

Situation Analysis

**Capacity of the Early Childhood Education and Care System to Respond to the Needs of Young Children with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs.
Report – Republic of Moldova**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EASPD - European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities
ECEC - Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI - Early Childhood Intervention
FGD - Focus-Group Discussion
MER – Ministry of Education and Research
MLSP – Ministry of Labour and Social Protection
NBS – National Bureau of Statistics
NGO – Nongovernmental Organisation
PAS - Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Service
RCF - Refugee Coordination Forum
RCIE - Resource Centre for Inclusive Education
SEN – Special Educational Needs
UNHCR - United Nations Refugee Agency
UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Situation Analysis provides an overview of the capacity of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system to respond to the needs of young children with disabilities and/or special educational needs (SEN), including refugee children from Ukraine. It gives a snapshot of the situation in the Republic of Moldova concerning the existing legislative and institutional frameworks and the main challenges and gaps related to the availability, access, and quality of ECEC services and connected social services for children with disabilities and/or SEN. The assessment was conducted by Keystone Moldova in partnership with the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) within the ECDUR regional project¹ implemented by UNICEF and funded by the United States Government. The assessment results intended to provide policy recommendations and plan capacity-building measures within the ECDUR project to improve ECEC interventions at the national level for responding better to the needs of both Moldovan and refugee children with disabilities and/or SEN from Ukraine.

In the Republic of Moldova, the national education system is regulated by a complex normative framework, which has undergone numerous amendments and completions in the last decade, in the context of the implementation of the Program for Development of Inclusive Education 2011 – 2020. The Ministry of Education and Research (MER), supported by development partners and civil society organisations, has developed and approved a set of documents (guidelines, regulations, standards, and instructions) that contain provisions on the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or SEN in mainstream education settings. In addition, support structures and services were regulated and developed, such as psycho-pedagogical assistance services, Resource Centres for Inclusive Education (RCIE) and support teachers, speech therapy sessions, psychological services, etc. In the same period, connected social services were regulated and developed that have an important role in identifying, rehabilitating, and assisting children with disabilities to prevent risks and increase their access to formal and non-formal education. Among key services are Early Childhood Intervention (ECI), Personal Assistance for children with severe disabilities, Mobile Team, Specialized Intervention Centre for Autism Spectrum Disorders, Day Care Centre for children with disabilities, Day Care Centre for Children aged 4 months - 3 years.

Despite the progress in the implementation of inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova, many ECEC settings and schools remain inaccessible to children with disabilities and/or SEN. Compared to the primary and secondary levels of education, at the level of ECEC, the process of inclusive education has not known as a systemic approach. There are good practices of inclusion of children with disabilities and/or SEN in ECEC, but these are sporadic. The Government has not approved yet a functioning mechanism for inclusive education in ECEC and a financing mechanism for support services and structures. The ECEC system is managed by local authorities, which allocate the resources for inclusive education depending on their financial capacity and local priorities. There is an extensive network of ECEC settings in the Republic of Moldova: 1467 mainstream ECEC, four sanatorium type ECEC, and eight special ECEC for children with disabilities. Of the total 1479 ECEC settings, 99.0% belong to the public sector and 1% - to the private sector, 22% operate in urban areas, and 78% - in rural areas.

The number of enrolled children per 100 available places in ECEC settings varies significantly across districts and municipalities (for instance, in 2022, there are 102 children enrolled in ECEC per 100 available

¹ ECDUR is a short name of the project “Emergency Early Childhood Development Action to Support Young Children at Risk or with Developmental Difficulties Affected by Ukraine War”

places in Chisinau municipality and 38 children enrolled in ECEC per 100 available places in Leova district). The analysis denotes the underutilization of ECEC settings, especially in rural areas, and the overutilization of them in Chisinau municipality, that also host the largest number of refugees from Ukraine. In 2022, the gross enrolment rate in ante-preschool education (ages 0-2 years) was 23.5% and 93.1% in preschool education (ages 3-6/7). An increase in the total number of children with disabilities and/or SEN enrolled in ECEC has been recorded, however, it is estimated that there are a significant number of children with disabilities who are still not enrolled in ECEC as data is not available. In 2022, 197 children with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream ECEC institutions and 589 children with disabilities (sensory impairments, physical impairments and behavioural disorders) were enrolled in special ECEC institutions. In 2022, according to official data, there were 10.6 thousand children aged 0-17 years in the Republic of Moldova with a certified disability, and one in four children with disabilities was between the ages of 0-6 (the estimated number of children with disabilities in this age group is over two thousand).

There is no record of refugee children with disabilities of preschool age in the Republic of Moldova because data collection in the case of refugees lacks disaggregation by disability and age groups. According to the UNHCR data portal, there are approximately 48,000 refugee children between the ages of 0 and 18 residing in the Republic of Moldova as of May 14, 2023. However, the MER communicates that only 1,862 refugee children were enrolled in 228 formal education settings in the Republic of Moldova, including 701 children of preschool age enrolled in ECEC settings. The results of a rapid needs assessment supported by UNICEF Moldova, show that about half of the refugee children of pre-school age were not participating in any educational activities in 2022. However, compared to other age groups, participation in non-formal education activities was the highest for children aged 0-7 years.

Limited access to specialized health services, inaccessible and/or unavailable services to address the children's complex needs in the area of their residence, and lack of qualified staff in ECEC settings to provide the necessary support, were the key factors affecting the access of refugee children with disabilities to ECEC mentioned by their parents. The personal factors also play an important role, as many parents are uncertain about their willingness to remain for an extended period in Moldova, they are not employed and therefore consider that can take care of their children at home. Furthermore, certain parents have expressed difficulties in providing proof of residence to attain the Temporary Protection status required to access various services. This was the case when the owner of the apartment was abroad or did not agree to sign the necessary documents for Temporary Protection granting.

During the assessment, it was discovered that there are numerous gaps and challenges related to the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or SEN in ECEC settings and their access to connected social services:

- **Poor identification and registration (evidence) at the local level of children aged 0-6/7 years who are at risk of developmental delays, or have developmental delays and disabilities** because of the undeveloped network of ECI services, limited access of families to health services in rural areas, the neglectful attitudes of some parents towards the child's developmental delays and awareness of the problems related to them;
- **Lack of data in the Educational Management Information System about children enrolled in ECEC disaggregated by disability, SEN, and refugee status;** Lack of a common database of children with disabilities and/or SEN shared between the health, education and social protection sectors to facilitate the planning, coordination and monitoring of the interventions;

- **Insufficiency or lack in some districts and localities of support services for inclusive education in ECEC** to meet the needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN, especially for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, and for those with severe and multiple disabilities;
- **Lack of legal provisions regarding the financing formula for inclusive education in ECEC** and lack of local funds for the development of support services, particularly in rural areas and small ECEC settings with only 1-3 groups of children;
- **Inadequate qualifications of teaching and non-teaching ECEC staff to work with children with different types of disabilities and/or SEN**, and unavailability of qualified professionals in rural areas and small districts to provide the necessary support services and guidance to ECEC staff;
- **Insufficient personnel and reduced capacity of the district/municipal Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service (PAS)** to cope with the growing demand for methodological assistance to ECEC teaching staff and service provision to young children in the context of inclusive education implementation at this level of education;
- **Mismatch between the number of professionals working in PAS and the number of children and educational institutions in the district/municipality**, which affects the quality of service provision and the staff capacity to fulfil their responsibilities in municipalities and large districts;
- **Inefficient use of the ECEC network at the country level** that results in the overloading of some institutions in municipalities and underutilization of others in rural areas due to the decrease in child populations, complemented by the difficulty of hiring the necessary staff in small ECEC settings with only 1-3 groups of children in rural areas;
- **Reduced accessibility of ECEC infrastructure** to meet the needs of children with different types of disabilities and **lack of assistive equipment and technologies** to facilitate the inclusion of this group of children in the educational process;
- **Insufficient inter-sectoral cooperation between specialists from health, education and social protection sectors** to ensure a holistic approach to the needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN and to prepare the transition from ECI to ECEC and subsequently to the child's enrolment in school;
- **Limited availability and reduced use of social services, especially Personal Assistance**, to facilitate the inclusion in ECEC settings of children with severe disabilities;
- **Lack or absence in most cases of parental education programs in ECEC settings** aimed at empowering parents of children with disabilities and those of typical children in their care and upbringing, facilitating their communication and reducing the stigmatization of children with disabilities.

Based on the assessment findings and input from key stakeholders during the participatory workshop organized by Keystone Moldova on May 18, 2023, recommendations were made to improve access to ECEC for local and refugee children with disabilities and/or SEN. The main recommendations for both central and local government are:

- **Expand the network of ECI services at the national level, ensure their connection with the ECEC network and develop ECI mobile services** to provide support in the natural environments of children (in the family, in the ECEC);
- **Improve the management of data on children with disabilities and/or with SEN in the educational system**, including ECEC by collecting, storing and analysing data disaggregated by type and severity of a disability, categories of SEN, and refugee status;
- **Develop mobile support services for inclusive education within the PAS and expand the PAS capacity** to cover ECEC from localities with a small number of children and that do not have the capacity to develop inclusive services;

- **Ensure continuous training of ECEC teaching and non-teaching staff** in order to enhance their abilities to support children with different types of disabilities and/or SEN and ensure their mentoring/supervision by the specialists of the PAS;
- **Train and certify the PAS specialists in applying specific work methodologies and tools**, which have proven effective in working with children with different types of disabilities;
- **Pilot the implementation of the support service packages for children with different types of disabilities within the ECEC settings**;
- **Develop and approve funding schemes/formulas for support services for inclusive education in ECEC**;
- **Allocate financial resources from the state budget to ensure the implementation of support services for inclusive education in ECEC settings** by creating a centralized financing mechanism;
- **Take measures for optimizing resources in order to balance the demand and supply of ECEC services** (consolidation of ECEC settings in localities with a small number of children and the opening of new groups/ECEC in Chisinau municipality and in the localities where ECEC settings are overloaded);
- **Increase the accessibility of ECEC settings infrastructure** in the process of renovating, expanding, and reorganizing them and **provide sets of equipment and assistive technologies** to children with disabilities enrolled in ECEC, including through a loan from the PAS;
- **Streamline inter-sectoral cooperation between specialists from health, education and social protection sectors**, to increase the degree of referral to support services, assessment, monitoring and assistance of children with disabilities and/or SEN;
- **Expand and finance parental education programs in ECEC**, based on good practices identified at the national level;

Moreover, in order to increase the enrolment rate of refugee children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, fostering improved collaboration between organizations and institutions supporting refugees is crucial. By working together, these entities can effectively inform parents about the available services, emphasize the benefits, and underscore the significance of enrolling their child in ECEC settings, even for short durations. **Creating mutual support groups among refugee parents with children with disabilities** presents an additional opportunity to bolster their capacity to handle different problems through information exchange and the development of supportive relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is seen as a crucial period for intervention as this period is considered a ‘critical’ or ‘sensitive’ period for brain development. Early childhood intervention (ECI) and early childhood education and care (ECEC) are both extremely important to children with disabilities and those at risk of and with developmental delays. Family-centred ECI is a field of services for young children and their families, which helps to identify, prevent, overcome, or minimise at-risk situations for optimal child development. These services aim to enhance child development and improve child functional skills, as well as enhance family competencies and wellbeing, and should be provided in the natural environment of the child with the active participation of parents and caregivers.² At the same time, ECEC refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age and lays the foundations for later success in life in terms of education, well-being, employability, and social integration.³

In the context of the refugee crisis caused by the ongoing war in Ukraine, that has disturbed the lives of millions of children, access to ECI and ECEC is particularly important. The impact of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the war, have left Ukrainian refugee children unable to attend school for several years. “Schools and ECEC settings provide a crucial sense of structure and safety to children, and missing out on learning could have lifelong consequences. There is no pause button. It is not an option to simply postpone children’s education and come back to it once other priorities have been addressed without risking the future of an entire generation.” said Afshan Khan, UNICEF Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia with reference to this specific situation of Ukrainian children.⁴

To respond to the needs of children with disabilities, developmental, or behaviour challenges or at risk of developmental difficulties, and their parents displaced due to the Ukraine war, the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD) has developed a regional multi-country initiative. The initiative titled “Emergency Early childhood development action to support young children at risk or with developmental difficulties affected by Ukraine war”, known also as the ECDUR project, is supported by UNICEF and funded by the United States Government. The project is implemented in Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and the Republic of Moldova by EASPD partner organisations. One of the project activities is to provide up-to-date data and research about the capacity of social sectors in border countries to Ukraine to assist refugees arriving from Ukraine, with a special focus on young children. Keystone Moldova, as a member of EASPD and implementation partner of the ECDUR project, conducted an assessment in the Republic of Moldova in March-May 2023.

The main purpose of this assessment is to provide an overview of the ECEC capacity to meet the needs of young children with disabilities and/or SEN, including refugee children arriving from Ukraine. It gives a snapshot of the situation in the Republic of Moldova with regard to the existing legislative and institutional framework in the social protection and education sectors, outlining the main challenges and gaps related

² EASPD. Family-centred Early Childhood Intervention: The Best Start in Life. Position Paper. Brussels, 2022, p. 4 https://www.easpd.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Family-Centred_ECI_PP_EASPD_The_best_start_in_life.pdf

³ European Commission. Early Childhood Education and Care. About ECEC. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/early-childhood-education-and-care/about-early-childhood-education-and-care>

⁴ UNICEF. 11 months of war in Ukraine have disrupted education for more than five million children. Press release of 24.01.2023. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/11-months-war-ukraine-have-disrupted-education-more-five-million-children>

to the availability, access and quality of the services provided, with a particular focus on ECEC and connected social services, ECI included. The results of the assessment are intended to provide policy recommendations and to plan capacity-building measures within the ECDUR project to improve the ECI and ECEC interventions at the national level to better respond to the needs of children with disabilities and those at risk of and with developmental delays.

In this report, the following concepts are used, as outlined in the national legislation of the Republic of Moldova:

Special educational needs - educational needs of the child/pupil/student, which involve schooling adapted to individual particularities or characteristics of a disability or learning disorder, as well as a specific intervention through appropriate rehabilitation or recovery actions;⁵

Inclusive education - an educational process that responds to the diversity of children and individual development needs and offers opportunities and equal chances to benefit from fundamental human rights to development and quality education in common learning environments;⁶

Parenting education - set of programs, services and resources intended for parents/legal representatives/caregivers with the aim of supporting them in caring and educating their children, in realizing their roles and developing and improving their parenting skills;⁷

Person with disability – a person with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory deficiencies, deficiencies that in interaction with various barriers/obstacles, may limit the full and effective participation in the life of society under conditions of equality with other persons;⁸

Additionally, for the purpose of this report, the term “**refugees**” refers to persons displaced from Ukraine since 24 February 2022, and whose legal status in the Republic of Moldova is currently controlled by the emergency law in the country and by the temporary protection regime, as of 1 March 2023.

⁵ Education Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 152/2014, art. 3

https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133296&lang=ro#

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Government Decision no. 1106/2016 on the approval of the Inter-sectoral Strategy for the Development of Parenting Skills and Competences for 2016-2022, art. 2 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=95476&lang=ro

⁸ Law no. 60/2012 on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities, art. 2

https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133226&lang=ro#

METODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The main aim of this assessment is to produce a Situational Analysis related to the capacity of the national ECEC system to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities, developmental delays, or behavioural challenges, with a special focus on refugee children coming from Ukraine. The specific objectives of the assessment are the following:

- Analyse the existing policies, legal and institutional framework related to the ECEC and connected social services through the perspective of inclusion of young children with disabilities and/or SEN;
- Identify the support services available in ECEC settings and the connected social services for children with disabilities aged 0-7 years, for those with developmental delays, and/or SEN;
- Understand the challenges and gaps related to the availability, access, and quality of ECEC services for children with disabilities, developmental delays, and/or SEN, including refugee children from Ukraine;
- Explore the capacity of ECEC system to respond to the needs of children with disabilities, developmental delays and/or SEN, including refugee children from Ukraine;
- Present the future trends related to the development of an inclusive ECEC system in the context of the refugee crisis and the new policy initiatives in the education and social protection sectors.

The EASPD provided guidance to partner organizations in developing research directions for the purpose of the assessment, which was carried out in several steps. The inception phase implied a desk review of secondary data sources and the development of an assessment framework and primary data collection tools. The collection of primary data was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions (FGD) and the last phase of the assessment was dedicated to data analysis and reporting. Therefore, data collection and analysis for the development of this report included triangulation of data from primary and secondary sources and used several methods and techniques such as Desk Review, In-depth Interviewing, FGD, and Case Study, as described below.

The desk review of secondary data consisted of a structured analysis of national legislation, regulations, policies, strategies, studies, reports, official statistics, and budget documents related to the assessment topics. Additionally, the minutes of the Education and Protection Working Groups operating within the Refugee Coordination Forum⁹ (RCF) were analysed. **In total, 50 secondary data sources were reviewed.** Subsequently, **in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 representatives of key stakeholders.** The data collection involved ministry officials, district/municipal directorates in the field of education and social assistance, ECI and ECEC service providers, NGOs and development partners.

To understand better the problems that affect the enrolment of refugee young children in ECEC settings and their access to connected services, Keystone Moldova conducted, **two FGDs with 16 refugee parents.** The identification of FGD participants was supported by the ECDUR project Coordinator and partner organisations that referred cases of refugee children with disabilities to Keystone Moldova through the Hotline service for persons with disabilities¹⁰. The only criteria imposed by the researcher for the selection

⁹ The Refugee Coordination Forum is an Inter-Sector Group co-led by the Government and the UNHCR to coordinate the refugee response in the Republic of Moldova. More information about its activity can be found on the UNHCR data portal <https://data.unhcr.org/en/working-group/316?sv=54&geo=10784>

¹⁰ Hotline support service for persons with disabilities 0 8001 0808 is operated by Keystone Moldova and is contracted by the MLSP. The service was extended in March 2022 to provided assistance to refugees from Ukraine. More information about the Hotline Service is available at <https://www.keystonemoldova.md/en/directions-of-activity/hotline-support-service/>

of refugee parents for FGD was the presence in the family of at least one child aged 0-7 years with a disability or developmental delays. Out of 16 parents who agreed to participate in the FGD, 13 were living in Chisinau municipality, one was established in the Transnistrian region, one was from Cahul district (South region) and another one was from Riscani district (North region). **The primary data collection involved 46 persons, of whom 41 were women and five were men.** Gender inequality is prevalent in the education and social protection sectors of the Republic of Moldova. This is because there are more women than men employed in these sectors, and women are traditionally expected to take care of children in the family. Also, in the context of the war, fathers in most cases stayed in Ukraine.

A Case Study was developed to capture the perspective of key actors involved in providing ECEC and social services to both local and refugee children with disabilities and/or SEN aged 0-7 years old and to their families. Stefan Voda district was selected for the case study due to its proximity to the border and its relevance in the context of a possible increase of refugee flows from southern Ukraine, and because it is one of the districts with the highest number of refugees per capita, according to UNHCR. The case study contains both quantitative secondary data and qualitative primary data that reflect the capacity of the early education system and connected social services to respond to the needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN at the district level.

The Situation Analysis preliminary findings were discussed on May 18, 2023, within a workshop organized by Keystone Moldova with key stakeholders for validation of results and participatory development of future interventions to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities, developmental delays, or behavioural challenges in the ECEC system. The report was completed based on inputs provided by workshop participants. The workshop attended 29 persons, of whom 27 were women and two were men. The participants in the assessment and in the workshop represented the following institutions and organisations:

- Ministry of Education and Research (MER)
- Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP)
- Ministry of Health
- Chisinau State Pedagogical University “Ion Creanga”
- Republican Centre of Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance
- National Agency of Social Assistance
- Education Directorates at the district/municipal level
- Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Services at the district level (PAS),
- Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorates at the district level
- ECI and ECEC service providers
- NGOs involved in the refugee response that provided services to children and/or people with disabilities
- UNICEF Moldova.

The first and **main limitation** of the assessment is the lack of data on the number of refugee families with children aged 0-7 years and their location/residence place in the country to select a representative sample. This assessment was qualitative in nature and therefore did not aim to employ a rigorous sampling methodology, but focused more on the selection of key informants to get prospective on the capacity of ECEC system for inclusive education implementation. The high number of ECEC settings at the national level (1479 units) and the **time and human resources constraints** for this assessment did not allow a mapping exercise of ECEC settings from the perspective of inclusion of local and refugee children with disabilities, developmental delays, behavioural challenges and/or SEN.

OVERVIEW OF GENERAL CONTEXT, POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Republic of Moldova ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1993 and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2010. This paved the way for the development of inclusive policy documents and determined the revision of domestic legislation to transpose the provisions of international conventions at the national level. In the last two decades, the country has made significant progress in the development, implementation and promotion of policies in the field of child protection, including children with disabilities, in accordance with European and international standards. The development by the MLSP and approval by the Parliament of the **Social Inclusion Strategy for Persons with Disabilities for 2010-2013** was the first step towards putting the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into practice. The Strategy outlined changes to the government's disability policy and measures to address the various barriers and challenges faced by persons with disabilities, including children. The policy document aimed to achieve various key objectives, such as reorganizing institutions and structures responsible for coordinating the system of social inclusion for people with disabilities, expanding community-based care services for people with disabilities, creating ECI services, adjusting educational programs to meet the needs of children with SEN, and adapting the social infrastructure to accommodate their needs.¹¹

The approach towards inclusive education was systemized after the approval, in 2011, of the **Program for the Development of Inclusive Education for the years 2011-2020**. The Programme aimed to contribute to ensuring equal opportunities and access to quality education for every child, young person, and adult, at all levels and steps of the education system.¹² The process of implementing inclusive education was planned as a complex one, involving central and local public authorities, families, educational institutions, research institutions, community services and civil society. The period that followed 2011, was marked by the development of the regulatory framework for inclusive education at the national level, as well as by the piloting and development of networks of educational support structures and services. Overall, the Program represented a significant step towards improving the education of children with disabilities, and provided a clear framework for action and a foundation upon which future efforts could be built. However, the desk review and the interviews revealed that the process of inclusive education was initially focused on primary and secondary education levels and only later started to be implemented in ECEC settings.

Within the context of the implementation of the above-mentioned key policy documented, the Parliament adopted the **Law on social inclusion of persons with disabilities** in 2012 and the revised **Education Code** in 2014. The law stipulates that every child with a disability has the right to receive an education that is appropriate for their needs and abilities. This includes access to specialized equipment, materials, and teaching methods, support services within the educational settings of all levels. In addition, the law mandates that educational institutions must offer appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, which includes providing accessible facilities and communication methods.¹³ Further, the Education Code establishes that education of children with SEN is an integral part of education and defines the “intervention measures and support services for inclusive education”. This represents a set of

¹¹ Law no. 169/2010 on for the approval of the Social Inclusion Strategy of Persons with Disabilities (2010–2013), art. 18 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=24024&lang=ro

¹² Government Decision no. 523/2011 on the approval of the Program for Development of Inclusive Education in the Republic of Moldova for the years 2011-2020 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=21997&lang=ro

¹³ Law no. 60/2012 on the Social Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, art. 27 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133226&lang=ro#

measures and services designed to support children, pupils and students with SEN in order to facilitate their access to community-based educational services.¹⁴

In 2017, the **MER revised and regulated the activity of ECEC settings** in line with the new Education Code provisions. The regulation stipulates that ECEC is addressed to all children from the community, including those with SEN who require recovery /rehabilitation and socio-educational inclusion. It contains several specific provisions related to the inclusion of children with SEN, such as complex evaluation and/or periodic re-evaluation of the degree of development of children with SEN, development and implementation of individualized intervention plans for children with SEN in accordance with PAS recommendations, provision of support and rehabilitation/recovery services and individualized education programs. A child with SEN or severe disabilities is eligible to benefit from a support teacher based on the recommendations of PAS. In the case of children with severe disabilities, they should be assisted in the educational process by a personal assistant, granted by the social protection authorities. Additionally, ECEC institutions in cooperation with responsible local public authorities ensure environmental conditions according to the individual needs of children with SEN. Mainstream and special ECEC institutions where children with SEN and disabilities are enrolled should collaborate with social protection institutions, and other public or private organisations, in order to assist children with SEN.¹⁵

According to the national legal provisions, **the main purpose of ECEC is the child's holistic development and his/her preparation for integration into school activity.** ECEC includes two cycles: ante-preschool education, for children aged 0 to 2 years and preschool education, for those from 2 to 6 (7) years old. In the Republic of Moldova, compulsory education begins with the preparatory group in preschool education from the age of 6. ECEC takes place in a wide range of settings such as nurseries, kindergartens, community early education centres or in other institutions that provide services in accordance with state educational standards. Childcare services for children under 3 years of age can be offered also by employers within the enterprise, organisation or institution for the benefit of employees, with the bearing of all related expenses from the means of the respective employer, according to the normative framework approved by the Government. The Education Code includes specific provisions regarding the organisation of ECEC in residential care institutions for orphaned children or those left without parental care, in sanatorium institutions for children with chronic diseases, as well as in special education institutions, penitentiaries and medical institutions.¹⁶

Ante-preschool education for children aged 0-2 years is carried out in the family which benefits from funding from the national public budget through a monthly allowance for child care. However, at the parent's request, local public administration authorities can also arrange the ante-preschool education, funding it from the local budget. Preschool education institutions enrol all children from the corresponding school district upon request, without any competitive tests being required. This enrolment is mandatory. The state bears the expenses for ECEC services in public institutions for all children, including children with SEN.¹⁷ For children from 2 to 3 years old, the state gradually implements the provisions regarding funding, according to a program approved by the Government, depending on the

¹⁴ Education Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 152/2014, art. 3
https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133296&lang=ro#

¹⁵ Regulation of the early education institution approved by the MER order no. 254 of 11.10.2017, art. 4, 31, 126-128.
https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/reg-tip_iet_14.11.2017_rom.pdf

¹⁶ Education Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 152/2014, art. 23

¹⁷ Ibidem, art. 24-25

degree of preparation and the places available in ECEC settings and general education institutions, as well as depending on the available financial means.¹⁸ The **public ECEC settings and extra-school education are established, reorganized and liquidated by the local public authorities**. They have the obligation to ensure the good functioning of ECEC institutions in accordance with the regulations and standards approved by the MER.¹⁹

During the last few years, the MER has developed, revised, and approved a series of methodological documents in the field of ECEC that are relevant for organizing the educational process and ensuring the quality of education for all children, including those with special educational needs. Among key methodological documents are the following:

- The Reference Framework of ECEC in the Republic of Moldova (MER Order no. 1592 of 25.10.2018);
- Child Learning and Development Standards from birth to the age of 7 (MER Order no. 1592 of 25.10.2018);
- ECEC Curriculum (MER Order no. 1699 of 15.11.2018);
- Implementing Guidelines: Child Learning and Development Standards from birth to the age of 7 and the ECEC Curriculum from the perspective of the Reference Framework of ECEC in the Republic of Moldova (MER Order no. 283 of 20.03.2019);
- Methodology for monitoring and evaluating child development based on the Standards of learning and development of the child from birth to the age of 7 (MER Order no. 1939 of 28.12.2018);
- The individualized educational plan for children with SEN in ECEC institutions (MER Order no. 1780 of 03.12.2018);
- Minimum endowment standards for the ECEC institution (MER Order no. 253 of 11.10.2017);
- National professional standards for ECEC teaching staff approved by the National Curriculum Council on 23 August 2010;

In 2020, the MER and LUMOS Foundation Moldova developed also a Methodological Guide for Inclusive ECEC, presenting models for the development of inclusive education in preschool settings. The document contains methodological suggestions regarding curricular practices, activity design, and educational management in kindergartens and has the function of guiding the implementation of inclusive ECEC by providing models and tools for planning, design, and evaluation.

In response to deinstitutionalization from residential care institutions for individuals with disabilities (both children and adults) and the implementation of social inclusion policies, the **MLSP has developed and approved regulations and quality standards for a set of social services**. It is crucial for social services to play a vital role in identifying, rehabilitating, and supporting children with disabilities. This helps prevent any potential risks and ensures that they have better access to other services, including formal and non-formal education. Among the most important services regulated and developed in this regard are ECI, Personal Assistance, Mobile Teams, Specialized Intervention Centre for Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Day Centre for Children with Disabilities, Day Care Centre for Children aged 4 months - 3 years. These are considered connected services to support the educational and social inclusion of children with disabilities. In order to improve the collaboration and coordination of interventions between specialists from different fields (education, health care, social assistance and public order), the inter-sectoral mechanism for the primary prevention of risks regarding the child's well-being was approved.

¹⁸ Education Code of the Republic of Moldova no. 152/2014, art. 152, d¹
https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133296&lang=ro#

¹⁹ Ibidem, art. 21

The most recent policy documents show a clear commitment of the Government to advance the inclusive education and social protection of all citizens, with special attention to children with disabilities. **The National Program for Child Protection for the years 2022-2026** and the Action Plan for its implementation represent the last programmatic policy document on child protection, developed and launched by the Government in 2022. The document aims to strengthen the child protection system to respond promptly and efficiently to the needs of each child, supported by an increase in the share of expenses allocated to family and child protection. The Program's priority areas of intervention target the good governance in the field of child protection, preventing and combating violence in all environments and in all forms, deinstitutionalization, alternative care, and supporting families to prevent separation.²⁰ Among others, it contains measures related to the improvement and diversification of family support services, the establishment of the moratorium on the placement of children of any age, but especially of children up to 3 years old, in residential care institutions, special measures for supporting foster care services for children aged 0-3 years and children with disabilities.

The Government has also recently approved a strategic policy document in the field of education. The **"Education 2030" Development Strategy** aims to increase the quality of education, implement digital technologies and ensure qualified and competent teaching staff within the educational system. One way to improve access to quality education is by implementing programs specifically designed for children and young people from vulnerable groups or those with disabilities. Upon analysing the strategic document and implementation program for 2023-2025, it is evident that there are well-defined goals for preschool education. One of them refers to ensuring the access of children aged 2 years and children aged (2)3 to 6 years to quality ECEC. Another specific objective lies in ensuring by 2025 the conditions for quality inclusive education for all, including the children of refugees from Ukraine, in at least 60% of the country's educational institutions. The capitalization of the resources of local public administration, community, and family in ensuring and promoting the inclusive education of children and students, including those with SEN, from vulnerable families, in situations of risk and/or with deviant behaviour represents also an objective of the Education 2030 Development Strategy.²¹

The Government has extended the implementation period of the **Inter-sectoral Strategy for the Development of Parenting Skills and Competences for the years 2016-2022** until 2024. The Strategy establishes the directions for the development of parent education, as a specific form of specialised intervention for the organisation of training programs, development and consolidation of parenting skills and competences of parents/legal representatives/caregivers. Parents who have children aged 0-2 years and 3-6 years and children with SEN are targeted by the policy. One of the planned measures is the development of didactic supports for parenting skills training taking into account the needs of children with SEN and/or disabilities of preschool age.²² The MER representative informed also that the National Centre for Early Education and Information of the Family (CNETIF) in partnership with the MER and with the support of UNICEF developed the parent education curriculum and methodology in 2018. Parent education programs can be held in various settings, including care facilities, medical institutions, educational institutions, as well as online, and even in the family home. The last form of parent education

²⁰ Government Decision on the approval of the National Program for Child Protection for the years 2022 - 2026 and the Action Plan for its implementation (325/MMPS/2022). <https://cancelaria.gov.md/ro/content/cu-privire-la-aprobarea-programului-national-pentru-protectia-copilului-pe-anii-2022-2026-si>

²¹ The policy document was approved by the Government on 7 March 2023. Its content can be found at https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect-02-nu-900-mec-2022_1.pdf

²² Government Decision no. 1106/2016 on the approval of the Inter-sectoral Strategy for the Development of Parental Skills and Competences for the Years 2016-2022, p. 17. https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=95476&lang=ro

programs organisation (at home) targets mainly families with children with disabilities, vulnerable families, or families with new-borns/ babies.²³

²³ Dima, A. and Pelivan, V. Parent education curriculum and methodology for organizing and implementing parent education programs (pilot version), Chisinau 2018, p.15
https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/curriculummetodologie_educatie_parentala.pdf

CAPACITY OF ECEC SETTINGS

In 2022, there were registered **1479 functional ECEC settings in the Republic of Moldova**, including 809 - nursery schools, 563 kindergartens, 89 school-kindergartens, 16 community centres and 2 nurseries. By destination, three types of ECEC settings are distinguished: 1467 institutions with the general destination (mainstream), 4 sanatoria-type settings (for children with chronic diseases) and 8 special institutions (for children with disabilities). Out of all the ECEC institutions, 99% or 1464 institutions belong to the public sector. Among these, 335 units are located in urban areas while 1129 units are in rural areas. Private ECEC institutions only consist of 15 units, all located in urban areas.²⁴ The assessment did not manage to identify any accessibility audit of the ECEC system at the country level. Although there was no accessibility audit conducted for the ECEC system at the national level, the desk analysis of policy documents and interviews with stakeholders reveal that many ECEC buildings and facilities remain inaccessible for children with disabilities, particularly those with physical and sensory disabilities.

Based on the MER data, on September 1st, 2022, 132199 children were enrolled in ECEC settings across 6327 groups, at the start of the 2022-2023 school year. In the eight ECEC special institutions, 46 groups operated and in two ECEC mainstream institutions, seven special purpose groups for children with disabilities operated in 2022. The gross enrolment rate in ante-preschool education was 23.5% and in preschool education - 93.1%.²⁵ The rates for preschool attendance among Roma children and children with disabilities are 12% and 11%, respectively.²⁶ The age distribution of children in ECEC institutions shows a preponderance of children aged 6 years – 23.1%, 5 years – 22.7%, 4 years – 22.0% and 3 years – 19.9%. The share of children under 3 years old enrolled in ante-preschool education is 11.1%.²⁷

The data collected by the NBS shows that **the highest share of ECEC enrolment was registered in Chisinau municipality (90.6%) and the lowest share - in the South region (86,5%)**. In 2022, the average number of enrolled children per 100 available places in ECEC settings was 75. A higher value of the average number of children per 100 available places in ECEC settings is registered in urban areas (94 children per 100 places), compared to the rural areas where there are 63 children enrolled per 100 available places. The most children per 100 places were registered in Chisinau municipality - 102 children, in Balti municipality – 96 children and in Ialoveni district - 90 children, and the fewest children per 100 available places were registered in Leova district – 38 children (see Figure 1).²⁸ It proves the underuse of ECEC settings in the majority of districts and the overuse of ECEC settings in Chisinau municipality.

²⁴ NBS. Statistical Bulletin from 19.04.2023. The activity of ECEC institutions in 2022. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/activitatea-institutiilor-de-educatie-timpurie-in-anul-2022-9454_60393.html

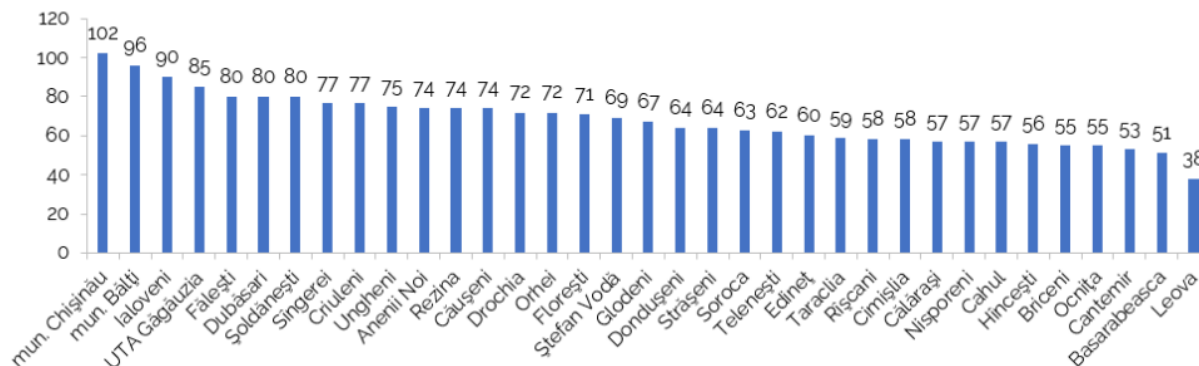
²⁵ MER Activity Report for 2022, p. 9 https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/raport_mec_2022_1.pdf

²⁶ UNICEF Moldova. Country Office Annual Report 2022, p.2 <https://www.unicef.org/media/136201/file/Moldova-2022-COAR.pdf>

²⁷ NBS. Statistical Bulletin from 19.04.2023. The activity of ECEC institutions in 2022. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/activitatea-institutiilor-de-educatie-timpurie-in-anul-2022-9454_60393.html

²⁸ Ibidem

Figure 1. Number of children enrolled in ECEC per 100 available places by districts and municipalities in 2022



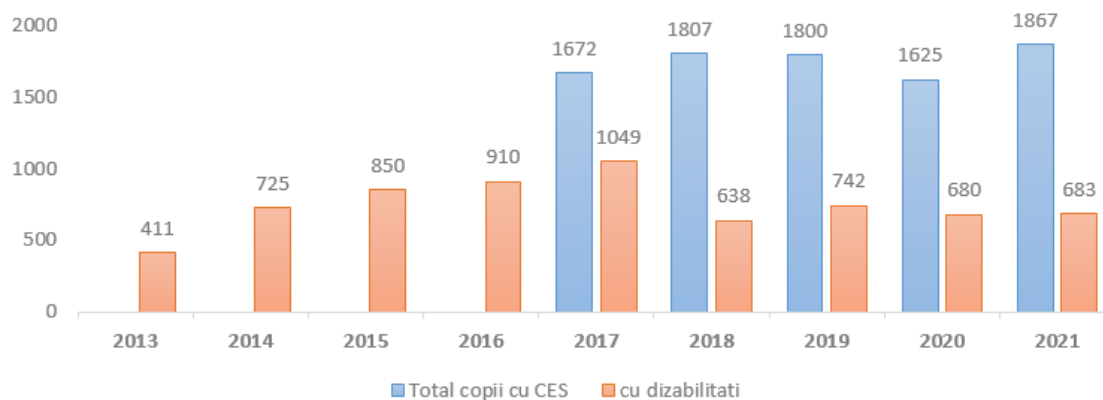
Data source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)

Apart from this data, the interviews confirmed the two realities of the ECEC system in the Republic of Moldova: **the insufficiency of places in ECEC settings in Chisinau municipality** to satisfy the increasing enrolment request from parents (especially for children under 3 years old) and the **closure of groups/kindergartens in rural areas** due to population decline. For instance, a representative of PAS communicated that in Stefan Voda district, 13 groups were closed in the last two years. At the same time, according to the Vice-mayor of Chisinau, the municipality opened 127 new groups in ECEC settings with a total capacity of 3035 new places during the years 2019-2022. In February 2023, 4443 children over 2 years of age were enrolled in the 168 ECEC settings in the municipality of Chisinau, which constitute half of the total number of applications (8953). Therefore, 4510 places are still needed in ECEC settings for children over 2 years old, which requires the opening of 230 new groups in Chisinau. Identifying solutions for organizing new groups and/or opening new kindergartens is one of the key priorities of the municipality.²⁹

During the last decade, according to the data of the Republican Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Centre, there was **an increase in the total number of children with disabilities and/or SEN enrolled in ECEC**. In 2013, there were only 411 children with disabilities in ECEC, while in 2021 there were 683 children with disabilities out of a total number of 1867 children with SEN (see Figure 2). There were registered also some improvements in the evidence of children with SEN (with and without disabilities) from 2017 when the PAS started to collect data on SEN in ECEC settings.

²⁹ Ukraine situation: Moldova: Inclusion and Livelihoods Working Group Meeting Minutes (22 Feb 2023) <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99860>

Figure 2. Total number of children with SEN and/or disabilities enrolled in ECEC



Data Source: Republican Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Centre (blue – total number of children with SEN, red – children with disabilities).

In 2022, **197 children with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream ECEC institutions and 589 children with disabilities (sensory impairments, physical impairments and behavioural disorders) were enrolled in special ECEC institutions**, based on NBS data.³⁰ In 2021, 175 children with disabilities were enrolled in mainstream ECEC institutions and 547 children with disabilities (sensory impairments, physical impairments and behavioural disorders) were enrolled in special ECEC institutions.³¹ In 2022, we can notice a rise in the number of children with disabilities in both mainstream and special ECEC, as compared to 2021. However, we can also observe that these children are mostly separated and enrolled in special ECEC settings. At the same time, there is an estimated significant number of children with disabilities that are still not enrolled in ECEC. According to interviewed specialists from the education sector, this is especially the case of children with severe disabilities. The data of the National Social Insurance House shows that on January 1, 2022, there were **10.6 thousand children with certified disability aged 0-17 years**.³² Based on the MLSP data, **one in four children with disabilities is between 0 and 6 years old**.³³ (the estimated number of children with disabilities in this age group is over two thousand).

Nevertheless, the interviewed representatives of the education sector reported that the data on children with disabilities and/or SEN enrolled in ECEC system, as well as the number of those that should be enrolled, are still not accurate, these numbers being underestimated. The current Information System of Management in Education does not capture the necessary data on children with SEN in ECEC. To improve **the data management related to SEN**, the project "Development of a new program and promotion of inclusive education in the Republic of Moldova" carried out by the MER through the Republican Centre for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance and financed by UNICEF, supported complex actions to fulfill the identified gaps. The representative of the Republican Centre for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service

³⁰ NBS. Statistical Bulletin from 19.04.2023. The activity of ECEC institutions in 2022. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/activitatea-institutiiilor-de-educatie-timpurie-in-anul-2022-9454_60393.html

³¹ NBS. Statistical Bulletin from 19.04.2022. The activity of ECEC institutions in 2021. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/activitatea-institutiiilor-de-educatie-timpurie-in-anul-2021-9454_59405.html

³² NBS. Annual Statistical Report. People with disabilities in the Republic of Moldova in 2021. https://statistica.gov.md/index.php/ro/persoanele-cu-dizabilitati-in-republica-moldova-in-anul-2021-9460_60129.html

³³ Draft Government Decision on the approval of the National Program for child protection for the years 2022-2026 and the Action Plan for its implementation, p. 12 <https://gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/subiect-02-nu-325-mmps-site-.pdf>

communicated that an “Informational Data Management System in the Field of Inclusive Education” Module was developed and is in the piloting process.

The "**Informational Data Management System in the Field of Inclusive Education**" Module represents an IT solution to ensure the registration, storage, processing, and use of information regarding the assistance provided by PAS at the district/municipal level, children with SEN, and specialists from preschool, primary and secondary education institutions who provide educational services. It represents a set of resources and information technologies, technical means of program and methodologies, located in interconnection, intended for reporting and journaling of data in accordance with the situation per district or at the national level in the field of inclusive education. The new Module will allow the analysis of the needs regarding the planning and development of inclusive education support services. It will also help in planning the accessibility of the educational environment for children with disabilities, endowment with assistive technology and equipment, and continuous training of teachers and specialists.³⁴

The inclusion of children with disabilities and/or SEN in ECEC is facilitated by support structures and services established at the local level. Each Education Directorate at district/ municipality level appoints a **specialist responsible for inclusive education** who is in charge of the development and promotion of inclusive education in the district/municipality in all types of educational institutions. The specialist on inclusive education is responsible for the implementation of state policies and the normative framework aimed at ensuring access to quality education for all children. In addition, in each district/ municipality a PAS operates based on the decision of the district/municipal council.

As per the governing regulations of PAS, it is responsible for the following activities:

- carries out the complex evaluation of children's development to ensure educational inclusion;
- Determines the presence of SEN and elaborates recommendations regarding intervention measures and support services addressed to children with SEN, depending on their specific needs;
- carries out the reassessment of children with SEN, at least once a year;
- issues recommendations regarding the form of child inclusion in the education setting (total, partial, occasional) as well as recommendations on the organisation of individual education/training of children at home;
- provides psycho-pedagogical, speech therapy, psychological assistance, as well as other services, as the case may be, to the child included in institutions that lack specialized services;
- provides methodological support related to Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance and psychological counselling to preschool, primary and secondary education institutions;
- collaborates with multidisciplinary commissions from educational institutions in order to evaluate children and organize inclusive education processes;
- monitors, evaluates and supervises the activity of specialists involved in the inclusive education processes;
- administers databases and monitors at the district/municipal level the situation of all children benefiting from PAS services.³⁵

The Republican Centre for Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance under the MER, which coordinates and monitors the PASs activity, reported that **the number of specialists within the PAS varies from district to district**, and is not aligned with the number and needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN or with the

³⁴ MER Activity Report for 2022, p. 34-35 https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/raport_mec_2022_1.pdf

³⁵ Government Decision no. 732/2013 regarding the Republican Centre for Psycho-pedagogical Assistance and the district/municipal Psycho-pedagogical Assistance Service, Annex 2, art.11. https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=22066&lang=ro

number of educational units within the covered geographical area. The specialists who assist students with special needs (PAS) are facing high demand in municipalities and districts, which makes it difficult for them to provide adequate support to school staff, parents, and children with SEN. In interviews, one of PAS specialists acknowledged this challenge and one of them provided evidence to support this claim.

"We do not manage to cover even 50% of the needs at the district level. About 9-14 children with disabilities and/or SEN are on our waiting list each year. Currently, there are 55 local children with SEN in the kindergartens in our district, of which 19 have disabilities. Our PAS specialists work with 45 children with SEN per week, one child benefiting from an average of 2 hours of support (speech therapy, psycho-pedagogy, psychology, etc.) per week. This is very little. For example, a child with Autism Spectrum Disorders would need support 4 hours a day, if we want to see positive results. In order to be able to initiate interventions with children with more severe disabilities or with increased support needs, we discharge 10-14 children who have made progress, even though they would still need support." Key Informant Interview, PAS

Within the education institutions, educational support structures are established intra-school multidisciplinary committees, resource centres for inclusive education (RCIEs) and support teaching staff. According to the MER, in March 2023 there were **990 RCIEs that operate in the educational institutions in the country, and 1,366 support teaching staff that provide services for children with SEN, including those with disabilities.**³⁶ During the interviews, the respondents pointed out the insufficiency of psychological assistance, speech therapy, and specific therapies for children in all educational institutions and especially in ECEC institutions. They mentioned also that the majority of RCIEs were created in primary and secondary educational institutions because the inclusive education program at the first stage focused on these education levels and only recently started to be implemented in ECEC. For instance, an assessment shows that in 2021, there were 20 psychologists, 16 psycho-pedagogues and 126 support teaching staff in the ECEC system and there were seven districts where there was no support service available in the ECEC settings.³⁷

According to the Education Code provisions, in the general education system, including ECEC, the staff consists of management personnel (principal, deputy principal), teaching staff, auxiliary teaching staff and non-teaching staff. In ECEC, the didactic functions are the following: **early education teachers (educators), support teachers for children with SEN, music director, speech therapist, psychologist, psycho-pedagogue and early education specialist responsible for methodological work.**³⁸ The interviewed representatives of the education sector mentioned **the lack of the majority of these positions and staff in small ECEC settings, except for early education teachers (educators).** In 2022, 31,000 persons were employed in ECEC institutions that provided didactic and non-didactic activities. Out of the total number of ECEC employees, 12.6 thousand people (40.6%) are management and teaching staff, the majority of whom are women (97.7%). Out of 12.6 thousand management and teaching staff, 9.9 thousand persons (78.6%) worked as educators, 48.7% - in the urban areas and 51.3% - in the rural areas. The share of

³⁶ MER. Inclusive Education Priorities. Press Release from 01.03.2023. <https://mec.gov.md/ro/content/prioritatile-domeniul-educatiei-incluzive-discutate-la-ministerul-educatiei-si-cercetarii>

³⁷ Trofin, L. et al. Inclusive education. UNICEF Moldova and MER Joint Evaluation of the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education 2011 – 2020, Chisinau, 2019, p. 31 <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/sites/unicef.org/moldova/files/2020-02/Raport-de-evaluarea-comun%C4%83%20a%20implement%C4%83rii%20programului%20de%20educa%C8%9Bie%20incluziv%C4%83%202011%20%E2%80%93%202020%20%28RO%29.pdf>

³⁸ Education Code of the Republic of Moldova, art. 53 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133296&lang=ro#

teaching staff with higher education/university degrees was 61.7%. In the urban areas - 75.1% of the teaching staff had higher education, and in the rural areas - 48.9%.³⁹

Identification, referral, evaluation and re-evaluation procedure of children with SEN is regulated by the Instruction on the application of Child Development Evaluation Methodology in ECEC. In the case of ECEC settings with 1-3 groups, with a small number of children and teaching staff, involvement of specialists from other ECEC settings that have speech therapist, psychologist, psycho-pedagogue or from the district/community school and/or from primary medicine and social assistance institutions could be requested.⁴⁰ The MER representative communicated that more than half of ECEC settings are small, with only 1-3 groups of children, particularly in rural areas, and there are challenges in recruiting specialized personnel for child development assessment purpose.

The interviewed representatives of PAS and inclusive ECEC service providers informed that it is quite difficult to cover the needs of its own constituencies and there are no sufficient and qualified human resources to support other institutions/districts. During the discussion, the issue of staff shortages and turnover rates, as well as the negative impact of aging teaching staff, inadequate salary levels and limited institutional endowment, on the implementation of inclusive education was brought up. A representative from Pedagogical State University shared that over the past five years, the university has graduated around 400 speech therapists, but unfortunately, most of them are not interested in working in ECEC systems located in rural areas. Only a small number of them have found employment in ECEC settings in urban areas.

When it comes to the inclusion of preschool children with disabilities, **the type of services they receive in ECEC settings** is crucial. The interviewed specialists have mentioned several groups of services available for all children such as educational services that vary based on age categories, as well as care services like feeding, sleeping, supervision, including health and safety supervision, including first aid in emergencies. Additionally, support services for children with SEN and parenting services should be also available, as multiple respondents have noted. The desk review shows that the MER drafted in 2017 a **standard package of services to be provided within ECEC settings** for each age category/level of education. In addition, support services for children with SEN and parenting services should be available, as multiple respondents have noted.

A review of the MER's 2017 draft package of services for different age groups and education levels reveals a wide range of support services, such as child development assessments, counselling and psycho-pedagogical assistance, speech therapy, assistive devices and technologies, kinesiotherapy, and physiotherapy. However, this document has not been approved yet. According to interviewed specialists, amendments or additions to the Education Code, as well as an estimate of the costs of services included in the package, are necessary before the package can be promoted. It is also important to approve a strategic document related to inclusive education.

Related to the **quality of education services** provided in ECEC for children with disabilities and/or SEN, the current assessment did not manage to identify any research that would reveal the opinion of parents of this target group. According to the KAP survey commissioned by UNICEF in 2018, the **level of**

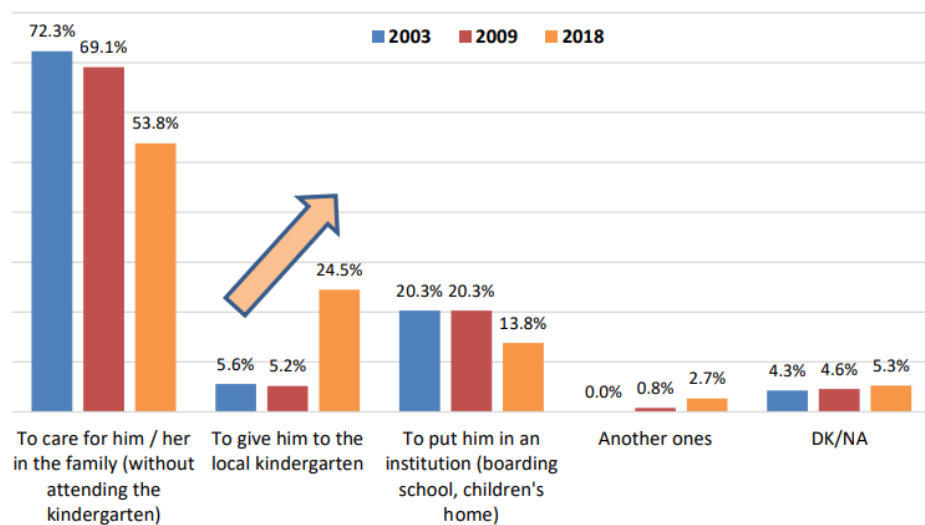
³⁹ NBS. Statistical Bulletin from 19.04.2023. The activity of ECEC institutions in 2022. https://statistica.gov.md/ro/activitatea-institutiilor-de-educatie-timpurie-in-anul-2022-9454_60393.html

⁴⁰ Order of MER no. 343/2018 on the approval of the Instruction on the application of Child Development Evaluation Methodology in ECEC, art. 22 https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/ordin_343_0.pdf

satisfaction with the quality of care and conditions in kindergartens is relatively high among parents, with nine out of ten respondents expressing satisfaction in this regard⁴¹, but the data are not disaggregated by category of parents (with and without children with disabilities). Therefore, further research is needed to explore if there are any differences between the two groups of parents. However, the lack or insufficiency of support services in ECEC for children with disabilities and/or SEN and the lack or shortage of specialized and qualified staff particularly in the rural areas, allow us to conclude that there is still a lot to be done to improve the quality of education for this target group.

Another problem communicated by interviewed stakeholders related to the enrolment of children with disabilities in mainstream ECEC settings has to do with the **reticent perceptions of inclusive education among parents of typical children**. According to the last UNICEF Moldova KAP survey conducted in 2018, there are still a significant number of people who hold "exclusive" attitudes towards admitting children with disabilities, most of the respondents (53.8%) believing that these children should be cared for at home or in residential institutions (13.8%) (see Figure 3). On one hand, there is a considerable increase in the population that supports inclusive education (24.5% compared to 5.2% in 2009 and 5.6% in 2003). The majority of the respondents (63.3%) believe that children with disabilities will develop better if they attend kindergarten alongside other children. On the other hand, there is a lower acceptance rate when it comes to specific types of disabilities, such as mental (42.7%) and hearing disabilities (42.4%).⁴²

Figure 3. Views on inclusion of children with disabilities in kindergarten



Data source: UNICEF Moldova, KAP survey 2018

The representatives of PAS and ECEC settings expressed during the interviews that often **parents of young children are often unaware of their child's developmental delays and refuse to accept the disability** until they go to school and face learning difficulties and adaptation problems. Many of them are hesitant to be assessed by PAS and/or to receive assistance from PAS when enrolled in ECEC institutions due to stigma, especially in rural areas, which hinders their further inclusion in primary school. Given these

⁴¹ Cantarji, V., Vladicescu, N., Vremis, M. Knowledge, attitudes and practices in early childhood development and care. UNICEF Moldova, 2018, p.38
<https://www.unicef.org/moldova/media/8201/file/Evaluarea%20cuno%C5%9Ftin%C5%A3elor,%20atitudinilor%20%C5%9Fi%20practicilor%20famililor%20privind%20C3%AEngrijirea%20C8%99i%20dezvoltarea%20copiilor.pdf>

⁴² Ibidem

difficulties, the interviewed stakeholders agree that a range of programs should focus on improving parenting skills and increasing parental involvement in education activities. Positive attitudes towards inclusion, effective parenting practices, and active parental involvement, all contribute to the success of inclusive education and the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC. However, several representatives of the education sector communicated that there is not enough capacity among ECEC staff to conduct regular activities for developing parenting skills, especially in case of parents with children with disabilities.

In a mapping study of parenting education programs, carried out in 2020 by CNPAC in partnership with MER, 32 providers of parenting education programs were identified, most of which were NGOs. Based on the profile of the parents benefiting from parenting education programs, **17% of the total programs (9 programs out of the 52 mapped) are intended for parents of children with disabilities and 23.1% (12 programs) are addressed to parents with children of preschool age.** The study attests to a series of difficulties faced by parenting education program providers. These refer to the recruitment of parents-beneficiaries of the program (56% of the providers), the lack or insufficiency of financial resources for the implementation of the programs (40.6% of the providers), the recruitment of trainers (37.5% of the providers), the accreditation of the programs (21.9% of providers). In addition, the study concludes that there are no national certification standards in the field of parenting education and that the financing of parenting education programs takes place, for the most part, within projects funded by donors.⁴³

MER informed that in 2018, in partnership with CNETIF, the **parenting education curriculum and the methodology** for organizing and implementing parenting education programs were developed and approved for piloting. About 150 kindergartens were involved in organizing activities aimed at developing parenting skills. In 2020, during the pandemic, several online materials were developed for parents to improve their parenting skills and about 10000 early education teachers were trained to provide parental education. The resources were uploaded on the MER webpage⁴⁴ and tackled different topics related to child development, care, education, communication, first aid, etc. However, several participants in the interviews consider that parenting programs are just at an incipient stage and that there is a need for more resources (human and financial) to organize these regular activities with parents.

The analysis of the Education Sector Expenditure Strategy 2021-2023 denotes that the **ECEC budget subprogram has the largest share of the planned financial means in the Education sector.**⁴⁵ Annually, 370.1 million MDL were planned for ECEC sub-budgetary program to ensure the financing of educational services from the local public authorities in 2023-2025.⁴⁶ At the same time, all interviewed specialists from the education sector mentioned that there are **no clear instructions for the estimation and allocation of funds for inclusive preschool education at the local level.** Now, the town hall and the local council decide on funds allocation and there is no clear methodology for budgeting and developing support services for children with disabilities and/or SEN. In the case of localities with low budget revenue, it is particularly difficult to identify the necessary resources for inclusive education. According to the assessment of the inclusive education program, commissioned by UNICEF in 2019, it is necessary to modify the normative framework regulating inclusive education at the level of ECEC, by introducing a coefficient for inclusive

⁴³ Oceretnii, A., Batranescu, V. Research report. Mapping the parenting education programs provided in the Republic of Moldova, CNPAC, Chisinau, 2020, p.11, p.24 <https://www.cnpac.md/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Studiu-pilot-parenting-final.pdf>

⁴⁴ MER web page. Resources for ECEC teachers. <https://mecc.gov.md/ro/content/resurse-pentru-cadre-didactice-educatia-timpurie> and ECEC Resources for parents. <https://mecc.gov.md/ro/content/resurse-pentru-parinti-educatia-timpurie>

⁴⁵ MER, 2021-2023 National Sectorial Strategy on Expenses in the field of Education. https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/ssc_2021-2023_educatie.pdf

⁴⁶ Ministry of Finance. Mid-Term Budgetary Framework 2023-2025. Early Education Sub-budgetary program. <https://mf.gov.md/ro/buget/cadrul-bugetar-pe-termen-mediu>

education in the ECEC financing formula. The lack of these provisions prevents the development of RCIEs and the hiring of support teachers in kindergartens.⁴⁷

One of the interviewed representatives of the education sector and the UNICEF representative mentioned that several solutions for a balanced distribution of finances for preschool education in urban and rural areas, for institutions with large and small capacities, and for institutions with different working hours were discussed at the national level with MER in 2019. UNICEF Moldova supported the development of ECEC financing options and one of them provided specific financing coefficients for the inclusive education of children with SEN. However, the document has not been approved by the MER. Keystone Moldova in partnership with MER has recently developed a **standard package of support services for achieving inclusive education at various education levels**, ECEC level included. The standard package offers services that cater to children who have hearing or visual impairments, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and intellectual disabilities.

The standard package includes educational assistance services and specialized assistance offered to children with disabilities provided by educational specialists within multidisciplinary teams, in partnership with the child's parents/legal representatives/caregivers, to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in educational institutions of all levels, ECEC included. The costs of each type of support service were estimated per hour, per disability type, and per severity based on an analysis of national best practices at the national and international levels. Keystone Moldova presented the draft package of service to the Parliamentary Commission for social protection, health and family. The participants in the workshop, to whom the standard package was presented during the workshop, suggested creating a coalition of NGOs, ECEC service providers, parents of children with disabilities and other interested stakeholders to advocate for the standard package funding from the state budget.

The desk review and interviews indicate that at the national level, **several models of inclusive education were piloted in ECEC institutions by NGOs** such as Keystone Moldova, Lumos Foundation Moldova, FCPS, Pas cu Pas, etc. Numerous ECEC didactic staff consulted during the evaluation of the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education 2011 – 2020 carried out by UNICEF in 2019, know the legal framework regarding the regulation of inclusive education.⁴⁸ There are inclusive ECEC settings that were developed due to the financial support and expert advice of NGOs specialised in ECI, ECEC and disability. However, there is a need to develop a clear methodology for the expansion of inclusive education in ECEC and to ensure the institutionalization of inclusive practices at the country level. The participants in the assessment mentioned that one of the gaps that also affects the inclusion of children with disabilities in ECEC is the **lack or insufficiency of didactic materials for the implementation of individualized educational plans in the case of children with disabilities and/or SEN**. The poor cooperation between specialists from different education levels and from health and social protection does not allow the continuation of support services and the preparation of the child's transition from one educational level to another one.

⁴⁷ Trofin, L. et al. Inclusive education. UNICEF Moldova and MER Joint Evaluation of the Program for the Development of Inclusive Education 2011 – 2020, Chisinau, 2019, p. 31 <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/sites/unicef.org/moldova/files/2020-02/Raport-de-evaluarea%20comun%C4%83%20a%20implement%C4%83rii%20programului%20de%20educa%C8%9Bie%20includiv%C4%83%202011%20%E2%80%93%202020%20%28RO%29.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 32.

ENTRY POINTS AND CONNECTED SOCIAL SERVICES

Before a child enters the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system, the medical worker should be the first specialist who to identify any possible problems in the children's development and direct the parents to the authorized institutions for screening, disability determination, and to rehabilitation, or recovery services. National standards exist for monitoring a child's growth and development, which include home visits by the family doctor and nurse for preventive examinations. In addition, new-borns screening tests are conducted to detect hearing and vision deficiencies, as well as screening for phenylketonuria and other congenital diseases.⁴⁹ The desk review and the interviews show that one of the causes of late identification of developmental delays and disability in children is limited access of their parents to health services, especially in rural areas (see also Stefan Voda Case Study).

According to the data of the Ministry of Health, in 2020 there were **4.8 family doctors (general practitioners) per 10 thousand inhabitants in the Republic of Moldova, compared to 7.96 family doctors per 10 thousand inhabitants in the European Union**. In some districts of the country, this proportion is far below the national average. A family doctor in rural areas often has 3000 - 6000 inhabitants and more on record, compared to the recommended number of 1500 - 2500 inhabitants. The activity of the family doctor is concentrated on the consultations provided in the institution (health centre, family doctors' office, health office). The majority of nurses work mainly in family doctors' offices, and some of them fulfill their duties by working as community nurses.⁵⁰

A representative from the Ministry of Health stated that the **health sector relies mainly on nurses for early identification of children who may present risks of developmental delays or disability**, taking into account that it is difficult to cover all vacancies of family doctors especially in rural areas and in small districts. However, two participants in the assessment mentioned that the nurses are often unable to conduct necessary home visits and implement person-centred approaches in the family environment of the child, because they are also overloaded.

ECI services play a crucial role in locating, identifying and evaluating all infants and toddlers, who have or are suspected of having developmental delays or disabilities and providing parents/caregivers with the knowledge, skills and support to meet the needs of the child. **The right to ECI services of children with disabilities, developmental delays or at risk was introduced by Law 60/2012** which defines ECI as: “a process of anticipating, identifying and undertaking effective measures for the child and family in order to minimize the impact and potentially negative consequences of the child's pathological condition and to contribute to his/her health and development”.⁵¹

To implement the mentioned legal provisions, the Government Decision No. 816/2016 approved the Framework Regulation on the organisation and functioning of ECI services and minimum quality standards for ECI services. The Framework Regulation further defines ECI as: “medical, social, and psycho-

⁴⁹ Ministry of Health. Order no. 964 of September 2, 2019 on the approval of the standards for monitoring the child's growth and development in outpatient conditions and the approval of the Child Development Record (F 112/e).

https://msmps.gov.md/sites/default/files/legislatie/ordin_nr_964_din_020919.pdf

⁵⁰ Draft National Health Strategy 2030, p. 14-15

<https://www.sanatateinfo.md/News/Item/11504/inca-o-incercare-ministerul-sanatatii-a-publicat-a-treia-oara-strategia-nationala-de-sanatate-pentru-urmatorii-7-ani-ce-propuneri-se-regasesc-si-ce-lipseste-din-noul-document>

⁵¹ Law no. 60/2012 on the social inclusion of persons with disabilities, art. 2

https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=133226&lang=ro#

pedagogical services, offered to children for the identification, evaluation, and assistance of developmental disorders and the risks of their occurrence, in order to stimulate physical, motor, vision, hearing, cognitive, communicative, social, psycho-emotional and adaptive development”.⁵²

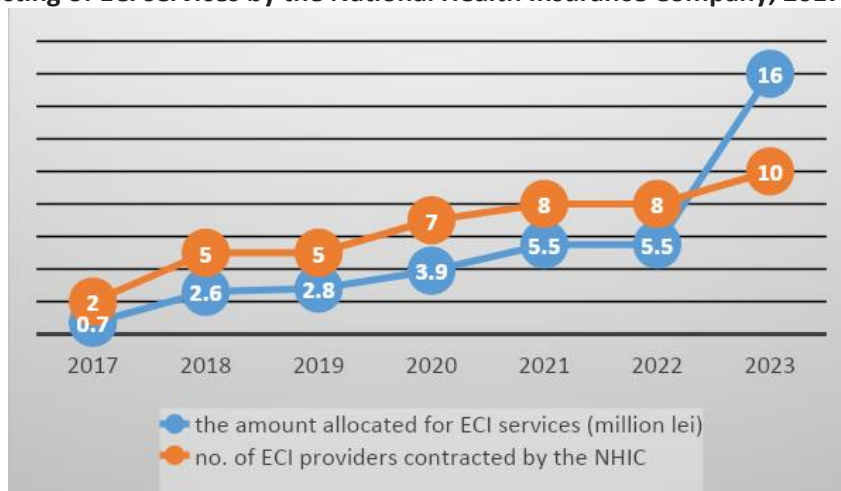
According to the provisions of the normative act, **ECI should be provided through inter-sectoral collaboration between specialists in different fields within interdisciplinary teams in partnership with parents or other legal representatives/ caregivers of the child.** The interdisciplinary team includes paediatricians, paediatric neurologists or physical therapists, psychologists/ psycho-pedagogues, speech therapists, physiotherapists or rehabilitation nurses, nurses, and/or social workers. Beneficiaries of the services are children under three years old with developmental disorders and/or their associated risk factors, as well as parents/other legal representatives/caregivers of the child according to established eligibility criteria for ECI programs.

In order to access the services, the family situation is assessed in accordance with the social service case management procedure. The service provider appoints a case manager who then coordinates and monitors the service delivery process for 18-20 beneficiaries. Services can be provided by healthcare facilities or organisations specialised in ECI regardless the type of ownership and the legal form of the organisation. Expenditure on the organisation and operation of ECI services shall be covered by the service providers. ECI services are funded by compulsory health insurance funds, grants, donations, and other legal sources. In the compulsory health insurance system, service providers hold contracts with the National Health Insurance Company for the provision of health care for insured individuals. There are no provisions on the costs of integrated ECI services.

Despite clear policy priorities and an approved regulatory framework, the mechanism for integrating social services and medical services funding within the ECI sector is not yet regulated. **Since June 2016, ECI services have been a part of the Mandatory Health Insurance Funds Single Program** under the budget subprogram "Specialised outpatient medical care". Every year, the National Health Insurance Company has increased the amount allocated for ECI services development and provision, as well as the number of contracted service providers. In 2017, 0.7 million lei was allocated to two ECI service providers, while in 2023, 16 million lei was allocated to 10 ECI service providers (see Figure 4).

⁵² Government Decision no. 816/2016 on the approval of the Framework Regulation on the organisation and functioning of ECI services and ECI minimum quality standards. Annex 1, art. 4, p. 15
https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=93683&lang=ro

Figure 4. Contracting of ECI services by the National Health Insurance Company, 2017-2023



Data source: National Health Insurance Company⁵³

In 2023, the National Health Insurance Company essentially increased the funding of ECI services. Thus, 16 million lei were planned in the mandatory healthcare insurance funds for this purpose, over 11 million more than the amount initially contracted last year. This increase in the contractual amount and in the number of contracted service providers, according to the National Health Insurance Company, was determined by the increase in the need for ECI services for children aged 0-3 years. After multiple meetings with ECI specialists to determine the necessary territorial coverage for specialized assistance, the budget for this service was estimated. Additionally, the area of ECI provision covered by mandatory health insurance has been expanded. As of 2023, there are ten ECI service providers contracted at the national level. Six of these providers are public medical institutions, while the remaining four are NGOs that offer a full range of services for eligible children.

An interviewed ECI provider communicated that the National Health Insurance Company has not yet develop and approved a reporting template and appropriate performance indicators for the contracted ECI services. Therefore, the National Health Insurance Company does not track the types of ECI services, primary and secondary beneficiaries of services. Additionally, several participants in the assessment stated that ECI is perceived more as medical or rehabilitation services by health sector specialists and not as medico-social services. Currently, UNICEF Moldova is conducting a mapping of ECI services to produce a comprehensive situation analysis. The report will inform the necessary measures to support the further development of the ECI system, as stated during the interview with the UNICEF Moldova representative.

The limited access of children with sensory and locomotor disabilities to assistive devices and technologies represents another challenge for the social inclusion of children with disabilities. Although there are some initiatives to ensure access to assistive equipment, they are not always sufficient to meet their needs. Unfortunately, there is no national mechanism for collecting data on the needs and monitoring the satisfaction of the beneficiaries of the services. At the same time, at the district level, there is a lack of specialists trained in this field. In recent years, there has been a diversification of intervention models, which are developed and tested with the support of NGOs providing social services and with the

⁵³ The chart reflects the data from annual reports on the execution of the Mandatory Health Insurance Funds for 2017-2021 <http://www.cnam.md/?page=131&> and Press Releases of the National Health Insurance Company on the allocation of funds for ECI in 2022 and 2023.

support of development partners. Particularly, **access to medico-social services for children and young people with autism spectrum disorders or at risk of developing them continues to be a challenge**. The mechanism for allocating financial resources for the development and provision of these services at the national level still needs to be finalized and implemented.⁵⁴

The assessment shows that the **shortage of social services in some administrative-territorial units** deprives vulnerable families of assistance and support, among the most affected groups being children with disabilities. For instance, the Mobile Team service is only available in 15 out of 35 level 2 administrative-territorial units (districts, municipalities), the Family Support service is available in 11 out of 35 level 2 administrative-territorial units and only 4 out of 35 level 2 administrative-territorial units have a Day Care Centre for children.⁵⁵ The data analysis reveals that not all eligible children with severe disabilities have access to personal assistance, with 677 children on the waiting list at the end of 2021. They represented 32% of eligible children who did not benefit from this service⁵⁶ that is crucial for the social inclusion of children with severe disabilities and for their access to different other services.

In interviews, education and PAS experts emphasized the importance of utilizing Personal Assistance services for children with disabilities, particularly during educational activities. However, it was noted that many parents who serve as personal assistants for their own children are hesitant to accompany them to school or kindergarten. Specialists have observed that some parents view Personal Assistance primarily as financial aid for the family rather than a means of promoting social inclusion.

ACCES OF REFUGEE CHILDREN TO ECEC AND CONNECTED SOCIAL SERVICES

⁵⁴ Government Decision on the approval of the National Program for Child Protection for the years 2022 - 2026 and the Action Plan for its implementation (325/MMPS/2022), p.12. <https://cancelaria.gov.md/ro/content/cu-privire-la-aprobarea-programului-national-pentru-protectia-copilului-pe-anii-2022-2026-si>

⁵⁵ MLSP. Reform of the social assistance system RESTART: for fair access to social services, March 2023, p.5. https://social.gov.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Reforma-sistemului-de-asistenta-sociala_FINAL-1.pdf

⁵⁶ National Agency of Social Assistance. Republic of Moldova: Children beneficiaries of social services in 2021. Statistical bulletin. June 2022, p.11 https://www.anas.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Buletin-Statistic-ANAS_Copii.pdf

According to the Government and UNHCR data, the Republic of Moldova has received **822,393** Ukrainian refugees and third-country nationals since the Russian invasion in Ukraine on 24 February, 2022 and up until 14 May, 2023. Of them, **108,620** are recorded to be in the country, as of 14 May 2023.⁵⁷ The Government of the Republic of Moldova has shown leadership in responding to the protection needs of refugees fleeing war in Ukraine. Civil society organisations, volunteer groups and individual citizens mobilized to provide the necessary support from the first days of the war.

While the Government continues to respond to meet the challenge, it is complemented and assisted by the efforts of partners, which are coordinated by UNHCR under the Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF). **In 2022, 42 government and humanitarian partners joined the efforts to provide protection services and multi-sectoral humanitarian assistance to refugees from Ukraine**, third-country nationals, and other persons in need, reaching some 128,000 people. Notable achievements included reaching 108,000 individuals with cash assistance, 89,000 receiving in-kind assistance, supporting 128,000 with food assistance, providing protection services for 118,000 people, facilitating access to health services for 16,000, and ensuring 1,800 children are benefitting from the national education system.⁵⁸

UNICEF Moldova played a key role in the refugee response and invested over USD 16.5 million in child and family protection services systems as well as in emergency programs for refugees with the MLSP and the Municipality of Chisinau in 2022. The interventions focused on developing and strengthening services for refugee and vulnerable Moldovan children and their caregivers, in response to the increased pressure on the child and social protection systems because of the Ukraine emergency. These services included Family Support, Personal Assistance for children with severe disabilities, Foster Care and Family type home, Maternal Centre, Kindergarten; Day Care Centre for children and families at risk and Supervised Independent Living.⁵⁹

In order to meet the urgent needs of children and families crossing the border of the Republic of Moldova with Ukraine, **UNICEF has reactivated "Blue Dots" as support centres for children and families, located along refugee transit routes**. These "Blue Dots" centres offer families and children services that meet their urgent needs: information and counselling, child-friendly spaces, psychological counselling and support, hygiene, health and nutrition services, as well as basic legal advice and referral services for cases of violence or health. There are currently eleven functional Blue Dots in Moldova, with five located at the border points and one at the Airport. The interviewed NGOs providing services at Blue Dots informed that there are using the **Child Protection Referral Pathways developed by UNHCR⁶⁰ to refer the cases of children with disabilities to organisations included in the package as focal points**, such as Keystone Moldova Hotline for persons with disabilities and Mobile Team, Day rehabilitation centre for children with disabilities from Criuleni.

On 15 March 2022, the MER approved the instruction on the enrolment of refugee children from Ukraine in general education institutions of the Republic of Moldova. This instruction clearly outlines the responsibilities of each stakeholder involved in preschool and school education such as district/municipal Education Directorates, Managers of the education institutions, teachers, and

⁵⁷ UNHCR. Operational Data Portal. Republic of Moldova. Data from May 14, 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/mda>

⁵⁸ UNHCR. News release from 03.03.2023. Broad humanitarian coalition launches joint 2023 plan to support the Republic of Moldova's refugee response. <https://www.unhcr.org/md/en/15929-230303.html#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20a%20combination%20of,reach%20refugees%20and%20Moldovans%20alike.>

⁵⁹ UNICEF Moldova. Country Office Annual Report 2022, p. 2. <https://www.unicef.org/media/136201/file/Moldova-2022-COAR.pdf>

⁶⁰ Child Protection Referral Pathways are part of the RCF Emergency Inter-Agency Referrals Package that describes guiding principles and procedures in the response to protection cases of those affected by the Ukraine situation, available at <https://data.unhcr.org/es/documents/details/92330>

psychologists.⁶¹ At the same time, the MER also approved a list of ECEC and school facilities with contacts from each district/municipality for enrolment of Ukrainian refugee children: The procedures for enrolment in Romanian, Russian and Ukrainian languages were uploaded on the MER webpage and shared with partners.⁶² However, the number of Ukrainian children enrolled in the national education system remained very low, according to the MER. The MER representative communicated that one of the reasons, was the preference of parents to choose online study with Ukrainian teachers.

According to the results of the rapid needs assessment conducted in 2022 and presented by the RCF Education Working Group, **about half of the refugee children of preschool age were not participating in any educational activity in 2022**. Although non-formal education activities were popular among children aged 0-7, the participation rate did not exceed 30%. The level of participation in education is very low for both genders. However, a higher proportion of boys (52%) are not attending any educational activities than girls (42%). Girls, however, participated in formal education more than boys, regardless of the language of instruction. Furthermore, the assessment revealed that 10% of the sampled children had disabilities and were concentrated in the Chisinau municipality.⁶³

The above-mentioned survey provides insights into why parents do not enrol children aged 3-6 years in kindergartens. The two most common responses received to this question were “*Do not know*” (33%) and “*I did not want to*” (20%), underscoring a certain degree of indecisiveness and hesitation from parents for schooling their young children in Moldova. This age group’s participation in online learning is considerably limited compared to older age groups. Notwithstanding the complexities of effectively engaging young children in virtual learning, the relatively low access to online learning can be explained in part by the insufficient materials currently available for this age group. Except for a few video classes, such as those offered by the NUMO online kindergarten developed jointly by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and UNICEF Ukraine, most other online learning platforms cover the primary to secondary grades.

Unlike other age groups, more children who attend formal education in Moldova attend Romanian-speaking ECEC institutions than Russian-speaking ones. This unique trend indicates a greater willingness and interest of refugee parents to facilitate children’s integration into mainstream Moldovan schools at an early age⁶⁴. It seems that is not the case for refugee parents with children with disabilities. The interviews with sector specialists and the FDG with refugee parents reveal that children with disabilities are practically not enrolled in ECEC and besides other barriers, language is one of them.

The UNHCR data of 14 May 2023 shows that there are a total of **48.438 refugee children aged 0-18 years in the Republic of Moldova**. (Males: 24.463 Ukrainian refugees and 536 third-country nationals from Ukraine; Females: 22.990 Ukrainian refugees and 449 third-country nationals from Ukraine).⁶⁵ There is **no record of refugee children with disabilities of preschool age** in the Republic of Moldova, as there is no disaggregation by disability group and age when collecting data on refugees (there is a distinction between children and adults only).

⁶¹ The instruction on the enrolment of refugee children from Ukraine in the Republic of Moldova general education institutions. MER Order no. 178 of 15.03.2022. https://mec.gov.md/sites/default/files/ordin_mec_178_instructiune_0.pdf

⁶² All information related to the enrolment procedures and the list of ECEC and school facilities is available at <https://mec.gov.md/ro/content/procedura-pentru-incadrarea-copilor-din-familiiile-refugiate-din-ucraina-institutiile-de>

⁶³ Education Rapid Needs Assessment: Moldova Inter-Agency Refugee Education Working Group (June 2022), p.20 <https://reliefweb.int/report/moldova/education-rapid-needs-assessment-moldova-inter-agency-refugee-education-working-group-june-2022>

⁶⁴ Ibidem, p.13

⁶⁵ According to the Republic of Moldova: Daily Population Trends updated on the UNHCR data portal <https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/248?sv=0&geo=680>

According to a presentation of the MER made in **March 2023**, there were only **1,862 Ukrainian children enrolled in 228 educational settings of all levels in the Republic of Moldova**, including **701 children of preschool age enrolled in ECEC settings**. The MER clarified that the parents of the children who are enrolled as pupils in classes decided to stay in Moldova (by applying to get Temporary Protection) and the parents of students who attend only as auditors remain undecided on their stay in Moldova and their children continue to also follow online classes provided by Ukrainian schools.⁶⁶

The highest number of refugee children enrolled in the national educational system was attested in Chisinau municipality. As per the Vice-mayor of Chisinau, **1480 refugee children were registered in the educational settings in Chisinau until February 2023**. Of them, 558 children attended daily classes in schools and **800 children were registered in kindergartens, but only 319 attended them on a daily basis**. About 250 refugee children attended creative, community and arts education centres in Chisinau, and 11 refugee children were enrolled in municipal extracurricular artistic education institutions.⁶⁷

A representative of the Municipal General Education Directorate of Chisinau municipality communicated that **over 200 refugee children registered in kindergartens have already left the country**. She explained that many mainstream ECEC settings in Chisinau are not prepared to enrol children with disabilities, both local and refugees, because of a lack of support staff and services, as well as a lack of spaces to create RCIEs in already overloaded kindergarten. She added that there are special ECEC settings intended for children with disabilities that have kinesiotherapy specialists, speech therapists, and psycho-pedagogues, but this is not the case of the majority of mainstream kindergartens. The assessment identified that different stakeholders provided many non-formal educational activities in the Refugee Accommodation Centres.

According to the data provided by the Director of the National Agency of Social Assistance, at the beginning of April 2023, there were **2590 refugees placed in 62 operational Refugee Accommodation Centres** around the country, of which **960 were children (105 children aged 0-2 years and 855 aged 3-18 years)**. There were in total 111 refugees with disabilities living in Refugee Accommodation Centres, but it is not known if children of preschool age are among them because the National Agency of Social Assistance does not collect centralized data disaggregated by age groups and disability. The interviews show that many local NGOs and humanitarian organisations provided **psychological counselling** to parents and children living in Refugee Accommodation Centres. The Director of the National Agency of Social Assistance mentioned that there was very good cooperation with NGOs, which made possible the organisation of various activities with refugee children such as handmade creative workshops, visits to museums, theatres, zoos, and trips to different places. Additionally, children placed in Refugee Accommodation Centres received books, toys, computers, etc.

UNICEF Moldova communicated that **12 Child Friendly Spaces were created in six districts and two municipalities and they were equipped with play equipment, toys, books and teaching materials for drawing, cutting, collage, modelling**, etc. However, two NGOs mentioned that the volunteers operating in the Child Friendly Spaces do not have the necessary abilities to work with children with disabilities. They cited examples where a volunteer failed to take into account the needs of young children with challenging behaviour. AVE Copiii informed that the organisation provides educational services for local and refugee children in their Day Centre as well as in Child Friendly Spaces that operate as a Toy Library. About 25 refugee and local children participate daily in activities within a Child Friendly Space (the estimated share

⁶⁶ UNHCR. Ukraine Situation - Moldova: Inter-Agency Refugee Education Working Group Meeting Minutes (30 Mar 2023). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/100315>

⁶⁷ Ibidem

of refugee children is about 40%). To support children with disabilities the organisation donated laptops for online learning.

Interviewed specialists from social and education sectors stated that many **capacity-building activities** were organised with stakeholders, involved in the refugee response to improve service delivery. Child protection specialists from district/ municipality Social Assistance and family Protection Directorates, community social workers, and police officers were trained in addressing the risk situations of refugee or displaced children of all ages. UNICEF supported the organisation of trainings for educators from kindergartens where refugee children were enrolled in the CNETIF project. Subsequently, according to MER, the educators who **speak Russian or Ukrainian**, organized **educational activities with preschool-age children and sessions with their parents** to provide psycho-emotional support and strengthen their parenting skills. **Despite the efforts of all stakeholders to facilitate the inclusion of refugee children in the national educational system, their enrolment rate is still very low.**

The situation of refugee children with disabilities and /or SEN of preschool age appears to be worse because of a lack of data on their location and needs. Keystone Moldova, Lead of the Disability Taskforce within the RCF Protection Working Group, communicated that the issues related to the inclusion of refugee children with disabilities are regularly approached within the RCF meetings. To respond to the needs of refugee young children with disabilities and their parents, the member organisations of the Disability Taskforce provide information, counselling, adapted transportation services, medicines, special nutrition (gluten-free, sugar-free products), assistive devices, rehabilitation services, non-formal education, etc. However, there are individual and institutional factors that may hinder the inclusion of refugee children into the national educational system, as presented below.

Refugee parents' experience in accessing services for young children with disabilities, developmental delays and/or SEN

The results of the DFG with refugee parents of young children with disabilities or developmental delays highlighted a series of challenges related to their access to services in the Republic of Moldova.

Temporary Protection granting

Within FGD, one-third of refugee parents that rented apartments/houses communicated that they face difficulties in obtaining the temporary protection status. The main reason indicated by parents is related to the absence of the apartment/house's owners ("they do not leave in Moldova in this period") and/or do not agree to sign the necessary documents, wishing to avoid paying income tax from renting out the flat. They would recommend simplifying the procedure for obtaining the temporary protection status (e.g. a statement of temporary residence address signed by the refugee under his/her own responsibility, which can be subsequently verified and confirmed by local authorities or institutions after a home visit). Three parents do not know the procedure for obtaining the temporary protection status and two of them consider that one year is not an appropriate period for temporary protection because "*It is difficult to plan the stay in Moldova for such a long period*". It seems that the refugees living in the Transnistrian region cannot get the Temporary Protection status at all.

"I live in Tiraspol and wanted to apply for Temporary Protection, but the operator told me that he cannot process the documents from refugees living in Transnistria." FGD, refugee mother

Information about available services for young children

The DFG participants learned differently about the available services for young children in Moldova: from local NGOs providing services to refugees with disabilities or at risk (Keystone Moldova, SOS Autism,

Voinicel were mentioned), from other refugee and local parents with young children, from neighbours, from volunteers helping refugees. There are several examples that illustrate the way they were informed about available services.

“I participated in a meeting organised by Keystone Moldova and they put me in contact with other refugee parents who have young children, and that's how I found out that there are early intervention services in Moldova and that I can call or go to.” FGD, refugee mother

“A local NGO connected me with a refugee speech therapist from Odessa who now lives in Moldova, and I was very happy to get a specialist who speaks the same language my child” FGD, refugee mother

“I asked the community social worker about available services for refugee children with disabilities and I was advised to look for NGOs providing services to refugees”. FGD, refugee mother

As a result of being informed about available services, four parents communicated that they accessed free ECI services and five parents accessed paid services such as private ECEC centre, private Day Care Centre, speech therapy, psychological services and kinesiotherapy, all being located in Chisinau municipality.

Access to health services

Starting with March 1st, the access to health services is conditioned by the Temporary Protection status granting. For some parents, it is unclear whether or not they need to purchase health insurance to access health services if they are not working. According to focus group participants, access to specialised medical services for families who have not managed to obtain this status has deteriorated since the Temporary Protection provisions came into force.

“My child had pain and discomfort in her ears, but this was not considered a medical emergency. The family doctor told me that without the Temporary Protection status, she could not send me to the specialist doctor. The landlord is out of the country at the moment and I cannot do the necessary paperwork to get the status. I had to go to a private clinic and pay for consultation and treatment.” FGD, refugee mother

“I waited for two hours under the family doctor's door, even though the child had a fever. We couldn't make an appointment, because we still haven't obtained the Temporary Protection status.” FGD, refugee mother

“We have been in Moldova for a year now. Last year my child benefited from medical consultations and different free blood tests at the polyclinic. Now we find ourselves in a situation where we have to pay because we do not have the Temporary Protection status and I don't know how we could get it, if it is impossible to receive the personal code without proof of residence. The house owner is now in Ukraine and he will not come back soon.” FGD, refugee mother

One parent mentioned the lack of specialists in public health institutions who could provide the necessary services. *“There is no massage therapist in our sector polyclinic. My child needs massage therapy and I go to a private clinic. I am satisfied with the quality of services, but the sessions are expensive there.” FGD, refugee mother*

Several parents reported that they received free services before March 1st, but after the Temporary Protection provisions came into force, they have to pay for health services.

“My child has problems with his teeth. We got free dental services from the municipal clinic before March 1st and now we should pay to finish the treatment”. FGD, refugee mother

“I enrolled my child in kindergarten, but he cannot go there, because he cannot stand the noise, there are too many children in the group. We chose to go 3-4 hours a day to private educational centre St. Ana. The psychologist helps us there, but we also see a neurologist at a private clinic.” FGD, refugee mother

Access to vaccines was highlighted as a positive point. Vaccination is considered an emergency and the majority of participants in FGD confirmed that they received vaccines in time in the Republic of Moldova, and have health records and appointments with the paediatrician. One parent informed that she cannot enrol her child in kindergarten because *“the child has a disability and cannot be vaccinated”*.

Access to ECI services

Only three out of 16 DFG participants benefitted from free ECI services at Tony Hawks and Voinicel centres, that provided complex assessment, medical rehabilitation and psychological counselling. Besides, one parent shared that her child benefitted from ABA therapy provided by SOS Autism.

Those who benefit from ECI services are satisfied with the quality of services. They communicated that after ECI interventions they learned *“how to relate better with the child”, “how to play with the child and what toys to choose”, “how to minimise the little one's access to gadgets”, “how to massage the child properly”, “how to cuddle with the child when she is angry”, etc.*

During a focus group discussion, one parent expressed her reasons for not enrolling her child in an Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) centre. She mentioned that her decision was influenced by two main factors: the lengthy waiting lists and the eligibility criteria. The opinions of other parents played a significant role in shaping her perspective. *“Other parents told me that it is difficult to find an available ECI centre due to the excessively long waiting lists. They have mentioned that it might take up to six months before you get a chance to enrol your child. They also think that ECI centres give priority to children with more serious health conditions. Mine, I think, has no serious problem.” FGD, refugee mother*

Access to ECEC services

Only three out of 16 DFG participants communicated that their children are enrolled in public ECEC settings. Among them, two participants had their children enrolled in ECEC centres within Chisinau municipality, while one parent had their child enrolled in a district.

It is noteworthy that refugee parents residing in Chisinau were informed about overcrowded kindergartens through communication with the administration of ECEC settings. This observation underscores the existence of challenges related to capacity and accessibility when it comes to these educational facilities.

Moreover, two parents expressed that the kindergarten administration was reserved to enrol children with Autism Spectrum Disorders.

When endeavouring to enrol their children in ECEC settings, refugee parents devised coping strategies to navigate the process effectively. However, two parents, who had multiple children, including an infant, exhibited reluctance in enrolling their older children in kindergarten. This hesitancy was attributed to the belief that since they were already providing care for the younger child at home, formal kindergarten attendance might not be deemed necessary. (*“they stay at home with the little one anyway”*)

"I have been patiently waiting for several months to enrol my child in a kindergarten in Chisinau, but, unfortunately, they told me that there are no available places even for Moldovan children. Through discussions with other mothers in the neighbourhood, I identified a Day Care Centre for children and my daughter now goes there for half a day." FGD, refugee mother

"There were no places in the nearby kindergarten and we had to look for another kindergarten with Russian teaching language, but it is very far from our apartment. We change 2 trolleybuses to get there." FGD, refugee mother

"Regrettably, there is a lack of qualified personnel to cater to children with specific needs and especially those with disabilities or Autism, like my own child. Due to this inadequacy, my child is no longer attending the kindergarten. I am actively seeking alternative services that can provide suitable support and care." FGD, refugee mother

Challenges frequently encountered by refugee parents in the Republic of Moldova concerning the care and education of their children are as follows:

- **Language barriers**

"I was told that there are few kindergartens/groups in kindergartens with Russian teaching language. I was afraid that my child would have trouble understanding a new language." FGD, refugee mother (the child is not enrolled in any ECEC setting)

- **Lack of information about support services for children with disabilities**

"There is no place where I can find information about the available services for children with disabilities, including the process to access them, and the required procedures to follow." FGD, refugee mother

- **Difficulty reaching available services without a medical recommendation**

"There is a speech therapist in the kindergarten, but she is overloaded and it is difficult to reach her if the child doesn't have a formal diagnosis. Children with confirmed medical diagnosis or disability are given priority." FGD, refugee mother

"My child is almost 3 years old and does not speak, but the speech therapist from our kindergarten does not work with children this young. She suggested I go to the policlinic for initial investigations first." FGD, refugee mother

- **Inaccessible services to address the complex needs of children with severe disabilities**

"My child has severe disabilities and we need a neuro-psychologist, a physiotherapist and a speech therapist. I don't know where to receive these services for free and I know they can be costly. Now I am gathering information and considering the price of a rehabilitation session, based on which I will choose where and which specialists to go to." FGD, refugee mother

- **Unavailable services in the area of their residence**

"We used to live in a village in the North of Moldova. Several months ago, we went to the district hospital, when our child fell sick. The doctor from the hospital referred us to Voinicel Centre located in Chisinau for an assessment, suspecting that our child had a form of Autism. That's how we moved to Chisinau." FGD, refugee mother

- **Service interruption**

"My child is not developing well physically. In Ukraine, he was doing medical rehabilitation and there was good progress. Now, to benefit from rehabilitation in Moldova, we must first go to the orthopaedist for consultations and recommendations. However, we cannot register at the orthopaedist until we confirm our Temporary Protection status." FGD, refugee mother

- **Discriminatory attitudes towards children with Autism in public transportation and public spaces**

“People around us fail to understand that my child has communication and behaviour issues. They often misinterpret his actions and consider him poorly behaved. There were cases when I received rude comments related to my child’s behaviour.” FGD, refugee mother

Apart from problems related to access to services for the child, many parents communicated employment-related problems that affect directly their decision to enrol the child in ECEC. The majority of parents were not employed in the Republic of Moldova. Different reasons were mentioned, such as: *“There is no available job to match my qualifications.”; “It is necessary to finish the vocational training course to get employed.”; “The employers are not willing to hire me for a short period of time.”; “It is difficult to find a part-time job and I cannot have a full-time job because of my child’s schedule at the private centre.”; “I hope to turn back to Ukraine and resume the previous job.”*. Meantime, some of them consider that they could take care of the child at home and participate, when possible, in different activities available in the community.

Stefan Voda Case Study – an overview of the institutional capacity to respond to the needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN

Stefan Voda district is an administrative-territorial unit in the South-Eastern part of the Republic of Moldova, covering an area of 998 square km. It is located at the state border with Ukraine, 100 km far from the country’s capital, Chisinau. The district has 26 localities, comprising one city and 25 villages.⁶⁸ In January 2022, the total usually resident population in Stefan Voda district was 49206, including 2963 children aged 0-4 years and 3072 children aged 5-9 years.⁶⁹ However, it is concerning to note that statistical data and interviews with specialists suggest a **declining trend in the number of children each year, primarily attributed to low birth rates and migration**. According to data from the NBS, the district’s population has decreased by 16% over the past 8 years.⁷⁰

The district Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorate communicates that, based on weekly evidence from local authorities, the average number of refugees from Ukraine registered in Stefan Voda district is about 1000. In the first week of April 2023, there were 902 refugees residing in the district’s communities. In total, **123 refugee children of pre-school age (32 children aged 0-2 years and 91 children aged 3-6 years) and 203 refugee children of school age are living in Stefan Voda**. Only two children of preschool age were reported as having a disability. The majority of refugees are living in host families/communities and 66 of them are accommodated in the local Refugee Centre. The administration of the Refugee Centre informed that there are eight children aged 0-7 years in the Centre. They participate in non-formal education activities provided by NGOs within the Refugee Centre, but none of them is enrolled in the village kindergarten. The district General Education Directorate informed that only 16 out of 123 refugee children of pre-school age from Ukraine were enrolled in kindergartens in Stefan Voda district by the end of March 2023. None of the refugee children enrolled in kindergartens has a disability and/or assessed SEN.

⁶⁸ According to Stefan Voda District Council web page <https://stefan-voda.md>

⁶⁹ NBS. Moldova Statistical Data Bank. Regional Statistics. The population with usual residence, at the beginning of the year by Districts, Age Groups, Years and Averages. Year 2022. Note: The regional statistics provide data for these two age groups (0-4 and 5-9) that are different from the age groups of our interest (0-2 and 3-6/7) for ECI and ECEC.

https://statbank.statistica.md/PxWeb/pxweb/ro/60%20Statistica%20regionala/60%20Statistica%20regionala_02%20POP/POP_010400rcireg.px/?rxid=9a62a0d7-86c4-45da-b7e4-fecc26003802

⁷⁰ NBS. Population with usual residence in territorial profile at the beginning of the years 2014-2022. Figure 4.

https://statistica.gov.md/ro/populatia-cu-resedinta-obisnuita-in-profil-teritorial-la-inceputul-anilor-2014-2-9578_59589.html

According to the results of an area-based assessment conducted by REACH between August and October 2022, it was found that **more than half of surveyed refugee households' respondents from Stefan Voda district (57%) reported no plans to integrate into community**. However, others planned to register with a general practitioner (33%), look for employment (20%), or enrol their children in school/kindergarten in Moldova (16%). Interestingly, none of the refugee household respondents from four localities reported knowing how to access protection services, mental health and psycho-social support services and childcare. This highlights a critical gap in knowledge and access to essential services in these areas. On the other hand, the assessment revealed that 93% of surveyed refugee household respondents reported receiving humanitarian assistance. Cash (87%), food (80%), hygiene items (79%), and vouchers (59%) were the most commonly reported forms of aid received by refugee families who received support.⁷¹

In terms of service needs, 15% of surveyed refugee household respondents in Stefan Voda reported having no service needs. Among those reporting needs, the top needs reported were financial assistance for other needs e.g., unemployment, disability allowance, pension (50%), general medical care (33%), refugee or temporary protection registration (28%), and pharmaceutical services (25%). The female-headed household service needs were similar, with 50% reporting financial assistance for other needs as a top priority, general medical care (29%), refugee or temporary protection registration (29%) and access to education (29%). When looking at **households with children, similarly the priority needs included financial assistance for other needs (54%), general medical care (33%), refugee or temporary protection registration (23%) and education (18%)**.⁷²

The community social worker assistants who were interviewed highlighted their **continuous engagement with refugees, actively keeping them informed** about the available support services.. They created a **Viber group** by including in the list of contacts all refugees from their host community. The information provided via Viber is usually related to the humanitarian assistance and its distribution time and location, procedures for cash assistance, schedule of interventions such as legal assistance on obtaining refugee or temporary protection status, cultural and educational activities. The Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorate informed that the NGOs and donor organisations work directly with mayor's offices to coordinate the distribution of vouchers, food, and non-food items to refugees in localities.

In Stefan Voda, a Blue Dot centre was opened with the presence of the guardianship authority 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorate ensures the participation of its specialists in Blue Dot shifts. The specialists from the Directorate (5 staff units) provide 24-hour assistance at Palanca customs to execute the Instruction of the Commission for Exceptional Situations regarding the assistance of unaccompanied children and those at-risk, including young children accompanied by other adults than their parents. Several NGOs from Chisinau capital, such as Terre des Hommes, Partnerships for Every Child, AVE Copiii, Keystone Moldova have created **mobile teams for the assistance of refugees' children in Stefan Voda** and organisation of various activities with children within the Refugee Accommodation Centre and within the communities.

According to the Social Assistance and Family Protection Directorate, the district benefits from a technical assistance project funded by UNICEF and implemented through the MLSP and the National Agency of Social Assistance. More than 4 million MDL were allocated for the protection of Moldovan children at risk and children separated from their parents, as well as for refugee children, those with disabilities included. Social services such as Family Support, Personal Assistance, Mobile Team and Day Care Centre are available for children with disabilities in Stefan Voda district. However, **the majority of refugee families**

⁷¹ UNHCR. Ukraine Situation - Moldova: REACH - Area-Based Assessment for Chisinau and Stefan Voda (31 Jan 2023), p.59. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/98651>

⁷² Ibidem, p.63

do not apply either for Temporary Protection or for social services because “they do not intend to remain in Stefan Voda and frequently turn back to their communities in Ukraine”. Only one-refugee mother applied for Family Support, but refuted the service because decided to leave the country. Another mother applied for being approved as a personal assistant for her child with a severe disability, but refused the continuation of the employment procedure after being informed about the responsibilities of the personal assistant as a service provider.

In the district of Stefan Voda, there are a total of 30 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, spread across 25 localities. Regrettably, one village remains without access to any ECEC facility. As of 2022, there were 2552 local children (both with and without SEN) from Stefan Voda district were enrolled in ECEC, distributed among 124 groups. On average, each group accommodates approximately 20-21 children. Depending on the number of children of preschool age in each community, each kindergarten has from one to eleven groups. The number of groups in each kindergarten varies from one to 11, depending on the number of children of preschool age in each locality. There were 208 fewer kids enrolled in ECEC in 2022 than there were in 2021, with the number of groups in kindergartens decreasing by seven (there were 131 groups in 2021). In total, **346 out of 2552 children enrolled in Stefan Voda educational system in 2022 had SEN (30 of them attended ECEC and 316 attended primary and secondary schools).** Of the overall number of children with SEN, 240 had learning disorders, 42 had intellectual disabilities, and another 32 had other types of disabilities (locomotor, visual, auditory, and emotional disorders).⁷³

According to the district General Education Directorate, **22 RCIEs and 24 support-teaching professionals provided assistance to integrate children with disabilities and/or SEN from Stefan Voda district into the educational system in 2022.** Only one out of 22 RCIEs is located in an ECEC setting, the others being organized in primary and secondary schools. Therefore, only one out of 30 ECEC settings is designed to accommodate the various needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN. The FCPS NGO provided assistance in developing this inclusive ECEC setting in Stefan Voda city. Four support specialists (speech therapist, psychologist, physiotherapist and support teacher) were hired and trained and the RCIE was created and equipped for individualized education activities with children with SEN. However, the representative of the inclusive ECEC considers that the early education teachers are not sufficiently prepared to provide qualified assistance to children with severe disabilities or with Autism Spectrum Disorders and need more capacity building and mentoring. The inclusive ECEC has a transport mean available for children with disabilities and/or SEN from other villages that are enrolled in the kindergarten where RCIEs and support staff exist (kindergarten no. 3 from Stefan Voda city). No refugee child with disability or/and SEN is enrolled in the inclusive ECEC.

In Stefan Voda district, there is **no accredited ECI service provider** and according to interviewed representatives of the education sector, **the identification of children who are at risk or who have developmental delays is done too late.** Children are occasionally referred to ECI services available in the country’s capital, but few parents travel there because of the high expense of lodging and transportation as well as their precarious financial situation. Data from the Stefan Voda Public Health Institution show that the district is provided with family doctors only in proportion to 60% and that there are not enough human resources to handle the demands placed on family medicine. There are also gaps in the paediatrician's availability for required consultations to young children given that one person holds both roles of family physician and paediatrician. Family medical assistant turnover was significant in 2022, with 20 nurses quitting and 16 nurses being hired. It is important to mention that they are mainly responsible

⁷³ Activity report of Stefan Voda General Education Directorate for 2022, approved by the decision of the District Council no. 2/2 of March 30, 2023, p.5. <https://stefan-voda.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Decizia-2-2.pdf>

for home visits and supervision of young children. At the same time, six positions of family doctor/physician were left vacant.⁷⁴

The Ștefan Voda Public Health Institution includes 19 primary medical institutions in 19 localities. In 2021, there were 149 children in the risk group in the medical records of Ștefan Voda primary medical institutions. Most of them are educated in socially vulnerable families. From the age group up to one year, 9 children with developmental disorders were identified. **Immunization of children is carried out with difficulties due to the multiple refusals of the parents.** Primary disability in children increased from 8 new cases in 2020 to 9 new cases in 2021, the main causes of disability being congenital developmental disorders and mental disorders. In total, 152 children with disabilities are recorded at the Ștefan Voda Public Health Institution.⁷⁵

During the interview, a representative of the NGO active in the Ștefan Voda district shared insightful information regarding the challenges faced by children in the villages when it comes to attending kindergartens. According to the representative, one significant reason for children not attending kindergartens is that their **parents do not have the possibility or do not want to go to the district centre for mandatory health examinations and immunizations**, which are prerequisites for kindergarten enrolment. Another mentioned reason was the lack of employment opportunities in the villages that determine parents to keep the child at home if not employed. Regarding the refugees, the representative informed that many refugee women who have settled in the village do volunteering at community centres, do occasional non-qualified work in rural households while the children stay with their grandmothers.

The interviewed representatives of the education sector identified a series of gaps that hinder the implementation of inclusive ECEC services in Ștefan Voda district. The first one has to do with the **lack of legal provisions on funding support services in ECEC** and the lack of local funds to create such services for children with disabilities. The mayor and the local council are in charge of allocating resources for the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or in ECEC. Finding the essential resources is especially challenging in small, underdeveloped villages. Additionally, compared to schools that can hire support staff and create RCIEs using the resources of the Inclusive Education Fund, there is no legal framework to govern the financing formula for inclusive education in ECEC settings.

Another problem communicated by key informants relates to the **lack of qualified staff to provide support to early education teachers** and to assist children with disabilities and/or SEN, especially in rural areas. The PAS informed that its staff is overwhelmed because of a high number of assessments, reassessments, and service provision to children with disabilities and/or SEN of all ages. The specialists of the PAS do not manage to provide sufficient methodological assistance to teachers in kindergartens and to prepare the environment for accommodating the needs of children with various disabilities and SEN. Additionally, the district General Education Directorate mentioned that the specialist responsible for inclusive education within the Directorate still needs capacity building to be able to provide the necessary support to ECEC staff. The interviewed representatives of two kindergartens communicated that they have a high didactic staff turnover due to the significant challenges involved in providing support and inclusion for children with disabilities and Special Educational Needs (SEN). Early education teachers face

⁷⁴ Decision no. 2/10 of March 30, 2023 of Ștefan Voda District Council on the approval of the Development Strategy of the public medical and sanitary institution "Ștefan Voda Health Center" for the years 2023-2028, p.9. <https://stefan-voda.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2.10-Strategia-CS-Stefan-Voda.pdf>

⁷⁵ Haret, M. Analytical report on the activity of Ștefan Voda Health Center for 2020-2021. Ștefan Voda, 2022, p.3-4. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1GRr-P0ItqAS9eN4pYf_7vqBCck1hicLp/view

numerous responsibilities in this regard, and the lack of adequate support is making it difficult for them to cope with the demands of their roles.

At the same time, the interviewed specialists acknowledge that **it is difficult to identify speech therapists, psychologists or special pedagogues** in Stefan Voda district, even if they were included in the personnel scheme of kindergartens and if there were funding for support services. Due to the decrease in the population of children, there are kindergartens that closed the groups and remained with one or two groups of children. This situation places a heavy burden on early education teachers, who are required to cater to three different age groups during educational activities. This challenge is compounded by the necessity to adapt the learning environment and contents to accommodate children with disabilities. Unfortunately, these kindergartens lack also other essential staff such as the specialist responsible for methodical work and the medical assistant.

Another challenge concerns the **cooperation of ECEC staff with parents of children with disabilities and/or SEN**. According to interviewed representatives of PAS and kindergartens, many parents deny the SEN or the disability of their child and refuse to receive the assistance because of the stigma in the community. When parents do not acknowledge the potential developmental delay or problematic behaviour in their child, it becomes challenging for the early education teacher and the ECEC team to refer the child for a comprehensive assessment and assistance without parental consent. This lack of consent hinders the timely identification and provision of appropriate support for the child. At the same time, they communicated that the **parents of typical children are very concerned about the inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders or problematic behaviours in kindergartens**.

The PAS mentioned the **CNETIF project as a good practice to work with parents of children with and without disabilities**. The project was implemented with the support of MER and UNICEF during the Covid-19 pandemic. It allowed the organisation of online education sessions with parents of children aged 0-7 years to improve their parenting skills. For this purpose, the directors, early education teachers and nurses of 14 kindergartens from Stefan Voda district were trained to work with parents. The parents that participated in parenting workshops were very satisfied and now the specialists from kindergartens continue to organize this activity once every 3 months being supported by the PAS.

The **language barrier** was indicated as an additional challenge for the inclusion of refugee children in schools with Romanian teaching language. One NGO representative explained that due to linguistic barriers, refugee children are occasionally turned away from primary education. According to her, the support teacher is already helping 14 Moldovan children with disabilities and/or SEN, and adding one or two more children with SEN who do not even understand the language will make things even more difficult. In these circumstances, **the parents select extracurricular activities run in host communities along with online education (offered by Ukrainian schools)**. The extracurricular activities, as reported by all interviewed stakeholders are usually provided by NGOs and Christian organisations in settings such as Day Care Centres, libraries, NGO offices, mayor's office and consist of pottery classes, cooking classes, English classes, dance classes, after-school activities, etc.

According to the majority of interviewed stakeholders from Stefan Voda, besides the above-mentioned challenges, an important issue that hinders the comprehensive approach to the needs of children with disabilities and SEN, is the **insufficient cooperation between specialists from the health, education and social assistance sectors**. It seems that every sector is caring out its own responsibilities in its field of intervention without involving constantly the relevant specialists from other sectors. They consider that it is difficult to ensure the early identification of all children with developmental delays and disabilities, their assistance and monitoring and to provide for their smooth transition from one education level in the case of their district. The key reasons are related to the lack of ECI services, shortage of staff in the health

sector, shortage of support staff in the ECEC settings and schools, difficulty to identify, employ and maintain qualified staff because of low salaries, and limited capacity of SAP to provide support to ECEC and school staff.

In conclusion, **Stefan Voda ECEC system has a limited capacity to respond to the needs of both local and refugee children with disabilities and/or SEN of preschool age.** While there has been made some advancement in including children with disabilities and/or SEN in ECEC in recent years, interviewed stakeholders assert that “there is still a considerable amount of work ahead to achieve equal access to education for all such children”. The case study demonstrates the imperative of establishing well-defined national policies concerning the funding of inclusive ECEC and to take measures at the local level for the optimisation of the network of kindergartens. Identifying and mobilizing resources for the development of support services is paramount, alongside substantial investments capacity building and supervision of early education teachers and support staff. Furthermore, extending parenting education programs is crucial. Overall, improving the enrolment of children with disabilities in ECEC requires a comprehensive approach and better cooperation between social, educational and health sectors and the participation of parents in the educational process.

CRITICAL GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The assessment identified many gaps and challenges related to the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or SEN in ECEC settings and their access to connected social services. The critical gaps are summarized below:

- **Poor identification and registration (evidence) at the local level of children aged 0-6/7 years who are at risk of developmental delays, or have developmental delays and disabilities** because of the undeveloped network of ECI services, limited access of families to health services in rural areas, the neglectful attitudes of some parents towards the child's developmental delays and awareness of the problems related to them;
- **Lack of data in the Educational Management Information System about children enrolled in ECEC disaggregated by disability, SEN, and refugee status;** Lack of a common database of children with disabilities and/or SEN shared between the health, education and social protection sectors to facilitate the planning, coordination and monitoring of the interventions;
- **Insufficiency or lack in some districts and localities of support services for inclusive education in ECEC** to meet the needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN, especially for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, and for those with severe and multiple disabilities;
- **Lack of legal provisions regarding the financing formula for inclusive education in ECEC** and lack of local funds for the development of support services, particularly in rural areas and small ECEC settings with only 1-3 groups of children;
- **Inadequate qualifications of teaching and non-teaching ECEC staff to work with children with different types of disabilities and/or SEN**, and unavailability of qualified professionals in rural areas and small districts to provide the necessary support services and guidance to ECEC staff;
- **Insufficient personnel and reduced capacity of the district/municipal Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service (PAS)** to cope with the growing demand for methodological assistance to ECEC teaching staff and service provision to young children in the context of inclusive education implementation at this level of education;
- **Mismatch between the number of professionals working in PAS and the number of children and educational institutions in the district/municipality**, which affects the quality of service provision and the staff capacity to fulfil their responsibilities in municipalities and large districts;
- **Inefficient use of the ECEC network at the country level** that results in the overloading of some institutions in municipalities and underutilization of others in rural areas due to the decrease in child populations, complemented by the difficulty of hiring the necessary staff in small ECEC settings with only 1-3 groups of children in rural areas;
- **Reduced accessibility of ECEC infrastructure** to meet the needs of children with different types of disabilities and **lack of assistive equipment and technologies** to facilitate the inclusion of this group of children in the educational process;
- **Insufficient inter-sectoral cooperation between specialists from health, education and social protection sectors** to ensure a holistic approach to the needs of children with disabilities and/or SEN and to prepare the transition from ECI to ECEC and subsequently to the child's enrolment in school;
- **Limited availability and reduced use of social services, especially Personal Assistance**, to facilitate the inclusion in ECEC settings of children with severe disabilities;
- **Lack or absence in most cases of parental education programs in ECEC settings** aimed at empowering parents of children with disabilities and those of typical children in their care and upbringing, facilitating their communication and reducing the stigmatization of children with disabilities.

The recommendations to improve the access to ECEC of both local and refugee children with disabilities and /or SEN were developed based on the assessment findings and inputs provided by key stakeholders

during the participatory workshop organized by Keystone Moldova on 18 May 2023. The main recommendations for the central and local government are:

- **Expand the network of ECI services at the national level, ensure their connection with the ECEC network and develop ECI mobile services** to provide support in the natural environments of children (in the family, in the ECEC);
- **Improve the management of data on children with disabilities and/or with SEN in the educational system**, including ECEC by collecting, storing and analysing data disaggregated by type and severity of a disability, categories of SEN, and refugee status;
- **Develop mobile support services for inclusive education within the PAS and expand the PAS capacity** to cover ECEC from localities with a small number of children and that do not have the capacity to develop inclusive services;
- **Ensure continuous training of ECEC teaching and non-teaching staff** in order to enhance their abilities to support children with different types of disabilities and/or SEN and ensure their mentoring/supervision by the specialists of the PAS;
- **Train and certify the PAS specialists in applying specific work methodologies and tools**, which have proven effective in working with children with different types of disabilities;
- **Pilot the implementation of the support service packages for children with different types of disabilities within the ECEC settings**;
- **Develop and approve funding schemes/formulas for support services for inclusive education in ECEC**;
- **Allocate financial resources from the state budget to ensure the implementation of support services for inclusive education in ECEC settings** by creating a centralized financing mechanism;
- **Take measures for optimizing resources in order to balance the demand and supply of ECEC services** (consolidation of ECEC settings in localities with a small number of children and the opening of new groups/ECEC in Chisinau municipality and in the localities where ECEC settings are overloaded);
- **Increase the accessibility of ECEC settings infrastructure** in the process of renovating, expanding, and reorganizing them and **provide sets of equipment and assistive technologies** to children with disabilities enrolled in ECEC, including through a loan from the PAS;
- **Streamline inter-sectoral cooperation between specialists from health, education and social protection sectors**, to increase the degree of referral to support services, assessment, monitoring and assistance of children with disabilities and/or SEN;
- **Expand and finance parental education programs in ECEC**, based on good practices identified at the national level;

Moreover, in order to increase the enrolment rate of refugee children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, fostering improved collaboration between organizations and institutions supporting refugees is crucial. By working together, these entities can effectively inform parents about the available services, emphasize the benefits, and underscore the significance of enrolling their child in ECEC settings, even for short durations. **Creating mutual support groups among refugee parents with children with disabilities** presents an additional opportunity to bolster their capacity to handle different problems through information exchange and the development of supportive relationships.

FUTURE TRENDS

In 2023, a collaborative effort to ensure the protection, safety, and assistance of refugees from Ukraine and vulnerable members of the Moldovan population will be undertaken by a coalition of 73 partners in Moldova within the RCF. A key objective of the **new Refugee Response Plan for 2023** is to provide coordinated support to government-led efforts to address the protection and lifesaving needs of refugees and those who fled the war in Ukraine. This will include also the facilitation of appropriate solutions and support to Moldovan host communities. The measures focus on key sectors, including protection, basic needs, health and nutrition, education, livelihoods and inclusion, shelter, and cash assistance to refugees and refugees hosting families.⁷⁶

According to the RCF Child Protection Sub-Working Group, **strengthening the capacity of the national child protection system in the country**, and seeking ways to complement the national child protection response remains a priority for the next period. Partners for the implementation of the Moldova Refugee Response Plan 2023, established under the UNHCR, will continue to support the identification and referral of children at risk, particularly those with disabilities and specific protection needs, to the appropriate services and support, as well as case management. Humanitarian advocacy and interventions will continue to be coordinated through child protection coordination mechanisms at national level.

To increase the capacity of the national system to identify and assist young children at risk of or with disabilities, developmental delays or behavioural challenges and their parents, the Government intends to extend the eligibility for ECI services by broadening the age of beneficiaries from the 0-3 until the age of five. The subject related to the modification of the Government Decision that regulates the organisation and functioning of ECI services is on the public agenda. The modification of the Government Decision will involve also the approval of a National Action Plan on the development of the ECI system for the years 2023 – 2027.⁷⁷

The draft National Action Plan contains measures aimed at improving the regulatory framework, access to and quality of ECI services as well as cooperation between health, education and social sectors. As part of the key planned activities, **several crucial initiatives will be undertaken to enhance ECI services**. These activities include: the development of the ECI services coordination mechanism, revision and standardization of referral procedures, assessment tools, internal review of the activity of service providers, expansion of the ECI service network and coverage area, costing and review ECI financing mechanism, strengthening professional skills of the specialists of ECI teams, organisation of parental education activities, etc.

To address the gaps related to the access to quality education of children with SEN, the Government has adopted **an Action Plan for the implementation of the Strategy Education 2030**. The plan outlines key measures to be implemented during the period 2023-2025, aimed at fostering inclusivity and enhancing support for children with SEN. One of the key measures focuses on the revision of the financing mechanism for inclusive education by establishing coefficients for the funding formula per child, taking into account the SEN. This revision aims to allocate adequate resources to cater to the diverse requirements of these children, ensuring they receive the necessary support and attention.

⁷⁶ UNHCR. Republic of Moldova: Refugee Response Plan 2023.

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/276?sv=54&geo=10784&secret=unhcrrestricted>

⁷⁷ Draft GD on the amendment of the GD no. 816/2016 no. 816/2016 on the approval of the Framework Regulation on the organisation and functioning of ECI services and ECI minimum quality standards.

<https://cancelaria.gov.md/sites/default/files/document/attachments/nu-289-ms-2023.pdf>

Another pivotal planned measure entails **adapting the physical environment of ECEC settings and providing specific equipment and assistive technologies to accommodate the needs of children with physical and sensory disabilities. Approval of the inter-sectoral cooperation mechanism**, developed by UNICEF, regarding the identification, assistance, monitoring and inclusion of children with SEN, including data transfer between the education, medical and social sectors is also among the priorities. Another direction of future activities is concerning the development and **approval of specific methodologies for working with children with intellectual and sensory (hearing, vision) disabilities, autistic spectrum disorders and behavioural disorders.**

The MER drafted a **new Inclusive Education Development Program for 2023-2027 to ensure access to inclusive quality education for all children at all levels of education.** The program aims for all children with SEN to benefit from standard packages of support services, based on the assessment of individual needs, by 2027. The rate of children with disabilities and/or with SEN in ECEC, compared to the total number of children included in preschool education is planned to reach 7%. The cost of implementing the program over five years is estimated at approximately 510 million MDL. According to the MER, the Government plans to approve the draft Program in the last quarter of 2023. The implementation of the Program is one of the key priorities of the MER in the next years. Inclusive education at all levels and connected services, ECI included, are on the agenda of the Parliamentary Commission for social protection, health and family. Several public hearings on issues related to rehabilitation, provision of ECI services to children with disabilities and inclusive education were held recently and are planned to be organized in the next months.

The Ministry of Education and Research has communicated its proposed **measures for amending of the Education Code to enhance the overall educational system at all levels, including ECEC.** Among the new measures are the granting of facilities by the state to young specialists employed in the educational system for a period of five years to motivate them to remain in the system. In 2024, the reform of the Republican Psycho-Pedagogical Assistance Service and PAS is intended to improve the quality of services offered to children with SEN and/or disabilities. This will imply the development of mobile psycho-pedagogical services and the hiring of additional units of specialized staff (speech therapists, psychologists, psycho-pedagogues, physiotherapists) within PAS to reach the localities with small ECEC settings and to provide the necessary support to educators, parents and children with SEN and or disabilities. To increase the quality of educational services, the review of authorization and accreditation procedures of educational institutions is planned for the next period.

UNICEF Moldova intends to conduct this year **a mapping exercise of the refugee children at the national level and to procure assistive devices for children with disabilities, both local and refugees.** This would ensure better planning of interventions and will improve the accessibility of educational settings for children with disabilities. The RCF Education Working Group presented five main objectives for 2023 (coordination, information management and monitoring & evaluation, planning & strategy development, capacity building and advocacy) along with sub-activities to strengthen the cooperation and coordination of partners in responding to the education needs of all refugee children.

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