EURO CENTRE PUBLICATION

Peer Review Report

Deinstitutionalisation of children and persons with disabilities

Upon request from the North Macedonian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 8-9 February 2023 (online)

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Vienna, September 2023

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY AND RESEARCH

The Peer Review Report "Deinstitutionalisation of children and persons with disabilities" was developed within the project "Bridge Building Peer Reviews and Trainings - Mutual Learning Activities in BB countries" (06/2021 – 03/2024).

The content, analysis, opinions, and recommendations contained in this report do neither necessarily reflect the views of the funding organisation nor that of the host country. The authors of this report are grateful to Amalia Solymosi for proofreading and editing the report.

The project is financed by: Federal Ministry Republic of Austria Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection

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List of Abbreviations

BB	Bridge Building
CSW	Centre/s for Social Work
DI	Deinstitutionalisation
EEG	European Expert Group
EU	European Union
ICF	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
MLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Policy
MSEC	Medical and Social Expert Commissions
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

1 Introduction

The Bridge Building (BB) Peer Review hosted by the Republic of North Macedonia was the fourth in a series of mutual learning events, including peer reviews, policy reviews and trainings that are offered to BB countries[1] by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (European Centre), following the methodology applied and widely used within the EU Member States in employment, social and inclusion policies. By implementing mutual learning activities in the BB countries, the European Centre provides an answer to countries' needs related to the better coping with the health and social consequences of COVID-19 and to fighting poverty, especially for vulnerable groups.

Peer reviews promote mutual exchange of experience and knowledge transfer about the situation on the selected topic in a host country and in respective peer countries. The aim of this peer review was to discuss North Macedonia's approach towards deinstitutionalisation (DI) of children and persons with disabilities, in line with their commitments to implement the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), as well as the accession process to the EU. Specifically, it aimed at answering the following questions:

- *What are the main characteristics of the deinstitutionalisation (DI) reform process in North Macedonia and in the other BB peer countries?*
- *What are the main challenges in the process of transitioning from institutional care to community-based social services, especially for children and persons with disabilities?*
- *Which governance structures are implemented to ensure a smooth delivery of newly created, coordinated support services in the community?*
- *What are the prerequisites of creating sustainable, community-based social services?*
- *In which ways can transitions among different social services across the life-course be best organised and supported?*
- *What role does partnership play during the planning and implementation of DI and in the delivery of social services?*

1 The BB countries are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, the Republic of North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine. See this website for more information about the European Centre's Bridge Building activities: https://www.euro.centre.org/domains/bridging-building

According to the Common European Guidelines on the transition from institutional to community-based care, developed by the European Expert Group (EEG), deinstitutionalisation entails the creation of a variety of community-based services, including preventive measures, with the aim of reducing or eliminating the reliance on institutional care (2012). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) defines deinstitutionalisation as "the complete process of planning transformation, reducing in size, and/or closing residential institutions, while creating a variety of alternative childcare services governed by rights-based and outcomes-focused standards" (2010). Various countries in Europe have initiated efforts to revolutionize the way in which they deliver care and assistance to both children and adults with disabilities, or other support needs. This transformation involves substituting some or all the traditional long-term residential institutions with services that are centred around families and communities. A challenging issue in this endeavour is to guarantee that the deinstitutionalisation process itself is executed in a manner that upholds the rights of the targeted user groups, reduces the potential for harm, and guarantees favourable outcomes for all parties involved (EEG, 2012). This peer review aimed to discuss all the above-mentioned processes and challenges, in the context of Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.

The delegations of the countries in this peer review consisted of representatives of ministries of labour and/or social affairs in:

- North Macedonia,
- Armenia,
- Azerbaijan,
- Ukraine, and
- Moldova.

Other public authorities, including public employment services, centres for social work, as well as social service providers from North Macedonia also participated in the event. The peer review took place online over two days and consisted of inputs from the above-mentioned delegations, as well as discussions in working groups, contributing to a fruitful and constructive exchange about common challenges and promising policy solutions. The event attracted significant interests, with over 90 registrations.

The evaluation of the peer review showed the following results: over 85% of participants stated that the event has increased their knowledge and that they have learned about useful approaches for their professional work. Furthermore, most participants informed that the event allowed them to develop their professional network and to

receive new policy perspectives for their job. Furthermore, participants affirm the value of the peer review in clarifying the prerequisites for establishing sustainable community-based social services.

This report summarises insights gained during the peer review and aims at further sharing these with a wider audience. It is structured as follows: chapter 2 informs on the deinstitutionalisation process in the host and peer countries, while chapter 3 highlights the main challenges faced and discussed by BB countries during the peer review. Chapter 4 outlines the key messages of the event. Finally, chapter 5 presents conclusions.

2 Deinstitutionalisation processes in the BB host and peer countries

2.1 Brief information on the DI process in the host country

The process of deinstitutionalisation of children and persons with disabilities in North Macedonia commenced in the early 2000s (MLSP, 2018), aligning since with UN human rights standards, as articulated in the UN CRPD and the UN CRC. Article 19 of the CRPD requires States Parties to ensure the right to independent living of persons with disabilities through the development of a range of community-based care and support services. The UN CRC also calls for the creation of alternative care for children without parental care, such as foster care, that provides family-based support and serves the best interest of the child. Though persons with disabilities and children without parental care are still often accommodated in large, congregated institutions which are unable to provide person-centred support in line with human rights, North Macedonia has made important steps in transforming its care system over the past decade.

One key aspect of the DI process has been the development and strengthening of alternative care options. This includes the establishment of family-based care, where children live with qualified and trained foster families who provide a nurturing and supportive environment. Additionally, the country has invested in expanding the capacity of community-based services such as day-care centres and supported living arrangements to ensure that persons with disabilities can receive appropriate support while remaining integrated within their communities.

To support the successful transition from institutional care to community-based care, North Macedonia endorses the *National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy 2018-2027*[2]. The strategy presents steps and goals related to the training of professionals and caregivers, the provision of financial support and resources to families and foster parents and the implementation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the quality of care. Efforts have also been taken to strengthen the legal framework and improve it towards meeting international standards and to safeguard the rights and well-being of children and persons with disabilities.

The country implemented reforms, particularly within the healthcare system, to enhance the quality of care and services. The national reform of the primary healthcare system implemented in 2019 brought improvements in care provision. Particularly, the reform focused on strengthening the support systems for foster families and aimed to enhance the overall conditions and experiences of beneficiaries.

Foster families have played a vital role in North Macedonia's care system for several decades. The country intends to further develop this system by introducing specialized foster families who will receive comprehensive training to effectively support vulnerable groups of children. Currently, more than 480 children benefit from foster care arrangements. The government aims to further increase the support provided through enhanced childcare allowances. Additionally, the country established three main Centres[3] that promote foster care with a preventive approach, prioritizing early intervention and support.

In North Macedonia, governance structures are being implemented to secure the smooth delivery of newly created, coordinated support services in the community. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) is responsible for designing policies. Both public and private providers, play a key role in service delivery. There is also an increased involvement from the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education and Science. Hence, partnerships between governmental agencies, non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations have been developed and supported the North Macedonian deinstitutionalisation process so far. The country recognizes the importance of licensing social service providers to ensure high quality and diverse services for different beneficiary groups. Efforts are being made to expand the range of services provided by non-state institutions and civil society organisations. The

[2] National Deinstitutionalisation Strategy of the Republic of Macedonia for 2018–2027: https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/2019pravilnici/23.4_National%20Deinstitutionalisation%20Strategy%20and%20Action%20plan.pdf

[3] Website of the Foster Care Support Centers: https://zgrizuvanje.gov.mk/about-us/

North Macedonian government implemented an annual price policy, enabling better access to services.

Municipalities and Social Councils are reported to have played a crucial role in supporting people in a vulnerable situation. Municipalities may utilize their budgets and engage with Social Councils and Employment Centres to intervene and represent the interests of citizens. Representatives from MLSP confirm that Local Social Plans have been developed in North Macedonia in 40 (out of 80) municipalities. These plans provide a framework for better addressing the needs of vulnerable groups and promoting social welfare.

Additionally, the Functional Assessment and Support Centre for Children and Youth[4] was established. The Centre introduced an evaluation approach for children with disabilities by building on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)[5]. This model places emphasis on appraising the child's capabilities and potential accomplishments, while also identifying environmental obstacles that may hinder children from reaching their full potential.

Long ahead North Macedonia expects approximately 1.4 million EUR funding from the European Union to establish a Centre for Social Services6 catering to the needs of persons with disabilities. Further reforms are anticipated to address the employment challenges faced by persons with disabilities. This includes monitoring and evaluation of the reforms as well as the introduction of a co-financing model for social services.

2.2 Deinstitutionalisation processes in the peer countries

In the following, a brief description of the process of deinstitutionalisation of children and persons with disabilities, as it was shared during the peer review, is provided for the participating peer countries:

[4] ICF School: https://www.icf-school.eu/index.php/en/stories-en/list-stories-en/289-story-31-en

[5] International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF): https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/international-classification-of-functioning-disability-and-health

[6] The website of the Centre is not running yet.

Ukraine

Ukraine's foster care system encompasses both big and small foster family types, serving as a vital mechanism for providing care and support to children in need. During the peer review discussions, representatives from the Ministry of Social Policy in Ukraine stated that there are 1,305 big foster families accommodating 9,102 children, along with 2,969 small foster families caring for 5,663 children. Additionally, there are 224 patronage foster families responsible for 446 children. Over the past four years, the country has been actively engaged in the deinstitutionalisation process, gradually transitioning children from institutional care to family-based settings.

However, the ongoing Russian military aggression against Ukraine and, consequently, the reduced workforce has created new challenges. The evacuation of approximately 11,000 children, including those without proper documentation, to countries such as Germany has further complicated the situation, informed the Ukrainian representative. Authorities are working closely with the European Commission to establish family connections for these children. Data protection concerns, however, have hindered the provision of accurate information on children in some countries. Efforts have been made to evacuate children from institutions, ensuring that they are professionally accompanied and can stay together.

Despite these challenges, the reform of the foster care system remains ongoing, with recent decisions emphasizing the individual accommodation of children under three years old, while also promoting the establishment of smaller foster families caring for up to four children. Furthermore, adequate allocation of housing and transportation support is provided to foster families.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is in the initial stage of its DI process, with significant developments taking place to protect and support children in need. In February 2022, a decree was signed to enhance the care of children and introduce new foster family models, based on the Turkish model[7]. The model includes the transfer of children to foster families, thus creating conditions for them to live in a family environment. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection has taken steps to establish an electronic infrastructure for registering foster families and assessing their readiness to assume responsibilities. Legislation has been improved, with the decision to provide salaries for foster families, acknowledging the importance of their role in the care system. SOS Children's

[7] APA - Azerbaijan prepares to apply Turkish model of foster family: https://apa.az/en/social/azerbaijan-prepares-to-apply-turkish-model-of-foster-family-366733

Villages are also operating in Azerbaijan[8]. Overall, the country is working towards transforming the care system and providing a better alternative for children in need of formal support due to the lack of adequate parental care.

Azerbaijan has a system called the Medical and Social Expert Commissions (MSEC)[9] that provides medical and social expertise services to the population. MSEC conducts assessments of the health conditions of children with disabilities under the age of 18 and identifies the needs for social protection of persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection operates the "e-sosial.az" platform[10], which allows the entire population, including persons with disabilities, to access necessary information, certificates, and documents through their personal accounts.

Azerbaijan also has a Sustainable and Operative Social Security Agency[11], which houses the Inclusive Development and Creativity Centre. This centre aims to develop the skills and creative potential of various groups, including individuals with war-related disabilities, children who have lost their parents or are deprived of parental care, low-income families, and talented individuals among persons with disabilities.

Armenia

Armenia also faces specific challenges with regards to the shift from institutional care to community-based services, particularly in relation to children with disabilities and the implementation of foster care. One prominent issue is the lack of support centres in the regions specifically designed to cater to the needs of children with disabilities who are not in institutional care. This deficiency hampers the availability of specialized services and assistance for these children, limiting their access to the support they require. Furthermore, although foster care is established in Armenia since 2010, there is a prevailing difficulty in shifting societal mindsets regarding the placement of children in foster care, confirm representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

[8] SOS children's villages: https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/

[9] Services in the field of disabilities: https://dost.gov.az/en/services/disability/?kt=14

[10] E-sosial website: https://e-sosial.az/#/index

[11] DOST – Agency for Sustainable and Operational Social Security: https://dost.gov.az/en/

3 Towards integrated community-based service delivery

3.1 Main challenges faced in the countries based on the host country experience

This section highlights major challenges and important aspects that were mentioned during the peer review by the host and participating countries as key drivers or barriers in the implementation of DI reforms. These issues are manifold and underline the complexity of transitioning from institutional to community-based care services:

- *Economic situation of the countries*: Participants admitted that the economic situation in North Macedonia affects the provision of social services. The MLSP in North Macedonia, for instance, does not have enough financial means to develop adequate community-based services according to the needs. The established price of services does not cover the costs to 100%.
- *Lack of social services in the local communities*: There is a shortage of social services in local communities, particularly those related to mental health, children and adults with disabilities, and individuals with chronic mental health conditions. The discussions highlighted the low coverage and difficulties faced in accessing services outside urban centres, especially for people with mental health problems and people with severe impairments. Prioritizing the growth of community-based services, involving both local municipalities and private providers, is essential to ensure equal access across regions and bridge service gaps for individuals with disabilities, regardless of their residency.
- *Missing user-centred, user-led, and preventive approaches*: Participants highlighted the inadequate involvement of users, parents, and communities in the planning of social support services for children and persons with disabilities. In order to guarantee that services are tailored to individual needs and preferences, it is vital to engage all stakeholders in the decision-making processes. This user-centred approach will empower persons with disabilities and their families, making them active participants in shaping the services they receive. Moreover, participants emphasized the need to develop and implement preventive programmes to support children with disabilities and their families to eliminate the need for institutional care. Long-term care and intensive support for children and individuals with severe and profound disabilities should also be provided in their homes, to release family members from their informal caring duties. In addition, empowering children by giving

them a clear voice and choice in selecting potential foster families, within child-friendly circumstances and procedures, is essential. It ensures their participation and well-being during the foster care process.

- *Quality standards, quality assurance of social services and assessments*: Establishing minimum quality standards and a rigorous quality assurance system for social services, including newly emerged community-based services are regarded to be critical by participants. A consistent national monitoring and evaluation mechanism is also needed to assess the quality of services offered.
- *Shortage of workforce and training needs*: The discussions highlighted the need for upskilling the professional staff (e.g., providing specialized training in areas such as sensory integration and art therapy). Investing in training and development of professionals will enhance their ability to deliver high-quality services, ultimately improving outcomes for persons with disabilities. Due to excessive brain drain by EU countries, social welfare systems in the Western Balkans face chronic shortage of workforce, caused by low salaries, and poor working conditions. The insufficient financing for support services hinders the provision of effective services, including the lack of necessary equipment and transportation.
- *Workload of Centres for Social Work (CSW) staff*: Participants inform that CSW in North Macedonia face significant challenges as they are overloaded with tasks related to social benefits, social services, child protection, support for persons with disabilities, and addressing domestic violence. Generally, human resources are described to be extremely limited. The current workload placed on the staff surpasses what can be reasonably managed, leading to potential shortcomings in service delivery. Representatives from the MLSA suggest emphasizing the need for a separate department or agency specifically focused on child protection to alleviate the burden on CSW.
- *Service providers and potential voucher system*: The system of referrals and checks of provided services poses a potential risk of clientelism. To address this concern, the representatives from the MLSA emphasized the need to develop a criterion or a system for prevention and objectivity for referrals. One potential solution could be the implementation of a voucher system, empowering service users to decide for themselves which provider to choose.
- *Missing gatekeeping mechanism and aftercare for care leavers*: There is a notable absence of a gatekeeping mechanism within the social services system. Participants confirm that the absence of such a mechanism undermines the ability to regulate and control the access to services, potentially leading to inefficiencies or improper utilization of resources. Additionally, it was highlighted during the discussions that dedicated services that would help young

people leaving alternative care are absent in many countries. This leads to employment and social inclusion challenges. It is necessary to improve the preparation and aftercare assistance for care leavers (young people above the age of 18, adults with disabilities) to ensure a smooth transition into independent living. Insufficient support often leads to re-institutionalisation or homelessness.

- *Specificities within target groups:*
    - *Insufficient support provided to infants and children* during the critical early years of their life: The discussions stressed the importance of early intervention and family support during this essential developmental phase. Enhancing assistance and guidance for families would enable better opportunities and living conditions for children with disabilities, maximizing their potential for growth and development.
    - *Re-settlement of adults*: The re-settlement of adults who still reside in residential institutions was identified as another pressing concern. The discussions emphasized the need for expedited re-settlement and the identification of suitable solutions for persons with severe disabilities, in order to facilitate their integration into the community and ensure their well-being and quality of life.
    - *Families at social risk*: Another pressing concern is the absence of services aimed at strengthening families at social risk (i.e., poverty and material deprivation), with the specific goal of preventing child abandonment from biological families. Without adequate support, families facing social risks are more likely to face difficulties in providing a nurturing environment for their children.
- *Other challenges:* Other challenges mentioned include the accessibility of services, the urban/rural division, the unattractiveness of working conditions of caregivers, ensuring sustainability through co-financing from local municipalities and users, the lack of understanding of the human rights approach among professionals working in the sector, which hinders the development of inclusive practices as well as the increase of the involvement of CSW in the disability inclusion process.
- *Services for clients with mental health issues*: There is a lack of sufficient functional services for the support and treatment of children and youth facing mental health problems, as reported by participants. Without adequate resources and support, these individuals may not receive the necessary care and assistance needed for their well-being and development.

3.2 Further peer review discussions

During the peer review, additional, more general topics were discussed in detail among participants as they were considered of key importance in planning and implementing the process of transitioning from institutional to community-based care:

Key requirements for sustainable community-based social services

Since the host country, North Macedonia, recognizes the imperative of establishing sustainable community-based social services for various target groups, including children and persons with disabilities, all participating countries discussed key requirements for the successful implementation of these services. According to the participants, these key requirements include workforce development, financing mechanisms, defined eligibility criteria, quality assurance, improved coverage of community-based social services at the local level and clearly defined standards for each social service. In North Macedonia, quality standards are recognized in the Law on Social Protection[12] and encompass frameworks, human resources, financial aspects, ensuring consistency and quality in service provision.

Enhancing working conditions and ensuring adequate payment for staff are decisive elements in attracting and retaining qualified professionals. This includes addressing necessary night shifts, weekend work, and infrastructure quality. Moreover, providing training opportunities for employees in social service providers enhances their competence and effectiveness in service delivery. Overall, a human rights approach that promotes independent living should guide the delivery of services.

To ensure the sustainability of community-based social services, a robust financing system is reported to be crucial. Participants recommend implementing a system of subsidizing service providers to guarantee their sustainability. Additionally, longer-term framework contracts (3-5 years) between public institutions and service providers, particularly for services targeting more challenging groups and new initiatives, are advised to provide stability and enable effective planning and development. Contracts should include agreed targets, indicators, expected outputs, eligible costs, staff qualifications, monitoring and reporting mechanisms, and quality assurance measures tailored to different target groups. By providing accountability and transparency, these agreements can contribute to the overall improvement of service quality. Participants discussed whether exploring funding models from various

[12] Dejure.mk: https://dejure.mk/zakon/zakon-za-socijalnata-zashtita-1,
Albanian version: https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/zakoni/2021_zakoni/2021_zakoni_alb/104-2019_zakonsocijalna.pdf

sources, such as contributions from the business sector and partial payment by service users, could enhance financial sustainability. Promoting the societal value of community-based services is vital to attract diversified funding.

Also in Azerbaijan, efforts are being made to establish sustainable community-based social services. To safeguard sustainability and effectiveness of these services, several key approaches have been identified. These include improving coverage of community-based social services through campaigns via state-sponsored media and TV programmes, leveraging international experience, encouraging private businesses to provide financial support through incentives, and implementing legislation and training programmes for local administration regarding community-based social services.

One approach discussed in Azerbaijan is offering tax reductions or other benefits to companies engaging in sponsorship activities aimed at supporting community-based social services initiatives. Such incentives would not only encourage private businesses to contribute financially, but also foster a sense of corporate social responsibility. The discussions pointed out the need for appropriate legislation and the provision of training to local administration officials. Legislation should outline the responsibilities and roles of local authorities in supporting and promoting community-based social services. Additionally, comprehensive training programmes can equip local administration officials with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively manage and collaborate with community-based social services providers, ensuring efficient service delivery.

Transition of persons between different social services

In North Macedonia, the transition of persons from one social service to another is carefully prepared and communicated to users, aiming to provide certainty and realistic expectations. Social services are organised based on the client's age, disability type, and individual needs, with support levels tailored accordingly. As participants informed during the policy review, the country is undergoing a reform process to introduce ICF methods[13] for the assessment for children and persons with disabilities, with the aim of strengthening both the system and bodies involved. The reform should ascertain that social services and cash benefits are provided based on identified needs. Additionally, efforts are being made to strengthen early detection and intervention for children with disabilities, facilitating their inclusion in the commu-

[13] International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43737/9789241547321_eng.pdf

nity. North Macedonia is committed to improving the transition process, assessments, and support for individuals, ultimately enhancing the overall quality and inclusiveness of its social service system.

The role of partnership

Participants of the peer review agreed that partnership plays a vital role at all governance levels, from municipal to central levels, during the planning, implementation, and delivery of social services as well as the process of deinstitutionalisation. Collaboration among various stakeholders is hence imperative for the successful transformation of the social service system whereas all stakeholders should be recognized as equal participants.

Advocacy groups and association of caregivers and social service providers are essential to ensure both that their voices are heard, and that their needs are addressed. The Ministry in North Macedonia, in cooperation with local governments, plays a key role in improving and stimulating the delivery of social services. This involves activities such as mapping the needs, planning the establishment of social services, and cooperating with licensed social service providers while providing necessary financing. To ensure effective oversight of social services, the Ministry also strengthens mechanisms at the national level, regardless of the source of financing. Transparency and information about social services and their availability are improved through collaboration between local governments and social service providers. This collaboration also extends to other sectors such as health, education, and employment to enhance the overall support provided.

The increased participation of users in all phases of support and service delivery is emphasized as it enhances the quality of services and treatment. To facilitate this, there is a need to improve the capacities of regional councils for planning and identifying development needs and sustainability of social services in North Macedonia. Securing funding from diverse sources, not solely relying on central-level funding, is regarded to be important in this respect.

Through strong partnerships, user involvement, capacity building, and digitalisation, North Macedonia aims to advance its social service delivery, foster sustainability, and meet the evolving needs of its population. Participants from Azerbaijan also emphasized the need for strong partnerships and coordination between state institutions, local authorities, and service providers. From their point of view, a collaborative approach facilitates the sharing of resources, expertise as well as best practices, fostering an effective and integrated social service ecosystem.

The impact of digitalisation in social service provision

Digitalisation was highlighted during the peer review as an important tool to improve social service provision. By embracing digital technologies, the efficiency and effectiveness of processes can be enhanced, warranting streamlined operations and improved data management, as participants from North Macedonia reported.

Also in Azerbaijan, significant progress has been made in the development of advanced electronic services that provide a digital infrastructure for potential trainings and facilitate communication among various social services. Given this advanced infrastructure, it becomes imperative to focus on creating relevant content and building a skilled workforce to effectively utilize and leverage the existing digital resources. In doing so, Azerbaijan can maximize the benefits of its electronic services, enhance training capabilities, and improve communication channels among social service providers. This concerted effort should ensure the optimal utilization of the digital infrastructure and should contribute to the overall effectiveness and efficiency of social services in the country.

4 Key Messages

Countries in the Western Balkans and of the Eastern Partnership are at different phases of transitioning from institutional to community-based care for different target groups. At the end of the peer review, a few key messages were formulated which can contribute to implementing deinstitutionalisation in a sustainable way.

Key message 1: The transition from institutional to community-based care (deinstitutionalisation) for different target groups (children, persons with disabilities, etc.) should be embedded in a comprehensive social policy reform.

In order to ensure the sustainable re-organisation of social support service provision, through moving away from institutional care, it is important to consider reforming different parts of the welfare states simultaneously. This includes enhancing the provision of targeted benefits and creating a range of support services in the community, such as foster care, day-care centres, counselling, respite care, personal assistance, and more. Furthermore, mainstream services (e.g., primary healthcare, public employment services) should be made accessible for persons with disabilities and other groups in a vulnerable situation. Sustainable financing is of central importance for

new types of services provided by NGOs, such as offering support, technical assistance, and knowledge transfer. It becomes particularly important when a specific project comes to an end.

Key message 2: Follow a human rights approach when creating new services in the community with the aim of providing person-centred support developed with the close involvement of users.

Countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership have ratified the UN CRPD and the UN CRC and thus committed to upholding the human rights of persons with disabilities and children. This includes the provision to ensure their full participation in society and the right to be included in the community. Services designed in line with the human rights approach respect the autonomy, dignity, privacy, choice and control of service users and their families. Persons with disabilities and children as rights holders should be involved in the development and implementation of services, as much as possible.

Key message 3: Individual needs assessment is key in the deinstitutionalisation process and in providing person-centred services.

People have different needs and require different forms and intensity of support, therefore, countries should avoid applying a one-size-fits-all model in social service provision. Individual needs assessment tools (accessible for all persons with disabilities) help in finding tailor-made solutions for persons with disabilities and guarantee that their real needs are met.

Key message 4: In order to ensure good service quality in newly created community-based services and in alternative care, policy measures should address the issue of attracting, employing, (re)training, and retaining qualified workforce, especially in rural areas.

Countries in the Western Balkans and of the Eastern Partnership face chronic staff shortages. To advance the deinstitutionalisation process effectively, the following aspects require specific attention by policymakers: ensuring a better staff/client ratio and requesting minimum level of professional qualifications, attracting adequate and well-trained personnel. Re-training the workforce from institutional care to community-based approaches is crucial for better support and in the newly created services different skills are needed. Moreover, improving working conditions, offering financial incentives, ensuring safety, and providing upskilling opportunities will enhance the workforce's commitment to successful deinstitutionalisation efforts.

Key message 5: Monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms are vital to ensuring that community-based services will support the social inclusion of persons with disabilities and children.

To promote the expansion of community-based support services, it is important to facilitate the licensing of new service providers. This involves engaging various local actors such as municipalities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to participate in offering these services at the community level. Furthermore, quality standards and well-defined quality assurance mechanisms (mandatory and self-assessment) help preventing neglect and abuse. They contribute to good quality care in newly created community-based services. Implementing digitalised monitoring and reporting systems can be an effective way to achieve this goal.

Key message 6: The successful transition from institutional to community-based care requires essential cooperation and partnership among different stakeholders (authorities, service providers, service users' representatives).

Multi-stakeholder cooperation among central and local-level authorities, different services providers, and the representative organisations of service users (if any) facilitates the smooth implementation of the DI process and maintains good quality community-based services, fostering trust in the process. Municipalities and Social Councils play a key role in implementing the deinstitutionalisation process by running or financing social support services in many countries. Promoting regional networking and cooperation between different sectors (e.g., health and social care services, education, etc.) and governmental levels (local-regional-national) is vital for successful deinstitutionalisation. Building partnerships among stakeholders need to come with clearly shared responsibilities.

5 Conclusions

The peer review (online, 8-9 February 2023) discussed North Macedonia's ongoing deinstitutionalisation process for children without adequate parental care and persons with disabilities. Participating countries, who shared expertise on the implementation of the DI process, were North Macedonia as host country and Azerbaijan, Armenia, the Republic of Moldova as well as Ukraine as peer countries. The national delegation of the host country included representatives from different departments of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of the Republic of North Macedonia, as well as representatives of key civil society actors, service providers, local authorities and CSWs.

The transition from institutional to community-based care services presents a complex array of challenges for North Macedonia and the participating countries. These encompass economic constraints, a lack of rural services, the need for user-centred approaches, quality assurance, workforce shortages, referral objectivity, gatekeeping, aftercare, and specific support for various target groups. Accessibility issues, disparities, caregiver conditions, co-financing, human rights, and mental health gaps also pose hurdles. Resolving these multifaceted challenges requires a comprehensive, collaborative effort to achieve inclusive and high-quality community-based care services such as foster care, day-care centres, counselling, respite care, and personal assistance, are essential for catering to the diverse needs of individuals. In that regard, participants put importance to developing and retaining a skilled workforce, who are also particularly familiar with digitalisation, as it optimizes service delivery.

In addition, the discussions emphasized that a human rights-based approach is crucial for upholding the rights of children and persons with disabilities by creating inclusive communities. Adequate funding for the transition period, where both institutional and community-based systems run concurrently, is imperative for a smooth shift.

Finally, the peer review revealed that fostering cooperation among services, municipalities, and social councils, as well as promoting regional networking and intersectoral collaboration, is essential for a successful transition and the maintenance of high-quality community-based services. Building partnerships among relevant stakeholders, defined by clear and shared responsibilities, is key to both implementing deinstitutionalisation and ensuring the ongoing provision of quality community-based services. These efforts collectively contribute to a smooth deinstitutionalisation process and build trust and help achieve the goal of an inclusive and supportive care system in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries.

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