

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Consultancy

National consultant to support UNICEF program components relating to early childhood development (ECD), with a particular focus on early childhood intervention for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties

Estimated start date: 1 August 2019
Estimated end date: 15 July 2020
Working days: Up to 230 days
Reporting to: Vera Rangelova, ECD Officer

I. Overview.

Over the recent decade research in neuroscience has shown the importance of early brain development for child health, development and overall wellbeing across the lifespan. Because of the high plasticity of the brain, early childhood presents a unique opportunity for learning and development for all children, including children with developmental difficulties and disabilities. Research also contributed to greater understanding of the need to support parents and other caregivers to ensure that all children receive nurturing care and are able to achieve their full potential¹.

Children with disabilities and developmental difficulties need nurturing care in the family, as well as adequate support during the first years of life to improve levels of development and functioning. The overall care they receive during the first years of life is critical for the realisation of their rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) calls on the states to ensure the right of children with disabilities to “enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community” (Article 23(1)). Along with the CRC, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2006, further reinforces the rights of children with disabilities and introduces new obligations on the states to remove the barriers that limit their participation in all relevant domains of life. CRPD General Comment 4 articulates the need to intervene early to enable children with disabilities to develop to their full potential: “If identified and supported early, young children with disabilities are more likely to transit smoothly into pre-primary and primary Inclusive Education settings.”

Across many countries, Early Childhood Development Intervention programs (ECI program) are established to enhance the development of young children with developmental difficulties and disabilities. These programs are recognized to improve child’s functional and learning outcomes, strengthen the skills of caregivers and contribute to better quality of life of the families. ECI programs across the EU and internationally build on diverse conceptual

¹ Nurturing care is defined as “a stable environment that promotes children’s health and nutrition, and protects children from threats, as well as the provision of a responsive and stimulating environment, which provides the first foundation for life-long learning and school achievement.

approaches and systems. In most cases however, they are intended for families with children from birth to 3 years of age (or in some countries – up to 5 years of age), with developmental delays, disabilities, atypical behaviors, social and emotional difficulties or at risk of developing developmental difficulties due to malnutrition, chronic illness or other biological or environmental factors. ECI services are individualized; intensive; family-centered, transdisciplinary and evidence-based. Unlike the traditional medical approach where an “expert” provides the child with intervention services in a clinical-like setting, a contemporary ECI approach embeds activities in the child’s daily routine involving parents as partners². In most cases services are delivered in the child’s natural environment.

II. The situation in Bulgaria.

There is no precise data on the prevalence and type of developmental difficulties and disabilities among children 0- 6 years of age. Available is only some data on children with disabilities, particularly those who receive special disability benefits. However, the estimated prevalence of developmental difficulties during early childhood is considered high in all countries³. According to some estimates 12 to 17% of the children in middle income countries have developmental delays. Data from high income countries shows 5% prevalence of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder⁴ and 1.68 % of Autism Spectrum Disorder⁵. In Bulgaria, many children may be at risk of developmental difficulties due to biological or environmental factors known to adversely affect early childhood development, such as low rates of breastfeeding, inadequate feeding and high rates of anemia, particularly among Roma children, low birth weight and poverty – which affects 29% of the child population in Bulgaria⁶.

Bulgaria is signatory to both CRC and CRPD. The country has established policy and institutional arrangements to ensure the delivery of family benefits, social services (including early intervention services, day care centres), various insurance payments, healthcare (preventive, diagnostic, treatment and rehabilitation services) and support for inclusive education to children with disabilities and developmental difficulties. Elements of an emerging early intervention system – early intervention services have also been introduced in some municipalities in the country although at present they are only donor funded.

However, despite the efforts serious challenges remain. Services, including early childhood development services in their majority are exclusively child-centred rather than family-focused, expert-driven and do not provide trans-disciplinary support and support for building the caregivers capacities to promote child development in its natural environment. Families receive services from multiple professionals who do not coordinate efforts. The medical approach to disability, which views disability as a condition of the individual present at birth or emerging later as a result of specific health condition dominates disability assessment and professional practice. In general, most services tend to provide support to children older than 3 years of age.

² RISE Institute. Global Survey of Inclusive Early Childhood Development and Early Childhood Intervention Programs. 2019.

³ WHO DDEC Review, 2012

⁴ Faraone SV, Larsson H. Genetics of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Mol Psychiatry* 2018; 14: R275–82.

⁵ Baio J, Wiggins L, Christensen DL, et al. Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 8 years—Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 11 Sites, United States, 2014. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2018; 67: 1–23

⁶ National Statistical Institute, 2017

The capacities of the health, social and educational systems for early identification of developmental difficulties, particularly in the social, emotional and cognitive domains are very limited. This is partly due to lack of availability and application of up-dated standardised tools for screening/monitoring and assessment of child development, as well as due to the insufficient knowledge and skills of professionals to detect developmental difficulties. Comprehensive assessment of developmental difficulties during the first years of life is carried out only in limited places and often families are left to navigate between different services providers on their own. Functional assessment and a focus on functional outcomes are still not integrated in the professional practice.

III. UNICEF role.

The Country Program Action Plan for the period 2018-2022 signed between UNICEF and the Government of Bulgaria, places special focus on enhancing support to children with developmental difficulties and disabilities during early childhood with a view of enabling them to develop to their full potential. Programmatic interventions draw on a twin-track approach for ensuring the rights of children with disabilities and aim to contribute to: 1) strengthening relevant national systems and policies in health, education, social and child protection to ensure that they deliver support to children with disabilities or developmental difficulties and their families in an inclusive way, and uphold their rights; and 2) expanding services that address the specific needs of children with disabilities or developmental difficulties and their families.

Special attention is devoted to improving early childhood intervention for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities, with a focus on the first 3 years of life. As part of a global partnership between UNICEF and H&M Foundation, over the period 2019-2020 UNICEF in Bulgaria will develop, test and evaluate in two selected municipalities of the country a system approach to early childhood intervention. The approach will support a seamless process for: 1) identification of developmental difficulties using standardised tools through relevant health, social and educational services; 2) assessment of child's strengths and weaknesses; 3) delivery of early childhood intervention, including support for transition to inclusive education, and 4) and communication for addressing negative stereotypes and social norms against children with disabilities. The envisaged activities include establishment within existing social services of ECI teams and their training, capacity building for different professionals – health care professionals, ECI professionals, and others, improving cooperation and coordination between different service providers, communication and awareness raising activities

In addition, at national level interventions will aim to build elements of an effective ECI system, including capacity development in the area of ECI of relevant professionals and service providers, technical support and advocacy for policy change, expanding training opportunities for ECI, etc.

All interventions will be developed and delivered in line with the UNICEF Global Guidelines on Early Childhood Intervention and the Guidelines for Europe and Central Region “Supporting Children with Developmental Difficulties in Early Childhood”. They will build on the existing services at local and national level, while strengthening them in line with the international best practice in the area of ECI. The interventions will be implemented in cooperation with local authorities, social service providers, civil society partners and will be monitored by an Expert Council established at national level.

IV. Objective of the assignment.

Under the guidance and supervision of the UNICEF ECD Officer, in coordination with other UNICEF Programme Officers (in particular Education Officer and Communication for Social Change) and in partnership with national partners, local authorities, schools and other relevant national and local stakeholders, the Consultant will support the development and implementation of UNICEF's program activities related to early childhood intervention and support for parents of young children with disabilities. In addition, it is expected the Consultant to work closely with the international expert contracted by UNICEF in Bulgaria to provide technical assistance in the area of early childhood intervention.

V. Specific objectives of the assignment.

The consultant will be expected to carry out the following specific tasks:

- Coordinate at local level UNICEF interventions related to piloting of a system approach to ECI, as well as other intervention aiming to strengthen the national capacities for Early Childhood Intervention.
- Coordinate and organise meetings/trainings in the selected municipalities as agreed with UNICEF for ensuring a system approach to early childhood intervention and improving ECI practice in coordination with local authorities, services providers, and other relevant stakeholders and partners.
- Provide technical support, training and supervision of the application of screening tools by relevant stakeholders – ECI teams and members of the home visiting services.
- Draft documentation necessary for the work of the ECI teams in consultation and under the guidance of the international consultant.
- Draft guidelines/other documentation related to use of screening and assessment tools by different relevant stakeholders – home visitors, ECI practitioners, etc.
- Support the collection of data to facilitate monitoring of UNICEF interventions at local level.
- Coordinate the implementation of the UNICEF program for support of parents of children with disabilities in the country – liaise with partners, support expansion of the program if necessary, collect feedback and statistical data on the program implementation, organise meetings, provide supervision to the teams, draft analysis and other information related to the program implementation.
- Draft or provide technical support for the development of parenting materials with a particular focus on care for and the needs of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties.
- Contribute to public awareness and communication campaigns of UNICEF CO related to early childhood intervention for children with disabilities and developmental difficulties and parenting: support for drafting different documents, coordination of awareness raising activities/events with different partners, identification of relevant human stories, etc.
- Participate in meetings, workshops and seminars as agreed with UNICEF.
- Other support related to ECD and inclusive early education and care as agreed with UNICEF office.

VI. Timeframe and duration of the assignment.

It is expected that the assignment will take place in the period August 2019 - July 2020.

VII. Required education, experience and competencies.

The successful candidate is expected to have the following competencies:

- Master's degree or higher in one or more of the following areas: pre-school pedagogy (early education), pedagogy, special pedagogy, child psychology or another relevant field.
- Excellent understanding of the contemporary conceptual framework on ECD and early childhood intervention for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities.
- Excellent understanding of the national policy framework and institutional arrangements relating to early childhood intervention.
- Experience in project management.
- Familiarity with UNICEF policies and strategic documents related to ECD and ECI is considered an advantage.
- Ability to work independently.
- Ability to manage partnerships across diversity of stakeholders.
- Respect for cultural diversity and human rights.
- Fluency of English language will be an advantage.

VIII. Expected deliverables.

The deliverables will be provided in the course of the assignment as required.

IX. Remuneration and incurred costs.

The consultant will receive a monthly fee in accordance with the submitted and agreed with UNICEF financial offer. Payments will be made based on written certification of timely and satisfactorily provision of consultancy services provided every month. The Consultant is expected to have frequent travels outside Sofia – to the sites of UNICEF interventions. Travel costs will be covered separately as per UNICEF rules and regulations.

X. Monitoring and evaluation.

The selected consultant will work under the direct supervision of UNICEF ECD Officer.