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УКРЕПВАНЕ НА СИСТЕМАТА
ЗА ЗАКРИЛА НА ДЕТЕТО
В БЪЛГАРИЯ

STRENGTHEN

Capacity building for social service, education
and police professionals to strengthen
the child protection system in Bulgaria

Qualitative Research Report
Sofia, 2020



WORKSHOP
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PROJECT SUMMARY

The STRENGTHEN project envisions capacity building for social service practitioners, police and the education sector (including early childhood education and care, schoolteachers, other school/early childhood education and care staff), with the aim of systemizing robust prevention, detection, identification and responses to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), with a clear focus on promoting positive and caring relationships to foster resilience. Activities: 1) Mapping of the current status of the child protection system in Bulgaria by means of qualitative research, gaps identification; 2) Development of training modules for professionals from the education sphere, social services, and police to fill in the gaps; 3) Implementation of the training on the national level, 28 trainings in regional centers, 420+ professionals trained; 4) Dissemination - production of 1 educational video; 1 international conference, involving education, social care, and violence prevention experts from at least 5 EU countries (60+ participants).

RESEARCH PROTOCOL

One of the recommendations of the Evaluator of the European Commission was to decrease the weight of the research activities in the project, because of the availability of sufficient data on the status of the Bulgarian Child Protection system. Following up on this recommendation, the Research Protocol focused on the collection of information about the training needs of professionals working in the social service units of municipalities, directly responsible for child protection, as well as educators, and law enforcement professionals. The desktop research included Monitoring Reports (2019, 2018 and 2017) of the State Agency for Child protection on the application of the Coordination Mechanism for interventions in cases of children victims of violence or at risk of violence and the interaction between the different units of the Child Protection System in such cases. It also included a report by UNICEF (2019) titled Analysis of the Child Protection System in Bulgaria. The findings from these reports were used in developing the questionnaire for the focus groups and interviews of professionals, which were the backbone of our research.

The next step in the assessment of the training needs was conducting 3 focus group discussions involving professionals from the education sphere (teachers/school principals), social workers, and law enforcement public servants to identify how the coordination mechanism for child protection really works. The focus groups were held in 3 cities of different size: in Sofia (approx. 2 million inhabitants), Stara Zagora (200 000) and Harmanli (25 000). This helped to develop a comparative perspective of the factors that influence the effectiveness of the child protection system in different settings. The total number of participants in the focus groups was 54, of which 70% were teachers, school administrators and school psychologists; 24% were social workers and other staff of the municipal social assistance units; 6% came from the local commissions for dealing with children in conflict with the law; and 2% - representatives of the regional reception center for refugees.

Additionally, in-depth interviews with key informants were conducted, including 5 experts from the regional structures of the State Agency for Child Protection, responsible for the implementation of the child protection policy at the grassroots level, and 7 experts from national-level (5) and local-level NGOs (2) working in this sphere. The present report summarizes the training needs identified by the qualitative research and the recommendations towards addressing the gaps in the child protection system formulated by the professionals.

Part A: KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED IN THE DESK RESEARCH

Based on the Report “Monitoring of the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism for interaction at work in cases of children, victims of violence, or at risk of violence, and for interaction in crisis intervention” – SACP, 2019

The desk research focused on data gathered by the State Agency for Child Protection in relation to monitoring of the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism for interaction among mandated public institutions and other stakeholders in cases of violence against children. The reason why we chose to review data only on this topic was that UNICEF published a comprehensive analysis of the child protection system in Bulgaria in October 2019 (<https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria>), and there was no need to research again the legal framework, the structure and the services provided by the system, as well as its financial aspects. The data provided by SACP in its annual monitoring report from 2019 will be used for raising awareness of the professionals who will be engaged in the capacity building activities of STRENGTHEN project. It concerns one of the most debated aspects of the child protection system in Bulgaria: the rights and obligations of the public institutions in prevention of violence against children and provision of support to the victims of violence. This aspect has become a source of conflict in the Bulgarian society in 2019, when the new National Strategy on the Child was presented for public consultation by the government. The Strategy was withdrawn because of the clash, which arose between groups united under the banner of “traditional values” and the promoters of the rights-based approach in childcare and safeguarding.

The Agreement on Cooperation and Coordination of the Work of the Territorial Structures of the Child Protection Bodies in Cases of Children, Victims of Violence or at Risk of Violence, and in Crisis Intervention was signed in 2010. Pursuant to this agreement, the child protection bodies at the national and local level are engaged in the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism for Interaction at work in cases of children, victims of violence or at risk of violence and for interaction in crisis intervention (for short called the Coordination Mechanism). The State Agency for Child Protection in partnership with The Ministry of Interior, the Social Assistance Agency and the District Administrations annually monitors the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism.

From the beginning of 2018, the SACP introduced electronic reporting of information through information cards, which are filled in online by registering on the Agency’s website. The local

structures send data which is summarized at regional level by the Regional Directorates for Social Assistance. The SACP, as an institution with a coordinating function, summarizes and analyzes the results at the national level. This organization for collecting and summarizing information, adopted from previous years, has been upgraded and at the end of 2019, the SACP has developed an electronic platform <https://sacp.kontrax.bg/> to report on the activities of the multidisciplinary teams under the Coordination Mechanism.

SACP annual reports include a descriptive analysis of the data, outline the identified problem areas, make recommendations for optimizing and improving the interaction in the work of children-victims of violence or at risk of violence. Where necessary, data comparisons with those for the previous years are made, in order to outline trends and form adequate proposals for improving the work of multidisciplinary teams at the local level.

The amendment of the national Law on Child Protection that came into force on 01.07.2020 contains a new text of Art. 36 for the “Coordination Mechanism on Violence”. It upgrades the provisions which regulated the Coordination mechanism in cases of violence against children, which was into force since 2010, with stronger emphasis of the national policies on coordination and collaboration among institutions and a cross-sectoral approach. The new text of the law underlines that a Multidisciplinary team needs to work on a case and elaborate an action plan for protection of the child and prevention of violence, whose implementation is monitored until the case is resolved. The focus is on timely intervention by the competent public bodies to assist children and their parents.

According to the results obtained by SACP in 2019¹, it is evident that at the local level there are 275 multidisciplinary teams for work on the Coordination Mechanism, which is 8 more than in 2018. The monitoring of the data on a regional basis gives information that most team meetings were held in the districts of Plovdiv (200), Blagoevgrad (123), Pazardzhik (120), Sofia District (97), Veliko Tarnovo (84), Burgas (80) and Stara Zagora (73). The tendency of the teams in Sofia-city to have relatively few team meetings is maintained, given the population and the number of teams.

¹<http://bit.ly/2OxTaox>

DISCREPANCY IN THE DATA REPORTED BY THE KEY MANDATED INSTITUTIONS

For another year, regardless of the updated software for gathering information, there is a discrepancy in the collected data on the number of team meetings. This shows that the three mandatory institutions do not keep the same statistics. The mandatory participants in the multidisciplinary team meeting under the Coordination Mechanism are a social worker from the child protection department of the municipality, the district inspector in the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Interior, and the inspector at children pedagogical room (municipal level unit responsible for prevention of child criminal activity). Additional participants in the local multidisciplinary teams under the Coordination Mechanism could be the GPs / emergency medical care, regional structures of the Ministry of Education, school principals and pedagogical staff / school psychologists, the local commission for addressing anti-social behavior of children and youth, district judge / district prosecutor, managers of residential-type services, social workers from CSOs providing services, other specialists related to specific cases. All of the aforementioned groups have a stake in child safeguarding and will be targeted by the capacity building activities of STRENGTHEN project.

The teams hold meetings on identified issues, on the initial receipt of a signal and on the follow-up of specific case work. From the presented information for 2019, it is clear that the interaction between the experts, members of the teams, is still not at a good enough level, given the discrepancy in the data. The same was noted in the previous monitoring reports, but no change has taken place. It is also common practice to organize meetings aimed at clarifying various procedural issues. The collected data from 2019 shows that the tendency from the previous years is preserved: the largest number of meetings take place at the initial receipt of a signal. With a total of 1 283 meetings at initial alert, only 226 meetings followed up on follow-up and casework. There is again a discrepancy in the reporting of data between the responsible institutions. Regarding the number of meetings held for follow-up and work on cases, the data of the Ministry of Interior show 253 team meetings, and the district administrations submit information on 198 meetings. Here again is the need to unify the methods for collecting information of the responsible institutions.

NEED TO INCREASE THE VIGILANCE OF AND REPORTING BY GPs AND TEACHERS

Analyzing the source of the signal in cases of violence against children is important for the purpose of measuring the level of awareness of the signs of violence, as well as the responsiveness of the responsible institutions. According to the data gathered in 2019, the leading source of signals is the Ministry of Interior (302), followed by parents (282), of which the mothers (197) predominantly signal, while the fathers signal almost twice less (85 pcs.). The signals from a neighbor are 29, from relatives 49, from a friend are 28, and from a stranger are 16. From the National telephone line for children 116 111 in 2019, more signals were reported, on which KM was convened - 128, with 90. in 2018. In recent years, the trend of increasing signals submitted by parents continues and that of not very active intervention by people outside the family remains.

It is noteworthy that the relative share of the signals submitted by the children's GPs remains extremely low, and even the number of signals is the same for the last two years - 31. The signals received from health facilities in 2019 (84) are less than in 2018 (107). In educational institutions, including the regional structures of the Ministry of Education, there is a slight increase compared to 2018, when the signals were 142, while in 2019 they were 158. This fact remains a concern, as doctors and teachers are people who fit into the circle of trust of children and can more easily distinguish forms of violence.

NEED TO EMPOWER CHILDREN AND RAISE AWARENESS ON THEIR RIGHTS

The signals received from the children themselves who became victims of violence are relatively few - only 76, which indicates a decrease compared to 2018, when their number was 84. The signals received from another child are only 17 for 2019. Given the total number of alerts and the percentage of alerts submitted by children victims of violence themselves, it can be assumed that children continue to feel insufficiently supported or insufficiently aware of their rights and protection options in cases of violence. It should be taken into account that some of the signals submitted by the children themselves or by other children are in fact submitted to the Police and are included in the total number as submitted by this source, which makes it difficult to accurately assess the reasons for the small number of reports from children.

LEADING TYPES OF REPORTED VIOLENCE: PHYSICAL, SEXUAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL

In the period 2016 - 2017, more than two-fifths of all submitted signals, on which the ME was collected, refer to physical violence - 41%, and the same is reported for 2018, as the percentage is 42%. This trend continues in 2019, as the percentage is again 42% or 649 signals of physical violence.

Compared to 2018, the percentage (21%) for signals of sexual violence is maintained. In 2019, 333 cases of sexual violence were reported, which is 22% of the total. However, there is a small increase in the signals for psychological violence - 24% for 2019 (365) compared to 19% for 2018. In 2019, in 14% of cases, or 219, the signals are related to neglect, as in 2018, this percentage was 18%. It is noteworthy that over the years physical violence remains the leading one, while psychological and sexual violence exchange the second and third place - in 2017 the second place was the psychological violence (28%), in 2018 the sexual violence (21%), and in 2019 again, psychological violence ranks second (24%). The share of signals related to neglect also varies - at 12% for 2017, for 2018 the data shows 18%, and for 2019 the percentage is 14%. There are also 19 signals for cyberbullying, which in percentage is a little more than 1%.

DISTRIBUTION OF VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE BY GENDER AND AGE

The distribution of children victims of violence by gender and age shows that in 2019 the most common victims of violence are children between 12 and 16 years of age, more often girls, followed by children between the ages of 8 and 11, with boys being the most common victims.

The trend is one of increase in the total number of children victims of violence over the last 4 years. The data for 2016 shows a total number of victims of violence between 12 and 16 years of age 357, for 2017 this number is 533, for 2018 it is 588, and for 2019 the number is 584. In 2016, there are 200 girls, 356 for 2017, 413 for 2018 and 421 for 2019. For boys - 157 for 2016, 177 for 2017, 175 for 2018 and 163 for 2019. In percentages during these years the victims of violence in this age group are 72% for girls against 28% for boys.

In the age group from 8 to 11 years, in 2017, the total number of children victims of violence is 230. In 2018, it is 197 children, and in 2019 this number is 245, of which respectively the boys are 126 in 2017, 94 for 2018 and 128 for 2019, and girls are 104 for 2017, 103 for 2018, and 117 for

2019. Boys are 52% and girls 48%. The next group of children are those between 4 and 7 years of age: a total of 160 children, of which 85 boys and 75 girls, respectively.

The share of children victims of violence is low between the ages of 17 and 18 - the total number is 104, of which 70 are girls and 34 are boys, and the smallest difference is between affected boys and girls in the age group up to 3- age 40 girls and 45 boys.

DISTRIBUTION OF CASES OF VIOLENCE ACCORDING TO THE PLACE OF COMMISSION

The largest number of cases of violence in 2019 (670) were cases of violence in the family, followed by other (103) – a significant number of unidentified place of commission, at school (98), among acquaintances (90), and on the street (84). The data shows a significant need of additional support to families and children at risk, as well as need of increasing the role of public institutions in the prevention of this type of violence. The second most common identified place of violence against children is the school. In response to this statistic, the STRENGTHEN project has focused on engaging teachers / school personnel as one of the key target groups whose capacity will be strengthened by the training activities.

DISTRIBUTION OF CASES OF VIOLENCE ACCORDING TO THE PERPETRATOR

According to the collected data in 2019 the leading perpetrators of violence against children are the fathers (297), followed by mothers (230), and neighbors/acquaintances (203), which confirms the findings that the family unit and the child closest circle remains the major threat for children at risk. The data on the type of perpetrators shows a stable trend since 2016. The next place in the list of perpetrators are other perpetrators (159 – some additional categories were introduced in 2019 to allow for more detailed analysis of this category), and another child (141). The last number signals the need to work with teachers and providers of various services to children to help boost prevention of violence among children. It is noteworthy to mention that there were 19 reported cases of violence against children committed by teachers, and a similar number of reported cases committed by caretakers in residential services (within the category of "other"). Relatives as perpetrators also occupy a relatively high place with 76 reported cases – confirming the need of support to the families.

One of the major conclusions of the report by SACP is that measures need to be taken to enhance the recognition of the early signs of violence against children in the family. In relation to this, capacity-building activities for teachers are of primary importance because children spend most of their time during the day at school. The awareness of GPs and other health practitioners on the importance of reporting should also be enhanced because doctors can easily detect signs of physical violence.

DIFFICULTIES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COORDINATION MECHANISM

The main difficulties reported by SACP are related to the lack of technical capacity of the mandated institutions, i.e. lack of cars and sufficient personnel to take immediate steps of crisis intervention.

Another difficulty is associated with the need to unify the understanding of “crisis intervention” among the mandated institutions. In 2019, the lack of a unified understanding of the application of the mechanism and the concept of “crisis intervention” found in previous analytical materials in connection with the crisis measures remains in force. There is still an understanding that a crisis situation is one that occurs outside the established working hours or on weekends / holidays. Despite the existing procedure described in Annex 2B of the Cooperation Agreement for the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism, during this reporting period the trend of discrepancy between the mandatory structures presented in their data, misunderstanding of the nature of the problem with and around the child, reaction and action continues. Although discussed at forums and workshops more than once, there remains a problem in understanding who and under what circumstances has the right and obligation to convene crisis intervention meetings, as well as who has the leading role.

GOOD PRACTICES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COORDINATION MECHANISM

The described good practices refer to successful partnership and close cooperation at local level not only between the mandatory structures, but also with alternative representatives. The latter are specialists from social service providers in the community, the health care system, educational structures, the police, court and prosecutor, which presupposes good opportunities for

adequate action of the teams and multiplication of the experience in these areas. Once again, these practices depend very much on the subjective factors (willingness of institution representatives to be pro-active rather than reactive), and are to be seen in less than 10 regions out of the 28 regional units of the country. An area that has not been covered in the identified good practices are joint actions with representatives of the courts and prosecution.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES ARE LISTED BELOW.

- In the municipality of Teteven a monthly schedule is prepared for duty officers, sending a representative for each meeting of the multidisciplinary unit, assisting in the implementation of decisions and supporting child victims of violence by providing crisis intervention in the community.
- In the municipality of Pazardzhik there is an Emergency Reception Center, which provides shelter and support. In Sofia-city, very good cooperation has been reported in all signals for children who have been abused with the police from district departments, and a joint verification of the signal is carried out.
- Silistra District describes a case of mental and emotional violence against a child alienated from their parents, in which the multidisciplinary team was convened four times, and in addition to the mandatory members, representatives of the court, prosecutor’s office, regional directorate for social assistance, and lawyers of the parties were summoned to the meetings.
- Sliven District shared that the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Interior cooperates by providing transport and the presence of uniformed officers.
- The districts of Veliko Tarnovo, Dobrich, Pazardzhik, Plevan, Sofia district (Botevgrad) and Yambol also describe good cooperation with the structures of the Ministry of Interior.
- The need for availability and good cooperation with appropriate social services (shelters, emergency admission) on the territory of the districts is shared, which would enable accommodation of the victims of violence from the districts of Lovech, Pazardzhik and Pernik.
- The data submitted by the districts of Dobrich, Kyustendil, Pazardzhik, Veliko Tarnovo and Plevan shows the importance of the presence and cooperation with a psychologist, and in most cases such a specialist is available through the existing daily and hourly social services in the respective district.
- The districts of Dobrich, Silistra and Yambol share a very successful partnership with the court and the prosecutor’s office.

Part B:

FOCUS GROUPS FINDINGS

SOFIA

The number of participants in Sofia was 23. This focus group included representatives of the SACP, teachers, kindergarten personnel, social workers, and representatives of the local commission for dealing with children in conflict with the law. The need of better coordination between the institutions working with children and the parents/families was identified as a main area of need. The participants showed general concern about the rise of aggressive behavior among children and the need to improve the knowledge of teachers as well as of social workers on ways to prevent and deal with aggression. The training needs identified included: recognizing and dealing with early signs of violence; understanding aggressive behavior; dealing with aggression in its diverse forms; improving collaboration between teachers and parents in combating violence at school. The need of enhancing the parental capacity for effective upbringing of children was also mentioned. It turned out to be one of the key topics of all focus groups, usually raised by teachers or representatives of the local commissions for dealing with children in conflict with the law.

STARA ZAGORA

The number of participants in Stara Zagora was 10. This focus group included teachers and school psychologists, as well as school administration workers, and one representative of the local commission for dealing with children in conflict with the law. The participants agreed to the statement that the number of groups of children at risk is increasing and these groups are more diverse today compared to the past. One of these groups are children whose parents work abroad and who are raised by relatives or grandparents. The children raised by parents in conflict were also identified as children at risk. The need of actual upbringing of children was underlined. Many participants agreed that the problem comes from the lack of parental capacity. Upbringing is replaced by minimal care. The training needs identified in this focus group were the following: enhancing the knowledge on the mechanism for action in cases of children at risk; the role of teachers/schools in addressing cases of children at risk; respecting children's rights and children's agency without losing control; how to recognize aggression and early signs of violence against the child; coordination between the different units of the child protection system in individual case management; legal aspects of child support; need of enhancing parental capacity and schools for parents.

HARMANLI

The number of participants in Harmanli was 21. The focus group included teachers, school administrators, representative of the regional reception center of the National Refugee Agency, police officers, health mediators, social workers from the local child protection unit, jurist from the municipal social service department, school psychologists, and one local journalist. This was the most diverse focus group in terms of representation of the different stakeholders in the child protection system. All participants confirmed that there is good collaboration between the units of the child protection system in their town, because the municipality manages the services quite effectively. The collaboration between the schools and the other units is also good. The main group of children at risk are the children of refugees and unaccompanied minors, which are quite many in this municipality, because there is a regional reception center. Because of the lack of parental care, the latter often get in conflict with the law. Another mentioned group of children at risk was the children living in the Roma ghetto. They are at risk of domestic violence and cases of domestic violence are difficult to deal with, because the parents do not have personal identification documents. The third group of children at risk mentioned in the discussion were children with disabilities. Teachers underlined that the schools can rely on the local commission for dealing with children in conflict with the law, as well as on the municipal social services. The main difficulty for teachers was working with non-collaborative parents. The need for adopting international best practices of dealing with non-collaborate parents of children at risk was mentioned several times in the discussion. In general, the participants were satisfied by the collaboration among the local units of the child protection system. The training needs identified in this focus group were exclusively in the sphere of working with parents: evaluation of the parental capacity, school for parents, enhancing the capacity of parents.

The relationship between educators and parents and the need to strengthen parental capacity was a key topic of all focus groups. This can be explained with the dominating number of teachers in the focus groups. Another key topic was working with children at risk, and improving the collaboration between the different units of the child protection system in provision of support to such children. The coordination among the different units was evaluated as good only in Harmanli, which is the smallest town in terms of population number. The focus groups highlighted the existence of local specifics in the awareness of key issues. Harmanli is again the example: the only place among the three in which children of refugees and unaccompanied children were recognized as a risk group, because of the existence of a regional reception center in the city, and the relatively high percentage of refugees living among the locals (in comparison with Sofia or Stara Zagora).

Part C:

INTERVIEWS ANALYSIS

Profile of the participants in the interviews

Public Servants	1	2	3	4	5		
Type of organization / body / institution	SACP	SACP	SACP	SACP	SACP		
Position / Role of person interviewed	Chief Inspector at North Territorial Unit of the Directorate on Control of Child Rights	Expert at the Directorate for Policies and Programs, Strategic Development and Coordination	Senior Inspector at the Directorate				
on Control of Child Rights	Chief Expert at the Directorate for Policies and Programs, Strategic Development and Coordination	Chief Inspector at South Territorial Unit of the Directorate on Control of Child Rights					
NGO Workers	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Type of organization / body / institution	National-level NGOs working for prevention of abandonment and early childhood development	National-level NGO working for parental capacity building and parents participation in child protection	National-level NGO for foster care	National-level NGO for children safety in Internet	National umbrella organization uniting many CSOs that work for child and youth development	Local CSO running a social service center for children and families	Local CSO running a social service center for children and families
Position / Role of person interviewed	Program Director	Program Director	Expert	Director	Program Director	Director	Manager of the Department on Children

The strengths of the Bulgarian child protection system were formulated in a similar way by the public servants and the representatives of the NGOs. They were seen in the fact that the child protection policy is based on the internationally recognized standards for child protection, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The opinions on the weaknesses, were also similar. The lack of standards for social work and the employment of underqualified personnel in territorial units of the social service system and/or child protection units at municipalities (where available) was seen as a main weakness by both groups of professionals. The insufficient funding to ensure good salaries and in-service training for the social workers in the public system was also identified as a factor of huge importance. The main differences in the opinions of the interviewed respondents are to be seen in the sphere of coordination between the different units of the child protection system, and in the sphere of training needs of professionals. All respondents from NGOs find huge gaps in the coordination between the different units, while some of the respondents from SACP think that the coordination between the different units is good.

The respondents from the NGOs identified another major weakness that was not directly mentioned by any of the experts from SACP. This weakness is to be found in the general approach applied by the management of the child protection system. This approach was defined as “administratively retributive” and not “supportive” (Respondent 3 from the NGOs). The respondents from the NGOs also spoke of the importance of the subjective factors (personal values and level of responsiveness) in the implementation of the social services for child protection. Many cases of slow and inadequate response by the social workers when violence in the family or in a child-care institution was identified were shared. According to Respondent 1 from the SACP structures, this was largely due to the insufficient number of personnel in the local social assistance units, the low qualification, the lack of standards for social work, and the inadequate monitoring of the servants in the system. Respondent 7 from the NGOs underlined the lack of shared understanding on the national level for the changes in the system that need to be made in order to improve its effectiveness, and the lack of political will to implement such changes. Respondent 8 from the NGOs spoke of “misuse of power” by public servants in institutions raising abandoned children, which remains unsanctioned. Two respondents from the NGOs also pointed out as a weakness the lack of “operational authority” of the State Agency for Child Protection to control the operation of the child protection units at the local level. The SACP was meant to be an independent inter-governmental body but in reality is partially

dependent on the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (budget wise) and its coordination with the local structures of the Agency for Social Protection is not always efficient. As far as the different groups of children at risk were discussed, issues with the protection of all of these groups were systemically identified. Among those groups the most vulnerable are the children in social care institutions of family type, children for adoption, children with disabilities, children in conflict with the law, children victims of domestic violence, cyber-violence, and sexual abuse, and children victims of identity-based bullying at school.

The diverse weaknesses of the child protection system identified by the respondents in the interviews can be summarized in the following categories:

1. Operational structure and approach of the system;
2. Underqualified and underpaid staff of the social services at the grassroots level;
3. Slow and inefficient coordination between the different units on the local level;
4. Lack of effective in-service training for the social workers: where existing, it is based on outdated approaches; does not build their soft skills, which are of primary importance in child protection work.

The STRENGTHEN project will address the deficiencies in point 3 and 4 above, and will raise awareness on the need for national consensus on the changes that need to be made in order to have a better functioning child protection system.

PART D: TRAINING NEEDS IDENTIFICATION

In this section we will list all capacity building needs identified by all respondents in the interviews categorized on the basis of topics.

The first major capacity-building group of needs, identified by both public servants and NGO workers concerns the **need for supervision** of the social workers from the municipal social care departments. The STRENGTHEN project will not address this group of needs, but it will raise awareness of the relevant public bodies that such need is widely recognized and not met, and the state should plan specific measures to address it.

The second major capacity-building group of needs concerns **thematic knowledge and skills** for dealing in specific situations of the field work. In analyzing this group of needs, we took into account not only the responses of the interviewed experts from the public sector and the NGO sector, but also the responses of the teachers, social workers, and police officers who took part in the focus groups. The following main topics were identified:

- The practical application of the Convention on Child Protection – the approach and key principles of child protection work that it implies.
- The practical application of the Law for Administrative Violations and Sanctions in child protection work.
- Effective methods, approaches and practices in working with cases of parental conflict (parents in conflict) – this topic appeared in all focus groups and in 4 interviews, which signals of its great importance.
- Evaluation of the parental capacity and support to the parents to increase it. The need for “Schools for parents” was mentioned by more than 10 different teachers who took part in the focus groups, as well as by several interview respondents.
- The use of restorative approaches, such as mediation, in working with parents in conflict and providing support to children raised in such families.
- Support for the social integration of children with disabilities.
- Best international practices in providing support to various groups of children at risk.
- Any topic that upgrades the knowledge of the social workers for case management, and improves their soft skills for managing cases.

- Crosscutting issues and approaches that improve the horizontal work for child protection.
- Effective approaches in supporting the children in conflict with the law.
- Effective approaches in addressing cyber-crime and cyber-bullying (trainings for teachers are needed).
- Involving the community in decision-making on local policies that concern children.
- Advocacy for children's rights, international standards for child protection.
- Enhancing the coordination and cooperation between the different units in the child protection system in managing specific cases.
- Supporting children in the ghettos.
- Teamwork and prevention of burnout for social workers.
- Training on the role of personal values and attitudes in social work; self-awareness and self-evaluation of attitudes; understanding children's agency and child participation.
- Support for children of refugees and unaccompanied children.
- Collaboration between teachers and parents in child protection work; community schools – good practices for involving the parents.
- Addressing the anti-rights campaigns that influence the work of the child protection system.

The above topics can be summarized in the following categories:

1. Applying the child rights centered approach in child protection work and encouraging children participation.
2. Best practices for support of children from various vulnerable groups: adopting international experience.
3. Enhancing the soft skills of social workers for effective case management / effective work with parents.
4. Improving collaboration between the different units of the child protection system: family, school, police and social services, for the provision of adequate support to all children and families in need.

The training modules of STRENGTHEN project will be based on the above analysis and will address the main categories of needs.

