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Inequalities in Education

ARISE

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National Report for Serbia



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ARISE

Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education

National Report for Serbia

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ARISE Consortium



Centar za obrazovne politike
Centre for Education Policy



STEP BY STEP



Contents

Introduction	9
1. General policy context relevant for equity	10
Equity in the national legislation and strategic documents	10
Poverty as a source of inequity	13
Poverty in Serbia – statistical data	14
2. Equity in education	19
Impact of SES on students’ achievements – research data	19
Main obstacles for low SES students	23
3. Description of the existing policy measures aimed at reducing inequity	27
Education	27
Health system	31
Social care and welfare	33
4. Changes in the last years that affected equity in education	35
Summary of main reform initiatives that help promote equity	35
5. Key conclusions and recommendations	39





List of Abbreviations

ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ERP	Economic Reform Programme
ESRP	Employment and Social Reform Programme
EU	European Union
EWIS	Early Warning and Intervention System
HE	Higher Education
ICT	Information and communications technology
IEP	Individual Education Plan
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
LoFES	Law on Foundations of Education System
LSG	Local Self-Government
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RSD	Serbian dinar
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEDS	Strategy for Education Development in Serbia
SES	Socio-economic status
SILC	Survey on income and living conditions
SIPRU	Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
SWC	Social Welfare Centres
TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
VET	Vocational Education and Training





Introduction

The national report was created within the project Action for Reducing Inequalities in Education (ARISE¹), a regional project implemented in Albania, Bosna and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey and funded by the European Commission. The project aims to support inclusion of students with low socio-economic status by building national and regional partnerships of civil society organisations from six aforementioned beneficiaries to engage in advocacy and constructive policy dialogue with governments, raise awareness among education stakeholders and pilot interventions targeting low SES students at the school level.

Data and information presented in the national report are collected through a policy questionnaire fulfilled after the analysis of equity-related policy documents and consultations with relevant institutions and experts and focus group and interviews with policy makers, school principals, teachers, school support staff, students, parents, civil society organisations and educational experts. Focus group and interviews are implemented to obtain stakeholders' perspective on equity-related issues in general and in the educational context of a country.

1 More information about project: <https://www.arisenetwork.eu/en/>

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence



1. General policy context relevant for equity

Equity in the national legislation and strategic documents

Under **the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia** (the Constitution)² all human and minority rights are guaranteed to preserve human dignity and exercise full freedom and equality of each individual in a just, open, and democratic society based on the principle of the rule of law. The right to education is one of the aforementioned rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Namely, according to Article 71 of the Constitution, everyone is entitled to free of charge and mandatory primary education, while secondary education is free of charge but not mandatory. Access to higher education under the same conditions is guaranteed to all the citizens, and the state enables free of charge higher education to students that are successful and gifted, but have low socio-economic status (SES).

Equity is, also, an indispensable part of legislation in the education sector and it is defined as equal access to all education levels to all students and equal opportunity for successful completion of schooling for everyone from Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) to Higher Education (HE) (more information is provided in Chapter 3). In addition, legislation defines vulnerable groups of students as groups of those in inequitable position comparing to the general population (e.g. students from low SES families, students from minority groups, Roma students, students with learning/developmental difficulties or disabilities, students with single parents, students without parental care, returnees in readmission, etc.) and foresees certain measures or benefits that might mitigate negative effects of vulnerability fac-

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2 The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia: http://www.parliament.gov.rs/upload/documents/Constitution_%20of_Serbia_pdf.pdf



tors. Equity is a cross-cutting topic within the **Strategy for Education Development in Serbia (SEDS)**³.

In the context of social care and welfare of Serbian citizens, the Constitution prescribes that individuals who need social assistance in order to overcome social and life difficulties and create conditions for satisfaction of basic living needs have the right to social protection⁴. The Social Protection Strategy 2019–2025⁵ is in the draft form at the moment and it will be subject of adoption in the following period. The current legal framework includes the Law on Social Welfare, the Law on Financial Support to the Families with Children and the Law on Red Cross (described in detail in Chapter 3), while the prohibition of discrimination is regulated by the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in the Republic of Serbia⁶.

Serbia, also, adopted **The Strategy of Social Inclusion of Roma for the period from 2016 to 2025**⁷ in order to decrease poverty among the Roma who are one of the most vulnerable social groups, to increase their participation in all aspects of the society and to combat discrimination.

The state **institutions** in charge of ensuring equity are the Protector of Citizens (**Ombudsman of Serbia**)⁸, **Commissioner for protection of Equality**⁹, **the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue**¹⁰ and **the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU)**¹¹ which operates within Office of the Prime Minister.

In general, it can be concluded that legal and strategic framework related to equity is well developed in Serbia which is confirmed by opin-

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- 3 A new strategy is in the process of writing.
- 4 Article 69. The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia: http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/documents/Constitution_%20of_Serbia_pdf.pdf
- 5 Draft of the Social Protection Strategy by 2025: <http://www.udruzenjesz.rs/images/PDF/nacrt-strategije-socijalne-zastite-2019-2025-27032019.pdf>
- 6 Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination in the Republic of Serbia: <http://ravno-pravnost.gov.rs/en/legislation/republic-of-serbia-legislation/>
- 7 The Strategy of Social Inclusion of Roma for the period from 2016 to 2025: https://www.ljudskaprava.gov.rs/sites/default/files/dokument_file/national_strategy_for_roma_inclusion_2016-2025_0.pdf
- 8 Ombudsman of Serbia: https://www.ombudsman.org.rs/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=25
- 9 Commissioner for protection of Equality: <http://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/en/>
- 10 Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_ministarstvima.html
- 11 Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit: <http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/en/>



ions of participants in the focus group and interviews. However, they were rather sceptical about the protection of human and minority rights in practice i.e., the difference between legislation prescriptions and practical implementation as well as the Government's true commitment to equity. The quotes that best describes this statement are *“equity is just a phrase in the policy discourse without real implementation”* and *“national legislation and strategic documents recognise equity and define it very clearly, however, there is a problem with the implementation of laws, and the fact that measures are not applied in reality”*.

In brief, there is a system, but it does not function well since there are still examples of violation of equity (usually based in deeply rooted common opinions and lack of mechanisms to implement the legislation – e.g. girls do not need to go to school, so they are not to be enrolled, Roma people do not wish to work so employers are avoiding to employ them, etc).



International strategic documents relevant for equity in education in Serbia

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. Serbia is fully committed to the implementation of the Agenda 2030, and that the prioritization of 17 Goals and 169 Targets and their adaptation to the situation in the country is in progress.

Economic Reform Programme (ERP) and Employment and Social Reform Programme (ESRP) are particularly important instruments in the context of accession to the European Union (EU), given that labour-market-oriented education reform and digitalisation in education are accorded high priorities, especially within the ERP while the ESRP also recognizes the social dimension of reforms and measures to set up a quality assurance system at all education and training levels with the aim to improve quality and equity of education. It should also be noted that Serbia opened and closed the EU Negotiating Chapter 26 (Education and Culture).

Serbia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations General Assembly Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Also Serbia signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, The United Nations Charter.

Poverty as a source of inequity

Poverty in Serbia is defined as absolute and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is defined by official criteria regarding income and it is related to persons that cannot satisfy basic living needs in any terms (lack of food, housing etc.). Therefore, such person is perceived to be under the absolute poverty line. For example, the absolute poverty line is defined based on the food and the sum of other expenditures (clothes, footwear, housing, health care, education, transport, recreation, culture, other goods, and services). Relative poverty is also known as the poverty risk threshold i.e. if the person cannot live in line with the social standards of the population he/she belongs to. Until 2010, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia only monitored poverty under the absolute poverty concept, while the relative poverty concept and measurement based on the EU indicators were, for the first time, applied in the First National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction¹². From 2006, the poverty line was calculated on the basis of the Household Budget Survey, using nutritional standards and the appropriate proportion of non-food items. The 2011 and 2012 calculation of poverty lines was upgraded by adding the retail price index, i.e. the consumer price index to the calculations used for the poverty line in 2006¹³. Today, different institutions refer to poverty by using absolute or relative poverty concept, so it is important to check which one is used before data analysis and concluding.

In other words, poverty in Serbia is seen as the inability of a person to satisfy basic living needs. Groups that are associated with poverty in Serbia are usually those living in poor conditions with minimal income, unemployed or working on the black market and Roma, but more details are presented in the box below.

12 First National Report on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction: <http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/First-National-Report-on-Social-Inclusion-and-Poverty-Reduction.pdf>

13 Mijatović, B. (2014). Poverty in Serbia 2011, 2012 and 2013, Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia





The most vulnerable population includes:

- ▶ Children up to the age of 14,
- ▶ Youth (15–24),
- ▶ Multi-person households,
- ▶ Non-urban population,
- ▶ Persons living in households where the heads of the household have a low education level,
- ▶ Persons living in households where the heads of the household are unemployed or outside the labour market.

The key poverty risk factors are:

- ▶ Education (complete or incomplete primary education),
- ▶ Labour market status (unemployed/inactive),
- ▶ Household size (five-person and larger households),
- ▶ Place of permanent residence (non-urban area, Eastern/South-Eastern Serbia), and
- ▶ Age (children and youth).

Source: SIPRU – Who are the poor in Serbia?¹⁴

When it comes to education, students from low SES families¹⁵ are recognised in different national strategies and accompanying strategic measures as students in need of additional educational support. In parallel, education is seen as extremely important for breaking the poverty cycle and improving the general wellbeing of students since education and, consequently, labour market status are the most important factors causing poverty – poverty is 4.5 times less prevalent in a household where ‘the head of a family’ has at least secondary education than in the household where he or she has an incomplete primary school (see more in Table 1)¹⁶.

All the participants in the focus group and interviews are aware poverty affects students negatively. They underlined that poverty

14 SIPRU (2018). Who are the poor in Serbia? <http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/en/social-inclusion-in-rs/poverty-statistics/who-are-the-poor-in-serbia/>

15 Low SES families are considered those with less than average income i.e. those where a person is spending less than 12.495 RSD (106 EUR) on basic living needs. Source: http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Assessment_of_Poverty.pdf

16 Ibid.

influence became even more obvious during the COVID 19 pandemic and common opinion is the same as the one pointing that *“COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how strongly poverty affects equity. How many students do not have electricity, internet connection and digital tools, digital competences etc. to actively participate in online learning”*. This one and similar statements were further discussed and general conclusion of the participants in the focus group and interviews is that despite the recognition of poverty as a source of inequity in Serbia, roles and responsibilities of different sectors and actors in decreasing poverty impact are still to be clearly defined. Specifically, dealing with minimisation of poverty influence is shared among sectors, but support measures are not well coordinated or synchronized which leads to *“duplication of efforts without achieving synergy”* as stated by one of the school representatives that participated in the interview. Also, support measures dedicated to low SES students and families e.g. provision of material and financial support, procurement of textbooks, etc. are often implemented by schools, local civil society organisations or international organizations in a situation when public bodies do not implement such measures. Another challenge mentioned was the one related to adequacy or sufficiency of some of the measures to the context, thus it was stated that *“Introduction of affirmative actions is in progress, but unfortunately poverty has increased in society and those small affirmative measures are not enough.”*

Focus group and interview participants also noticed that even free of charge preparatory preschool, primary and secondary education in practice have ‘hidden’ costs that low SES families cannot cope with – e.g. families still need to provide clothes, food and learning materials for their children, etc. At the secondary education level transportation costs might be covered by local self-governments (LSGs) but it is not mandatory and it usually depends on LSG’s willingness/ability to provide for such costs, textbooks, learning materials, uniforms or health exams (for VET students) which financially burden families.

At the macro level poverty is particularly visible in some of the regions, while at the mezzo level it is visible through the composition of students’ body at secondary education level (i.e. low SES students more often enrol to VET schools) and there are cases of segregated





schools (i.e. schools with an extremely high percentage of Roma students). At the micro level, poverty influences ‘division’ of students, so their sense of belonging to school and peer group is negatively affected, while years of poverty present through generations of the same family negatively affect the perception of the value of education, family cultural capital and ability to support the student throughout the educational process.

One of the issues that participants frequently mentioned in the focus group and in interviews is the comprehensiveness of the existing measures. More specifically, there is a lack of systemic measures and activities that support low SES families in securing basic needs like food and clothes since there is a general notion that the family should take care of those. Nevertheless, in reality, the absence of basic supplies presents a huge obstacle for the participation of poor students in education which is reflected in the following statement: *“...low SES students and their families do not feel comfortable to go to school if children do not have clean clothes, snack, school supplies or do not have money for transport ticket (secondary school example).”*

Additionally, teachers and school staff are still unaware of how the SES impacts children and their families. According to educational expert research experience *“...sometimes teachers in primary schools do not perceive low SES students as vulnerable.”*

It is worth to mention that all focus group and interview participants agree with the statement of one the participants who said that *“Reduction of poverty should be the priority because we cannot speak about equity in education if children do not have to eat, do not have electricity and water if they live in unhygienic settlements.”*

Poverty in Serbia – statistical data

According to the Government of Serbia (Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit)¹⁷, the percentage of those under the absolute poverty line in 2019 was 7%. Data related to absolute poverty in Serbia in 2019 based on the key indicators are presented in the following table (Table 1).

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17 SIPRU (2020). Assessment of the Trends of Poverty and Living Standard and the Response to the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Assessment_of_Poverty.pdf

Table 1. **Absolute poverty in Serbia in 2019**
based on the key indicators

Poverty line, RSD per month per consumer unit	12.495 (106 EUR)
Percentage of the poor in the Republic of Serbia	7
Percentage of the poor by settlement type	
Urban area	4,8
Other areas	10,3
Gender disaggregated proportion of the poor	
Male	6,9
Female	7,2
Percentage of the poor by age	
Children up to 13	8,2
Children 14–18	8,5
Adults 19–24	8,2
Adults 25–45	5,7
Adults 46–64	6,2
The elderly from 65 and over	8,0
Percentage of the poor by educational attainment of household head	
Incomplete primary education	20,8
Primary school	14,1
Secondary school	4,6
Non-university higher education	1,2
University education	0,9
Percentage of the poor by socio-economic status of household head	
Self-employed	5,8
Employed	2,7
Unemployed (18+)	19,2
Pensioners	8,1
Others inactive	32,7

Source: The Early data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia within the Assessment of the Trends of Poverty and Living Standard and the Response to the Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

According to the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), in 2019 the at-risk-of-poverty threshold amounted to an average of 19.381 RSD (165 EUR) a month for a single person household. For a household with two adults and one child aged below 14, the threshold was 34.886 RSD (297 EUR) per month, while for a four-member household with two adults and two children aged below 14, it amounted to 40.700 RSD (346 EUR). Knowing that, in 2019, the **at-risk-of-poverty rate** in Serbia was 23.2% (these persons are not necessarily poor but are at a higher risk of poverty than others)¹⁸.

18 SORS (2020). Statistical release Number 283 - Year LXX, 15/10/2020. Survey on Income and Living Conditions: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/PdfE/G20201283.pdf>



In addition, during the same year, at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate amounted to 31,7% (these persons are at risk of poverty, or are severely materially deprived, or live in households with low work intensity).

Serbia has one of the highest income inequalities in Europe. SILC data show that the highest population quintile had income that were 6,46% higher than in the lowest quintile (2019)¹⁹. The median net salaries in September 2020 amounted to 45.817 RSD (390 EUR)²⁰. Gini coefficient is also among the highest in Europe, 33,3²¹.

More details about at-risk-of-poverty rates in 2019 are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. At-risk-of-poverty rate in 2019.

At-risk-of-poverty rate in Serbia	23,2
At-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion rate in Serbia	31,7
At-risk-of-poverty threshold (monthly) in RSD	19.381 (165 EUR)
At-risk-of-poverty rate by gender	
Male	22,7
Female	23,6
At-risk-of-poverty rate by age	
Younger than 18	28,9
Adults 18–24	25,6
Adult 25–54	21,9
Adult 55–64	21,7
The elderly from 65 and over	21,1
At-risk-of-poverty rate by employment status	
Self-employed	25,9
Employed	6,5
Unemployed (18+)	47,5
Pensioners	17,2
Others inactive	33,5

Source: Review of data according to Survey on income and living conditions – SILC (SORS, 2020)²²

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- 19 Eurostat: https://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_di11&lang=en
 - 20 SORS (2020). Average salaries and wages per employee, September 2020: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/statisticalrelease/?p=6095&a=24&s=2403?s=2403>
 - 21 Eurostat: http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?lang=en&dataset=ilc_di12
 - 22 SORS (2020). Survey on income and living conditions – SILC. Poverty and Social Inequality, 2019: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/PdfE/G20201283.pdf>



2. Equity in education

Impact of SES on students' achievements – research data

Serbia participates in TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), which provide additional data about equity and quality of education system in Serbia and allow comparison with other participating countries.

Serbia participated in **TIMSS** assessment in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019 and Serbian students achieved results above TIMSS average in both mathematics and science (Table 3).

Table 3. TIMSS results in 2011, 2015 and 2019.

4 th -grade students	Mathematic Results	Science Results
TIMSS 2011 – Serbia	516	516
TIMSS 2011 – TIMSS average	500	500
TIMSS 2015 – Serbia	518	525
TIMSS 2015 – TIMSS average	500	500
TIMSS 2019 – Serbia	508	517
TIMSS 2019 – TIMSS average	500	500

Source: *Researching education, improving learning (IEA), TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Centre*

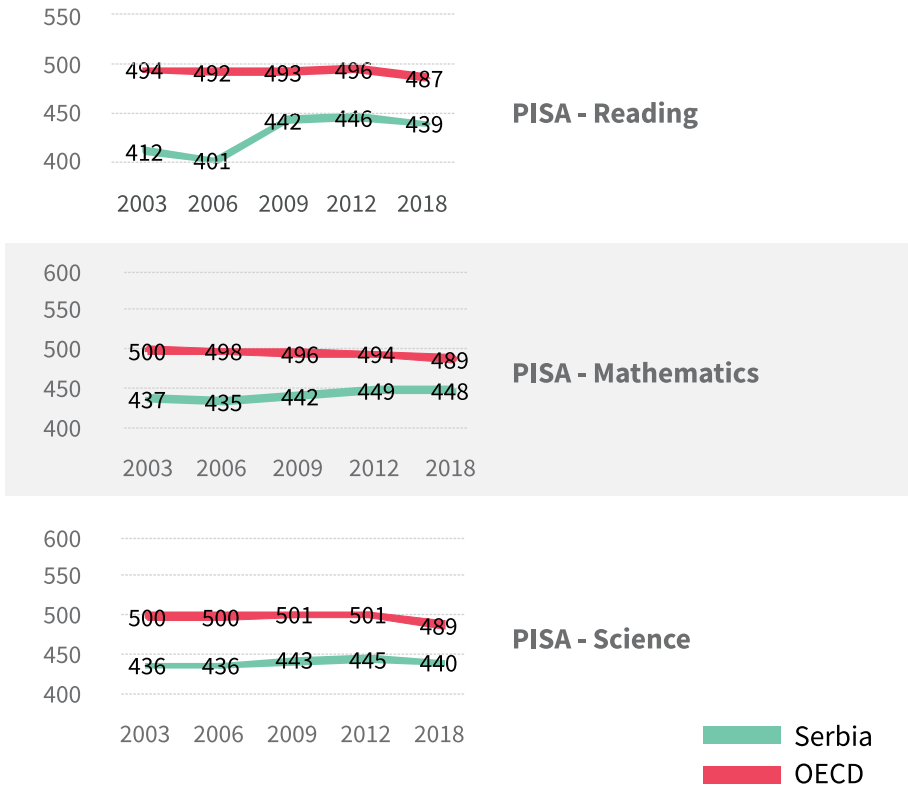
Secondary analysis of TIMSS 2015 results showed that very strong effects on students' achievements have socio-economic status (17.40%), beliefs about mathematics (positive attitude towards mathematics and mathematical self-concept, 13%) and early learning (length of preschool attendance and language and numerical skills acquired before enrolment in primary school, 12.50%). Effects of school and teaching factors are very weak.²³

23 Jaksic, I. (2015). Faktori postignuća učenika iz Srbije u oblastima matematike u istraživanju TIMSS 2015. U TIMSS 2015: rezultati i implikacije, Institut za pedagoška istraživanja, Beograd: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/TIMSS-2015-knjiga-rezimea-sa-Konferencije.pdf>



Serbia has participated in **PISA** assessment since 2003, and continued participation in 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2018. According to the latest results, the average student’s achievement on the scale of mathematics literacy is 448 points, on the scale of reading literacy 439, and on the scale of science literacy 440 points. The average achievement of participating OECD countries is about 500 points. Trends in performance in reading, mathematics and science are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Trends in performance in reading, mathematics and science in PISA



Source: OECD

Based on the results, it can be concluded that every third student in Serbia does not reach the basic level of literacy (38% on the scale of reading literacy, 40% math, and 38% science).

When it comes to learning outcomes, students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Serbia performed around two years behind their peers from wealthier families (73 score point difference) in the reading domain of PISA 2018. However, 13,2% of students in Serbia from disadvantaged backgrounds are considered “resilient” (able to beat

the odds and achieve high-performance levels in PISA), compared to the OECD average (11,3%)²⁴.

In Serbia, socio-economic status (**SES**) explains the 8% variation in reading scores and 9% variation in math and science scores. It means the Serbian education system has higher equity than OECD average which is 12% for reading, 14% for math and 13% for science.

Serbia has a higher between-school variance of achievements (40%)²⁵ in comparison to the OECD average (29%). More specifically, it means that there is the influence of SES to school selection – low SES students more often attend VET schools than general schools²⁶ which is connected with the fact that VET track is preparing students to gain their first occupational qualification and entrance the labour market faster rather than to continue education²⁷.

Also, between-school variance in SES dramatically increased from PISA 2003 and there is a kind of mild school segregation that reflects inequities in education caused by SES²⁸, and there is the expectancy that one of eight high-achieving but low SES students will not complete tertiary education (comparing to one of 50 high-achieving and high SES students).

More than 80% of students from 3-year VET profiles (programmes) do not reach the basic level of literacy. Their achievements in PISA 2018 are lower by 140 points compared to students from gymnasiums (general secondary education).

Serbia participates in **Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 (MICS 6)**²⁹ which is designed to provide statistical data on key social

24 OECD (2019), PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed, OECD Publishing. Paris: <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>.

25 Videnović, M. Čaprić, G. (2020). PISA 2018, Report for the Republic of Serbia: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PISA-2018-IZVE%C5%A0TAJ.pdf>

26 Bearing in mind the structure of the Serbian education system, most of 15 years old students are already enrolled in secondary education which enables this analysis.

27 In Serbian education system, mostly 15 years old students are enrolled in secondary school.

28 Radišić, J. Baucal, A. & Jovanović, V. Contribution of SES to Student Achievement at PISA: 2003-2012, ECER 2015, Budapest, Hungary, 7-11.9.2015; Lazarević, Lj. Orlić, A. (2018). PISA 2012 mathematics literacy in Serbia: A multilevel analysis of students and schools, Psihologija, 51(4).

29 UNICEF (2020). Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/16076/file/MICS%206%20Multiple%20Indicator%20Cluster%20Survey.pdf>



indicators for most vulnerable participants of the population: women, children, vulnerable groups. Selected results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. MICS results for selected indicators presented per wealth index quintile

Wealth index quintile ³⁰	Poorest	Second	Middle	Fourth	Richest
Percentage of children aged 2–4 years with whom adult household members are engaged in activities (4 or more) that promote learning and school readiness during the last three days.	92,8%	95,4%	93,7%	96,8%	97,5%
Percentage of children aged 2–4 years with whom adult household members engaged in activities that promote learning and school readiness during the last three days. <u>Roma Settlements.</u>	54,9%	50,9%	59,2%	55,1%	61,9%
Percentage of children under age 5 by the number of children’s books present in the household. Three or more children’s books.	47,6%	79%	80,2%	83,8%	89,9%
Percentage of children under age 5 by the number of children’s books present in the household in <u>Roma Settlement.</u> Three or more children’s books.	3,8%	3%	6,5%	14,1%	17,9%
Percentage of children aged 7–14 years with 3 or more books to read.	57,2%	84,2%	84,9%	92,6%	97,6%
Percentage of children aged 7–14 years with 3 or more books to read. <u>Roma Settlement</u>	5,9%	6,5%	17,4%	14,4%	24,6%
Percentage of children aged 15–17 years involved in Economic activity less than 43 hours during the previous week.	47,5%	45,9%	26%	20,7%	20,8%
Percentage of children aged 12–14 years involved in Economic activity for 14 hours or more during the previous week.	10,1%	5,5%	0%	0%	3,4%
Percentage of young women aged 15–19 years currently married or in union.	12,7%	4,4%	2,3%	0%	0%
Percentage of young women aged 15–19 years currently married or in union, <u>Roma Settlements.</u>	40,7%	37%	29,7%	29,6%	30,8%

Source: UNICEF, Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019

30 The wealth index quintiles divide the whole population into five equally large groups, based on their wealth rank.



It is, also, important to mention that MICS 6 results show that 60,6% of children aged 36–59 months are attending pre-school education, among them only 10,5% from the poorest families. At the same time, only 7,4% of children from the same age group from Roma settlements and only 3,3% of the children from the poorest population groups attend early childhood education (i.e. pre-school programmes)³¹.

MICS 6 results show that 97,2% of children of primary school age attend primary or lower secondary school (adjusted net attendance ratio), while 0,6% is out of school.³²

In 2019, based on the Household Budget Survey, the largest share of the individual consumption expenditures relates to expenditures for food and non-alcoholic beverages, 34,2%, while individual consumption in all households for education in 2019 was 943 RS (8 EUR) (1,4%). Individual consumption in urban areas for education is 1064 RSD (9 EUR) (1,5%) and in other areas 746 RSD (6,3 EUR) (1,2%).

Source: Statistical release. Household Budget Survey³³

Main obstacles for low SES students

Review of different existing studies and analysis³⁴ as well as a review of answers of the participants in the focus group and interviews, allowed division of the main obstacles to those relating to different levels of education, but also whether they affect students' access or participation.

Access to preschool services is very challenging for the lowest SES families mainly because refunding of costs that comes from the local self-government (LSG) level, is not nearly enough for the poorest. Namely, LSGs refund up to 80% of costs of pre-school attendance while parents need to cover the remaining amount which is still a

31 UNICEF (2020). Serbia Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 and Serbia Roma Settlements Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/16076/file/MICS%206%20Multiple%20Indicator%20Cluster%20Survey.pdf>

32 Ibid.

33 SORS (2020). Household Budget Survey. Statistical Release. Number 080. Year LXX, 31/03/2020: <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/PdfE/G20201080.pdf>

34 E.g. Social Inclusion, Poverty Reduction Unit and UNICEF (2014). Providing Additional Support to Students from Vulnerable Groups in Pre-University Education: <http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/en/policy-impact-analysis-providing-additional-support-to-students-from-vulnerable-groups-in-pre-university-education/>





significant amount for low SES families. Also, in some deprived regions, the network of pre-school institutions is not in accordance with the needs thus many children are left without a place in pre-school institutions.

Access to primary education is not secured for all the children since there are children still ‘invisible’ to the system that don’t get enrolled. LSGs lack outreach measures and during the focus group and interviews participants specifically pointed out that there is lack of financial resources at the local level for activities related to support to the low SES students (e.g. to implement Inter-sectoral committees’ recommendations related to securing personal assistants, assistive technology, to finance transportation). There is no targeted budgeting in accordance with the needs of the inhabitants of that community. Also, lower SES families have problems in information access and often do not know anything about their rights or options for some benefits or they are not educated enough to go through the process. They also find that “*LSG staff capacity and expertise for support to low SES students and their families is insufficient*”. Additionally, there are no scholarships for low SES primary school students.

Access to secondary school is even less equitable since many benefits available for primary education at a local and national level for low SES students (e.g. transportations, textbooks etc.) are not available for those in secondary schools³⁵ and career guidance and counselling services are not adjusted to students from marginalised groups. Also, there is a bottleneck in the network of student dormitories and lack of financial resources for transportation if students want to enrol to a secondary school in LSG outside of their place of residence.

It is worth mentioning positive examples of enhancing access to secondary education, such as affirmative action measures focused on the students from vulnerable groups. Precisely, according to the **Rulebook on the criteria and procedure for enrolment of pupils**³⁶

35 According to amendments of the Law on Foundations of Education System, article 189 „The budget of the local self-government may provide funds for the transportation of secondary school students and students attending dual education classes who reside on the territory of the local self-government at a distance of more than four kilometres from the school, i.e. from the employer’s premises, as well as in cases when the school, i.e. the premises of the employer are at the territory of another local self-government.

36 Rulebook on the criteria and procedure for enrolment of pupils: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-o-upisu-ucenika-u-srednju-skolu.html>

Roma students might enrol secondary school under more favourable conditions in order to achieve full equality. More specifically, the number of points Roma students achieve based on their results from previous level of education and based on the final exam should be increased by 30% of the number of points that they miss up to 100 points maximum. For pupils living in families using financial social assistance, the number of points earned based on school and final exams is increased by 35% of the number of points that they miss up to 100 points.

Participation of low SES students is a great challenge at all levels of education since many of low SES students take part in different activities necessary for the survival of their families. This situation negatively affects their participation – e.g. some of them have a job that secures additional money, they take care of siblings when parents are engaged in multiple jobs, work migrations, etc. At the school level, usually, teachers are not sensitised enough to recognise all the drop-out risk factors which makes identification of students at risk of leaving school very difficult and even if such students are identified teachers do not know how to properly react if the student is under the risk of dropping out. Another important barrier for students' participation is lack of coordination mechanisms for needs assessment of schools and their students at the local level. Also, when it comes to VET schools, there is an annual mandatory health examination which is costly for low SES students. Parents' participation in school life is very low, and interviewed parents noticed that *“schools do not recognise and they don't use parents as a resource of support to students.”*

For low SES students participation in extracurricular activities is also challenging since some are costly for their families like trips or cultural visits.

Although the Law on Foundations of Education System (LoFES) prescribes that future teachers need to be acquainted with the psychological, pedagogical and methodical disciplines acquired during higher education or after graduation (it needs to be at least 30 points (ECTS), at least 6 for each mentioned discipline and at least 6 for school practice), teachers' initial education is still not completely adequate since teachers are being educated to be experts in disciplines while topics related to inclusion in education and work with students' from vulnerable groups are pretty much neglected.





Low SES students through COVID-19 prism

During COVID-19, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD) organised distance learning. Distance learning was implemented through broadcasting lessons on national TV channel, online learning platforms, other digital tools (including Viber and social networks) and in alternative ways, such as sending printed materials to students who do not have opportunity to attend/follow lessons online and on TV.

Lack of internet connection, digital tools and absence of parents' support were the main obstacles for students in the process of distance learning, both in primary and secondary schools.

According to UNICEF research data, 17% of Roma children who need additional support in education were not included in distance learning, as well as 4% of students with disabilities and 6% of students from other vulnerable groups in primary education. In secondary education 9% of Roma children were not included in distance learning, as well as 3% of students with disabilities and 33% of students from other vulnerable groups.

The reasons why students from vulnerable groups (e.g. low SES students, non-Roma students and students who need additional support) in primary schools did not participate in online distance learning:

- ▶ About 42% do not have Internet connection,
- ▶ About 29% do not have appropriate ICT equipment,
- ▶ About 22% do not have parents' support,

while 12,1% of students from vulnerable groups (e.g. low SES students) were included in alternative ways of distance learning (e.g. working with paper materials delivered at home) and 6% of students did not participate in teaching.

The reasons why students from vulnerable groups (e.g. low SES students, non-Roma students and students who need additional support) in secondary schools are not participating in online distance learning:

- ▶ About 38% do not have Internet connection,
- ▶ About 31% do not have appropriate ICT equipment,
- ▶ About 24% do not have parents' support,

while 7,3% of students from vulnerable groups (e.g. low SES students) were included in an alternative way of teaching and 33% did not participate in teaching.

*Source: Monitoring participation and learning process of students from vulnerable groups during distance learning – First Report based on research findings*³⁷

37 Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, Institute of Psychology and UNICEF (2020). Monitoring participation and learning process of students from vulnerable groups during distance learning – First Report based on research findings: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/4.b-Prvi-izve%C5%A1taj-osestljive-grupe-u%C4%8Denje-na-daljinu.pdf>

3. Description of the existing policy measures aimed at reducing inequity

Education

The education system in Serbia is regulated by **The Law on Foundations of Education System (LoFES)**³⁸ and by a set of laws and bylaws which cover preschool, primary, secondary and higher education. Compulsory education in Serbia lasts nine years (mandatory preschool preparatory programme and 8 years of primary education). At the moment secondary education is not mandatory, but policy makers are considering to make it mandatory. Also, in order to secure equity in education the LoFES (Article 5) prescribed that the education in Serbia is carried out in Serbian language and Cyrillic script, but that the education process for the national minorities students is to be conducted in their mother tongue or bilingually. Therefore, in Serbia education can be carried out in Serbian, Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak and Croatian languages. Students who attend education in the language of the national minority have the Serbian language as non-mother tongue language as a mandatory subject. All the students that attend education in Serbian, can attend elective subjects called Mother tongue language with elements of national culture. This elective subject exists for the following languages of national minorities: Bosnian, Bunjevac dialect, Hungarian, Macedonian, German, Roma, Romanian, Ruthenian, Slovak, Slovenian, Croatian, Ukrainian, Vlach and Czech.

There are several policies proved to be efficient at the national level. One of them is the introduction of **pedagogical assistants**

38 The Law on Foundations of Education System: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_osnovama_sistema_obrazovanja_i_vaspitanja.html





in the education system. They were initially Roma mediators, assigned to schools with a high percentage of Roma students, but now they work with other students that need additional educational support as well. They support teachers, pre-primary teachers and psychologists/pedagogues in deciding on proper support measures for students and providing them. The work of pedagogical assistants is financed from the budget of the Republic of Serbia and from the budget of local self-governments. In the 2019/20 school year, the total of 261 pedagogical assistants were engaged, 221 in primary schools and 40 in preschool institutions³⁹. The work of pedagogical assistants contributed to the increase in the coverage of Roma children in the education system⁴⁰.

In the field of **early childhood education and care (ECEC)**, some LSGs (e.g. the City of Belgrade) provide ECEC programs free of charge for children from families who are beneficiaries of material assistance, children with disabilities that were not entitled to the right to child allowance and who have not been enrolled in a special education group, children without parental care and without children allowance, children of refugees and temporarily displaced persons with unemployed parents and children beneficiaries of the safe house. Also, single parents are entitled to a 50% reduced price of the ECEC, while the users of services whose child has certain diseases have the right to an additional reduction of 10%.

The Rulebook on Student Loans and Scholarships⁴¹ was amended at the end of 2017, and the Ministry now allocates 10% of the total number of student loans and scholarships as well as 10% of places in dormitories for pupils and students from vulnerable social groups

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- 39 MoESTD (2020). Report on realisation of the action plan for the implementation of the Strategy for the development of education in Serbia until 2020. Reporting period: January 2019 to July 2020: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Report-on-the-Realization-of-the-Action-Plan-for-the-Implementation-of-the-Strategy-for-the-Development-of-Education-in-Serbia-Until-2020-for-2019..pdf>
 - 40 Bibija (2014). Monitoring public policies: the effects of the Roma Decade on position of Roma women in the Republic of Serbia: http://www.bibija.org.rs/images/publikacije/Prelom_BOS.pdf and Council for implementation of the Action plan for chapter 23 (2017). Report 1/2017 on implementation of the Action plan for chapter 23: <https://www.mpravde.gov.rs/files/Report%20no%20%201-2017%20on%20implementation%20of%20Action%20plan%20for%20Chapter%2023%201.pdf>
 - 41 Rulebook on Student Loans and Scholarships: <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SlGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/ministarstva/pravilnik/2019/36/2/reg>

(materially endangered families, children without parental care, single-parent families, Roma national minority, persons with disabilities, persons with chronic diseases, persons whose parents disappeared or were abducted on the territory of Kosovo and Metohija and the territory of the republics of the former Yugoslavia, refugees and displaced persons, returnees under the readmission agreement and deported pupils and students, etc.). Also, there are some milder criteria for scholarships for some groups of secondary schools (e.g. Roma students) where excellent academic achievement is not the main criteria, i.e. it is important that these are low SES students. It is noticeable that a continuously higher number of scholarships are granted to girls (always over 60%). Bearing in mind that the participation of Roma girls in secondary education is significantly less than of Roma boys, granting more scholarships to girl students supports their inclusion in secondary education and reduces the existing gender gap⁴².

Procurement of textbooks funded from the national budget continues, thus in the school year 2018/2019 free textbooks were procured for about 16% of primary education students in Serbia (around 830.000 textbooks). The right to free textbooks is granted to students from families with very low SES (beneficiaries of financial social assistance); students with developmental difficulties and disabilities (including those who need customised textbooks, e.g. large-print, Braille, electronic form, etc.); primary school students who are third child or every next child in a family.

Full-time teachers work 40 hours per week and along with other activities their work includes **remedial teaching** that is organised per subject and per grade. For students with learning difficulties or gifted students, teachers need to produce individual educational plan (IEP): IEP1 (adapted programme of teaching and learning that contains an adaptation of environment, teaching methods, teaching and working materials, schedule, etc.), IEP2 (a modified programme of teaching and learning that includes all the same as IEP1 adaptation plus modification of learning outcomes for one or more subjects)

42 MoESTD (2019). Annual Progress Report on the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Strategy for Education Development in Serbia by 2020 for 2018: <http://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Progress-Report-on-The-Action-Plan-for-the-Implementation-of-The-Strategy-for-Education-Development-in-Serbia-by-2020-for-2018.pdf>





and IEP3 for gifted students (enriched and extended programme of teaching and learning)⁴³.

When it comes to measures on local and school level, the main challenge is how to prioritize activities with limited financial resources, so education-related activities and resources dedicated for their implementation usually stay low on local agendas. It is particularly challenging to secure funds for educational activities at the secondary education level since secondary education is yet to become mandatory. Also, inter-sectoral cooperation between education and social welfare systems in the implementation of pro-poor policies and actions is very weak – social welfare centres are often understaffed, structures for pro-poor measures are fragmented, responsibilities are not clear, etc. This diminishes possible positive effects of measures and prevents informed planning of local and institutional budgets. It also interferes with efficient identification and targeting of beneficiaries.⁴⁴ In cases when local assistance is provided, it mostly includes meals (snacks), clothing and footwear (even participants in the focus group and interviews underlined that this is usually done in collaboration with Red Cross and as a way of additional support to school-level initiatives), transportation, textbooks and school supplies, scholarships and subsidised accommodation in dormitories for low SES secondary school students.

As for the monitoring and evaluation in the field of inclusive education, a comprehensive monitoring framework for inclusive education⁴⁵ was developed a few years ago, but it has not been officially integrated into the national monitoring system. Also, there is a lack of a national assessment of student learning other than the final exam at the end of primary education, while **education management in-**

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- 43 Rulebook on closer instructions for defining rights on individual education plan, its implementation and evaluation: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-blizim-uputstvima-utvrđivanje-prava-individualni-obrazovni-plan.html>
 - 44 SIPRU and UNICEF (2014). Policy impact analysis: Providing additional support to students from vulnerable groups in pre-university education: http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Annex-4_POLICY-IMPACT-ANALYSIS-Providing-Additional-Support-to-Students-from-Vulnerable-Groups-in-Pre-University-Education.pdf
 - 45 SIPRU and UNICEF (2014). Monitoring Framework for Inclusive Education in Serbia: <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/media/7006/file/Monitoring%20framework%20for%20inclusive%20education%20in%20Serbia.pdf>

formation system (EMIS) is yet to be fully developed. In practical terms, it means that the education system in Serbia lacks data to be used for evidence-based education reforms and to create measures that will lead to inclusive education improvement. Focus group and interview participants confirmed this as an issue since they stated that *“establishment of EMIS needs to be finalized quickly, because without it there is no evidence-based policy as well as monitoring”* and that *“without mechanisms to monitor the effects of support measures, the system is not able to provide adequate and targeted support to those that need it”*.

Health system

Health services in Serbia are available to the entire population and are regulated by the Law on Health Care, the Law on Health Insurance, and the Law on Public Health. Regulation in the field of health-care recognises children, students, unemployed youth in education system up to 26 years of age as the vulnerable population who need to have complete health protection and have right to the free of charge health services.

Also, free health services are available for beneficiaries of family disability allowance; unemployed persons whose monthly income is below the income determined by the Law on Health Insurance⁴⁶; victims of domestic violence; victims of human trafficking; victims of terrorism; veterans. The fact that Serbia maintains a wide network of health care institutions and approach to health care from the period of old Yugoslavia has a positive effect on equity in society despite the increasing economic disparities.

Improving Roma men and women health and better access to health care for them are listed as one of the goals of the Strategy of Social Inclusion of Roma for the period from 2016 to 2025.

Some measures in the education field require close cooperation with health services on the local level.

46 Law on health insurance: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_zdravstvenom_osiguranju.html





Based on the **Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support to Children, Students and Adults**⁴⁷, local self-governments shall establish and provide conditions for the work of the inter-sectoral committees. Inter-sectoral committee permanent members are representatives of three systems: **health**-paediatrician, **education**-school psychologist and **social protection**-professional associate in social work. The main role of the inter-sectoral committee is to assess a child's needs for additional support. Reasons for additional support might be social deprivation, learning and/or development difficulties, etc. Inter-sectoral committee members define a deadline for reporting on the implementation of the proposed support measures by the competent institutions and services.

The health commission is a body with an important role for enrolment in secondary VET since it provides opinion if students fulfil requirements needed for the occupation in case. The commission is composed of a paediatrician and an occupational medicine specialist. Their opinion is submitted to the district enrolment commission, together with the complete documentation of the candidate. The district commission, based on the opinion of the health commission, issues an instruction for enrolment of candidates in the appropriate educational profile in secondary VET. However, some VET profiles require annual health/sanitary checks (e.g. VET profiles in the field of food processing etc.) which should be paid by students.

According to the Rulebook on medical-technical aids/tools provided from health insurance⁴⁸ children in the education system are entitled to get free medical-technical aids (glasses, hearing aid etc.).

There is also a mandatory health check for students on all educational levels every two years.

Some participants in focus group and interviews believe that primary health centres should be *“the first key point where parents with low SES could receive information about early child development and available support measures”*. Primary health centres could also be the focal point for early identification of all children who need sup-

47 Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support to Children, Students and Adults: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/pravilnik-dodatnoj-obrazovnoj-zdravstvenoj-socijalnoj-podrsci.html>

48 Rulebook on medical-technical aids/tools provided from health insurance: https://www.rfzo.rs/download/pravilnici/pomagala/Preciscen_tekst-pravilnik_pomagala-24032017.pdf

port. Some participants think it would be good to connect health and education system on the local level.

Social care and welfare

The state pro-poor policies (to be provided by local or national level) are regulated by the following legislation: **The Law on Social Welfare**⁴⁹, **the Law on Red Cross**⁵⁰ and **the Law on Financial Support to Families with Children**⁵¹. The latter has the closest link to education since it regulates state support measures related to pre-school attendance benefit for the children without parental care, pre-school attendance benefit for children with disabilities, subsidies for pre-school education of children from vulnerable and low SES families provided by LSGs, maternity, parental and child allowance as well as all services of Social Welfare Centres (SWC).

The most important state measure against poverty, regulated by the **Law on Social Welfare**, is **financial social assistance**. The financial social assistance is intended for no or low-income households to secure resources for their minimum living standard.

Child allowance is not intended just as material support for basic child needs, but as support to the education of children. It is available only for financially deprived children and families (with income below the national threshold). One of the eligibility criteria for this allowance is regular school attendance for children/youth up to the age of 19 (children with disabilities up to 26)⁵². The right to child allowance lasts for a year, but the money is paid every month. The basic monthly amount for Child allowance in July 2020 was around 25 EUR.

Social care services within the mandate of local self-governments for children are day care, home care, personal child attendant (for

49 The Law on Social Welfare: https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_socijalnoj_zastiti.html

50 Law on Red Cross: <https://civilnodrustvo.gov.rs/upload/documents/zakoni/Zakon-o-Crvenom-krstu-Srbije.pdf>

51 Law on Financial Support to Families with Children: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon-o-finansijskoj-podrsци-porodici-sa-decom.html>

52 Other eligibility criteria are – Serbian citizenship or permanent residence; parent does not own additional real estate, in the country and abroad, except for the one in which the family lives; it is received for a maximum of four children; if the total monthly income of the family in the previous three months does not exceed 79 EUR per family member.



children with disabilities), drop-in centre (for street children, i.e. children living and working in the street), placement in a shelter⁵³.

Persons or families who are in a difficult financial situation have the right to **one-time assistance**. Social welfare centres are in charge to decide the allocation of one-time financial assistance while in kind (food, medicine, heating, footwear, clothing, etc.) support depends on the decisions of LSGs. Practical implementation of all the aforementioned activities/measures highly depends on cooperation between SWC and LSG representatives.

The Red Cross provides humanitarian and social assistance to the most vulnerable groups of the population and conducts preventive action, solidarity action and training of individuals for civil protection and many other humanitarian activities.



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53 SIPRU (2020). Mapping social care services and material support within the mandate of LSG in RS: http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Mapping_social_care_services_and_material_support_within_the_mandate_of_LSG_in_RS.pdf

4. Changes in the last years that affected equity in education

Summary of main reform initiatives that help promote equity

In the past 10 years, Serbia has undertaken extensive reforms in the education system intending to improve equity, quality and efficiency of education.

Namely, in 2009, the **Law on Foundations of Education System (LoFES)** provided the legal framework for inclusive education by introducing easier enrolment procedures to schools, affirmative actions for those from vulnerable groups, and defined additional support for all the students that might need it. In the context of the law, inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all children, youth, and adults through increased participation in learning and reducing and eliminating exclusion within and from education⁵⁴.

Quality of teaching in diverse classrooms was improved through training of more than 30.000 teaching staff in two phases of training programmes. The first phase, 2009–2013 training programmes were aimed at increasing knowledge of individuals and educational institutions about inclusion, as well as acquiring and developing professional skills to work in a diverse classroom which includes children with disabilities. The second phase, 2013–2019, was focused on differentiation, classroom management; novelties in teaching strategies and support to students. In all schools in Serbia mandatory teams for Inclusive Education are established (teachers, psycholo-

54 Source: <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary/filt=all/id=449>





gists, and pedagogues) and Individual Education Plans are introduced as teachers’ instruments for individualisation and facilitation of support to be provided⁵⁵.

Also, as mentioned, **pedagogical assistants (PAs)** are introduced in all the schools that need that type of support and PAs are mainly in charge of securing the participation of Roma pupils in the education process and establishing cooperation between school staff and Roma parents.

Affirmative actions for enrolment of Roma students in secondary schools are legally completely regulated since 2017 and their application has produced good results –number of Roma students at the level of secondary education is increasing every year.

The LoFES was amended in 2013, and since then schools are obliged to incorporate actions related to drop-out prevention and intervention plans into their development plans. There is an Early Warning and Intervention System (EWIS) for students at risk of dropping out together with different resources available to schools (guidebooks, etc.) and training accredited by the MoESTD which is a valuable, free of charge source for all the schools in combating drop-out.

Monitoring the quality of inclusive education forms an integral part of the overall quality assurance policy of the educational institutions, therefore, monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning process as well as support to students is part of the regular external evaluation implemented by the MoESTD’s Regional School Administration pedagogical advisors and the Institute for Evaluation of the Education Quality representatives.

Also, a lot of **donor projects** dedicated to inclusive education, poverty reduction and increasing equity in education have been implemented. These include⁵⁶:

“Delivery of Improved Local Services (DILS)” funded by the World Bank and implemented in the period from 2009 to 2013. The project

55 UNECE (2019). Sustainable Development Goals 4: Quality Inclusive Education in Serbia: https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/RCM_Website/SDG_4-1_Serbia.pdf

56 SIPRU and UNICEF (2014). Policy impact analysis: Providing additional support to students from vulnerable groups in pre-university education: http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Annex-4_POLICY-IMPACT-ANALYSIS-Providing-Additional-Support-to-Students-from-Vulnerable-Groups-in-Pre-University-Education.pdf

was implemented by three sectors. Ministry in charge of education, Ministry in charge of health and Ministry in charge of social policy and labour. The main goal was to increase the capacity of institutional actors in order to improve access to and the efficiency, equity, and quality of local service delivery. One component was dedicated to Roma inclusion and improved assistance for them in all three sectors. Regarding education, the main activities were related to increasing coverage of vulnerable groups and Roma in the education system through grants for schools, training seminars for schools, teachers, inter-sectoral committee, professional assistance, and improvement of social inclusion of Roma through municipal grants.

“Improvement of preschool education in Serbia (IMPRES project)” funded by the EU through IPA 2009 funds and implemented between 2011 and 2014. Main activities included the development of a toolkit for LSGs to systematically organize pre-school networks, to optimize pre-school capacities and increase access for vulnerable groups, improving the quality of pre-school programmes.

“Combating early school leaving”, founded by UNICEF in Serbia and implemented from 2014 to 2016. The project aimed to contribute to decreasing dropout and early school leaving of children and adolescents through the establishment and enforcement of mechanisms for early identification of children at risk of dropping out, responding to this and through the implementation of efficient prevention measures and interventions at the school level.

“Establishing foundation for integrative approach to combating school dropout from the education system of the Republic of Serbia”, funded by UNICEF in Serbia, implemented from 2017 to 2018. The project contributed to an integrative approach focused on improved cooperation between two sectors – education and social protection and strengthening their capacities in preventing the drop out from the education system in primary and secondary schools. Within this project, the plan for integrating measures of these two systems was developed for students who were identified as being at risk of dropout.

Ongoing project “Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)” (2017–2021) funded from the loan of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (in the total amount of EUR 47 million). The overall goal of the Project is to improve the acces-



sibility, quality, and fairness of preschool education, especially for children coming from vulnerable social groups. It has been planned, *inter alia*, to provide around 17.000 new places for children aged 3 to 5.5 years in new, renovated, or predesignated facilities in at least 30 cities and municipalities in the Republic of Serbia.

Bearing in mind all the aforementioned, it was important to check how civil society organisations and representatives of research and academic institutions see policy making, did they participate or have an opportunity to provide feedback on draft versions of laws, strategy, bylaws, as well as to hear their opinion about the participation of different stakeholders in this process. The following quotes best describe the general opinion of participants: *“Creating educational policies is somewhat participatory because there is opportunity to comment text and give some suggestions. But the question is who participates. Who is representing people with low SES?”* and *“Legal framework is not developed with evidence in mind so it often happens that the measures do not work in practice and then authorities have to change them. This is time-consuming and inefficient.”*



5. Key conclusions and recommendations

After years of reforms and strong donor support, the impact of SES on equity and school achievements is still visible in Serbia. Although the legal framework is well established, obstacles in implementation remain. In the following paragraphs, the most significant issues that still exist are systematised, including recommendations on how to address them and indicators to be used in the assessment if the issue is to be resolved.

Key issue no. 1: Poverty and low SES of students are addressed in education legislation, however, the support provided to these students (especially on the local level) is still vague. There is, also, an overlap in jurisdictions between education and social welfare systems. Some important issues like securing clothes, food, school supplies etc. are left to schools or local communities to provide, and they often do not have enough resources. Social welfare system provides financial aid but except for child's allowance, it is not connected to educational needs. Also, support measures recommended by inter-sectoral committees often cannot be implemented since there are no resources available at the local level. Red Cross and other organizations with project activities fill the systemic gaps, but this is not sufficient and universally available.

Recommendation: Legislation should be further improved in the parts that regulate responsibilities between education and social welfare systems as well as responsibilities of the central and local level. Also, an annual data collection on SES of students, as well as coherent planning between local and national level on how to ensure financial and material support to students should be done. Local action plans should be developed particularly targeting educational and material needs of low SES students, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities of local institutions and organisations.





Local action plans for financial and non-financial support to these students should be developed in close cooperation with schools, local self-governments, social welfare centres, inter-sectoral committees and local non-governmental organisations.

Success indicators: Local tailor-made action plan to support low SES students and provision of financial resources for the implementation of the activities planned by the action plan.

Key issue no. 2: Inclusive education encouraged schools and teachers to use different methods to satisfy student needs, but the general context has not changed. Financing is still insensitive to differences between and within schools, and school professional associates are not present in every school full time in order to support teachers and students.

Recommendation: There is a need for systemic and long-term support to schools to create equity context for all students, thus policy makers should secure continuum in strategic planning. Also, such support needs to include particular support to professional associates that work in schools which have more than the average number of students from low SES families and the development of horizontal connection and peer learning between schools.

Success indicators: Publicly presented and widely accepted long-term strategy for support of equity in education independent from political changes. Financial and non-financial support for schools according to their needs and the number of students from low SES.

Key issue no. 3: Low SES families are often not familiar with measures in the field of social welfare, especially child allowance, pre-school attendance benefits, financial social assistance, educational and non-educational support and they do not know their rights and opportunities for help.

Recommendation: Development of communication strategy and action plan on a local level with the main objectives to inform low SES families about their rights, procedures and how to exercise their rights. This information should be understandable and approachable for target groups. The second objective of this strategy should be to improve cooperation and communication between education, health and social welfare systems on the national and local level, the key points for the dissemination of information.

Success indicators: Communication strategy for improvement of communication with low SES families is developed and local institutions, organisations within the education, health, social welfare systems provide understandable and approachable information for the target group.

Key issue no. 4: Low SES severely impacts students' achievement and participation. SES has a cumulative effect on education, so these students rather choose VET profile than gymnasium or they enrol in non-attractive VET profiles without perspective on the labour market but approachable to them. All of these examples prevent students from breaking the chain of poverty.

Recommendation: Support for low SES students during education in improving their learning skills, self-efficiency, self-confidence, motivation and help them to choose the best secondary school according to their preferences and talents.

Success indicators: Statistical data, international and national assessment research show a decrease of SES influence on students' enrolment in secondary schools.

Key issue no. 5: Absence of functional education management information systems (EMIS) in education with valid statistical data linked with other information systems (social issues, employment etc.).

Recommendation: Establish EMIS as soon as possible and link it to the other information systems and improve the capacities of the MoESTD, schools, regional school administrations to use EMIS, collect data about SES and indicators which assess support provided to low SES students. Also, ensure that segregated data are publicly available.

Success indicators: Established and functional EMIS which contains data about students' SES.

Key issue no. 6: There is room for improvement of the use of data collected during schools' external evaluation and self-evaluation in the way to be used for real improvement of school work rather than for a formal purpose. Some data show the gap between external evaluation results and school self-evaluation results, which indicate that schools are not objective when they conduct a self-evaluation process.

Recommendation: School staff should be equipped with competencies to self-evaluate their work, to conduct action research and



other methods which will provide data that could be used for the improvement of their work and support to students. Also, data collected during external evaluation and self-evaluation should be used more effectively as guidelines for schools' improvement.

Success indicators: School staff use research, action research and methods to improve their work and support to students and parents with low SES. The recommendations received after external evaluation are reflected in school planning documents and in activities the school is implementing.

Key issue no. 7: Low value of education in low SES families.

Recommendation: Strengthening parents' engagement in school life and involving them in school decision making. Strengthening parents' councils through training events to have a more active role in school as well as engage parents of low SES students. Support parents with uncompleted primary education to finish it.

Success indicators: Parents with low SES are active participants in school parents' bodies. Number of parents with low SES who finished at least primary education increased.

Key issue no. 8: Initial teacher education does not equip the future teacher with competencies for work with diverse groups of students including working with students from vulnerable groups.

Recommendation: Initial teacher education should be improved and it should include revised syllabus (more content related to inclusive education) with more hours of practice in schools with an adequate mentoring system as well as more methodical, didactical, pedagogical and psychological subjects.

Success indicators: Updated syllabus for initial teacher education. Assurance of mentoring programme for teachers working in schools for the first time.

Key issue no. 9. Influence of COVID-19 pandemic on equity in education and lack of digital tools and digital competences of students for education.

Recommendation: Online learning is a great challenge for low SES students if they do not have digital tools and technical infrastructure, thus schools, in cooperation with LSGs, should provide space



with a good internet connection and ICT devices for students who do not have digital tools and space for learning. Also, schools should improve peer support in distance learning and engagement of pedagogical assistants.

Success indicators: Students with low SES have digital tools and stable internet connection for education. Also, they have support from their peers and pedagogical assistants or teachers in learning.


Key issue no. 10. Sustainability of the projects' results.

Recommendation: Development of projects' activities adjusted with long-term education strategy and engagement of policy-making institutions in projects' steering committees.

Success indicators: Project products related to strategic goals implemented in the system.



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STEP BY STEP

