SERBIA
NATIONAL POLICY BRIEF

The objective of this policy brief is to present the current situation and progress made in family support on behalf of the children's rights in Serbia towards achieving quality standards using the quality assurance protocol for family support services developed by the 19 countries participating in the COST Innovators Grant IG18123, QA(4)EuroFam. The aim is to provide key messages on current strengths as well as recommendations to key audiences, bringing relevant views and appraisals from the group of interdisciplinary experts, representatives of various sectors in the field at national level.

National Working Group

Consensual responses were provided by members of the Serbian National working group made up of 8 researchers and coordinators of services and social entities at national, regional and local levels in social, education, health, and community sectors.

1. Contextualization and characterization of family support in Serbia

Definition and understanding of family support: The concept of FS is not commonly defined or understood among various stakeholders in Serbia; however, it relates to a broad spectrum of resources and services foreseen and supported by national policies, regulations, and institutions. Regulations and policies clearly require the implementation of the best interests of children and special protection of families in all sectors. A series of strategies, laws and by-laws address this field, including those encouraging births, providing for financial support to families with children, family–work balance, inclusive education, gender equality, health protection and early development, and combating domestic violence and violence against children.

Family support services in context: Competences for FS provision are distributed among central and local government. CSOs are established at the local level in addition to numerous NGOs providing FS services. However, there is an apparent lack of adequate regional and local level organization and financing. The leadership in state-run agencies often does not promote positive work environment (e.g. effective supervision, support, in-service training and staff collaborative practice) so to support families while promoting professionals' wellbeing. FS in Serbia is a complex network of formal and informal services shaped by various factors, including demographic trends (population aging), lately widespread climate of violence and continuously unfavorable political and economic dynamics.

Political perspective on family support: National legal framework follows international standards, aiming at safeguarding the rights of children and the welfare of families. However, delivery of FS services is poorly financed by the state and without adequate monitoring in all sectors. The high level of variability exists in terms of the number and quality of services financed and regularly offered to children and families. There is also an apparent lack of political will to ensure a sufficient number of qualified professionals to provide services for children and families. This is recently followed with strong narratives in the political and public arena for a return to traditional patriarchal family values.

2. Key messages from the National Strengths and Recommendations Report

Families and Children

STRENGTHS

1. Associations of parents of different groups of children (children with disabilities, with chronic and rare diseases, children victims of violence) exert significant pressure to improve existing regulations, financing and quality of FS services.

2. The best interests of the child standard and respect for the rights and developmental needs of children and families is clearly included in national regulations and policies, and supported by trainings for professionals and other creative and good practice methods of dealing with crisis regarding various family support services.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Coordinated advocacy actions of parents, professionals and CSOs is needed for securing a basic package of preventive services in social welfare and health protection for vulnerable families with children, with secured financing.

2. Incorporate lessons learned from various NGOs and public FS services into regulations and training for professionals regarding the strength-based collaborative approach to family and inter-sectoral cooperation.

Professionals

STRENGTHS

1. There is a growing awareness among practitioners to incorporate strength-based and collaborative approach and improve the quality of FS interventions.

2. There is a public recognition for professional teams and services that adopt good practices guidelines to improve the quality of FS.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop and deliver evidence–based practice manuals and continuing trainings (preferably inter-sectoral) for the family supportive strength-based approach to families in all sectors.

2. Secure funding and improve institutional and organizational efforts in all sectors at the management level to establish positive working culture and leadership, promoting professional development and in-service training, including monitoring the implementation of intersectoral cooperation.

Policymakers

STRENGTHS

1. There is a growing awareness among policy makers on central and local level regarding the importance of FS policies and services.

2. Different FS services are recognized as effective and important in many local communities, despite the lack of regulations regarding standards and poor funding mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Harmonize different family-related policies and regulations (particularly regarding the mechanisms of inter-sectoral cooperation) and merger/fusion of the Ministry of Social Protection/Welfare and the Ministry of Family Care.

2. Adopt minimal obligatory standards for social protection services, particularly for socio-educational and socio-therapeutic services focusing on service users' strengths and capacities, with secure financing and adequate human resources (to provide adequate financing and a sufficient number of qualified professionals in all sectors, including NGOs/CSOs).

Academics

STRENGTHS

1. Higher education, academic and research community offers different professional profiles in the field of FS.

2. An increasing number of academics and researchers is involved in FS policies and practice advocacy, evaluation, in-service training, research and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Initiate changes in higher education curricula for pre-service training to include evidence-based family support and collaborative practice approach to more extent.

2. Adopt consensual evidence-based best practices guidelines in FS in relevant sectors and professional fields.

3. Insights and lessons learned regarding the quality of family support

1 Provision of family support is recognised within state policies, regulations and professional guidelines. Still, there is a lack of political vision, with often ineffective, non-transparent state coordination bodies, and without stable collaboration between policy makers, researchers and practitioners. There is a need for more comprehensive and harmonized family support policies, and coordinated inter-sectoral efforts to properly address the contemporary families' needs and challenges.

2 There is a strong agreement among practitioners, academic community and general public that family support services are insufficiently developed, unequally distributed and with low user coverage across the country. Many successful family support services endure with positive results based solely on the enthusiasm and commitment of professionals, especially in the NGO sector. It is necessary to improve state recognition of good practices and secure nation-wide, systematic support, including proper funding in this field.

3 FS services need to be monitored and evaluated to offer quality family support. Mechanisms to empower families in the justice system are extremely poor and require development to better recognise family's capacities. Overall, it is necessary to examine the number, content and availability of FS services in all sectors, and create a continuum of services for families with numerous and complex needs, from preventive to very intensive ones. This should be accompanied by a sufficient number of qualified professionals, particularly in the public sector.

4 The state provision of FS requires additional targeted economic support measures for vulnerable families and secured financing for socio/psycho-educational and community support services for all families, in order to recognize different types of families and different levels of intervention in all sectors. It is particularly important to define basic package of preventive services in social welfare and health sectors for vulnerable families with children, with secured financing and quality assurance mechanisms.

5 Although regulations and policies recognise the importance of collaborative relationships with families, this is rarely confirmed in practice as a service standard. Stronger alliance between relevant sectors, professionals and families is crucial, so to create more strength-based collaborative approach to service delivery. This could be initially supported by systematic inter-sectoral and multidisciplinary trainings for management and professionals across sectors and better organised management structures.

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