



The situation of implementation of services for children with disabilities at the local level.

Guideline Paper on interventions for improvement of the educational situation for children with disabilities.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 2011 Census in Albania revealed that 6.2% of the population over 15 years of age (2,084,137 persons) is affected by one form or another of disability. Recent State Social Services data indicate that there are 140,840 identified disabled people, of whom 67,741 are beneficiaries of disability payment and 73,099 are beneficiaries of payments due to being persons with labor-depriving disabilities. 14,578 children are registered as beneficiaries of disability payments. This figure represents roughly 2% of the number of children in the country (n = 738990).

The study conducted by World Vision Albania and Save the Children in Albania¹, which aimed at measuring the prevalence of disability among children and access to services, identified that **10.4%** of children experience a lot of difficulty or cannot do at all one activity in at least one functional domain. In other words, **1 in 10 children in Albania has a disability.**

The study also showed that only 7.8% of children with disabilities in Albania receive specialized services from a social center while 75% of children with disabilities attend an institution of the pre university education system in Albania. The same² the study also made an assessment of the quality of educational, social and health services, noting that despite the fact that the enrollment attendance rate is high in an educational institution, children with disabilities drop off from school sooner than other children who have no disabilities, pointing out that schools are not sufficiently inclusive and lack the expertise or special support services.

26.2% and 14.6% of parents of children with disabilities are dissatisfied or totally dissatisfied with the infrastructural conditions in the premises of the educational institution and the distance to attend school in it. 1 in 2 children with disabilities experience discrimination in the community (52.9%), in educational institutions (52.4%) and during play with peers (54.9%)

CONTEXT

In recent years, a number of laws and policies have been drafted in Albania regarding the promotion, protection and mainstreaming the rights of people with disabilities such as the National Action Plan on People with Disabilities 2016-2020, the Law on Pre-University Education (2012), the Strategy of Social Protection (2015-2020), Social Inclusion Policy Document (SIPD 2016-2020), Law on Inclusion and Accessibility (2014), Law on Social Care Services in the Republic of Albania (2016). All of these documents, to the extent that they deal with issues related to persons with disabilities, have in their essence the implementation of the guidelines set out in

¹ World Vision in Albania and Kosovo and Save the Children in Albania. (2018). "Disability in Children 2 to 17 Years Old in Albania: The Prevalence and Quality of Supportive Services According to Parents' Perception".

² 36.5% of children with disabilities' parents identified through this study are either dissatisfied or totally dissatisfied with the costs they have to cover in order to enable the attendance of educational institutions by the child, 26.2% and 14.6% of the parents of children with disabilities are dissatisfied or totally dissatisfied with the infrastructural conditions of the educational institution's premise and the distance that needs to be covered in order to attend school in it. Moreover, parents of children with disabilities are dissatisfied with the progress of the child in education (19.4%); with the adaptation level of teaching to the needs and development of the child (13.3%) and the respect shown for these children by the educational staff (6.3%). 1 in 2 children with disabilities experiences discrimination in the community (52.9%), in educational institutions (52.4%) and during the game with peers (54.9)

the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified in December 2012 by the Albanian Government. Article 24 of the Convention focuses on education and requires countries to recognize the right to education of persons with disabilities. In order to achieve this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities, States Parties should ensure a comprehensive education system at all levels and guarantee lifelong learning. Article 24 highlights *three important elements* that countries need to consider and implement in their education systems. They are: (a) The right to inclusive education for all students at all stages of their education; (b) Provide reasonable accommodation to enable inclusive education; (c) Provide the necessary support of individualized learning opportunities.

There are different ways to achieve inclusive education (a) It is important that policies and practices be tailored and relevant to the specific needs of children, regardless of the level of their impairment and functioning; (b) To understand and implement inclusive education, it is essential to develop exchange programs, which ought to include civil servants, teachers, school principals, parents and organizations of persons with disabilities, as well as employees of special education; (c) From a human rights perspective, inclusive education should not be seen solely as an obligation but also as an opportunity to educate all children on human rights and respect towards all.

It is important to understand that to change the system and to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, a revolution must take place in the mindset of people including that of the families and organizations of persons with disabilities, alongside that of the relevant public authorities, school principals, staff of the education system and trade unions. In the education system, in mainstream schools, there is still confusion regarding *integration* and *inclusion*. *Integration* is a matter of registration/placement of students with disabilities in mainstream schools where they have to adapt to the existing teaching and learning methodology as well as school's organization. *Inclusion, on the other hand, requires adaptation of the system to meet the needs of the children with disabilities. Environment, teaching and learning, school organization and the education system, ought to systematically be modified to remove obstacles for children with disabilities in order to maximize their academic achievements and social inclusion.* An inclusive approach is useful to all students, whether they are disabled or not, and whether they have learning difficulties or not. It is still unclear what the reasonable adjustment/adaptation in the education system and the student's needs for repairing/adjustments of premises are, while they are only partially met in the Albanian schools.

The legal and political framework, the new approach and the concepts of the CRPD, oftentimes remain unfamiliar in some of the central-level segments, and more so at the local level.

Despite the efforts made and measures taken to bring about a change, the community of people with disabilities still faces difficulties, which prevent them from being citizens with equal rights and opportunities with the rest of society.

People with disabilities face many obstacles in their efforts to get involved in the country's socio-economic, political and cultural life. The difficulties, inter alia, relate to: (a) the lack of accessibility and, consequently, their inclusion and participation in low levels in all aspects of life; (b) low level

of income; (c) lack of services related to rehabilitation and inclusion; (d) lack of services in the communities where they live; (f) discrimination, stigmatization and prejudice.

To assist in the guidance of appropriate interventions that ensure social inclusion through the improvement of social, health and education services for persons with disabilities, with special focus on children, World Vision in Albania (WVA) in cooperation with the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation (ADRF), implemented the initiative to draft a set of Local Plans for the inclusion of people with disabilities in 10 municipalities of the country. The Local Plans were developed respectively for the Municipalities of Durrës, Vlora, Korça, Elbasan, Kurbin, Librazhd, Lezha, Kamza, Dibra and Shkodra. These plans target 49,595 persons with disabilities, 23,121 beneficiaries of disability payments and 26,474 are beneficiaries as people with labor-depriving disability in these 10 municipalities. Of them, nearly a tenth are children (9.97%, n = 4,946).

The drafting of the local plans for the inclusion of people with disabilities, as a specific intervention, is in line with the legal and political framework that the Albanian government has adopted and is trying to implement in order to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities in Albania. Also, these plans are an added value for the Social Plans, which exist or are being drafted in many of the country's municipalities.

The main areas where the work for designing these plans was focused were those of: a) Social Services; b) Health services; c) Education. For each area, administrative data were collected from local and regional government stakeholders as well as Centers providing services for people with disabilities, be they with state support, civil society or religious institutions. Based on the situation as well as the legal and political framework adopted by the Albanian government, the main interventions were proposed, which are mandatory to be implemented at local and regional level in order to fulfill the obligations assumed, and in order to realize the rights of persons with disabilities in the areas of Education, Social Services and Health Services. Meanwhile, the fulfillment of interventions at the local level is often conditioned by and requires the implementation of interventions by public institutions at the central level.

The purpose of this policy document is to provide a brief overview of the situation of children with disabilities in the 10 municipalities above-mentioned and to guide interventions by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, in order to improve the situation of inclusive education of children with disabilities in the mainstream education system.

II. THE EDUCATIONAL SITUATION OF FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN 10 MUNICIPALITIES OF THE COUNTRY.

Despite the steps taken to ensure inclusive education for children with disabilities, the organizations working with and for people with disabilities and parents involved in the design of the 10 local plans, as well as the parents involved in the report study conducted by World Vision in Albania and Save the Children Albania (2018), are still dissatisfied with the quality of education of their children in schools.³

During the process of assessing the situation of children with disabilities in 10 municipalities, a number of challenges were identified that call for urgent interventions in addressing them.

- I. The Regional Education Directorate (RED) data from the 10 municipalities where work efforts were made for drafting of the local plans, showed that children with disabilities, to a considerable extent, are still out of the education system. Only 1,255 children with disabilities, that have obtained an attestation from the Medical Commission for Work Capacity Assessment (MCWCA), are enrolled in ordinary schools and kindergartens. The level of involvement varies from one area to another, so in Lezha Municipality, 60% (n = 165) of children with disabilities of school age, are not part of the educational system. Also in the Municipality of Vlora, 65% (n = 173) children with disabilities, are not yet part of the education system. Children with disabilities, especially children with a higher degree of disability or those with multiple disabilities, experience major obstacles in regard to access to schools. According to World Vision Albania's and Save the Children's study report (2018), besides the data demonstrate that the level of enrollment in an education institution of the pre-university education system is high (75%), children with disabilities drop out from school sooner than other children who do not have a disability. Based on the assessment made by the multidisciplinary commission⁴, children with disabilities enrolled in schools are mainly children with autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, hearing impairment or loss, visual impairment, physical disabilities, physical and mental health disabilities, epilepsy, Down Syndrome, paraplegia and so on.

³ Parents of children with disabilities are dissatisfied or completely dissatisfied with their child's progress in education (19.4%), the level of teaching adapting to the needs and development of children (13.3%) and respect shown by educational staff (6.3%).

⁴ Established at all REDs, pursuant to the Law No. 69 / 2012, dated 21.06.2012 "On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania",

2. The RED reports its data to the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MoESY), three times a year, in a database with unified indicators⁵ that provide information on age and the kind of disability, while categorizing the disability only into mental and physical disabilities and children who attend special schools together with other vulnerabilities like enrollment of ethnic minorities, children returning from emigration and gender. There are efforts but uncoordinated and not unified by the MoESY, from different REDs in the country, to gather these data (disability related) with specific indicators⁶ based on the International Classification of Functionality (ICF), for each child's learning needs, including the needs for disability-related support services, also based on the **legal obligation** of the Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) no. 708, dated 26.08.2015⁷) to do so.
3. RED but also the MoESY still lack a structure or at least one specialist, pursuant to the by-laws⁸ to be in charge of following up **solely** on issues related to inclusion of children with disabilities or that would at least be in charge of it as his/her a primary task.
4. In all REDs included in the process of designing the local plans, a multidisciplinary commission has been set up and is running. There are noted **delays in the assessment process** due to the lack of a physician/ doctor in the composition of the team, and this issue will be present as long as this member of the commission is not subordinate to the MoESY or there are no clear roles and responsibilities between the line ministries. In addition to the **lack of a physician/ doctor, the multidisciplinary commission** in the RED, which operates on a voluntary basis, due to the time and commitments of members among their main tasks, **has no possibilities and time to continuously assess the process of inclusion and progress for students with disabilities**. The Commission does not **carry out assessments** of children who are affected by disability issues but are **not declared by parents** as such or have no **MCWCA certification** of it. Even though some REDs are using **new forms of assessment**, based on the manual prepared by Save the Children on ICF, adding

⁵ The existing database is unified by the MAS for all DARs and the EO in order for them to report the data on the number of children with disabilities enrolled in country's mainstream kindergartens and schools.

⁶Based on these indicators, specific needs are identified, such as: (a) the presence of specialists who would provide therapeutic services, such as speech therapists that would provide speech therapy; (b) texts in various formats, including simplified formats, with enlarged fonts, Brail text or audio, etc.; (c) didactic materials that would facilitate the teaching and learning process of information; (d) assistant teachers; (e) sign language interpreters; (f) environments that would create opportunities for individual work, in order to be as close to the level of non-disabled classmates as well as to relax or benefit other support services, including psychosocial support, physiotherapy, speech therapies etc.

⁷ DCM no. 708, dated 26.08.2015, sets out new requirements for statistical information on children with disabilities, the data base should be supplemented with other indicators that highlight the needs for support services to ensure quality education for children with disabilities.

⁸Law No. 69 / 2012 "On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania", the Normative Provisions and the Law on Inclusion and Accessibility (2014).

indicators to the needs of performing activities and participation of children with disabilities in the educational process, these forms and protocols **are not unified and not standardized by the MoESY**. In addition to assessing the need for assistant teachers, the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools, depending on the type of disability, requires evaluation for a range of other support services. These services, such as customized transport, sign language translators, Brail printed texts, simplified language programs, didactic tools, etc., as well as referral or specific support from psychosocial service specialist, speech therapist, physiotherapist, should also be part of a standardized assessment made of the child by the multidisciplinary commission in such a way that is reflected in the Individual Education Plan (IEP). Although **there is an effort to provide a supportive infrastructure assessment** (Brail texts/sign language interpreters/enlarged font textbooks/didactic tools to assist working with children with disabilities and other support services needed by a student with disabilities), **this assessment is not complete, as there is a shortage on specialists in the commissions who can assess the needs for didactic tools and support services.**

5. Subordinate to each RED, the **psycho-social service unit**⁹ is established facilitates and assists the inclusion and the wellbeing of children with disabilities in mainstream kindergartens and schools. **The effectiveness of this unit's work is dismal due to of the high workload that psychologists are assigned to** (1 psychologist for 1,800-2,000 students), **the absence of a social worker**, as well as **the lack of ongoing training on treatment of children with disabilities according to different diagnoses or even the ICF**. Trainings have been conducted for school's management, psychologists and social workers for the use of the handbook designed to assist the psycho-social service in schools for children with disabilities, but only in schools where inclusion projects are implemented by organizations, while the expansion of these projects in all educational institutions, particularly in rural schools is pivotal. This has been accomplished mainly by organizations (World Vision has provided training in 87 schools in rural areas) and recently through a process of validating a set of accredited trainings which was coordinated by the MoESY and the Institute for the Development of Education for the professional development of teachers.
6. At each educational institution, an evaluation commission has been set up and is running, which should draw up a PEI for each child with disabilities. **Work on the implementation of the PEI Plans is hampered and is not effective** due to: (a) the lack of a standardized format for drafting PEI Plans for them; (b) lack of necessary materials / didactic tools for their implementation; (c) the presence for only a brief time

⁹Minister's Order No. 344, dated 19.08.2013 "On the Establishment of the Psycho-Social Service".

of assistant teachers, who should assist a certain number of children per day, the large number of students in the classroom where the children with disabilities are attending; etc. (d) lack of an integrated system providing specialized services within educational institutions based on the achievements and objectives of the individual education plan.

7. Despite RED/Education Offices's (Eos) efforts, **the number of assistant teachers remains very low** in relation to the number of students with disabilities and the specific needs they have in learning, even though in the past months it is noticeable the increase of the number of assistant teachers. At present, in the educational institutions of the 10 municipalities, there are 149 full-time and 20 part-time assistant teachers (the latter being in the Shkodra municipality). The largest number of assistant teachers is in the DAR Vlora, although 5 other teachers are also needed. RED Elbasan reports 1.5 times more students with disabilities enrolled in the education system compared to the Vlora Municipality but has only 12 assistant teachers, while in the Durrës Municipality, at DAR there are only 3 assistant teachers when the number of children involved in the education system is almost the same with the number reported by RED Vlora. The lack of assistant teachers in classroom where there are students with disabilities, renders it almost impossible for the teaching and the entire educational process for them. It is ascertained as an issue the fact that assistant teachers do not meet the criteria¹⁰ and do not have the proper background needed in order to be able to work with children with disabilities.

8. **REDs do not have a plan for training of coordinator teachers, mainstream education teachers as well as for assistant teachers working with children with disabilities**¹¹. Training for specialists, including social workers, psychologists and teachers, is provided by various organizations, such as MEDPAK, World Vision, Save the Children, UNICEF etc. in the framework of the partnership between RED and the MoESY with these organizations, as well as individually by the teachers themselves. There are training manuals certified by the Institute for Development of Education, but there are no unified and standardized training manuals from the MoESY. It is ascertained the need for further and in-depth training in aspects such as: how to determine teaching hours with assistant teachers; drafting of PEI, methodology of working with students with disabilities; assessment of students with disabilities, how to manage aggressive/violent situations when there are children with disabilities that at certain times may turn aggressive, peer support, techniques and practical strategies for classroom management while taking into account the unique needs of each child, etc.

¹⁰ Based on the guideline, they ought to have graduated special pedagogy.

¹¹ Education/Objective 1/Point 1.6 in the Action Plan of People with Disability

9. There are no **resource centers** in schools as integrated premises of the educational institutions, that would help with individual and specialized work with any child with disabilities that finds it hard to cope in the classroom, that is lagging behind his/her classmates and that needs support in order to facilitate its active participation in the educational process just as his/her peers. Oftentimes, the lack of support services from specialists such as speech therapists, physical therapists, impede the learning process for children with disabilities in inclusive schools. Efforts to provide these services within the educational institutions, in the format of resource centers, have started in partnership piloting phase and with the support of World Vision Albania. This service needs to be shaped and standardized with experts at central and local level.
10. Meanwhile, even though in the Municipality of Durrës, Elbasan, Korça, Shkodra, Vlora, operate also **special schools**, no measures have yet been taken in terms of complying with the legal obligations¹² to turn them into resource centers.
11. RED and the educational institutions operating at the local level **have not developed an action plan to address accessibility issues**¹³, despite the legal obligation¹⁴ to do so. So far it is noticed that there are no plans in this regard, not even in regard to the financial planning.
12. **There is no formal network of cooperation**¹⁵ **between all institutions in charge for addressing disability issues at the local level** (education, health, employment, vocational training, social services, housing, transport and infrastructure institutions) organizations of people with disabilities or those that focus on disability. Collaboration with the parent community, awareness raising, and their real involvement, assuming responsibility in the education process, are considered necessary but not widely-established and consolidated elements to achieve a quality education for children with disabilities¹⁶.
13. With regard to the recognition of the legal and political framework of education of children with disabilities, it is evidenced that the Law on Pre-University Education is well known and the same also applies to its by-laws, while there is a lack of familiarization with the legal acts and policies specific to disability that directly or indirectly are related to the education of children with disabilities. Disability is still

¹² National Action Plan for Persons with Disabilities 2016-2020

¹³ (a) Physical access to service facilities, sports grounds, cultural centers, streets and sidewalks; (b) Access to information, through accessible formats or through the provision of online services - on accessible websites; (c) access to transport/customized transport.

¹⁴ DCM no. 1074, dated 23.12.2015 "On measures to remove environmental and infrastructure barriers in the provision of public services for persons with disabilities" and Law No. 139/2015 on Local Self-Governance, which renders municipalities incumbent with the realization of infrastructure/maintenance in each school institution.

¹⁵ There is such an experience in 2017 initiated by Save the Children in Durrës and Vlora that has made possible the establishment of a local network for disability, coordinated respectively by the Municipalities of Vlora and Durrës

¹⁶ Education/Objective I / Item 1.1 in the Disability Action Plan

treated in a fragmented and sectoral manner, with no cross-sectoral and inter-institutional approaches and coordination. The law on pre-university education addresses the services for children with disabilities, under the umbrella of education, the Law on Social Services has no provision linking the work of service specialists to that of professionals in the field of education, while the same spirit also describes legislation pertinent to health services.

III. CENTRAL LEVEL INTERVENTIONS TO ENSURE INCLUSIVE QUALITY EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES.

Strategic Objective: Children with Disabilities enjoy the right to quality and inclusive education at all levels of the education system.

I. The MoESY needs to undertake specific steps to empower structures and capacities at all levels of educational services.

I.1 The MoESY should take measures to establish a special structure for issues of education, sport and youth for persons with disabilities, which will guide the preparation, implementation and monitoring of the legal and political framework under the CRPD and human rights framework, by guaranteeing the planning of specific and inclusive measures and budgets in the field of education, sport and youth;

I.2. The MoESY should constantly guide, fund and monitor so that the RED/EO have a designated staff for inclusive education for children with disabilities, or to have the inclusive education of children with disabilities as a primary duty;

I.3. The MoESY and Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) should take appropriate steps to improve the functioning and increase the effectiveness of the Multidisciplinary Commission at RED, ensuring that it has a permanent status. At the same time, the MoESY should:

(a) standardize the forms of evaluation used by the multi-disciplinary commission at the RED based on the model of the International Classification of Functionality; (b) standardize the documentation to be completed and accompany the whole process of teaching children with disabilities;

I.4. The MoESY ought to increase annually the number of support teachers on the basis of assessment and demand from each RED/EO in accordance with the needs of the children attending the inclusive education and compliant to criteria of guideline 38/2014 of MoESY for their selection and qualifications;

I.5. The MoESY ought to ease the workload of the current psychologists and increase the number of psychologists and social workers in order to improve psycho-social service in kindergartens and schools;

I.6. In order to carry out the role of structures/professionals involved in the education of children with disabilities, the MoESY *should strive to strengthen their capacities through:*

- Drafting, updating, financing/co-financing and periodically monitoring a training plan for all structures entitled to ensure inclusive education;
- Provision of in-depth training for: (a) Responsible staff at the MoESY and RED/EO (b) Multi-disciplinary Evaluation Committee at RED; (c) Assessment Commission at each educational institution; (d) Coordinator teachers and mainstream education teachers; (e) Assistant teachers; (f) the Psycho-social Service Unit; (g) parents' community, etc. (h) students and peers on the principles of equality, inclusion, empathy and diversity within open hours or the implementation of national initiatives such as School as a Community Center.

To assist in these trainings there needs to be compiled and standardized by the MoESY materials and training packages promoting the the bio-psycho-social model and the use of ICF in assessment, data collection and statistics, accessibility elements, and contemporary methods of working with these children, based on successful models and international practices.

The MoESY needs to plan for training and information sessions for RED/EO for any change in the legal and political framework, both specific and inclusive, which directly or indirectly affects education, participation in sporting activities, and participation in youth employability programs of people with disabilities.

2. The MoESY should develop annual plans to be followed up and on the basis of which to report periodically on the implementation of the legal and policy documents on quality and inclusive education and throughout the life cycle for children with disabilities in Albania.
3. The MoESY should require from the RED/EO to prepare annual plans for the inclusion of children with disabilities, and should monitor their implementation, based on indicators defined in advance.
4. The MoESY should first and foremost draft its own, and require from all RED/EO and educational institutions at all levels, including those private-run ones, to prepare a plan of measures, including relevant budgets and timelines, with the aim of overcoming barriers in communication, infrastructure and transport, in the education services at all levels for all categories of people with disabilities (people with mobility visual, hearing, speech impairment, intellectual disabilities) and to monitor annually their implementation.
5. The MoESY should work on the establishment and standardization of a resource center model within schools/ educational institutions by ensuring the support of the assistant teachers and other specialists recommended by the multi-disciplinary commission for the children with disabilities. For the children with disabilities who attend the education system, there is a need to be supported with additional therapies including speech therapy, physiotherapy and psycho-social therapy. The MoESY, in partnership with the MHSP and municipalities need to finance/generate

funds for the operation of resource centers, including the support staff, specialists, material and didactic base as well as capacity building to ensure inclusive education and social inclusion of children with disabilities.

6. The MoESY should undertake steps to convert the special schools to resource centers, including (a) creating separate facilities at the special school and drafting training curricula so that they can be used as a resource center for ordinary and assistants teachers that will work with children with disabilities; (b) Training and certification of staff in special schools so that they can act as trainers; (c) Building educational infrastructure and supply didactic materials at resource centers; (d) Preparing publications for specialists and parents of children with disabilities; (e) Develop a methodology for the functioning of special schools as resource centers, etc.

7. The MoESY should improve the data collection and reporting system for children with disabilities involved in all levels of the education system. Achievement of the objective requires the engagement of the MoESY to supplement the existing database¹⁷ with indispensable new indicators that will serve to reflect data on the specific learning needs of children with disabilities, based on ICF-based assessment. The MoESY should gather from all regional and local institutions to collect data and report in accordance with the DCM. No. 708 dated 26.8.2015 "On the types, periodicity and manner of reporting of disability statistics by the responsible state structures at central and local level". This DCM which provides the legal framework to collect primary data is key to the design and implementation of policies or people with disabilities at the central and local level as well as conducting surveys dedicated to people with disabilities mainly the National Institute of Statistics INSTAT.

¹⁷The existing database is unified by the MAS for all REDs and EOs with the purpose of reporting data on the number of children with disabilities enrolled in country's mainstream kindergartens and schools.