

ARISE

Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

Policy Road Map
Systematic Regulation of
Access to Quality Compulsory
Preschool Programs
in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Policy Road Map for Systematic Regulation of Access to Quality
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Where do we start from?

For more than 27 years, the **Step by Step Center for Educational Initiatives** has stood behind every child in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their right to access quality education. Already with the *Child-Centered Methodology*, which permanently changes hundreds of educators throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Center is philosophically and activist oriented towards advocacy and working on a quality educational platform that should provide every child with guaranteed access to quality education, quality and responsive educators, and quality and agile system.

The willingness to selflessly share knowledge and jointly create an understanding of the principles of quality upbringing and education has led to the fact that the key terms of the *Child-Centered Methodology* have become an everyday professional narrative, and within legal frameworks - a substantial part of it.

The **Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education (ARISE) project** is financed by the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). The general aim of the project is to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations (both partner organizations implementing the project and local organizations) for policy development and advocacy in the field of equality in education through regional cooperation and building local coalitions.

The Center for Educational Initiatives Step by Step (COI Step by Step) is part of a regional consortium of eight partner organizations that are part of the Network for Education Policy Centers (NEPC), thus creating the axis of the project in order to focus on the most vulnerable groups of society: children and families with lower socio-economic status (SES).

Poverty and students affected by poverty must be acted upon on two levels: on the one hand, educational and social policies can provide long-term solutions for creating equality in education, while, on the other hand, pilot interventions at the level of pre-school institutions and schools can address the current needs of low SES students, thereby contributing to policy development.

As a response to the problem and as part of the ARISE project, the **Coalition for Reducing Inequality in Education** was formed whose goal is to create guidelines for educational policies, also known as **Policy Road Maps**.

Through structured meetings, conversations and joint learning, members agreed that early growth and development is a meaningful starting point for the permanent reduction of inequalities in education.

The center is aware that high-quality preschool programs and early intervention are one of the key factors that influence the difference in further achievements and bring results in creating equality, both through further education and in the overall quality of the student's life - these are necessary to meet the needs of students with low SES.

Indicators, on the other hand, show that children with a low SES background are almost never included in quality preschool education programs, which is an additional concern.

This document, unpretentiously called a **Policy Road Map**, should inspire rapid, efficient and permanent changes in early childhood education policy, offer a very clear theoretical rationale, as well as strategic goals with accompanying activities.

The document recognizes all the complexity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the guaranteed authority in education and offers a voice to those who do not have it, in the hope that preschool coverage of the most vulnerable categories will be greater, and the programs of mandatory preschool upbringing and education will be of better quality, longer and more comprehensive.

The guidelines are based on existing legislation, examples of good practices with an emphasis on the region, as well as on available data from various sources.

Data drawn from reports, analyses, and reviews from domestic educational authorities, international agencies and local non-governmental organizations was used to illustrate areas of concern in early childhood education.

Later in this document, there's an overview focused on three specific objectives with ten supporting recommendations. The authors of these guidelines note that further operationalization of this document is necessary at the level of competent administrative units. In the best manner, guided by common shortcomings, this document may not fully recognize the peculiarities of each competent administrative unit and leaves room for them to be at different levels of development.

Specific goal 1: Establish a high-quality legal and procedural basis for the regulation of access to high-quality compulsory preschool programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Specific goal 2: Establish quality programmatic and professional frameworks for the implementation of compulsory preschool education.

Specific goal 3: To develop high-quality cooperation of all relevant actors connected with the preschool education system.

This document is entirely guided by the idea of the well-being of the child, allowing to go beyond conventional and pragmatic thinking.

Coalition to reduce inequalities in education and *Policy Road Map* methodology

In order to increase the impact on policies, and thus to find systemic solutions at different levels, the Center included and connected the main educational actors who deal with issues of poverty and providing support to students of low SES by creating a platform for sharing knowledge and cooperation – **Coalition for reducing inequality in education in Bosnia and Herzegovina**.

The coalition, as a project method, was planned and formed in five countries (Albania, Kosovo [1], North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) whose organizations are part of the ARISE project consortium. Access to the coalition was the subject of a public call, and the members of the Coalition are mentioned at the end of this document.

In each of the mentioned countries, the national coalition is composed of representatives of civil society organizations, schools/preschool institutions, local civil society organizations/non-governmental organizations, government representatives, researchers and academic staff that are focused on the social dimensions of education.

Due to the complexity of the problem, actors from different spheres of society are involved with the intention of a comprehensive analysis and readiness to create meaningful solutions.

Members of the national coalition were expected to:

- provide insights and feedback on the main determinants of project activities and outcomes;
- promote and share information about project activities and results;
- identify ways of cooperation between different actors and experts that are operational and effective in their countries;
- advocate a change in relevant policies;
- participate in five meetings of national coalitions and the final national conference;
- if necessary, participate in regional "Policy Lab" events.

[1] This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

Before the actual draft of the Guidelines for Education Policies, the Coalition had the opportunity to collaborate and construct the existing document through five working meetings [2] and based on the conclusions of the Policy Lab held in Zagreb in March 2022, which recommends the development of Policy Road Maps at multiple levels (policy of schools/preschool institutions, civil society organizations).

[2] Sarajevo, 30. 11. 2021. – constitutive meeting (formation of the Coalition)
Sarajevo, 29. 4. 2022. – first working session
Srebrenica, 5. 11. 2022. – second working session
Sarajevo, 23. 12. 2022. – third working session
Sarajevo, 2. 6. 2023. – fourth working session
Sarajevo, 3.2. 2024. – fifth working session

A brief overview of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The issue of poverty and students affected by poverty requires a complex and multidimensional approach.

In order to gain the necessary knowledge about this problem, the analyses were carried out at the country level of each of the partners in the project. The analysis included policy documents and regulations related to equality [3], consultations were conducted with relevant institutions and experts, as well as focus groups and interviews with policy makers, school principals, teachers, school support staff, students, parents, civil society organizations and educational experts.

The collected data resulted in national reports and policy overviews for all six countries, which are available on the websites of the organizations involved in the project [4].

Based on the analysis carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is recognised that poverty is associated with vulnerable social groups.

People with disabilities, Roma, returnees and internally displaced persons, victims of gender-based violence, people living in rural and remote areas, single-parent families, women-headed households and people of low level of education are recognized as being at high risk of poverty.

Poverty, rural/urban divide, minority status, disability, refugee and migrant status - are recognized as key causes of inequality.

There are recommendations for solving and overcoming these problems based on the model of participatory action planning based on rights. The model refers to the local and cantonal level, i.e. establishment of multidisciplinary teams for coordination and monitoring, localization of guidelines for implementation in the best interest of the child, development and/or improvement of program planning focused on the child and development of guidelines for public-private partnership.

[3] National report for Bosnia and Herzegovina. ARISE Coalition, 2021.

[4] Comparative report for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia and Turkey. ARISE Coalition, 2021.

Experts from the following fields and areas of expertise form the coalition in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- representatives of ministries and state agencies, representatives of institutions of lower levels of government that work with schools and representatives of actors in the field of social protection;
- representatives of policy makers at the local level;
- representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations working with vulnerable and marginalized groups (children and parents from low SES, children with difficulties, children from rural areas, Roma, refugees, single parents);
- teachers, educators and management of schools and preschool institutions; researchers investigating poverty, inclusive policies and data presentation, education and inclusive education.

Why early growth and development matters?

Early growth and development represents a formative period in a child's life that is undeniably important for the complete and healthy development of a being. Bosnia and Herzegovina faces a number of problems that go beyond local communities, as well as the highest educational authorities in education, with a special emphasis on early growth and development. The decline in the birth rate (as shown by demographic data), the outflow of the population in all parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and relapses of social destruction do not favor the well-being of the child.

Although there are changes in the level of understanding of the importance of early growth and development, both in urban and peripheral environments, there is still a backups regarding the status and assistance of educators and institutions for early growth and development.

The dominant cultural belief related to women (that upbringing is her primary task) also makes it difficult to include children in the system of early growth and development. This prevents a huge number of women from working, as well as leaving out the undeniably important participation of the child in the process of upbringing and education in a systemic way.

The lack of infrastructure and professional staff substantially prevents greater coverage of children.

According to UNICEF data, the average number of children involved in preschool education in full and half-day programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina is 33.25%, and this is significantly higher in the Republic of Srpska (42.5%) compared to the Federation (22, 76%).

When we talk about the age of 5-6 years, related to compulsory programs of preschool education in the year of starting school - the data are better, and in total in Bosnia and Herzegovina (44.1%), of which the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (43 .8%) and Republika Srpska (47.6%), while Brčko District has the highest participation rate (92%).

Taking the complex problems mentioned before into account, it is very clear that a large number of children in the existing and upcoming generations will not be included in a very important period of upbringing and education, especially those children who come from families with a weaker socio-economic background. Currently, kindergartens are predominantly attended by children whose parents are both employed.

Also, according to UNICEF data and the latest *Investing in Children Study*, it is stated that investing in early childhood has various impacts - from improving health, improving learning, reducing inequality to increasing lifetime earnings. Therefore, investing in early childhood development (ECD) makes sense because it is crucial to maximizing development and realizing children's rights. In addition to the general well-being of children, investments in increasing the scope of preschool education services are also financially profitable. Calculations show that every single KM invested in preschool education will yield up to 6.9 KM in FBiH during the research period, 6.7 KM in RS and 5.9 KM in Brčko District, in terms of socio-economic benefits. If there is no increase in access to preschool education, this could cost BiH close to 30 billion KM by 2052 [5].

[5] Investing in Children study, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of Srpska and Brčko District, 2023.

The general goal

Considering the implications of the findings presented in the previous section, the Coalition for Reducing Inequality In Education proposes the following general goal of the selected public policy.

General goal:

The systematic regulation of access to quality compulsory preschool programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Specific goal 1:

Establish a high-quality legal and procedural basis for the regulation of access to high-quality compulsory preschool programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A high-quality legal basis for the regulation of access to high-quality mandatory preschool programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the primary task in order to create the conditions for further progress. This does not mean that specific goals cannot be done in parallel, but in their particular domains it is indeed a prerequisite otherwise it excludes other particular domains.

The participation of all relevant actors is necessary in this process, while taking into account that such changes are inevitably accompanied by budget allocations.

Therefore, the communities must stand together behind this proposal based on the voice of the professionals and the interested professional public.

Quality is the only item that really changes the context and without quality there is no discussion about the expediency of any other interventions.

Systemic regulation goes in the direction of amendments to laws regarding mandatory programs which, for now, are not defined in all administrative units in the same way or not at all.

Enrollment procedures should be based on meaningful and inclusive criteria and should facilitate the system, institutions, parents and children. As we continue to talk about unequal conditions in different administrative units, transitional solutions must be creative and explore different models such as mobile kindergartens, ad hoc kindergartens where there is a need, and kindergartens in communities that share their public spaces.

Recommendation 1:

Amendment of the law regarding the mandatory one-year programs of preschool education and upbringing.

Recommendation 2:

Redefining the existing and adopting new enrollment procedures in the compulsory preschool program.

Recommendation 3:

Establishment of alternative systems for program attendance (mobile kindergartens, ad hoc kindergartens, community kindergartens, etc.)

Specific goal 2:

Establish quality programmatic and professional frameworks for the implementation of compulsory preschool education.

It is not out of place to underline once again how important a quality system, process and content are.

Educational authorities lack a monitoring and quality control system in order to really have credible data based on which strategic decisions would be made.

As with other levels of education, the key factor is the professionals themselves, who together with the authorities must establish a system of continuous professional development, an integral part of which are necessary standards for educators.

This is a prerequisite for any intervention in education to ensure that all attempts at change are met with flexible and competent educators who will actually be able to implement these envisioned changes with unequivocal support of the system.

Recommendation 1:

Harmonized programs based on the common core of comprehensive development programs for preschool education defined on learning outcomes.

Recommendation 2:

Monitoring/quality control of the implementation of the mandatory preschool program.

Recommendation 3:

Professionalization of the workplace of educators in preschool education.

Recommendation 4:

Development of a professional development system for preschool teachers.

Specific goal 3:

To develop high-quality cooperation of all relevant actors connected with the preschool education system.

We strongly believe that the cooperation of the entire community is the only possible way to not only address these very important issues but also lead to implementation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a lively civil society that can be a partner in almost all aspects. However, it is necessary that system matters are primarily dealt with by the systems themselves, while all others can come as a support factor.

Parents, as the greatest resource of educational systems, should and must be given a well-deserved role that will be helpful to professionals and institutions.

Recommendation 1:

Establishment of quality cooperation between schools and preschool institutions and other institutions for the benefit of the child.

Recommendation 2:

Cooperation between parents and NGOs for the purpose of improving working conditions in preschool education institutions, as well as opening an authentic space for the involvement of civil society organizations according to clear guidelines and system needs.

Recommendation 3:

General advocacy for the importance of early growth and development.

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