



# Reforms and Challenges of Inclusive Education in North Macedonia

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This edition of policy papers is developed to assist the civil society and citizens, in general, engage in an informed debate and have access to expert knowledge, views and opinions on topics of importance for EU integrations. Areas in which the Republic of North Macedonia will lead its EU accession negotiations are both complex and diverse, while reforms that need to be implemented will open many dilemmas that necessitate an expert debate. For more contents produced under the project “CSO Dialogue – Platform for Structural Participation in EU Integrations”, visit the website: **[www.dijalogkoneu.mk](http://www.dijalogkoneu.mk)**

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## Abbreviations

MES - Ministry of Education and Science

MLSP - Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

UN - United Nations

ICF - International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health

PSRC - primary school with resource centre

EA - educational assistant

IEP - individual educational plan

PI - public institution

## Background

This policy briefs attempts to provide an overview and critical observation, and to offer proposals and solutions for inclusive education of children with disabilities in North Macedonia, with a focus on primary education that has been reformed in the last years. This document is developed on the basis of several domestic and international documents, as well as discussions, interviews, consultations and experiences of relevant line ministries, the service for functioning assessment of children and youth, resource centres, organizations, schools and parents. All of them have a shared role to play in design of inclusive education for children with disabilities, as well as in processes for creating quality policies and inclusive climate for each and every child.

## International documents on inclusive education

The need for inclusion in the education process and the quest for models under which the same can be best achieved has gained particular attention over the last 20 years. This is visible in international documents that advocate for quality education for all and different professional movements aimed at enforcement of such documents in the practice. To build inclusive schools, the education and teaching process needs to be based on the model of support interventions at several levels. This model includes transformations/interventions in education plans and curricula, teaching strategies, activities and materials, human resources, and continuous monitoring of the process for implementation of said interventions.

The concept of inclusive education is incorporated in several documents adopted by international organizations, such as:

- **United Nations' World Declaration on Education for All**, adopted in 1990, which promotes the basic principles of education for all and stipulates that “steps need to be taken to provide equal access to education to every category of disabled persons as an integral part of the education system”[1].

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[1] (цитат од: WCEFA. *World Declaration on Education for All, Inter-Agency Commission for the World Conference on Education for All, 1990*). Available in EN: <https://www.unesco.org/en/education>

- Article 2 of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989-1993) stipulates the following: “[...] shall respect and ensure the rights of each child without discrimination in respect to the race, gender, race, language, ethnic or social origin, disability or other status of the child”, while Article 3 stipulates that: “[...] in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”. Furthermore, Article 23 of the Convention reads: “[...] disabled child should enjoy efficient access to education and training”, while Article 28 stipulates that: “States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, on the basis of equal opportunity”[2].

- The World Declaration on Education for All was followed by the **Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education**, whereby the 1994 Salamanca Statement obliges the governments in all world countries to adopt inclusive education as law or principles, whereby:

- every child has a fundamental right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning;
- every child has unique characteristics, interests, abilities and learning needs;
- education systems should be designed to care for the wide diversity of these characteristics and needs.
- disabled children must have access to regular schools, which should accommodate these needs [3].

- Article 8 of the **United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** 2008-2011 concerns “fostering an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities, at all levels of the education system, including in children from an early age”, while Article 24 stipulates that “States Parties recognize the right to these persons to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity and shall ensure inclusive education system at all level and lifelong learning [4].

- Article 26 of the **Universal Declaration on Human Rights** includes the principle that everyone has the right to education, while the parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children [5].

- In December 2017, the Council, the European Parliament and the Commission supported the adoption of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. This treaty emphasizes the importance of social, educational and cultural dimensions of EU policies for building the joint European future.

The first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights underlines that “Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market”[6].

[2] Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available in MK: [https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/1806/file/MK\\_CRC\\_1990\\_MK.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/1806/file/MK_CRC_1990_MK.pdf)

[3] Salamanca Statement, UNESCO, 1994. Available in EN: <https://www.unesco.org/en/education>

[4] Available in MK: <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/WBStorage/Files/Konvencija%20za%20pravata%20na%20licata%20so%20invalidnost.pdf>

[5] Available in MK: <https://bezomrazno.mk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Univerzalna-deklaracija-za-pravata-na-covekot.pdf>

[6] Available in EN: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/inclusive-education>

## Need to reform inclusive education in North Macedonia

Inclusive education in the Republic of North Macedonia is a process that started two decades ago and is continuously dispersing and progressing throughout the entire education system, with enhanced intensity in the last several years, and includes an increasing number of children with special education needs attending regular schools. However, it is evident that education and teaching of children and youth with special education needs in North Macedonia does not follow a long established tradition. In continuity, it is facing various challenges and shortcomings.

Past experiences have shown it is impossible to advance theory and practice without application of science-based evaluations of all education segments and without parallel efforts to build the capacity of practitioners who are transferring scientific knowledge into practice. Meaningful progress cannot be expected in the absence of such effort [7].

According to **2018 research study conducted by the Bureau for Development of Education** [8], education staff at regular primary schools believe that (human and organizational) resources needed to strengthen capacity for inclusive education are deficient in both qualitative and quantitative terms. For most part, teachers are not trained to develop and monitor individual educational plans, to apply differentiation, to adjust conditions, methods and activities to the needs of pupils with disabilities and to monitor their achievements. Furthermore, pedagogic and personal assistants do not have differentiated competences to support pupils with special education needs. Individual support that pupils receive from expert associates (pedagogists, psychologist and social educators) in all segments of the education and teaching process (in class, during breaks, as part of extracurricular activities, free activities, additional lessons) differ in quantity, depending on special competences held by these associates.

Another **research conducted by the Resource Centre for Parents of Children with Special Needs** [9] shows that pupils with atypical development are often ridiculed, abused, threatened and isolated, especially during puberty and adolescence, and therefore additional education is needed for partners of children with typical development. In parallel, inadequate treatment of atypical pupils is a result of the lack of training and preparedness to work on the part of teachers, who are most responsible for socialization, support and assistance to all students at the same time. Also, insufficient funds are allocated to improve conditions for pupils with atypical development, and many schools do not have an inclusion team or when such team is already place, it is incomplete [9].

Looking more broadly, **Education 2020 Framework for Action** [10], adopted by the global education community and aimed to improve progress towards attainment of sustainable development goals (SDG 4: *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all*) underlines the need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization. More specifically, this document calls to address inequalities in terms of access, participation and learning processes and results, with due consideration of gender equality.

[7] <https://www.bro.gov.mk/?q=mk%2Fobrazovanie-za-deca-so-posebni-potrebi>

[8] Available in MK: <https://www.bro.gov.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Aktuelna-sostojba-na-inkluzija-na-deca-so-posebni-obrazovni-MK.pdf>

[9] Available in MK: [Barriers to Educational Inclusion of Children with Special Needs](#)

[10] Available in EN: <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

**Concluding Observations of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** about the initial report of the Republic of North Macedonia from September 2018 [11], among others, enlists the recommendation to revise the Law on Primary Education in order to clearly promote inclusive education and prohibit discrimination on the ground of disabilities.

### New inclusive reforms

Based on international recommendations, a new **Law on Primary Education** was adopted in 2019 [12]. It emphasizes that primary education shall be organized in terms of institutions, human resource and content in a manner that supports inclusion of all children in regular primary education.

Article 19 of the Law on Primary Education anticipates learning support for pupils with disabilities, whereby primary schools provide: **educational assistant, personal assistant, adequate professional support from the learning support centre, inclusion team and assistive technology**, upon recommendation from the **expert body** for assessment and in compliance with **individual educational plans** or **modified curricula**.

Relevant secondary legislation is adopted with a view to further facilitate educational inclusion. Special needs primary schools were transformed into **primary schools with resource centres (PSRC)**, while separate classes were organized as **learning support centres for pupils with disabilities**.

According to the new **Concept for Primary Education** [13], textbooks for first to fourth grade are adapted to the needs of pupils with disabilities, i.e. they are printed with Braille letters, adapted to audio formats, including development of audio-reader able to play teaching materials in Macedonian and Albanian language.

**Concept for Inclusive Education** [14] was created in the light of the fact that inclusive education takes into account individual developmental needs of pupils, gives equal opportunities for exercise of fundamental human rights to development and education. It provides guidelines for inclusion, development and education of different groups of pupils.

The Bureau for Development of Education published the **Work Guide for School Inclusion Teams** [15], after these teams became an important link in the inclusion process. According to the Law, **school inclusion teams** have a mandate of three school years and are comprised of seven members, as follows: pedagogist or psychologist or social worker employed at the school, two teachers from the ranks of school employees (one for class teaching and one for subject teaching), two parents or guardians, special educator and rehabilitator, and the school principal. There are two types of inclusion teams: one at school level and the other per individual pupil [15]

[11] Available in EN:

[https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/concluding\\_observation\\_2018\\_committee\\_on\\_the\\_rights\\_of\\_persons\\_with\\_disabilities.pdf](https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/concluding_observation_2018_committee_on_the_rights_of_persons_with_disabilities.pdf)

[12] Available in MK: <https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Zakon%20za%20osnovnoto%20obrazovanie%20-%20nov.pdf>

[13] Available in MK: <https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Koncepcija%20MK.pdf>

[14] Available in MK: <https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Koncepcija%20za%20inkluzivno.pdf>

[15] Available in MK: [https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/MK\\_%20revidiran\\_Vodic%20za%20rabota%20na%20UIT\\_final\\_WEB.pdf](https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/MK_%20revidiran_Vodic%20za%20rabota%20na%20UIT_final_WEB.pdf)

IPA-funded project “**Be IN, Be INclusive, Be INcluded**” started its implementation and has awarded **471 scholarships to children with disabilities** in regular education, for first and second grade pupils. Project activities also include **adjustments to several schools** attended by scholarship beneficiaries, and underway are **trainings on inclusive education for teaching staff**.

Aimed at advancing the inclusion process, MES confirmed that implementation is underway in respect to the **Project for Unhindered Access** at 14 educational institutions across the country: six primary schools, four secondary schools and four faculties, financed under IPA II 2019 Action Program “EU for Inclusion”, including development of technical documentation (adaptation projects). MES expects construction activities to start soon. **Municipalities** are also expected to **improve infrastructure conditions** and to make **existing education institutions more accessible** for pupils with disabilities.

### ICF became part of the inclusion system

An important role within the system of educational inclusion in North Macedonia is given to the **International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health**, commonly known as **ICF**. It is an internationally recognized framework for organizing and documenting information on functioning and disability. ICF represents a standard language for definition of disability, used by Macedonian services to monitor child development, appoint educational assistants, develop individual educational plans (IEP) or modified curricula, in order to ensure that all children get equitable treatment and support.

ICF belongs to the “family” of **international classifications developed by the World Health Organization (WHO)** for application in different aspects of health. It was approved for international use on 22 May 2001 [16].

According to ICF, functioning is a dynamic interaction between a person’s health condition, environmental factors and personal factors. It upholds that definition of disability is not “black and white” and that “ability” and “disability” may be viewed against the scale of different levels and definitions, having in mind that everybody belongs somewhere on that scale and that anybody’s situation might be affected by disability to do something in certain stage of life. ICF offers a new view of persons with disabilities - a view that is focused on what they are able to do, how to help them do their best, how to fit in the environment, instead of focusing on disability barriers [17].

ICF’s mission is based on support and protection of children with disabilities and development of the civil society, responsibility, personal integrity, empathy. Also, it is important to note that ICF is applicable to all persons, irrespective of their specific health conditions and in all physical, societal and cultural contexts. Having in mind that anybody can experience some disability at certain point in their lives, be it temporary or permanent, ICF can be used to document various changes. It is not designed, nor it should be used, to label persons with disabilities as separate social group.

ICF organizes information in two parts. Part 1 concerns functioning and disability, while Part 2 concerns contextual factors.

[16] Available in MK: [https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/sites/unicef.org.northmacedonia/files/2019-01/MK\\_SP\\_CWD\\_ICF\\_MK.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/sites/unicef.org.northmacedonia/files/2019-01/MK_SP_CWD_ICF_MK.pdf)

[17] Available in MK: <https://sojuzser.org/index/index.php/mk/m-activities/mkf>

**Table 1. Overview of the International Classification of Functioning**

	Part1: Functioning and disability		Part 2: Contextual factors	
Components	Body functions and structures	Activity and participation	Environmental factors	Individual factors
Domains	Body functions Body structures	Living areas (tasks, activities)	External influences on functioning and disability	Internal influences on functioning and disability
Constructs	Changes to body functions (physiological)  Changes to body structures (anatomical)	Capacity Performance of tasks in uniform environment  Performance Performance of tasks in current environment	Facilitators or barriers arising from characteristics of the physical and social world, and attitudes in that world	Personal attributes
Positive aspect	Functional and structural integrity	Activity Participation	Facilitators	No data
	Functioning			
Negative aspect	Diseases/ Disorder	Limited activity Limited participation	Barriers/obstacles	No data
	Disability			

In the domestic context, i.e. North Macedonia, the new assessment model for additional educational, health and social support to children and youth with disabilities was piloted in the period 01.04.2019 to 31.03.2020. **The model is based on ICF.** One national and two regional expert bodies with seats in Skopje were formed for the purpose of piloting the new model and they were assessing children from all towns in the country. The pilot bodies were comprised of temporarily seconded experts from health and social institutions, with completed education for application of the new assessment model according to ICF. The entire process was led by an international expert for functioning assessment.

The piloting process was coordinated by the **National Coordination Body for Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the Government of North Macedonia**, due to the need to ensure interdepartmental coordination and cooperation among different stakeholders. In that period, i.e. by 30.12.2019, a total of 356 functioning assessments of children and youth were completed, of which 152 assessments were made at functioning assessment centres, 10 assessments were made at home and 194 assessments were made at schools. Functioning assessments included mandatory participation of children's parents and/or guardians, who are also represented in the expert assessment bodies as temporary members.

The piloting process for the new model continued in 2020 and resulted in formation of the **Service for Functioning Assessment and Support to Children and Youth** within PHI Health Centre- Skopje in December 2020, which includes two expert teams from the Skopje Region and one coordination expert team. Gradually and over time, expert teams were also formed in the Southeast Region - with seat in Strumica, the Pelagonija Region – with seat in Bitola, and the Polog Region – with seat in

Gostivar. The purpose is to ensure complete and systematic solution and implementation of ICF within the existing system.

Based on conversations with heads/directors of these services, by the end of August 2022 expert bodies should also be formed in Kumanovo, Ohrid and Veles, thereby ensuring complete coverage of the country and relieving the “pressure” on Skopje-based bodies.

In the meantime, after the process was initiated, **the expert service announced open calls for training on functioning assessments based on ICF** [18]. Trainings are available for all regions where expert teams are formed. They include 30 hours of theoretical knowledge and 10 hours of practical work in groups of 5 to 10 participants, in duration of one month. Afterwards, training participants are selected for recruitment in expert teams established per planning region.

**The expert services operate according to ICF and include medical doctor, psychologist, special educator and social worker.** By the end of April 2022, they have completed around 1,380 assessments. They assess whether the child needs educational assistant, other assistive technology or individual educational plan. For pupils with complex needs, they assess whether the curriculum should be modified based on abilities for acquisition of independence, personal development and social relations. **These reports are sent to primary schools and afterwards, based on the individual assessment, relevant work program is designed and educational assistant is recruited through the resource centres.** Functioning assessments are made every year, with planned interim evaluations/controls.

**The service has faced several delays, extended deadlines and challenges.** Actually, the global pandemic halted the process and the service faced problems in terms of staff recruitment and providing necessary work conditions. In the school year 2021/2022, some regional expert bodies were still not formed which, in turn, postponed recruitment of educational assistants for children with disabilities. Many pupils started the school year 2021/2022 without assessment, individual educational plan or assistant, but they were already in school [19]. This activity was postponed for the second school semester [20].

By early July 2022 and the cut-off date for this document, **ICF-based service does not have an official website.** Moreover, official website of PHI Health Centre-Skopje, where the service is located, is not functional. Information and open calls are published on the website of the Alliance of Special Educators and Rehabilitators or they can be found in news sections on official websites of line ministries. This represents a major shortcoming in terms of communication with parents and guardians and in terms of publishing data, figures and press releases. The public is unable to monitor and evaluate performance of this service. In particular, the public does not have insight into service employees and staff members that conduct assessment of children. Assessment appointments are arranged via telephone or e-mail, but there is no information about how many children are on the waiting list, how long would they have to wait and when could somebody expect to have an appointment scheduled.

[18] Available in MK: [Open call for participation in comprehensive training on functioning assessment](#)

[19] Available in MK: [The school year for some atypical children started without educational assistant](#)

[20] Available in MK: [Large portion of children with disabilities will start the second semester without educational assistants](#)

According to the head of the ICF service, they cooperate with all institutions and bodies that operate in the field of healthcare, education and social protection. However, general challenges in terms of fully inclusive system are identified in the absence of such services in several regions and ensuring equal standard of operation among them. For example, some regions do not have speech therapists, others do not have sensory rooms at schools, and third group of them should put an emphasis on providing early intervention services.

### The system of educational assistance

In the school year 2021/2022, another major reform was implemented in parallel to ICF implementation when North Macedonia initiated the new system of **educational assistance** as pre-condition for inclusive education.

Educational assistance started in compliance with **2019 Law on Primary Education** and **Rulebook on the Manner to Improve Educational Assistance and the Manner for Selection and Appointment of Educational Assistants** [21]. Instead of the current system, which was administered by municipalities with support from the donor community, whereby educational assistants implied a financial burden for families of pupils with disabilities, financing of these assistants is now an obligation of the state. They are paid from the state budget, through the Ministry of Education and Science (MES).

For the school year 2021/2022, the line ministry has allocated **56 million MKD for employment of 500 educational assistants** at salary level of 24,000 MKD, through the five special education schools in North Macedonia which have changed their statute and became primary schools with resource centres. Open calls for recruitment published by primary schools “MD Zlatan Sremac” and “Idnina” anticipated engagement of 130 educational assistants each, while primary schools “Kocho Racin” in Bitola, “St. Clement of Ohrid” in Novo Selo and “Maca Gjorgieva Ovcharova” in Veles each published an open call for 80 vacancies.

Estimates for the school year 2021/2022 proved to be insufficient, but they still implied optimal number of assistants according to children’s and schools’ needs. According to MES, a total of **911 pupils** with special educational needs are integrated in primary schools, which represents **an increase by 4.5%** compared to the school year 2019/2020 [22]. On the other hand, the ICF service estimates that additional 250 educational assistants will be needed in the school year 2022/2023, bringing the total number to 750 assistants to address the actual needs.

The activity performed by educational assistants is regulated under the **Rulebook on the Normative, Description of Competences and Job Tasks** [23], separately for educational and personal assistants as two different forms of support. For example, educational assistants give support for curricular and extracurricular activities, tasks that require communication, social interaction, sensory and motor activities, movement, feedings and drinking. On the other hand, personal assistants are more oriented to offering support in terms of medical aids, orientation in space, personal hygiene, dressing, etc., according to individual guidelines for each pupil and in consultation with parents/guardians. This is what the rulebook stipulates, but the practice is still plagued with challenges in terms of distinguishing between these two activities.

[21] Available in MK: [https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/2021\\_Pravilnik\\_Nachin%20na%20pobarauvanje%20asistenti.pdf](https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/2021_Pravilnik_Nachin%20na%20pobarauvanje%20asistenti.pdf)

[22] Available in MK: <https://mon.gov.mk/content/?id=4800>

[23] Available in MK: [https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Pravilnik%20za%20obrazoven%20i%20licen%20asistent\\_1.pdf](https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Pravilnik%20za%20obrazoven%20i%20licen%20asistent_1.pdf)

**The profile of expert associates – educational assistants** requires them to have completed higher education of VII/7 level, i.e. VI A level according to the Macedonian Framework of Qualifications (MFQ) or 240 ECTS in professions such as: special educator and rehabilitator, pedagogist, psychologist, social worker, social and rehabilitation pedagogist, as well as persons qualified as class teachers (VII/1 level, i.e. VI A level according to the MFQ or 240 ECTS), and persons qualified as subject teachers (VII/1 level, i.e. VI A level according to MFQ or 240 ECTS).

Candidates undergo a process of selection and training by primary schools with resource centres and are appointed to schools on the basis of applications. The idea behind **educational assistants is for these to become direct support to teachers**, serve up to three children with disabilities per class instead of the current model of one assistant per child. In that, a cooperative relation is established with the teacher who should be the primary holder of inclusion activities. Children should achieve their potential and acquire independence and social inclusion in their school environment.

### New activities and challenges of primary schools with resource centres

The five special needs schools that have changed their statute and became primary schools with resource centres have a major and important role to play in the inclusion process. That is why this document includes special section on these schools, based on collected information, experiences and proposals from the principals of four such schools, based in different municipalities in North Macedonia.

According to the Law on Primary Education, resource centres **use their material and human resources and provide expert support to primary schools**. For that purpose, **the Manual for Cooperation** [24] was developed and stipulates that resource schools make contributions to teaching staff, inclusion teams, parents, children, and they offer skills and advice. This process means that special need schools (transformed into primary schools with resource centres) will stop enrolling pupils in the school year 2022/2023, meaning that all children will be gradually integrated in integrated schools, irrespective of their “disability”. More specifically, starting from next year these school should not enrol first grade pupils, but will continue their education and teaching activity until the last generation of pupils enrolled at such schools completes the ninth grade by the school year 2031/2032. In parallel, they will also perform resource activity and use their premises to offer modified curricula for children with complex needs enrolled through primary schools.

As regards **specialized services**, resource centres offer sensory integration, occupational therapy, psychological and motor re-education, Montessori pedagogy/approach, art therapy, and use assistive technology, logopaedic treatment, services of special educators and rehabilitators, psychologists, social workers.

**The challenge** faced by many of them in the inclusion process concerned support that should have been given to primary schools under cooperation agreements, i.e. implementation of the new “educational assistance” system. According to the procedure in place and based on previously established catchment areas, municipal primary schools should address resource centres with applications for educational assistants for students who have been issued an opinion by the ICF

[24] Available in MK:

<https://mon.gov.mk/stored/document/Upatstvo%20za%20nacinot%20na%20sorabotka%20pomegu%20OU%20i%20OU%20so%20resurse%20centar.pdf>

service that they need assistance. Then, resource centres forward applications for educational assistances from all schools in their catchment area to the Ministry of Education and Science in order to obtain approval, and afterwards announce open call for selection of educational assistants.

As regards this process, three from the four interviewed resource centres indicated the need for **increased number of assistants**. Also, some of them reported **deficit of personnel for the position of educational assistant**, but on the other hand, one resource centre reported **surplus**, i.e. more than 200 candidates have applied to the open call for 130 such positions. Furthermore, one resource centre indicated that one of major challenges concerns **synchronization of work performed by the expert body for ICF assessment and issuance of opinions**, which was defined as precondition for obtaining assistant. According to the legislation in effect, there are deadlines for submission of applications from primary schools to the resource centre in order to obtain assistant for specific children.

As regards **contracts with educational assistants**, according to the Law on Primary Education these assistants are employed for fixed period of time, i.e. by the end of the school year the latest. On one side, assistants work under one-year contracts with all labour rights, but on the other side, the question is raised whether they need full-time employment contracts with undefined duration? Two resource centres believe that the number of children with disabilities who will need assistant is variable and therefore one-year contracts are functional. A third resource centre is of the opinion that contracts for educational assistants should have an adaptation period in duration of one school year, and afterwards if assistant-child relations are as they should, the contract can be signed for several years, i.e. by the end of the child's schooling. The fourth resource centre indicated the increasing need for educational assistants whose services are necessary, and therefore their labour relations should be changed, but that would require changes to the legislation.

In terms of **tasks and competences of educational assistants**, one resource centre believes that these need to be defined with further details. Another resource centre has established the need for in-service training of educational assistants in terms of dealing with different situations, but also documents they need to keep and submit. The third resource centre referred to the need for creation of common methods of work between assistants and all other associates, while the fourth centre indicated the need for detailed definition of the position of educational assistants based on experiences from the practice. In other words, too many details could also be a limiting factor, having in mind that day-to-day support to children with disabilities and teachers requires flexibility and involvement of all factors in this process.

Furthermore, after the new rulebook distinguished the normative, description of competences and **job tasks of educational and personal assistants**, some resource centres are wondering who will perform personal assistance now because, at the moment, these tasks are left to the good will of educational assistants and they are not required to perform them, but are not making fuss when the child needs medical aids, orientation in space, feeding or personal hygiene. Hence, some believe that capacity in the sector should be re-examined and adequate model needs to be designed for division of labour or shared activities, i.e. who will practically provide services in the field, in the best interest of children. One resource centre mentioned that maybe the school should engage caregivers.

Resource centres were involved in **trainings**. They underwent training of trainers for educational assistants from relevant providers organized by UNICEF. After employment, educational assistants were given training. In general, resource centres agree that training should continue, with increased dynamic and intensity. Trainings are intended for teachers, educational assistants and staff from resource centres. Also, some of them refer to education for modified curricula, as well as continuous support to assistants from trainers.

MES awarded 2,500,000 MKD to primary schools with resource centres for procurement of **equipment and didactic aids** to support inclusive education. Three from the four resource centres confirm the need for additional funds, various budget allocations, in order to continue the process for developing specialized services and individual treatment and rehabilitation. They stressed the need for adjusted furniture, improved accessibility, construction of sports halls, expanded spatial capacity and securing human and technical resources.

Given that resource centres **cooperate with primary schools**, they also perceive the need for schools to be fully equipped with staff for educational inclusion, didactic materials and equipment, assistive technology. Some of them referred to construction of sensory rooms, where they are missing. Sensory rooms should be used by trained staff and according to individual needs of the child. Furthermore, two resource centres emphasized the need for primary schools to also include support centres, i.e. to amend the secondary legislation, strengthen human resources for children with disabilities, spatial capacity and equipment.



## Inclusive education during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the surface shortcomings of the system and tested the social position of persons with disabilities, including effects on their health and social services, work, and education in particular.

Children with disabilities were faced with challenges and difficulties in terms of following online teaching which was inadequate and non-adjusted to their needs. Teaching was conducted under conditions that implied lack of adequate educational aids, i.e. lack of technical equipment for following online classes, as well as lack of adequate support to attend online classes (educational assistant, special educator, etc.).

This was shown by the **analysis of the Western Balkan Democracy Initiative** [25]. Seven from eight respondents have indicated that the most serious barrier faced by children with disabilities is inadequate and non-adjusted teaching. An example thereof is the fact that teaching was provided via the public service broadcaster, i.e. Macedonian Radio and Television, which has not addressed the needs of persons with sensory disabilities and failed to secure sign language interpreter .

One stakeholder from the survey enlisted that barriers for children with disabilities in the education process mainly arise from lack of access to adequate assistive technology, while the problem for some children is located in the lack of individual approach in implementing their individual educational plans, meaning that children with disabilities have not received assistance from the expert service. In the opinion of another factor, the lack of assistive technology is a result of the parents' insufficient means to secure such technology at home, which ultimately leads to undermining the rehabilitation component of their education.

Furthermore, the survey has shown that negative effects from non-adjusted curriculum could be mitigated if the state puts into function local human resources by providing temporary employment for unemployed special educators and rehabilitators and teaching staff to support children for learning at home.

This further proves that the state has failed to deliver its commitment from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, i.e. has disrespected the right to necessary protection and assistance from the society and the state for full and equitable exercise of rights.

The document **Youth in Crisis 2.0 – Effects of the Pandemic on Youth and Recommendations for Institutions** [26] developed by a group of youth organizations, highlighted similar problems. In particular, it underlined the need to provide fast and equal access through legal and procedural conditions for all students who need educational assistants in order to have unhindered access to education.

The document enlisted that, in order to provide equal access to education for all students, efforts are needed to increase the level of inclusion in the education process by securing textbooks with Braille letters and online educational content in sign language. **Youth in Crisis 2.0** refers to the fact that educational content aired on national television outlets and EDUINO platform are still not adjusted

[25] Available in MK: <https://mhc.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/vlijanieto-na-kovid-19-vrz-licata-so-poprechenost.pdf>

[26] Available in MK: <http://www.nms.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Mladi-vo-kriza-2.0-MK-brief1.pdf>

to hard-of-hearing pupils, putting them in unfavourable and unfair position and denying them the right to follow educational content.

According to last information from MES for the purpose of this policy brief, educational materials posted on EDUINO platform will be subtitled in Macedonian and Albanian language. Also, the line ministry will continue procurement of primary education textbooks which, in addition to printed form, will also be available in digital and audio formats, as well as in Braille letters. Plans are in place to also procure assistive technology and didactic aids for pupils with disabilities.

### **Embla's case raised the issue of discrimination at schools**

The European Commission's last **Country Progress Report** assessed that progress is achieved in improving the rights of persons with disabilities, but they are still discriminated. Persons with disabilities continue to face significant, direct and indirect, discrimination due to barriers related to infrastructure, lack of information and services, discriminating views and social exclusion. In 2020, the Ombudsman has been presented with 111 complaints related to violation of the rights of children and with 37 complaints related to children with disabilities. According to this report, the Ombudsman has issued 42, i.e. 17 opinions respectively [27].

Дискриминацијата се пренесува и во училиштата. Иако изминативе години институциите и невладини организации поттикнаа повеќе кампањи против дискриминацијата врз лицата со попреченост, случајот со малата Ембла Адеми во гостиварското училиште „Единство“ е евидентен пример дека претстои уште работа, од сите засегнати страни. Особено што група родители преку петиција ја бојкотираа наставата, барајќи нивните типични деца да не учат заедно со четвртоодделенката со Даунов синдром.

Discrimination has moved into schools. Although the institutions and non-governmental organizations have conducted several campaigns against discrimination of persons with disabilities in the last years, the case of young Embla in the Gostivar-based school “Edinstvo” is an evident example that more efforts are needed by all stakeholders, especially having in mind that group of parents petitioned for boycotting the education process because their typical children should not learn together with a fourth-grade female pupil that has Down syndrome.

**Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPC) established discrimination by primary school “Edinstvo” from Gostivar** [28]. Moreover, the Commission established segregation and exclusion on the grounds of disability, pursued by unjustified and illegitimate physical separation from other pupils into separate room, isolated from pupils without disabilities on the basis of her special educational needs. Furthermore, the Commission established direct extended discrimination by the school due to non-adjustment of school structure in terms of providing resource and sensory room equipped with adequate assistive technology, which had resulted in denied access to education on equal grounds with other pupils, and based on disability.

[27] Available in MK: <https://www.sep.gov.mk/data/file/Pregovori/North-Macedonia-Report-2021-%D0%9C%D0%9A2.pdf>

[28] Available in MK: [Discrimination established against young Embla](#)

However, Embla's case is not isolated. Experiences of other parents show that, in the last few years, some primary schools have rejected enrolment of their children with disabilities under the explanation that "they do not have adequate conditions and staff". Hence, due to non-resistance on the part of these parents, their children remain outside the education process, which practically means that schools are discriminating pupils with disabilities. Therefore, it is important to stress that inclusion is not only moral, but legal obligation as well. The Law on Primary Education prohibits discrimination on any grounds and in all areas of primary education. Relevant protections are also in place by the effect of human rights protection instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both of which are ratified by the country. Hence, schools should be promoters of inclusive policies, adjusted structures, equality and fairness, and they should counteract each and any form of discrimination or violence.

### No registry of persons with disabilities

Recent data from the **2021 census conducted by the State Statistical Office** [29] show that there are total of 94,412 persons with disabilities living in North Macedonia. Most of them are women (52,203), while majority of them, i.e. more than 40%, have problems with movement. There are 1,674 children with disabilities aged up to 14 years, 43.5% are aged 15 to 64 years, and 54.8% are aged 65+ years.

However, North Macedonia does not have a **registry of persons with disabilities** in order to provide categorization of necessary data and plan relevant policies that affect this group of citizens, including education policies.

Thus far, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) has kept records on all persons with disabilities in the form of book for persons with bodily and mental development disabilities, including electric records, i.e. LIRIKUS system, which falls under competences of social work centres and the Bureau of Social Activities – Skopje.

In order to change the current method for categorization of persons with disabilities in line with recommendations from the UN Committee and the World Health Organization, in May 2021, MLSP announced that, together with other relevant institutions, it works intensely on reforms for introduction of **new model of assessment for additional educational, health and social support to children and youth**. This model is based on the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) and should provide quality functioning assessment of children with disabilities. In May 2022, MSLP confirmed that underway are activities to establish the registry of persons with disabilities [30].

This means that, to present, information was collected from children with disabilities that have received some form of social allowance, recorded through social services, but the new registry will also include data from the newly established assessment services that work according to ICF. The national registry will provide an actual image of the types of persons with disabilities living in the country at municipal level, for example, persons with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, etc. All that would allow planning of different policies and decisions for their inclusion in different spheres of social life.

[29] Available in MK:

[https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/mk/MakStat/MakStat\\_Popisi\\_Popis2021\\_NaselenieVkupno\\_Naselenie\\_Poprecenost/T1053P21.px/?rxid=47aabd54-cf4f-4034-b9ae-79d3bee1e8e3](https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/mk/MakStat/MakStat_Popisi_Popis2021_NaselenieVkupno_Naselenie_Poprecenost/T1053P21.px/?rxid=47aabd54-cf4f-4034-b9ae-79d3bee1e8e3)

[30] Available in MK: [https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/april-2022-ns\\_article-soopshtenie-za-javnost-20042022.nspix](https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/april-2022-ns_article-soopshtenie-za-javnost-20042022.nspix)

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

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Access to quality education for all needs to be improved, especially for children with disabilities, which is one of key recommendations put forward in the European Commission's Progress Report for North Macedonia.

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The system of inclusive education at national level should be maintained and comprehensive standards are needed on quality of inclusive education, development of monitoring plans and mechanisms to follow progress at all levels of education, including coordination among all three sectors – education, social protection and healthcare.

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Institutions should continue to strengthen capacity of primary schools with resource centres in terms of space, didactic materials for development of specialized services and individual treatment and rehabilitation, but also in terms of professional competences of special educators and rehabilitators.

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Efforts are needed to further develop learning support centres for children with disabilities.

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Continuous education should be provided on the concept of educational inclusion for all employees at schools in order to improve inclusion climate, not only for teaching staff, expert services, but also for school principals and administrative and technical staff.

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The expert services at schools should be completed with special educators and rehabilitators. In general, capacity building is needed for school inclusion teams in order to improve the inclusion process, especially transition of pupils with special educational needs from class-based or subject-based teaching, as well as from primary to secondary education, whereby inclusive teams from primary and secondary schools must provide all relevant information for pupils' safe and confidential transition.

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Human and material-technical capacity at pre-school institutions needs to be strengthened in order to increase coverage of children from the earliest age.

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Support and education should be provided for parents of children/pupils with disabilities throughout this process.

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Monitoring mechanisms should be designed for planning, implementation and evaluation of joint activities with primary schools from the action plan that is integral part of cooperation agreements between primary schools and resource centres.

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Cooperation should be enhanced between pre-school institutions, primary schools and resource centres to enable monitoring and evaluation of every child's development and progress and to create possibilities for timely planning of support measures to be provided to children.

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Local governments and all schools should define accessibility as high priority when planning their budgets. Accessibility does not imply only access ramps, but also lifts, adjusted furniture, toilets and the like.

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Construction of sensory rooms at schools should continue with adequate equipment for visual, auditive and tactile stimulation, and for improving soft and hard motoric skills. Also, efforts are needed to organize more trainings on sensory integration for staff members. In that, use of sensory rooms should be adjusted to individual characteristics of each child.

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The official website of services for functioning assessment of children and youth needs to be designed and launched in order to ensure transparency of their operation, services, and public communication.

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All anticipated regional services for functioning assessment need to be established in order to increase the coverage according to ICF and reduce pressure on expert bodies in Skopje. In other words, parents and children should not have to travel to Skopje or other towns, and they should be able to receive necessary assessment for educational program or assistant in their home town/region.

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Effective coordination and communication should be ensured between ICF services and all institutions, schools and resource centres for the purpose of optimizing services, equipment and infrastructure needed for educational inclusion based on individual assessments of children by the expert service.

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The number of educational assistants should be increases or optimized according to the needs in each region.

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Based on experiences of some resource centres, possible changes to engagement and job tasks of educational assistants should be reconsidered by revising relevant rulebooks or legislation that govern their activity.

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Staff capacity in the education sector should be re-examined and adequate model for operation of education and personal assistants should be designed because these assistants practically serve the schools, in the best interest of children.

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Educational campaigns should be organized against discrimination or any kind of exclusion of children with disabilities, especially in respect to educational inclusion and creating the feeling of togetherness at schools. Each school must recognize the value of differences of their pupils, find ways to respect these differences, adjust curricula to individual characteristics of each pupil. In cases where greater difficulties are identified for participation in the education and teaching process, each school should identify learning barriers faced by individual pupils and should offer adequate strategies to address them, including request for support from the local resource centre.

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The procedure for creation of the national registry of persons with disabilities should be intensified because it will help categorization of necessary data and planning of relevant policies for this group of citizens, including education policies.

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If the pandemic continues with strong intensity or there is new outbreak, needs of the children with disabilities should be taken into account when designing relevant measures, i.e. when organizing online classes, implementing individual educational plans, providing assistive technology, special educators, social rehabilitators and teaching staff to support children under a possible scenario on following classes from home.

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Negative effects from non-adjusted teaching during the pandemic might be mitigated if the state puts into function local human resources by providing temporary employment for unemployed special educators and rehabilitators and teaching staff to support children with learning from home.

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