

TERMS OF REFERENCE

International Consultancy

International Consultant to provide technical support to UNICEF CO in Bulgaria and national partners for piloting a system approach to Early Childhood Intervention in selected municipalities of the country.

Start date: 01.08.2019 (tentative)
End date: 31.06.2020
Working days: Up to 30 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 potential during early years. 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 achievement¹.

Across many countries, Early Childhood Development Intervention programs (ECI program) are established to enhance the development of young children with developmental difficulties and disabilities². 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 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 the age for compulsory school), 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 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 partners³. In most cases services are delivered in the child's natural environment.

ECI programs are critical for the realisation of the rights of children with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) calls on the states to ensure the wellbeing of every child and promote 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

¹ Nurturing CARE FOR Early Childhood Development. A Framework for Helping Children Survive and Thrive to Transform Health and Human Potential, accessed at: <https://apps.who.int>

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

³ Ibid.

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. Specific reference is made to the right to inclusive education. In addition, 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.”*

Bulgaria has established some important legal and institutional conditions to ensure the protection of the rights of children with disabilities. The country is signatory to both CRC and CRPD. National policy and institutional arrangements ensure the delivery of essential support to children with disabilities and their families during early childhood and beyond. In December 2019 the Government adopted a package of legal acts that are expected to further enhance the support provided to children, including the Social Services Act, the Law on People with Disabilities and the regulation for its implementation and the Law on Personal Assistance. The new Law on People with Disabilities also introduces a definition of disability that is aligned with the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

Over the past years Early intervention services for children 0-6 years of age have been established by municipalities and a limited number of civil society organisation as part of the social service sector. At present, they are mainly donor funded but the new Law on Social Services is expected to provide a basis for sustainable government funding in the future. More specialized services (mainly rehabilitation and treatment oriented) for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities are also offered through the tertiary and secondary health care system. Steps towards introduction of assessment of child development at the entry of kindergarten at 3 years of age and provision of individualised support for addressing developmental difficulties have also been taken by the Ministry of Education and Science in implementation of the School and Pre-school Education Act.

However, despite the existing arrangements serious challenges remain. Services are limited and not equally distributed across the country. A recent situational analysis⁴ of the services for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities under 7 years of age reveals fragmentation across social, health and educational sectors with no coordination between multiple experts and service providers, involved in support of the individual child and their families. Services are “expert driven” and do not provide inter-disciplinary or transdisciplinary support. They are exclusively child-centred. Family needs and priorities are not considered in the intervention process and caregivers are not involved as partners of the professionals. The majority of the services also heavily draw on a “rehabilitation approach”.

There is no precise data on the prevalence of developmental difficulties and disabilities among children in Bulgaria. However, the situational analysis shows that children 0-2 years of age are less served than the group 3-6 years and many professionals, particularly from the social service sector, report the need to enhance their competencies related to young children. No specific arrangements for regular training and supervision of the professionals who directly work with

⁴ Carried out by UNICEF in Bulgaria in 2019. Not published.

children with developmental difficulties and disabilities and their families are established to ensure continuous competence development and quality of services.

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. Primary health providers (General practitioners and paediatricians) often apply a “wait and see” approach which delays the detection of developmental difficulties.

II. 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 functional 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 pilot interventions will be developed and delivered in line with the UNICEF Global Recommendations on Early Childhood Intervention⁵ 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. The envisaged activities include:

- establishing within existing social services (day care centres for children with disabilities) of ECI teams and provision of ECI services to children with developmental difficulties and disabilities;
- capacity building for different professionals – health care professionals, ECI professionals, teachers in kindergartens and others, related to early identification of developmental difficulties and disabilities and key principles of ECI.

⁵ Currently being prepared by UNICEF Headquarter in New York.

- improving cooperation and coordination between different service providers;
- introduction of screening of child development in relevant services (health care, nurseries, home visiting, ECI services);
- communication and awareness raising activities.

The interventions will be implemented in cooperation with local authorities, civil society partners and will be monitored by an Expert Council established at national level.

UNICEF pilot interventions will inform and support future UNICEF CO work toward building a national ECI system, including advocacy, technical support to the government and capacity development.

III. Overall objective of the assignment.

The main objective of the Consultancy is to provide technical support for UNICEF work related to the design and piloting of a system approach to Early Childhood Intervention in two selected municipalities in Bulgaria.

IV. Specific objectives of the assignment

The Consultant will work under the guidance of the UNICEF ECD Officer and in close coordination with the national and local partners. He/she will be responsible for the implementation of the following specific tasks:

Support for the development of the pilot interventions:

- 1.1. Provide technical support and input for finalising the design of the pilot interventions (including a Theory of Change) to be implemented in two selected municipalities of the country based on the findings and recommendations of the situational analysis of services for children with developmental difficulties and disabilities carried out in 2019.
- 1.2. Design a series of up to 4 workshops in total for local stakeholders in the two selected municipalities to develop shared understanding of the needs of children with disabilities and developmental difficulties and the key principles of early intervention – draft concept notes for the workshops (including a detailed program, participants, methods and tools to be used, as well as materials).
- 1.3. Facilitate the workshops in cooperation with UNICEF and the other local partners. Based on the workshops outcomes develop recommendations for the design and implementation of the pilot interventions.
- 1.4. Provide technical support and input for development of documentation necessary related to ECI service provision (i.e family support plan, family needs assessment forms, ECI standards, others as relevant and agreed by UNICEF).
- 1.5. Provide technical support for selection and adaptation/validation of appropriate tools for screening of child development and functional assessment, as well as for their application.

Support for capacity building:

- 1.6. Deliver trainings related to screening, assessment and key principles of early childhood intervention to diverse groups of stakeholders (professionals, policy makers) if needed.

- 1.7. Provide external supervision and technical advice to the local partner organisation involved in the delivery of trainings and technical support to the ECI and other professionals in the selected municipalities (remote and face-to-face).
- 1.8. Provide technical advice for the scope and content of the training of the local ECI teams.

Support for monitoring and evaluation:

- 1.9. Provide input and technical support for the development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the pilot interventions – including selection of appropriate indicators, type of data to be collected at baseline or routinely as part of the interventions, tools for data collection.
- 1.10. Carry out formative assessment of the pilot interventions in the selected municipalities and provide recommendations for improvement of quality of ECI services, as well as other interventions.

Other:

- 1.11. Deliver presentations on issues related to ECI to raise awareness on key principles and approaches in contemporary ECI.
- 1.12. Provide advice and training materials on ECI for different stakeholders.

V. Timeframe and duration of the assignment

The expected total duration of the consultancy is 30 days over the period 1st August (tentative) – 31st of June 2020. The assignment includes 3 missions to Bulgaria with a total duration of up to 15 days. The tentative timing of the missions is September 2019, November 2019, and April 2019 (to be additionally agreed with UNICEF).

VI. Required education, experience and competencies

The successful candidate is expected to have the following competencies:

- Relevant academic education: Pediatrics, child psychology, child development, early education, special education, etc. with special academic training in the area of ECI.
- At least 8 years of progressive professional experience in planning, delivery or management of ECI program.
- Excellent understanding of the ECI approaches – principles, organisation, standards, scope, human resources.
- Excellent training/facilitation skills.
- Ability to work under pressure; good negotiation, communication and presentation skills. Pro-activity and strong orientation towards results;
- Ability to work independently;
- Fluency of English language.

VII. Expected deliverables and timeframe for their provision

Deliverables will be provided in the course of the assignment in accordance with a time schedule, agreed with UNICEF. Mission reports will be provided after each of the in-country missions.

VIII. Remuneration and incurred costs:

The Consultant should present a financial proposal in accordance with the Terms of Reference, including professional fee (daily consultancy rate). The price must include all costs to be borne by the applicant for undertaking the assignment, excluding travel costs (travel cost and DSA).

In addition to the consultancy fee, UNICEF will cover the cost for in-country missions (accommodation, meals and incidentals) in accordance with the applicable daily subsistence allowance (DSA) rates, as promulgated by the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC). Travel expenses (including international and local travel) will be reimbursed by UNICEF based on the actual cost incurred and after the provision of an invoice. Travel expenses must be based on the most economical and direct route, economy class air ticket only.

The Consultancy fee will be paid as follows:

- upon the completion of every in-country mission for the first two visits after the provision of a mission report and other deliverables and a timesheet for the actual number of days spent on the assignment for the respective reporting period;
- by 31st of June 2020 after the provision of a final report (and other agreed deliverables) and a timesheet for the actual number of days spent on the assignment for the reporting period

IX. Monitoring and evaluation

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

X. Unsatisfactory performance

The performance of the consultant will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- Quality of implementation of the assigned tasks;
- Compliance with the established timelines;
- Demonstration of good cooperation with UNICEF team and partners.

In case of unsatisfactory performance, the contract will be terminated by notification letter sent 10 days prior to the termination date.