

# **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: EQUALITY STARTS AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL**



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## **Impressum**

The document, *Early Childhood Education: Equality Starts at the Community Level*, aims at improving the position of children and youth in northern Kosovo. It is meant for all the relevant social actors, that is, policymakers, professionals, practitioners, academic community, civil society organizations, and citizens, with the aim of developing participatory public policies.

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## *1. Executive summary*

This policy brief confirms huge disparity and inequalities in access to early childhood education services between children residing in urban and rural areas. Despite the efforts of all relevant stakeholders, the situation is very disadvantaged and requires immediate attention and action from all developmental actors and policymakers. There is a clear reference between poor access to early childhood development programs, low achievement of children in the education process and overall socio-economic underdevelopment.

Kosovo has the lowest rate of enrolment in early childhood education in the region of Western Balkans, with only 33.9% of children of age 3 -6 with access to early childhood care and education programs. Furthermore, only 27 out of 38 municipalities in Kosovo have public nurseries, kindergartens, or any early childhood education facility, which considerably amounts to inequalities in access to early learning for children in different parts of Kosovo.

The overall access to quality early childhood education is poor for children from all communities, with non-majority children and children with special needs in a specifically vulnerable position. The situation in municipalities Zvecan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic does not defer much from other municipalities of similar size and population in Kosovo. Communities living in remote villages have no access to early childhood education programs, they are neglected and with almost no support in this respect. Consequently, children residing in rural areas do not have equal start with children living in urban settlements, which leads to their poor school performance and drop out in the early phase of the education process, early marriages, and child labour. As in many other aspects, the situation disproportionately affects girls in rural areas of northern municipalities, putting them in a more vulnerable position in comparison with boys.

To remedy such a disadvantaged situation, municipalities must mobilise all available resources, before all to significantly increase investments and budgetary allocations for early childhood education in general, and more specifically for remote villages in mountains and alongside the Ibar river valley. They have to better outreach communities in remote rural areas and conduct a comprehensive needs assessment in early childhood education, and further respond to findings with concrete activities. Apart from regular budgetary allocations, additional fund-raising actions should be initiated with international donors and civil society organizations. Partnership with the private sector may also provide additional resources for early childhood education programs on the community level.

There is also a need for continuous awareness-raising with parents and all relevant stakeholders on the critical importance of early childhood education. Common understanding and consensus of all actors on the importance of investment and support to this sector is the pre-condition for improvement of access for disadvantaged children, and further alleviating inequalities in access to quality early childhood education between children in rural areas and urban settlements.

## ***2. Background and objectives***

Early Childhood Education is increasingly recognized by sectorial practitioners as a critically important aspect of child development and for achieving the full potential of every individual person. The forward-looking approach to early education implies increased investment in these services, which will bring multiple benefits and positive effects for overall socio-economic development, but also decrease the costs for remedial programs in the future. In that respect, this policy brief should inform all future programs in the field of early childhood development in Kosovo, by providing data on the coverage, infrastructure and services offered to children of pre-school age in one specific, predominantly rural region of Kosovo.

The overall objective of this exercise is to contribute to the improvement of conditions for child development in Kosovo and decrease disparities in access to these services between children living in urban and rural areas. Specifically, it aims to provide analyses of the situation in access to quality early childhood education on the community level, with a focus on predominantly rural municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, through the lenses of international standards. Findings and recommendations of this exercise should be further utilised by relevant stakeholders in policy planning and implementation of programs aimed at advancing integrated services for early childhood development, both at local and national levels. It is expected to serve as a reference for policymakers and developmental actors as well as for civil society and international organizations active in this sector.

The activity is carried out by the NGO Domovik, in the framework of the project by the EU Office in Kosovo.

## ***3. Methodology***

The methodology included semi-structured interviews, focus groups and informal bilateral communication with diverse stakeholders relevant for this exercise, including representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, municipal departments for education, youth and sports, management and teaching staff of schools and pre-school facilities, children and parents' associations, sectorial civil society organizations and international organizations, before all UNICEF and Save the Children. For this assessment, a questionnaire was developed and disseminated with relevant actors to obtain quantitative and qualitative data on the number of children enrolled, number and state of available pre-school facilities, number and composition of staff working with children, curricula and programs applied, review and evaluation methods in place, etc.

In addition, a thorough desk review of policy, legislative and institutional framework relevant for early childhood education was done as well as comparative analyses of the situation in the region as a reference for the local context. International standards set in the conventions were taken as a reference along with global, regional, and national trend analyses that were utilized as resource materials. The data collection was done using different sources with further multiple cross-checking, given that very limited data on local early childhood education are publicly available. In this respect it is worth noting

Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)<sup>1</sup> and Mapping Services for Early Childhood Development in Kosovo<sup>2</sup> conducted by UNICEF Kosovo Program as well as analyses produced by UNICEF Zone Office Mitrovica and NGOs Domovik, CARITAS, Save the Children and Santa Marija, reflecting the situation on municipal and community level.

#### *4. International Standards and Practice*

The right to education is a fundamental right embedded in major international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC). It is considered not only a fundamental right but also a necessary means in achieving other human rights.

Article 26 of the UDHR, clearly states that everyone has the right to education, which should be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages, and directed to the full development of the human personality. Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) comprehensively regulates the right to education and defines obligations of the states to provide compulsory primary education and generally available secondary education in different fields along with vocational training. It does not explicitly mention early childhood development programs, but certainly creates a conducive environment for their establishment and development on national levels in conjunction with more detailed standards integrated into the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, Articles 28 and 29) and some other human rights instruments. Article 28 of the CRC implies that States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, with a view to achieving this right progressively and based on equal opportunities, while Article 29 states that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. To achieve full potential, early childhood education programs are critical as they give a better start to any child in the education process and further personal and societal development. It is noteworthy that a major breakthrough in the global increase of access to quality early childhood education occurred in the 1990s, soon after the CRC was adopted in 1987, and made a critical positive impact in this sector. Another relevant human rights instrument is the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 24 of the convention states that persons with disabilities should be guaranteed the right to inclusive education at all levels, regardless of age, without discrimination and based on equal opportunities. More specifically, it states that children with disabilities must have effective access to free and compulsory primary and secondary education.

In the European context, the right to education is embedded into Article 2, of the Protocol 1, of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) which states “no person shall be denied the right to education, and in the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions”.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/reports/mics-2020-key-findings-snapshots>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/kosovoprogramme/media/1951/file/Mapping%20of%20Early%20Childhood%20Development%20services%20in%20Kosovo%20Report.pdf>

Early childhood education is integrated into the global development agenda for 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The **SDG-4** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, in its Target 4.2 **“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”**, clearly indicates the importance of having universal access to early childhood education, with the same importance as universal primary education.

The umbrella international organization for education is United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In the General Conference in November 1997, UNESCO adopted the International Standards for Classification of Education and classified early childhood education as ISCED – 0. According to UNESCO, “early childhood is defined as the period from birth to eight years old, is a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak. During this stage, children are highly influenced by the environment and the people that surround them.” This implies that early childhood education is a more comprehensive process than preparation for primary school, it rather “aims at the holistic development of a child’s social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs to build a solid and broad foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.” Investment in early childhood education is the best way for governments to contribute to human resource development, gender equality and social cohesion, proven to be absolutely cost-effective in a long-term perspective for overall socio-economic development. Apart from UNESCO, other international organizations also promote and support the development of early childhood education programs and infrastructure, before all UNICEF, as a global leader in protection and promotion of all child rights, then UN Women, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Save the Children and others.

In the context of these analyses, early childhood will be considered from 0 to 6 years which corresponds to the existing system of pre-school education and primary school enrolment age of children in Kosovo and the region.

Access to early education programs varies worldwide and is very much dependent on the level of socio-economic development of the country. The most recent global study carried out by UNICEF in 2018 and published in April 2019, “A world ready to learn: Prioritizing quality early childhood education”<sup>3</sup>, indicates that 50% of children in the world of the age for early education does not have access to it, what is nearly 175 million of children. The global trends on the percentage of children worldwide with access to early education range from 23.35% in the low-income countries, up to 83.41% in high-income countries (picture 1).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/world-ready-learn-prioritizing-quality-early-childhood-education>

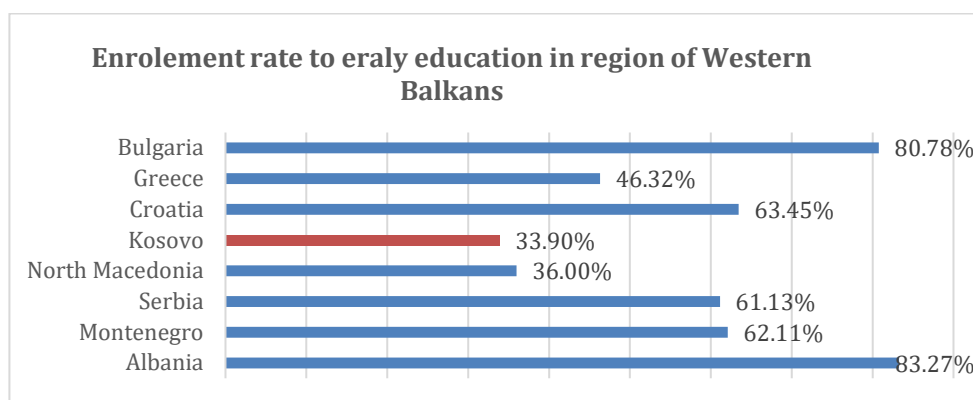


Picture 1.



In the region of Western Balkans, the best enrolment ratio has Albania, 83.27%, followed by Montenegro with 62.11% and Serbia 61.13%. North Macedonia has the least pre-primary enrolment ratio with only 36% of children enrolled. This study does not have data for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, however, there are data available for Kosovo obtained through comprehensive research carried out by UNICEF Kosovo Program. For comparison purposes, Croatia has a 63.45% enrolment ratio, Greece has 46.32% and Bulgaria 80.78, as countries which are EU member states closest to the region of Western Balkans (Picture 2).

Picture 2.



Based on the data published by UNICEF Kosovo Program, only 33.9 % of children between the ages of 3-6 years old, are attending any early childhood education programme in Kosovo. If we consider the 5-6 age groups, the enrolment rate is 87.6%. On the other side, access to early education programmes for children aged 36-59 months (3-5 age group) is very low, only 13.9% compared to an average in EU member states which goes over 80%. In correlation with poor development-focused family practices, this leads towards very low child development indexes particularly for the cognitive dimension: only 18% of children in Kosovo have a sufficient level of literacy and numeracy, with even lower indexes in Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian populations, where only 9% of children have sufficient literacy and numeracy, with clear differences among those attending early childhood education (30%) and those not attending (5%).

## Enrolment rate attending any early childhood education programme in Kosovo

5-6 age groups  
87.60%

3-5 age groups  
13.90%

The EU progress report for Kosovo 2020, confirmed the above-mentioned findings and states that “despite slight improvements in reading and mathematics as compared to 2015, Kosovo scored amongst the worst performers in the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessment, ranking 3rd from the bottom. Low educational attainment is to some extent correlated with low inclusion of children in preschool education due to the urban-rural divide, extreme poverty and a lack of facilities”.

### *5. Legal, institutional and policy framework in Kosovo*

Major international human rights instruments are included in the Constitution, its Article 22 regulates that they are directly applicable in Kosovo legal framework and have priority in interpretation over national legislation. They are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC), Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) and Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention). Consequently, all international standards related to the right to education are integrated into the highest-level legal act in the national context. In addition, Article 47 states that every person enjoys the right to free basic education, while mandatory education is regulated by law and funded by public funds. Public institutions shall ensure equal opportunities for education for everyone, based on their specific abilities and needs. Finally, Article 53 states that human rights and fundamental freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution shall be interpreted consistent with the court decisions of the European Court of Human Rights.

In 2006, Kosovo Assembly adopted the Law on Pre-school Education to set a legal base for the regulation, progress, and improvement of pre-school education. It contains definitions, goals, and organizational aspects of pre-school education as well as the division of competencies between central and local level authorities and related stakeholders. It regulates curriculum development and approval, selection of educators and teachers, planning and programming, rights of children with special needs and other important aspects. It also regulates financial aspects, parents' contributions, data protection issues, specific conditions for employment of staff, etc. As a follow-up, general standards of pre-school education and schooling (ages 3-6 years) and curriculum for pre-school education (ages 3- 6 years) in Kosovo were developed.

The legislative framework further includes Law on Local Self-governance, Law on Pre-university Education, and the Law on Education in Municipalities in Kosovo. In

accordance with Article 17 of the Law on Local Self-governance, referring to municipal own competencies, municipalities have full and exclusive powers, in the provision of public pre-primary, primary and secondary education, respecting the standards outlined in the applicable legislation. This also includes registration and licensing of educational institutions, recruitment, payment of salaries and training of education instructors and administrators. In accordance with this Law, municipalities are entitled to cooperate, within the areas of their competencies in the field of education, with other municipalities and other authorities. This entitlement includes cooperation with municipalities and institutions, including government agencies, in the Republic of Serbia.

The Law on Pre-University Education regulates pre-university education and training from ISCED levels 0 to 4, including education and training for children and adults taking qualifications at these levels. As explained in the previous chapter on International Standards and Practice, early childhood education is classified with ISCED – 0, as specified in Article 9 of the Law on Pre-university Education. The curriculum for early child-care and education is regulated in accordance with the Kosovo Curriculum Framework (KCF). Article 10 of this law gives more detailed provisions specific to preschool education and its relations with Key Stages of the Kosovo Curriculum Framework (KCF). Pre-school education of children under the age of five (5) is part of the KCF Key Stage 0 in ISCED Level 0, early child-care, and education, while pre-primary grade education of children over the age of five (5) is part of KCF Key Stage 1 in ISCED Level 0, incorporated into compulsory education according to Article 9 of this Law. According to the Law, early child-care and education may be organized in public pre-school institutions, private pre-school institutions, socio-cultural centres, licensed according to the provisions of this Law and bylaws. In addition, municipalities may take appropriate action, including financial assistance, to support private initiatives for early child-care and education. The Law also brings division of competencies between ministry, municipalities and other actors in the organization, monitoring, quality assurance, inspection and teacher training and evaluation as well as provisions regulating inclusive education.

The Law on Education in Municipalities in Kosovo states that municipalities have full and exclusive powers for provisions of public pre-primary, primary and secondary education, including registration and licensing of educational institutions, recruitment, payment of salaries and training of education instructors and administrators. Article 12 of this Law regulates education in the Serbian language and enables schools that teach in the Serbian language to apply curricula or textbooks developed by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia upon notification to the Kosovo Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. This aspect is interrelated with further chapters of assessment focussed on the municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, with a majority Serbian population.

The key institutional stakeholders for early childhood education are municipal departments for education, youth and sports, Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Council for Pre-university Education, Agency for Curriculum, Standards and Assessment, Licensing Council for Teachers, and others. The core competencies for early education are exercised by municipalities, and the access and quality to early education programs for children very much correspond to the level of their socio-economic development. That explains why only 27 out of 38 municipalities in Kosovo have publicly funded kindergartens.

Kosovo Child Rights Strategy 2019 -2023, under Strategic Objective 4, foresees the inclusion of children in integrated services for early childhood education and development. Specifically, it foresees to increase investment and ensure inclusion of children in preschool, pre-primary education including alternative programs as well as to improve the system of service quality assurance in early childhood development.

### *6. Local context in municipalities in northern Kosovo*

Northern Kosovo is the area north of the river Ibar, with a majority Serbian population, living together with Albanian, Bosnjak, Gorani and Roma communities. The number of residents is estimated between 60,000 and 80,000. The exact figure is not available since the census in 2011 was not carried out in this part of Kosovo. The information on population numbers is calculated based on estimates of OSCE, UNHCR, KAS, municipal and community representatives, information from civil registry offices, schools, and other sources. The area consists of four municipalities including North Mitrovica, Zvecan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic. North Mitrovica is a predominantly urban settlement, while the other three municipalities are comprised of mainly rural areas, with small urban parts, and surrounded with mountains Rogozna, Mokra Gora and slopes of Kopaonik. In the past, the main economic pillar was Trepca, with several thousands of employees, however, in the last 20 years, it operates with considerably reduced capacities and is not capable to employ as many people as before. Most of the employment is provided by the public sector, while the private sector is underdeveloped, dominated by micro and small-size enterprises, mainly in the field of services and trade. In rural areas, small farms produce fruits, vegetables, milk products and meat at a lower scale, insufficient to cover the needs of the local market.

The area is considered as one of the economically most underdeveloped in Kosovo. Apart from the reduced operational capacity of Trepca, political instability also made significant obstacles and bottlenecks for socio-economic development. Integration of these municipalities in Kosovo legal and institutional system started in 2013, after the signature of the Brussels Agreement by Belgrade and Pristina authorities, under the auspices of the European Union (EU).

Following the Brussels Agreement, integration of remaining Serbian institutions in Kosovo legal and institutional system has started. Before all, the process was successfully completed in the rule of law sector including police, prosecution, courts, and civil protection. In addition, Serb political representatives participated in several cycles of local and central elections and have their elected representatives in Kosovo Assembly and Kosovo government. The same applies to four municipal assemblies and their executive branches, where Serb political entities won majority votes. The parties also agreed in Brussels that, that Serbia keeps supporting the education and health sector in coordination with Kosovo authorities for the transitional period of ten years, having in mind sensitivity and their critical importance for the remaining local communities. This part of the agreement is very important for this assessment, in the context of service provision for early childhood education.

Early childhood education in four northernmost municipalities in Kosovo applies a curriculum accredited by the Serbian Ministry of Education and Science, which is regulated by the Law on Pre-school Education. This law regulates pre-school education as part of a regular education system. Apart from it, the right to preschool education is guaranteed by the Constitution, the Law on the Education System Foundations, and

ratified international conventions. The Law on Pre-school Education is expected to further contribute to the protection and fulfilment of child rights, by addressing developmental, educational, cultural, health and social needs of preschool children and families. The activities of preschool education are considered activities of immediate social interest and are achieved as a public service. Under pre-school age, this law considers the age of children from six months until the enrolment of the primary school. The law states that activities of preschool education are performed in preschool facilities and could be performed exceptionally in school premises.

## **7. Access to Early Education by Municipality**

In this chapter access to quality early childhood education will be analysed for municipalities Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić. Given that this assessment focus on disadvantaged children in rural areas, North Mitrovica, comprised of predominantly urban settlements will not be the subject of this assessment. There are in total 5 public pre-school facilities Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić. The fees are largely subsidised by municipalities; however, parents are obliged to pay an additional 30 - 40 EUR per child monthly for services. In the table below, there is a list of all pre-school facilities in municipalities.

Table 1<sup>4</sup>. Preparatory pre-school institutions (age 6-7)

<b>ID</b>	<b>Municipality</b>	<b>Settlement</b>	<b>Name of institution</b>	<b># of children (dec 2021)</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Date of establishment</b>
1	Zvečan	Zvečan	Pre-school "Lane"	81	Public	1993-12-28
2	Zubin Potok	Zubin Potok	Pre-school "Naše dete"	67	Public	1988-09-01
3	Leposavić	Sočanica	Pre-school "Bambi"	29	Public	2008-09-26
4	Leposavić	Lešak	Pre-school "Veselo detinjstvo"	37	Public	2003-07-11
5	Leposavić	Leposavić	Pre-school "Naša radost"	89	Public	1982-09-20
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>303</b>		

### **7.1 Municipality of Zvečan**

Zvečan municipality is placed in the Ibar river valley, surrounded by mountains Rogozna, Majdan and Kopaonik, with a surface of 122 km<sup>2</sup>. According to the municipal website and the OSCE municipal profile, it has around 17,000 population, residing in the urban settlement Zvečan town and 35 surrounding villages. Apart from the majority Serb population, there are three villages Zhazhe, Lipa and Boletin, populated with Albanian community (approximately 500 inhabitants), and some 300 Bosnjak community members residing mainly in Zvečan town. The main employer in the past, Trepča led smelter, now operates with limited capacities, thus most of the employment nowadays is provided by public institutions in local administration, education, and health sector. Several important cultural heritage sites are located in the municipality including Zvečan fortress, monasteries Banjska, Sokolica and Devine Vode as well as recently renovated spa resort Banjska with springs of thermo-mineral water used for

<sup>4</sup> Source: Data collection report – position of children in the territory of three municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, NGO Domovik, 2021

wellness and medical purposes. Regarding health care, there is one family medicine centre in Zvecan town and six additional infirmaries in surrounding villages.

Regarding educational institutions, there are three primary schools, one secondary school, one kindergarten and four early childhood development centres as well as faculty of arts and college of technical science teaching electrical and mechanical engineering.

The main pre-school facility is PU “Lane” was established in 1993, it is located in the urban part of Zvecan, very close to the municipality, primary and secondary school. It has a nursery for children from 6 months to 3 years old and kindergarten for children 3 – 6 years old. Currently, 67 children attend early education program or receive care in the nursery (37 boys and 30 girls)<sup>5</sup>. This service is available only in the urban settlement, while some parents from surrounding villages also bring their children on daily basis. The nursery applies a curriculum developed by the Serbian Ministry of Education. There is no reliable data on how many children of this age do not have access to this service.

The reason for that is the long distance between most of the villages and the urban part of Zvecan where the nursery is located, insufficient understanding of the importance of early education with parents, economic situation, and negative social norms.

Out of 35 villages in the municipality, several larger ones gravitating towards the urban part of the town have relatively good access to the facility in terms of physical distance and quality of road infrastructure. They are Korilje, Veliko Rudare and Mali Zvecan. However, the remote villages around Banjska settlement located on the slopes of Rogozna mountain are too remote to benefit from this service. Due to that and inadequate access to other basic services, these villages are remaining with fewer inhabitants as the migrations towards urban centres and abroad are a continuously ongoing process. It is particularly the trend with young parents and young people in general. The nursery needs additional staff with contemporary teaching skills, a speech therapist and a defectologist. The facility needs additional space to accommodate all children since groups are quite large. This is particularly important in times of COVID-19 pandemic when physical distance is required.

PU “Lane” applies a curriculum developed based on the Rulebook on Foundations of Pre-school Education issued by the Ministry of Education and Science. It consists of two parts, the basis of pre-school education for children from 6 months to 3 years old and the basis for pre-school education from 3 years up to enrolment in primary school. It contains specific recommendations for educators for specific age groups of children from 6 to 12 months, 12- 18 months, 18 -24 months and 24-36 months old, for care, socio-emotional relations, play, motoric activities, sensory and perception activities, music and rhythmic activities, intellectual and language activities. They are designed specifically for each age group, with additional activities for the latter two groups involving graphic/visual arts and dramatization. The nursery also needs didactic material, Lego cubes and toys which are suitable and safe for this age groups.

The kindergarten for children from 3 to 5 and half years old, operates in the same building of PU “Lane” based on the curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education

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<sup>5</sup> Source: Data collection report – position of children in the territory of three municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, NGO Domovik, 2021

and Science. Currently, 120 children attend the pre-school program there (67 boys and 53 girls). Again, children from surrounding remote villages do not have access to pre-school education in kindergarten. The exact number of children without access to kindergarten is not known, but certainly, it is a considerable proportion.

The central ideas of the model curriculum for children from 3 to 6 years old, is an open system of education, interactive program development, and individualisation of the work with children. Learning is used as the construction of knowledge, and internal motivation as a basis of learning in early childhood. In this respect Individualism and autonomy of the child are central values, the educator is a program designer and there is intensive interaction/cooperation with the environment.

The building and infrastructure are in relatively good condition, with a good quality kitchen and furniture. The playground outside the building is well maintained.

Preparatory pre-school program before enrolment in primary school (age 6-7) is implemented also in the premises of PU "Lane". Currently, 81 child attends the program, 44 girls and 37 boys<sup>6</sup>. The curriculum is developed in accordance with the Ministry of Education and science, in line with the above-mentioned rulebook. In villages Zhazha, Boletin and Lipa populated with Albanian community, there are no early education facilities or programs.

## ***7.2 Municipality of Leposavic***

Municipality Leposavic is the northernmost municipality in Kosovo. It covers an area between mountains Rogozna and Kopaonik of approximately 750 km<sup>2</sup> and is comprised of urban settlement Leposavic town and 72 villages. No official data on population is available, but according to the municipal administration, the total population is estimated at 18,635. The majority community are Kosovo Serbs, in addition to 350 Bosnjaks, 270 Albanians and 12 Roma inhabitants. Bosnjak community mainly resides in village Rvatska, while Albanian community resides in villages Ceranja, Bistrica and Kosutovo, in the mountain area close to the boundary with Podujevo municipality.

Apart from Trepca Mines (Crnac and Belo Brdo) and Flotation, the economy of Leposavic municipality is predominantly based on agriculture and small trade businesses. Leposavic has good potential for tourism development in the area of Kopaonik mountain and several thermo-mineral water springs, however, significant investment is needed in infrastructure and services. Lack of economic opportunities has led to unfavourable demographic trends since many young people and families are leaving from remote mountain villages to Leposavic town and other urban settlements or abroad.

The primary health care is comprised of one family medicine centre and 9 village infirmaries of which not all are operational. Leposavic hosts three primary schools, two secondary schools and three faculties including sports, education, and agriculture as well as colleges of economics and traffic engineering. Regarding pre-school education, there are three facilities located in Leposavic town and two larger settlements, Socanica and Lesak.

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Data collection report – position of children in the territory of three municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, NGO Domovik, 2021

The pre-school facility “Nasa radost” in Leposavic was established in 1982. It applies nursery programs for children 6 months to 3 years old. Currently, 256 children of that age receive care and early education services, 127 girls and 129 boys. It applies a curriculum developed in line with the rulebook issued by the Ministry of Education and Science. The facility also runs a kindergarten for children 3-6 years old with 171 children attending, out of that number, 78 girls and 98 boys<sup>7</sup>. It applies a curriculum developed according to the Rulebook issued by the line ministry. The facility also runs preparatory pre-school education before the enrolment in primary school. This school year, 89 children enrolled in preparatory education, 50 boys and 39 girls. The pre-school facility organizes out of curriculum activities such as picnics, humanitarian actions, sports, English language, visits, workshops, and practical activities.

The Pre-school facility “Veselo Detinjstvo” in Socanica settlement was established in 2008. It runs a nursery for children 6 months to 3 years old. Currently, 95 children receive care and early education services, 55 boys and 40 girls<sup>8</sup>. It also runs a kindergarten, but at the moment the number of children is not available. The same applies to the preparatory pre-school education before enrolment in primary school.

The Pre-school facility “Bambi” in Lesak settlement was founded in 2003. It also runs a nursery for children 6 months to 3 years old. Currently, 81 children receive care or early education services, 44 girls and 37 boys.

There is no early childhood care and education facility in most of the villages including both majority and non-majority communities. The exact percentage of children without access to any early education program is not known but certainly goes up to 50%.

### ***7.3 Municipality of Zubin Potok***

Zubin Potok is positioned in the north-western part of Kosovo, in the upper part of the Ibar river valley between mountains Mokra Gora and Rogozna. It is consisted of Zubin Potok town and 63 surrounding villages, covering an area of 333 km<sup>2</sup>. The exact number of inhabitants is not known since the population census was not conducted in 2011. According to the municipal administration, the estimated number is approximately 15,200 inhabitants, 13,900 Serbs and 1,300 Albanians who reside in village Čabra, close to the municipal boundary with South Mitrovica.

The economy of Zubin Potok municipality is predominantly based on agriculture and small trade businesses, while a significant number of people are employed with public institutions and with Trepca. The largest water reservoir in Kosovo, Gazivoda lake is located in this municipality, made after the dam and hydropower plant was built in the 1970s. It is assessed as one of the most attractive regions for tourism development in Kosovo, with a beautiful lake and surrounding mountains, and cultural heritage sites such as monastery Duboki Potok.

The primary health care system includes one family medicine centre and seven infirmaries in villages, while the secondary health care services are used in the hospital

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<sup>7</sup> Source: Data collection report – position of children in the territory of three municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, NGO Domovik, 2021

<sup>8</sup> Ibid



in North Mitrovica. There are four primary and one secondary school in the municipality as well as one pre-school facility.

The pre-school facility “Nase dete” was established in 1988, and it runs a nursery, kindergarten, and preparatory pre-school program for children before their enrolment in primary school. There are 95 children, age group from 6 months to 3 years old attending nursery, 53 boys and 42 girls. It has relatively good quality premises, furniture, and playground, while there is a need for support in the provision of didactic boards and materials for individual research for the age group 1-3 years old. The nursery regularly prepares an annual curriculum in accordance with the rulebook issued by the ministry. It also prepares four-year developmental plans for the facility. The same applies to the kindergarten which hosts the age group of children from 3 to 5 and half years old. It has 149 children, 85 boys and 64 girls. The kindergarten needs support to start English language classes for attendees, and in this respect, it needs assistance to develop an action plan and introduce English language learning for children. The budget needed for that purpose is approximately 300 EUR per month<sup>9</sup>.

The facility also runs a preparatory pre-school program with children 6-7 years old. Currently, 67 children attend preparatory classes, 30 boys and 37 girls. The program needs an IT research centre, and for that purpose, it needs support in purchasing several laptops. The branch unit of PU “Nase dete” is in village Velji Breg. It was a former UNICEF supported early childhood education centre, taken over by the municipality, and integrated with the existing pre-school facility. It runs a kindergarten and preparatory pre-school program for children before enrolment in primary school. It is not known how many children are not covered with early education programs, but certainly, many children are residing in villages Ugljare, Varage, Zupce, Citluk, Dobrosevina, Crepulja, Strmac, Prelez, Cabra and others which are quite remote from Zubin Potok, and without access to any early childhood care and education services. The estimate is that the percentage goes up to 50% in this municipality.

#### ***7.4 Community-based Early childhood education centres in rural areas (Supported by UNICEF Kosovo Program)***

Apart from pre-school facilities run by municipalities, there are four early childhood education centres established by UNICEF, to complement existing nurseries and kindergartens. There are nine in total in the Mitrovica region, four of which are located in municipalities relevant to this research. Bellow table shows the list and geographic locations of those centres.

Table 2 Community-based education centres

ID	Municipality	Settlement	Location of premises	# of children (dec 2021)	Ownership	Date of establishment
1	Zvečan	Žerovnica	Premises of primary school “Vuk Karadžić”	23	Supported by UNICEF Kosovo	2015
2	Zubin Potok	Brnjak	Premises of primary school “Petar kočić”	17	Supported by UNICEF Kosovo	2016

<sup>9</sup> Source: Data collection report – position of children in the territory of three municipalities in the northern part of Kosovo, NGO Domovik, 2021

3	Zvečan	Banjska	Premises of primary school "Banović Strahinja"	18	Supported by UNICEF Kosovo	2015
4	Zvečan	Grabovac	Premises of primary school "Vuk Karadžić"	22	Supported by UNICEF Kosovo	2015
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>80</b>		

These centres are established to provide access to some form of early education for the most vulnerable children in remote rural areas uncovered with any public early care and education program. NGO Santa Marija is UNICEF implementing partner and coordinates the work of the centres. They have shown to be an extremely beneficial service for those communities with multiple benefits for both children and parents. They largely contribute to the better start of these children in the further education process, more equal with children attending pre-school programs in urban settlements. Four (4) such centres are currently operating in northernmost municipalities, in villages Zerovnica, Grabovac and Banjska in Zvecan municipality, and village Brnjak in Zubin Potok municipality. Currently, 80 children attend early care and education programs in these centres with the support of educators hired from local communities. These centres provide services for children 3-6 years old using the "Step by Step" program, a methodology for working with children 3-7 years old, developed for educators, psychologists, and parents. It is a child-centred methodology designed to stimulate motoric, cognitive, socio-emotional, and spiritual development and communication skills of children of that age.

### ***7.5 Inclusive pre-school education***

Children with special needs are not included in early care and education programs in target municipalities in a systematic manner. The inclusion in all other levels of education has not been achieved in practice, despite advanced legislation and applicable international standards. Most of the assistance to these children is provided by NGOs and the school for special education in North Mitrovica, however, there is no inclusive program that benefits children with special needs of pre-school age. A lot of preparatory work is needed before the introduction of an inclusive approach to early childhood care and education programs become effective. However, they are of critical importance for inclusion in all further levels of education. The sooner children, educators and parents are sensitized to diversity, the better effects of the entire inclusion process could be expected. There is a need to introduce services that are of crucial importance for children with special needs and their parents, before all teaching assistants and personal assistants, along with raising awareness with other children and parents on respect for diversity. According to available data, there are 10 children with special needs of pre-school age in northern Kosovo, out of them, 7 reside in North Mitrovica (4 boys and 3 girls) and do not attend any early education program, while one boy in Leposavic, one boy in Zvecan and one girl in Zubin Potok of pre-school age also do not attend any early education program. Children with special needs and their parents are stigmatized and there is always a possibility that some children are not visible, and that the available number of children does not fully correspond to reality.

## ***8. Conclusions***

Early childhood education is as important as primary education and should be compulsory and free of charge for every child. There is a serious equity gap in access to early childhood care and education programs at all levels. The finding that only 13.9% of children 3-5 years old in Kosovo have access to kindergartens explains low achievements of children in literacy and numeracy and further low ranking based on PISA tests. Kosovo invests 4.66% of GDP in education, which is on the level of countries in the region, however, the portion allocated for early childhood education programs does not correspond with the real needs of children and parents on the ground. Poor access to early childhood care and education, puts an additional burden on parents, in most cases mothers, and it additionally contributes to gender discrimination.

Municipalities have the core competencies in organizing and facilitating early childhood education programs, therefore the access and quality largely depend on their capacity in terms of budget, expertise, and prioritization of this important aspect. While in Pristina there is a pluralism of opportunities in both public and private kindergartens, on the other side 11 municipalities in Kosovo do not have any public early childhood education facility.

This assessment has shown a very high inequality rate in access to quality early childhood education programs between urban and rural settlements. In this respect, children from non-majority communities are even more vulnerable. Children and parents residing in villages are neglected in many aspects and remain out of the main developmental processes. The assessment is that up to 50% of children 0 -5 do not have access to early education programs in municipalities Zvecan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic. Apart from the lack of infrastructure and unavailability of early education programs at the community level, low awareness of parents on the importance of early childhood education is an additional barrier to the improvement of the situation. Gender discrimination and traditional perception of gender roles may lead towards lower enrolment of girls in early education compared with boys and put an additional burden on women for the provision of caregiving services at home.

No access to quality early childhood education has a direct impact on migrations from rural areas to urban centres and out of Kosovo, as there is a general lack of socio-economic opportunities in villages except for small farming. Many villages in municipalities Zvecan, Zubin Potok and Leposavic, remained almost empty, or with very few elderly people, especially those on the slopes of mountains Rogozna and Mokra Gora. There are some villages with only a couple of children, and their parents struggle to provide them access to basic services.

## ***9. Policy Recommendation***

Each municipality must undertake thorough needs assessment in the field of early childhood education and apply a more proactive approach in reaching out to the communities residing in rural areas. Every village and every family with children of pre-school age should be visited and necessary data collected on their needs for access to early education programs and facilities. Improvement of quality of early education in rural areas must be associated with other developmental processes including road maintenance, refurbishment of premisses and construction of new facilities, provision

of employment opportunities for parents, the opening of the health care units, and others.

The needs assessment should result in budgetary projections, and in this respect, the key recommendation is to multiply increase allocations for early childhood education programs and facilities. This could be done through re-allocations within the existing budget envelope foreseen for education in municipalities, but certainly, with a more proactive approach from all relevant stakeholders, additional funds could be raised from the central level as well as from donors directly through a partnership with other institutions and sectorial civil society organizations. The recommendation is for each municipality to establish a pool of supporters to early childhood education, and secure sustainable funding in a longer-term perspective.

A more strategic approach is needed in planning and programming for early childhood education programs. The strategic vision must be no children without access to quality early childhood education programs. In this respect, each municipality should develop and implement action plans for the improvement of access and quality of early childhood care and education programs, with regular review and evaluation. Specific attention must be given to data collection given that strategic documents and action plans must be measurable and assessed upon implementation against baseline data and targets set.

Good practices such as Early Childhood Education Centers supported by UNICEF in villages Banjska, Grabovac, Zerovnica and Brnjak, should be replicated by municipalities in many other villages in all three municipalities. Similar facilities and programs could be established in villages Doljane/Zitkovac, Srbovac, Korilje, Veliko and Malo Rudare, Lipa/Zhazhe/Boljetin in Zvečan municipality, Ugljare, Citluk, Varage, Prelez, Pridvorica, Crepulja, Cabra and others in Zubin Potok municipality, Vuca, Vracevo, Slatina, Belo Brdo, Kamenica, Bistrica/Ceranja/Kosutovo and other in Leposavić municipality. They are not expensive but have proven to be cost-effective and beneficial for both children and parents.

After mapping all children of pre-school age and their geographic locations, creative solutions must be found for villages with a small number of children of pre-school age which are isolated from other villages and urban parts of settlements. In such cases, transport arrangements are critical, and municipalities must ensure that children from two or three villages are transported to some facility located in the most convenient position for all. Regular meetings and discussion with children and parents during the planning is critical in this regard.

Investment in infrastructure and building additional facilities for early childhood programs is necessary given that majority of kindergartens and nurseries were built 30-40 years ago and cannot accommodate contemporary needs in early childhood education. They must satisfy contemporary standards for early childhood education and provide a safe and stimulating environment for children. Purchase and upgrade of adequate equipment, didactic tools, toy libraries and other materials are critical for the effective learning process, therefore funds should be timely secured and always available for that purpose.

Regular support to capacity building of educators, listening to their voices during the planning and providing them additional assistance in facilitation of the education

process is critical for the quality of early childhood education and attainment of children. In many facilities, educators work with very large groups of children, therefore new educators need to be recruited and the number of children in groups is reduced for more effective teaching. The principle of inclusion must be respected, and early childhood education programs must give equal opportunities for children with special needs. Teaching assistants and personal assistants should be involved to assist educators in inclusive groups. They could be engaged through cooperation with faculties of Psychology, Pedagogy or Sociology, whose graduates may benefit from an internship in early childhood education facilities, and after specialised training provide support to educators, for the benefit of all.

There is a need for comprehensive awareness-raising activities on the importance of early childhood education at all levels including parents, children, local administration, and the public. For that purpose, cooperation with media and civil society in outreach activities is crucial.