working was highlighted as an important factor that contributed to achieved progress in application of the PCF. Interviewed stakeholders noticed that levels of motivation vary among PIs, but there is a critical mass of actors in kindergartens – nuclei of change that can further support the implementation of the PCF.
117. **Adaptation to circumstances.** All reform interventions showed a certain level of flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances (COVID -19) and to respond to arising needs within the sector. For illustration, online version of the training for to implement the new PCF was developed to enable capacity building for PIs during COVID -19.

Hindering factors

118. Evidence collected through extensive review of available documentation, stakeholder consultations and survey results highlight several key points regarding the reform efforts and challenges that the PSE system has encountered over the reference period, many of which continue to persist going forward:

Challenges for the reform overall

119. **Challenges with visibility.** Despite efforts to develop and promote joint activities of MoE in the capacity of a leader and its partner institutions and organisations, the visibility of reform activities and results remained insufficient. This affected the overall perception, awareness, and support for the reforms. Moreover, a lack of collaboration with private PIs limited their awareness of the MoE reform investments, as survey results indicate that private PIs have a lower perception of results achieved under those investments than respondents from public PIs.
120. **Challenges with coordination.** Stakeholders reported significant challenges in reform coordination among various entities, including intersectoral coordination of MoE and development partners or organisations, as well as between different ministries. Despite improved CSO cooperation, overall coordination was a challenge to monitor and implement reform initiatives, due to the lack of a structured mechanism, insufficient institutional capacities and changes in state administration bodies, as pointed out by some interviewed stakeholders. This coordination deficit resulted in problems in information exchange, task allocation, and leadership continuity, which in complex initiatives with a large number of actors caused certain challenges in communication and achievement of common understanding of roles and visibility of contributions by different actors. Furthermore, some stakeholders pointed out that difficulties in coordination impeded planning and monitoring efforts, and evaluation of implemented measures and activities.
121. **Slow changes in universities.** Faculties and academies that train preschool teachers have been slow to adapt their curricula to align with the PSE reforms. This lack of coordination may be due to the need for re-accreditation, changes in approaches, and additional learning as found by this evaluation. Limited support in the area of higher education available under projects negatively affected the overall progress of the reforms and their sustainability.
122. **Dependence on donor funds.** The reforms heavily rely on donor funds and funds from other sources (e.g., loans and grants). This dependence raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of the initiatives, as they require continuous financial support.
123. **Creating common vision and ethical perspective.** There is a constant need for creation of a shared vision and ethical perspective around the role of PSE, as well as the focus on market principles for professional empowerment by some stakeholders. The lack of common vision can compromise the sense of ownership and responsibility over the reform process and its outcomes.

124. **Overambitious agenda of the reform.** Evaluation found that, the curriculum introduction was the first time such huge reform was introduced in phases with robust capacity building program, which was a game changer for absorption of the paradigm shift as emphasised by stakeholders. However, evaluation found that, in some instances, the reform efforts were overly ambitious, leading to a multitude of intensive activities that overwhelmed teachers and PIs. It would have been more beneficial to adopt a more sequenced approach, allowing the system to absorb and provide feedback through monitoring on areas that require further adaptation or in-depth exploration. Monitoring was not consistently utilized to inform necessary adjustments or guide changes in direction.
125. **Staffing issues across PI structures.** During the reference period, an employment ban in PIs complicated the recruitment of necessary staff for the daily functioning and further development of this sector in line with strategic priorities (improving access, quality and equity in PSE). Moreover, many practitioners worked on temporary contracts, with delays in salary payments up to three months in some instances. This employment ban strained existing staff and hindered the implementation of innovative practices. The prevalence of temporary contracts negatively affected the stability and motivation of the workforce, often leading to job insecurity and reduced commitment. Stakeholders emphasized that delayed salaries and inconsistent compensation, particularly in response to COVID-19¹⁰⁰, further challenge practitioners, impacting their motivation and job satisfaction. Additionally, some teachers have been given increased salary coefficient due to further education, while others in the same status were not, which also dampen motivation, as pointed out by interviewed PIs.
126. **Lack of education advisors and advisers-external associates.** Interviewed stakeholders pointed out a lack of educational advisors specialized in preschool education that could provide adequate support to preschool institutions in the implementation of the new PCF and/or external evaluation. In addition, over the period 2012–2022, there were only seven advisers-external associates hired in coordination of regional school administration units of MoE as practitioners from PIs to support education institutions in coordination with. There is an ongoing effort to expand the number of advisers-external associates, as currently additional 25 are engaged from the pool of trainers/mentors for new PCF.
127. **Inconsistency of the process of acquiring preschool teacher and PI expert associate licenses and the requirements of the new PCF.** The Rule book on license to work as a teacher, a preschool teacher, and an expert associate is not aligned with the new PCF and interviewed stakeholders cited that this as a challenge particularly for mentors of newcomers to the system. It is also a challenge for newcomers themselves because during the internship they are starting to train for the implementation of the new concept, but the licensing exam procedures follow the old concept, which is confusing and not helpful in promoting the new approach.

Challenges encountered by PIs

128. **Resistance to change.** PIs faced resistance to change among wider cohorts of PSE practitioners, despite the fact that 95 % of PSE practitioners being trained, while practitioners in kindergartens - nuclei of change benefited from the whole CB program (training, mentoring and horizontal learning models). There was also a lack of full understanding or motivation among practitioners to apply new PCF, particularly in overcrowded groups. As pointed out by some stakeholders, the reform has only scratched the surface of change management within PIs through trainings and mentoring of practitioners and principals, but this is still insufficient as reported by consulted stakeholders (See sustainability section).

¹⁰⁰ This refers to the one-time financial support to PI staff due to somewhat difficult conditions of work and overwork during the COVID-19 pandemic.

129. **Political/managerial support within PIs.** Evaluation found that some directors of preschool institutions displayed resistance or disinterest in embracing the necessary changes. In response, efforts were made to engage with these directors and educate them about the benefits and importance of the new approach. It was observed that significant changes occurred more rapidly in cases where principals were supportive of reforms as reported by consulted stakeholders .
130. **Lack of financial resources.** PIs frequently face issues related to insufficient funding and space, critical for implementing and maintaining new preschool education concepts, especially diversified programs in rural areas. PI Survey data confirms that 81 percent of public PIs report a lack of financial resources and inadequate space as key challenges (See Annex 5, figure 15) , often leading to group sizes exceeding the 20% over the norm prescribed by law.
131. PIs also reported a chronic lack of material and financial resources for project supplies, exacerbated by unchanging budgets amidst inflation, making it hard to meet even basic needs. On many occasions, PIs resorted to collecting donations from parents or staff for essential supplies, as emphasized by both consulted parents and practitioners. Furthermore, the lack of funds for organized transportation, such as purchasing a van, restricts the involvement of children from remote areas and the organization of joint activities as corroborated by survey results and interviewed PIs . These financial limitations present a significant ongoing obstacle for PIs .
132. **Lack of oversight and evaluation of private kindergartens.** Interviewed stakeholders raised a concern with a lack of expert -pedagogical supervision and external evaluation of private kindergartens following their verification . While in most recent period, notably since online trainings were provided , private PIs were invited to participate, their participation was not mandatory. Private PIs are subjects to expert -pedagogical inspection in the same way as public PIs, although this evaluation was unable to collect consistent data on those inspection visits . It is not clear , therefore, to what extent private PIs adhere to or apply PCF or follow some other programs. While private PIs have helped LSGs relieve the coverage pressure especially in bigger cities, there is the need for greater control of the quality of work there .
133. **Harmonisation of the initial education of preschool teachers with the Standards of competence of preschool teachers and the new PCF.** Challenges arise from discrepancies between the initial training of PSE teachers and the new concept of PSE applied in PIs. Interviewed stakeholders cited that this as a challenge particularly with newcomers to the system who are not adequately trained to assume duties and apply the new concept, which creates challenges for PIs. The lack of competent professionals for the implementation of the new PCF can impact the quality of work and support provided to young children. Inadequate initial education may result in ineffective strategies of preschool teachers in developing preschool programs , limited knowledge of the holistic nature of child development, and a lack of understanding of the nature and function of PSE, also articulated in PCF .
134. **Challenges of program diversification.** Implementing diversified PSE programs in rural areas and PPP in schools , where programs are often conducted within school premises, can be challenging due to the need to remove materials every day after class, disrupting project dynamics as reported by consulted PIs.
135. **Challenges in coverage of vulnerable groups.** A key challenge for ensuring the adequate increase of coverage of children from vulnerable backgrounds in PSE are shortage of space capacity of public PIs and lack of funding for development of diversified programs (See Annex 5) . In addition, as confirmed by survey results and interviewed stakeholders a lack of personal assistants and other professional staff is a significant limitation for quality coverage of children with disabilities. This has been emphasized as a hindrance to equal opportunities for these children.

136. ***Overuse of support provided by a limited number of professionals in PIs.*** The evaluation revealed that sharing best practices heavily relied on a group of enthusiastic practitioners who played a vital role. Their commendable engagement resulted in significant achievements. However, it was observed that practitioners who were particularly enthusiastic about the new approaches often took on multiple activities, leading to a potential risk of professional burnout in the medium to long term. A survey respondent cites that *'short deadlines for the start of the implementation of new PCF and increased responsibility for assurance of PSE quality have led to increased emotional sensitivity and stress levels among employees'*.

Challenges encountered by LSGs

137. ***Low level of development in some municipalities.*** Overall lack of development in certain municipalities, can hinder progress in various sectors, including education. Without proper infrastructure, resources, and services, it becomes difficult to provide quality PSE and support the holistic development of children.
138. ***Lack of sustainable funding and uncertainty in municipality's funds.*** Evidence collected through document review and as corroborated through stakeholder interviews and survey results, indicates that LSGs encounter persisting challenges with insufficient and/or uncertain funding sources, making it challenging to plan and sustain initiatives effectively. Without reliable financial resources, it becomes difficult to maintain and enhance the quality of preschool education, invest in space capacities, professional development opportunities, and provide necessary resources, materials and equipment for the provision of high-quality educational work with children.
139. ***Lack of project management experience.*** Interviewed stakeholders cited the lack of project management knowledge in some LSG and this way is one of solutions to fund some initiatives that would ensure continuity and sustainability of change in PSE system. Recognizing the importance of project management skills, it becomes essential for LSG institutions to invest in training and capacity-building programs for their staff. By providing opportunities for individuals to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in project management, LSGs can improve their abilities to successfully plan and execute projects and, in this way, ensure sustainability.
140. ***Uneven needs and migratory changes within and across municipalities.*** Demographic changes and migration patterns across regions and municipalities lead to varying needs and challenges for preschool education. Thus far, cities, municipalities and educational authorities have not found the best formula to plan programs and services that could be adapted to address these changing dynamics and ensure equal access and support for all children, regardless of their backgrounds or migration status.
141. ***Complex administration procedures for adapting premises or new infrastructure.*** The complexity of administrative procedures was found to be a hindrance to the timely adaptation of premises, and the establishment of new infrastructure required for PSE. Infrastructure investments have encountered delays that have impeded the expansion of offered preschool programs. These have influenced the coverage and access for children, in turn hindering the overall effectiveness of reforms as confirmed by several consulted stakeholders.
142. ***Social distance, parental distrust, and low recognition of disabilities or other types of vulnerability.*** Evaluation found that such factors have played an important role in low enrolment, particularly for marginalized groups such as Roma children and children with disabilities. Social distance and parental distrust were reported by interviewed and stakeholders participating in focus group discussions as reasons discouraging families from enrolling their children in preschool, while low recognition or availability of preconditions to support disabilities have limited the provision of inclusive education and support services.

143. **Issues with local procedures, data collection instruments, and electronic software.** The absence of local procedures, adequate data collection instruments, and electronic software were raised as hindrances to effective planning, monitoring, and evaluation of provision of PSE on the local level. Stakeholder interviews and site observations in sampled municipalities raised the issues of lack of accurate data on specific needs of different children and their families which would be used to design targeted interventions, and to allocate resources appropriately.
144. **Limited outreach to and involvement of parents.** The evaluation found that the reform initiatives, particularly their operationalization at local level, have cumulatively helped to increase cooperation with parents. However, this is still not fully satisfactory in raising their awareness of the benefits of including children in high-quality PSE programs and cooperation with families. This was reported to be an important hindrance to the overall parental awareness and interest to enrol their children in preschool.
145. **Political challenges.** The evaluation revealed that LSGs and PIs are facing numerous political challenges (such as lack of political support; changing the reform direction; frequent change of civil servants and officials in MoE, etc.) and conflicting interests of different actors, which significantly impact the sustainability of support provided to PIs. These political challenges are viewed as critical by stakeholders interviewed during the evaluation process.
146. **Insufficient preschool physical capacities.** The limited physical capacities of preschools pose a major obstacle for the inclusion of all children based on the pronounced needs of their families. This shortage of infrastructure hinders efforts to expand access and provide equal opportunities for all children. Moreover, lack of adequate outdoor space in some PIs limits possibility of enabling daily opportunity for children to play and engage in various activities outside.
147. **Ineffective application of enrolment regulations.** Despite the existence of regulations prioritizing the enrolment of children from vulnerable groups, their implementation has been ineffective. This failure to effectively prioritize the enrolment of children from vulnerable backgrounds, particularly from Roma community, further exacerbates disparities in access to PSE.
148. **High costs of programs, transport or other related costs.** The high costs associated with PSE services, including expenses such as transportation, creates financial barriers for many families. These financial constraints hinder access to preschool education, particularly for economically disadvantaged families (e.g., from rural areas) as confirmed by interviewed PIs.

3.2 Impact

EQ2.1: What difference did the PSE reform make to children and under what circumstances? What challenges remain?

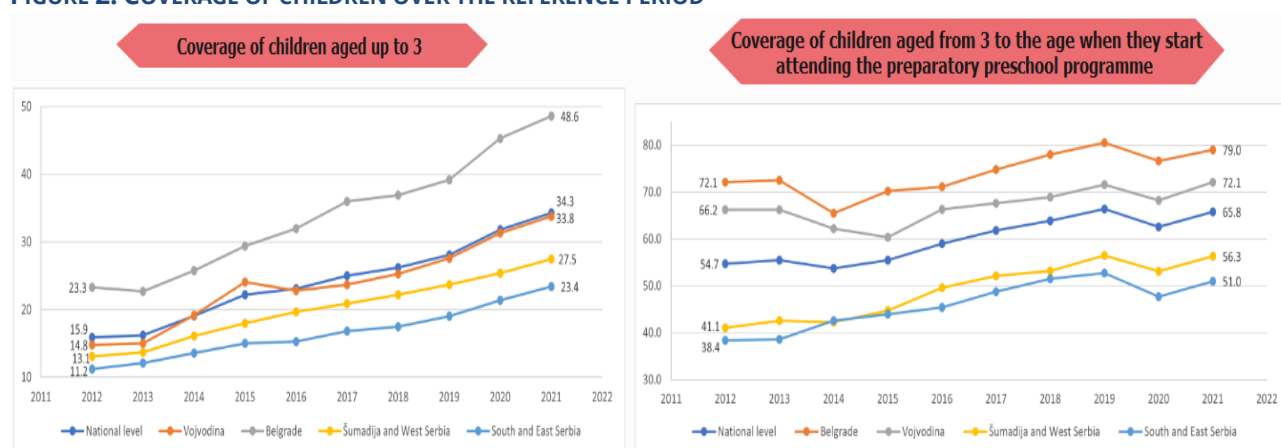
FINDING 9. THE REFORM INVESTMENTS IN PSE IN SERBIA HAVE LED TO INCREASED CAPACITY, QUALITY, AND DIVERSITY OF AVAILABLE PROGRAMS, EXPANDING ACCESS FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS AND LESS DEVELOPED AREAS. HOWEVER, UNIVERSAL COVERAGE HAS NOT BEEN ACHIEVED YET, AND CHALLENGES REMAIN IN ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES AND ENSURING SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN FROM VULNERABLE BACKGROUNDS, PARTICULARLY ROMA CHILDREN AND THOSE WITH DISABILITIES. EFFORTS TO DEVELOP INCLUSIVITY AND PROVIDE SPECIALIZED CARE TO DISABLED CHILDREN ARE ONGOING, BUT THE LACK OF PROFESSIONAL STAFF (PERSONAL ASSISTANTS, SPEECH THERAPISTS) REMAINS A CHALLENGE IN DELIVERING QUALITY EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES.

149. The reform investments across conceptual, spatial, human resource, and didactical domains, as well as the investments in the equipment, have cumulatively raised the capacity and quality and the diversity of preschool programs. These investments have expanded access to preschool education for vulnerable groups and less developed areas, increased the inclusion of children from the most vulnerable groups, notably Roma, children with disabilities, and children from rural areas and addressed infrastructure

challenges. The impact of these changes has been profound in terms of progress towards the universal access to quality preschool education and ensuring the provision of adequate support for all children, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds, in line with Serbia's commitments to SDGs.

150. Review of national statistics and other relevant data sources points to progress in increasing coverage and access to quality PSE, which has increased from 58.1 percent in 2012¹⁰¹ to 63.7 percent in 2020¹⁰². In addition, survey respondents from PIs show that almost every second public PI (49 percent) confirmed that their PI established 1 to 5 new groups thanks to the support implemented over the period 2012–2022, and almost every fourth public PI that responded (24 percent) stated that PI opened 6 to 10 new groups (See Annex 5).
151. Coverage of children up to 3 years in preschool education is the lowest compared to other age groups, albeit an increase is visible in the considered period. According to DevInfo, coverage of children up to 3 years increased from 15.9 percent in 2012 to 34.3 percent in 2021, with the highest coverage recorded in the Belgrade region (25.3 percentage points increase, Figure 2).¹⁰³ EU target (Barcelona target) of 33 percent for children below 3 years of age until 2020 was reached in 2021 in Serbia, while at the EU level was reached in 2019 (35 percent).¹⁰⁴

FIGURE 2. COVERAGE OF CHILDREN OVER THE REFERENCE PERIOD



Source: Evaluation team calculation based on DevInfo, MICS and National statistical data

152. There is also an increase in the coverage of children aged 3 to the age when they start attending the PPP, which is a difference of 11.1 percentage points from 2012 to 2021 (65.8 percent). This is below average EU level in 2021 of 91.8¹⁰⁵ percent of children between age of 3 and age for to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level participating in ECEC (EU target 96 percent by 2030).¹⁰⁶ The largest increases have occurred in Šumadija and Western Serbia (15.2 percentage points) and (12.6 percentage points)¹⁰⁷, where the most support for the development of diversified programs has been provided aiming to increase coverage of children, particularly from vulnerable groups.

¹⁰¹ SORS (2014), Statistical Yearbook 2014, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2014/PdfE/G20142013.pdf>

¹⁰² SORS (2022), Statistical Yearbook 2022, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2022/PdfE/G20222055.pdf>

¹⁰³ DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/home.aspx>

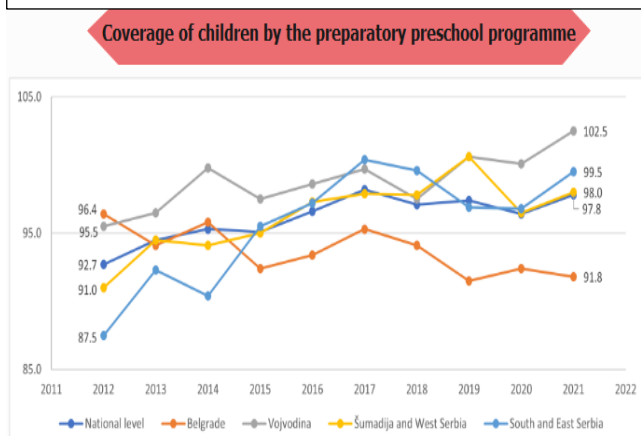
¹⁰⁴ JRC, EC (2022), Indicators for early childhood education and care, JRC Science for Policy Report, page 6, available at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC130350>

¹⁰⁵ Eurostat (2021), Children from age 3 to the starting age of compulsory education at primary level by NUTS2 regions - percent of the population of the corresponding age

¹⁰⁶ JRC, EC (2022), Indicators for early childhood education and care, JRC Science for Policy Report, page 6, available at <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC130350>

¹⁰⁷ DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/home.aspx>

FIGURE 3. COVERAGE OF CHILDREN IN COMPULSORY PRESCHOOL



Source: Evaluation team calculation based on DevInfo, MICS and National statistical data

153. Findings of MICS studies point to achieved progress in coverage of children aged 3 to 5 years from rural settlements, as there has been an increase from 27 percent in 2014¹⁰⁸ to 45.9 percent in 2019¹⁰⁹ (Figure 3). However, those findings also point to slow progress in increasing coverage of children aged 3–5 years from Roma settlements attending preschool education (5.7 percent in 2014, 7 percent in 2019)¹¹⁰. This is corroborated by those consulted who reported that there is still a significant difference in coverage of children aged 3 to 5 between children from Roma settlements and the general

population.

154. The coverage of children in the PPP is almost universal according to the DevInfo database. Data on the regional level shows that the largest increase in coverage of children in PPP is in Vojvodina, while Belgrade records a slight decline in coverage in recent years (Figure 6). The results of the MICS 2019 and 2014 study indicate a positive trend in attending PPP by children from Roma settlements, as the coverage rate increased from 63 percent in 2014 to 76 percent in 2019. However, the current coverage rate of children from sub-standard settlements is still not at a satisfactory level.
155. This indicates that there is still work to be done to ensure that every child, regardless of their background or location, can access early education. The evaluation found that main contributory factors included the expansion of a network of preschool institutions since 2012, primarily driven by the renovation/construction of existing/new public and an increase in the number of private institutions. This indicates a positive trend towards improving access to early education.
156. According to available data, the overall increase in enrolment is attributed also to private preschools, particularly in Belgrade and the region of Vojvodina (e.g., 72 percent of all private preschools are opened in Belgrade, 18 percent in Vojvodina), pointing to the important role of private institutions in expanding access to preschool education and the need to continue involving private preschools in ECEC reform process. The number of children enrolled in private preschool institutions is eight times higher in 2022 (27,145) than in 2012 (3,328), and their share in the total PSE coverage of children is six and a half times higher (11.8% of the total number of children attending PSE in 2022, and 1.8% in 2012). However, it is important to consider the affordability and equity of private education options. Most recent data suggest that a significant number of children remains unenrolled due to capacity constraints (e.g., 5,736 children in 2021)¹¹¹, although some PIs exceed their capacities, which causes overcrowding of groups and spatial capacities. According to the data collected by the Serbian Statistical Office, in 2021, less children were enrolled above capacity of PIs (9,203) than in 2018 (12,296) but higher compared to 2012 (5,228).¹¹²
157. One of the challenges raised by stakeholders is that urban areas face issues of overcrowding in preschools, while rural areas suffer from a lack of capacity and lower enrolment. While

¹⁰⁸ SORS, UNICEF (2014), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys on Status of Women and Children.

¹⁰⁹ SORS, UNICEF (2019), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys on Status of Women and Children.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ SORS (2022), Preschool education and care, in 2021/22 school year. Note: the SORS research did not cover all PIs

¹¹² DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/dataview.aspx>

- there have been positive shifts in including children from rural areas and diversifying programs, the statistical classification of urban and other areas may lead to misleading enrolment data for rural areas, including semi-urban areas. Interviewed stakeholders reported that there is still no developed system for forecasting population trends which would inform infrastructure development and resource allocation to address regional disparities in access to early education.
158. Another contributory factor to the increased coverage was the investment in diversified programs of preschool education, which enabled the participation of children who would otherwise be excluded, particularly those living in rural areas or Roma communities. This suggests that efforts made to address educational disparities and promote inclusivity have shown some positive impact, although there is still room for further improvement. These programs reportedly helped increase coverage especially thanks to efforts to establish models near Roma settlements, though the Roma children are still underrepresented in the preschool as detailed above, which limits their opportunities for institutional support to learning and development. Despite this, a positive trend was recorded in attendance of children from Roma settlements in the PPP.
 159. Document review and stakeholder interviews point to outstanding challenges linked to resistance and a lack of institutional support within the Roma community but also with local population alike. Other factors, such as the lack of financial, human resources and other factors also hinder these efforts. Additionally, the enrolment of children from the poorest families, including those in foster care and Roma children, has been prioritized in some cases. However, there are instances where priority registration is not always respected, and the problem of insufficient capacity in smaller communities remains as pointed out by various consulted stakeholders. These issues contribute to disparities in access to preschool education among different socioeconomic groups.
 160. Furthermore, despite the increase in the number of children enrolled in the PSE system, there are still concerns about the inclusivity and adequacy of support for certain groups. Inclusion of children with disabilities has seen progress, with efforts to create inclusive environment and implement inclusive approaches. However, challenges persist in this domain due to a lack of professional staff, including personal assistants and speech therapists to provide a holistic support system (See Annex 5, Annex 9).

3.3 Sustainability

EQ3.1: To what extent did the preschool education reforms lead to sustainable changes in practices?

161. Institutional sustainability of reformed PSE system refers to the long-term ability of preschool institutions and systems to maintain and continue the implemented reforms effectively and successfully. It involves creating a supportive and enabling environment that ensures the ongoing implementation and positive impact of the reforms beyond their initial introduction. To assess the sustainability of results of the PSE reform thus far, the ET used the framework and methodology for the analysis are provided by newly introduced UNICEF Diagnostic and planning tool for the sector of early childhood education and care ¹¹³. This framework reflects systemic approach in building competent ECEC sector (Figure 4). Following the tool, this report includes analysis of the sustainability of results of the reform of the PSE system by looking into its five core functions: (1) planning and budgeting, (2) curriculum development and implementation, (3) workforce development, (4) family and community engagement and (5) quality assurance.

FIGURE 4. BUILD TO LAST FRAMEWORK



CORE FUNCTION 1. PLANNING AND BUDGETING

162. The purpose of this core function is to develop strong and responsive sector plans, across levels of government, for equitable provision of quality pre-primary education, making efficient use of available financial, human, and physical resources.

FINDING 10. THE EVALUATION UNDERSCORES THE EFFICACY OF BLENDING BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES WITH TOP-DOWN OVERSIGHT FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION. THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION'S INCLUSIVE STRATEGY WAS CRUCIAL IN CHAMPIONING DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING AND PARTICIPATIVE LEADERSHIP, LEADING TO COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT FOR THE REFORMED CURRICULUM. YET, SUSTAINABILITY CONCERNS PERSIST DUE TO CONSTRAINED FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCES AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE, IMPACTING THE CONSISTENT APPLICATION OF THE NEW CURRICULUM AND HINDERING A STABLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR EDUCATORS AND LEARNERS.

163. Document review highlighted a significant shift in the regulatory framework, which provided a strong foundation for the sustainability of the new foundations for the PSE, also corroborated by interviewed stakeholders. Adopted policies, legal acts and bylaws represent strong foundations for harmonization of measures, practices, and approaches across PIs, both public and private. Besides, Efforts by the MoE, as evidenced by document reviews, interviews, and focus group discussions, have strategically combined bottom-up initiatives within PIs with top-down support structures, driving systemic change in PSE. Their participatory approach was instrumental in democratic decision-making, fostering partnership, and securing increased buy-in for the reformed curriculum as confirmed by interviewed stakeholders. The reform engaged with LSGs on project bases, but more proactive consultation with all LSGs through specific meetings or targeted horizontal support would have ensured that the LSGs have more information on reform processes in PSE and potentially by themselves increase their motivation for accepting the change and acquire knowledge and tools to actively participate and support reform's objectives.

164. Infrastructure development has been a cornerstone of the reform, to assist expansion of space and diversification of programs as means to expand coverage of children, particularly those from most vulnerable groups. Each participating LSG was required to have an environmental and social management plan, guiding facility constructions and renovations. They also received the Guidelines for Space Arrangement, which was produced

¹¹³ <https://www.unicef.org/media/67201/file/Build-to-last-framework-universal-quality-pre-primary-education-Brochure.pdf>

as a part of the series The Routes of Access, as well as the Catalogue for Furnishing Preschool Facilities, produced under the ECEC Project Component 1 .

165. However, insufficient funds emerge as a significant concern for ensuring sustainability, particularly in underdeveloped municipalities. The lack of financial resources poses a risk to the continuity and effectiveness of the reform results, hindering long-term progress as pointed out by majority of interviewed stakeholders . In rural areas, progress has been made in improving coverage through interventions such as equipping rooms , establishing diversified programs, and procuring vehicles for transporting children, thus enabling children's attendance and benefits from such programs. The sustainability of these efforts depends on the understanding and commitment of LSGs, and their financial capacity and availability of personnel, as emphasized by consulted stakeholders. A challenge is the sustainability of personnel to develop diversified programs (e.g., in rural areas); personal and pedagogical assistants' work or other professionals that are needed to be engaged for supporting children with disability (See Annex 5) . Their salaries are contingent on LSG finances, with examples of some municipalities facing challenges in covering such salaries or finding such professionals to hire, while others have successfully addressed the issue. Such issues often depend on personalities both at PIs and in LSGs and their personal commitments, which is a shortcoming, as such tasks are not institutionalized, as noted by interviewed stakeholders. More broadly, in many municipalities and notably in less developed ones, LSGs struggle to ensure financing even regular PIs' budgets, and there are some cases where PIs encounter situations where staff salaries are not paid for months. Field observations and interviews also revealed that many PIs also have encountered challenge of staff working for years on temporary contract without any coverage. As previously noted, many PIs also rely on their own fundraising from parents, their own staff, or donations to fund basic materials or needs. These present critical challenges for sustainability of the new concept and wider reform results, as well as inclusion challenges when parents are not able to contribute. The also present significant factor that demotivates personnel, which hinders the transformative potential in medium to long term.

CORE FUNCTION 2. CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

166. The purpose of this core function is to ensure that children across early learning settings benefit from preschool curriculum and have access to learning and play materials that stimulate their learning and development. This core function has three goals, i.e., Goal 1 Define a pre-primary curriculum framework and the content of the curriculum; Goal 2 Disseminate and implement the curriculum widely; and Goal 3 Regularly review the quality of PCF implementation . The evaluation assessed sustainability through the prism of these three goals.

FINDING 11. COLLABORATIVE DESIGN OF CURRICULAR REFORM AND PILOT TESTING OF THE NEW PCF ENHANCED THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PCF, EMPHASIZING AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO LEARNING, FOCUSED ON SUPPORTING THE WELL-BEING AND COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN. COLLABORATIVE PCF PROMOTIONAL AND CAPACITY STRENGTHENING APPROACHES BOOSTED PRACTITIONER ADOPTION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEW PROGRAM.

167. The evaluation found that the reform's collaborative approach to developing PCF , combined with pilot testing for feasibility and value, strengthened the sustainability prospects of PCF implementation in medium to long term. This fundamental and incremental approach to introducing change facilitated shifts in pedagogical approach and practice. The PCF emphasizes holistic , integrated learning with all the senses in a space that encourages learning and participation of children in the community with peers and adults .

168. The PCF promotion and accompanying comprehensive capacity strengthening effort , horizontal and vertical exchange between practitioners, cumulatively contributed to implementation of the new PCF by practitioners in most PIs, as evidenced by this

evaluation. Guidelines, manuals, booklets, didactic and other materials that were produced and distributed to PIs across the country helped operationalization of pedagogical approaches promoted by the new curricular concept, also serving teachers as an important professional support in developing actual programs in an education group, as reported by all interviewed and stakeholders participating in focus groups.

169. Horizontal exchange under the models of Professional Learning Community and Joint Learning through Modelling helped better understand starting points of the curricular concept and their operationalization in kindergarten practice, addressing both issues and topics that could potentially be the points of resistance between practitioners, and also helped identify further capacity-building needs in a PI for effective curriculum implementation.

CORE FUNCTION 3. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

170. The purpose of this core function is to support the recruitment, development, and retention of a sufficient number of pre-primary teachers and other key personnel into the subsector, ensuring the development of required essential competencies, training and support required to practitioners.

FINDING 12. THE NEW REGULATORY FRAMEWORK HAS PROVIDED A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF THE NEW CONCEPT IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION. COMPREHENSIVE CAPACITY STRENGTHENING EFFORTS HELPED OPERATIONALISE THE CONCEPT BY INCREASING AWARENESS AND BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, TOOLS, AND SKILLS TO ADOPT AND APPLY THE PROGRAM BASICS AMONG PRACTITIONERS. THE NEW CONCEPT IS APPLIED BY A CORE GROUP OF PRACTITIONERS (CA. 10-20%) FORMING A NUCLEUS THAT DEVELOPS A REAL PROGRAM AND TRANSFORMING THE KINDERGARTEN CULTURE WHICH PRESENTS THE BASIS TO BUILD FROM. HOWEVER, SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES REMAIN, INCLUDING RESISTANCE TO CHANGE, INCONSISTENCIES IN INITIAL EDUCATION ALIGNING WITH THE NEW CONCEPT, AND INSUFFICIENT FUNDS FOR SUSTAINABILITY, PARTICULARLY IN UNDERDEVELOPED MUNICIPALITIES.

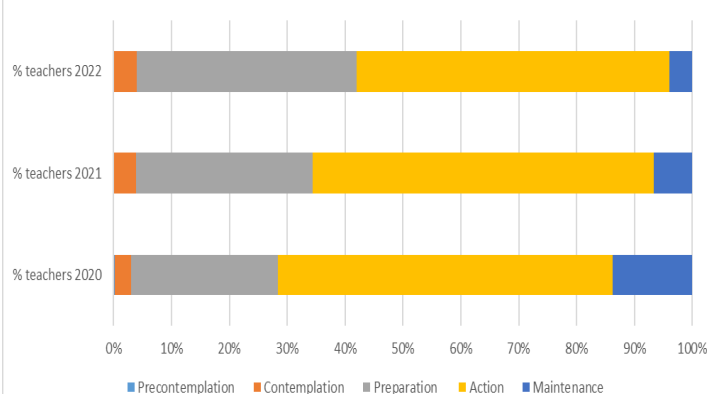
171. Evaluation found that comprehensive training programs, emphasizing competencies and reflective pedagogical practices, and reflection on pedagogical practices have enabled context-specific learning opportunities and fostered peer learning, as highlighted by stakeholders. These capacity-building investments set the stage for a transformative shift in preschool education attitudes, prioritizing children's needs in activity design. The phased approach to support transition from nucleus-kindergartens ensures gradual change adoption, though stakeholders caution that it requires careful management to maintain quality.
172. Document reviews and stakeholder feedback indicate that significant changes in practices were seen in about 10 -20% of practitioners. Monitoring reports from the ECEC project¹¹⁴ reveal that most preschool teachers, post-training, were either ready to act (Preparation for or initiating change), but not consistently maintaining it (Figure 5). Furthermore, 60 -70% of practitioners displayed openness and motivation to change during mentoring.

¹¹⁴ UNICEF (2022), Data monitoring report of implementation of capacity building program for preschools 2019 -2022 (part of ECEC project), page 9 -10

program for preschools 2019 -2022 (part of ECEC project), page 9 -10

173. The evaluation revealed that resistance to the new approaches persists, especially among practitioners familiar with the previous Model B. Factors contributing to this resistance include challenges posed by COVID-19, the complexity of the PLC model, and disparities in its rollout from kindergarten s-nucleus to other kindergartens inside a PI. This remains the single biggest challenge to the rooting and institutionalization of the new practices in the medium to long term as cited by consulted stakeholders. Survey respondents from PIs noted addressing resistance to change as vital for the long-term success of the reforms. Survey respondents also suggested prioritising modern pedagogical training, followed by mentoring, fostering a learning community of practitioners, and sustaining e-learning platforms as good mitigating approaches (See Annex 5).

FIGURE 5. THE PHASE OF CHANGE IN WHICH THE TEACHERS WERE IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE TRAINING



Source: Figure developed by the ET based on data monitoring report of implementation of capacity building program for preschools 2019 - 2022 (part of ECEC project)

174. The evaluation identified a sustainability challenge due to universities/higher education institutions not aligning their preschool teacher training with the new concept. This misalignment not only increases costs for additional training or recertification but also affects the sustainability of the program. Furthermore, the current licensing process for preschool teachers does not align with the new concept, presenting another shortcoming as pointed out by consulted stakeholders.

CORE FUNCTION 4. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

175. The purpose of this core function is to ensure that families and communities are active participants and partners in supporting children's learning and development across early learning settings.

FINDING 13. THE ENGAGEMENT OF DIVERSE STAKEHOLDERS, INCLUDING GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS, NGOS, BUSINESSES, AUTHORITIES, COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND PARENTS, HAS PLAYED A VITAL ROLE IN FOSTERING COLLABORATIVE AND COMMUNITY-CENTRED APPROACHES, CONTRIBUTING TO THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE REFORM RESULTS. AN INCREASE IN COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES IS VISIBLE BETWEEN PIs, COMMUNITIES AND PARENTS. COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES WITH LSGs DEPENDED ON INDIVIDUALS RATHER THAN SYSTEMATIC APPROACHES, WHICH WAS A SHORTCOMING.

176. Evaluation found that the MoE did not take a very proactive role in engaging with communities, LSGs and parents, so this space was filled by PIs, which proactively sought engagement with such actors to promote and seek support for their activities. Continued nurturing of collaborative approaches and networks with local communities, businesses and partners helped many PIs to ensure extra-budgetary sources to cover financial needs, many of which also arose from the application of the new curriculum (e.g., materials, didactic tools, etc.) as exemplified by visited sampled communities. Interviewed PI stakeholders and focus groups also reported their 'opening' to local communities, whereby PIs also promoted their work through street festivals, local manifestations, or other events (e.g., in Sjenica, Aleksinac, Leskovac, See Annex 9: Case Studies).

177. Through community engagement and collaboration, PIs reported becoming more visible and active participants in their local communities and recognized stakeholders in community affairs, as cited by a majority of local stakeholders interviewed within the scope

of this evaluation and by majority of survey respondents from public IPs (around 50 of them reported that this was changed to a great extent and around 40 percent to some extent). According to stakeholder feedback, these networks, and the more visible role of PI institutions in their local communities have the potential to not only provide support structures for PIs in their efforts to navigate change but also facilitate resource -sharing and access to new resources. An illustrative example was found in Sjenica where the PI received donations from diaspora for their new transport van, or donations from parents for materials and other needs.

CORE FUNCTION 5. QUALITY ASSURANCE

The purpose of this core function is to ensure that a coherent framework for monitoring and quality assurance of pre -primary education is in place and that quality monitoring is used to support continuing improvements in both policy and practice.

FINDING 14. MONITORING, AND IN PARTICULAR THE JISP ENCOUNTER CHALLENGES, IN TERMS OF INCREASED ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS, EMPHASIZING THE NEED FOR ITS REFINEMENT TO ENHANCE NATIONAL OVERSIGHT.

178. While planning was thorough, the reform's monitoring measures were fragmented, often spotlighting singular projects rather than comprehensive impacts. The introduction of the Unified Information System of Education (JISP) aimed to centralize educational data, but its roll-out faced operational hiccups, as emphasised by interviewed stakeholders. Actors familiar with the JISP argued that it added administrative duties to the staff (persons delegated by PIs to deal with JISP) due to overlapping systems, highlighting an imperative for JISP's enhancement to bolster national oversight and informed policymaking.

EQ3.2 How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure continuous advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia?

FINDING 15. EVIDENCE FROM DOCUMENT REVIEWS AND STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS INDICATES THAT THE CURRENT FINANCING SYSTEM DOES NOT ENSURE CONTINUOUS ADVANCEMENT OF PSE FOR ALL CHILDREN IN SERBIA. THE REFORM INITIATIVES DID NOT PUT ENOUGH ATTENTION TO THE ABSORPTION CAPACITIES OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENTS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NEW PCF, ALBEIT THE FUNDING FOR PSE IS PREDOMINANTLY SECURED AT THE LOCAL LEVEL. FURTHER CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND COVERAGE EXTENSION IN PSE WILL DEPEND ON EXTERNAL RESOURCES.

179. PSE services in Serbia are predominantly funded by the local level which funds up to 80 percent of the '*economic price*' per child for non -mandatory programs, with full coverage of expenses for children from materially deprived families. On the other side, the MoE covers the full costs for compulsory PPP for all children, in 4 hours of preschool per day, and the cost of the ECEC program for children with disabilities, and children in hospital treatment.
180. The novelty concerning equitable enrolment in preschool institutions refers to the free PSE services of children without parental care, and children from households receiving financial social assistance, which was funded through the budget of the MLEVSP. Interviewed stakeholders point to the sustainability of introducing free enrolment for these vulnerable groups, as it was included in the Law on Financial Support for Families with Children.
181. Document review and key actor interviews point to the lack of a financing model that would be based on equal PSE standards. This is because economic costs are calculated by LSGs based on the real cost of inputs (salaries of employees and other related costs, and operational costs), but not based on local needs. A gradual introduction of financing of PIs and PSE programs per child (per capita model) has not been achieved although it was defined in the Strategy of Education by 2020, which was assessed as a missed opportunity (See Efficiency section, Finding 20).

182. The PSE reform did not put enough focus on the assessment of absorption capacities of LSGs and PIs for the implementation of the new PCF, which is in line with the above -mentioned issues elaborated in the section sustainable operations (Finding 1 5). Even though most reform initiatives were implemented in the less developed regions of Serbia (e.g., ECEC project, SUPER, etc. , See Annex 3, Map 1. Frequency of community involvement in ECEC interventions), document review and interviewed stakeholders confirmed that the sustainability of the implementation of the PCF is hindered by the lack of sufficient funds and space. For example, 81 percent of survey respondents from public PIs confirmed that financial limitations present key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services (most of the respondents were from communities between up to 50,000 inhabitants (57 PIs), and between 50,000 and 200,000 inhabitants (20 PIs)) , See Annex 5, Figure 15 .
183. Several actions undertaken by the reform (e.g., capacity building activities, infrastructure, equipment) remain inherently dependent on external financing and therefore raise sustainability questions. Some stakeholder highlights that the use of EU -funded Sector Budget Support is a viable option for continued support for the implementation of the PCF. Some other interview stakeholders see the possibility of using a new WB loan, which is under discussion for elementary education, to narrow the gap in the education approach that happened in the transition from preschool to elementary school.

3.4 Efficiency

EQ4.1: Has the PSE reform been successful in ensuring efficiency? Does efficiency vary across contexts or subgroups? If so, by how much and for which groups?

FINDING 16. FACTORS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING THE REFORM INCLUDED COVID-19 PANDEMIC, LACK OF ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITIES AT LOCAL LEVEL, TURNOVER OF GOVERNMENT COORDINATORS, ETC. KEY ACTORS WERE ABLE TO MITIGATE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THOSE FACTORS, THOUGH DELAYS OF CERTAIN ACTIVITIES STILL AFFECTED THE TIMELINESS OF DELIVERY OF RESULTS.

184. While most of reform initiatives were efficient, the evaluation found that the ECEC project experienced launch and implementation delays, particularly with its infrastructure component due to slow fund utilization and municipal unpreparedness to meet World Bank standards. The COVID -19 pandemic significantly impacted the project's second and third components, prompting multiple modifications. This led to overlapping activities, causing some practitioners to be overworked, as only a limited number of practitioners could engage in all activities, as corroborated by focus group discussions with practitioners and interviewed stakeholders . An example of out of sequence activities was that practitioners stated that Joint Learning through Modelling (with cluster centres) should have started in parallel or before the Professional Learning Communities, but the opposite happened. In addition, a practitioner stated *'the sequencing of the capacity building activities should have been done better, as at the same time they worked on self -assessment and on the Joint Learning through Modelling. Better sequencing of activities would ensure that practitioners could adopt the knowledge and reflect it better '*.
185. While capacity building component for PCF implementation did not encounter major delays due to COVID -19 restrictions, the choice of the mode of delivery of trainings (combined or online) was based on local epidemiological situations . As illustration, UNICEF reported that 76 percent of trainings were conducted in person, while 24 percent were held online.¹¹⁵ However, the online approach to capacity building resulted in a slight decrease in quality for the implementation of the new PCF as emphasised by all consulted practitioners and actors. Challenges also arose from frequent turnover of decision -makers within the MoE,

¹¹⁵ UNICEF (2022); Development and Implementation of the Capacity Building Program for Preschools (part of Subcomponent 2.1. Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care Project): Third Progress Report 30 June 2022 .

affecting the pace of various projects. For example, five coordinators from the MoE have been changed during the implementation of the ECEC project (2019 –2023). Despite this, good internal coordination among MoE and partners mitigated potential overlaps and operational challenges, though some communication issues persisted as discussed in Finding 22 under the section on coherence.

FINDING 17. THERE ARE CHALLENGES RELATING TO A LACK OF TRANSPARENCY IN FINANCIAL REPORTING WHICH IS CHALLENGE FOR OVERSIGHT OF SUPPORT TO PSE.

186. Document review showed a lack of transparency on budget expenditures for PSE which presents a challenge for oversight of local support to preschool education and for holding LSGs accountable. In addition, Yale University's Country Report for Serbia stated that *'In relation to the funding the lack of financial statistics at central and local level impedes the development of an evidence and needs based system of transfers between Central government and LSG.'*¹¹⁶ Moreover, the practice of intersectoral cooperation on data sharing and decision-making at a local level is not present, albeit there is some ongoing work in this direction in some communities (e.g., in Zrenjanin).

FINDING 18. THERE ARE EXAMPLES OF INITIATIVES AND PROJECTS WITHIN THE PSE REFORM THAT EFFICIENTLY OUTREACHED DIVERSE GROUPS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES (CWD, ROMA, CHILDREN FROM POOREST FAMILIES, CHILDREN FROM RURAL COMMUNITIES, GENERAL POPULATION).

187. Document review and consulted stakeholders pointed out that diversified programs were instrumental to promote the inclusion of rural children previously out of the preschool system. For instance, PI 'Vukica Mitrovic' from Leskovac for 10 years offering distinct programs for children aged 3 to 5.5 years both in urban and rural settings initiated under the "Kindergarten without Borders 2" project. However, the sustainability of diversified programs in general is questioned due to funding constraints, space limitations, and overcrowding.
188. Evaluation found that inclusion of children with disabilities into PSE was stronger in areas with established intersectoral collaboration on early interventions. The inclusion of Roma children is enhanced through pedagogical assistance and collaboration with local associations, yet there is a concerning trend of segregation in certain regions, underscoring the need for continued efforts towards inclusive enrolment policies. A few interview stakeholders noticed that work on non-segregated inclusion of Roma children in PSE is not covered enough thus far, pointing to the need for further efforts towards elimination of segregation for fair enrolment policies.

EQ4.2: What resources (national, EU, other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform? What have been the costs, who covered those costs and for how long were they covered?

FINDING 19. THERE IS EVIDENCE THAT THE DIVERSITY OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES (NATIONAL, LOCAL, AND DONORS) CONTRIBUTED TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PSE REFORM, HOWEVER, THE LEVEL OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT HAS NOT BEEN ENOUGH TO BUILD CONDITIONS AT PIs FOR SMOOTH IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PCF.

189. Over the period between 2012-2022, approximately 55 million EUR were invested in the PSE reform in Serbia, according to the ET's analysis of financial data of targeted PSE interventions carried out by the MoE (See Annex 3 List of Projects Contributed to the reform). In addition, there was approximately 9 million EUR investment in inter-sectoral intervention, which partially include investments in PSE, and at least 15 million EUR invested by other development partners (e.g., Novak Djokovic Foundation). The largest proportion of investment is the project Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care which has been

¹¹⁶ Yale University (2018), Analytical Review of Governance, Provision and Quality of Early Childhood Education Services at the Local Level in Countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS), Country Report for Serbia, page 43.

implemented by the World Bank loan (50 million US \$/app. 47 million EUR). Over the considered period the EU invested approximately 7 million EUR in PSE. Other larger investments include Novak Đoković Foundation investing 15 million EUR through the project 'Schools of Life', covering the period 2013-2020.

190. Evidence points to achieved improvements regarding equitable share in financing from public resources. The Government of Serbia adopted the *Law on financial support for families with children*¹¹⁷ which defines that PSE payment for children deprived of parental care, children with disabilities and children from families that are social beneficiaries are covered from the national budget, while costs of PSE for children from financially disadvantaged families are covered from LSGs funding (See Table 1). Some interviewed stakeholders state that costs of enrolment of children deprived of parental care and children from families that are social beneficiaries was initially envisaged to be covered through ECEC project, but the government ensured a national budget for coverage of these expenses.

TABLE 1. SYSTEM OF FINANCING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

	Nursery Children aged 6 months up to 3 years	Preschool Children aged 3 to 5.5 years	Preparatory Preschool Program children aged 5.5 to 6.5 years
Most children	Up to 80 percent covers LSG, up to 20 percent parents	Up to 80 percent covers LSG, up to 20 percent parents	PPP 4-hours of preschool per day for at least 9 -months covered by the national budget (Ministry of Education) Additional hours per day and months are covered by LSG up to 80 percent and parents up to 20 percent
Children from materially deprived families	100 percent covered by LSG	100 percent covered by LSG	PPP 4-hours of preschool per day for at least 9 -months covered by the national budget (Ministry of Education) Additional hours per day and months are covered 100 percent by LSG
Children with disabilities (in development groups), and children in hospital treatment (in hospital groups)	100 percent covered by national budget (Ministry of Education)	100 percent covered by national budget (Ministry of Education)	PPP 4-hours of preschool per day for at least 9 -months covered by the national budget (Ministry of Education)
Children deprived of parental care, children from families that are social beneficiaries	100 percent covered by national budget (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy)	100 percent covered by national budget (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy)	PPP 4-hours of preschool per day for at least 9 -months covered by the national budget (Ministry of Education)

Source: Adapted by ET based on Country Report for Serbia (unpublished), Yale University and data gathered from interviewed stakeholders

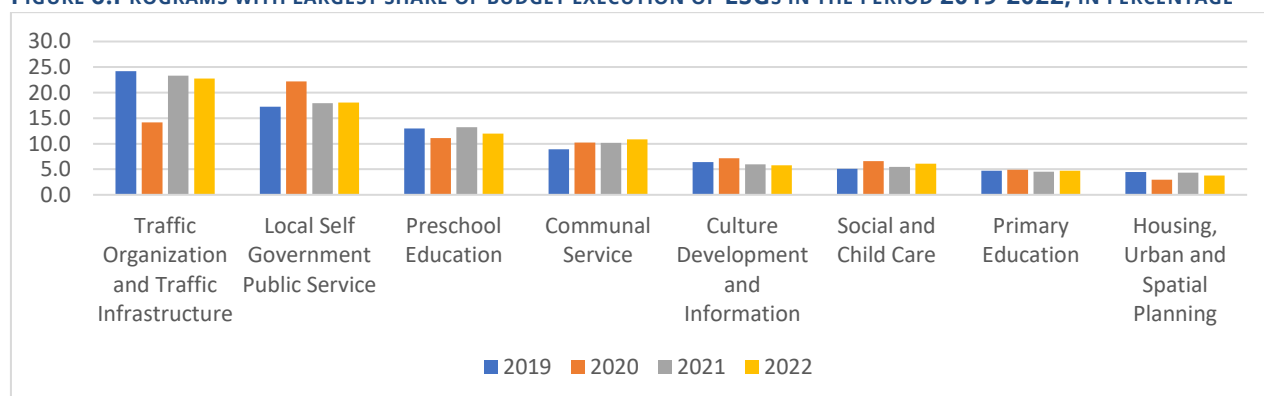
191. Document review and stakeholder interviews stated that some LSGs introduced incentive measures for the public-private partnership as they have included private PIs in the subsidy system (vouchers), which resulted in increased coverage of preschool children (e.g., in Belgrade, Kragujevac). A few interviewed stakeholders state that the private sector is a resource that was not fully utilized in ensuring equitable access to PSE as prioritization of vulnerable groups could be included in the subsidy system with private PIs. This would require adequate monitoring of the private PIs and their increased engagement in reform processes.

Level of funding in education over the period 2012-2022

¹¹⁷The Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. br. 113/2017, 50/2018, 46/2021 - decision CC, 51/2021 - decision CC US, 53/2021 - decision CC, 66/2021, 130/2021 and 43/2023 - decision CC <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon-o-finansijskoj-podrsци-porodici-sa-decom.html>

192. Regarding funding of ECEC, government expenditures on education have slightly deteriorated since 2012 (3.8 percent), decreasing to 3.6 percent of GDP in 2019¹¹⁸. Study '*ECEC in Serbia: Situation Analysis and Recommendations*' shows that total public expenditure on preschool education in Serbia for 2014 is estimated to be around 0.5 percent of GDP, which is the latest available data.¹¹⁹ *Serbia Education Public Expenditure Review* stated that share of preschool expenditures in a total public spending on education increased by 1 percentage point per year in the period 2007 to 2018, being at 17 percent (RSD 34 bn) in 2018.¹²⁰
193. Document review and interview stakeholders point out that LSGs provide almost complete funding for PSE, with their contributions estimated to be above 90 percent, covering salaries as the largest expenditure, professional development of teachers and maintenance, and utility costs for preschools. A review of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities' data on budget execution of LSGs in the period 2019–2022 indicates that 11 percent to 13 percent of the total budget went to the financing of preschool education, which represents the third largest expenditure to LSGs.¹²¹ (See Figure 6). Similarly, survey responses received from 21 LSGs shows that LSGs allocate to preschool education an average of around 10 percent of the total budget (See Annex 5). However, interview stakeholders point out that albeit a share of allocations for preschool education is large for LSGs, it is not sufficient. There is still a need for increasing investment in PIs to be able to ensure access to all children in line with the goal of the Strategy for Education Development 2030 in Serbia.

FIGURE 6. PROGRAMS WITH LARGEST SHARE OF BUDGET EXECUTION OF LSGs IN THE PERIOD 2019-2022, IN PERCENTAGE¹²²



Source: Data provided by the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities.

194. Based on survey responses from 92 public PIs, LSGs increased their spendings on preschool education over the period 2012–2022 (Figure 7). This is the case regardless of the size of municipality. According to survey responses, this increase occurred due to increase coverage of children, including children from vulnerable groups (opening of new groups, adaptation of facilities), increased number of employees or increased salaries. A few public PIs see that the budget increase is linked with implementation of the new PCF and related projects.

FIGURE 7. AMOUNT OF FUNDING THAT PUBLIC PIs RECEIVED FROM THE LOCAL BUDGET FROM 2012 TO 2022 (IN RSD)

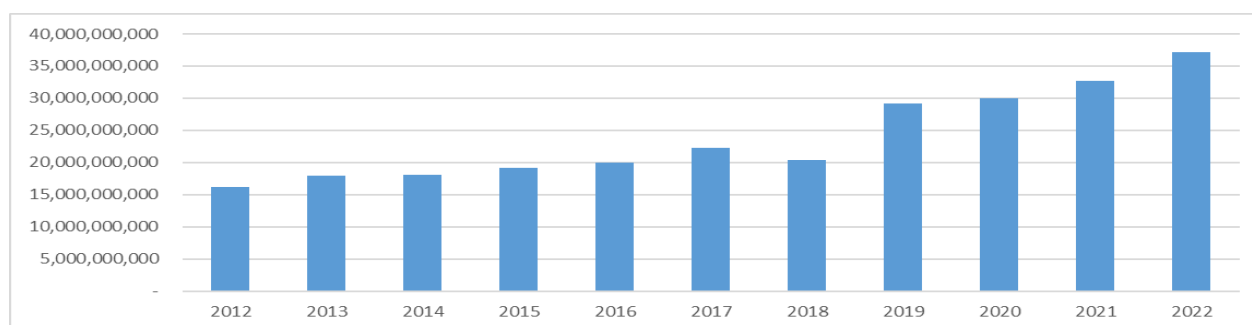
¹¹⁸ <https://uis.unesco.org/en/country/rs>

¹¹⁹ Ministry of Education (2016) ECEC in Serbia: Situation Analysis and Recommendations, page 30.

¹²⁰ WB, UNICEF (2022), Serbia Education Public Expenditure Review, page 16.

¹²¹ Program budgeting is introduced in 2015 in Serbia, including for LSGs. Budgeting programs are the following: Traffic Organization and Traffic Infrastructure, Local Self Government Public Service, Local Self Government Political System, Preschool Education, Primary Education, Secondary Education, Social and Child Care, Housing, Urban and Spatial Planning, Communal Service, Health Care, Sport and Youth Development, Culture Development and Information, Local Economic Development, Tourism Development, Agriculture and Rural Development, Environmental Protection, and Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Sources.

¹²² 2020 data do not include data on Belgrade budget expenditure. Number of LSGs that provided that was 100 in 2019, 122 in 2020, 127 in 2021, and 125 in 2022.



Source: Survey for PIs

195. Evaluation found that local budget increases for PSE were insufficient to ensure full financial commitment to reform interventions. Besides, research on PSE financial models and some financial advocacy efforts largely fell short to influence the allocation of public funding. As noted by the Strategy of Development of Education in Serbia 2020 and World Bank's and UNICEF's *Serbia Education Public Expenditure Review* report,¹²³ the move towards a per capita model was not achieved, resulting in funding often disconnected from actual institutional and demographic needs¹²⁴ as also corroborated by stakeholder interviews and the review of more recent data. This funding discrepancy, largely determined by local self-governments, leaves children in underdeveloped municipalities at a disadvantage. A stakeholder noticed that 'Taking care of equity is not only inclusion of vulnerable groups. If we compare EPS funding proportionally to the number of enrolled children, in some municipalities children receive more in other less, so there is no financing based on standards. As funding is provided by LSGs this difference is even more visible in underdeveloped municipalities. This question has not been sufficiently covered in the reform initiatives.' Further, the Yale University's report emphasized the necessity for targeted initiatives favouring needy municipalities¹²⁵. Furthermore, evaluation revealed that in underdeveloped municipalities, parents often bear the brunt of preschool funding due to funding shortages for PIs from local budgets, exacerbating existing inequities (See also Finding 5 and 13).

3.5 Coherence

EQ5.1: Which key partners or actors who had an impact on the reform of preschool education and education can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education? What characterizes the connections and relationships between the key actors and the ways in which they work to achieve results or resist change? Which potential collaborations are not used enough?

FINDING 20. COMPREHENSIVE PSE REFORM SUPPORT HAS BUILT ON PREVIOUS INITIATIVES, LED BY THE MoE AND ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS INCLUDING PROFESSIONAL INSTITUTIONS, PRACTITIONERS, ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS, CIVIL SOCIETY, ASSOCIATIONS, WORLD BANK, EU, UNICEF, AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS. TENSIONS REGARDING COMMUNICATION AND COORDINATION, A LACK OF A DEDICATED COORDINATION PLATFORM, AND LIMITED MONITORING OF PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS AND ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS WERE IDENTIFIED AS CHALLENGES.

196. Comprehensive support to PSE in Serbia has been informed by contemporary theoretical knowledge focusing on the well-being of children and the active participation of children and families in education. The efforts to design and implement a new curriculum reform have

¹²³WB, UNICEF (2022), Serbia Education Public Expenditure Review, Overall Sector Financing Note, page <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/23201/file/Serbiapercent20Educationpercent20Publicpercent20Expenditurepercent20Review.pdf>

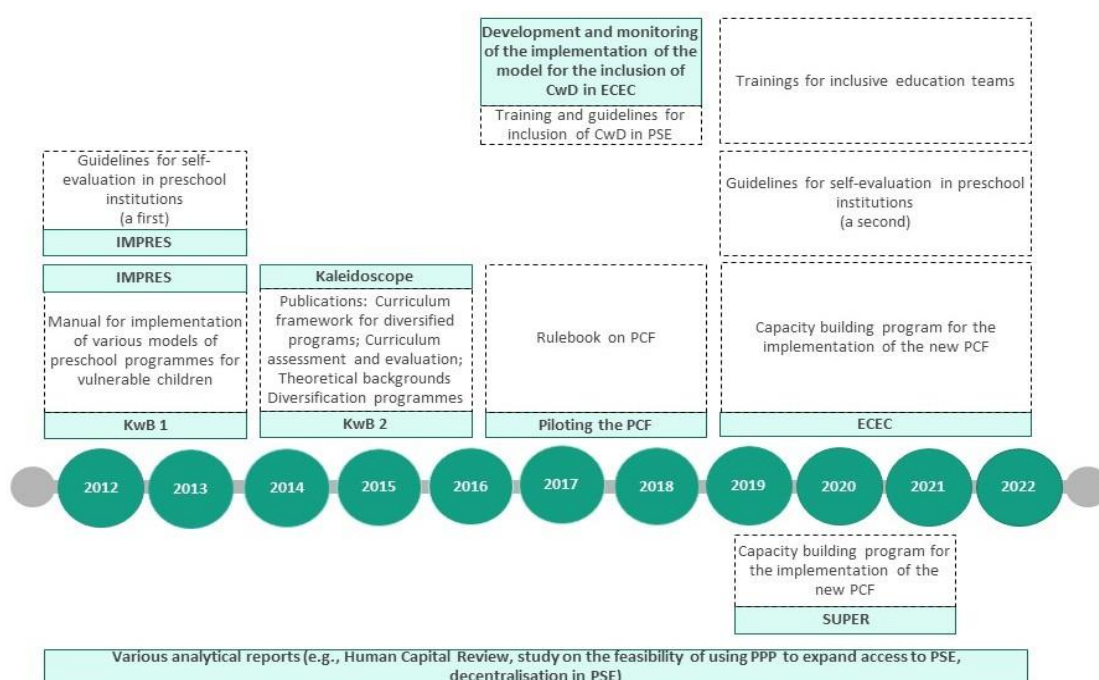
¹²⁴Ibid

¹²⁵Yale University (2018), Analytical Review of Governance, Provision and Quality of Early Childhood Education Services at the Local Level in Countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS), Country Report for Serbia, page 43.

been built upon the experiences of previous smaller initiatives that were implemented at the local level, with a particular emphasis on quality inclusive programs like IMPRESS, Kindergarten without Borders, and Kaleidoscope.

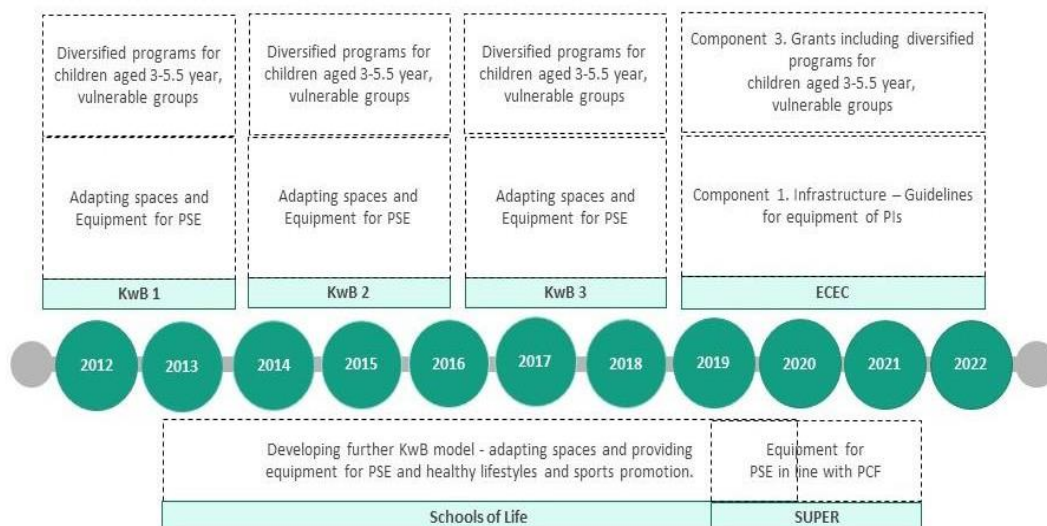
197. From 2012 to 2022, a cohesive synergy was observed among projects supporting reform efforts, thanks to collaboration between the MoE and associated partners. Examples, depicted in Figures 10 and 11, highlight the linkages among various initiatives implemented as part of the reform.

FIGURE 8. EXAMPLES OF LINKAGES AMONG PSE INITIATIVES RELATED TO INCREASE OF QUALITY



Source: ET elaboration based on desk review, interviews, and focus group discussion.

FIGURE 9. LINKAGES AMONG PSE INITIATIVE RELATED TO INCREASE OF COVERAGE AND EQUITY



Source: ET elaboration based on desk review, interviews, and focus groups findings.

198. The MoE played a central role as a leader or partner in the implementation of most initiatives over this period (See detailed overview of survey responses in Annex 5, Figure 18, Figure 33). Survey responses also show that among national institutions, public PIs assess that IIE, and the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation are key actors. These institutes, in collaboration with other actors, actively contributed to reform initiatives, providing research, advisory services, and professional support to enhance the quality of education in Serbia. Furthermore, the academic community and the civil society sector, including professional associations of practitioners, and association of nurses of preschool institutions, association of professional associates and associates of preschool institutions have been actively involved in the development and implementation of various initiatives aimed at improving quality and equity of PSE in Serbia.
199. Survey respondents from public PIs and LSGs rank professional associations and preschool teacher training institutions higher in influence than other academic bodies and NGOs (see Annex 5, Figure 19, Figure 33). However, expertise of academic bodies and NGOs and their collaboration were considered by interviewed stakeholders as critical in reforming the sector. For instance, the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Belgrade has consistently played a crucial role in PSE reform, conducting research, advocating for high quality preschool education, and contributing to policy development. The Centre for Interactive Pedagogy has been instrumental in developing diversified programs and engaging with stakeholders. Concerning development partners, most PIs and LSGs see UNICEF as a key and/or important actor for ECEC reform, followed by WB and EU (see Annex 5, Figure 20, Figure 33).
200. Among other mentioned actors, The Provincial Secretariat for Education annually funds projects for preschools in Vojvodina, emphasizing modernization and inclusiveness, underscoring its commitment to quality preschool education. Furthermore, PIs received support from entities like Save the Children, the Embassy of Japan, the Ministry of Justice, NGOs, and private sectors such as NIS. The evaluation identified no significant overlaps in support during the period reviewed.
201. Stakeholder interviews reported some tensions between the MoE and implementing partners, particularly concerning the visibility and the communication of initiatives to beneficiaries and the public. According to stakeholder feedback, there were instances of miscommunication regarding the initiative holder, leading to different perceptions among the public as also discussed in Hindering Factors section above. Other gaps identified in this evaluation included gaps in systematic information sharing, that were exacerbated by challenges in MoE's inter-sector cooperation and between MoE and managing structures of certain projects, under-resourced units, and limited capacities for overseeing initiatives.
202. The evaluation pinpointed the lack of a MoE-led platform for communication on PSE development projects and programs as a shortfall.

FINDING 21. LSGs ROLE AND INFLUENCE ON FINANCING AND OVERALL FUNCTIONING OF PSE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IS CRITICAL. PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE IN COORDINATION BETWEEN LSGs AND OTHER LOCAL INSTITUTIONS, SUCH AS DATA SHARING, JOINT DECISION-MAKING, AND PARTNERSHIPS WITH ASSOCIATIONS SUPPORTING VULNERABLE GROUPS', HOWEVER ACCESS TO PSE IS STILL ENCOUNTERING LIMITED ATTENTION. PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS ARE RECOGNIZED AS VALUABLE COLLABORATORS, WITH THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN EXPERT CONFERENCES, KNOWLEDGE SHARING, AND CAPACITY-BUILDING ACTIVITIES SEEN AS ESSENTIAL FOR IMPLEMENTING THE NEW PCF AND ENHANCING PRESCHOOL EDUCATION.

203. According to stakeholders, LSGs are seen as the most influential actors in PSE at the local level, as they are responsible for its implementation and financing, which is corroborated by survey responses (Annex 5, Figure 20, Figure 33). The evaluation findings indicate some progress in increased coordination between LSGs and other relevant local institutions involved in PSE, primarily driven by various initiatives. However, there is room for further strengthening this collaboration by enhancing data sharing, joint decision-making, and partnerships with associations supporting vulnerable groups' access to PSE.

204. Collaboration with professional associations was also highlighted as significant by all interviewed stakeholders. These associations have been actively involved in PSE reform initiatives since its inception and are considered by consulted stakeholders to have the potential to provide further support in implementing the new PCF and enhancing preschool education. Their participation in expert conferences, meetings, knowledge sharing of best practices, and capacity -building activities has been cited as crucial for multiplication of knowledge by consulted stakeholders.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Delivery of outputs and contributions to desired outcomes of the reform

Conclusion 1. The participatory and democratic processes of designing the new PSE paradigm were a game-changer driving the reform efforts in PSE in Serbia. Strategic and legal framework have been developed through inclusive stakeholder involvement, considering different views. The consultative and participatory approach to the development of the new preschool curriculum concept, introducing a significant shift towards a holistic child development and meaningful relationships approach has brought new value in terms of tailor making the new PCF to Serbian preschool context. Thanks to piloting the new curriculum concept so as to ensure its feasibility and efficiency, the relevance of the concept has been enhanced.

Conclusion 2. Reform efforts contributed to an overall improvement in competencies across the PSE system to apply the new relationships-centred PSE concept, promoting reflexive practice and implementation of diversified programs. However, there are still challenges to address, including resistance to change and administrative issues, and the need for continuous education and mentoring to enable competence building among practitioners and wider professional community. This is critical, because university/higher education is still not aligned with progressive changes in practice and is slow to adapt. Continued investment in self -evaluation, external evaluation, and ongoing support is crucial for further progress in achieving higher -quality and more inclusive preschool education in Serbia.

Conclusion 3. Efforts to build capacities of LSGs for planning and development of quality and inclusive PSE have fallen short of expectations. Despite the crucial role they play, LSGs have been relatively passive participants in the reform process, remaining insufficiently informed about reform initiatives, legislative changes, and the new financial, material, and human resource needs of preschool institutions under the new curriculum. LSGs that have shown better results in coverage and quality of PSE are those that have taken proactive steps to engage, either through close working relationships with PIs or prior experience with donor -funded projects. The lack of targeted capacity strengthening and awareness-raising activities for LSGs on the reform and legislative changes has been a notable shortcoming, leading to their limited knowledge and motivation to support their respective PIs.

Conclusion 4. Efforts to expand infrastructure, to introduce inclusive practice and to diversify preschool programs, particularly bringing them to the rural areas or settlements, have helped increase coverage, particularly among vulnerable groups and in less developed areas, though further investments in these dimensions, notably infrastructure are warranted. The efforts in infrastructure and diversification of programs have expanded access to preschool education for vulnerable groups and less developed areas, increased the inclusion of children with disabilities, and addressed infrastructure challenges. The introduction of diversified preschool programs tailored to the needs of children and families has provided more options for families, challenging the traditional notion of preschools primarily serving employed parents. Such

programs also provided options to parents and families, which presented a freedom for families, motivating them to enrol and keep children in preschool. The investment in infrastructure has addressed inadequate facilities and overcrowding issues. Municipalities have actively participated in the construction and renovation of preschool facilities, leading to the creation of new places for children. However, challenges remain in terms of space, sustainability, and financial constraints, requiring greater engagement of local self-governments in the reform programs and further investments into infrastructure expansion/ reengineering. Furthermore, there are outstanding needs relative to the spread the new PCF practice to other kindergartens (outside kindergartens – nucleus of change) and to private PIs.

Coherence

Conclusion 5. Despite some challenges, PSE reform has been comprehensive. Overall, there has been coherence among interventions implemented to increase quality, coverage, and equity.

There has been strong coherence among initiatives aiming to increase the quality of PSE, as development and implementation of the new curriculum have been built upon the experiences of previous smaller initiatives. There has been ongoing collaboration among involved actors on various aspects of reform initiatives. Coordination effort of reform initiatives has sometimes been hampered by a lack of dedicated coordination platform and a systematic approach to information sharing on initiatives, as well as lack of internal inter-sector cooperation within the MoE as well as among relevant ministries (Ministry of Health, MLEVSA, Ministry of Public administration and LSG), understaffing of relevant units responsible for preschool education, and lack of capacities for monitoring all ongoing preschool education initiatives. LSGs' role and influence on financing and overall functioning of PSE at the local level is critical, albeit not fully utilized. There has been some progress in coordination between local partners but, further steps are needed to enable data sharing, joint decision-making, and partnerships with associations supporting vulnerable groups' access to PSE.

Efficiency

Conclusion 6: Most reform interventions were implemented efficiently before COVID-19.

However, the efficiency of the ECEC project was significantly affected by delays caused by COVID-19, turnover of decision-makers within the MoE, and limited capacities of local actors to follow strict requirements related to infrastructure work. Capacity building activities have had a comprehensive approach; hence it was to some extent affected by overlapping and out of sequence activities caused by COVID-19. There are some improvements in terms of establishing monitoring and evaluation practice that support improvements in the quality of policy and practice, but further work is needed to ensure overall monitoring and evaluation practices of PSE in a systemic manner. There are examples of reform initiatives and projects that efficiently outreached diverse groups of children and their families in different socioeconomic context. The most notable improvement has been in long-term implementation of some diversified programs, intersectoral collaboration on inclusive education and professional support to vulnerable groups. The increasing local, national and donor funding dedicated to improvement of preschool education, contributed to the implementation of reform initiatives. However, the available level of local funding is still insufficient to substantially contribute to a smooth implementation of the new PCF, wider inclusive practice, and higher coverage of children, which is a particular challenge for underdeveloped municipalities. As there is limited fiscal space at local level, there is an outstanding demand to prioritise municipalities that are more in need, which would require reform of financing formula.

Impact and sustainability

Conclusion 7. Serbia is on a positive trajectory towards fulfilling its commitment to increasing access to quality PSE and fulfilment of Barcelona targets (33 percent for children below 3 years of age, 96 percent for children between age of 3 and starting age of compulsory education at

primary level). Serbia has made remarkable progress in PSE reform, with significant investments leading to increased capacity, quality, and diversity of programs. The expansion of preschool institutions, both public and private, and involved public private partnership has resulted in improved enrolment rates and expanded access for vulnerable groups. While challenges persist in achieving universal coverage and ensuring support for marginalized children, such as Roma children and those with disabilities, the ongoing efforts to improve inclusivity and address the shortage of professional staff demonstrate a strong commitment to providing quality education for all. By continuing these endeavours and bridging regional disparities, Serbia is steadily advancing towards fulfilling its commitment to ensuring that every child has access to excellent preschool education. The reform efforts have positively impacted the conceptual understanding, spatial infrastructure, human resources, materials, teaching methodologies, and financial aspects of preschool education. As a result, there has been a significant enhancement in the capacity, quality, and diversity of preschool programs throughout the country. These achievements demonstrate the commitment of Serbia to ensure universal coverage with high-quality early childhood education and creating an inclusive and enriching learning environment for young children.

Conclusion 8. Ongoing commitment and collaboration are needed to overcome the remaining challenges and ensure the long-term sustainability of the reforms. These challenges include the level of capacity and resistance to change across the PSE system, the funding shortages, particularly in underdeveloped municipalities; the availability of personnel; discrepancies between university curricula and the PCF, etc. By overcoming these obstacles, Serbia can realize the transformative potential of preschool education and ensure sustainable provision of quality and inclusive early childhood experiences for all children.

4.2 Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Successful reform implementation is dependent on the institutionalization of reforms and the capacity and motivation of staff required to implement them.

- i. Institutionalization of reform requires long term consistent support to the Government. In Serbia, this was crucial to help identify needs and gaps, develop proposals and bring diverse knowledge and know-how, shaping country-specific institutional arrangements and legal frameworks and strengthening the capacities at national and local levels.
- ii. Implementation of reform requires investment in capacity development of key stakeholders. To implement PSE reforms in Serbia, practitioners, managers, LSGs, etc. were key to successful reform, as was staff motivation and good performance. Stabilization of the reform requires on-going political will and long-term systemic change to develop mechanisms that drive a highly-motivated professionals and allows capacities to grow and reforms to be embedded.

Lesson 2: Tangible and transformative support requires systemic approaches, long-term funding, cross-sector coordination, and coherent collaboration with all engaged actors and partners over a prolonged period.

- iii. Serbia's efforts to shift the paradigm of preschool education show that systematic and consistent efforts to explore different aspects and experience is needed to bring knowledge and know-how to shape the framework, approach and strengthen capacities.
- iv. Long-term stable funding is a prerequisite to the successful shift in preschool education approaches and frameworks. Experience from Serbia shows that achieving tangible and transformative results requires long term and stable support from development partners over a prolonged period, as exemplified by the World Bank's loan and development partners' (EU, UNICEF, private foundations, etc.) long support to the education.
- v. Coordination and collaboration require dedication, time, resources, and political will.

Experience from Serbia shows that declarative commitment is not enough; policy/legislation and guidance are needed to ensure strong collaborative efforts.

4.3 Recommendations

All recommendations are underpinned by the need to have reliable multi-year funding that enables a solid focus on building on changes already made towards the enhancement of efficiency and quality of PSE. The recommendations focus on seeking a stronger, more realistic focus, with efforts to develop strategic partnerships. Recommendations are directed mainly to the MoE, but with contributions by the institutes, academic community, PIs, LSGs and other national and development partners.

TABLE 2. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation		Responsibility	Timeframe
Strategic recommendation: There is a need for further advancement of the capacities for planning and managing the network of preschool institutions aimed at increasing coverage			
1.	<p>Invest further into data-driven approaches to make better investment decisions and allocate resources more effectively into different ways of increasing coverage.</p> <p>The reform created strong foundations, but the reform is not finished. To move forward, the reform should continue promoting data-driven and evidence-based approaches that combine the use of simulation models to assess the potential impact of programs in specific regions and the utilization of best practices from successful municipalities. This approach promotes evidence-based decision-making, helps justify investments, and encourages the replication of successful strategies to achieve desired infrastructure development goals in other regions and municipalities to increase coverage.</p> <p>Operational recommendations include:</p> <p>1.1 Conduct micro-regional simulations by using facility network analysis models analyse towards examining the feasibility of different strategies for increasing child inclusion. The simulations should consider factors such as demographic changes, population inflows, outflows, and other relevant variables. The purpose of these simulations is to evaluate the effectiveness and feasibility of different means of increasing coverage (diversification of programs, construction of new facilities, adaptations and repurposing of existing facilities, public and private partnerships). By conducting micro-region simulations, decision-makers can gain valuable insights into the potential outcomes and impacts of different program interventions. They can assess and provide evidence on the potential success rates, identify potential challenges, and assess the long-term sustainability of proposed policy alternatives.</p> <p>1.2. Further strengthening of the MoE and the relevant institutes by increasing the number of employees and the amount of funding so that the reform processes can continue uninterrupted.</p> <p>Operational recommendations to improve monitoring and analytical capacities:</p> <p>1.3 Monitor and evaluate interventions at regular intervals to ensure sustained evidence-generated practice.</p> <p>Build on existing monitoring systems (e.g., JISP) and establish guidelines and mechanisms for monitoring (and evaluation) of interventions within the MoE department dealing with data.</p>	<p>Ministry of Education, LSGs, PIs, other local and development partners, MoPALS, SCTM</p> <p>MoE, with support of UNICEF, MoPALS, SCTM</p> <p>MoE, MoF</p> <p>MoE, MoF, MoPALS, LSG with support of UNICEF</p>	<p>2023 onwards</p> <p>2023-2024</p> <p>2024</p> <p>2024 – onwards</p>

	<p>1.4 Strengthen the analytical capacities of relevant institutions for planning, monitoring and evaluating development initiatives. This can be done through training programs that focus on data analysis, evidence-based decision-making, and monitoring and evaluation techniques. Building these capacities will enable stakeholders to assess the impact of the initiatives and make informed decisions.</p> <p>Operational recommendations to strengthen cooperation and cooperation:</p> <p>1.5 Improving coordination and collaboration among stakeholders involved in preschool education reform and education reform in general.</p> <p>The Ministry of Education and its partners should continue to invest efforts to enhance the coordination and collaboration among stakeholders involved in the preschool education reform. MoE should lead the creation of platforms at central, regional, local, and PI level for regular and open communication among stakeholders, including preschool institution principals and kindergarten heads, policymakers, educators, associates and expert associates, parents, and community members. This can include regular meetings, workshops, and online counselling to facilitate the exchange of information, ideas, and best practices.</p>	MoE with support of UNICEF and other development partners	2023 onwards	-
2.	<p>Continue empowering local self-governments to plan and support the development of PSE system</p> <p>Continue supporting LSGs in planning and implementing measures for improving access, equity, and quality of PSE by investing into building competencies of LSGs.</p> <p>Operational recommendations include:</p> <p>2.1. Leverage best LSG practices in the field of improving the PSE.</p> <p>Study successful examples from municipalities that achieved positive results by establishing comprehensive local action plans and instruments of support. By studying the experiences of successful municipalities, decision-makers can identify effective strategies, implementation models, and approaches that have proven to be successful in achieving their desired outcomes. These best practices provide valuable insights into the planning, execution, and management of infrastructure development initiatives, allowing other regions to adopt or adapt them to suit their specific needs and context.</p> <p>2.2. Consider providing additional targeted support to local communities that are significantly below the average development index, whereby the unfavourable environment must not hinder the inclusion of children in pre-school education. This could be done by the allocation of additional funding and resources specifically tailored to address the unique challenges of such communities at individual basis. This might include funds for infrastructure, training of professionals in PIs, or provision of learning materials or transport for children from rural areas.</p> <p>2.3 Strengthen the capacities of LSGs and PIs for sustainable resource mobilization. LSGs and PIs should partner in exploring and tapping government, donor, and private sources of funding to diversify funding sources and create a more sustainable resource base. Consider establishing mechanisms for wider participation of different stakeholders (LSGs, PIs, parents, CSOs working with vulnerable groups, local private sector, and other interested actors, to actively explore and pursue funding opportunities).</p>	<p>MoE, MoF, MoPALSG, development partners</p> <p>MoE, MoPALSG, LSGs, PIs with support of all other actors</p> <p>MoE, MoF</p> <p>MoE, MoF, MoPALSG, with support of all partners</p>	<p>2024 onwards</p> <p>2023 onwards</p> <p>2024 onwards</p> <p>2023 onwards</p>	<p>-</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p> <p>-</p>

Strategic recommendations in support to advancing preschool education quality				
3.	<p>Continue to provide support to the improvement of initial education of educators and continuous professional development.</p> <p>Operational recommendations include:</p> <p>3.1 Harmonise study programs for the education of educators and professional associates with competency standards. Continue with the harmonization of regulations and practice with the initiated reform initiatives in PSE sector .</p> <p>3.2 Harmonise the licencing framework for employees in PSE with established PSE concepts and standards. This exam serves as a benchmark to ensure that educators and medical nurses meet the required standards in accordance with established concepts and practices.</p> <p>3.3 Provide continuous professional support to PIs in further high-quality implementation of PCF and transformation of practice.</p>	<p>Ministry of Education, LGUs, PIs, other local and development partners</p> <p>MoE, universities</p> <p>MoE</p>	<p>2024 onwards</p> <p>2023 - 2024</p> <p>2023-2024</p>	-
4.	<p>Continue to provide support to principals of preschool institutions (both public and private) in managing the change in their institutions. The Ministry of Education should design and implement supportive measures for directors of preschool institutions to help them navigate the complexities of change management brought by the new PCF more effectively. This holistic approach will empower them to be the key support to the transformation of practice in a PI in line with its strategic decision .</p> <p>Some strategies that MoE could consider providing support to the sustainability of change in the system :</p> <p>4.1. Consider supporting the establishment of regional change management teams. Consider making teams comprising principals and other practitioners from public and private PIs , educational advisors, external associates, mentors, and change management experts who can support principals in their change initiatives. This team can provide expertise, resources, and practical guidance throughout the process.</p> <p>4.2 Organize networking events, forums/counselling, or online learning communities where PI principals can connect, share experience, and learn from one another. Encourage the formation of peer support groups where directors can discuss challenges, exchange ideas, and offer advice. This collaborative learning environment can help build a sense of community and provide valuable insights for successful change management.</p> <p>4.3. Provide access to resources for strengthening capacities of PI principals. Directors should have access to relevant resources for professional development (research , best practice management examples) and up -to-date information that can inform their decision - making process and help them navigate potential obstacles.</p> <p>4.4. Promote good change management practices. It is important to acknowledge good management practice examples and provide opportunities for principals to share success stories to inspire and motivate others to embrace change.</p>	<p>Ministry of Education, principals of PIs, LSGs, Regional School Administration, Institute for the Improvement of Education</p> <p>MoE, PIs, Regional School Administration, Institute for the Improvement of Education with the support of development partners</p> <p>MoE, Regional School Administration, Institute for the Improvement</p>	<p>2023 onwards</p> <p>2023-2024</p> <p>2023 - onwards</p>	-

		of Education, professional associations	
5.	<p>Strengthen the capacity of educational advisors and advisors – external associates for monitoring and ensuring the quality of work of preschool institutions</p> <p>To enhance the monitoring and quality assurance of PI, it is essential to invest in the targeted education and training of educational advisors and advisors – external associates. These professionals could be supported by focusing on building competencies in areas such as providing expert support to PIs and effective communication relative to PSE. Their continuous professional development should be nurtured to ensure that they stay updated on the latest developments, research, and innovations in the field of preschool education (through participation in conferences, workshops, seminars, horizontal learning and online learning platforms).</p>	Ministry of Education, Regional School Administrations	2023-2024
6.	<p>Ensure work quality assurance of public and private preschool institutions.</p> <p>To ensure the provision of high -quality preschool education and the maintenance of accountability within the PSE sector, it is necessary to literarily abide by regulations regarding self -evaluation and external evaluation in both public and private .</p> <p>Operational recommendations:</p> <p>6.1 Increase the number of advisors for preschool education and general education.</p> <p>6.2 Conduct regular evaluations of the quality of work of private PIs. Their work should be guided by clear guidelines and criteria for evaluating the quality of preschool programs, including PCF, developing real program , teacher qualifications, facilities, health and safety measures, ethical and child protection policies and overall learning and child development practices.</p> <p>6.3 Establish mechanisms for continuous monitoring and reporting on the work of private PIs. These evaluations would serve as an opportunity to identify areas for improvement and provide guidance and support to PIs in implementing necessary changes. By applying clear standards to evaluating the quality of work of private PIs , the regulatory bodies would create a framework that promotes continuous improvement and ensures the delivery of high-quality preschool education.</p>	Ministry of Education, Institute for the Improvement of Education (IIE), Institute for Evaluation of the Quality of Education (IEQE)	2024 onwards
7.	<p>Provide support to PIs and elementary schools in partnership building in order to support a smooth transition from preschool to primary school.</p> <p>Consider developing partnership programs between PIs and schools, specifically supporting children transitioning from preschool to primary school. Such programs can include orientation sessions, school visits, meeting teachers, joint projects based on collaboration between preschools, primary schools, and parents, along with regular communication, sharing of information, and joint planning to ensure a coordinated approach. Such programs would help children familiarize with the primary school environment, routines, and expectations. This would help children to reduce anxiety about the transition.</p>	Ministry of Education, PIs, Schools, LSGs, UNICEF	2024 - onwards
Strategic recommendations to support advancing preschool education equity			

8.	<p>Continue to encourage the inclusion of Roma and other children from vulnerable groups in PSE programs by fostering educational environment that values diversity, fosters understanding, and prepares all children for a more inclusive society.</p>	MoE, principles of PIs, LSGs	2023-onwards
	<p>Operational recommendations include:</p> <p>8.1. Expand the coverage of Roma children in PSE by implementing targeted initiatives to improve cooperation with the Roma community, particularly focusing on the inclusion of children aged 3 -5 years. It is crucial to actively involve Roma coordinators and pedagogical assistants in an assertive manner to lead outreach endeavours and advocate for the advantages of the (PSE). Additionally, the utilization of Roma health mediators situated within the community, along with support from Roma Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), can further bolster these efforts. To ensure coordination and effectiveness, all these actions must be integrated at the local level through intersectoral committees established for this purpose.</p>	MoE, principles of PIs, LSGs	2023-onwards
	<p>8.2 Support PIs to optimally use the existing resources and provide a stimulating environment for the inclusion and participation of children with disability in accordance with the Fundamentals of the Preschool Education Program. The said resources could refer to the use of various already existing forms of professional development (handbooks, trainings, horizontal exchange, examples of good inclusive practice); intersectoral support and support of professionals of different profiles in PIs and local communities; the possibilities for developing different inclusive programs and forms of work with and services to children and parents, etc.) It would be necessary to further open the development groups towards other groups and vice versa, which is in line with the PCF, and use their cooperation as a potential for forming inclusive society and securing benefits to all children, thus potentially reducing the number of development groups, and enhancing inclusivity.</p>	MoE, MoF	2023-onwards
	<p>8.3 It is necessary to further strengthen the capacities of LSGs for planning and investing in the development of inclusive preschool education (accessibility of facilities, providing adequate additional support – personal assistants, pedagogical assistants, etc.) and for enrolling into a PI in line with the rule book defining enrolment priorities, means for personal development of staff, and PI capacity building so as to ensure enrolment in line with the current norms, etc.)</p>	MoE, MoF, IIE, IEQE, PIs, UNICEF	2023-onwards
	<p>8.4. Provide financial resources for monitoring the implementation of regulations on enrolment priorities in PIs and strengthening the responsibility of LSGs.</p> <p>8.4.1. Within the private and public partnership model (voucher system), give priority to children according to the degree of vulnerability with clear criteria.</p>	MoE, MoF, MoPALS	2023-onwards
	<p>8.5. Ensure capacity building of professionals and technical staff in PIs on inclusive practices. Programs should be aimed at understanding the situation and providing adequate support to all children and strengthening the competencies of employees to create an inclusive environment. Programs should focus on understanding the situation, challenges and strengths of Roma population and other vulnerable groups so as PIS could efficiently support their inclusion in preschool programs.</p>	MoE, IIE, IEQU, PIs	2023-onwards

Annexes

Annex 1: Terms of Reference

<p>Title of the assignment</p> <p>Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia</p>
<p>Background and Justification:</p> <p>Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a fundamental right for every child and a global commitment by the United Nations under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (sub-goal 4.2), with the target of ensuring that, by 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality ECEC and pre-primary education.</p> <p>Increasing access to and improving the quality and equity of preschool education is a key priority of the Ministry of Education (MoE) in the area of preschool education, as evidenced by the Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia till 2020 (adopted in 2012), as well as the Strategy for the Development of Education and Care till 2030 (adopted in 2021). Both strategies acknowledge the importance of equal access to quality early childhood education programs. The latter was preceded by an ex-post analysis of the implementation of the Strategy till 2020, including the level of achievement for specific targets in preschool education.</p> <p>Based on the strategic priorities, aims and principles of preschool education specified by the Law on Preschool Education, the Ministry of Education, with support from the Government of the Republic of Serbia, and in cooperation with preschool institutions, local self-government units and significant support from partner institutions and organisations, provides continued support in implementing activities and initiatives that contribute to building a quality system of preschool education for all children of preschool age and their families.</p> <p>The adoption of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework¹²⁶ and corresponding preschool teachers' professional development, including through the implementation of 3 key projects – Improvement of Preschool Education in Serbia-IMPRESS (IPA – EUR 3,75m), Inclusive ECEC (World Bank loan – \$50m), and Support to Preschool Education Reform in Serbia SUPER (IPA EUR 1m) have created the platform for a comprehensive reform of preschool education over the last decade.</p> <p>Apart from the ex-post analysis of the Strategy for Development of Education in Serbia till 2020, a more focused evaluation of the reform processes in preschool education is missing, which would contribute to reflecting on the scope, content, quality and sustainability of reform initiatives at different levels (central and local), and through their contextualization serve as the basis of planning support to the development of the system (having in mind the dynamic nature of implementation of policies and measures and desired changes in the system, the complexity of reform processes and conceptual and methodological challenges in their monitoring and valuation). Therefore, such evidence is highly necessary in order to ensure an evidence-based continued roll-out of these important reform processes.</p> <p>The evaluation will be instrumental for further analysing the progress that has been made in Serbia with a focus on outcomes and impacts, but also for looking specifically at key challenges, and exploring where and what types of effective solutions to those challenges have been implemented by the Government of Serbia including those conducted with the support of UNICEF and why they were or were not successful. In particular, there is a need to look at the key accelerators to ensure</p>

¹²⁶ The Framework program for pre-school education ("Years of Ascent") provides a common conceptual basis for developing an educational and care program for children from 6 months of age till their enrolment in school. It is focused on benefits and relationships; play and participation as the backbone of the program; respect of differences; understanding learning as a process of exploration and life/practical experiences; highlights collaboration, partnership and participation through empowerment of children, families and communities.

further advances in the quality, equity and accessibility of preschool education. Therefore, the evaluation will be important to provide a formative assessment of the most effective and efficient way forward in the area of preschool education for both the Government of Serbia, UNICEF and other stakeholders supporting the reform initiatives.

Context

In Serbia, preschool education is delivered in preschool institutions (public and private), exceptionally in schools, and it provides a platform for the overall development of young children. A unique programmatic concept is delivered for children of different age groups: (a) nurseries cater to children aged 6 months to 3 years; (b) kindergartens are for children aged 3 to 5.5 years; and (c) the compulsory 4 -hours a day and 9 -month-long Preparatory Preschool Program (PPP) is for all children ages 5.5 to 6.5 years, which is free of charge when provided by a public kindergarten or school. However, parents who wish to enrol their children in a full day PPP program and parents of children younger age 5.5 years have to pay a monthly fee.

Serbia is aligned with other European countries on most key indicators of preschool education provision. These include teacher qualifications, group sizes, and qualitative considerations of quality pedagogy. Serbia has stronger requirements than most of European countries for requirements for head teachers of ECEC, and the amount of continuing professional development (CPD) required of ECEC teachers.

National data show an increase in the coverage of children from the general population from 50.2 percent in 2014 to 63.9 percent in 2019, but also that the children from vulnerable groups are still less represented in preschool education, with only 11 percent of children from the poorest quintile, and only 7 percent of children living in Roma settlements attending preschool.¹²⁷ The law on preschool education (2010, revised in 2017, 2019 and 2021) and relevant by-laws (e.g. Rule book on specific conditions for determining the priority enrolment in preschool institutions) stipulate that children from vulnerable groups should have priority in enrolment, however data indicate that this is not yet the case.

Additional supply and demand-side factors account for the low and insufficiently equitable access to preschool education, particularly in the age group from 3 to 5.5 years and for the Roma population. These include: (i) insufficient and unevenly distributed infrastructure, with fewer preschools spaces in underdeveloped, low-income (including cities' peripheries), and rural areas and over-crowded preschools where they exist; (ii) a tendency for preschool institutions with long waiting lists to give priority to families with working parents and/or to have non-transparent admission criteria; (iii) parents' lack of understanding of the benefits of ECEC, especially when they can take care of the child at home (e.g. if they are not working) or through relatives, and/or their dissatisfaction with the quality, sensitivity (e.g. to the specific needs of individual children) and practical aspects (e.g. hours of operation) of the service provided; and (iv) other barriers such as language and lack of personal documents and proof of citizenship, even if not officially required for enrolment (especially for Roma and internally displaced families).

The current financing of the ECEC sub-sector is lower than in EU countries and predominantly financed by local self-governments (LSGs) and parents' contributions. Total government expenditure for ECEC in Serbia for 2018 is estimated at around 17 percent of overall spending on education (34 billion RSD annually). According to the Law on Foundations of the Education System, LSGs play an especially important role for financing preschool education—they contributed 94 percent of public funds for pre-primary education as of 2018. They play the central role in funding preschool employees' salaries, as well as maintenance and utilities costs for preschools.

An increase in enrolment in private preschool institutions in recent years, such as in Belgrade and a few other cities around the country, can be attributed to an incentive stemming from contractual arrangements between parents and local self-governments—involving parents who send their children to private kindergartens in a subsidized system. However, the regulatory role of

¹²⁷ Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, April 2022 and Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia and UNICEF, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys on Status of Women and Children, 2019.

	<p>government and local self -governments and monitoring of private preschool education is not yet fully ensured.</p>
	<p>Purpose of the assignment:</p> <p>Object and scope of the evaluation</p> <p>The object of this evaluation are the national preschool education reform initiatives between 2012 and 2022 in Serbia.</p> <p>Preschool education reform initiatives include measures designed and implemented under national policies, strategies, action plans, programs, or projects. Aspects of preschool education reforms which are the object of the evaluation include, but are not limited to initiatives/interventions focused on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancing the capacities of local self -governments for planning and managing the network of preschool education with the aim of increasing coverage • Support to advancing preschool education quality (with a focus on the absorption of support provided for quality and change achieved) • Support to advancing preschool education equity. <p>The evaluation will focus on network, coverage, and equity over the evaluation period, while for quality it will focus on the results of support program monitoring and self -evaluation of preschool institutions from 2018 onwards.</p> <p>The evaluation will take into consideration contextual factors that include a decentralized governance of preschool education, a ban on public employment for several years of the evaluation period, the influence of the COVID -19 pandemic etc.</p> <p>The evaluation will take into consideration both public and private preschool provision, where relevant for the aim of the evaluation.</p> <p>Links with other reforms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education sector: primary and secondary education • Health sector: early childhood development and early childhood intervention in cases of developmental delays and disability. • Social protection: reducing child poverty, particularly by increasing the coverage of children with cash transfers: universal and targeted services etc. <p>Purpose</p> <p>The purpose of the evaluation is to provide a rigorous assessment of the results of the Government of Serbia in preschool education reform during the evaluation period, and UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, LSGs, donors, professional associations, civil society organisations etc.) contribution to those results. It will provide an objective perspective of the strengths and weaknesses in the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate the ongoing implementation of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change, as well as the aims and mechanisms of change. The evaluative focus is on the contribution of multi -faceted elements of the reform to the observed outcomes and impacts.</p>

Objectives

The evaluation will be formative in nature and forward looking, being an important learning opportunity, both for MoE, UNICEF, as well as other stakeholders involved. In particular, the evaluation has the following objectives:

- To assess the impact of the preschool education reform on children of preschool age in the Republic of Serbia based on network, coverage, quality and equity
- To determine the extent how and why actual results for children were achieved, including for children with disabilities, children living in Roma settlements and, rural areas and boys and girls respectively
- Identify the risks, challenges, obstacles and any problems that emerged in the course of the implementation of reform measures that may call for adjustments or corrections
- Understand which elements of the reform worked and which did not and why, and identify those elements of the reform that have the potential of further advancing preschool education and its sustainability
- Understand UNICEF's and other actors' contribution to the results (outcomes and impact) if any, as well as added value and comparative advantage in supporting national PSE reforms in Serbia.

Stakeholders

The primary audience is the Ministry of Education of the Government of Serbia and UNICEF. Secondary audiences include the Institute for Improvement of Education (IIE), the Institute for Evaluating the Quality of Education, regional school administrations, professional associations of preschool practitioners and others as relevant.

Approach

The approach and methodology of the evaluation should be guided by the UNICEF's revised Evaluation Policy¹²⁸, the Evaluation Norms and Standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG)¹²⁹, UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards in Research, Evaluations and Data Collection and Analysis¹³⁰ and UNICEF's reporting standards. Proposals should set out an approach and methodology for gathering and analysing data allowing theory-based evaluation of impact and outcome, as well as contribution analysis for measuring the impact of reform as well as UNICEF's contribution to it. It is envisaged that the evaluation team will also adopt a case-study approach of preschool institutions that are representative of urban and rural, larger and smaller preschools, and regional coverage. At least 3 case-study municipalities will be sampled. Moreover, bidders are welcome to suggest ideas about how they would approach this assignment to complete it as efficiently and timely as possible.

It is envisaged that the evaluation will be theory-based. The evaluation questions are formulated as per [OECD-DAC evaluation criteria](#). While five criteria will be included (impact, effectiveness, coherence, efficiency, and sustainability), impact, effectiveness and efficiency should be given the primary focus. Additional cross-cutting issues such as relevant human rights, including child rights, equity and gender equality are also to be examined. The evaluators will be expected to adopt a user-driven approach to the development of an evaluation strategy that will guide the work. It is important to note that the evaluation is focused both on the accountability and learning purposes.

The evaluation team together with UNICEF's Child Rights Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist will clarify strategies for meetings the expressed expectations. The team will, furthermore, as part of the inception phase of the evaluation reconstruct a TOC based on Government strategic documents

¹²⁸ UNICEF 2018 Evaluation Policy <https://undocs.org/E/ICEF/2018/14>

¹²⁹ UNEG Norms: <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/21>, UNEG Standards: <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/22>

¹³⁰ https://www.unicef.org/supply/files/ATTACHMENT_IV_UNICEF_Procedure_for_Ethical_Standards.PDF

related to education and in particular, preschool education (e.g., the Strategy of development of education in Serbia 2020).

The team will be expected to explain its approach to triangulation and quality assurance of all evaluation deliverables and to clarify, how it plans to engage key evaluation stakeholders to promote participation, ownership, and utilization of the evaluation. The evaluation design should also consider the issues of gender and equity and mainstream them throughout the evaluation according to UNICEF Guidance on gender¹³¹ and disability integration¹³².

Evaluation questions

Impact

(The extent to which the intervention has generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended, or unintended, higher-level effects.)

- What difference did the reform make to the children of preschool education age, and under what circumstances?
- Since the reform was initiated, what has been the impact on children of diverse backgrounds attending preschool education? What challenges remain?
- How, why, in what way did the PSE reforms generate sustained changes in services, financing mechanisms, legal frameworks, and policies?
- How, why, and in what ways did the reforms contribute to strengthening the PSE workforce?

Effectiveness

(The extent to which the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups.)

- How, under what circumstances, and why did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?
- What are the enabling factors (necessary and/or sufficient) and barriers for the PSE reforms to give results at different levels?

Coherence

(The compatibility of the intervention with other interventions in a country, sector, or institution.)

- Who were the key influencers to achieve the needed changes? Who needs to be further influenced in the future?
- What key PSE reform partners can influence the further PSE reform implementation, performance, and sustainability?
- What characterizes the links and the relationships among the key actors and how are they working to achieve change (or resist change)?

Efficiency

(The extent to which the intervention delivers, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way.)

- Has the PSE reform been successful in ensuring efficiency? Does efficiency vary across contexts or subgroups? If so, by how much and for which groups?
- What resources (national, EU, other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform? What have been the costs, covered by whom and for how long?

¹³¹ UNICEF (2019) UNICEF Guidance on Gender Integration in Evaluation EVALUATION OFFICE AND GENDER SECTION; UNICEF (2020) "How to" checklist for gender integration into COVID-19 socioeconomic impact assessments and response plans

¹³² UNICEF (2012) Integrated Social Protection Systems Enhancing Equity for Children, UNICEF

Sustainability

(The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue or are likely to continue.)

- How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure full advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia? What further policies would need to be put in place towards this goal?
- Which policies, measures and activities contributed to the sustainability of preschool education reform?

Work assignments and deliverables

The evaluators are expected to produce the following key deliverables (please also refer to the table below):

1. **Inception report** (in English and Serbian) of maximum 20 pages, excluding annexes, should contain a detailed plan for evaluation, including data collection and analysis methodology and tools, an evaluation matrix (as the main analytical framework against which data will be gathered and analysed and is shaped around the evaluation questions, to be developed by the evaluation team leader and agreed by the evaluation manager prior to the start of field work as part of the inception report). The report will also contain a tentative outline of the final evaluation report, quality assurance arrangements, identification, and analysis of and measures taken to address risks and proposed communication and dissemination plan. Once the inception report is reviewed and the methodology is agreed with UNICEF, the process of data collection will begin.
2. **Final evaluation report** (in English and Serbian) of maximum 40 pages, excluding the executive summary and the annexes, will be reviewed by UNICEF, MoE, ERG, and other stakeholders, and finalized in consultation with UNICEF and MoE.
3. **Power point presentation** (in English and Serbian) summarizing the content of the final report, projections, and timelines (see deliverable #3).
4. A short, recorded, **interview** with the team leader

Other interim products may include:

- Minutes of key meetings with the evaluation manager and the ERG;
- Video and photo materials to be collected during the evaluation to enrich presentations and the report; and
- Bi-weekly reports to the evaluation manager to track progress in the implementation of the evaluation.

Reports will be prepared according to the UNICEF Style Guide and UNICEF Brand Toolkit (to be shared with the winning applicants), UNICEF –Adapted UNEG Evaluation Report Standards (2017) and Geros Quality Assessment System.¹³³ All deliverables must be in professional level standard English and must be proofread by a native English speaker. The final report branding will also be aligned with the World Bank project and Ministry of Education brand identity.

The first draft of the final report will be received by the evaluation manager who will work with the evaluators on necessary revisions in consultation with the country and regional teams before sending the report to the ERG for comments. The evaluation manager will consolidate all comments on a

¹³³ Available at http://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/UNICEF_Eval_Report_Standards.pdf

response matrix and request the evaluation team to indicate actions taken against each comment in the production of the second draft final and final reports. Products are expected to conform to the stipulated number of pages where that applies. The products of the evaluation will be disseminated per the Advocacy and Dissemination Plan developed at the onset of the evaluation and be made available to a wider public on UNICEF website and unicef.org as well as the website of the Ministry of Education.

Reporting Requirements:

The evaluation will be managed by the Child Rights Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist who will be responsible for the day-to-day oversight and management of the evaluation and for the management of the evaluation budget. The evaluation manager will ensure the quality and independence of the evaluation and guarantee its alignment with UNEG Norms and Standards and Ethical Guidelines and other relevant procedures, provide quality assurance on the relevance of the evaluation findings and conclusions, and the implementability of recommendations, and contribute to the dissemination of the evaluation findings and follow-up on the management response. The evaluation manager will work in collaboration with relevant Sections and the Deputy Representative of the UNICEF Serbia CO. Additional quality assurance will be provided by the Regional Evaluation Adviser and Regional Evaluation Specialist, as needed. The Final Report will need to be rated as satisfactory by UNICEF's external quality assurance facility and will be approved by the Ministry of Education and the UNICEF Representative in Serbia.

Evaluation reference group:

As per the UNICEF evaluation policy an Evaluation Reference Group will be established to act as an advisory and provide inputs on all main evaluation deliverables. The ERG is expected to provide feedback during the evaluation process and on the deliverables; comment on the evaluation approach and methods and facilitate access to data and information. Representatives of the evaluation reference group will participate in elaboration of recommendations through active contribution during debriefing meetings and by providing feedback to the draft inception and final reports.

Structure of evaluation report

The Final Report must be compliant with UNICEF evaluation report standards and shall include the following:

Title page and opening pages

- Executive summary (4 –6-page stand-alone document, concise and well-formulated)
- Description of the object of the evaluation
- Rationale and purpose of the evaluation
- Evaluation scope, objectives, and key questions
- The evaluation design and methodology
- The stakeholders' participation
- Ethical issues
- Findings
- Constraints
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- Lessons learned
- Annexes

The evaluation report will be assessed and rated against an assessment tool to be made available to the winning applicants.

Methodology:

The evaluation will involve duty bearers and stakeholders in all stages, in accordance with a participatory approach. To the extent possible, the evaluation may include rights holders (e.g. , parents of preschool children).

A preliminary evaluability self -assessment revealed availability of a number of government normative and strategic analytical documents. Data provided by national sources (e.g. , Statistical Office) is deemed reliable. The evaluation team may also make use of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

The following sources of information have been identified, whereas more detailed and specific materials will be provided starting from the evaluation inception phase.

Initial list of key documents:

- Strategy of development of education in Serbia 2020;
- Ex-post analysis of the implementation of the Strategy of education in Serbia 2020;
- Strategy of development of education and upbringing in Serbia 2030 (and accompanying Action Plan 2021 -2023)
- Strategy for social inclusion of Roma men and women in the Republic of Serbia for the period from 2016 to 2025;
- Law on foundations of the system of education and upbringing;
- Law on preschool upbringing and education;
- Law on local self -government;
- Law on public -private partnership;
- Law on financial support for families with children.

For evaluating the domain of the PSE network, it is recommended that the evaluation team explores the availability of data with LSGs that adopt an act on the network of public preschool institutions on their territory and local action plans for their planning and management at the level of the local community, within the Education Information System for current data, the report on preschools compiled as part of the Inclusive Preschool education project of the Ministry of Education (Component 1) in preparation for network expansion or reports from IPA projects IPA and IMPRESS. Individual preschool institutions can also be a source of data. Alternative sources/reports for earlier data may also be considered, as well as demographic trends that are available with the Statistical Office (e.g. , DevInfo database). The MoE Handbook on Optimization of the Network is also recommended.

For evaluating PSE coverage and equity, it is recommended that the evaluation team explores Statistical Office and MICS data. Additional data of children from vulnerable groups may be available through the Registry of Children with Disability, LSG Departments for Social Affairs, local Intersectoral Committees, Developmental Counselling Units, Republic IPH etc. although these sources may not be available in all municipalities, or the availability of data may be sporadic. The National report on inclusive education is also available.

For evaluating PSE quality, it is recommended to take into consideration new self -evaluation reports of preschools (to be available in May/June 2023), the endline report of external evaluation on a representative stratified sample (25 preschools) that are part of the monitoring of advancement of quality of preschool through the project Inclusive preschool education of the Ministry of Education, data available from the monitoring framework of the program of support to capacity building of professionals in preschool (Component 2 of the project Inclusive preschool education of the Ministry of Education) etc.

A more in -depth evaluability assessment will be conducted by the evaluation team at the inception phase to further inform evaluation methodology. A specific methodology will be developed by the evaluation team and may include desk review/analysis, key informant interviews, observations, and field visits.

The team will verify the evaluability and devise strategies for how to manage possible data limitations. The evaluation team may find that disaggregation of data, at times, is limited, and baseline data

unavailable, which may influence assessment of changes. Mitigation strategies should be put in place for such instances.

Methodological rigor will be given significant consideration in the assessment of the proposals. Hence, consultants are invited to interrogate the approach and methodology suggested in the ToR and improve on it, or propose an approach they deem more appropriate, which should be guided by the UNICEF's revised Evaluation Policy (2018),¹³⁴ the Evaluation Norms and Standards of the United Nations Evaluation Group (2016),¹³⁵ UN system -wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and Empowering Women (Gender Guidelines), UNICEF Procedure for Ethical Standards and Research, Evaluation and Data Collection and Analysis (2015)¹³⁶ and UNICEF -Adapted UNEG Evaluation Report Standards (2017).¹³⁷ Moreover, the evaluation should consider throughout the issues of equity, gender equality and human rights. In their proposal, consultants should clearly refer to triangulation, sampling plan and methodological limitations and mitigation measures. They are encouraged to also demonstrate, wherever possible, methodological expertise in governance and public finance areas, following human rights -based approach and gender -responsiveness.

It is expected that the evaluation will employ a theory -based approach (by using the ToC reconstructed at the inception phase) and apply mixed methods, drawing on key background documents, monitoring framework, and primary data that should be generated through key informant interviews.

All key documents, as noted above, together with a contact list of all relevant informants will be provided to the evaluators once a contractual agreement has been made.

At a minimum, the evaluation will draw on the following methods:

- **Desk review** of background documents, literature and other relevant data, including analysis of secondary quantitative data, review of material on the environment, and recent plans, strategies and reports;
- **Key informant interviews** with Government, UNICEF CO, donors, implementation partners, communities, and other stakeholders;
- **Observations and field visits** for direct exposure to the implementation of the reform, collection of beneficiaries' and partners' feedback and evidence needed to respond to some evaluation questions.

Sampling of key informant interviews and field sites will be determined during the inception phase, in consultation with the Ministry of Education, Management Unit for the project Inclusive preschool education and UNICEF.

During the field mission phase, the team will be expected to visit selected sites and conduct primary data gathering. Sites will be selected during the inception phase based on criteria developed by the evaluation team in collaborating with the Ministry of Education, Management Unit for the project Inclusive preschool education, UNICEF and other partners.

There are several **limitations** to the evaluation which can hinder the process, including but not limited to:

- As already noted, the reforms which are the object of this evaluation were not articulated in a formal Theory of Change but emerged from the strategic framework set out by the Government. The evaluation team will need to reconstruct the Theory of Change, based on available documentation and consultations with stakeholders.
- Interviews with stakeholders will depend on their availability. Due to a considerable number of sites, it will not be feasible to visit all of them. The evaluation sampling plan will explore mitigation of these and other related potential limitations.

¹³⁴ UNICEF's revised Evaluation Policy: https://www.unicef.org/about/execboard/files/2018-14-Revised_EvalODS-EN.pdf

¹³⁵ UNEG Norms: <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/21>, UNEG Standards: <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/22>

¹³⁶ Available at https://www.unicef.org/supply/files/ATTACHMENT_IV-UNICEF_Procedure_for_Ethical_Standards.PDF

¹³⁷ Available

[https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/UNICEF_adapted_reporting_standards_updated_June_2017_FINAL\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/UNICEF_adapted_reporting_standards_updated_June_2017_FINAL(1).pdf)

The evaluation should include the following steps:

Step 1: Desk review of relevant background documents and literature search. The evaluators will review key background documents to understand the reform and carry out literature search of secondary data to understand the context in which it transpired.

Step 2: Inception Mission. Upon the desk review, an inception mission to Serbia will be organized for the evaluation team. The inception mission will aim to introduce the evaluation to important stakeholders, including UNICEF, the Ministry of Education, Management Unit for the project Inclusive preschool education, members of the Evaluation Reference Group with the objective to establish a common vision for the evaluation.

Step 3: Preparation of Inception Report (IR) that includes in-depth evaluability assessment that should, among other, specifically propose the evaluation methodology, tools and protocols. The methodology should be prepared to cover all the intended objectives of the evaluation. The evaluation methodology design will be finalized in agreement with the Reference Group (see below), the Ministry of Education, Management Unit for the project Inclusive preschool education, UNICEF and the Inception Report should be prepared based on the Evaluation Norms and Standards of UNEG and submitted to the evaluation manager for approval.

Step 4: Data collection. The application of mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) is expected, which should be human-centred, and including child rights-based, and equity- and gender sensitive, as noted above. The evaluators will seek to collect, use and report disaggregated data wherever possible, and conduct interviews in a manner that encourages active and equal participation of rights holders vis-à-vis duty bearers, among other.

Step 5: Data analysis. Collected data should be analysed by using relevant analysis methods that should be clearly described in the inception report. All reported data will be disaggregated wherever possible and gender overview of interviewed persons will be provided.

Step 6: Sharing preliminary findings. The evaluators will share preliminary findings with the Reference Group, the Ministry of Education, Management Unit for the project Inclusive preschool education and UNICEF CO. While feedback will be taken into consideration and incorporated into the draft report, the consultants are encouraged to guard against validity threats, such as personal bias.

Step 7: Draft report. The consultants will prepare a draft report, with conclusions, lessons learnt, and recommendations drawn from the data. The report structure should follow UNICEF's evaluation report guidance.

Step 8: Finalization of the evaluation report. The consultants will present the final draft evaluation conclusions and recommendations to the Reference Group, the Ministry of Education, Management Unit for the project Inclusive preschool education UNICEF and other key stakeholders, using a Power Point Presentation and/or other methodologies for presenting in a participatory manner and in an accessible language form, if needed. Recommendations of the evaluation should also be presented, prioritized, and grouped according to stakeholder groups. Comments and feedback on findings and recommendations should be incorporated to finalize the report, as appropriate.

Good practices not covered therein are also to be followed. Any sensitive issues or concerns should be raised with the evaluation manager (CRM/E Specialist in the CO) as soon as they are identified.

March (<i>evaluation team contracted</i>)	Background reading and desk review	Evaluation Team with support by Evaluation Manager

	Inception mission plan, including data collection tools; Outline of Inception Report	Evaluation Team; Evaluation Manager to assist inception phase
April	Inception mission to Serbia, including meetings with stakeholders and Reference Group;	Evaluation team leader; Evaluation Manager and CO to assist with inception mission preparations
20 April	Submission of draft Inception report	Evaluation Team
30 April	Review and comment on draft Inception report; Submission of final Inception Report; Ethical review (if any)	Evaluation Manager; Reference Group; Evaluation Team
May	Data collection mission to Serbia and debriefing;	Evaluation Team; Evaluation Manager and CO to assist with field mission
15 June	Data analysis and Draft Evaluation report submission	Evaluation Team
15 July	Review and comment on the draft Evaluation report	Evaluation Manager;
30 July	Comments addressed; Finalization of Evaluation Report and Evaluation Briefs	Evaluation Team
September	Management response preparation; dissemination	CO Senior Management; Evaluation Manager

A quality assurance (QA) review in line with UNICEF Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for Research Studies and Evaluations (RSEs) will be applied to both Inception Report and Final Draft Report. The QA is performed by the Country Office, using an external review facility.

Ethical guidance to evaluation

The evaluation should be conducted in strict adherence with UNEG ethical guidelines and code of conduct. The evaluation team will also sign a non-disclosure agreement. The team should identify any potential ethical issues and approaches, as well as the processes for ethical review and oversight of the evaluation process in their proposal. All evaluation deliverables will be subject to ethical approvals through an external review facility assigned by UNICEF.

Special measures will be put in place to ensure that the evaluation process is ethical and that the participants in the evaluation process can openly express their opinion. The sources of information will be protected and known only to the evaluators.

Specific attention should be paid to issues specifically relating to:

- harm and benefits;
- informed consent;
- privacy and confidentiality; and
- conflict of interest of the evaluation informants.

Consequently, the consultants have to ensure that it is clear to all subjects that their participation in the evaluation is voluntary. All participants should be informed or advised of the context and purpose of the evaluation, as well as the privacy and confidentiality of the discussions.

Timing/duration of contract:

A tentative timeframe for the evaluation is presented below.

The evaluation team may propose a realistic timeline for the implementation of tasks and deliverables, although the end date is non-negotiable.

Annex 2: Evaluation Matrix

EQ	Indicators	Data sources	Data collection methods	Data analysis
Effectiveness				
EQ1.1 To what extent have the reforms contributed to strengthening of the PSE system?	<p>Evidence of delivery of the expected outputs as defined in the reconstructed TOCs:</p> <p>Informed participatory development of PSE policies and measures and their implementation at the national level</p> <p>The PSE legal framework has been improved in accordance with the strategic framework and contributes to the development of a better quality, more accessible and fair P SE system</p> <p>Improvements in intersectoral cooperation in providing support for families and children</p> <p>Improved system for continuous professional development</p> <p>Improved capacities of LSGs for planning and development of quality inclusive PSE</p> <p>Improved competences of professionals in preschool institutions for the development of quality inclusive PSE</p>	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national statistics; UNICEF's CPD and PSE interventions documentation, reports on implementation of other UNICEF's portfolios;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports, indicator data</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank, Management Unit for the project Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care, and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Community groups (community leaders, parents) • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs 	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions</p> <p>Field observations</p> <p>Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Document review identifying analyses pertaining government capacity gaps and bottlenecks in provision of PSE services and interventions</p> <p>Policy analysis</p> <p>Comparative analysis of main national statistical data and strategic documents and reports as well as other sources</p> <p>ToC analysis and contribution analysis tracing activities to results.</p> <p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>

	<p>Improved competencies of professionals from Ministry of Education, external experts, and institutes</p> <p>Increased visibility of PSE and understanding of the importance of the activity from the perspective of different actors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Site observations of PSEs 		
EQ1.2: To what extent did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?	<p>1.2.1 Evidence and examples where the PSE reform output results contributed to the achievement of desired reform outcomes and impact:</p> <p>Accessible, equitable and quality preschool education system is in place and in function</p>	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national statistics; UNICEF's CPD and PSE interventions documentation, reports on implementation of other UNICEF's portfolios;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports, indicator data</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank, OECD and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, Community groups (community leaders, parents) 	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions</p> <p>Field observations</p> <p>Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Document review identifying analyses pertaining government capacity gaps and bottlenecks in provision of PSE services and interventions</p> <p>Policy analysis</p> <p>Comparative analysis of main national statistical data and strategic documents and reports as well as other sources</p> <p>ToC analysis and contribution analysis tracing activities to results.</p> <p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis.</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs • Site observations of PSEs 		
EQ1.3. What are the enabling factors (necessary and/or sufficient) and barriers for the PSE reforms to give results at different levels?	Degree and type of drivers that promoted reform implementation Degree and type of hindering factors affecting reform implementation	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national statistics and MICS data; UNICEF's CPD and PSE interventions documentation, reports on implementation of other UNICEF's portfolios;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports, indicator data</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Community groups (community leaders, parents) • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs • Site observations of PSEs 	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions Field observations Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Document review identifying analyses pertaining government capacity gaps and bottlenecks in provision of PSE services and interventions</p> <p>Policy analysis</p> <p>Comparative analysis of main national statistical data and strategic documents and reports as well as other sources</p> <p>ToC analysis and contribution analysis tracing activities to results. Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>
Impact				

<p>EQ2.1: What difference did the reform make to the children of preschool education age and under what circumstances? What challenges remain?</p>	<p>2.1.1 Evidence of contributions towards acceleration of the SDG related to PSE: By 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality preschool education</p> <p>Evidence of contributions to the equitable access and benefits to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> general population (boys and girls) CWD (boys and girls) Roma children (boys and girls) Children (boys and girls) from rural communities Children (boys and girls) from the poorest families 	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national statistics and MICS data; UNICEF's CPD and PSE interventions documentation, reports on implementation of other UNICEF's portfolio s;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Community groups (community leaders, parents) • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs • Site observations of PSEs 	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions</p> <p>Field observations</p> <p>Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Document review identifying analyses pertaining government capacity gaps and bottlenecks in provision of PSE services and interventions</p> <p>Policy analysis</p> <p>Comparative analysis of main national statistical data and strategic documents and reports as well as other sources</p> <p>ToC analysis and contribution analysis tracing activities to results.</p> <p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>
<p>Sustainability</p>				

EQ3.1: To what extent did the preschool education reforms lead to sustainable changes in practices?	<p>3.1.1 Evidence of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concrete changes (with examples) in national laws, policies, regulations, standards and plans that can sustain results and strategies achieved under the reform • Institutional capacity in place to sustain levels of achievement • Additional or increased investments in PSE 	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national statistics; national budget information and donor financing reports; UNICEF's CPD and PSE interventions documentation, reports on implementation of other UNICEF's portfolios;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Community groups (community leaders, parents) • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs • Site observations of PSEs 	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions</p> <p>Field observations</p> <p>Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Document review identifying analyses pertaining government capacity gaps and bottlenecks in provision of PSE services and interventions</p> <p>Comparative analysis of main national statistical data and strategic documents and reports as well as other sources</p> <p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>
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<p>EQ3.2 How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure full advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia?</p>	<p>3.2.1 Evidence that the current financing system fostered full advancement of preschool education for all children (boys and girls) in Serbia</p>	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national budget information and donor financing reports;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs 	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions</p> <p>Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>
<p>Efficiency</p>				
<p>EQ4.1: Has the PSE reform been successful in ensuring efficiency? Does efficiency vary across contexts or subgroups? If so, by how much and for which groups?</p>	<p>4.1.1 Proportion of reform projects and initiatives that demonstrated implementation on schedule, within budget and utilizing performance monitoring data for decision making and adjustments</p> <p>4.1.2 Existence of mechanisms to prevent and/or mitigate operational bottlenecks in the</p>	<p>National budget information and donor financing reports;</p> <p>Annual management plans; Progress and Performance reports</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports of projects implemented under the PSE reforms</p>	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and Online surveys</p>	<p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>

	<p>implementation of projects (risk assessment, assumptions and mitigation measures)</p> <p>4.1.3 Existence of mechanisms for ongoing, periodic collection, documentation, analysis and utilization of data from monitoring and evaluation purposes to inform program adjustment and planning</p> <p>4.1.4 Evidence and examples of reform initiatives and projects that efficiently outreached diverse groups of children and their families (CWD, Roma , children from poorest families, children from rural communities, general population)</p> <p>4.1.5 Evidence and examples of efficiency of reform initiatives and/or projects across</p> <p>LSG with different levels of the socio-economic development, across regions.</p>	<p>Annual reports or other monitoring data produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs 		
EQ4.2: What resources (national, EU, other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform? What have been the costs, who covered those costs	<p>4.2.1 Evidence that the diversity of resources fostered the implementation of the PSE reform</p>	<p>National budget information and donor financing reports;</p> <p>Annual management plans; Progress and Performance reports</p>	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and Online surveys</p>	<p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>

and for how long were they covered?		<p>Studies and analytical reports of projects implemented under the PSE reforms</p> <p>Annual reports or other monitoring data produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p> <p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs 		
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Coherence

EQ5.1: Which key partners or actors who had an impact on the reform of preschool education and education can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education? What characterizes the	<p>5.1.1 Existence, of operational linkages among partners and influencers and their role in implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education</p> <p>5.1.2 Evidence and examples of actors or collaborators who could be more engaged in the future</p>	<p>National strategies and related regulatory documents; national statistics and MICS data; UNICEF's CPD and PSE interventions documentation, reports on implementation of other UNICEF's portfolios;</p> <p>Annual management plans, Progress and Performance reports</p> <p>Studies and analytical reports produced by national authorities, UNICEF, World Bank and other development partners, or think tanks</p>	<p>Document Review to identify themes among documentation sources for comparison</p> <p>Semi-Structured Interviews and focus group discussions</p> <p>Field observations</p> <p>Online surveys</p>	<p>Document review of existing studies identifying main challenges in Serbia</p> <p>Document review identifying analyses pertaining government capacity gaps and bottlenecks in provision of PSE services and interventions</p> <p>Policy analysis</p>
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<p>connections and relationships between the key actors and the ways in which they work to achieve results or resist change? Which potential collaborations are not used enough?</p>		<p>Data collected through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interviews and focus groups with stakeholders as follows: • key government stakeholders (Ministry, national institutions, PSE service providers, LSGs) • UNICEF CO, World Bank, EU, other donors, • Community groups (community leaders, parents) • Online surveys with 1) PSE service providers; 2) LSGs • Site observations of PSEs 		<p>Comparative analysis of main national statistical data and strategic documents and reports as well as other sources</p> <p>ToC analysis and contribution analysis tracing activities to results.</p> <p>Qualitative Iterative Data Analysis</p> <p>Triangulation between data sources, data collection techniques, and data types according to principles of iterative analysis</p>
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Annex 3: List of Projects and Activities implemented under the ECEC reform

Table: List of Projects Contributed to the reform

Implementation	Focus intervention	Title	Year	Financial amount
The Ministry of Education in collaboration with partners	Preschool education	Improvement of Preschool Education in Serbia - IMPRESS	Feb 2011 May 2014	5,000,000 EUR
		Kindergarten without Borders - More Opportunities for Learning and Development of Young Children	2011 2013	517,483 EUR
		Kindergarten without Borders 2 - Quality Inclusive Preschool Education in Serbia	Mar 2014- Jun 2016	537,850 USD
		Kaleidoscope - basics of diversified preschool education programs	May2014- Jun 2016	44,120 USD
		Improving the quality and relevance of PSE through supporting the application of quality standards for preschool institutions (external and self -evaluation)	2012-2013	38,500 USD
		Kindergartens without Borders 3 - Supporting Improvement of the ECEC System at the Local Level	Dec 2016 Jul 2018	231,602 USD
		Piloting the Preschool Curriculum Framework - Years of Ascent	Oct 2016 Jun 2018	302,170 USD
		Development and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC	Aug 2016 Oct 2018	119,862 USD
		Establishment of the Preschool Assistance Network	Sep 2016 - Jun 2018	92,892 USD
		Improving the quality of preschool education by enhancing mechanisms for evaluating preschool institutions and developing support systems	Jul 2016 - Jul 2018	90,321 US\$
		Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (WB)	2018 2023	47,000,000 EUR
		IPA 2014 Support to Preschool Education System Reform in Serbia (SUPER) IPA 2014 Equipping of preschool institutions	Mar 2019 Sep 202	874,000 EUR 1,060,671 EUR
		Preschool Online Community of Practice	Dec 2020-ongoing	120,000 USD
		The Learning Passport - support for the development of Preschool Online Learning Community	2022	

	Inter -sectoral interventions	Roma Education Programs Under the Roma Inclusion Component of the DILS (The Delivery of Improved Local Services)	Apr 2011 Sep 2013	2.500,00 0 EUR
		Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment	Jan 2017 Jun 2019	55,000 USD
		The Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre -University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education	June 2021 May 2024	4,780,000 EUR
		Playful Parenting	2019-2024	2,071,500.00 USD
		Family oriented early interventions	2017-2023	
Other development partners	Preschool education	Schools of Life (Novak Djokovic Foundation, Centre for Interactive Pedagogy)	2013 2020	15,000,000 EUR
		Initiative to support the development and learning of early-age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia (Romanipen, Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, Open Society Foundation)	Dec 2015 Dec 2018	

Table: List of Activities implemented under the main reform

Objectives	Main activities	Initiatives	Responsible agency
Increasing quality of PSE	Development and adoption of the regulations that defined various quality standards related to PSE (e.g., space, equipment, preventive health protection, for quality nutrition and child safety, condition regarding employees, professional competence of teachers and professional associates who work with children.	Improving the quality and relevance of PSE through supporting the application of quality standards for preschool institutions (external and self - evaluation), 2013/2014	ME, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, UNICEF,
	Development of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (PCF)	Improving the quality of PSE through piloting, development, and finalization of the new curriculum of PSE., 2016/2018	MP, Institute for the Improvement of Education (IIE) UNICEF, Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy (IPA)
		Improving the quality of preschool education by enhancing mechanisms for evaluating preschool institutions and developing support systems , 2016/2018	ME, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation, UNICEF
		Establishment of the Preschool Assistance Network, 2016/2018	MoE, IIE, Institute for Education Quality Evaluation, IPA

	<p>Capacity building for the application of the Basics of the program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - harmonizing the initial education of educators with the standards of competence for the profession of educators, - self-evaluation through trainings, mentoring and manuals - Licensing of preschool directors - Strengthening digital competences of professionals in PIs <p>Strengthen the professional capacity of municipalities for planning and management of preschool education, mentors to work with educators to develop a quality inclusive program</p> <p>Improving the professional development of employees in ECEC – e-learning</p>	<p>Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (Component 2), 2018/2023</p> <p>IPA 2014 SUPER Support to Preschool, Education System Reform in Serbia 2019/2021</p> <p>Preschool Online Community of Practice, 2020, The Learning Passport, 2020</p>	<p>WB, ME, UNICEF, CIP</p> <p>EU, Particip GmbH, CIP</p> <p>LEGO, UNICEF, CIP</p> <p>MoE, IIE, UNICEF, CIP</p>
Ensured equity of PSE	<p>Activities focused on increasing the coverage of children from vulnerable groups, primarily children from Roma families</p> <p>Diversified programs for children from vulnerable groups to increase their coverage (children 3 -5.5 years)</p>	<p>Roma Education Programs Under the Roma Inclusion - DILS, 2011/2013</p> <p>IMPRESS, 2011/2014</p> <p>Kindergartens without Borders 1, 2, 3, 2011/2018 Kaleidoskop, 2014 /2016</p> <p>Development and monitoring of implementation of model for inclusion of children in need in PSE, 2016/2018</p>	<p>WB, ME</p> <p>EU, ME, CIP</p> <p>SDC, MP, UNICEF, CIP, Novak Đokovic Foundation</p> <p>ME, UNICEF, CIP</p>

	<p>Expansion of PSE institution places for children in rural communities</p> <p>Monitoring of Inclusive PSE</p> <p>Support to municipalities for planning of inclusive PSE</p> <p>Grants for municipalities to ensure that the most vulnerable families get enrolment priority for free preschool education (children aged 3 -5.5)</p> <p>Strengthening the system for early interventions</p>	<p>Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care, 2018/2023</p> <p>The Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre -University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education, 2021</p> <p>Family oriented early interventions, 2017/2023</p> <p>Initiative to support the development and learning of early-age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia, 2015/2018</p>	<p>ME, UNICEF, IPA, CSO</p> <p>ME, UNICEF, CIP, Particip</p> <p>ME, Ministry of Health, MLSA, UNICEF</p> <p>Romanipen, CIP, OSF</p>
Increased coverage	<p>Creating expended places for children aged 3 to 5.5 in new, renovated or repurposed facilities</p> <p>Equipment of PSE facilities</p> <p>Diversification of the PSE programs - for all children between 3 and 5.5 years of age</p> <p>Improvement of legal framework related to diversification of programs</p>	<p>Kindergartens without Borders 1, 2, 3 and Kaleidoskop</p> <p>Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (component 1 and 3)</p> <p>Schools of Life, 2013/2020</p> <p>IPA 2014 Equipping of preschool institutions, IPA 2014 SUPER</p>	<p>SDC, MP, UNICEF, CIP, Novak Đokovic Foundation</p> <p>WB, ME, Novak Đokovic Foundation</p> <p>Novak Đokovic Foundation</p> <p>EU</p>

Sample strategy and community selection

Overview of main interventions

The first step was mapping the portfolio through the establishment of targeted interventions that were grouped into three categories: 1. interventions that have their main objectives explicitly focussing on preschool education and have been implemented by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with partners; 2. inter-sectoral interventions that included preschool education and implemented by the Ministry of Education and its partners; and 3. interventions that contributed to preschool education reform but were implemented by other development partners. Targeted interventions have been implemented over the period 2012 -2022. The interventions are identified in collaboration by the Ministry of Education, and UNICEF (table below). For selection of the communities that will be targeted by the evaluation, the evaluation team look at the interventions that have been implemented at the level of communities.

Table: Selected main interventions implemented at community level

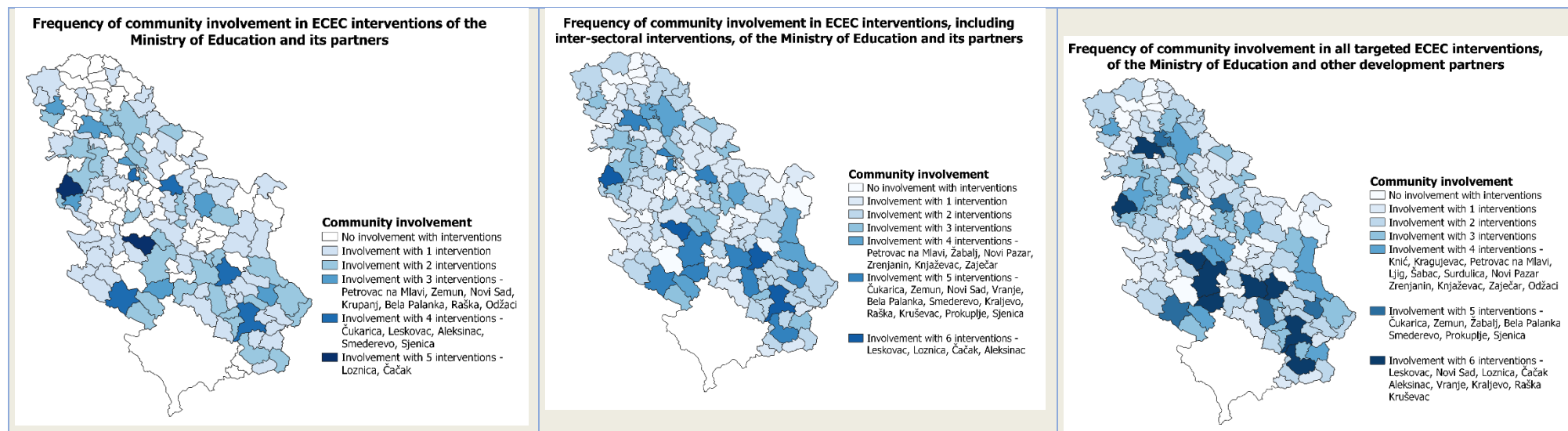
Implementation	Focus of intervention	Title	Targeting vulnerable groups	Infrastructural support or support in equipment	Year	Financial amount
The Ministry of Education in collaboration with partners	Preschool education	Improvement of Preschool Education Project in Serbia - IMPRESS	X		Feb 2011 - May 2014	5,000,000 EUR
		Kindergarten without Borders	X	X	2011 - 2013	517,483 EUR
		Kindergarten without Borders 2	X	X	Mar 2014 - Jun 2016	537,850 USD
		Kaleidoscope - a diversification of forms and programs of preschool education	X		May 2014 - Jun 2016	44,120 USD
		Kindergartens without Borders 3	X		Dec 2016 - Jul 2018	231,602 USD
		Piloting the Preschool Curriculum Framework			Sep 2016 - Jun 2018	302,170 USD
		Development and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC	X		Aug 2016 - Oct 2018	119,862 USD
		Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (WB)	X	X	2018 - 2022	47,000,000 EUR
		IPA 2014 Support to Preschool Education System Reform in Serbia (SUPER) IPA 2014 Equipping of preschool institutions		X	Mar 2019 - Sep 2022	874,000 EUR 1,060,671 EUR

	Inter-sectoral interventions	Roma Education Programs Under the Roma Inclusion Component of the DILS (The Delivery of Improved Local Services)	X		Apr 2011 Sep 2013	2.500,000 EUR
		Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment			Jan 2017 Jun 2019	55,000 USD
		The Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre-University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education	X		May 2021 Ongoing	4,780,000 EUR
		Playful Parenting			2019-2024	2,071,500.00 USD
		Family oriented early interventions	X		2017-2023	
Other development partners	Preschool education	Schools of Life			2013 2020	15,000,000 EUR
		Initiative to support the development and learning of early-age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia	X		Dec 2015 Dec 2018	

Overview of reform ECEC interventions

Mapping of frequency of community involvement in different targeted ECEC interventions over the period 2012 -2022, has resulted in 9 communities (Leskovac, Novi Sad, Loznica, Čačak, Aleksinac, Vranje, Kraljevo, Raška, Kruševac) that were involved in 6 out of all targeted interventions. Out of those, Loznica, Čačak, Leskovac and Aleksinac were most frequently involved in interventions of the Ministry of Education and its partners, including the inter -sectoral interventions.

Map 1. Frequency of community involvement in ECEC interventions

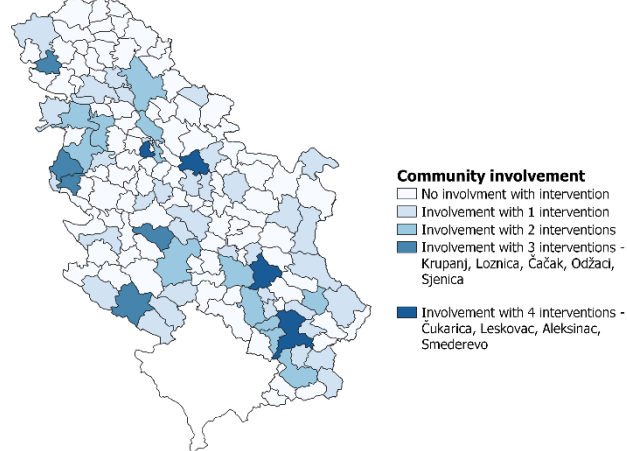


Frequency of communities in the ECEC interventions with focus on vulnerable groups

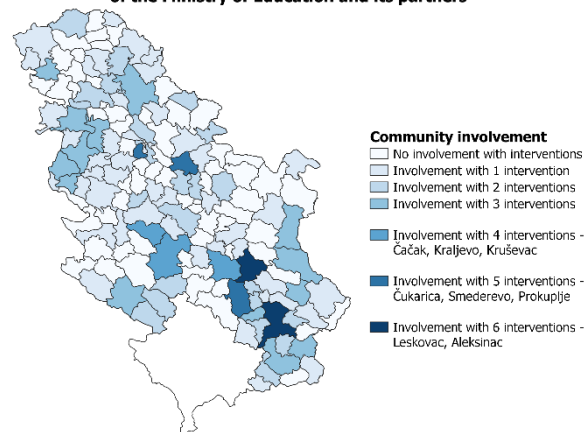
A review of the community involvement in the ECEC interventions focusing on vulnerable groups shows that **Leskovac** and **Aleksinac** were most frequently involved. Leskovac has been involved in 6 following interventions: IMPRESS, Kindergartens without Borders 2, Kaleidoskop, Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (grant -component 3), Roma Education Programs Under the Roma Inclusion Component of the DILS (inter -sectoral intervention), and Family oriented early interventions (inter -sectoral intervention). Aleksinac has been involved in 6 interventions as well as Leskovac, with difference of its involvement in Kindergartens without Borders 1, and the Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre - University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education (inter -sectoral intervention). Aleksinac has not been involved in IMPRESS.

Map 2. Coverage of the ECEC interventions that targeted vulnerable groups

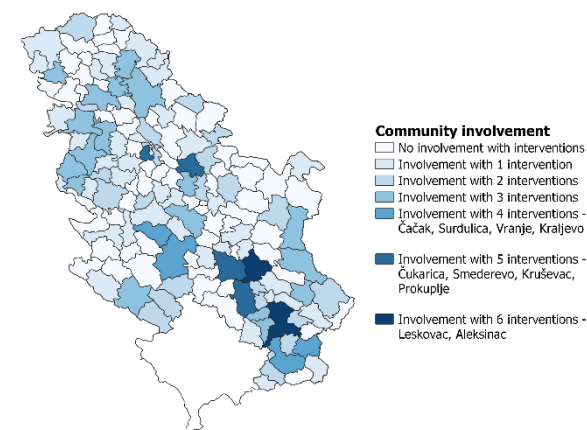
Frequency of community involvement in ECEC interventions of the Ministry of Education that targeting vulnerable groups



Frequency of community involvement in ECEC interventions that target vulnerable groups, including inter-sectoral interventions, of the Ministry of Education and its partners



Frequency of community involvement in all ECEC interventions that target vulnerable groups, of the Ministry of Education and other partners



Frequency of communities in the ECEC interventions with focus on infrastructure, adaptation, or equipment

As regards community participation in interventions that worked on preschools infrastructure, adaptation, or equipment, **Loznica** has been involved in 4 interventions (Kindergartens without Borders 1 and 2, Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (Component 1) and equipping of preschool institutions under IPA 2014. In addition, **Smederevo and Sjenica** have been beneficiaries of three interventions (Kindergartens without Borders 1 and 2, Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (Component 1, Smederevo (Kolari – rural area))).

ECEC diversity

A review of all targeted interventions shows that communities that the involved in the ECEC interventions of the Ministry of education and its partners are Loznica, Čačak, Aleksinac, Smederevo, Sjenica, and Leskovac. Communities that were frequently involved in all targeted interventions are presented in the table below.

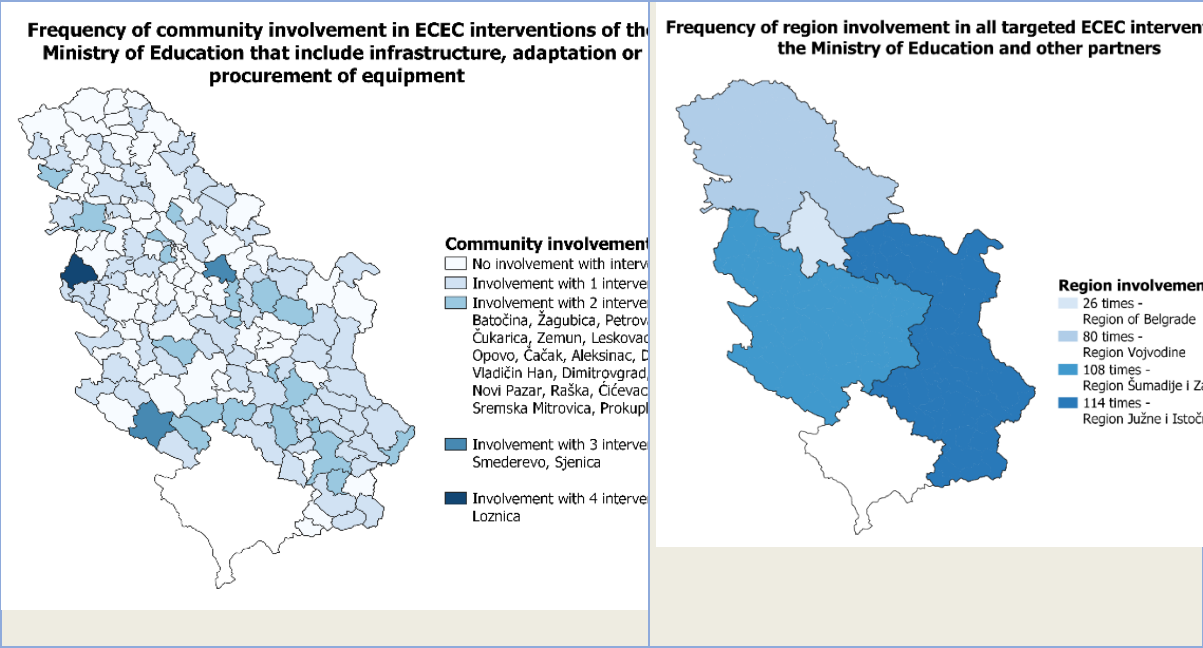
Table Interventions per communities that were most frequently involved

	ECEC interventions of the ME and its partners									Inter-sectoral interventions of the ME and its partners					ECEC interventions of other partners	
Community	IMPRESS	KwB1	KwB2	Kaleidoskop	KwB3	New preschool curriculum framework	Inclusive Childhood Education Care	Early and	IPA2014 SUPER and Equipment	DILS	IPA2020 Children in Need	Playful Parenting	Family oriented early interventions	Safe and Supportive Learning	Schools of Life	Learning of Early age Roma
Loznica		X	X	X			X		X			X				
Čačak			X	X		X	X		X				X			
Aleksinac		X	X	X			X			X	X					
Smederevo		X	X	X			X			X						
Sjenica		X	X	X			X					X				
Leskovac	X		X	X			X			X			X			
Raška	X						X		X		X	X			X	
Zemun						X	X		X			X	X			
Novi Sad						X	X		X			X	X			X
Vranje		X					X			X		X		X		X
Kraljevo	X						X			X			X	X	X	
Kruševac	X						X			X		X	X			X

Frequency of regions in the ECEC interventions

The region of Southern and Eastern Serbia has been the most involved in all targeted interventions of the Ministry of Education and other development partners. Most of the ECEC interventions with a focus on infrastructure, adaptation or equipment have been implemented in the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia. The same mapping results were for the ECEC interventions that involved vulnerable groups. In the region of Southern and Eastern Serbia, the communities that have been the most involved in targeted interventions are Leskovac, Aleksinac, Smederevo, Vranje, Bela Palanka, and Prokuplje. In the region of Šumadija and Western Serbia, the most engaged communities have been Loznica, Čačak, Sjenica, then Kraljevo, Raška and Kruševac. In the region of Vojvodina, Novi Sad, Odžaci, Žabalj and Zrenjanin have been the most involved communities, while from the Belgrade region, they have been Čukarica and Zemun.

Map 3. ECEC interventions that include infrastructure, adaptation or equipment and regional coverage.



Annex 4: List of interviewed stakeholders

Overview of interviewed stakeholders (List of Stakeholders submitted separately)

Stakeholder group	No.	Female	Male
Ministry	8	8	0
Institutes	3	2	1
Provincial Secretariat for Education, Regulations, Administration and National Minorities	1	1	0
CSO	2	1	1
Academic community	3	2	1
Standing Conference of Cities and Municipalities	2	2	
Donors	5	4	1
UNICEF	10	9	1
Local self-governments	9	5	4
PIs	21	19	2
Centres for social work	2	2	0
Total	66	55	11

Overview of participants of Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions	No.	Female	Male	
Practitioners	22	22	0	Zrenjanin 7 (all female) Sjenica 8 (all female), Aleksinac (7 female) Kraljevo (1 female) – written response
Parents	16	13	3	Zrenjanin 5 (4 female, 1 male), Sjenica 6 (6 female, 0 male), Aleksinac 5 (3 female, 2 male)
Professional associations	3	3	0	All female
Mentors	7	6	1	6 female, 1 male
Total	48	44	4	

Annex 5: Analysis of Survey results

Analysis of survey data – Survey for PIs

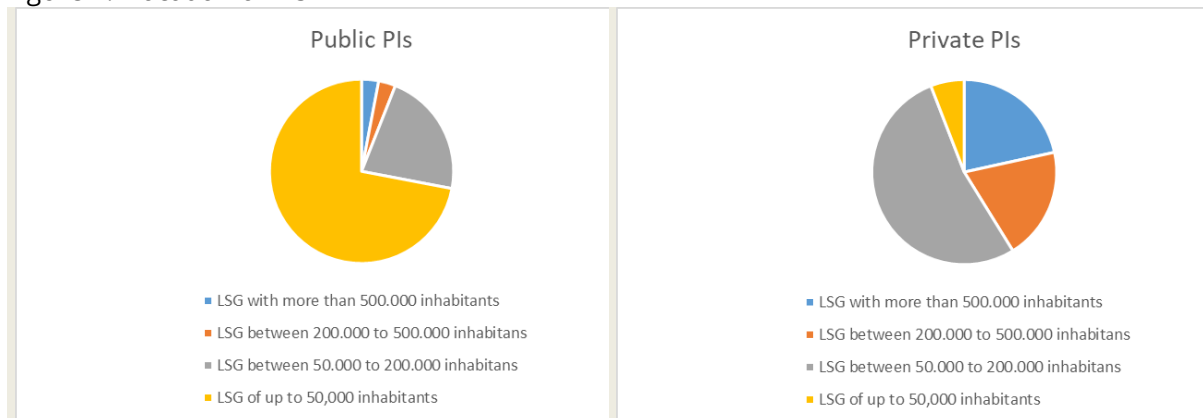
Introduction

A survey was conducted with PIs to collect insights into the overall approach and main results and contributions of the preschool education reforms over the period 2012 –2022. In particular, the survey gathered views and reflections regarding the results that the reform had when it comes to coverage, equity, and quality of preschool education. A total of 100 public preschool institutions and 51 private preschool institutions completed the survey.

Location of PIs

Overall, every second preschool institution is from local self-government with up to 50,000 inhabitants, followed by every third preschool institutions from local self-governments with between 50,000 – 200,000 inhabitants. As compare type of PIs, public PIs are from communities larger than 50.000 in habitants.

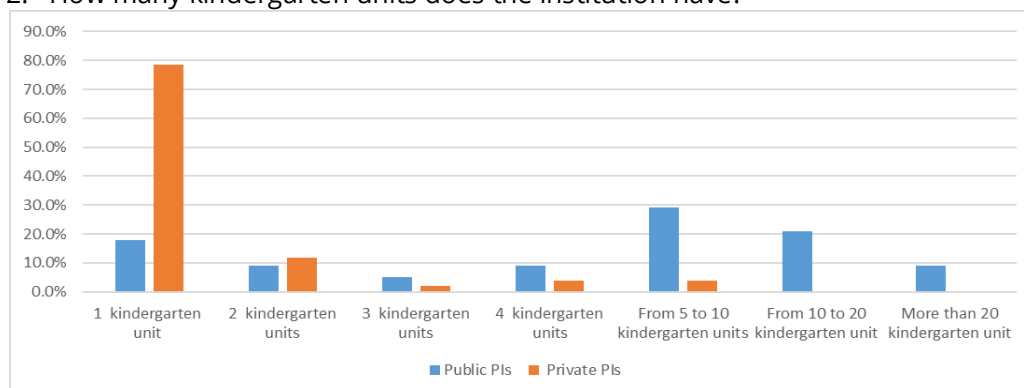
Figure 1. Location of PIs



Number of kindergartens units

Most respondents from public PIs (59 percent) stated that there are more than 5 kindergartens units in their PI, while most respondents from private PIs (78.4 percent) stated that there is one kindergartens unit.

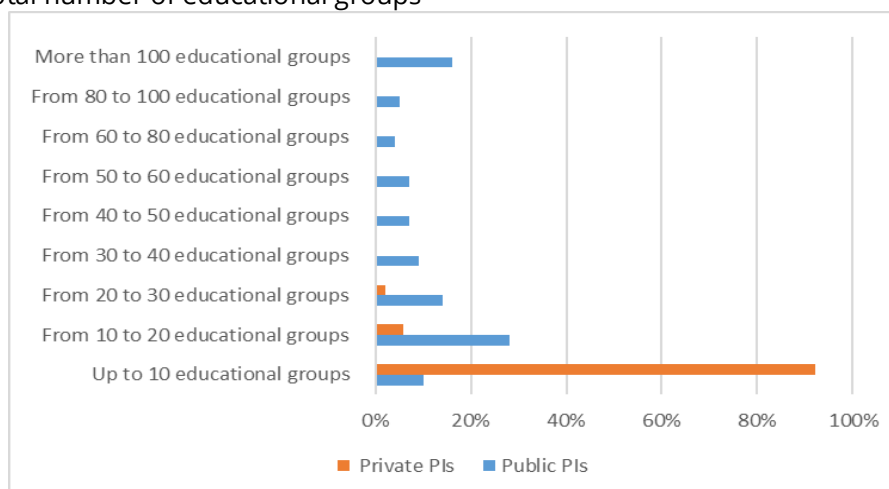
Figure 2. How many kindergarten units does the institution have?



Number of educational groups

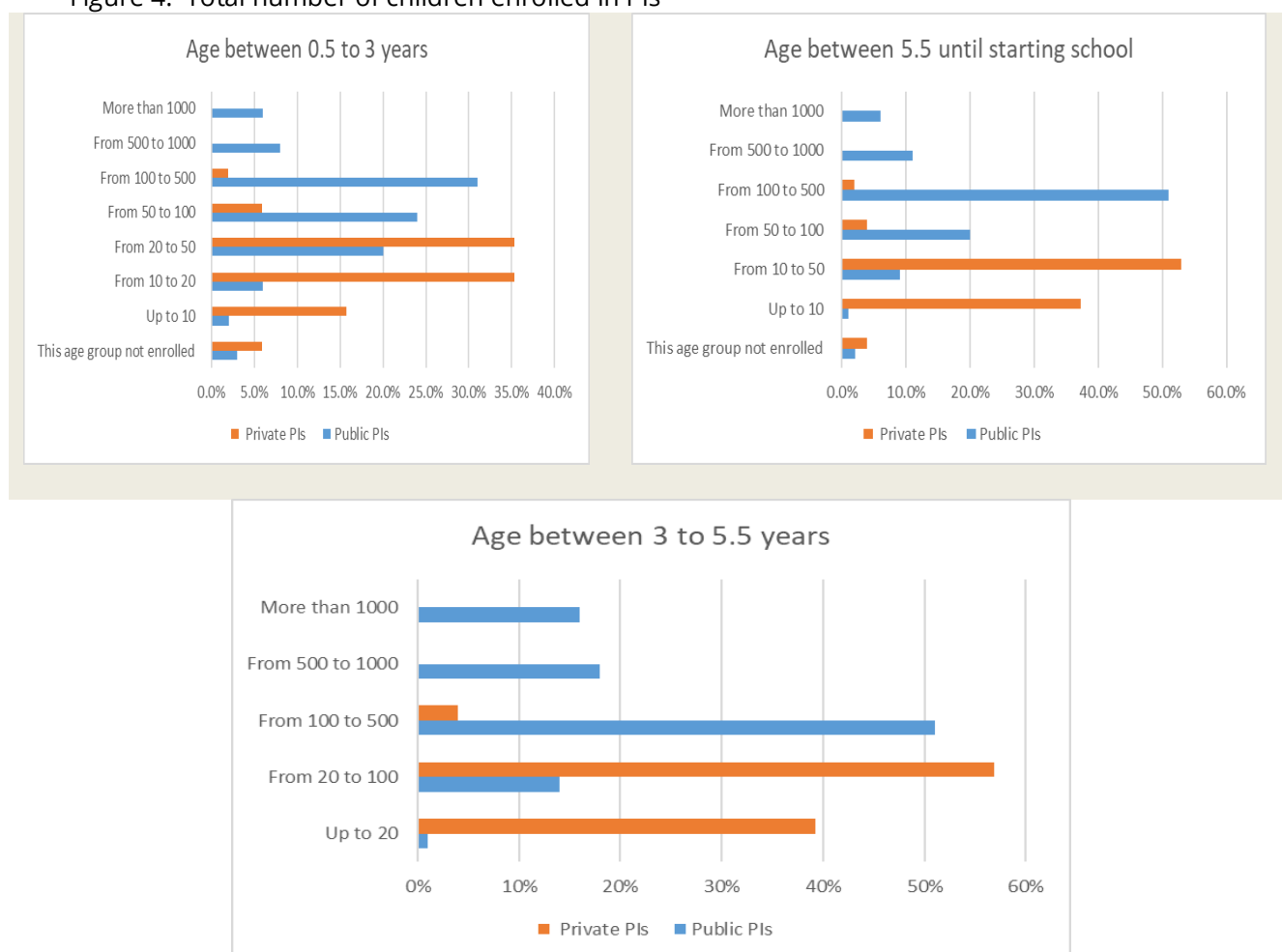
Similarly, public PIs has more educational groups than private PIs. Almost all respondents from private PIs stated that there is up to 10 educational groups (92.2 percent).

Figure 3. Total number of educational groups



As regards to number of enrolled children, more children are enrolled in public PIs than private PIs according to survey responses.

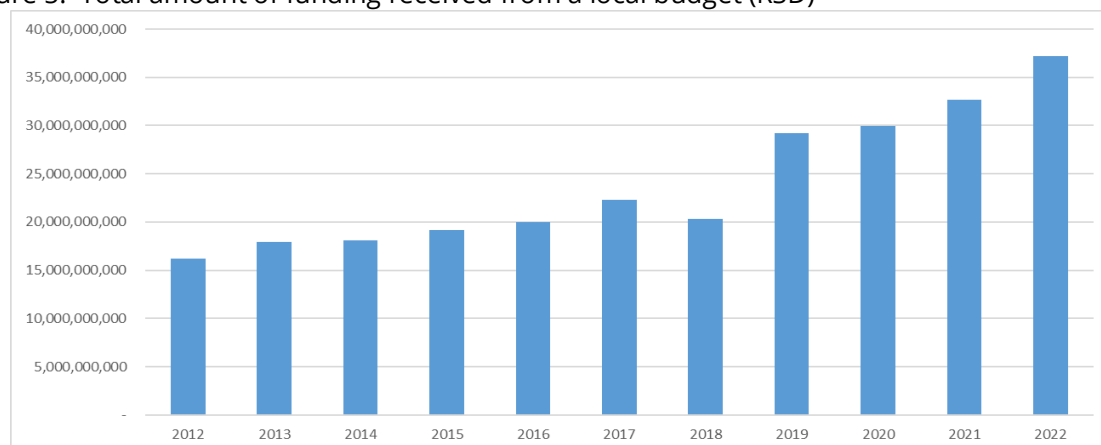
Figure 4. Total number of children enrolled in PIs



Financial resources of PIs

A total of 92 public PIs (92 percent) answer the question related to the amount of funding received from local budget over the period 2012 -2022. According to those answers, LSGs increased their spendings on preschool education during considering period. This is the case regardless of the size of municipality. According to survey responses, this increase occurred due to increase coverage of children, including children from vulnerable groups (opening of new groups, adaptation of facilities), increased number of employees or increased salaries. A few public PIs see that budget increased is linked with implementation of the new PCF and related projects.

Figure 5. Total amount of funding received from a local budget (RSD)



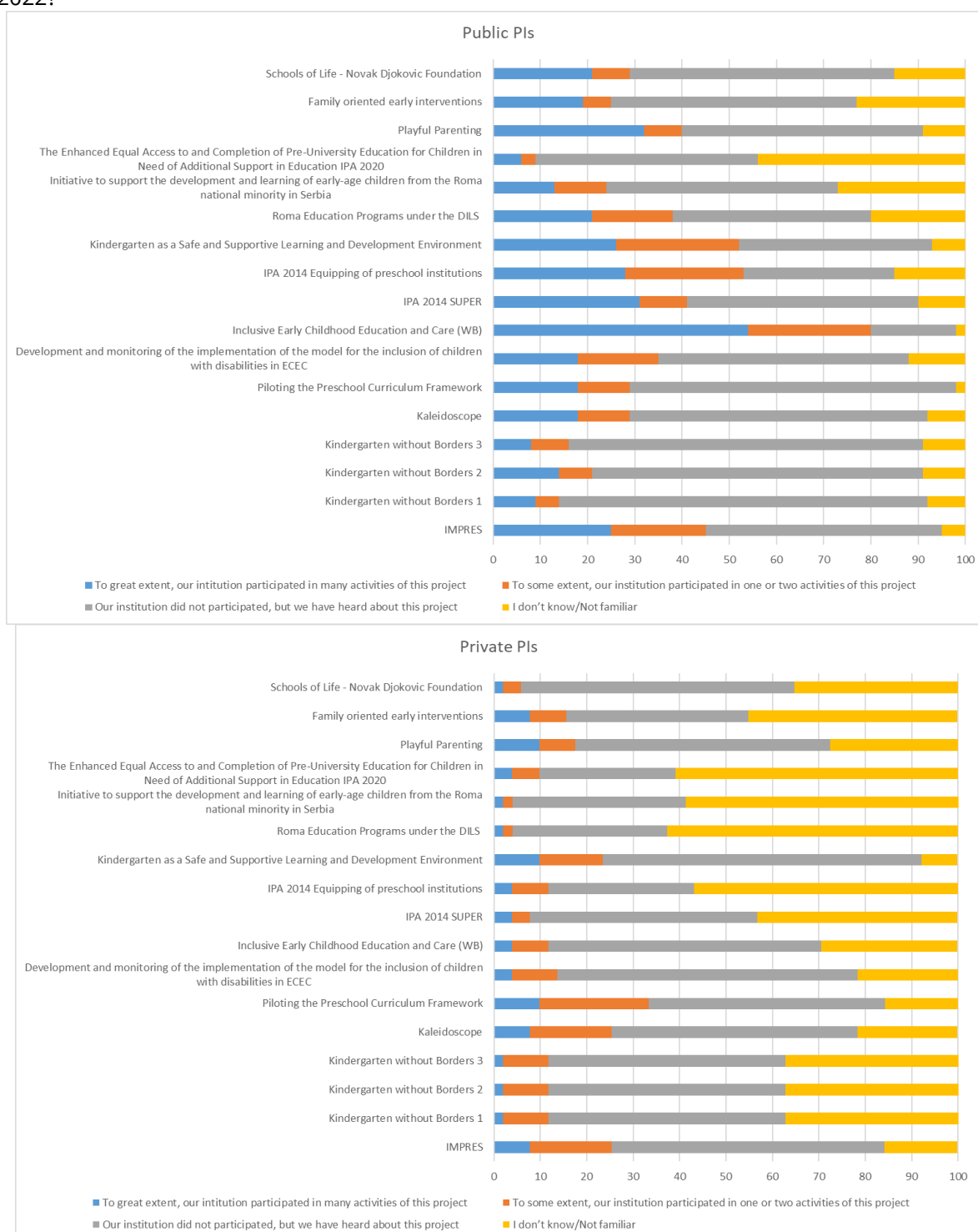
To what extent are you familiar within your institution about the preschool education reform that was supported through various initiatives over the period of 2012-2022?

Most of the respondents are familiar to a great extent (85 percent public PIs, 41 percent private PIs) or to some extent familiar (15 percent public PIs, 57 percent private PIs) with the preschool education reform that was supported through various initiatives over the period 2012-2022.

To what extent are you familiar with specific projects and their activities that were implemented within the scope of the preschool education reform over the period of 2012-2022?

When it comes to respondents' familiarity with concrete projects, public PIs are much more aware of the project initiatives conducted in the period 2012-2022. Public PIs reported that they institutions mostly participated in Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (54 percent to great extent and 26 percent to some extent participated in project activities), Playful Parenting (32 percent to a great extent participated) and SUPER project (32 percent to a great extent participated). Private PIs are aware of most initiatives but did not participate.

Figure 6. To what extent are you familiar with specific projects and their activities that were implemented within the scope of the preschool education reform over the period of 2012 - 2022?

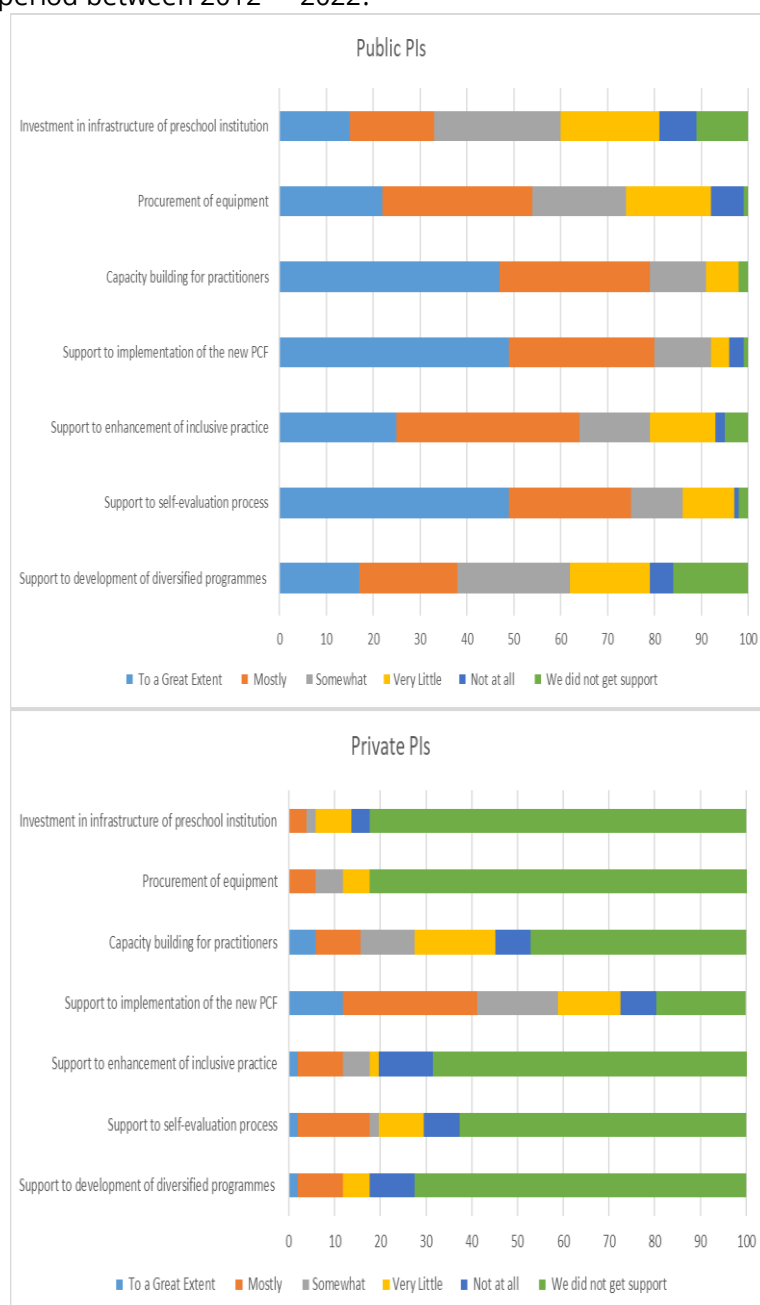


To what extent you are satisfied with support that your PIs received for preschool education in the period between 2012-2022?

The survey responses show high satisfaction of public PIs with support to implementation of the new PCF (49 percent to a great extent), support to self-evaluation process (49 percent

to a great extent) and capacity building support for practitioners towards high -quality preschool education through different forms of professional development (47 percent to a great extent). Respondents from private PIs mostly received support to implementation of the new PCF, and overall, they are somewhat satisfied with provided support.

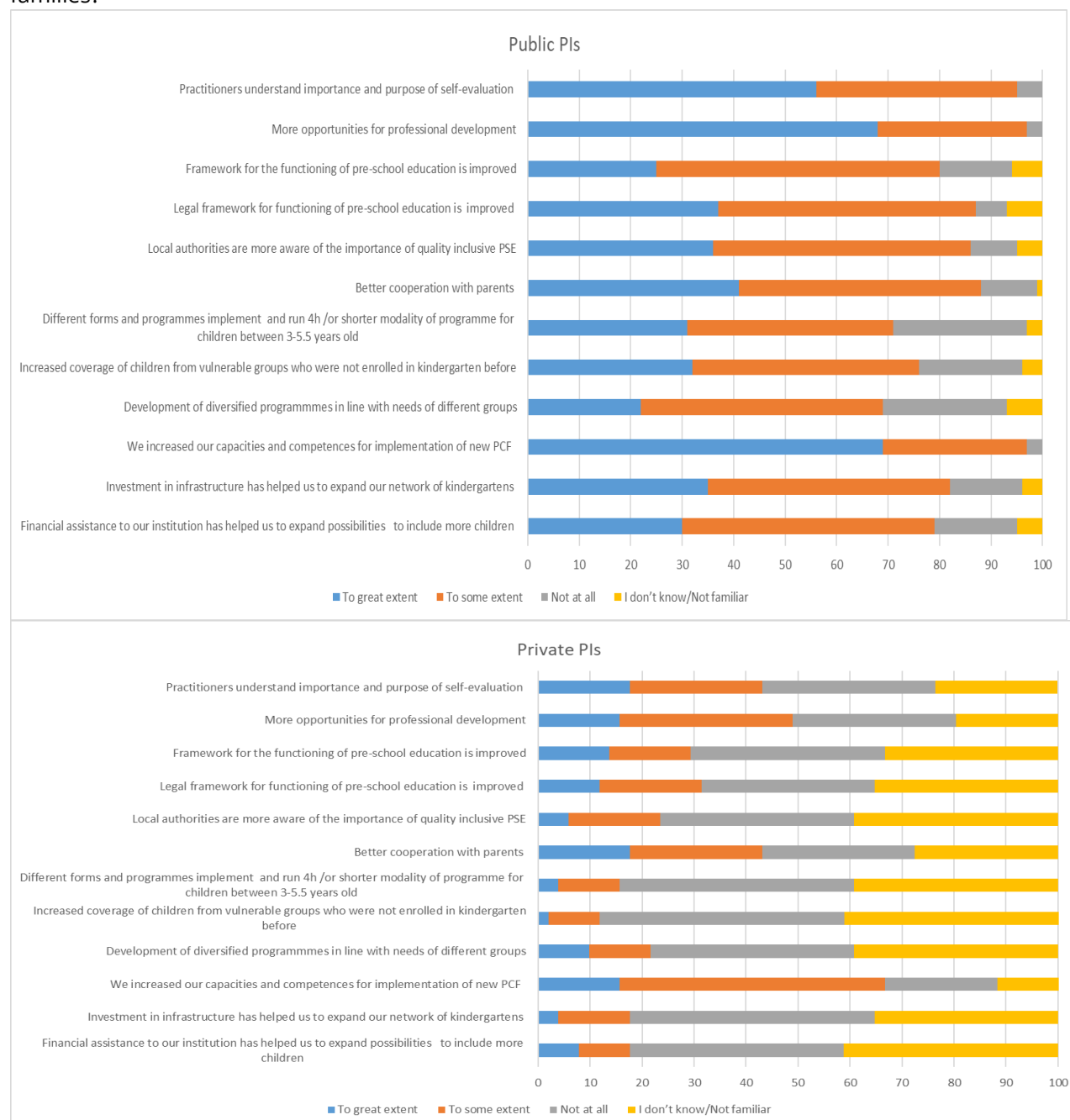
Figure 7. To what extent you are satisfied with support that your PIs received for preschool education in the period between 2012 -2022?



In what ways has the reform support respond to the needs of your institution to ensure greater coverage of all children, and the most vulnerable children and their families?

Most of respondents from public PIs stated that thanks to support their PI increased our capacities and competences for implementation of new PCF (69 percent), have more opportunities for professional development (68 percent) and their practitioners understand importance and purpose of self-evaluation (56 percent). Every second private PIs mentioned that so some extent they increased capacity for implementation of the new PCF because of support received.

Figure 8. In what ways has the reform support respond to the needs of your institution to ensure greater coverage of all children, and the most vulnerable children and their families?



How many new groups has your institution managed to establish thanks to the support implemented over the period between 2012-2022?

Almost every second public PIs (49 percent) confirmed that their PI established 1 to 5 new groups thanks to the support implemented over the period 2012 -2022, and almost every fourth of public respondents (24 percent) stated that PI opened 6 to 10 new groups.

To what extent has support implemented through reform interventions (including projects mentioned above in question 1) helped you to enhance the enrolment of children from most vulnerable groups as listed below?

On average, support implemented through reform interventions help majority public PIs to enhance the enrolment of children from vulnerable groups to great extent (36 percent) or to some extent (45 percent).

Figure 9. To what extent has support implemented through reform interventions (including projects mentioned above in question 1) helped you to enhance the enrolment of children from most vulnerable groups as listed below?

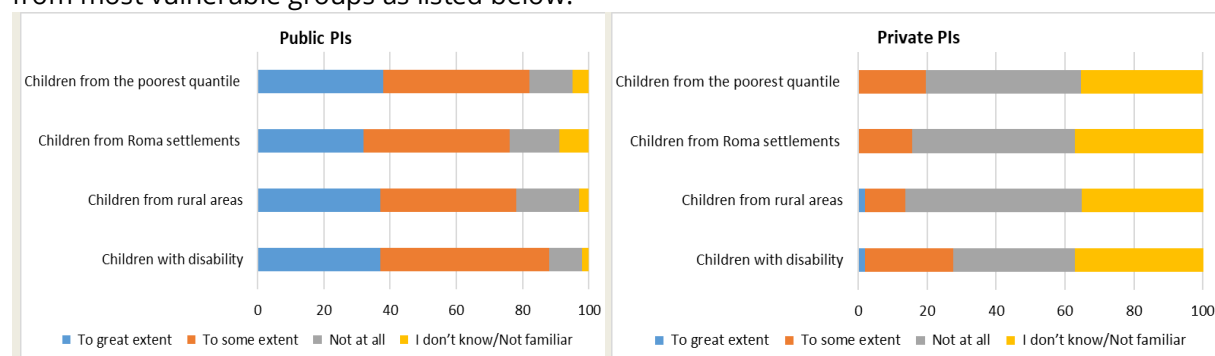


Figure 10. How could future reform interventions help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups? Please, elaborate for each group.

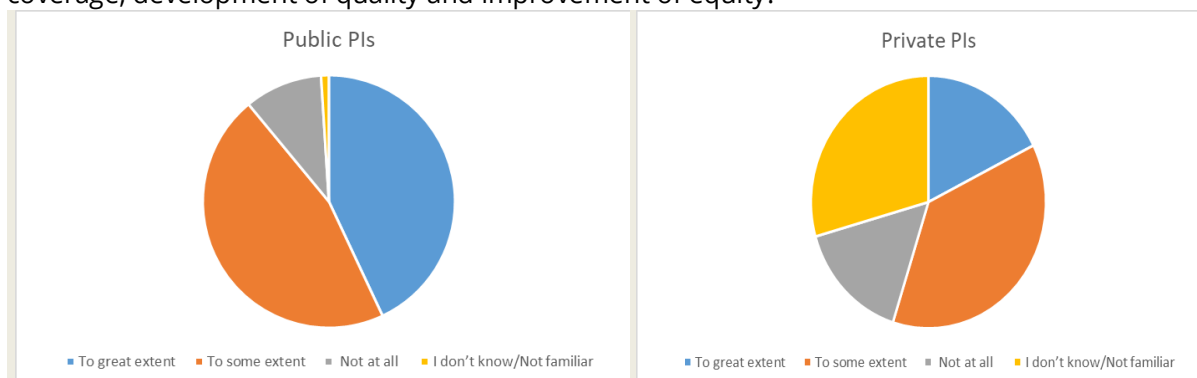
	Potential future reform interventions that could help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups
Children with disability	Hiring of pedagogical assistants, defectologist Hiring of personal assistants and better regulation of personal assistance Increasing number of expert associates Increased number of available spaces Decreased number of children per group – norm Open of development groups Education of parents Adaptation of physical space in accordance with their needs Intersectoral coordination
Children from rural areas	Providing transportation Promotion of importance of PSE Increase number of groups Opening/adaptation of facilities Free PSE service Diversified programs in accordance with their needs Cooperation with private PIs
Roma children	Decreased age that is mandatory for PSE, below 5.5 Education of parents on importance of PSE Increase number of pedagogical assistants and mediators Free shorter diversified programs Mapping of Roma children out of PSE system Coordinated activities with association that work with Roma target groups

Children from the poorest families	Free PSE s service Decreased age that is mandatory for PSE, below 5.5 Financial support to parents Providing transportation Better coordination between centres for social work, PIs and LSGs
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To what extent did activities/initiatives/interventions supported by the Ministry of education and its partners contribute to strengthening of PIs capacities for increase of coverage, development of quality and improvement of equity?

Analysis of survey responses shows that 46 percent of respondents from public PIs believe that to some extent provided support by the ministry and its partners contributed to strengthening PIs' capacities for an increase of coverage, development of quality and improvement of equity. In comparison, 43 percent of them believe it was largely achieved. Most private PIs cannot relate those activities to their PI capacities, due to their low involvement and collaboration with the Ministry of Education.

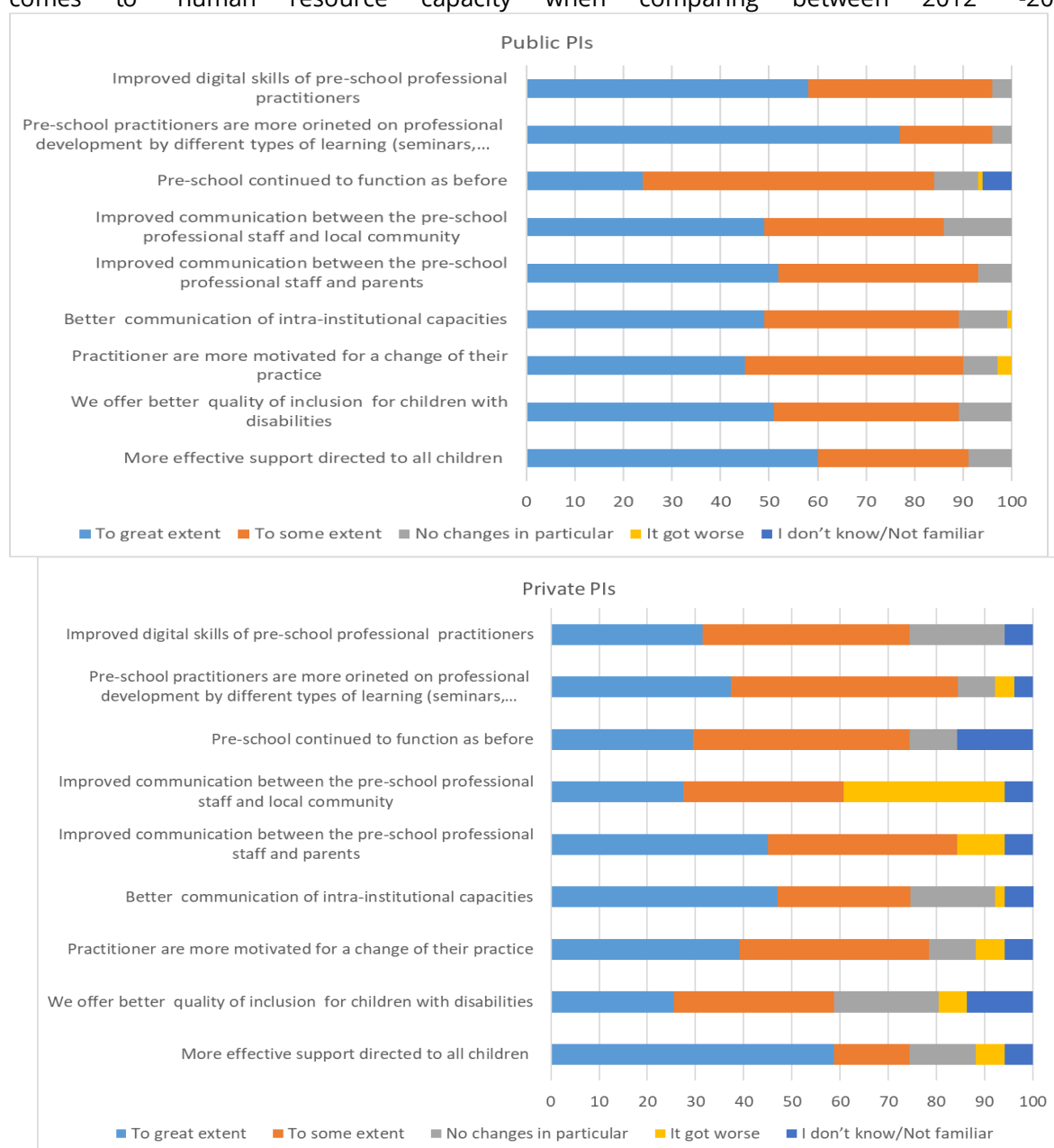
Figure 11. To what extent did activities/initiatives/interventions supported by the Ministry of education and its partners contribute to strengthening of PIs capacities for increase of coverage, development of quality and improvement of equity?



What are the main changes that you have observed in your institution when it comes to human resource capacity when comparing between 2012-2022?

Most of respondents from public PIs believe that main changes occurred in terms of greater orientation of practitioners to professional development (77 percent), followed by their improved digital skills (58 percent). Respondents from private PIs assessed that to some extent PIs make changes in below mentioned areas.

Figure 12. What are the main changes that you have observed in your institution when it comes to human resource capacity when comparing between 2012 -2022?



In your view, what kind of support should Ministry of education and its partners consider in ensuring further support to the preschool education reforms?

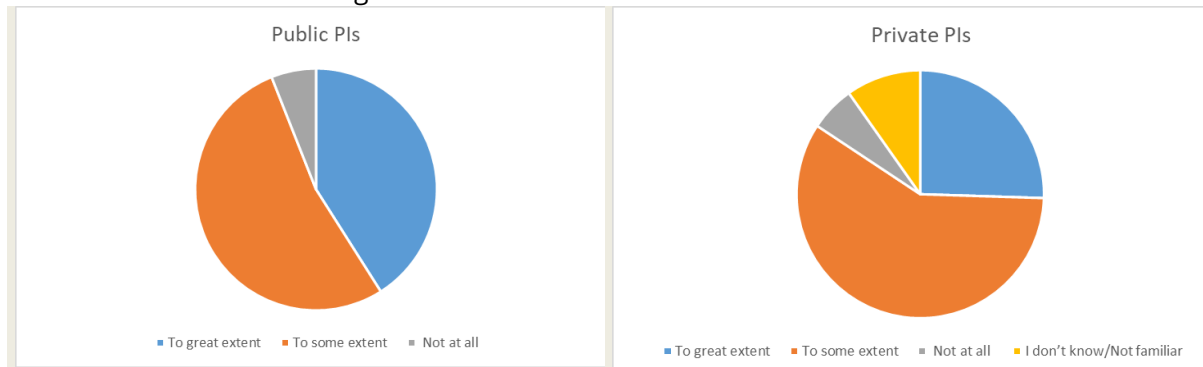
According to survey responses from PIs (both public and private) further priority support to the preschool education reforms should be the following:

1. priority: provision of trainings related to modern pedagogical approaches methods and diversified program s.
2. priority: mentoring of preschool education professionals to implement and develop innovative preschool practice.
3. priority: support in organizing learning community of practitioners, and
4. priority: ensure the sustainability of E -learning platforms .

Overall, to what extent have PSEs reform activities/initiatives contributed to wider access to PSE following the needs of children and their families?

Most of respondents from public and private PIs believe that to some extent PSE reform activities/initiatives contributed to wider access to PSE following the needs of children and their families.

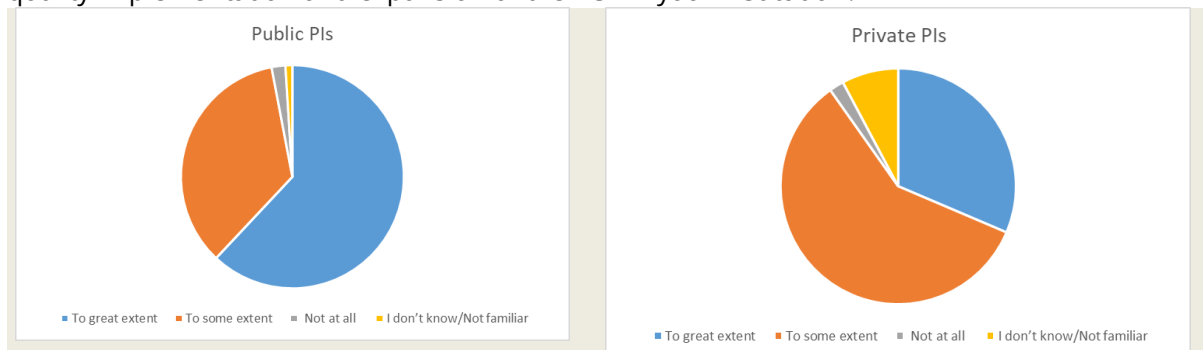
Figure 13. Overall, to what extent have PSEs reform activities/initiatives contributed to wider access to PSE following the needs of children and their families?



To what extent is the continuity of reform changes ensured through support for quality implementation and expansion of the PCF in your institution?

Overall, most of the respondents from public PIs believe that continuity of reform changes related to the implementation of the PCF has been ensured to a great extent (62 percent) or some extent (35 percent). In comparison, respondents from private PIs believe that to some extent this continuity is ensured.

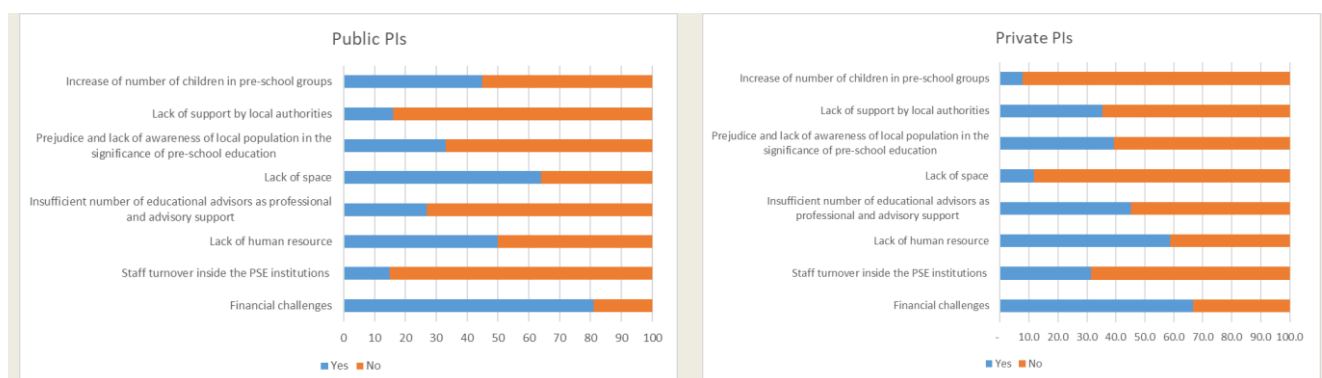
Figure 14. To what extent is the continuity of reform changes ensured through support for quality implementation and expansion of the PCF in your institution?



What are some of the key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services?

Financial challenges and a lack of space in public PIs are assessed by respondents from those institutions as key challenges related to the sustainability of the reformed PSE services. On the other hand, respondents from private PIs point to a lack of human and financial resources.

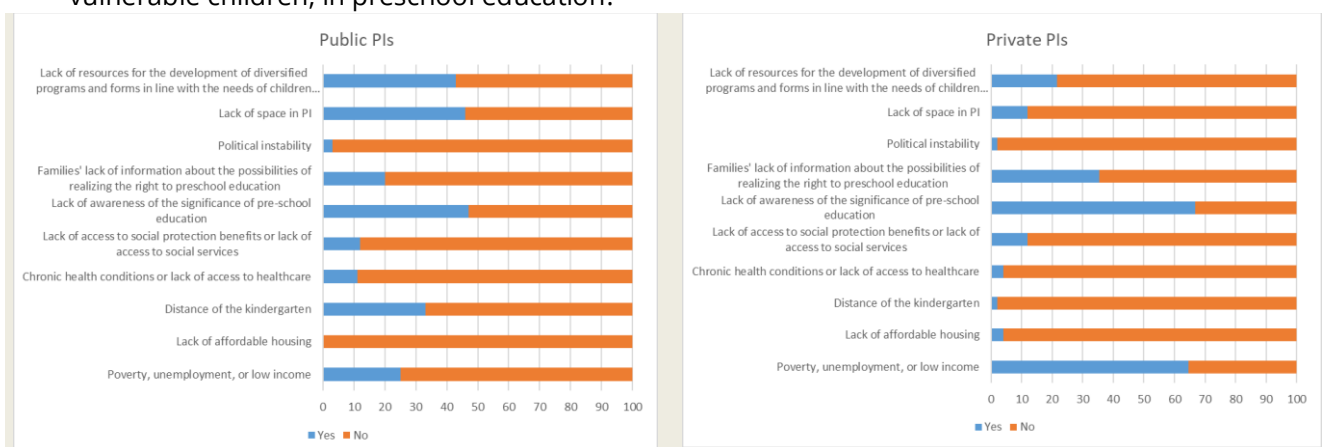
Figure 15. What are some of the key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services?



What are the two main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of the most vulnerable children (Roma children, children with disability, children from rural areas, children from the poorest families), in preschool education?

Main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of most vulnerable children in public PIs are a lack of awareness of the significance of preschool education and a lack of space in PI. As regard private PIs, the main challenges for their coverage are poverty, unemployment, or low income and a lack of awareness of the significance of preschool education.

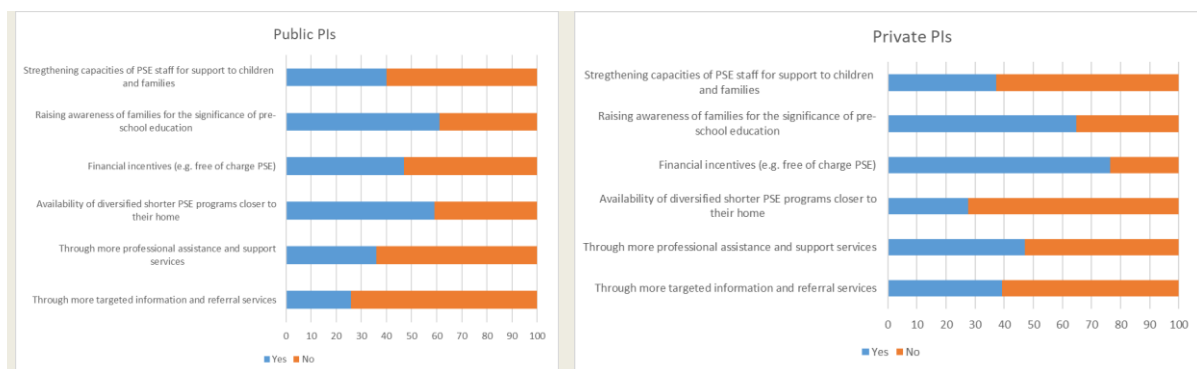
Figure 16. What are the two main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of the most vulnerable children, in preschool education?



In your opinion, in what ways could children the above mentioned most vulnerable groups (Roma children, children with disability, children living in rural areas or children from the poorest) and their families be more motivated to enrol in preschool education?

Raising awareness of families for the significance of PSE is assessed by public and private PIs as a possible way of motivating of most vulnerable groups to enrol in PSE. In addition, public PIs see a solution in the availability of various PSE forms and programs with shorter duration and closer to their home, while private PIs believe that financial incentives could be motivation to enrolment in preschool education.

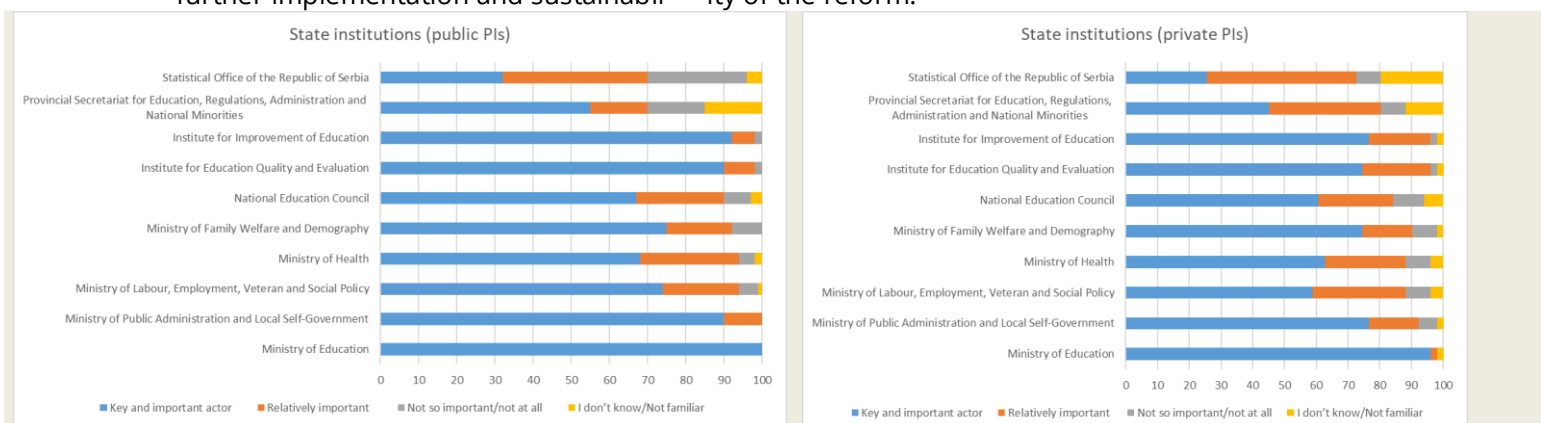
Figure 17. In what ways could children the above mentioned most vulnerable groups and their families be more motivated to enrol in preschool education?



To what extent the following actors had an impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and care.

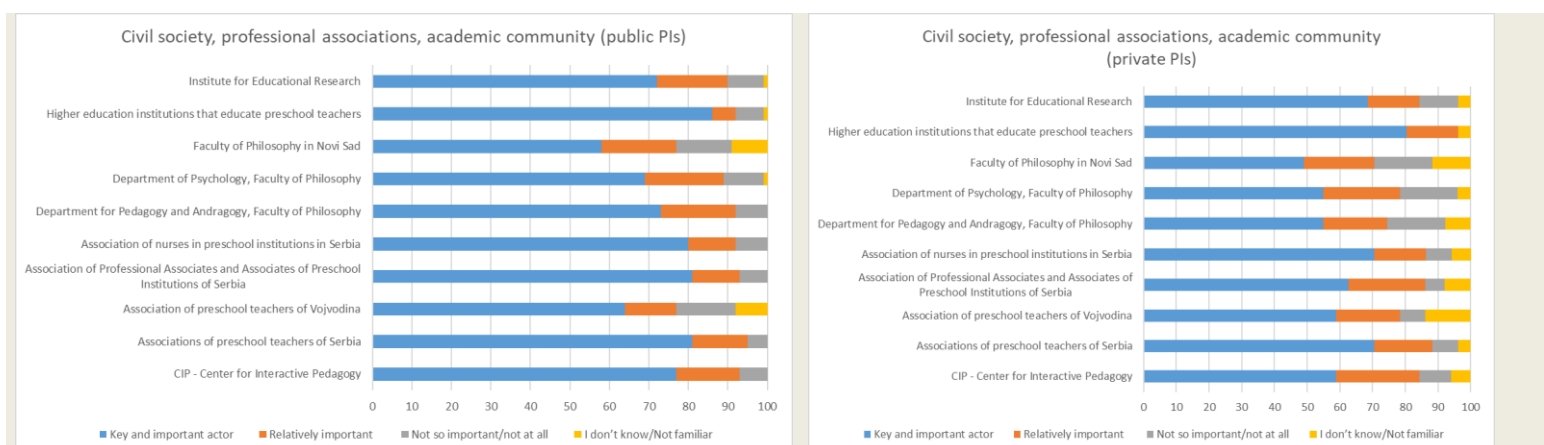
Numerous actors are assessed by PIs as key and/or important actors. Most respondents from PIs believe that the Ministry of Education, LSGs, and Preschool Institutions are key and important actors in reform of PSE, followed by the Ministry of Public administration and Local Self-Government, Institute for Improvement of Education, Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation.

Figure 18. State actor impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform.



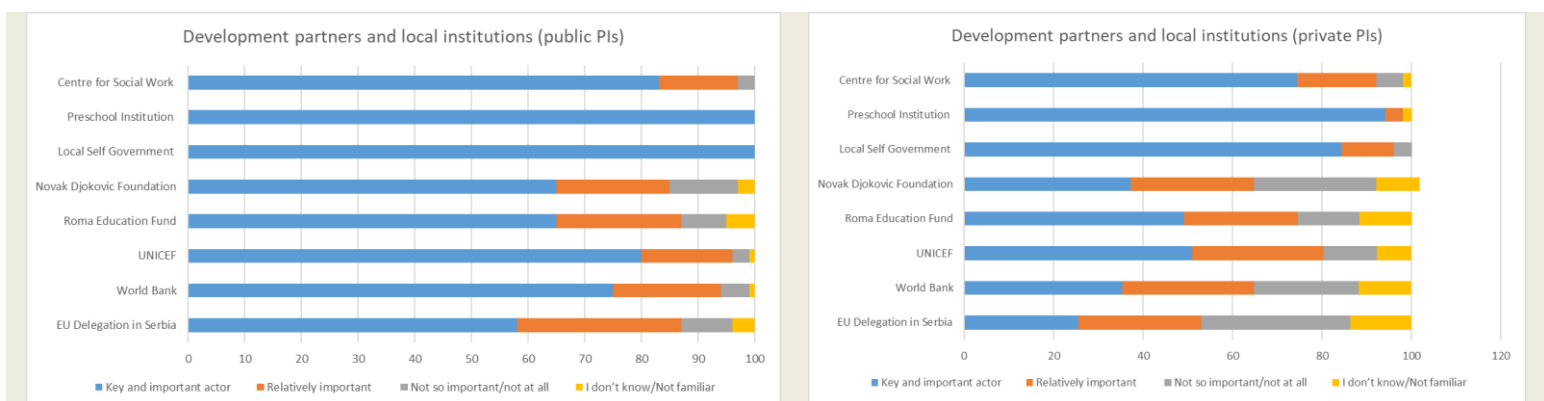
Higher education institutions that educate preschool teachers are assessed by PIs as most important among civil society, professional associations, and academic community.

Figure 19. Civil society, professional associations, and academic community impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform.



Concerning development partners, most PIs see UNICEF as a key and/or important actor.

Figure 20. Development partners and local institutions impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform.



Overview of survey data – Survey for LSGs

Introduction

A survey was conducted with LSGs to collect insights into the overall approach and main results and contributions of the preschool education reforms over the period 2012–2022. In particular, the survey gathered views and reflections regarding the results that the reform had regarding coverage, equity, and quality of preschool education.

A total of 34 respondents participated in this survey with most of them (29 LSGs or 85 percent) being local self-governments with up to 50,000 inhabitants, followed by local self-governments with between 50,000–200,000 inhabitants (5 LSGs, 15 percent). Only one respondent is from local self-government with two public preschool institutions, while all others have one public preschool institution in their local self-government.

Most respondents stated that there are between 1 and 5 kindergartens facilities (19 LSGs, 63 percent), while 5 LSGs (17 percent) stated that there are between 5 to 10 facilities, and 7 LSGs (23 percent) between 10 and 17 facilities. A total of 4 respondents stated that their LSG has private preschool institutions, and their number varies between 1 and 5.

Financial resources and planning of PSE

A total of 21 LSGs answer the question related to the share of their budget that is allocated for PSE. According to those answers, the average value of the budget share for PSE is 9.7 percent with the lowest share of 5.4 percent and the highest share of 14.1 percent.

The majority of LSGs have development plans that include planning of the PSE area (23 LSGs, 70 percent). Almost all of them confirmed that they have financial resources for the implementation of those development plans (21 LSGs).

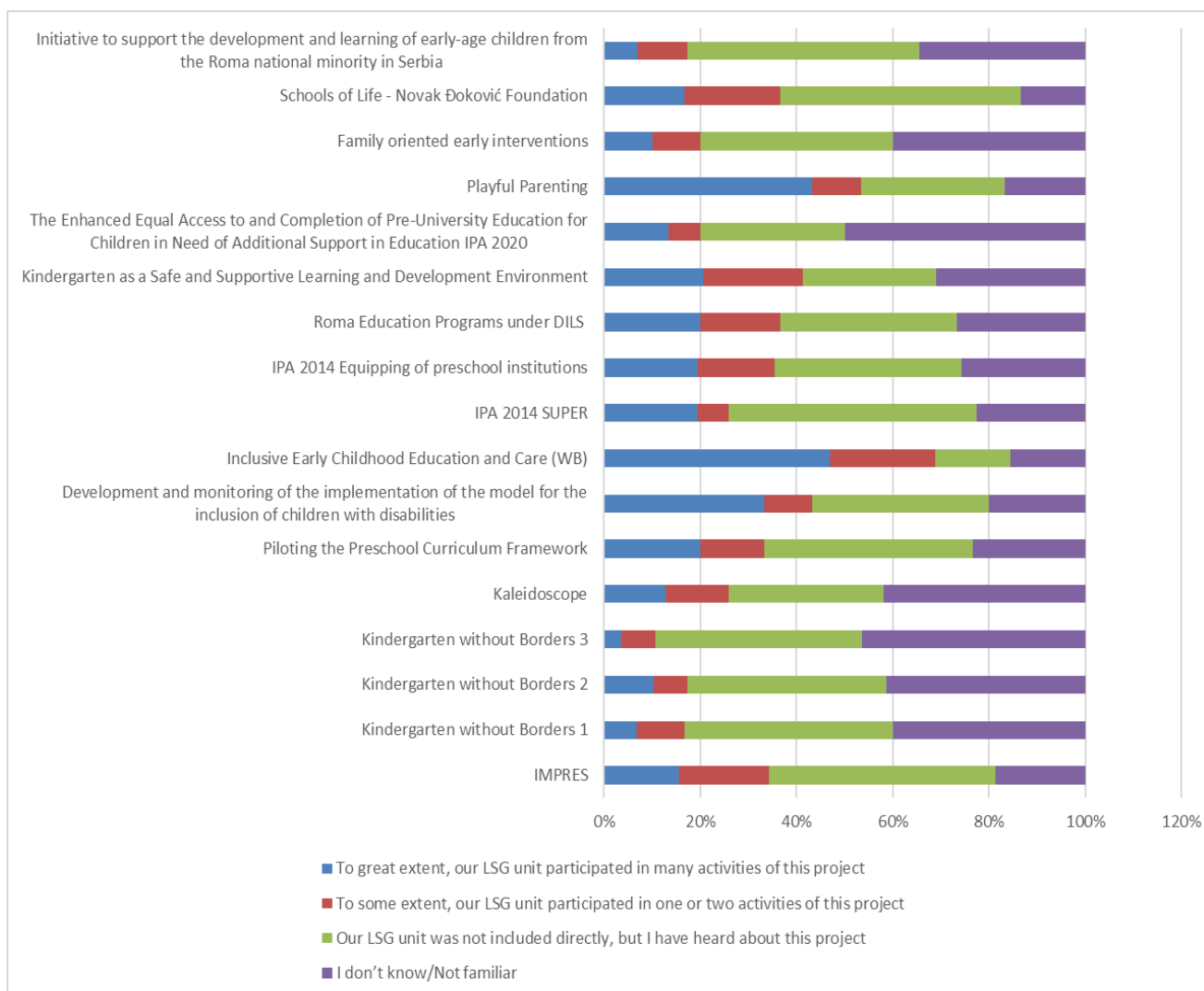
To what extent are you familiar with the preschool education reform that was supported through various initiatives over the period of 2012-2022?

Most of the respondents are familiar to a great extent (16LSG, 47 percent) or to some extent familiar (16LSG, 47 percent) with the preschool education reform that was supported through various initiatives over the period 2012 -2022.

To what extent are you familiar with specific projects and their activities that were implemented within the scope of the preschool education reform over the period of 2012-2022?

When it comes to respondents' familiarity with concrete projects, respondents were largely involved in Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (15 LSGs, 47 percent), Playful Parenting (13 LSGs, 43 percent), and Development and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities (10 LSGs, 33 percent). For most of other projects, respondents stated that their LSG was not included directly, but they have heard about the project. The respondents are the least familiar with the project 'The Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre-University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education' funded under IPA 2020, which partially targets PSE.

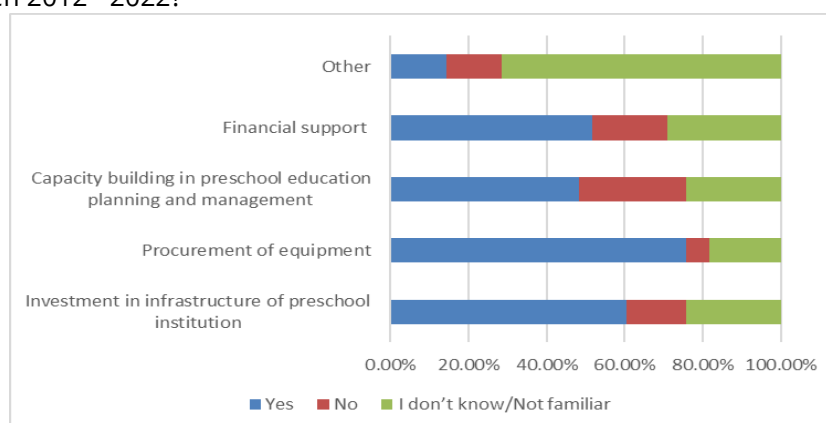
Figure 21. To what extent are you familiar with specific projects and their activities that were implemented within the scope of the preschool education reform over the period of 2012-2022?



What types of support has your LSG unit received for preschool education in the period between 2012-2022?

The most common support that LSGs received for preschool education was procurement of equipment (25 LSGs, 75.8 percent), followed by investment in infrastructure of preschool institution (20 LSGs, 60.6 percent).

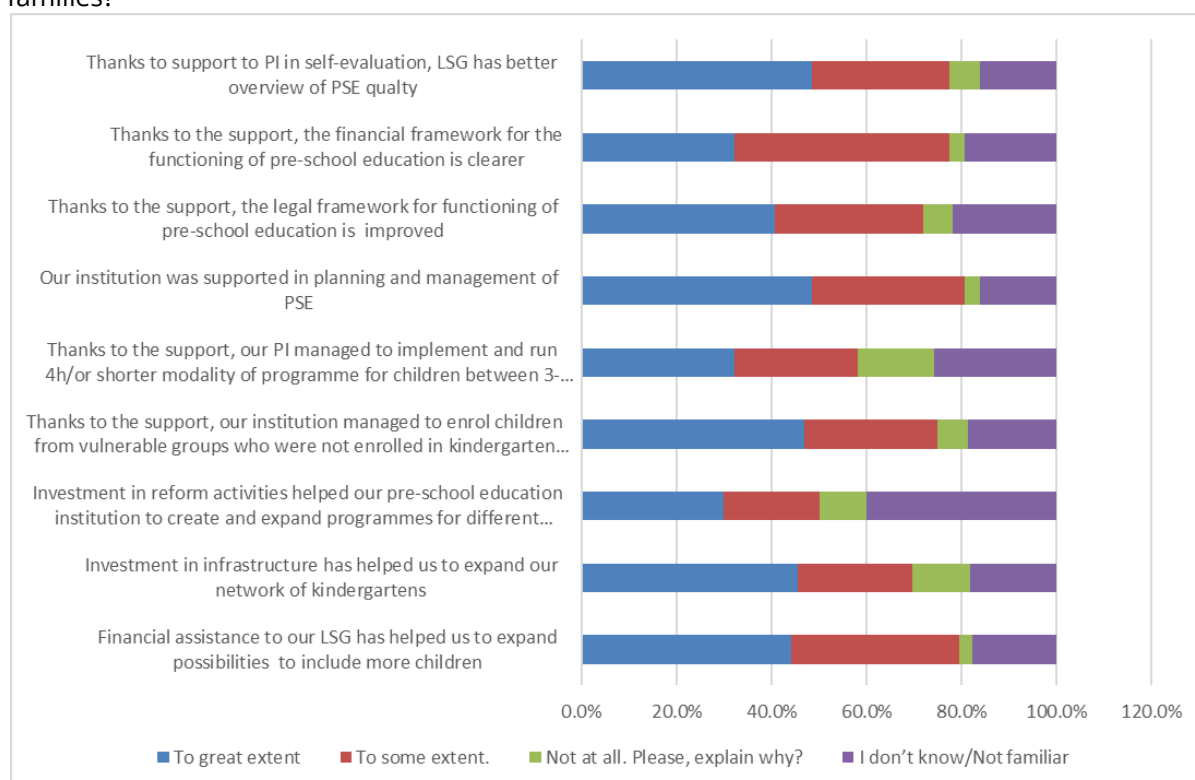
Figure 22. What types of support has your LSG unit received for preschool education in the period between 2012 -2022?



In what ways has the reform support responded to the needs of your LSG unit to ensure greater coverage of all children, and the most vulnerable children and their families?

Most of respondents stated that thanks to reform support their LSG worked on planning and management of PSE, that LSG has better overview of PSE quality, and enrolment of children from vulnerable groups who were not enrolled in kindergarten before was enabled.

Figure 23. In what ways has the reform support responded to the needs of your LSG unit to ensure greater coverage of all children, and the most vulnerable children and their families?



To what extent has support implemented through reform interventions (including projects mentioned above in Q1) helped your LSG unit to enhance the enrolment of children from most vulnerable groups as listed below?

On average, support implemented through reform interventions help majority LSGs to enhance the enrolment of children from vulnerable groups to great extent (15 LSGs, 46.5 percent) or to some extent (13 LSGs, 40.3 percent).

Figure 24. To what extent has support implemented through reform interventions (including projects mentioned above in Q1) helped your LSG unit to enhance the enrolment of children from most vulnerable groups as listed below?

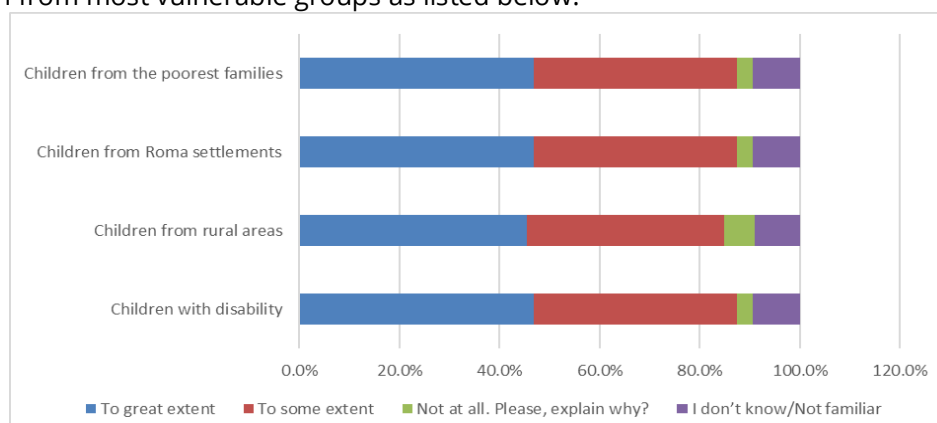


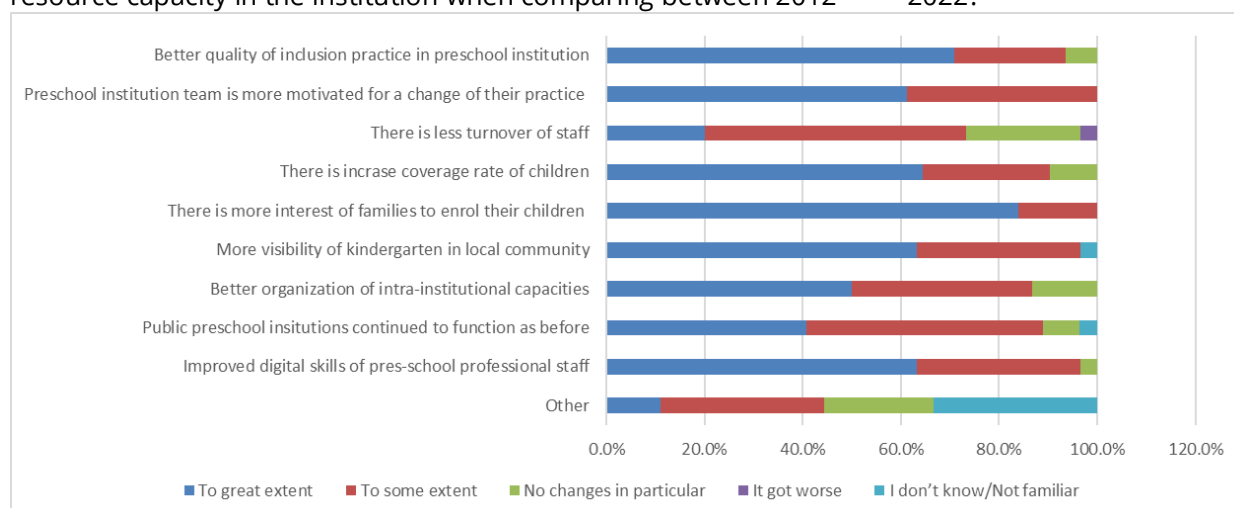
Figure 25. How could future reform interventions help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups? Please, elaborate for each group.

	Potential future reform interventions that could help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups
Children with disability	Hiring of pedagogical assistants, defectologist Hiring of personal assistants More clarity how to classify severity of the problems Assistive technology and equipment Family oriented early interventions Increased number of available spaces
Children from rural areas	Providing transportation Increase number of groups Opening of new facilities Promotion of importance of PSE Increasing number of teachers
Roma children	Education of parents on importance of PSE Increase number of pedagogical assistants
Children from the poorest families	Financial support to parents Providing transportation Support from centres for social work

What are the main changes that you have observed when it comes to human resource capacity in the institution when comparing between 2012-2022?

Most of respondents from LSGs believe that main changes occurred in terms of increased interest of families to enrol their children (26 LSGs, 83.9 percent) and better quality of inclusion practice in preschool institution (22 LSGs, 71 percent).

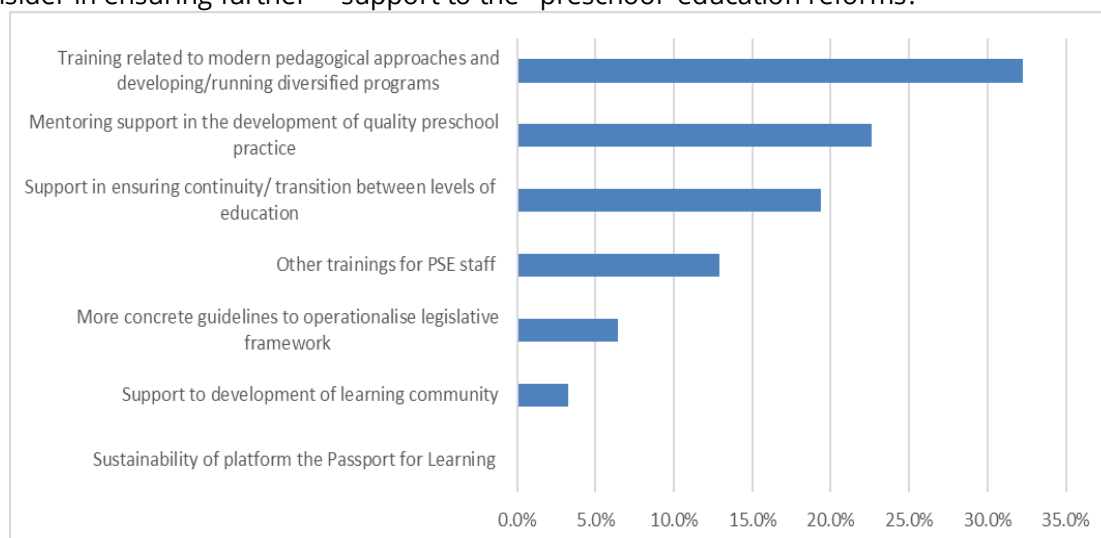
Figure 26. What are the main changes that you have observed when it comes to human resource capacity in the institution when comparing between 2012 -2022?



In your view, what kind of support should Ministry of Education and its partners consider in ensuring further support to the preschool education reforms?

Most respondents from LSGs believe that the Ministry of education and its partners should further support preschool institutions by providing training related to modern pedagogical approaches and developing/running diversified programs.

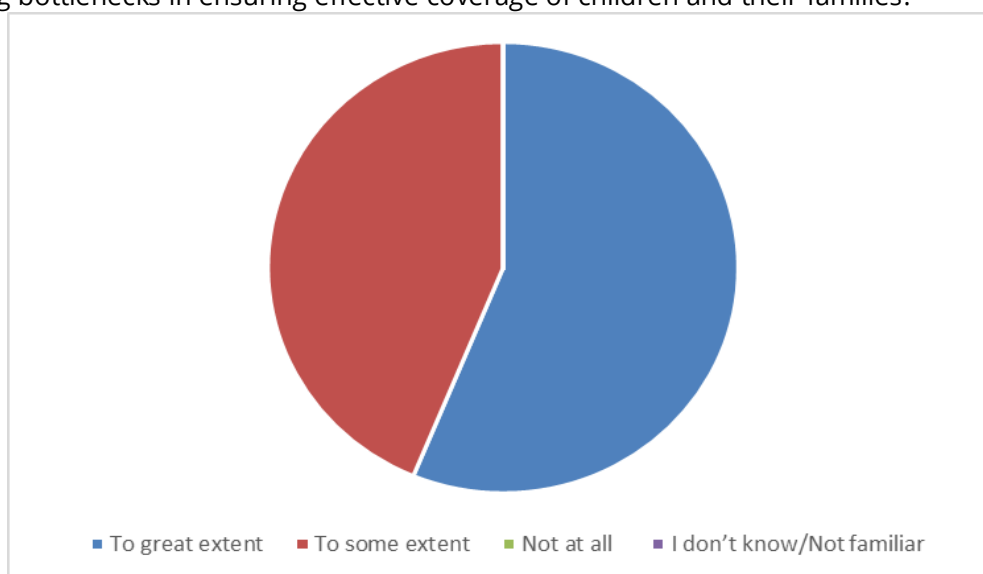
Figure 27. In your view, what kind of support should Ministry of Education and its partners consider in ensuring further support to the preschool education reforms?



Overall, to what extent has the preschool education reform contributed to reducing bottlenecks in ensuring effective coverage of children and their families?

All respondents believe that preschool education reform contributed to reducing bottlenecks in ensuring effective coverage of children and their families, for 18 of them (56.2 percent) this is true to great extent and for 14 of them to some extent (43.7 percent).

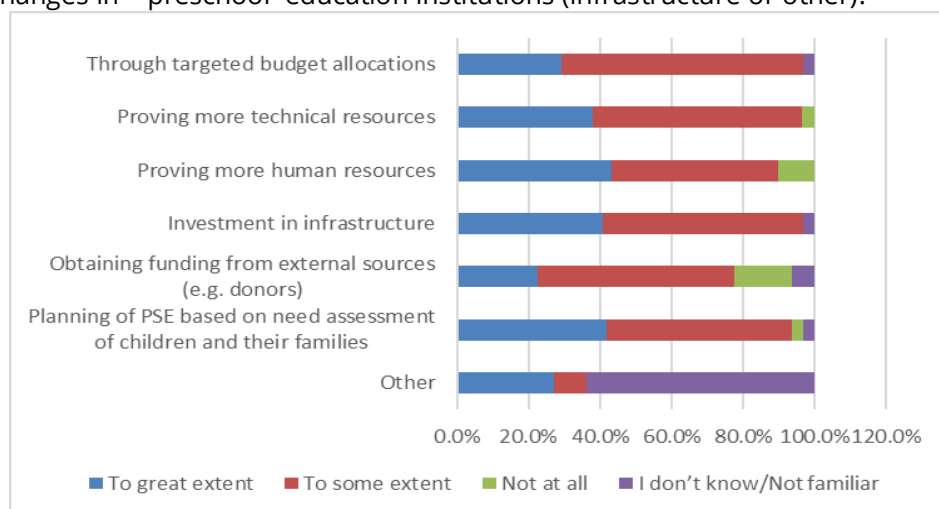
Figure 28. Overall, to what extent has the preschool education reform contributed to reducing bottlenecks in ensuring effective coverage of children and their families?



To what extent has your LSG been in position to ensure the sustainability of the initiated changes in preschool education institutions (infrastructure or other)?

Overall, LSGs to some extent has been in position to ensure the sustainability of the initiated changes in preschool institutions

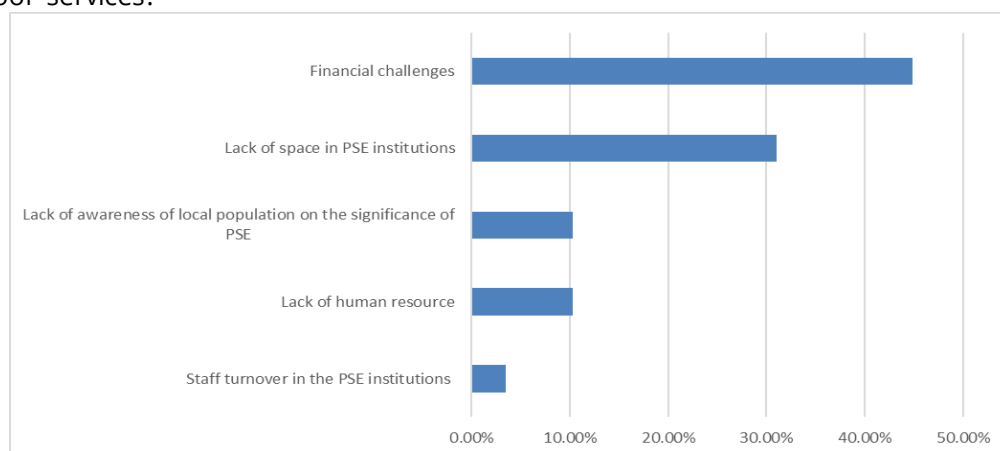
Figure 29. To what extent has your LSG been in position to ensure the sustainability of the initiated changes in preschool education institutions (infrastructure or other)?



What are some of the key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services?

Financial challenges and a lack of space in PIs are assessed by respondents as a key challenge related to sustainability of the reformed PSE services.

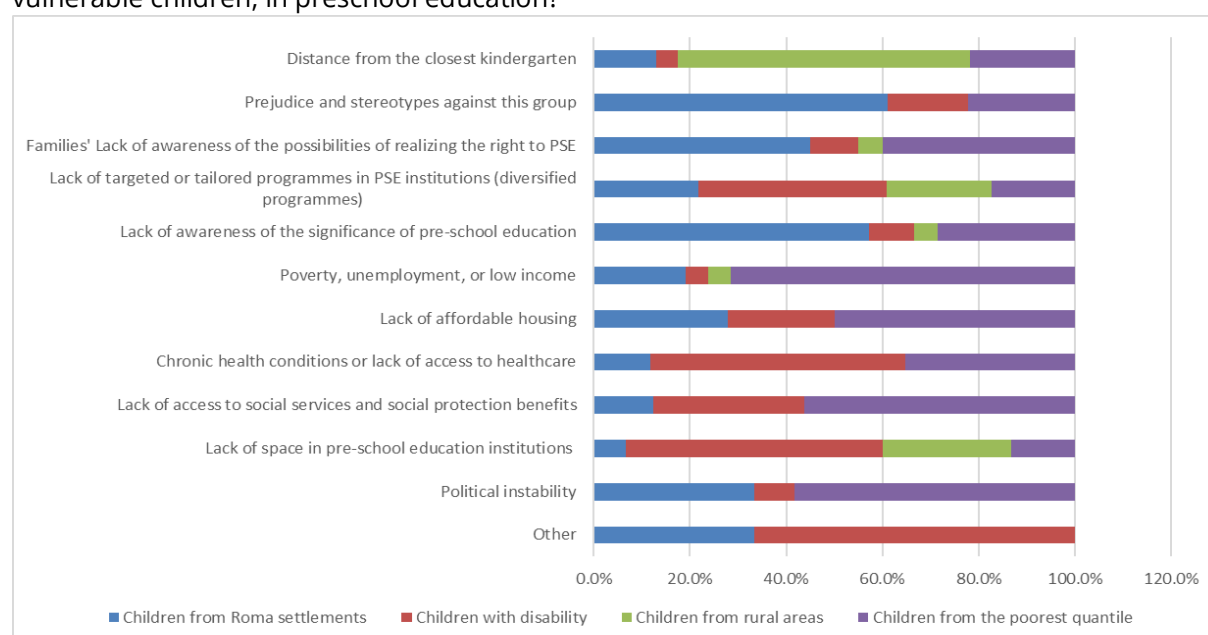
Figure 30. What are some of the key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services?



What are the two main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of the most vulnerable children (Roma children, children with disability, children from rural areas, children from the poorest families), in preschool education?

Main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of children from Roma settlements are prejudice and stereotypes against this group and lack of awareness of the significance of preschool education. As regard children with disability, the main challenges for their coverage are a lack of space in preschool education institutions and health conditions issues. Distance from the closest kindergarten is the main challenge for children from rural areas. Poverty, unemployment, or low income is the main challenges for children from the poorest families.

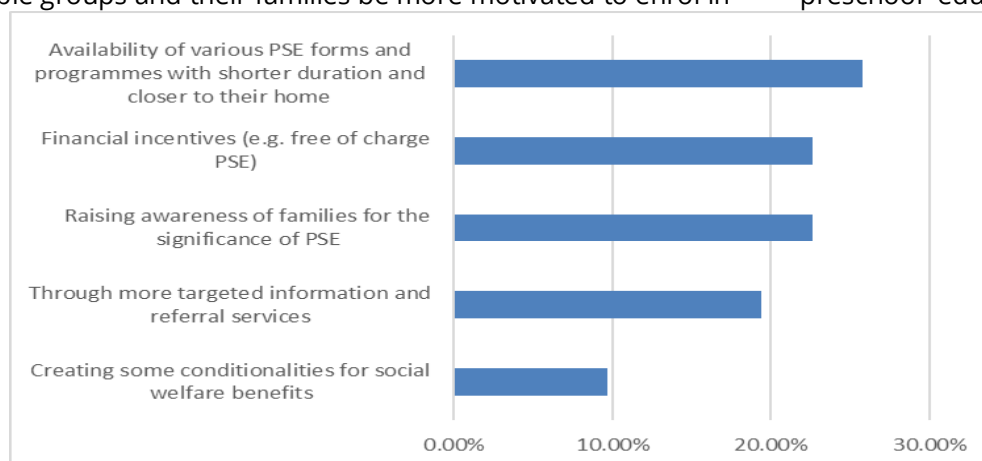
Figure 31. What are the two main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of the most vulnerable children, in preschool education?



In your opinion, in what ways could children the above mentioned most vulnerable groups (Roma children, children with disability, children living in rural areas or children from the poorest) and their families be more motivated to enrol in preschool education?

Availability of various PSE forms and programmes with shorter duration and closer to their home (8 LSGs, 25.8 percent), financial incentives (7 LSGs, 22.6 percent) and raising awareness of families for the significance of PSE (7 LSGs, 22.6 percent) are assessed as possible ways of motivation of most vulnerable groups to enrol in PSE.

Figure 32. In your opinion, in what ways could children the above mentioned most vulnerable groups and their families be more motivated to enrol in preschool education?

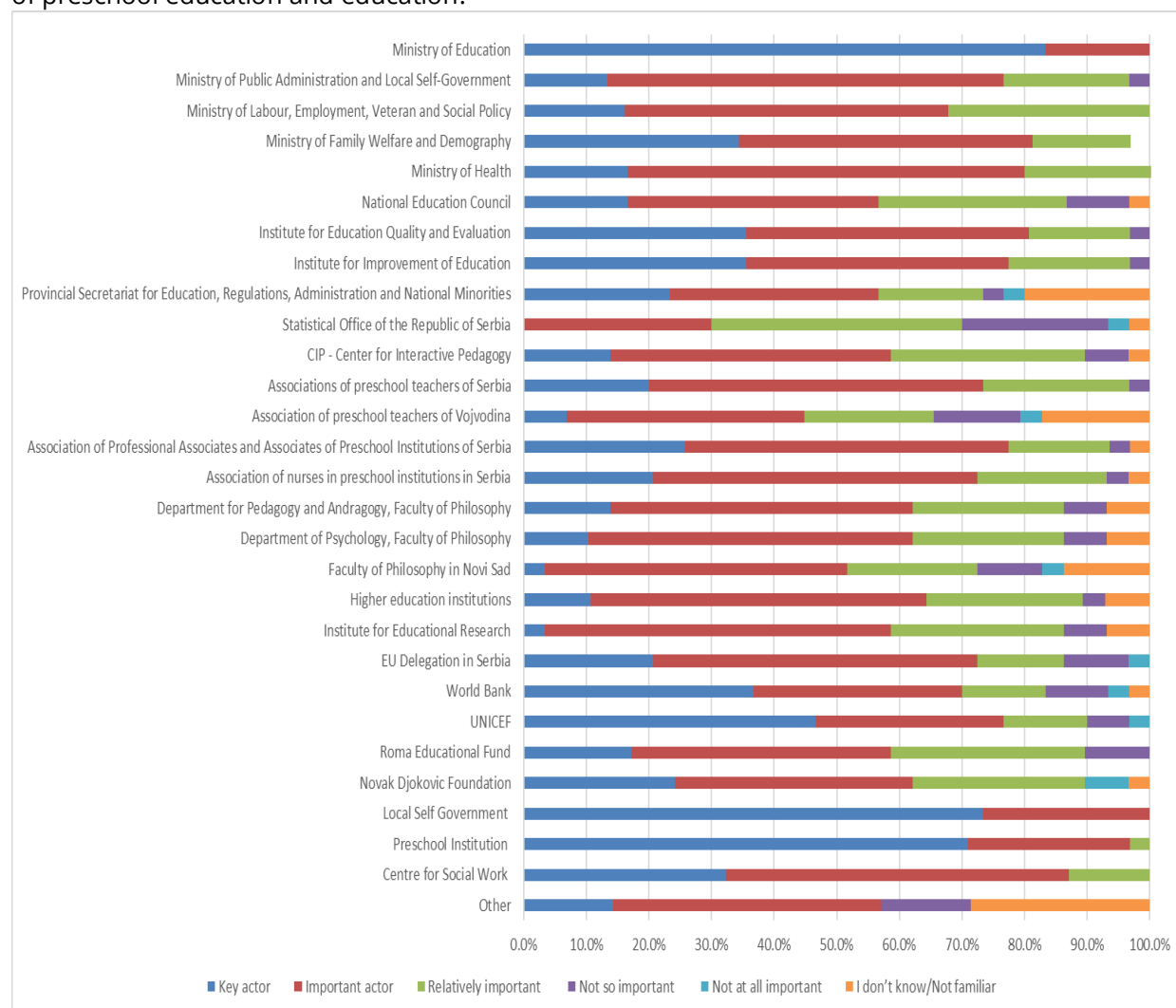


To what extent the following actors had an impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education?

Most respondents from LSGs believe that the Ministry of Education (25 LSGs), LSGs (22 LSGs), and Preschool Institutions (22 LSGs) are key actors in reform of PSE. In addition, 14 LSGs believe that UNICEF has a key role in this regard. Then, the Ministry of Public Administration

and Local Self -Government and the Ministry of Health are assessed as the most important actors.

Figure 33. To what extent the following actors had an impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education?



Annex 6: List of policy and regulatory documents adopted over the reference period

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN SERBIA

1. Education Strategy 2020
2. Ex-post Analyses 2020 Strategy
3. Education Strategy 2030
4. AP 2021-2023
5. Roma Inclusion Strategy

LEGAL FRAMEWORK OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN SERBIA

1. Law on the Foundations of the Education System, 2021
2. Law on Pre school Education, 2019
3. Law on Local Self -government
4. Law on Financial Support to Families with Children, 2021
5. Law on Public Services
6. Law on Public -Private Partnerships and Concessions, 2016
7. Rule book on the Preschool Curricula Framework, 2018
8. Rule book on quality standards of the institution's work, 2018
9. Rule book on evaluating the quality of the institution's work, 2019
10. Rule book on the type of vocational training for education, nurses and professional associates in kindergarten
11. Rule book on closer conditions for the establishment, start of work and performance of activities of a preschool institution, 2019
12. Rule book on preschool teacher's competency standards and professional development, 2018
13. Rule book on the Protocol of Behaviour in the Institution in Response to Violence, Abuse and Neglect, 2019
14. Rule book on closer conditions in the procedure for awarding a unique educational number (JOB), 2019
15. Rule book on detailed instructions for determining the right to an individual education plan, its application and evaluation, 2018
16. Rule book on the training program and examination for the license for the director of an education and training institution, 2018
17. Rule book on continuous professional development and advancement in the professions of teachers, educators and professional associates, 2017
18. Rule book on closer conditions and methods of achieving children's nutrition in preschool institutions, 2018
19. Rule book on closer conditions and methods of providing care and preventive health care for children in preschool institutions, 2017
20. Rule book on the norms of funds for the implementation of educational programs in preschool institutions
21. Rule book on the program of all forms of work of professional associates, 2021

Annex 7: Data collection instruments

Interview Guide MoE Representatives

This guide shall serve as basis for interviews and discussions with Key informants.

We are an evaluation team commissioned to carry out the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia in PSE system in the period of 2012 -2022, including preschool education reform initiated by introduction of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (officially from 2018.), and UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, LSGs, donors, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) contribution to those results. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate the ongoing implementation of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

We are asking you to participate in the evaluation because you are in a position to contribute a relevant and valuable perspective on the functioning of preschool education reform interventions. If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by members of the evaluation team for approximately 1 hour.

Participation is voluntary: This review is designed to help improve preschool education reform interventions by learning from the perspectives of everyone involved. Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview after it has begun, for any reason, with no penalty. Participating or not in the interview will not affect the benefits to the organizations or your engagement. You should report any problems to [_____].

Confidentiality: The reports from this and the other meetings will collect and summarize the views and opinions of participants without connecting them to specific individuals and without using names at any time. Any report of this research will be presented in a way that makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to determine the identity of individuals participating in the evaluation.

If you have any questions, now or at any time in the future, you may call _____

Are you willing to be part of this discussion? (verbal response only requested)

Respondent: _____

Profession and Function: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Interview Questions ¹³⁸
0. GENERAL Questions	
0.1 Role	1. What is your current position and in what ways have you interacted with PSE reform interventions?
0.2 Strengths and weaknesses	2. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly good at? 3. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly weak at?
EFFECTIVENESS	
To what extent have the reforms contributed to strengthening of the PSE system?	4. What were the key PSE reform interventions' results achieved? What do you consider as the most important changes? 5. To what extent, if at all, did PSE reform interventions contribute to the changes when it comes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improvements of the legislation on preschool upbringing and education in accordance with the strategic framework (e.g., quality standards, verification procedure of educational institutions, etc.) Raised capacities of professional staff in preschool institutions Expansion and optimisation of the network of preschool education institutions Improvement of the quality of the PSE services Advanced system of further professional training and professional development What were the driving factors that promoted implementation of PSE reform interventions? What were the hindering factors affecting implementation? What is missing?
To what extent did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?	8. What are the most significant changes when it comes to the overall efficiency of the system of preschool upbringing and education? 9. To what extent do you see that the PSE providers (PIs, LSG, professionals) increased their capacity to provide quality and accessible services for all beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable groups? Can you please provide some examples? 10. What is missing?
IMPACT	
Are there early indications that the reforms of PSE services have contributed to the acceleration of the SDG related to PSE: By 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality preschool education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the reform contributed to the ability of PIs and LSG to include all boys and girls in PSE? How about enrolment of children from the most vulnerable categories (CWD, Roma, children in rural areas, children from the poorest quantile)? How is the reform affecting the access to PSE to girls and to boys of these different group? Are there any differences, specific results? If yes, pls provide examples 11. What is missing? What are the main obstacles for full coverage? 12. What are some examples of main results achieved by the PSE reform interventions and most salient success stories? 13. Why these activities were successful/what were the enabling factors?

¹³⁸ Not all questions can be asked in all interviews. Different sections will need to be prioritized from different stakeholders.

What positive/negative, intended, or unintended outcomes have PSE reform interventions contributed to so far?	<p>14. What have been some important unintended consequences from PSE reform Interventions?</p> <p>a. If there were any unintended negative outcomes, which were the three most important ones? How were they handled?</p> <p>15. If there were any unintended positive outcomes, which were the three most important ones? How were they handled?</p>
SUSTAINABILITY	
To what extent did the preschool education reforms lead to sustainable changes in practices?	<p>16. Can you offer any examples of sustainable change when it comes to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comparative evidence of change in Government's Legislative and policy framework in the PSE sector prior and post PSE reform interventions? What are concrete changes in national laws, policies, regulations, standards, and plans that can sustain results and strategies achieved under the reform? Comparative evidence of change in institutional capacity in place to sustain levels of achievement prior and post PSE reform interventions Additional or increased investments in PSE prior and post PSE reform interventions <p>17. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives have the greatest amount of priority from the Serbian Institutions?</p> <p>18. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives have the least amount of priority from Serbian Institutions?</p>
How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure full advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia?	<p>19. What are financing sources that help ensure full advancement of PSE for all children? What is missing? Which areas are the most under sourced?</p> <p>20. In terms of sustaining PSRE reform results long term, what is the evidence of consistency of planning and budgeting mechanism for PSE programs they are financing?</p>
EFFICIENCY	
Were PSE reform interventions budgets and resources (human, financial and technical) adequately used for addressing priority bottlenecks?	<p>21. How would you assess the operational, human and financial resources within PSE reform interventions? To what degree have they been sufficient to ensure adequate implementation of the activities in the context, including during the pandemic?</p> <p>22. To what extent were planned activities and outputs delivered within the intended timeframe?</p> <p>a. What have been delays and how did they effect results of PSE interventions?</p> <p>23. What have been the mechanisms for ongoing, periodic collection, documentation, analysis and utilization of data from monitoring and evaluation purposes to inform program adjustment and planning? What is missing?</p> <p>24. What have been the mechanisms to prevent and/or mitigate operational bottlenecks in the implementation of projects (risk assessment, assumptions and mitigation measures)?</p>
Which PSE reform initiatives have been the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children (by	25. Which initiatives proved to be the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children?

program type, by target population, by inequities)?	
What resources (national, EU, other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform? What have been the costs, who covered those costs and for how long were they covered?	<p>26. How much did PSE interventions contribute to enhancing efficiency in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. leveraging investments in provision of services to the children, b. resource mobilization efforts and partnership arrangements <p>27. Which partners and how were they engaged in the PSE reforms??</p>
COHERENCE	
Which key partners or actors who had an impact on the reform of preschool education and education can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education? What characterizes the connections and relationships between the key actors and the ways in which they work to achieve results or resist change? Which potential collaborations are not used enough?	<p>28. Who are the main actors in the reform? How do actors engaged in the PSE reforms interact and coordinate? What is missing?</p> <p>29. What are examples of successful synergies?</p>

Interview Guide – UNICEF and other key development partners

This guide shall serve as basis for interviews and discussions with Key informants.

We are an evaluation team commissioned to carry out the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia in PSE system in the period of 2012 -2022, including preschool education reform initiated by introduction of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (officially from 2018.), and UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, LSGs, donors, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) contribution to those results. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate the ongoing implementation of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

We are asking you to participate in the evaluation because you are in a position to contribute a relevant and valuable perspective on the functioning of preschool education reform interventions. If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by members of the evaluation team for approximately 1 hour.

Participation is voluntary: This review is designed to help improve preschool education reform interventions by learning from the perspectives of everyone involved. Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview after it

has begun, for any reason, with no penalty. Participating or not in the interview will not affect the benefits to the organizations or your engagement. You should report any problems to [_____].

Confidentiality: The reports from this and the other meetings will collect and summarize the views and opinions of participants without connecting them to specific individuals and without using names at any time. Any report of this research will be presented in a way that makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to determine the identity of individuals participating in the evaluation.

If you have any questions, now or at any time in the future, you may call _____

Are you willing to be part of this discussion? (verbal response only requested)

Respondent: _____

Profession and Function: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Interview Questions ¹³⁹
0. GENERAL Questions	
0.1 Role	1. What is your current position and in what ways have you interacted with PSE reform interventions?
0.2 Strengths and weaknesses	2. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly good at? 3. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly weak at?
EFFECTIVENESS	
To what extent have the reforms contributed to strengthening of the PSE system?	4. In your view, what have been the key PSE reform interventions' results achieved? What do you consider as the most important changes? Please, elaborate contributions to areas you are familiar with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements of the legislation on preschool upbringing and education in accordance with the strategic framework (e.g., quality standards, verification procedure of educational institutions, etc.) • Raised capacities of professional staff in preschool institutions • Expansion and optimisation of the network of preschool education institutions • Improvement of the quality of the PSE services • Advanced system of further professional training and professional development What were the driving factors that promoted implementation of PSE reform interventions? What were the hindering factors affecting implementation? What is missing?

¹³⁹ Not all questions can be asked in all interviews. Different sections will need to be prioritized from different stakeholders.

To what extent did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?	<p>6. What change do you observe when it comes to the overall efficiency of the system of preschool upbringing and education?</p> <p>7. Do you observe a change in terms of PSE providers' (PIs, LSG, professionals) capacity to provide quality and accessible services for all beneficiaries, including those from the most vulnerable groups? Can you please provide some examples? What is missing?</p>
IMPACT	
Are there early indications that the reforms of PSE services have contributed to the acceleration of the SDG related to PSE: By 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality preschool education?	<p>8. Has the reform contributed to the ability of PIs in your community and LSG to include all boys and girls in PSE? How about enrollment of children from the most vulnerable categories (CWD, Roma, children in rural areas, children from the poorest quantile)? How is the reform affecting the access to PSE to girls and to boys of these different group? Are there any differences, specific results? If yes, pls provide examples</p> <p>9. What is missing? What are the main obstacles for full coverage?</p> <p>10. What are some examples of main results achieved by the PSE reform interventions and most salient success stories?</p> <p>11. Why these activities were successful/what were the enabling factors?</p> <p>12. Are there any unintended results (positive or negative) of PSE reform Interventions? Why did they happen?</p>
SUSTAINABILITY	
To what extent did the preschool education reforms lead to sustainable changes in practices?	<p>13. How do you observe the sustainability of achieved PSE reform results? Do you consider that the changes of below listed areas can contribute to sustainability of the system's coverage, equity and quality:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislative and policy framework in the PSE sector • Institutional capacity • Additional or increased investments in PSE <p>14. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives have the greatest amount of priority from the Serbian Institutions?</p> <p>15. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives have the least amount of priority from Serbian Institutions?</p>
How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure full advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia?	<p>16. How do you assess the financing system for coverage of services? What is missing? Which areas are the most under sourced?</p>
EFFICIENCY	
Were PSE reform interventions budgets and resources (human, financial and technical) adequately used for addressing priority bottlenecks?	<p>17. How would you assess the operational, human and financial resources within PSE reform interventions? To what degree have they been sufficient to ensure adequate implementation of the activities in the context, including during the pandemic?</p> <p>18. How do you assess the mechanisms for ongoing, periodic collection, documentation, analysis and utilization of data from monitoring and evaluation purposes? What is missing?</p> <p>19. How do you assess the mechanisms to prevent and/or mitigate operational bottlenecks in the implementation of projects (risk assessment, assumptions and mitigation measures)?</p>
Which PSE reform initiatives have been the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children	<p>20. Which initiatives proved to be the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children?</p>

(by program type, by target population, by inequities)?	
What resources (national, EU, other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform? What have been the costs, who covered those costs and for how long were they covered?	<p>21. How much did PSE interventions contribute to enhancing efficiency in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. leveraging investments in provision of services to the children, b. resource mobilization efforts and partnership arrangements
COHERENCE	
Which key partners or actors who had an impact on the reform of preschool education and education can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education? What characterizes the connections and relationships between the key actors and the ways in which they work to achieve results or resist change? Which potential collaborations are not used enough?	<p>22. Who are the main actors in the reform? How do actors engaged in the PSE reforms interact and coordinate? What is missing?</p> <p>23. What are examples of successful synergies? What is missing?</p>

Interview Guide – Local level Institutions, service providers

This guide shall serve as basis for interviews and discussions with Key informants.

We are an evaluation team commissioned to carry out the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia in PSE system in the period of 2012 –2022, including preschool education reform initiated by introduction of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (officially from 2018.), and UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, LSGs, donors, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) contribution to those results. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate the ongoing implementation of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

We are asking you to participate in the evaluation because you are in a position to contribute a relevant and valuable perspective on the functioning of preschool education reform interventions. If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by members of the evaluation team for approximately 1 hour.

Participation is voluntary: This review is designed to help improve preschool education reform interventions by learning from the perspectives of everyone involved. Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview after it has begun, for any reason, with no penalty. Participating or not in the interview will not affect the benefits to the organizations or your engagement. You should report any problems to [_____].

Confidentiality: The reports from this and the other meetings will collect and summarize the views and opinions of participants without connecting them to specific individuals and without using names at any time. Any report of this research will be presented in a way that makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to determine the identity of individuals participating in the evaluation.

If you have any questions, now or at any time in the future, you may call _____

Are you willing to be part of this discussion? (verbal response only requested)

Respondent: _____

Profession and Function: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Interview Questions ¹⁴⁰
0. GENERAL Questions	
0.1 Role	1. What is your current position and in what ways have you interacted with PSE reform interventions?
0.2 Strengths and weaknesses	2. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly good at? 3. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly weak at?
EFFECTIVENESS	
To what extent have the reforms contributed to strengthening of the PSE system?	4. Looking from the perspective of your community/institutions, what do you observe as the main results of the reform, when it comes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvements of the legislation on preschool upbringing and education in accordance with the strategic framework (e.g., quality standards, competence standards, opening of new PIs, work of a professional associate, etc.) • Raised capacities of professional staff in preschool institutions • Expansion and optimisation of the network of preschool education institutions • Improvement of the quality of the PSE services • Advanced system of further professional training and professional development What were the driving factors that promoted implementation of PSE reform interventions in your community? What were the hindering factors affecting implementation?
To what extent did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?	6. What has been the most significant change when it comes to the overall efficiency of the PSE services in your community?

¹⁴⁰ Not all questions can be asked in all interviews. Different sections will need to be prioritized from different stakeholders.

	7. What are the most visible changes when it comes to the capacity of PSE providers (PIs, LSG, professionals) to provide quality and accessible services for all beneficiaries, including those from the most vulnerable groups? Can you please provide some examples? What is missing?
IMPACT	
Are there early indications that the reforms of PSE services have contributed to the acceleration of the SDG related to PSE: By 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality preschool education?	<p>8. Has the reform contributed to the ability of PIs in your community and LSG to include all boys and girls in PSE? How about enrolment of children from the most vulnerable categories (CWD, Roma, children in rural areas, children from the poorest quantile)? How is the reform affecting the access to PSE to girls and to boys of these different group? Are there any differences, specific results? If yes, pls provide examples</p> <p>9. What is missing? What are the main obstacles for full coverage?</p>
SUSTAINABILITY	
To what extent did the preschool education reform's and other initiatives lead to sustainable changes in practices?	<p>10. To what extent are the PIs (public/private) in your community able to sustain or scale up the coverage, quality and equity of services? What is missing [prompt: investment in infrastructure, finances, human resources, other]</p> <p>11. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives do you consider to have the greatest amount of priority from the Serbian government?</p> <p>12. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives do you consider to have the least amount of priority from the Serbian government?</p>
How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure full advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia?	<p>13. What are financing sources that help ensure full advancement of PSE for all children? What is missing? Which areas are the most under sourced?</p> <p>14. In terms of sustaining PSE reform results long term, what is the evidence of consistency of planning and budgeting mechanism for PSE programs they are financing?</p>
EFFICIENCY	
Were PSE reform interventions budgets and resources (human, financial and technical) adequately used for addressing priority bottlenecks?	15. How would you assess the operational, human and financial resources within PSE reform interventions? To what degree have they been sufficient to ensure adequate implementation of the activities in the context, including during the pandemic?
Which PSE reform initiatives have been the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children (by program type, by target population, by inequities)?	16. Which initiatives proved to be the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children?
What resources (national, EU, other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform ? What have been the costs, who covered those costs and for how long were they covered?	<p>17. How much did PSE interventions contribute to enhancing efficiency in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. leveraging investments in provision of services to the children, b. resource mobilization efforts and partnership arrangements

COHERENCE	
Which key partners or actors who had an impact on the reform of preschool education and education can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education? What characterizes the connections and relationships between the key actors and the ways in which they work to achieve results or resist change? Which potential collaborations are not used enough?	18. Have you encountered any projects implemented by other donors/partners on the same subject? Do you have an example of successful synergies?

Interview Guide – CSOs

This guide shall serve as basis for interviews and discussions with Key informants.

We are an evaluation team commissioned to carry out the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia in PSE system in the period of 2012 -2022, including preschool education reform initiated by introduction of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (officially from 2018.), and UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, LSGs, donors, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) contribution to those results. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate the ongoing implementation of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

We are asking you to participate in the evaluation because you are in a position to contribute a relevant and valuable perspective on the functioning of preschool education reform interventions. If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by members of the evaluation team for approximately 1 hour.

Participation is voluntary: This review is designed to help improve preschool education reform interventions by learning from the perspectives of everyone involved. Your participation in the interview is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview after it has begun, for any reason, with no penalty. Participating or not in the interview will not affect the benefits to the organizations or your engagement. You should report any problems to [_____].

Confidentiality: The reports from this and the other meetings will collect and summarize the views and opinions of participants without connecting them to specific individuals and without using names at any time. Any report of this research will be presented in a way that makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to determine the identity of individuals participating in the evaluation.

If you have any questions, now or at any time in the future, you may call _____

Are you willing to be part of this discussion? (verbal response only requested)

Respondent: _____

Profession and Function: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Date: _____

Location : _____

Evaluation Questions and Sub-Questions	Interview Questions ¹⁴¹
0. GENERAL Questions	
0.1 Role	1. What is your current position and in what ways have you interacted with PSE reform interventions?
0.2 Strengths and weaknesses	2. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly good at? 3. What do you see PSE reform interventions that you are following/being engaged in as being particularly weak at?
EFFECTIVENESS	
1. To what extent have the reforms contributed to strengthening of the PSE system?	4. What do you observe as the main results of the reform when it comes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Improvements of the legislation on preschool upbringing and education in accordance with the strategic framework (e.g., quality standards, verification procedure of educational institutions, etc.)• Raised capacities of professional staff in preschool institutions• Expansion and optimisation of the network of preschool education institutions• Improvement of the quality of the PSE services• Advanced system of further professional training and professional development What were the driving factors that promoted implementation of PSE reform interventions in your view? What were the hindering factors affecting implementation?
To what extent did the PSE reforms generate the desired outcome(s)?	6. What has been the most significant change when it comes to the overall efficiency of the PSE services? 7. What are the most visible changes when it comes to the capacity of PSE providers (Pls, LSG, professionals) to provide quality and accessible services for all beneficiaries, including those from the most vulnerable groups? Can you please provide some examples? What is missing?
IMPACT	
Are there early indications that the reforms of PSE services have contributed to the acceleration of the SDG related to PSE: By 2030, all boys and girls have access to quality preschool education?	8. Has the reform contributed to the ability of Pls and LSGs to include all boys and girls in PSE? How about enrolment of children from the most vulnerable categories (CWD, Roma, children in rural areas, children from the poorest quantile)? How is the reform affecting the access to PSE to girls and to boys

¹⁴¹ Not all questions can be asked in all interviews. Different sections will need to be prioritized from different stakeholders.

	<p>of these different group? Are there any differences, specific results? If yes, pls provide examples</p> <p>9. What is missing? What are the main obstacles for full coverage?</p>
SUSTAINABILITY	
To what extent did the preschool education reforms lead to sustainable changes in practices?	<p>10. To what extent are the PIs (public/private) able to sustain or scale up the coverage, quality, and equity of services? What is missing [prompt: investment in infrastructure, finances, human resources, other]</p> <p>11. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives do you consider to have the greatest amount of priority from the Serbian government?</p> <p>12. Which tested models of PSE services and initiatives do you consider to have the least amount of priority from the Serbian government?</p>
How are services financed? Does the current financing system ensure full advancement of preschool education for all children in Serbia?	<p>13. What are financing sources that help ensure full advancement of PSE for all children? What is missing? Which areas are the most under sourced?</p> <p>14. In terms of sustaining PSE reform results long term, what is the evidence of consistency of planning and budgeting mechanism for PSE programs they are financing?</p>
EFFICIENCY	
Were PSE reform interventions budgets and resources (human, financial and technical) adequately used for addressing priority bottlenecks?	15. How would you assess the operational, human and financial resources within PSE reform interventions? To what degree have they been sufficient to ensure adequate implementation of the activities in the context, including during the pandemic?
Which PSE reform initiatives have been the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children (by program type, by target population, by inequities)?	16. Which initiatives proved to be the most efficient in meeting the needs of the children?
What resources (national, EU , other donors) were available to carry out the PSE reform? What have been the costs, who covered those costs and for how long were they covered?	<p>17. How much did PSE interventions contribute to enhancing efficiency in terms of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. leveraging investments in provision of services to the children, b. resource mobilization efforts and partnership arrangements
COHERENCE	
Which key partners or actors who had an impact on the reform of preschool education and education can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education? What characterizes the connections and relationships between the key actors and the ways in which they work to achieve results or resist change? Which potential	18. Have you encountered any projects implemented by other donors/partners on the same subject? Do you have an example of successful synergies?

collaborations are not used enough?	
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Focus Group Discussions – Local and Community Level

This guide shall serve as basis for interviews and discussions with focus groups participants.

We are an evaluation team commissioned to carry out the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia in PSE system in the period of 2012 -2022, including preschool education reform initiated by introduction of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework (officially from 2018.), and UNICEF's and other stakeholders' (government institutions, LSGs, donors, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) contribution to those results. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate the ongoing implementation of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

We are asking you to participate in the evaluation because you are in a position to contribute a relevant and valuable perspective on the functioning of the preschool education reform interventions. If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed by members of the evaluation team for approximately 1 hour.

Participation is voluntary: This review is designed to help improve preschool education reform interventions by learning from the perspectives of everyone involved. Your participation in the focus group discussion is voluntary. You can withdraw from the interview after it has begun, for any reason, with no penalty. Participating or not in the discussion will not affect the benefits to the organizations or your engagement. You should report any problems to [_____].

Confidentiality: The reports from this and the other meetings will collect and summarize the views and opinions of participants without connecting them to specific individuals and without using names at any time. Any report of this research will be presented in a way that makes it as difficult as possible for anyone to determine the identity of individuals participating in the evaluation.

If you have any questions, now or at any time in the future, you may call _____

Are you willing to be part of this discussion? (verbal response only requested)

Respondents: _____

Profession and Function: _____

Interviewer Name: _____

Date: _____

Location: _____

DEMOGRAPHICS

IMPACT	
Are there early indications that the reforms of family and child focused benefits and reformed social services have contributed to social inclusion of children and their families?	<p>5. To the extent to which you are informed/aware: thinking back to the PSE interventions (pre and post reform), what, if anything, has changed in the PSE? What has changed in your work after your LSG started applying the new FCP?</p> <p>6. What has changed, if anything, in the lives of your community as a result of the PSE reform?</p> <p>Have there been children and vulnerable groups in your community who were not able to access PSE services and benefits? Which groups are these?</p>
SUSTAINABILITY	
Are legal, institutional/administrative and financial mechanisms established to ensure monitoring and evaluation as well as sustainability of the results (policies, strategies, services)?	7. Thinking about SP services and benefits, what would be the area that could benefit from further reform going forward?
EFFICIENCY	
Were PSE reform interventions budgets and resources (human, financial and technical) adequately used for addressing priority bottlenecks?	8. Which PSE initiatives were implemented in your community? Which of them have been most effective in addressing your children's needs? What is missing?
COHERENCE	
Has there been any duplication of efforts among UNICEF's own interventions and interventions delivered by other organizations or entities in contributing to the outcomes?	9. Do you know from whom you got support from? From which institution, organization? Have you encountered any projects implemented by other international donors/partners? Please, provide examples

Direct Observation Checklist

PSE facility	Observations
<i>This direct observation tool is used in conjunction with the interview guides</i>	
Name of the PSE institution	
Date	
Town	
Name of PSE institution manager/ representative	
Number of enrolled children	
Ratio of children to number of professionals, number of groups, number of work rooms	
Is the physical space adequate for children with various disabilities?	

Set up is adequate for the service providers (relevant didactic material, computer programs, internet, other equipment)	
General Observations	

Annex 8: Questionnaire for Pls and LSGs

Questionnaire for Pls

Dear Madam/Sir,

This survey is carried out as part of the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia and other stakeholders' contribution to those results (government institutions, LSGs, academic community, UNICEF and other development partners, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) in PSE system that were supported through various initiatives over the period of 2012 -2022. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate/improve the ongoing process of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

Within the scope of the evaluation, this survey aims to collect the views and experiences of Preschool education institutions regarding the overall approach and main results and contributions of the preschool education reforms. In particular, the survey will gather views and reflections regarding the results that the reform had when it comes to coverage, equity, and quality of preschool education. We recommend you to fill this survey together as a team including principal, educators, professional associates and members of the Assets for Development Planning of the institution (where applicable).

This survey should not take more than 15 minutes to complete. Your participation is appreciated but entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time or answer only some of the questions. Personal identifiers will not be shared with the Ministry of Education or third parties. Please note that no IP address will be kept or tracked, so please express your views freely. Kindly complete the survey by XX, 2023. We will very much appreciate obtaining your feedback, which is essential to the evaluation.

The final page of the survey contains a "Submit" button. By clicking this button, you agree to your participation in the survey, and you submit your responses.

Please, contact XX at XX for any further information regarding the survey or evaluation.

Thank you very much in advance for your time and cooperation!

General information (please, choose the answer that is most suitable)

G-1. Type of Preschool education institution:

- Public
- Private

G-2. Preschool location:

- [] community with more than 500,000 inhabitants
- [] community between 200,000 - 500,000 inhabitants
- [] community between 50,000 - 200,000 inhabitants
- [] community of up to 50,000 inhabitants

G-3. How many kindergarten units does the institution have? _____

G-5.Total number of educational groups? _____

G-6 . To what extent are you familiar within your institution about the preschool education reform that was supported through various initiatives over the period of 2012 -2022?

- ☐ To great extent.
- ☐ To some extent.
- ☐ Not at all.
- ☐ I don't know/Not familiar

Reform interventions and contributions

Q1 . To what extent are you familiar with specific projects and their activities that were implemented within the scope of the preschool education reform over the period of 2012-2022?

Project	To great extent, I participated in many activities of this project	To some extent, I participated in one or two activities of this project	Not directly following but I have heard about this project	I don't know/Not familiar
Improvement of Preschool Education Project in Serbia - IMPRESS				
Kindergarten without Borders 1				
Kindergarten without Borders 2				
Kindergarten without Borders 3				
Kaleidoscope - a diversification of forms and programs of preschool education				
Piloting the Preschool Curriculum Framework				
Development and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC				

Project	To great extent, I participated in many activities of this project	To some extent, I participated in one or two activities of this project	Not directly following but I have heard about this project	I don't know/Not familiar
Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (WB)				
IPA 2014 Support to Preschool Education System Reform in Serbia (SUPER)				
IPA 2014 Equipping of preschool institutions				
Roma Education Programs Under the Roma Inclusion Component of the DILS				
Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment				
The Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre - University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education IPA 2020				
Playful Parenting				
Family oriented early interventions				
Schools of Life - Novak Djokovic Foundation				
Initiative to support the development and learning of early -age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia				

Q2. Has your institution received support to the following:

Support to PSE institution within the project and initiatives listed in question 1	Yes	If yes, how would you rate the support [1-not at all satisfactory - 5- excellent]	No	I don't know/Not familiar
Investment in infrastructure of preschool institution				
Procurement of equipment				
Capacity building (e.g., professional training)				
Financial support (more resources from LSG or projects)				
Provision of didactic and other materials				
Support in organizing learning community of practitioners in your institution				
Support in participating in learning communities of practitioners from other institutions				
Mentoring by external consultant				
Support to implementation of new curriculum 'Years of Ascent'				
Support to enhancement of inclusive practice				
Support in improvement of the mechanism for evaluation and self -				

Support to PSE institution within the project and initiatives listed in question 1	Yes	If yes, how would you rate the support [1-not at all satisfactory - 5- excellent]	No	I don't know/Not familiar
evaluation of quality in preschool institutions				
Support to development of diversified programs				
Other, pls add_____				

Q3. In what ways has the reform support respond to the needs of your institution to ensure greater coverage of all children, and in particular the most vulnerable children and their families?

Type of support	To great extent	To some extent.	Not at all. Please, explain why?	I don't know/Not familiar
Financial assistance to our institution has helped us to expand possibilities to include more children				
Investment in infrastructure has helped us to expand our network of kindergartens				
Trainings to our team helped improve our capacity to develop competencies and implement realistic program				
Investment in reform activities helped us to create and expand programs for different groups of children				
Thanks to the support, our institution managed to enrol children from vulnerable groups who were not enrolled in kindergarten before				
Thanks to the support, our institution managed to implement and run 4h				

Type of support	To great extent	To some extent.	Not at all. Please, explain why?	I don't know/Not familiar
/or shorter modality of program for children between 3 -5.5 years old				
Thanks to the support, our institution managed to improve better cooperation with parents				
Thanks to the support, local authorities are more aware of the importance of quality inclusive preschool education				
Thanks to the support, the legal framework for functioning of preschool education is improved				
Thanks to the support, the financial framework for the functioning of preschool education is clearer				
Thanks to support, the staff have more opportunities for professional development				
Thanks to support, the preschool education institutions have more opportunities for evaluation and self-evaluation.				

Q4. How many new groups has your institution managed to establish thanks to the support implemented over the period between 2012-2022?

- ☐ 1-5 new groups
- ☐ 6-10 new groups.
- ☐ 11-15 new groups
- ☐ 16-20 new groups
- ☐ more than 20 new groups
- ☐ none
- ☐ I don't know/Not familiar

Q5. To what extent has support implemented through reform interventions (including projects mentioned above in question 1) helped you to enhance the enrolment of children from most vulnerable groups as listed below?

	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all. Please, explain why?	I don't know/Not familiar
--	-----------------	----------------	----------------------------------	---------------------------

Children with disability				
Children from rural areas				
Roma children				
Children from the poorest quantile				

Q5a. How could future reform interventions help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups? Please, elaborate for each group

	Potential future reform interventions that could help ensure better coverage of most vulnerable groups
Children with disability	
Children from rural areas	
Roma children	
Children from the poorest quantile	

Q6. To what extent did capacity-building activities supported by the Ministry of education and its partners contribute to effective implementation of the preschool education reform interventions? Please, explain why?

- ☐ To great extent.
- ☐ To some extent.
- ☐ Not at all. _____
- ☐ I don't know/Not familiar

Q7. What are the main changes that you have observed in your institution when it comes to human resource capacity when comparing between 2012-2022?

	To great extent	To some extent	No changes in particular	It got worse	I don't know/Not familiar
More effective support directed to all children					
We offer better quality of inclusion for children with disabilities					
Our team is more motivated for a change of their practice					
Better communication of intra -institutional capacities					
Improved communication between the preschool professional staff and parents.					
Improved communication between the preschool professional staff and local community.					
Preschool continued to function as before					
Improved digital skills of preschool professional practitioners					
Preschool practitioners are more involved in different types of learning (seminars, trainings, learning communities...)					

Other. Please identify other changes					
--------------------------------------	--	--	--	--	--

Q8. In your view, what kind of support should Ministry of education and its partners consider in ensuring further support to the preschool education reforms? What should be priorities, rank from 1 (the most important priority) -to 7?

- ☐ Trainings related to innovative methods and diversified programs
- ☐ Mentoring of preschool education professionals to implement and develop innovative preschool practice
- ☐ More concrete guidelines to operationalise legislative framework, if yes - which piece of legislative framework
- ☐ Support in organizing learning community of practitioners
- ☐ Support in ensuring continuity/ transition between levels of education
- ☐ Other trainings for PSE staff (please, list some of trainings that would be useful):

- ☐ Other. Please identify _____

Q9. Overall, to what extent has the preschool education reform contributed to reducing bottlenecks in ensuring effective coverage of children and their families?

- ☐ To great extent.
- ☐ To some extent.
- ☐ Not at all. Please, explain why? _____
- ☐ I don't know/Not familiar

Q10. To what extent has the preschool education reform process enabled your institution to maintain the provision of the implementation of reformed preschool education?

- ☐ To great extent.
- ☐ To some extent.
- ☐ Not at all. Please, explain why? _____
- ☐ I don't know/Not familiar

Q11. What are some of the key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services? (you can choose more than one answer):

- ☐ financial challenges
- ☐ staff turnover inside the PIs
- ☐ lack of institutional and human resource capacity
 - insufficient number of educational advisors as professional and advisory support
- ☐ Lack of space
- ☐ prejudice and lack of awareness of local population in the significance of preschool education
- ☐ lack of support by local authorities
- ☐ Increase of number of children in preschool groups
- ☐ Other _____

Q12. What are the two main challenges for ensuring adequate increase of coverage of the most vulnerable children in preschool education? (please, select two that are most important in your view)

- ☐ Poverty, unemployment, or low income
- ☐ Lack of affordable housing
- ☐ Chronic health conditions or lack of access to healthcare

- ☐ Lack of access to social protection benefits or lack of access to social services
- ☐ Lack of awareness of the significance of preschool education
- ☐ Political instability
- ☐ Other, please add: _____

Q12a. In your opinion, in what ways could children from most vulnerable groups and their families be more motivated to enrol in preschool education (Roma children, children with disability, children living in rural areas or children from the poorest families ?

- ☐ through more targeted information and referral services;
- ☐ through more professional assistance and support services;
- ☐ shorter preschool program closer to their home;
- ☐ financial incentives (e.g. free of charge PSE)
- ☐ creating some conditionalities for social welfare benefits
- ☐ raising awareness of families for the significance of preschool education
- ☐ other, pls add _____

Q13. To what extent the following actors had an impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education.

	Key actor	Important actor	Relatively important	Not so important	Not at all important	I don't know/Not familiar
Ministry of Education						
Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government						
Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy						
Ministry of Health						
National Education Council						
Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation						
Institute for Improvement of Education						
Provincial Secretariat for Education, Regulations, Administration and National Minorities - National Communities						
Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia						
CIP - Center for Interactive Pedagogy						
Associations of preschool teachers of Serbia						

Association of preschool teachers of Vojvodina						
Association of Professional Associates and Associates of Preschool Institutions of Serbia						
Association of nurses in preschool institutions in Serbia						
Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Philosophy						
Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy						
Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad						
Higher education institutions						
Institute for Educational Research						
EU Delegation in Serbia						
World Bank						
UNICEF						
Roma Educational Fund						
Novak Djokovic Foundation						
Local Self Government						
Preschool Institution						
Centre for Social Work						
Other, please specified						

Thank you!

Questionnaire for LSGs

Dear Madam/Sir,

This survey is carried out as part of the Formative evaluation of key areas of preschool education policy in Serbia. The evaluation assesses the results of the Government of Serbia and other stakeholders' contribution to those results (government institutions, LSGs, academic community, UNICEF and other development partners, professional associations, civil society organisations, etc.) in PSE system that was supported through various initiatives over the period of 2012 -2022. This includes also the introduction of the new Preschool Curriculum Framework from 2018. The evaluation analyses the strengths and weaknesses of the different elements of the reform as well as insights on how to further address possible system level bottlenecks to accelerate/improve the ongoing process of the reform and/or revise the pathways to support change.

Within the scope of the evaluation, this survey aims to collect the views and experiences of local self -governments regarding the overall approach and main results and contributions of the preschool education reforms. In particular, the survey will gather views and reflections regarding the results that the reform had when it comes to coverage, equity and quality of preschool education.

This survey should not take more than 15 minutes to complete. Your participation is appreciated but entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time or answer only some of the questions. Personal identifiers will not be shared with the Ministry of Education or third parties. Please note that no IP address will be kept or tracked, so please express your views freely. Kindly complete the survey by XX, 2023. We will very much appreciate obtaining your feedback, which is essential to the evaluation.

The final page of the survey contains a "Submit" button. By clicking this button, you agree to your participation in the survey, and you submit your responses.

Please, contact XX at XX for any further information regarding the survey or evaluation.

Thank you very much in advance for your time and cooperation!

General information (please, choose the answer that is most suitable)

G-1. Size of your LSG unit:

- ☐ more than 500,000 inhabitants
- ☐ between 200,000 - 500,000 inhabitants
- ☐ between 50,000 - 200,000 inhabitants
- ☐ up to 50,000 inhabitants

G-2. How many **public** preschool institutions does your city/town have?

G-2a. How many kindergartens do your preschool institutions have?

G-3. How many **private** preschool institutions does your city/town have?

G-4 . To what extent are you familiar with the preschool education reform that was supported through various initiatives over the period of 2012 -2022 ?

- ☐ To great extent.
- ☐ To some extent.
- ☐ Not at all.

- [] I don't know/Not familiar

Reform interventions and contributions

Q1 . To what extent are you familiar with specific projects that were implemented within the scope of the preschool education reform over the period of 2012-2022?

Project	To great extent, our LSG unit participated in many activities of this project	To some extent, our LSG unit participated in one or two activities of this project	Our LSG unit was not included directly, but I have heard about this project	I don't know/Not familiar
Improvement of Preschool Education Project in Serbia - IMPRESS				
Kindergarten without Borders 1				
Kindergarten without Borders 2				
Kindergarten without Borders 3				
Kaleidoscope - a diversification of forms and programs of preschool education				
Piloting the Preschool Curriculum Framework				
Development and monitoring of the implementation of the model for the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC				
Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (WB)				
IPA 2014 Support to Preschool Education System Reform in Serbia (SUPER)				
IPA 2014 Equipping of preschool institutions				

Project	To great extent, our LSG unit participated in many activities of this project	To some extent, our LSG unit participated in one or two activities of this project	Our LSG unit was not included directly, but I have heard about this project	I don't know/Not familiar
Roma Education Programs Under the Roma Inclusion Component of the DILS				
Kindergarten as a Safe and Supportive Learning and Development Environment				
The Enhanced Equal Access to and Completion of Pre - University Education for Children in Need of Additional Support in Education IPA 2020				
Playful Parenting				
Family oriented early interventions				
Schools of Life - Novak Đoković Foundation				
Initiative to support the development and learning of early -age children from the Roma national minority in Serbia				

Q2. What types of support has your LSG unit received for preschool education in the period between 2012-2022:

Support to PSE institution within the project and initiatives listed in question 1	Yes	If yes, how would you rate the support [1 -not at all satisfactory – 5- excellent]	No	I don't know/Not familiar
Investment in infrastructure of preschool institutions				
Procurement of equipment				

Support to PSE institution within the project and initiatives listed in question 1	Yes	If yes, how would you rate the support [1 -not at all satisfactory – 5- excellent]	No	I don't know/Not familiar
Capacity building (e.g. professional training)				
Financing preschool enrolment				
Provision of didactic and other materials				
Support in organizing learning community				
Support to implementation of new curriculum 'Years of Ascent'				
Support to enhancement of inclusive practice				
Support in improvement of the mechanism for evaluation and self - evaluation of quality in preschool institutions				
Support to development of diversified programs				
Other, pls add_____				

Q3. In what ways has the reform support respond to the needs of your LSG unit to ensure greater coverage of all children, and in particular the most vulnerable children and their families?

Types of support	To great extent	To some extent.	Not at all. Please, explain why?	I don't know/Not familiar
Financial assistance to our LSG has helped us to expand possibilities to include more children				
Investment in infrastructure has helped us to expand our network of kindergartens				

Types of support	To great extent	To some extent.	Not at all. Please, explain why?	I don't know/Not familiar
Investment in reform activities helped our preschool education institution to create and expand programs for different groups of children				
Thanks to the support, our institution managed to enrol children from vulnerable groups who were not enrolled in kindergarten before				
Thanks to the support, our institution managed to implement and run 4h/or shorter modality of program for children between 3 -5.5 years old				
Thanks to the support, our senior municipal/city officials are more aware of the importance of quality inclusive preschool education				
Thanks to the support, the legal framework for functioning of preschool education is improved				
Thanks to the support, the financial framework for the functioning of preschool education is clearer				
Thanks to support, the preschool education institutions have more opportunities for evaluation and self - evaluation.				

Q4. To what extent has support implemented through reform interventions (including projects mentioned above in Q1) helped your LSG unit to enhance the enrolment of children from most vulnerable groups as listed below?

	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all. Please, explain why?	I don't know/Not familiar
Children with disability				

Children from rural areas				
Roma children				
Children from the poorest families				

Q4a. How could future reform interventions help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups? Please, elaborate for each group

	Potential future reform interventions that could help ensure greater coverage of most vulnerable groups
Children with disability	
Children from rural areas	
Roma children	
Children from the poorest families	

Q5. From what you can observe in interactions with the public preschool education institution, what are the main changes that you have observed when it comes to human resource capacity in the institution when comparing between 2012-2022?

	To great extent	To some extent	No changes in particular	It got worse	I don't know/Not familiar
Our local kindergarten now offers better quality of inclusion of children with disabilities					
Their team is more motivated for a change of their practice					
There is less turnover of staff					
There is less drop -out of children					
There is more interest of families to enrol their children					
More visibility of kindergarten in local community.					
Better organization of intra -institutional capacities					
Our local kindergarten continued to function as before					
Improved digital skills of preschool professional staff					
Other. Please identify other changes					

Q6. In your view, what kind of support should Ministry of education and its partners consider in ensuring further support to the preschool education reforms? What should be priorities, rank from 1-to 7?

- ☐ Trainings related to innovative methods and diversified program s
- ☐ Mentoring of preschool education professionals to organise and develop innovative preschool practice
- ☐ More funds

- ☐ More staff in kindergartens
- ☐ More concrete guidelines to operationalise legislative framework, if yes - which piece of legislative framework
- Support in ensuring continuity/ transition between levels of education
- ☐ Other trainings for PSE staff (please, list some of trainings that would be useful):

- ☐ Other. Please list _____

Q7. Overall, to what extent has the preschool education reform contributed to reducing bottlenecks in ensuring effective coverage of children and their families?

- ☐ To great extent.
- ☐ To some extent.
- ☐ Not at all. Please, explain why? _____
- ☐ I don't know/Not familiar

Q8. To what extent has your LSG been in position to ensure the sustainability of the initiated changes in preschool education institutions(, , infrastructure or other)

	To great extent	To some extent	Not at all	I don't know/Not familiar
Through targeted budget allocations				
Providing more technical or human resources				
Investment in infrastructure				
Obtaining funding from external sources (e.g., donors)				

Q9. What are some of the key challenges related to sustainability of the reformed preschool services? (you can choose more than one answer):

- ☐ financial challenges
- ☐ staff turnover in the PIs
- ☐ lack of institutional and human resource capacity
- ☐ Lack of space
- ☐ prejudice and lack of awareness of local population in the significance of preschool education
- ☐ lack of support by local authorities
- ☐ Other _____

Q10. What are the two main challenges for ensuring adequate coverage of the most vulnerable children (Roma children, children with disability, children from rural areas, children from the poorest families), in preschool education? (please select two that are most important in your view)

	Roma children	Children with disability	Children from rural areas	Children from the poorest quantile
Distance from the closest kindergarten				
Prejudice and stereotypes against this group				
Lack of targeted or tailored programs in our local preschool education institution				
Lack of awareness of the significance of preschool education				
Poverty, unemployment, or low income				
Lack of affordable housing				
Chronic health conditions or lack of access to healthcare				
Lack of access to social services and social protection benefits				
Lack of space in preschool education institutions				
Political instability				
Other, please add: _____				

Q10a. In your opinion, in what ways could children the above mentioned most vulnerable groups (Roma children, children with disability, children living in rural areas or children from the poorest) and their families be more motivated to enrol in preschool education?

- ☐ through more targeted information and referral services;
- ☐ through more professional assistance and support services;
- ☐ shorter preschool program closer to their home;
- ☐ financial incentives (e.g. free of charge PSE)
- ☐ creating some conditionalities for social welfare benefits
- ☐ raising awareness of families for the significance of preschool education
- ☐ other, pls add _____

Q11. To what extent the following actors had an impact on the reform of preschool education and can influence the further implementation and sustainability of the reform of preschool education and education.

	Key actor	Important actor	Relatively important	Not so important	Not at all important	I don't know/ Not familiar
Ministry of Education						
Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self -Government						
Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Policy						
Ministry of Health						
National Education Council						
Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation						
Institute for Improvement of Education						
Provincial Secretariat for Education, Regulations, Administration and National Minorities – National Communities						
Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia						
CIP - Centre for Interactive Pedagogy						
Associations of preschool teachers of Serbia						
Association of preschool teachers of Vojvodina						
Association of Professional Associates and Associates of Preschool Institutions of Serbia						
Association of nurses in preschool institutions in Serbia						
Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Philosophy						
Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy						
Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad						
Higher education institutions						
Institute for Educational Research						
EU Delegation in Serbia						
World Bank						
UNICEF						
Roma Educational Fund						
Novak Djokovic Foundation						
Local Self Government						
Preschool Institution						
Centre for Social Work						
Other, please specified						

Thank you!

Annex 9: Case studies

Case study – Aleksinac

Introduction

This case study focuses on PSE initiatives of the Ministry of Education and other partners that targeted the municipality of Aleksinac, over the period 2012–2022.

This municipality is in the Nišava District of Southern and Eastern Serbia. It is classified as an underdeveloped municipality, as its development level is below 60 percent of the national average (group IV out of V).¹⁴² Aleksinac is the second largest municipality in Nišava District by number of residents and area. According to the 2022 census, there are 43,098 inhabitants, out of which 15,607 (36.2 percent) live in urban areas.¹⁴³ Roma are the largest minority in this municipality, counting around 3.7 percent of the total number of inhabitants. The number of inhabitants has declined by 8,765 since 2011 (2,371 in urban areas, 6,394 in other areas).¹⁴⁴ In the same period, there has been a decline in the number of children aged 0 to 4 years (by 253), and 5 to 9 years (by 623). This aligns with the statements of local institutions' representatives that the number of preschool children has been declining. Employment-related migration has been the primary factor of population decline, as the income differences between Aleksinac and bigger cities in Serbia. For example, the average monthly net salary for residents of Aleksinac was 59,048 RSD in 2022, below the national average of 74,933 RSD.¹⁴⁵

The largest share of private entities in Aleksinac is in wholesale and retail trade, followed by the manufacturing sector. In recent years there has been increased investment and the opening of new workplaces in the manufacturing sector (e.g., companies Magna, Grammer, Ateni Commerce, Monicom). This was reflected in a decrease in the number of registered unemployed, from 7,974 in 2012 to 4,785 in 2022.¹⁴⁶ However, there were no significant changes in the share of social protection beneficiaries in the total population, as it was 7.5 percent in 2021, slightly more than in 2012 (7.3 percent).¹⁴⁷

Contributions of the PSE reform initiatives to the changes in the PSE institution and in the community

Quality of PSE

PI 'Lane' has been implementing the new FCP "Years of Ascent" since 1 September 2019, as it was defined by the Rule book on Foundations of Preschool Education Program, Official Gazette of RS – Educational Gazette, no. 16/2018–1. The FCP "Years of Ascent" is based on understanding of children and their learning and development, understanding of the preschool curriculum and practice, and functions of the preschool education and care.¹⁴⁸ Before the start of application of the new FCP in PI 'Lane', most of practitioners for children aged 3 to 5.5 followed program Model B, which is a cognitive–developmental teacher-centred program. Only a few of them followed Model A, which is a more open and child-

¹⁴² Official Gazette of Republic of Serbia, no. 104 /2014 (1, October 2014), https://ras.gov.rs/uploads/2019/01/uredba_o-utvrdivanju_jedinstvene_liste_razvijenosti_regiona_i_jedinica_i-2.pdf

¹⁴³ Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia (2023), 2022 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings, Age and Sex, Data by settlements, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/Pdf/G20234003.pdf>

¹⁴⁴ Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, the 2022 Census of Population, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/Pdf/G20234003.pdf>, the 2011 Census of Population, https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/oblasti/popis/popis_-2011/

¹⁴⁵ Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, database, <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/2403040403?languageCode=en-US>

¹⁴⁶ DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/home.aspx>

¹⁴⁷ DevInfo database, <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/home.aspx>

¹⁴⁸ MoE (2018), Years of Ascent Preschool Curriculum Framework, https://ecec.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Godine_uzleta-ENG-fin-Edited.pdf

centred practice with activities development in line with child's partial interests and closer to the concept of the new FCP "Years of Ascent."

The evaluation found that PI 'Lane' has made visible steps towards implementation of FCP "Years of Ascent". The feedback from staff confirms that the most visible changes have occurred in terms of **rethinking the approach to learning through reflection and dialogue with colleagues**. Data obtained from a focus group with practitioners and interviews with the director and other colleagues show that teamwork within the institution has been established as a way of working, which contributes to a reflexive approach to practice. One practitioner stated that *'We are now more open to discussing with other colleagues, to be their 'critical friend.'*

Another change has occurred in creating spatial units in rooms or in corridors, which was a challenge for practitioners in terms of understanding who can contribute to the creation of spatial units and how to develop them. Learning from examples of good practices of other kindergartens was an important factor in understanding the creation of spatial units (e.g., space for exploration of light and shadows).

Some practitioners also stated that they have a **better understanding of the terminology** used in the new FCP. A practitioner states that *'At the beginning 'integrated approach to learning' was an abstract word to me but through the implementation of 'Years of Ascent,' I have learned that one topic/project we can learn through interdisciplinary ways. Now we put focus on the process of education, not just on the final product.'* A further evident change is the way children learn about **topics/projects that are meaningful** to them by being engaged in different activities, including research and practical examples. This was highly valued by parents that participated in the focus group.

In addition, the changes have occurred at the level of the **physical environment** as confirmed by interviewed practitioners participated at the focus group. Before the implementation of the new PCF, the program was organized within classrooms, while after the start of its implementation, there has been more flexibility in using open space of kindergarten, and the creation of spatial units. Practitioners point to some initial challenges in understanding the concept of spatial units. However, their capacities in this regard have been increasing due to Joint Learning through Modelling and available guidelines.

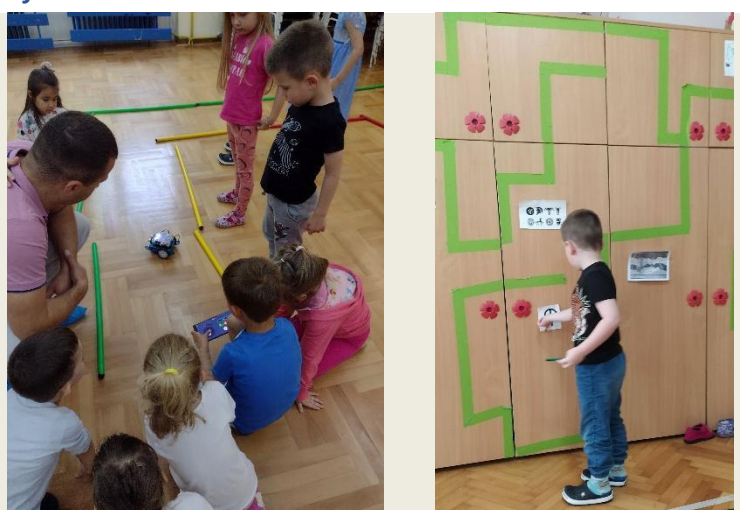
Figure 1. Spatial units in corridors of the kindergarten



Source: Photo taken during the field visit to PI Lane

Interviewed practitioner confirmed that there is a **greater involvement of parents** in certain activities (e.g., regular meetings, purchase of didactic materials, selection of project, open day in kindergarten, etc.), as well as increased level of **collaboration between PI and local community and participation of children in the local community**. There has been 'opening' to local communities, as PI Lane has been engaged in street festivals, local manifestations, humanitarian actions, etc. For example, a memorandum of understanding was signed between PI Lane and the Sports and recreation centre to jointly organize the 'Festival of Play' which is part of the municipal day celebration. As an example of collaboration with schools, during the learning topic/project 'Labyrinth,' a professor of informatics from the Gymnasium visited one group to show them how the robot moves in a labyrinth, while a professor of history talked about Minoan civilization and explained the symbol of Labyrinth.

Figure 2. Project 'Labyrinth'



Source: Photos are taken from PI website and Facebook page.

Practitioners of PI Lane participated in extensive capacity building activities since 2019. Focus groups discussion point out the high quality of the received capacity building program for the implementation of the new PCF as of 2019, delivered in the form of training, handbooks and guidelines, horizontal exchange mechanisms and mentoring support and self-evaluation. Evaluation found that practitioners who were engaged and trained by the project Kindergarten without Borders 1 and 2 and Kaleidoscope understood better how to apply the curriculum than other practitioners in this PI. In addition, PI 'Lane' from Aleksinac has significantly invested in the digital competencies of practitioners since 2019 through purchasing ICT equipment and training organized by CIP, and later ECEC project. Focus groups with practitioners show that digital competencies are improved in this PI.

Implementation of the Professional Learning Community model in the PI and between different PIs was highly valued and appreciated by the practitioners, leading to the development of reflexive practice in kindergartens – nuclei of change on the topic of space, project, and pedagogical documentation. As part of the Joint Learning through Modelling model, practitioners from PI Lane visited PIs in Pirot and Zemun, while as part of the Professional Learning Community, they could reflect on the practice of documenting and inclusive approach with practitioners from Čačak. Regarding self-assessment, Aleksinac has established a team to conduct self-evaluation of all four areas of PI quality assessment in 2023. Self-evaluation instruments that were shared with them by the ECEC project and self-evaluation guide are assessed as good tools for this practice. Moreover, PI has published papers and participated at meetings of professional associations of practitioners to share the best practice in implementation of the PCF.

However, there have been several challenges in the application of capacity-building activities. In terms of a professional learning community, changes are the least visible in programs that are organized in school facilities where around 20 practitioners are working. There is a small number of expert associates who could not cover a large number of facilities where PSE is organized which is a particular problem for scattered municipalities, such as Aleksinac.

Another mentioned challenge by practitioners is the large number of changes in the PSE area that happened all at once. *'Implementation of new PCF and related changes in the practice requires a change in the mindset of practitioners that used to work on very different concepts (B model). This change of curriculum is so radical that years must pass for it to happen change on the ground.'* Moreover, the internship and the exam for the license are not in line with the new conception. An additional mentioned challenge by interviewed stakeholders is filling the data in the Unified Information System of Education (JISP) is perceived as a significant administrative burden for a small number of staff in charge of this.

Inclusion of vulnerable groups

There has been improvement in the inclusion of vulnerable groups since 2012. The projects Kindergarten without Borders and ECEC have brought about significant changes in the development of diversified programs. As a result of the project Kindergarten without Borders, two educational groups were running since 2012, covering children aged 3 to 5.5 who were out of the PSE system, including children with disabilities (around 50 children in two groups). An additional diversified program was developed with the support of a grant under the ECEC project named 'Creative Club.' This program has been running 2 times per week for 3 hours for 20 children aged 3 to 5.5 years not included in PI and living in Prčilovica (rural areas). However, interviewed stakeholders confirmed that the program's sustainability is questionable. The pedagogical assistant has been engaged through the project Inclusion of Roma and other marginalised groups in Serbia. Pedagogical assistants work with children from Roma settlements and provide personal assistance to children with disabilities. As PI Aleksinac does not have any personal assistants engaged, interviewed stakeholders and group discussion point to the great value of having pedagogical assistants who can partially cover this position as well.

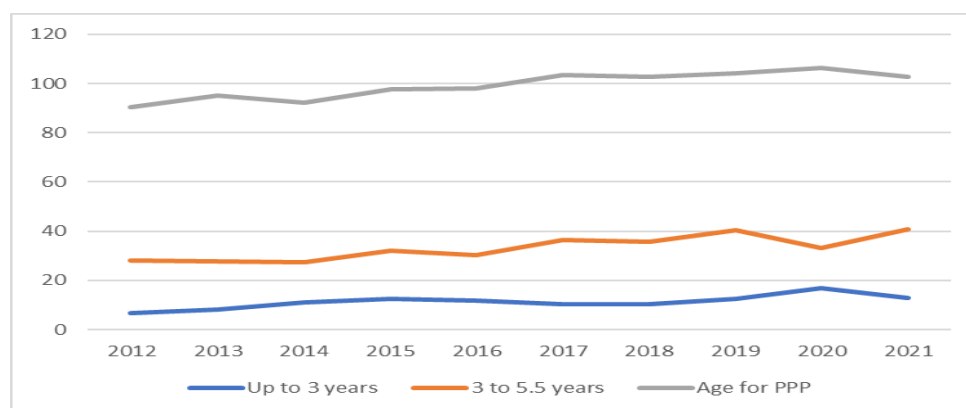
There has been improvement in the infrastructure and equipment of PIs because of a collaboration of PIs, LSG, Ministry of Education, WB, UNICEF, Novak Djokovic Foundation and the local community, such as adaptation of rooms, equipped classroom with furniture, didactics, education materials, to the arrangement of playgrounds.

Impact

The municipality of Aleksinac covers an area of 707 km² and is divided into 72 settlements which for Preschool Institution 'Lane' and the municipality of Aleksinac as its founder make a significant challenge for the planning of network of ECEC institutions to ensure total coverage of preschool children. However, there is a wide network of ECEC facilities, which has been shrinking since 2012 (6 in urban area, 23 in rural areas)¹⁴⁹ and in 2022 consisted of 24 facilities (5 in urban areas and 19 in non-urban areas)¹⁵⁰. This was due to declining of number of preschool children in non-urban areas. However, the number of children that attend preschool education has been increased from 2012 (802) to 2022 (895) as confirmed by stakeholders and document review.

The outreach and inclusion of vulnerable children has been progressing, with around 20 children with disability and between 20 to 30 children from Roma settlement covered in last three years. The main challenge for inclusion of children with disabilities is absence of personal assistants in PIs as due to some legal constraints they could not be engaged by LSG, but only through the centre for social work. Another challenge that was mentioned by practitioners is a lack of parents' awareness and acceptance that a child has a developmental delay. As regards coverage of children living in Roma settlement, there is not enough pedagogical assistants, the frequent economic migrations of Roma, distrust of Roma families towards institutional PSE, etc. Interviewed stakeholders pointed out that up to 100 children remains unenrolled due to capacity constraints. However, the coverage of children in PPP is 100 percent as there is organized transportation for children living in rural areas that are far away from preschool facilities.

Figure 3. Coverage of children by PSE in Aleksinac between 2012 - 2021 (percent)



Source: DevInfo data for Aleksinac, accessed on: <http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/Opstine/libraries.aspx/Home.aspx>

Sustainability

Over the reference period, the budget allocation for PI has increased from around 150 million RSD to a round 220 million RSD. LSG covers the cost of salaries and their professional development, transportation cost for children in rural areas and for teachers, as well as

¹⁴⁹ Z. Stevanovic, M. Petrovic, V. Popovic, S. Golubovic, Predskolsko vaspitanje i obrazovanje u Aleksincu i okolini od 1926. godine do 2019. godine.

¹⁵⁰ Work Plan of the Preschool Institution 'Lane' for 2022/2023 year

capital investments and maintenance of the PI's facilities. Support from projects, as well as private donation from business and parents have also contributed to better conditions in this PI. There is a need for additional financing resources that would ensure more spaces for children on the waiting list, and the hiring of expert associates, personal assistants, and pedagogical assistants. In addition, decreasing the number of children per educational group would enable better implementation of the new curriculum, as confirmed by consulted stakeholders.

Case study – Sjenica

Introduction

Sjenica is a small municipality situated in the southwestern region of Serbia, located on the expansive Sjenica –Pešter plateau. Sjenica had a population of 25,411 inhabitants in 2021¹⁵¹, out of whom, 2,228 were children aged 0 –6 years.

Sjenica has faced a growing outmigration and socio –economic challenges and was classified in the fourth group of extremely underdeveloped local self –government units whose level of development was below 60 percent of the national average, according to the classification of the level of development of local self –government units for 2014.

The Preschool institution “Maslačak” in Sjenica currently has 49 groups, with 20 located in field facilities and 29 within the city. They recently opened a new facility, accommodating a total of 706 children. The opening of the new facility created the condition for establishment of the nursery group, which at the time of the evaluation hosted six babies aged 6-12 months. However, the PI still encounters challenges relating to the overcrowding of groups, some of which even have up to 40 children.

Over the reference period, the municipality received numerous donations from various actors, including ministries, private donations, grants, etc. which have supported the improvement of conditions in preschool education institutions. Notably, the PI participated in a number of projects, including Kindergarten without Borders 1 and 2, Kaleidoskop, Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (Component 1 – adaptation/equipment of facilities and Component 2 – quality improvement), and Playful parenting supported by the Djokovic Foundation, etc.

Contributions of the PSE reform initiatives to the changes in the PSE institution and in the community

The PI's engagement in various projects has significantly contributed to the overall transformation of the institution and its teams. The trainings provided by Kindergarten without Borders were considered crucial in preparing the PI for the Years of Ascent and adoption of the new concept. The transformation of spatial units, especially in the new facility, has facilitated the implementation of the new reformed approach. Improved management, communication, and overall climate have had a positive impact on the reforms. Integration of self-evaluation activities have further supported these positive changes.

Projects such as "Rastimo uz ples" (Growing with Dance) and "Playful Parenting" have brought about significant changes in kindergarten practices. The establishment of a developmental group after 11 years, equipped with a sensory room, has provided specialized support as mandated by the Law. Despite challenges in establishing this group, collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Djokovic Foundation helped create the necessary preconditions for the establishment of such space. The PI maintains good cooperation with an association for children with developmental disabilities, which also helps to engage more closely on issues and needs of children with disability. The employment of a nutritionist and the provision of a diverse diet have also been positive additions.

¹⁵¹ http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/SerbiaProfileLauncher/files/profiles/sr/1/DI_Profil_Sjenica_EURSRB002001001011.pdf

Enrolment subsidies and additional afternoon groups have been implemented, benefitting four groups in Sjenica and five in field facilities. These efforts have been praised by local stakeholders as important steps toward more inclusive preschool practices. Interviews and discussions with practitioners and parents have indicated that the trainings and ongoing support have laid strong foundations for further changes within the kindergarten. Parents have reported positive changes in their children, including increased self-confidence, improved socio-emotional skills, and overall better development.

Impact

According to the stakeholder feedback and further analysis of documentary evidence regarding support to this municipality, it can be concluded that the overall quality of work in the PI has significantly improved, benefiting the children's experience.

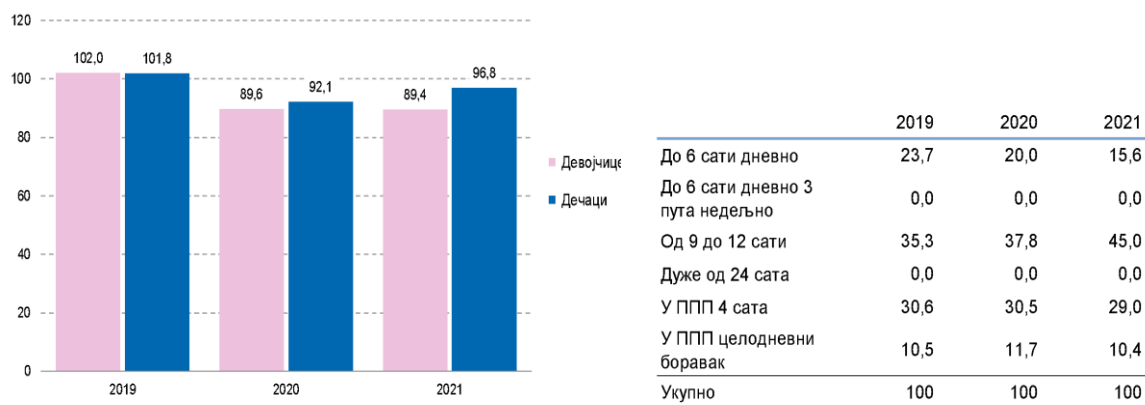
The activities on inclusion of children with disability has been progressing, with visible boosts since enhancement of spatial and methodological approaches for their inclusion in the program. At the time of the evaluation, the PI "Maslačak" had 13 children with disabilities, seven of whom are part of the development group, and others were integrated into general groups with individual support plans. Efforts are made to include and socialize these children, with each group having one or more children with disabilities. The main challenge for further inclusion pertains the lack of licensed personal assistant service in the municipality. The LSG has not yet opened any tenders for such assistance.

Another challenge that was raised with inclusion of children who experience delays in their development, links to the parents who in some cases do not accept the assistance; although there are only six Roma children enrolled in preschool. According to PI's data, these children do not attend regularly, but the kindergarten maintains constant contact with them. Efforts are made to include them in various activities, and transportation is organized to facilitate their participation. The main challenge as raised in interviews links to the difficulty to establish cooperation with their parents to overcome the irregular attendance of children. Motivating parents to bring their children to mandatory preparatory classes is a difficult task, but the kindergarten is actively working towards inclusion. In 2018, the kindergarten had a mixed group with migrants for approximately 9 months. However, such groups are no longer present as most of the migrants are single and older individuals.

Diversified programs also assisted outreach to children from rural communities in preschool and their inclusion in preschool programs. When it comes to general population, the coverage has been high with some further improvements, as visible in the figures below. The increase in children staying in different types of programs has been visible.

The PI still encounters challenges to enroll all the children that seek placements, and to ensure appropriate group setting, prescribed by Law. Most of the groups are overcrowded and this creates a challenge to fully implement the new Concept, particularly the segment of individual approaches to children. This hinders the achievement of the full benefit of the new concept as emphasized by practitioners. Besides space, material constraints pose significant challenges, requiring improvements in financial and material conditions. To overcome these challenges, the PI has taken proactive steps in fundraising from various sources, including private donations. As a result, the PI has received a van as a donation from diaspora, while local private companies also provided some material support to the PI.

FIGURE 1. COVERAGE OF CHILDREN BY PSE



Source: DevInfo data for Sjenica, accessed on:

http://devinfo.stat.gov.rs/SerbiaProfileLauncher/files/profiles/sr/1/DI_Profil_Sjenica_EURSRB002001001011.pdf

Sustainability

The financing of the PI operations is covered by the L SG. Over the reference period, the PI managed to successfully increase the budget allocation from 30 million RSD to 130 million RSD, overcoming political and other bureaucratic obstacles. Private donations and grants present significant financial input as well.

The PI has recently overcome the huge challenge of employment bans and salary delays, which presented a significant obstacle to the motivation and overall functioning of the PI. The PI succeeded in ensuring permanent contracts for practitioners, some of whom worked for years on temporary contracts. These positive steps enhanced the potential for sustainability of the PIs results.

Case study – Zrenjanin

Introduction

Zrenjanin is the fourth -largest city in Serbia. It is in the north part of Serbia, in the autonomous province of Vojvodina. In 2021, the population of the City of Zrenjanin was estimated to be around 76,511 residents.

Zrenjanin has a long history of preschool education. In 1891, the first Serbian kindergarten was officially opened in Zrenjanin. Today, the Preschool institution Zrenjanin has 20 kindergarten units (115 groups and one hospital group in local hospital for children who are treated longer in the Department of Paediatrics), central kitchen and a bakery. Over 2,600 children aged 1 to 7 are enrolled in the institution. There are also 404 employees working in the Preschool institution Zrenjanin, 250 preschool teachers and nurses, 10 expert associates and associates (pedagogues, psychologists, social workers...) and others (technical staff). The preschool institution implements a program of full -day and half -day work, together with the activities on providing food, care, preventive health care and social protection programs.

In the last decade, the municipality of Zrenjanin has used different types of financing and co-financing to increase coverage by building new kindergartens (in 2014 "Alisa u Zemlji čuda", in 2020 "Bubamara") or reconstructing the existing ones.

In 14 populated locations within Zrenjanin municipality there are preschool groups within primary schools. The municipality recognizes a great need for more places in nurseries. They are currently preparing documentation for the construction of the new kindergarten at the place of the existing building from 1964 which will be demolished and a new one will be built.



Kindergarten Bubamara

čuda



Kindergarten Alisa u Zemlji

Over the reference period of the evaluation, Zrenjanin has been involved in different initiatives, such as "Kindergartens without borders 3", "Inclusive preschool upbringing and education" (component 2 - quality improvement and component 3 - grants), "Encouraging parenting through play", "Family -oriented early interventions", "Playful parenting" project, "Years of Ascent".



Contributions of the PSE reform initiatives to the changes in the PSE institution and in the community

During interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders such as practitioners, parents, directors, and local self-government representatives, a noticeable sense of enthusiasm emerged as they talked about the significant transformation taking place in preschool education after many years. They unanimously expressed their astonishment at the newfound importance and attention given to preschool education, not only at the governmental level but also at the local level.

This change in perception of the significance of preschool education in their community was initiated by the project "Kindergartens without Borders 3" in 2017. This project empowered them to step outside the traditional boundaries and offer innovative programs in their institutions, specifically targeting children between the ages of 3 and 5.5 years. The primary goal was to include as many children as possible, particularly those from vulnerable groups, who were not previously enrolled in any preschool program. The training they received through the project, focusing on diversifying preschool education, served as valuable preparation for the implementation of the new curriculum called "Years of Ascent".

The implementation of the "Years of Ascent" education program began in the PS institution Zrenjanin in 2019. During the 2021/22 academic year, individuals from this institution also served as mentors in "Years of Ascent" in other preschool institutions. However, it is beneficial to have more individuals who have been involved in the program from its initial stages. In one focus group, a father who previously served as a mentor in "Years of Ascent" at the PS institution Zrenjanin expressed his continued support for the preschool institution.

Two kindergartens – nuclei of change, namely "Leptirić" and "Biberče," have played a central role in the implementation of the curriculum. Alongside their expert associates and the principal, they actively engage in horizontal learning, exchanging their professional experiences, reflections, and insights with colleagues from other institutions. Practitioners in focus groups expressed that visiting these kindergartens – nuclei of change for them was the most effective way of learning among their colleagues.



There has been an increased openness to reflective practices, discussions, and willingness to attend conferences. However, some practitioners still feel hesitant about presenting their work. As the assistant director mentioned, they are slowly starting to overcome this reluctance. The most visible changes have been observed in the kindergarten's physical spaces, with practitioners now utilizing all available areas and documenting their activities.

Since the "Kindergartens without Borders 3" project, the institution has developed numerous diversified programs, such as Music and Movement, Little School of Swimming, Park as Kindergarten, and Traditional Games. They have also implemented a program specifically designed for young mothers and babies who are not enrolled in preschool. Preschool teachers have recognized the benefits of these programs and continue to develop new ones in collaboration with local NGOs, sports clubs, and parents, ensuring their sustainability.

Currently, PSI Zrenjanin has successfully employed a highly skilled professional staff, enjoying excellent cooperation and support from the local self government (LSG). There is a growing awareness among the staff regarding the importance of continuous professional development. Moreover, they have fostered strong cooperation and, in certain instances, partnerships with parents. The community at large demonstrates sensitivity and a willingness to lend a helping hand, in focus group with parents they gave an example where parents together with preschool teachers are renovating some rooms for children, or equipment that would be more appropriate in line with new preschool curriculum.



During the visit to preschool, a lot of documentation for parents is visible on the walls and halls of PSI explaining the importance of play, learning of children. Also noticeable is the usage of natural materials.

Preschool teachers have observed a positive shift in parental engagement as of late. Parents are attending parental meetings and workshops at the preschool more frequently, demonstrating a desire to actively participate in daily activities and projects.

Through interviews and focus groups with practitioners and parents, a unanimous agreement emerged that the Zrenjanin preschool institution has never been more visible and actively involved in their local community. The institution's presence is prominently demonstrated through its organization and participation in numerous community activities.

A noteworthy example is the First Parenting Fair held in Zrenjanin in June 2023. The primary objective of this event was to provide parents, guardians, and foster parents with the opportunity to engage in conversations with experts from various fields, seeking answers to parenting-related questions and acquiring new knowledge. The fair aimed to contribute to a healthier and more nurturing upbringing for children. The fair featured informational booths on topics such as child nutrition, healthcare, child rights, and kindergarten enrolment. Additionally, parents had the chance to explore services offered by the City Administration of Zrenjanin, the PSI, CSW and other institutions.

Impact

Zrenjanin is currently experiencing a significant advancement in development of preschool education, with solid foundations laid for the development of higher quality preschool services. The city has demonstrated its commitment to this endeavour through increased budget allocations over the years. In 2016, 20.7 million RSD were allocated, followed by 57.6 million RSD in 2018, and a substantial increase to 478 million RSD in 2022. This substantial budget allocation reflects a clear intention and goal of improving conditions and the quality of preschool services, not only within the city but also in surrounding populated areas, where there is a demand for new kindergartens.

It is very clear that PIs and LSG are aware of importance of inclusive education which can be only reached through intersectoral cooperation. LSG Zrenjanin is listening to the needs of parents and PSI and trying to ensure support whenever is possible, what is very important especially when we are considering outreach to vulnerable groups.

Zrenjanin is respecting the values of contemporary research where the children with difficulties should be included in regular preschool programs, but there are not enough personal assistants for them, at this moment there are totally 54 personal assistants in the city of Zrenjanin but for children in preschool, primary and secondary school, in preschool they are missing 15 of them. The procedure for hiring personal assistants, which is financed by LSG, requires parents to apply a child for interresor commission to determine adequate assistance for a child and proper support. Because of this lack of personal assistants, and low motivation for this job, some parents are privately co-financing personal assistants of their child just to ensure continuity of work with their children. Also, there are more and more children that would need personal assistants, which is evident in parent request every year.

There is a wonderful example where LSG recognized a need to help one special vulnerable group and that are blind and visually impaired children, this children had to go in special schools which are not existing in Zrenjanin and close area, since they are also obligatory to be involved in preschool program parents had to place children in special schools with accommodation in the age of 5,5, years what is very stressful for children and their parents. LSG was financing the costs of parents visit to them, but 2 years ago they ensured conditions in preschool Zrenjanin to include these children in regular program.

In 2018/2019. there were 63 Roma children enrolled in preschool Zrenjanin (32 of them were involved through project Kindergarten without borders 3), in 2019/ 2020. 53 Roma children were involved; and in 2020/2021 63 children. Social worker from PSI is working with mobile team and Roma coordinator from City of Zrenjanin and they are visiting Roma community, their homes, helping them to enrol their children in preschool, in parenting, and achieving their rights e. most of them are beneficiaries of social assistance. PSI from Zrenjanin organized diversified programs close to Roma communities, which made the transition to preparatory preschool programs easier.

Parent receiving child benefit (at this moment around 700 users) enrolled their children in Zrenjanin preschools at the expense of LSG. Also, for foster families that are enrolling children in preschool is financed through LSG.

In 2002, Zrenjanin preschool institution, the Centre for Social Work and Health Centre "Dr. Bosko Vrebalov signed agreement on cooperation on the introduction and strengthening of the early intervention system in the City of Zrenjanin. Family-oriented early intervention will help early recognition of developmental risks, difficulties and disturbances in the child, assessment of the need for additional support, and support services for parents to support the optimal development and progress of the child together with experts from these three institutions. They include the creation and implementation of a unique support plan for the child and family through regular visits by experts from the teams to the family home and through support for the family and the child in the kindergarten, as the most natural environments for encouraging development and learning. Equipment is also provided in for the implementation of this program, in the form of assistive technology, computers and digital equipment, didactic materials, furniture adapted to the needs of children and parents, means of transport, as well as training for the empowerment of experts. The Family-Oriented Early Intervention Project was launched by UNICEF in cooperation with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and other partners.

At this moment, all the parents that want to enrol their children in Preschool institution Zrenjanin can do that, but the number of children in some groups especially the preparation preschool groups (app. 30 children) are higher than it should be according to Laws which is questioning the quality of program. According to PSI Zrenjanin there is a

visible increase in the need to enrol children in full -day programs (parents are not interested anymore in short programs), the need for more places for children in nurseries and for that it is necessary to expend capacities - build new kindergartens or repurpose some other spaces. Also, in smaller places that are within municipality of Zrenjanin where there are preschool groups inside the schools the problem is that they are only for preschool children and there is a need for involvement of younger children and opening nursery groups. For example, from Centre for Social Work said that there are many foster families living in these small places that have children that could be attending nurseries but there aren't any, except in Zrenjanin, which is far for them.

In 2019, a collaboration between the LSG and PI Zrenjanin led to the introduction of electronic enrolment in preschool. This initiative marked a significant milestone, as it greatly simplified the enrolment process and allowed parents to easily enrol their children. However, it posed a considerable challenge for parents who lacked digital competence. Since then, the situation has improved due to the widespread impact of Covid -19, which has generally enhanced digital skills among parents. As a result, an increasing number of parents are now utilizing this system to enrol their children.

Sustainability

In 2018, Zrenjanin became the first city in Serbia to adopt a comprehensive Strategy for Improving Preschool Education and Education, covering the period from 2018 to 2022. This groundbreaking project is implemented in collaboration with UNICEF and the Ministry of Education , Science, and Technological Development, with the active involvement of various key stakeholders.

The Working Group responsible for developing the Strategy comprises esteemed individuals, including the Director of the Centre for Social Work, the Head of the Department of Social Activities of the City Administration, and the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy. The core objective of this Strategy is to provide support for early learning development and to ensure the inclusion of as many children as possible in quality preschool education and upbringing.

This commitment extends beyond the city of Zrenjanin itself, encompassing all populated areas under the city's jurisdiction. This Strategy contributed to establishing the Centre for the Provision of Social Protection Services of the city of Zrenjanin. Association "MOST" 2020 in Zrenjanin, as important support to for different vulnerable groups children and young people with physical disabilities or intellectual disabilities between the ages of 5 and 26, also some of important activities of Centre is the right to use the service is recognized by the Centre for Social Work in cooperation with the non-responsible Interdepartmental Commission. This Centre is also doing a training for personal assistants for children with special needs involved in PSI.

One of the good examples is the software platform that was developed through the project "Kindergartens Without Borders 3 - support for the improvement of the system of social care for children and preschool upbringing and education at the local level", which was implemented in Belgrade and Zrenjanin. The project was implemented in partnership by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, UNICEF, and CIP - Centre for Interactive Pedagogy. In 2018, the Technical Faculty "Mihajlo Pupin" of the University of Novi Sad, revised the existing instrument (that was created within the project "Improving preschool education and education in Serbia (IMPRESS)", which was financed by the European Union, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia) and created a web application for the purposes of the project "Kindergartens without borders 3" for collecting data on all preschool children

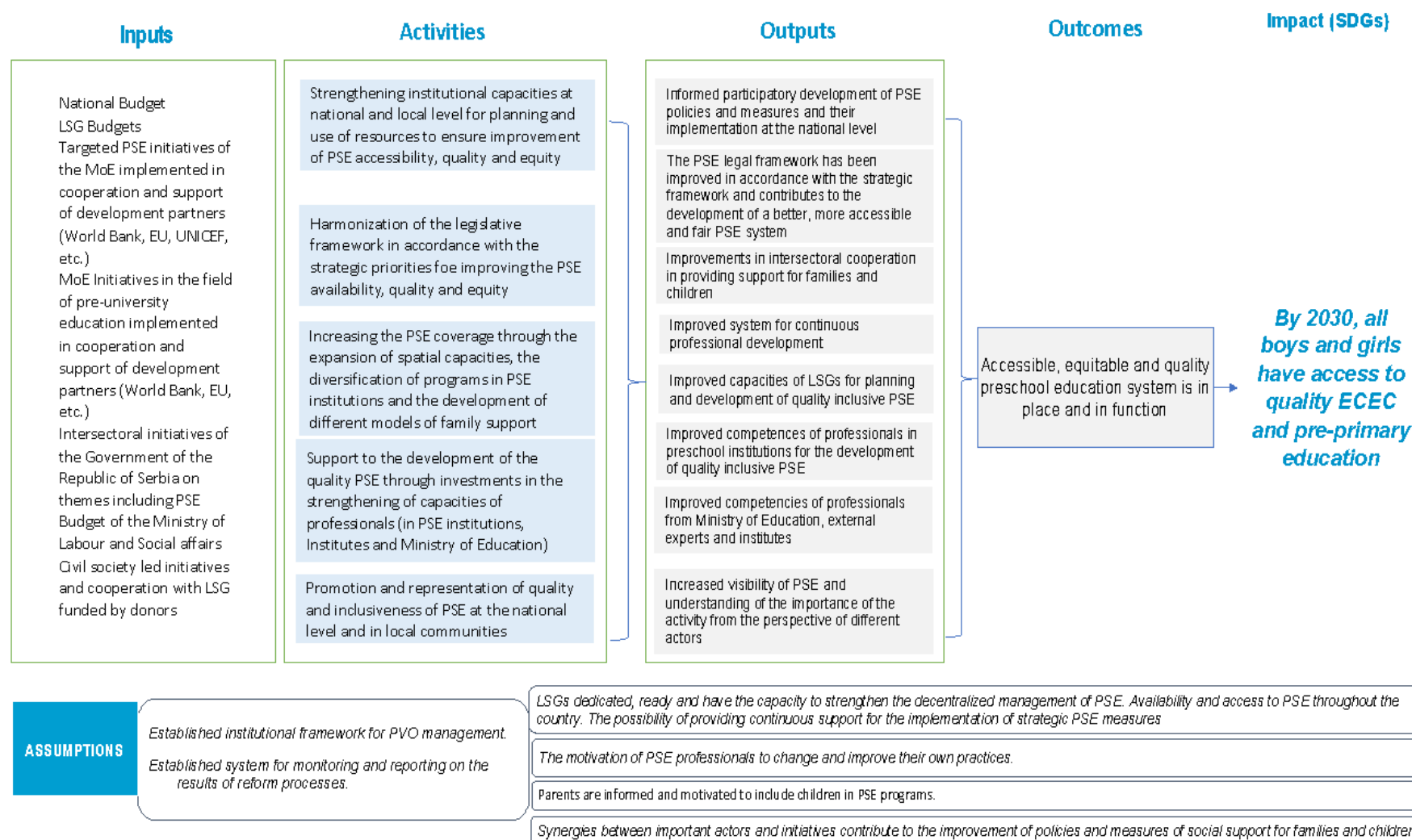
by managing data at the local level so Zrenjanin could provide support for the strategic planning of educational capacities in preschool education. This way they could detect children that were not enrolled in any programs and that help them to achieve their right to be enrolled in preschool program or at least some diversified program.

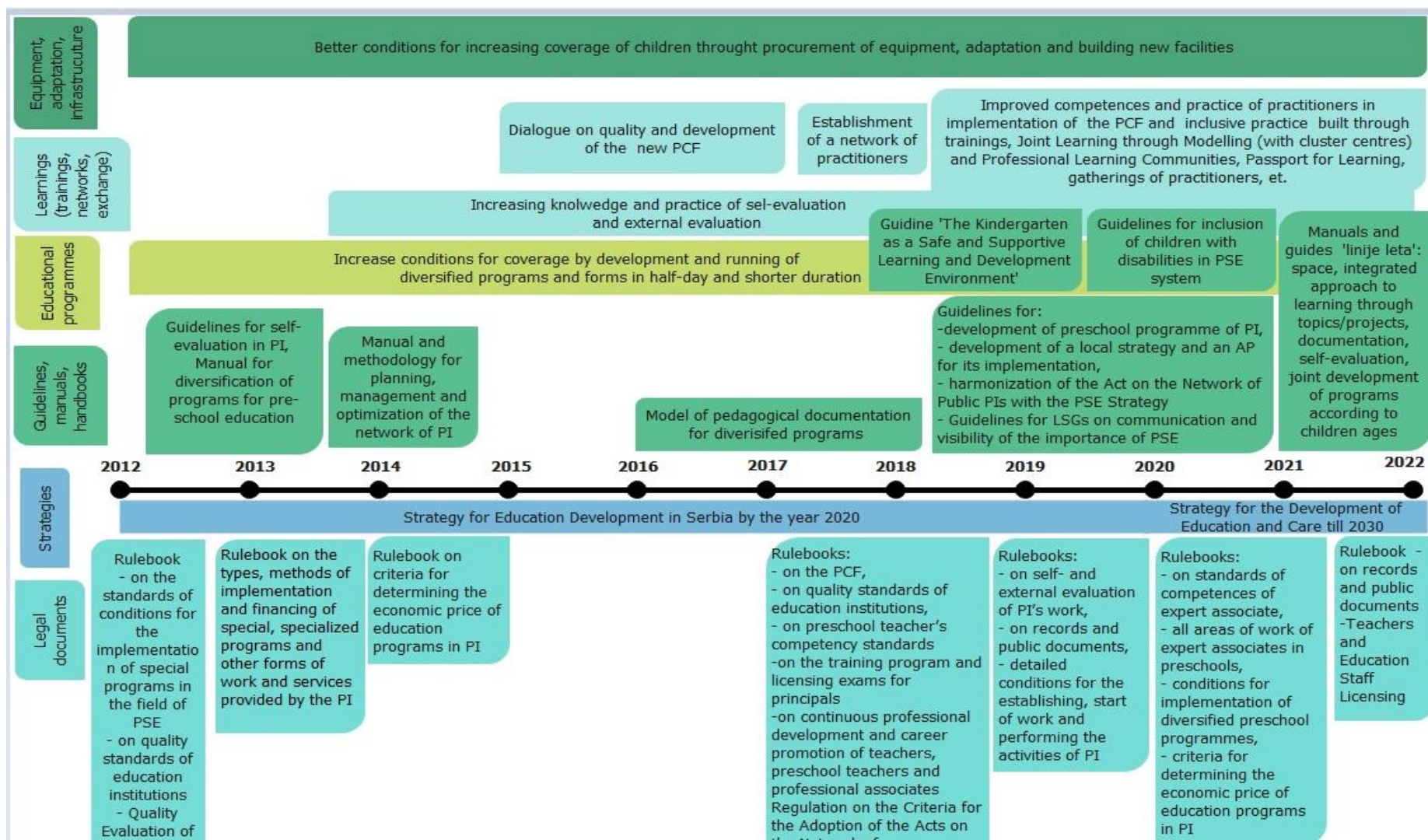
In 2021, the Zrenjanin PSI, in collaboration with the "Mihailo Palov" College of Vocational Studies for Educators from Vršac and NGO "Kreativ research" from Rešice and "Smile of a child" from Timisoara, initiated the implementation of the "For Unique - New Education Design" project (RORS -434). This project is financed under the Interreg IPA CBC cross-border cooperation program between Romania and Serbia. The total contracted value of the project amounts to 623,028.31 euros, with 529,574.05 euros representing the European Union's co-financing rate (85 percent), and 93,454.26 euros representing the co-financing rate (15 percent) contributed by project partners and the Romanian government.

This highlights PSI Zrenjanin's commitment to seeking additional sources for improving the quality of preschool education, professional development, and institutional sustainability.

Annex 10: Intervention logic and Timeline of reform

FIGURE 1. INTERVENTION LOGIC OF THE REFORM





Annex 11. Model A and Model B

In 1990, the National Education Council of the Republic of Serbia adopted the concept for the preparation of Preschool Curriculum Framework for working with children aged 3 to 7, which served as a basis for one of the models of curricular framework, while the other was a shortened and somewhat adapted version of the Canadian curriculum. The opposition between the two models had to be overcome by integration, supported by the majority of preschool employees. The so-called Model A, also known as the child-centred model, places a strong emphasis on the needs, interests, and development of individual children. In this approach, teachers design their educational activities around specific themes or topics that are relevant and engaging for the children. The curriculum is flexible and responsive to the children's interests, allowing for personalized and experiential learning. Teachers facilitate hands-on activities, play-based learning, and collaborative projects, fostering active engagement and exploration. This child-centred approach recognizes the importance of nurturing children's curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking skills.

Model B represents a more traditional approach to preschool education, focusing on the content and predetermined methodologies and approaches. In this model, the curriculum places a strong emphasis on prescribed subject matter, predetermined learning outcomes, and specific teaching techniques. Teachers follow a structured curriculum that outlines the content to be covered, the skills to be developed, and the methods to be employed. The emphasis is often on teacher-directed instruction, with a focus on academic knowledge and skills. This traditional approach seeks to ensure a systematic and comprehensive coverage of educational content.

Annex 12: Bibliography

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