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THE CHILD PROTECTION POLICY IN NORTH MACEDONIA: PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONALS AND BENEFICIARIES

Abstract

Social and child protection is a set of policies and programs designed to reduce and prevent poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout the life cycle. Early childhood interventions provide an exceptional opportunity to invest in something that is both cost-effective and reasonable, cost-effective in the sense that there is an opportunity to obtain a skilled and capable workforce in the future, and fair in the sense that this intervention gives the best results for children who live in unfavourable conditions and lack adequate stimulation. The paper aims to analyse the perception of the professionals and beneficiaries regarding needs for enhancement of the child protection system in North Macedonia. The practical goal of this study is for the results to serve as guidelines for evidence-based policy making, as well as the introduction of new programs or the improvement of existing ones.

Keywords: Child protection, social protection, Child and social Protection reform, Human capital, Early Childhood Development, early interventions, school readiness, capacity building, equity

Introduction

The interventions in social protection are based on the human development approach whose aim is narrowing the gaps in basic capabilities (education, health, life expectancy, etc) and gradually enhancing advanced capabilities (quality of education and health care) that will give citizens the freedom and opportunity to live the lives they aspire to. The most appropriate way to get out of the circle of poverty is precisely the investment in the human capital of the population.

Protection of children in the Republic of North Macedonia is achieved through the provision of certain rights, services, means and forms for the protection of children. The child protection system is governed by two laws, the Law on Child Protection, and the Law on Social Protection. According to the Child Protection Law, child protection is an organized activity based on the rights of children, as well as

the rights and obligations of parents for family planning and the state and local self-government units for conducting a humane population policy. The protection of children is achieved by providing conditions and a level of standard of living that corresponds to the physical, mental, emotional, moral, and social development of children.

The provisions of the law are based on the principles of protection of the right to life and development of the child, protection of the best interests of the child, provision of a minimum standard for every child under equal conditions, exclusion of any form of discrimination, respect for the right the child's freedom and security of the person, of his own opinion and free expression, association and education, conditions for a healthy life and exercising of other social rights and freedoms of the child.

The protection of children is also covered by the Law on Social Protection. Namely, social rights and services are provided by the Law, which are directly aimed at the child or the child as a member of the family/household appears as a cohabitant/indirect beneficiary. The activity of social protection is provided through the exercise of rights to financial assistance from social protection and provision of social services and other measures determined by this law. Social protection is achieved through taking measures and activities in employment, scholarship, housing, family protection, child protection, health care, upbringing, and education and in other areas in accordance with the law.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Existing research shows that quality upbringing in the period of early childhood development among children affects the development of critical opinion, self-confidence, the ability to deal with problems and the capacity to nurture relationships with other people from the surrounding. Beside ensuring stimulating family environment, enabling fair access for all children to child care facilities, as well as to other forms of child care and upbringing, is one of the basic postulates when it comes to child protection⁵. The lack of a sufficient number of child care facilities is a problem that parents face, especially in order to establish a balance between work and family obligations.

Investments in human development play a key role in a nation's economic success, in terms of building a capable and productive workforce as well as minimizing social problems. Scientific evidence points to the fact that intervention in early childhood development (ECD) is much more effective than later interventions

⁵ Bredecamp, S., Coople, C., (1997 revised edition)

undertaken to overcome non-intervention in early childhood, which cannot be compensated for in later life⁶.

Developing skills in early childhood lays the foundation for lifelong learning and success in the labour market. Early childhood interventions strengthen children's learning abilities, cooperation with others, patience and developing other abilities that are the basis for formal learning and social interaction in and out of school.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) interventions can be categorized according to the impact they have into three broad categories, although it should be noted that the three categories are interrelated and many interventions have an impact over all three categories:

- Improving the children's readiness to start school and, consequently, improving the results in education. As an example, can be mentioned the better success in the tests, the reduced early school leaving or failure as well as the reduced percentage of children who repeat the year. School readiness is improved by a number of ECD interventions including those focusing on preschool literacy, nutrition and parenting skills and knowledge.

- Improving physical and mental health and reducing the use of health care system services. While it is not surprising that programs related to nutrition, immunization and hygiene provide significant health benefits, it is important to mention other types of ECD interventions that have a direct impact on children's health. Programs that strengthen children's cognitive and socio-emotional abilities also lead to fewer health problems, in part because they reduce the likelihood of children developing psychosomatic illnesses, and in part because they guide children toward making decisions that result in health benefits. such as increased use of seat belts and reduced use of cigarettes, alcohol, sedatives, and narcotics⁷.

- Programs to improve children's cognitive and socio-emotional abilities also build their capacity for self-control of behaviour and emotions. The reduction of involvement in high-risk activities of children and youth, such as smoking, risky sexual behaviour, use of psychotropic substances and addiction, as well as criminal and violent behaviour. These behaviours reduce the chances of making a successful transition to adulthood and increase the chances of a number of negative outcomes, including disease, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, addictions, prison sentences and social exclusion.

Apart from the direct impact of ECD interventions on children, there are additional opportunities for economic benefits. So far there is a small evidence data, although that number is constantly increasing, that suggests that interventions that provide a childcare component at an affordable cost can give mothers the opportu-

⁶ Kendel,JS (2003)

⁷ WHO (2004) Child and adolescent health and development

nity to be employed (this is especially true for mothers who have a higher degree of education). One of the biggest arguments for investing in early childhood development is the impact of an intervention on children's ability to do well in school. From a systemic perspective, the impact of interventions in early childhood has significant implications for the educational system and the economic well-being of the population.

Children whose basic needs are met at an early age are certain to develop skills for a successful start to school as a result of good preparation. In contrast, children who will begin education with underdeveloped social, emotional, physical, and cognitive abilities are susceptible to a number of problems that disrupt success in the educational process and in children's lives. One such example can be children who manifest aggressive behaviour. Often these children are not accepted by their classmates in the first years of education, they face a high risk of lower school achievements, higher chances of repeating a school year, higher chances of leaving school prematurely and higher chances of delinquent behaviour, as well as committing criminal acts during adolescence.

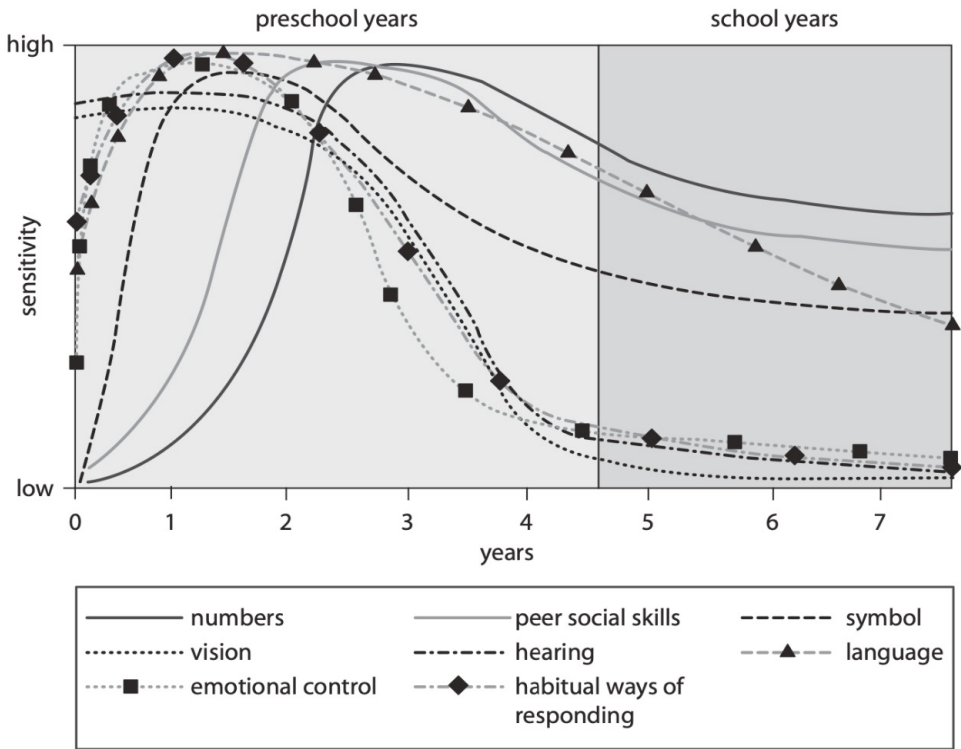
Some of the research findings point to the relationship between a child's readiness to start school and later academic achievements, such as: a lower IQ at 5 years of age indicates the possibility of repeating a year in primary school; scores on tests of cognitive skills and beginning reading in kindergarten indicate possible reading scores in fourth grade; teacher ratings of school adjustment, self-perceptions of ability, language expression, and IQ at age three predict achievement in reading, language, and mathematics in third grade, problem behaviour in kindergarten predicts possible grade repetition in elementary school, chronic health problems predict increased days of absence from school as well as poorer school performance, and early refusal to establish peer relationships indicates possible further refusal to attend school.

Neurological changes

The child's physical and social environment have such pronounced effects that they directly affect the physical development of the brain, that is, the synapses (connections) that are formed between neurons⁸. Additionally, while in some other respects the human brain is shaped throughout life, many brain functions are particularly sensitive to changes in early childhood, and become more stable and less "plastic" over time. As we can see from Figure 1 below, even functions that have a high degree of sensitivity later in childhood, such as numerical abilities and social skills with peers, reach their peak sensitivity in the first four to five years of age. the life.

⁸ Shonkoff, J.P., &Phillips, D.A. (Eds.) (2000).

Figure 1. “Sensitive periods” in early brain development



Source: Council of Early Childhood Development, 2010 based on Nash, 1997; McCain and Mustard, 1999;

Other functions such as emotional control and habitual responses not only peak during the first few years, but as Figure 1 shows, typically reach a high level of stability before age five.

Interventions in early childhood development in the Republic of North Macedonia

The data of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy show that 27,589 children aged 3 to 6 or 43.76% are involved in some form of preschool care and education. In the last 4 years, the existing capacities have been expanded for 4751 new places in institutions for the care and upbringing of children. In addition to the fact that the Government, i.e., the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, provides funds for capacity expansion through the budget, other funds are also used to address the challenge of insufficient infrastructure facilities in care and education institutions.

The existing standards and norms for the performance of activities for children's institutions have been revised in the direction of applying modern architectural design in the construction of cost- and energy-efficient institutions for children, as well as creating a stimulating environment for children's development.

Continuous trainings of the foster care and educational staff (theoretical, practical, and specialized trainings for children with special needs), exchange of experiences through good practices and examples from other countries are carried out. Adequate learning materials are provided (for the educational staff and for the children).

Work is underway to improve the licensing system for foster care and educational staff, professional staff, and management staff.

With the introduction of the Measuring Early Learning Quality & Outcomes (MELQO) instrument, it is possible to measure the quality and results of early learning so that through visible parameters we can work on improving and advancing the quality of preschool education. This means that this instrument will provide a clear picture of the skills acquired by preschool children, the areas that need to be improved and the ways in which the program affects early learning and early childhood development.

Greater and fair accessibility for all children will be ensured by implementing a new funding formula that will enable the inclusion of children from vulnerable categories who are currently outside the system.

For the Republic of North Macedonia, cross-sector coordination and joint commitment to the human capital agenda is important for dealing with challenges related to early childhood development, early school leaving and youth employment. Many of these challenges are multi-faceted and only a comprehensive approach tailored to the needs and vulnerabilities of each individual will lead to effective coping with them. Cross-sectoral coordination is key to ensure that investments in quality services reach the poor. Equally important, this process requires providing (financial and other) incentives for institutions to cooperate effectively with each other.

Policies and practices regarding child protection in North Macedonia

In 2019, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy launched a systemic reform that introduced novelties in the Law on Social Protection and the Law on Child Protection, and at the same time a new law was passed, the Law on Social Security of the Elderly⁹.

The aim of the reform was to group the monetary compensations and to correct or increase the amounts in order to adequately respond to the needs of the citizens.

⁹ Carraro.L, Implementation of the social and child protection reform in North Macedonia

By grouping and increasing the amounts of cash benefits, a way out of multi-generational poverty and improving targeting is possible. The reform also covered social services by expanding the network of social services and establishing a comprehensive system of social services that is based on quality and availability of the same to vulnerable categories of citizens.

Social Financial Assistance (SFA) is being reformed and upgraded to a Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA). Beneficiaries received a significantly higher amount with which they will be able to meet the minimum subsistence needs, which was not the case with Social Financial Assistance. In terms of support, the reform also included the activation of beneficiaries, by providing support for completing their education, acquiring skills that will make them competitive in the labour market, as well as help and support for employment.

The second set of rights are intended for persons with disabilities for whom the state has an obligation to take care of and financially assist them. For this purpose, there are four rights, as compensation due to disability, compensation for assistance and care, compensation for part-time salary due to care of a child with physical or intellectual disabilities in development and permanent compensation. The purpose of some of these rights is to provide these persons with social inclusion, for which they need more financial means, and some of those are intended to compensate the increased needs of these persons. A new right was also introduced, which will be intended for single parents who took care of their child with a disability, did not place him in a social protection institution, and are of retirement age but have not acquired a pension on another basis.

The reform enabled easier access to the child allowance. The right to child allowance is intended for families with children who have low incomes, abandoning the requirement that the family has an employed member. A novelty in the protection of children is the introduction of the educational allowance for children who regularly attend classes in primary and secondary school. With the introduction of this supplement, parents are given help in paying school expenses, thus preventing early school leaving. Also, the parental allowance was reformed and intended for families with low incomes, unlike before when the right was exercised without considering the financial situation of the families.

With the reform, a new law was passed, the Law on Social Security of the Elderly, which covers socially uninsured persons over the age of 65.

Social protection as an activity of public interest is realized through measures, activities, programs, and policies for protection from social risks, prevention and overcoming of social problems that adversely affect the well-being of citizens, with the aim of:

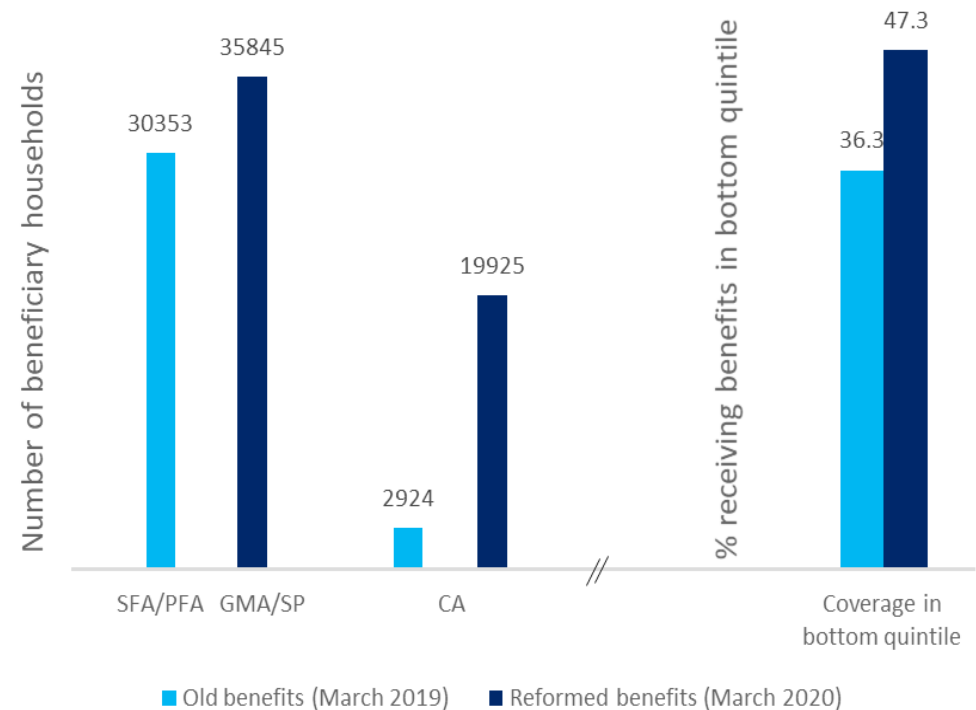
- promoting and maintaining the social security of citizens,
- prevention of social exclusion,

- improving the quality of life of citizens and
- strengthening the capacities of citizens to lead an independent, active, and productive life.

The activity of social protection is provided through the exercise of rights to financial assistance from social protection and the provision of social services and other measures determined by law. Social protection is achieved through taking measures and activities in employment, scholarships, housing, family protection, child protection, health care, upbringing, and education and in other areas in accordance with the law.

The results of the reform show that, in general, the reform was well implemented in a relatively short time and the reformed cash compensations responded adequately to the recession caused by the pandemic. The numbers of beneficiaries before and after the reform are given below together with a simulation of the coverage in the poorest quintile.

Figure 2: Number of cash benefit beneficiaries before and after reform



Source: L. Carraro, *Implementation of the reform in social and child protection*, 2021

Social Financial Assistance (SFA) – Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA): The number of SFA beneficiaries was significantly decreasing before the reform, but GMA immediately started with a significantly larger number of beneficiaries, that is, with a jump of 5,000 beneficiaries (from approximately 23,000 to 28,000). This is probably due to the work of the Centres for Social Work that started before the reform, all of which was informing and encouraging citizens to apply for the new compensation. We must also highlight the surge of beneficiaries starting from April 2020, which happened as a result of the measures in the Covid crisis. The result was that there were an additional 5,000 beneficiaries, that is, almost 33,000 beneficiaries by the end of 2020. The increase in the number of beneficiaries was expected, because the conditions for GMA eligibility criteria were changed, that is, the amount of the income threshold was increased as part of the reform. It is very important to point out that the average transfer to households has been more than doubled, not counting the additional support given as an energy subsidy in the winter months of the year.

Child Allowance (CA): There is a large increase of beneficiaries in the Child Allowance, but it happened in stages. All GMA-eligible households automatically qualify for CA if they have children. Also, the income threshold was increased to allow households with working parents to benefit from this support if they have a low income. The number of beneficiaries increased from less than 3,000 households in April 2019 to 11,500 in May 2019, but then gradually increased to reach around 19,000 beneficiaries by the end of 2019, to reach 20,000 beneficiaries in 2020.

Permanent Social Assistance (PSA) and Social Security for Elderly (SSE): Before the reform, PSA had about 7,000 beneficiaries, but unlike GMA and CA, these beneficiaries do not seem to have been immediately transferred to SSE. SSE started from a very low base of only 70 beneficiaries in May 2019, reached 5,000 beneficiaries in September 2019 while in 2020 reached 7,000 beneficiaries. Also, this compensation was increased with the reform to 6,000 MKD while the beneficiaries who received average 5,000 MKD before the reform.

In addition to the changes in the Law on Social Protection that refer to the rights to financial assistance, in terms of the scope, types, amounts and criteria for exercising the rights, changes were introduced in the classification and types of social services, as well as the method, scope, procedures and standards for the provision of social services. With the adoption of the new law, licensing of service providers was introduced, which enabled pluralization and opportunities for greater involvement of non-governmental organizations in providing social services. Also, changes were made in the licensing system and continuous professional education of professionals in the social protection system.

In addition, a new approach was introduced that is used in professional work, such as case management and supervision, which initiated changes in the acts for internal organization and systematization of jobs in social protection institutions.

The novelties in the Law on Social Protection represent a significant step towards the fulfilment of strategic goals in the field of social protection, especially in relation to the rights to social protection financial assistance and laying the foundation for the development of new social services as an alternative to accommodation in institutions. With the new types of social services provided for in the Law, a basis was created for facilitating the process of deinstitutionalization, increasing the volume, type, and quality of social services, and providing conditions for reduced dependence on institutional protection.

The introduction of the network of licensed and authorized service providers created conditions for pluralization in the provision of social services. The provisions of the Law on Social Protection are aimed at continuing the decentralization process, especially with the introduction of municipal and regional councils for social protection, as well as with the introduction of grants for financing social services at the local/regional level.

With the reform of the social protection system in 2019, as already mentioned, amendments were made to the Child Protection Law in 2019, which introduced the right to an educational allowance for children attending primary and secondary school. The purpose of the introduction of this monetary compensation was to stimulate children to attend classes regularly, to reduce the number of children who drop out of formal education, as well as to improve success, as an indirect goal.

The introduction of the education allowance followed a four-year piloting of the Conditional Cash Allowance, which was introduced only for children attending secondary education. The benefits and positive effect of the introduction of this fee were confirmed by surveys, baseline and follow-up research carried out by consultants from University College London, Institute for Fiscal Studies, Centre for Micro Data Methodology and Practices.

Research method and research findings

To assess the impact of child protection policies, this paper analyses the perceptions of professionals working in the centres for social work (CSW) and kindergartens, as well as the perception of beneficiaries of the measures themselves. Three structured questionnaires were distributed to three separate target groups. The first questionnaire was delivered to 44 professional workers in Centres for social work and Institutions for care and upbringing of children aged 0 to 6 years (kindergartens) from 7 municipalities (Centar, Aerodrom, Butel, Karposh, Prilep, Krusevo and Ohrid). Majority of the respondents were women (86%), and the age group of the respondents were from 35 to 54 years. The second questionnaire was delivered to

90 beneficiaries of financial allowances from social protection and child protection. Respondents were from 6 municipalities, including: Veles, Prilep, Berovo, Tetovo, Skopje and Sveti Nikole, majority of which were ethnic Macedonians (58%), followed by ethnic Albanians (23%), ethnic Turks (9%), Roma (9%) and ethnic Bosnics (1%). The third questionnaire was delivered to 42 beneficiaries of services in institutions for the care and upbringing of children from 7 municipalities, including: Centar Aerodrom, Butel, Karposh, Prilep, Krushevo and Ohrid. From the total number of respondents, majority or 71.4% have children aged 3 to 6 years, while the rest (28.6%) have children aged 0-4 years.

The perceptions of the professional workers from the CSW and from the kindergartens are positive in relation to the change in the access criteria and the amount of the financial allowances in the field of child protection (after the legal amendments of 2019) in the direction of increased coverage of children from households with lower incomes, as well as due to the introduction of new financial rights. From the perspective of the impact of the change in the access criteria and the amount of the rights to financial assistance in the field of child protection on the reduction of the total and child poverty, experts have divided opinions. Those whose perceptions are negative justify their views with rising inflation and low incomes. Those who believe that the changes in the child protection system affected the reduction of total and child poverty, state that with the increased amounts and the increased number of rights, the financial opportunities of families to meet their own needs increase, as well as due to the justified expectation of greater motivation for inclusion of children from poorer families in the education process.

Regardless of these perceptions about the major reform of the child protection system, professionals also recognize the need for some other innovations and enhancement of the child protection system in different segments. Examples are given as easing administrative requirements in procedures for exercising rights, increasing cooperation between educational institutions in the country, emphasizing greater protection and support for children from single-parent families, especially children with a deceased parent, children with a missing parent and children with unrecognized paternity. The need for innovation in terms of meeting the health needs of children with developmental disabilities has also been recognized, creating conditions for opening day care centres for children from low-income families where children could use technical equipment that parents cannot afford, provide it to them, or they don't have enough knowledge and cannot help them with their homework or pay for another teacher to do so. The need to increase the capacities in kindergartens and the possibility of introducing mandatory pre-school care for children so that there is no waiting list for children to be cared for in kindergartens is highlighted.

Professional workers also believe that the reformed child protection system improves the psycho-social and emotional development of children. In the direction of this are the considerations that belonging to a certain group from an early age in the child creates emotional attachment and affects the emotional development of the child. Every interaction, connection and play, no matter how small, can stimulate children's brain development and promote their health and well-being. Support for positive parenting is especially important as an essential component for children's early development. At the same time, it is pointed out that the inclusion of children in an organized stay in children's institutions enables development in all spheres which are stimulated in parallel from the earliest age. Involvement of children in an institution for early childhood development contributes to the acquisition of social skills through interaction with peers and adults, as well as learning norms and rules of behaviour that later enable easier adaptation and are a basis for further educational development.

Regarding the contents of the short and long programs in the kindergartens and early childhood development centres, despite the appropriateness and adaptation to the age of the children, there is room and need for revising some segments and introducing novelties, in the direction of the duration of the programs according to the age of the children, better equipment with didactic materials, as well as strengthening the capacities of the professional staff.

The reformed child protection system expectedly had a certain impact on the direct beneficiaries, especially due to the fact that the amendments to the Child Protection Law in 2019 led to an increase in income in their households. Despite that, the beneficiaries themselves perceive the need for some innovations in the direction of improving the child protection system. In the area of financial allowances, part of their considerations refers to the possibility of larger amounts for children from large families and children from single-parent families, additional incentives for children with above-average results, introduction of additional rights for children with special needs, removal of the material census as criterion for exercising a certain right.

In the section of services in kindergartens, the beneficiaries mention some other additional needs, in the direction of care in the afternoon, care when the child is sick, as well as care during weekends and holidays. Regarding the type of care, if they had the opportunity to choose, the majority of beneficiaries would choose a state kindergarten, with full-day or flexible care, as well as mandatory pre-school preparation for children before starting school. Regarding the quality of care for their children, the beneficiaries value different quality indicators, in terms of a nicely arranged space, affordable price of services, well-balanced and healthy diet, good hygienic conditions, the behaviours of the staff, and others.

Same as the professionals, beneficiaries also believe that some innovations are needed in the child protection system. Their perceptions of this are in the direction of the need to enrich the programs with physical (sports) activities in nature, greater cooperation with parents, greater recreational, more educational content, etc. And in terms of perceptions of whether the type and scope of early childhood development services in the Republic of North Macedonia can influence the improvement of children's well-being, in the direction of improving physical health, development and safety, psychosocial and emotional development, social development and behaviour as well as the cognitive development and educational achievements of their child/children, beneficiaries have a positive attitude.

Conclusion

Provided evidence-base data in this paper can serve as ground for further improvements in the social and child protection system in North Macedonia. Based on the analysed perceptions of professionals in the social and child protection system, as well as perceptions of the beneficiaries, some of the steps that can enhance the current systems of social and child protection in North Macedonia include:

- Strengthening the Social Work centres by improving the working conditions, providing means and methods for working with beneficiaries in order to advance the preventive work that is carried out through field work and close cooperation with educational, health, non-governmental, municipal, and other organizations and institutions.
- Implementation of trainings for professional workers for better targeting of potential beneficiaries for the possibility of obtaining cash benefits and social services.
- Improvement of programs for educators in initial education.
- Provision of continuous training for the staff working in institutions for the care and upbringing of children of preschool age.
- Expanding the capacities of institutions for care and upbringing of children up to 6 years of age
- Improvement of children's motor skills, develop physical skills and abilities, to increase coordination activities through games and dances, recreational sports and outdoor activities.
- Support of staff working in care and education institutions regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- Regular revision of early learning and development programs.
- Supporting parents in the care and upbringing of children, through opening counselling centres in kindergartens and organizing counselling work with parents and extended family members.

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