

**SECTOR "EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY"****Minutes of the 6th Meeting of the Sector Working Group (SWG)**

Venue: Cisco Webex Meeting, hosted by Secretariat for European Affairs (SEA)

Date: 18 June 2020, Thursday, 13:10 - 15:55

Introductory Statements

☞ The Head of Department in SEA, Ms. Kirkovski, welcomed the attendees on second meeting with a main subject of IPA III programming for financial perspective 2021-2027. SEA/NIPAC has received an official letter from DG NEAR requesting the Government and relevant institutions to initiate the programming exercise. She informed that currently IPA III strategic response documents are under preparation and project ideas in a form of action fiches are being drafted for 2021-2022 programming years. The Multi Financial Framework document for new perspective has not been finalised yet, but it was clear that around 14,5 billion € would be available and there was an indication for an increase of IPA funds. She briefly presented agenda and topics and encouraged the participations to discuss draft text of IPA III Strategic Response and project ideas presented afterwards. In relation to IPA III perspective 2021-2027, 5 windows as areas for financing are foreseen, and this sector corresponds to one of thematic priorities within Window 4 Competitiveness and inclusive growth, i.e. Thematic priority 1 Education, employment, social protection and inclusion policies, and health. She also informed that the UN and its agencies will present draft strategic priorities of new framework 2021-2025, whereas one specific priority corresponds to the work of this SWG. She noted that draft text of IPA III Strategic Response was circulated prior to the meeting.

☞ The Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, Ms. Shkrijelj, pointed out that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the priorities for EU funding over the period 2021-2027 in this sector. IPA III programming has been initiated in May and happening in a challenging time, where decisions on a daily basis were made to provide an immediate response to the ongoing crisis. At the same time, it made the authorities consider the priorities and needs on a mid-term perspective that is to continue the reforms in the areas of labour market and social protection and to further promote gender equality and equal opportunities for all citizens. The crisis also showed the importance of the occupational safety and health at work and the need for greater responsiveness of the social security systems to the changing work environment. She noted that discussions about the IPA III were taking place in parallel with the preparation of strategic framework of the UN for the period 2021-2025 and were seen as critical for better informing each other, better coordination and building consensus around the future priorities. She highlighted that the SWG was recognised as a platform for discussion and defining priorities among donors, with an involvement of social partners and civil society organisations.

Since declaring the existence of a state of emergency, the Government has swiftly introduced series of temporary measures to prevent and mitigate the negative economic and social consequences of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemics. In addition to the public health prevention measures, three packages of Governmental measures have been put in place ("Covid 1", "Covid 2", "Covid 3") providing among other the employment retention measures, worker protection measures and the support for the most vulnerable individuals. Those measures include financial assistance to companies as direct support with wage subsidies, tax reliefs, credit support, zero interest loans, support to vulnerable households, unemployment measures, support for education, and other additional regulatory and legislative measures allowing bigger flexibility of the existing procedures related to managing economic activities, etc.

She referred to the main policy steps taken since the COVID-19 outbreak with regards to the most vulnerable, which were under the competence of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. The Government introduced a set of measures aimed at protecting those who have lost their jobs and other sources of income, such as the relaxation of the eligibility rules for the guaranteed minimum assistance.

At the same time, a significant support in terms of food, hygiene products, and medicines was provided to the most vulnerable such as those living in sub-standard conditions, victims of domestic violence, persons with disabilities, etc. The support was delivered in cooperation with the donor community and international organizations and involvement of the civil society organizations.

As part of the third set of measures aimed to support and provide assistance to specific workers and sectors, the Government enabled entitlement to financial compensation for a period of two months to unemployed workers whose employment was terminated in March to April 2020, regardless of the ground for employment termination.

Employment Service Agency has continued implementing the Operational Plan for Active Employment Programs and Measures and Labour Market Services for 2020, with a planned coverage of 11,761 unemployed persons, but



with postponement of training programmes. Implementation of the Youth Guarantee has continued. Thus far, 33% of the YG participants had positive and timely exit from the YG services despite the worsening of the domestic economy caused by the COVID-19 pandemics.

She highlighted that the EU support of 50 million EUR announced as performance award by the EU to the country was reallocated to cope with the consequences of the COVID 19. The set of activities in the form of Sector Budget Resilience Contract would encompass measures for support to micro and small companies affected by COVID-19 with interest-free credit line with a grant component, managed by the Development Bank of North Macedonia; and support to active labour market measures for sustained and equitable post-corona recovery with a 1) Grant line for unemployed people, wishing to self-register or establish a small start-up and 2) Grant line for established entities (micro, small and medium) creating new jobs, both managed by the Employment Service Agency.

In this period, measures, guides and recommendations have been developed related to workplaces, to employers and to workers, but also the ones targeting some specific sectors and circumstances. Most of them have been formulated in consultation with the social partners. In the frame of the Economic and Social Council, social partners provided significant contribution in the discussion about the Employment Impacts and Policy Response to the Crisis caused by COVID-19.

Finally, unfortunately the Constitutional Court repealed the Law for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination. In this regard, setting relevant regulatory framework for combating unequal treatment and anti-discriminatory practices remained a challenge that needed to be tackled with urgency by any new Government.

➤ The Minister of Education and Science, Mr. Ademi, highlighted the importance of this meeting, and thanked to all of the participants for making the effort, in this limited conditions, to meet and to discuss the process of planning and programming the strategic response to the new program cycle IPA 3 in the frame of the sector coordination for the Sector: Education, employment, social policy and now including health. He pointed out that the implementation and monitoring of sectoral policies, with a focus on achieving results, in order to ensure long-term effect and harmonized reforms in the sector remain a main priority.

In the past period, the Ministry of Education and Science has been working hard to adopt good and useful policies exclusively on the basis of analyses and data, implementing upgrading and supplementing the national strategic priorities. Comprehensive analysis of the OECD, for which there is a Report and an Action Plan, is a clear indicator of the direction in which the reforms in education will be forwarding.

In addition, several important laws were adopted, such as the Law on Higher Education, the Law on Primary Education and the Law on Teachers and Professional Associates in primary and secondary education, and a number of bylaws are drafted and adopted and the ongoing preparation of several concepts such as the Concept for Inclusive Education, The Concept of Distance Learning, The Concept of Digitalization, The Concept of Regional Centers, The Concept of Work Based Learning as a complementary part of the implementation of the Education Strategy 2018/2025.

He emphasised that there must be continuation of the initiated reforms from the last period. MoES is in the phase of implementation of projects from the Action Program IPA 2, through which implementation of the Sector Budget Support has already began as a new modality, and different project from other donors like the World Bank Project Skills, that is in final phase.

At the very end, the Minister stressed out that MoES will remain committed to the realization of national and strategic goals, as well as the cross-sectoral priorities. The new financial perspective for IPA 3 is that IT will be complementary and will further support the realization of the strategic goals together with all the other activities and donors in education, having in mind that only coherent and synchronized investments will lead to achieving results and fulfilment of strategic reforms and goals.

➤ The Head of Cooperation in the EU Delegation, Mr. Bertolini, highlighted the important moment for discussion of IPA III strategic framework and actions to be planned. He point out that few criteria will be followed for future IPA support. In this regard, it should be considered ongoing actions in order to ensure continuity of actions and support of development and implementation of reforms in this sector. In this regard, it would be closely analysed when it was the best moment to intervene is those sectors. When speaking on maturity of actions, the most important would be to consider ready actions and if the institutions were ready to receive the assistance. Maturity meant if tender documents were ready, but the readiness of the institutions was far more important since during their preparation it was often found out that action overlapped with other donor's activity or there was no clear coordination among national institutions. All these elements were the most important to absorb the assistance.

I session – Overview of IPA III and Strategic Response for Window 4 Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth - Thematic priority 1 Education, Employment, Social Protection and Inclusion Policies and Health

➤ Ms Ms. Popovska, IPA Coordinator in MES, briefly went through the process of programming and preparation of the Strategic Response along with the SEP and EUD representatives, with the goal to emphasise the necessity to improve the quality of the education in the country through aligning the country strategy priorities with all the



priorities written in the Educational Strategy, the ESRP, as well as the Action Plan of the Innovation Strategy. Through the research for the appropriate activities that should be taken into consideration with the Strategic Response, it was realised that education is a cross-cutting issue in IPA, i.e. education is covered both in Thematic Priority 1 and 2.

The main aim is to provide access to quality education, including Vocational Education and Training (VET), and Lifelong Learning opportunities on all levels, with the focus on strengthening the system to become more flexible and inclusive for all, including kids with special educational needs, marginalised and vulnerable groups, migrants, refugees and those from socio-economic disadvantaged background. Another segment that cannot be excluded in the process of programming IPA 3 is digitalisation, but not to consider digital learning as a tool, but as a supporting mechanism for education both of teachers and students/pupils.

The potential action fishes, part of the Strategic Response, were discussed on several meetings with representatives from the educational institutions and all the donors working in the sector, and the response was positive, as well as their feedback on the ideas. In general, MoES will need to finalise the Strategic Response in the upcoming period with the missing indicators from the Roma segment, along with the feedback on the document itself.

➤ Ms. Slavkoska, IPA Coordinator in MLSP presented the thematic priority objectives and proposed areas of interventions covering the competences of ministry's work in the areas of employment and labour market, equal opportunities and social policies. These thematic priorities build on ongoing actions under IPA II and Covid-19 Resilience Contract.

First thematic priority objective in the employment and labour market areas is to raise employment level and the quality of jobs and productivity. Main types of interventions are not different from what had been implemented thus far. However, there was a shift towards productivity and quality of jobs. In addition, fields of interventions which were not tackled by IPA while ago were proposed for financing, such as improving the occupational health and safety standards in the country in line with the EU acquis and international standards and ensuring compliance with the OHS standards; promotion of productivity and adaptation of workforce and enterprises to changes, which proved critical during the pandemics. Other interventions include modernisation of the legal and regulatory frameworks of the employment policy; improvement of the labour market programmes and development and introduction of new programmes targeting the most vulnerable cohorts on the labour market; enabling access to new or adjusted micro-financing instruments for vulnerable population with limited access to commercial financing; strengthening of labour market institutions and encouraging the participation of social partners and civil society organisations (CSOs) as key factor for overall governance in the sector.

Second thematic priority objective in the area of social policies is related to reducing poverty and social exclusion. There was a need to complete the reform of the social protection system and continue investing in stronger and better social services. To this end, a new intervention was proposed for setting up a monitoring system for delivery of social services and community based services. Investments in infrastructure in sub-standard settlements and housing will continue, including improvements of social, health and other services and social infrastructures that prevent exclusion of people living there. It is intended to continue with the promotion of dialogue and participation of CSOs in policy development and implementation. Finally, gender equality and anti-discrimination policies and practices would be considered. Areas of interventions were broadly defined given the long-term perspective. In terms of sequencing, labour market activities, improvement of working conditions and gender equality would be mostly addressed in the initial programming years. Having in mind the projects in social area, the absorption capacities were also considered at all levels. After 2023, investments in youth employment would continue as well as supporting the second stage of the Deinstitutionalisation Strategy, continuing investment in housing infrastructure for Roma and improvement of social rights for people with disabilities. Roma would be targeted horizontally in all projects in the field of employment and social policy depending on what would be finally negotiated for the programming year 2021 or 2022.

All these priorities and proposed interventions are aligned with, coherent and contribute to the umbrella strategy - Revised Employment and Social Reform Programme 2022, and in compliance with all relevant national sub-sector strategies. They fit the overall EU enlargement process and committed reforms. Concerning the indicators, the Strategic Response lists indicators of the Performance Assessment Framework discussed by the SWG in 2019. In that regard, targets must be set for 2027 and the scenarios for major indicators are currently devised with the support of IPA/ ILO project "Strengthening the Social Dialogue". During the week to follow, the scenarios and targets for 2027 would be discussed.

➤ Ms. Kirkovski, SEA opened the floor for discussion for donors to inform about their plans and for the CSO to share their views and the problems on the ground. She noted that health sector is within the same thematic priority, but another SWG was established which would deliberate over health issues. North Macedonia is preparing for negotiations and the respective particular thematic priority correlates with different chapters of EU Acquis (19, 26, 22), and also has complementarities with three clusters of the new negotiation methodology. Therefore, it will be crucial that the Government ensures good coordination mechanism for preparation of the country for effective and efficient use of IPA funds and other donors, as well optimal use of human resources in public administration.



Ms. Prodanova, EUD referred to the recent comment of the DG Employment provided in the context of IPA II Budget Support Operation. It related to the development of new active labour market measures, particularly targeting people who are in employment with precarious contracts (so called 'atypical contracts') and she invited the national authorities to add a point on atypical workers in the Strategic Response.

Ms. Slavkoska, MLSP responded that the precarious employments could be adequately reflected in the IPA III Strategic Response, which was not the case in IPA II because it required changes of the measures planned for COVID-19 economic recovery as well as legal amendments.

Ms. Beaumont, EUD raised a question in regard to the education part of MES. Having in mind that there is a lot interest in aspect of digitalization which occurred during the Covid-19 situation. Meeting was held that morning on National ICT Strategy and Digital Plan Transformation for 2020-2025 which has a direct relevance to the work pursue by MES. As regards to internal discussions done, the concern raised is due to absorption capacity of MES, in particular the IPA Unit which works with limited capacities and its staffing is small, as well quite overburdened. This problem will remain as a concern although the staffing in IPA Unit is not substantially improved. Also, other departments of MES should be engaged, especially due to implementation of Education Strategy. There are quite lot actions in relation to IPA II 2017 implementation, whereas there has been some delays, as well Action Document 2019. Therefore, she proposed to be focused what currently is being implemented and to ensure to be successful. Her thought around digitalisation and e-learning was in regard that if MIOA lead this agenda and to be a coordinated action, it might be more realistic to pursue with this proposal.

Ms. Popovska, MES agreed with concerns addressed due to limited capacities in IPA structure in ministry. She noted that IPA units are leading capacity for programming parts, but absorption capacities remains in other departments and institutions. In this regard, she informed that there was a communication with Minister what it could be done in near period for internal staff transfers or to see options for new employments within IPA structure. These persons should have knowledge of IPA and not to be just a number, because quality is more important in IPA III. Ministry has capacities within other departments and institutions. If there are not challenges, it will never be on a scale to fulfil tasks.

Mr. Ademi, MES Minister, shortly addressed the concerns and fully agreed with them. He noted the commitment shown in last period to improve the capacities of IPA structure in MES. In this period of elections, the institutions are blocked with Electoral Code and legal provisions for engage new persons, as well considering the capacities of already staff employed in ministry to transfer them in IPA structure.

Ms. Kirkovski, SEA highlighted that IPA III strategic response should be sent as official package from the Government to the EC by 30 June and those interested in commenting the document should provide inputs to both IPA Coordinators in the MLSP and MoES by 25 June.

Mr. Bertolini, EUD raised the issue of expecting wider participation of other stakeholders and this forum was needed to discuss with other donors in relation what was there and proposed, whether it was logic or already redundant. On the question of management capacity, i.e. how the IPA operating structure fits to IPA III when the modalities of implementation were still unknown, he noted that the IPA department were useful independently on the management modality. Indirect management would be selectively used when structural funds would be mirroring. That would be from 2023 onwards most likely in a sort of multi-annual programmes under ex-post control. This means everything is done before the control function of the DEU. Indirect management is not considered for EESP sector for 2021-2022. But, the capacities of national authorities would be strengthened for indirect management by beneficiary country. Coming back to donors, he pointed out the importance of cross-coordination, closed discussions, as well the overlaps in the past. He called the other donors to get involved in the discussion and informed that EUD staff was already involved in technical discussions with line ministries.

Ms. Kirkovski, SEA highlighted that comments/ inputs on draft IPA III strategic response could be submitted to both IPA Coordinators by 19 June. She informed that the IPA III Strategic Response would be subject of policy relevance assessment by EC, which constituted the first phase of the programming. EC services will look at the IPA III documents presented by each country in Western Balkan and should reply to countries by the end of the summer. Then, the national authorities would launch the second phase of preparation of particular action documents, called action fiches which are backbones of projects. It will continue with writing a full project documents which would be subject to second round of consultations within SWGs. Action Fiches were still in drafting phase, their scope would be presented during the meeting, but they would be officially available by end of the summer. She also confirmed that the EUD and national institutions were heavily involved in preparation of programming documents. Therefore, she asked active donors and CSO to provide their assessment and opinion on the IPA actions, so that they could better contribute or fit within the overall context and complement the efforts in the EU integration process.

Ms. Naceva, WB Senior Education Specialist and also covering issues of human resources and social protection, considered that there was no overlap with the MLSP objectives presented in the Strategic Response with the current WB programme which was related to improving the access and quality of social services. MLSP will also be supported in creation of management information system for cash transfers and social services which is essential to provide quality and comprehensive support to vulnerable people. Human resources development sector



in the country requires reforms and a lot of support and each part of reform is comprehensive. For example, speaking of social services, she stressed that both WB and EUD could complement and implement activities, if the same framework is used. The Government put in place the legal framework, which governs the social protection area. She highlighted that all donors could support the Government in implementing social services, considering that the area was new for the country.

When it comes to education area, the planned areas of interventions are pretty much generic and it is understandable why the MES objectives are not more focused because it is long 7-year period. There is a lot work to be done in education area in order to improve the quality and participation in each cycle of education. It is huge sector with a lot of sub-sectors and considering the results from large scale assessment and overviews and WB / OECD/ UNICEF analytical documents, it could be summarised with a regret that it needs to be improved substantially. She pointed out that the WB will finish their support in secondary education area and good to see that IPA will continue to support MES and VET Centre. Reform of VET has started, curricular have been modernised and several opportunities are provided for improved work-based-learning through a grant programme. It would be good to see continuous support to VET system, formal and informal, having in mind that labour market is rapidly changing and constantly, and this sector needs to be under constant reform in order to be relevant for labour market. Covid-19 lock-down shown that VET system is lacking behind and is not so stable. She stressed that WB will not continue to work in this area and pointed out that EU/ IPA is right instrument for support because the national system should be adjusted to EU VET area. EU counterparts are more appropriate to provide such a support. She mentioned that WB will continue to work for improvement of access and quality of primary education and there are no problems of overlapping. WB will further support primary education in tackling the recommendations and areas of concern identified in OECD report regarding efficiency of its financing and some dialogue has been started with EUD and IPA team in MES in order to avoid any potential overlaps. WB project of teacher training, the provision will be focused on for supporting primary education teachers, while EU/ IPA could provide opportunities for secondary and VET education. She noted that it is missing general secondary education and this could be included for its improvement which system has not been reformed since 1998.

II session - Presentation of Action Fiches for IPA III Action Programmes for 2021 and 2022

Mr. Docinski, MLSP presented projects/ interventions under priority to raise the employment level and quality of jobs and productivity. Three separate interventions were proposed for financing under this IPA package.

First intervention proposed is related to improving the access to employment for unemployed job seekers which is not new and already supported by IPA funds in the country. The intention is to further provide assistance in financing the active labour market measures for unemployed persons and those who have difficulties to find an employment on their own. Type of assistance will include activities for personal counselling, such as skilling, re-skilling, internships, subsidized employments, and grant for self-employment. The most vulnerable unemployed persons in the labour market are expected to be covered. Additionally, it is not clear how the current Covid-19 crisis will continue and what would be the economic effects of this crisis. Thus, it is envisaged, if relevant, the action in its implementation period to prioritize employment or re-employment of those persons who have lost their jobs during the Covid-19 crisis. Additionally, the country will start very soon with the EU4Resilience Contract which will support post Covid recovery. In terms of timing and sequencing, the activity is foreseen to start at the beginning of 2022 when the previous interventions will more or less end and it will build on existing projects.

Second intervention is rather new in this sector aiming to promote human resources development in the enterprises in order to strengthen the competitiveness and adaptability of workers and employers. Support is foreseen to be provided to persons employed in enterprises. Type of assistance will include personal counselling, skilling, re-skilling and other types of trainings for employed persons. The reason for envisaging that kind of action is because the country would like to link this support with the process of economic restructuring of companies which have been impacted by this crisis. The idea is to develop criteria for this assistance to be provided and made available to companies that are ready to invest in new technologies, improve work processes, re-organizations and with a need for certain type of training for re-skilling of their workers. In parallel, it is foreseen to provide technical assistance for introducing a model for sustainable funding of job related trainings for existing workers, based on close cooperation with social partners (employers' organizations and chambers of commerce).

Third intervention proposed is the area of health and safety at work, which was not sufficiently tackled so far. This area has an urgent need for a coordinated assistance. A comprehensive project is proposed that will provide capacity building for OSH inspectors in State Labour Inspectorate (SLI) in terms of improving their competences and working methods, modernizing their working procedures and conducting supervision visits, providing advisory notes to employers during visits and even developing tools for inspectors. In addition to this, the assistance will boost the capacities of all other relevant stakeholders (social partners, civil society organizations, organizations of professionals in the field of OSH and occupational medicine). As well, harmonization of OSH legislation is foreseen, as the OSH acquis is the heaviest in chapter 19. The country has noted some progress in this respect, but additional assistance is definitely needed, especially in the light of starting the negotiations with the



EU. Two additional points would be touched upon with the action, the first one being data collection and analysis of work related accidents and injuries and occupational diseases, which is insufficiently developed area, while the second one is integration of the OSH themes into the education system, starting from primary and secondary education since the international experience shows that the awareness of future workers about the OSH must be built from the earliest age possible.

- Ms. Mustafafova, MLSP presented the proposed intervention that includes promotion of gender equality, which objective is to further improve the situation with gender equality in North Macedonia. The intervention will be focused on establishment of effective and efficient system to promote gender equality and empowerment of women notably through functional gender mechanisms at national and local level. It will aim to provide systematic support for integration of gender perspective in policies, legislation and financial instruments across different sectors in line with Law for equal opportunities of women and men, foreseen to be amended by the end of 2020. The Action will encompass measures for closing the gender gap in labour market in different economic sectors by addressing the barriers for women for their greater participation at national and local level, as well measures for equal access of women to justice and social protection. Further on, the Action will envisage support for establishment of integrated system for data collection for gender based violence according to the new law which is in parliamentary procedure, supporting capacities for prevention and combating violence against women and domestic violence and strengthening the capacities for relevant stakeholders for achieving public sector duty in planning and implementation of gender equality policies. She explained that the new Law for equal opportunities of women and men would define obligations for national and local authorities for gender equality.
- Mr. Tomsic, MLSP presented the proposed intervention for support of monitoring and evaluation system for social services. Currently, there is ongoing process of investing in new services with a grant scheme supported by WB project "Social Services Improvement Project" and the intention is to expand the services according to the new Social Protection Law in all municipalities in the country. In parallel, the MLSP is implementing the EU funded project for supporting the modernization and deinstitutionalization of social services, where one component is related to establishment of national effective monitoring and evaluation system for services for persons with disabilities. The project assessed the current situation of monitoring in the MLSP and Social Work Centres; it also mapped the EU good practices. The project will design the architecture of monitoring and evaluation system of social services, including its components and institutional setup. The Action proposed is continuation of those previous activities, and after receiving new design of the system, new institution should be set up, capacities of professionals working in all three level within the social protection system should be increased (national and local level and at level of service providers).
- Ms. Malevski, CSO Reactor, pointed out the need to receive the draft Action Fiches that had not been disseminated before the meeting. That would facilitate the dialogue among civil society and other CSOs not present at the meeting could provide their comments to the draft papers.
- On this issue, Ms Kirkovski, SEA clarified that while the IPA III Strategic Response was shared for commenting; the Action Fiches were being fine-tuned and were not disseminated prior to the meeting. The Action Fiches will be disseminated once the policy relevance assessment will be finalised by EC services and DG NEAR gives a "green light" for preparation of full action documents.
- Mr. Drago, Team Leader of SEA project "Support for the Management of the EU Funds", stressed its concern that draft Action Fiches should have been disseminated prior to their finalization at the end of June and proposed the partners to provide inputs on the programming documents. Moreover, it would be useful to know of what amount of funds planned, how many action fiches will be prepared by MLSP, budgets per interventions, etc. He considered that those issues were important for SWC members to understand the discussion.
- Ms. Popovska, IPA Coordinator in MES, started with the presentation of the Action Fiche for Capacity and Skill development for quality and inclusive education for all, in direct correlation with the implementation of the Action Plan of the Educational Strategy and the OECD country report, and complementary with the new Concept for inclusive education, with the accent put on inclusive education and distance learning. This Fiche address the need to strengthen the educational system and make it more flexible so that it can respond to the challenges to ensure quality education for all, especially with accent put on inclusive education, in connection with the digital learning initiatives designed to support all teachers and students. This Action Fiche consists of three components that are also planned to be complementary with the World Bank Loan, with certain activities that are ongoing under UNICEF at this phase, the Concept for inclusive education, as well as the Law on Primary Education. The first component is to 1) Improve the digital learning environment - design online platforms, tools and content that is enabling higher quality inclusive teaching and learning for all children; 2) Strengthen the capacity of teachers and other school staff to deliver inclusive education and 3) ICT and accessibility tools. Within the Action Fiche, there are several types of contracts presented that can be taken into consideration for implementing the proposed components.

There is one Action Fiche which is still under discussions, Support cooperation between VET schools and industry. This action title was already presented to the sector and they reacted positively, however, there need to be



further developments in regard to this action, so this will probably be postponed for the other programming years of implementation modality under IPA 3, 2023 or 2024.

Ms. Kreceva, Head of Department in Fund for Innovations and Technological Development (FITD), started with the presentation of the other two Action Fiches in the area of education, developed in close cooperation between the Fund for Innovations and Technological Development (FITD) and the Ministry of Education and Science. One of the Actions will fall under the Thematic Priority – Education, Employment and Social Protection and Inclusion, and the other under two priorities, including the Thematic Priority – Private sector development through research and innovation. Since this is the first time that FITD is directly involved in the SWG, Ms. Kreceva shortly presented their activities and ongoing programmes in the area of education, as critical thinking, entrepreneurship, innovativeness and several contest for young researchers. The aim of the first Fiche is to bridge these programmes together and ensure their sustainability under coherent framework which will better tap the R&D potential of all citizens, but putting school as connectors for pursuing social interest. This was followed by an example from the contests for young researchers which led to further explanation of the actions undertaken under this Fiche. The name of this Action Fiche is Enhancing Science and Technology Excellence and Entrepreneurship among School Aged Children and Youth. There are the proposed sub-actions under this Fiche: 1) Strengthening the capacity of school teachers in responsible research and innovation at STEAM education. The actions envisioned under this sub-action is to develop STEAM-tool kits and pilot a call for expression of interest, and provide these STEAM-tool kits to the schools and teacher training for using them. This way the project pipeline that comes from the primary and secondary schools will be improved, and further activities concerning young researchers could be additionally funded in the future. The second sub-action is to Enhance the scientific technological excellence and entrepreneurship among school children and youth. This action envisions a grand scheme for providers of coaching for excelling students to participate in international competitions. The third one is implementing open schools concept, covering activities for implementing this concept in primary and secondary schools. This platform is intended to bridge the private sector, the schools, the private companies that interested in social responsibility, and all other local communities.

- ☞ Mr. Bertolini, EUD representative, raised the issue that is not possible to continue with the presentation of the Action Fiches since the materials concerning these activities weren't shared, nor approved, before the meeting. HE pointed out that this was not agreed before the meeting, that there are no available presentations/slides to present the main objectives, and that on the last technical meeting there were no ready fiches that could be presented today.
- ☞ Ms. Kreceva, FITD representative, commented that the programming was done very rapidly, and with that in mind, FITD was asked to prepared the fiches in a very short period of time, together with MoES, so that they can be shared and discussed.
- ☞ Ms. Popovska, IPA Coordinator in MES, elaborated that the titles of the Actions were proposed in the first matrix that was presented to EUD. Those are the same Action Fiches, but are deeply developed; they are not completely new actions.
- ☞ Mr. Bertolini, EUD representative, stressed out that these Action Fiches are not for now, and only gender, occupational safety and another social area will be taken into consideration, but nothing on education, since the actions are not matures to be implemented in the next two years, and that MoES is fully busy with the upcoming IPA projects that are not yet implemented.
- ☞ Ms. Popovska, IPA Coordinator in MES, explained that MoES don't share the opinion that these actions are not mature and that is why they were additionally modified and made more specific, in order not to be excluded from IPA 3. These actions are in line with the Education strategy and other supporting documents, there is good coordination and support with the donors, and they have the potential to be implemented in the period until 2023.
- ☞ Ms. Kreceva, FITD representative, asked if it is possible to share the Action Fiches with the members of the SWG and the EUD and receive feedback so that they will know how to proceed in the next phases.
- ☞ Ms. Beaumont, EUD representative, clarified that the aim is not to exclude MoES from IPA 3, but just from the first phase, 2021-2022, so that there is more time to prepare for 2023-2024, and these concepts that are developed now to be foreseen for the second part of IPA3. This is due to the fact that there are obligations and ongoing projects under IPA2 that involve the whole Ministry of Education and Science, so EUD feels that there is not enough capacity and that these Action Fiches should be considered for the second part of IPA III.
- ☞ Ms. Slavkoska, MLSP, clarified that the presented projects were the same with those discussed with the EUD two weeks ago. Then it was agreed that those ideas were good and the MLSP was instructed (by SEA) to develop one Action Fiche, which could be shared as it was already ready .
- ☞ Ms. Prodanova, EUD pointed out that at technical meeting it was not agreed on classical active labour market measures for the reason of having Budget Support (SBS) starting soon. EUD would like to see innovation in the labour measures and expected the authorities craft new ones, by investing in quality of the measures instead of repeating the same measures since several years. New measures are expected to be proposed, also in terms of quality employments which should potentially attract other donors, in addition to the EUD. This was the reason why the EUD considered the action under the first objective immature for financing in 2021-2022.



She commented on first project of MES for digital skills, which is not considered as mature, because the concentration is given on on-line learning, instead to focus on how to develop digital skills in schools. She highlighted that on-line learning was the only possible way during this Covid-19 crisis. At EU level, the on-line learning is recognized as exclusive and it does not ensure inclusiveness of vulnerable people, children and families to properly receive education. The conclusion at EU level is that there is nothing better than real schooling. The intention is not to invest in online learning because there is just Covid-19 crisis and EUD would like to see real change in schooling approach in schools on digital skills. This issue is not shown in this project and this is not targeted.

- Ms Kirkovski, SEA noted that on the issue of dissemination of Action Fiches, information would follow after the meeting before prior check with EUD and line ministries and apologized on unavailability to provide precise information. Regardless, it would be written in the minutes of this meeting what was presented, discussed and agreed.

III session – UN SDCF 2021-2025 Presentation

- Ms. Dudziak, UN Resident Coordinator, thanked on the opportunity on this SWG to discuss UN 2021-2025 Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework. UN recognizes representatives of Government, civil society and international community as key partners and stakeholders in the implementation of cooperation framework as a UN key strategic document that would guide the UN work in North Macedonia. Feed-back is valuable in helping the UN in shaping plans for next 5 years. She thanked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that has been co-leading new UN cooperation framework since last year. Consultations were ongoing in regard to IPA III in 5 thematic priorities that would further ensure alignment and strengthen synergies between UN and EU programming in support of collective sustainable development objectives. In addition to draft Strategic Cooperation Framework, its priorities and outcomes, UN has shared the Country Programme Document outlines of UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF prior the meeting. The session would be second in a line of consulting the SWGs. In a view of thematic focus of this group and materials shared, she noted that strategic priority 1 shall be presented and comments on draft documents of overall framework and aspects of UN agencies are equally important.

She provided an overview on cooperation framework and proposed strategic priorities, before opening discussion. UN SDCF is key planning document of UN system in the country and outlines the collaboration for the country's achievements of the Agenda 2030 and SDGs. This programme document is a work of all UN agencies, resident and non-resident, in North Macedonia over next 5 years. To identify most important and urgent challenges, the UN prepared a comprehensive analysis of the context vis-à-vis SDGs, so called common country analysis. This analysis draws on a variety of research methods, including desk review of national and international studies and strategic documents, as well interviews, focus groups and citizens perception surveys, as well as meetings with international partners and consultations and data collections over the past few months.

In terms of identified challenges and gaps, the context analysis identified 9 key areas that should be in focus in next 5 years to accelerate sustainable development in North Macedonia. Based on those 9 key challenges, UN identified 3 strategic priorities on which UN would be working on next 5 years. First is sustained and inclusive economic and social development. Second is climate action, natural resources and disaster risk management. Third one is transparent and accountable democratic institutions. These three priorities were based on the criteria: 1) a need to have a transformational effect, potential to help the country to progress to achieve as many SDGs as possible; 2) to assist the groups left behind and broad outreach in terms of the number of people reached, magnitude of change and geographical coverage, its sensitiveness and level of efforts and human resources as needed as manageable; and 3) whether these are within UN mandate and to provide value added.

Strategic priorities and outcomes are key elements of the new cooperation framework and therefore, the UN wanted to discuss them on SWGs few months before the finalization the cooperation framework scheduled by end of this year.

She presented strategic priority 1 which focuses on improving the living standards of all people in North Macedonia through equal access to decent work; productive employments; inclusive business eco-system under outcome 1; and universal access to quality health care, education and social and child protection services under outcome 2.

Priority captures key themes in which many UN agencies have strong global expertise and long-standing experience in supporting North Macedonia. 15 UN entities are foreseen to contribute to the strategic priorities, such as FAO, IAA, ILO, IOM, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNECE, UNHCR, UNICEF, UNIDO, UNDCS, UNOPS, UN Women and WHO.

Under outcome 1, the activities of UN family will focus on building capacities to plan, implement and monitor policies effecting jobs, labour force participation, entrepreneurship, resilient and circular economy, green jobs, innovation and digitalization, modernization of agriculture, and pro-growth business environment.

In terms of outcome 2, there are 4 key sub-themes captured. In terms of support to health, the foreseen activities of UN will focus on strengthening the health system and addressing emerging health priorities, such as communicable



and non-communicable diseases, immunization, sexual and reproductive health and universal access to health services, and preparedness to cope with public health emergencies. In terms of education, the UN will focus on strengthening the education system by improving the standards in education towards EU levels, ensuring equitable access to quality inclusive education by all (especially vulnerable women, girls and marginalized persons), further developing pre-school education and streamlining the skills and vocational education to align with labour market demands. In terms of culture, the UN focus will be strengthening the role of culture in development and promoting social identity and cohesion. In terms of social protection, the UN will support the Government in further promoting better targeted and more accessible social protection which prevents the most vulnerable in falling into poverty and strengthens human capital. The particular focus will be on strengthening child protection by promoting child rights, children on risks of poverty and exclusion. Last, but not at least, the UN stands to support the Government in fulfilment of standards set in Istanbul Convention and work towards strengthening the support and protection services for survivors of gender based violence and domestic violence, as well support initiatives of employment and socio-economic empowerment of potential victims of trafficking.

UN aims to enrich and improve lives of wide set of vulnerable groups with the activities, such as people with disabilities, Roma community, at risk children, youth and adolescents, elderly, rural populations, unemployed, temporary and informal workers, population in informal settlements, homeless, poor, migrants, returnees, refugees and asylum seekers, stateless persons, victims of trafficking and people with substance use disorders.

She opened the floor for discussion and feedback in regards to the slide with several questions: was the context captured well; if there are any additional developments and challenges that needed to be considered; how the UN could effectively contribute to those areas; what the areas are in which the UN should engage less or where it should be more active; what capacities the UN should strengthen to achieve the results; and which partners should UN considers strengthening the collaboration with to accelerate the achievement of the results, both in terms of traditional and non-traditional partners.

- ☞ Ms Kirkovski, SEA reiterated that UN Development Cooperation Framework derives from SDGs and from the analysis that UNRCO has done with previous multi-annual package. Strategic priorities derive from proper evidence based system employed.
- ☞ Ms. Bertolini, EUD noted that comprehensive presentation highlighted that EU and UN were working closely in many of the areas. This presentation contributed to have a comprehensive meeting about all development policies that could support the country. He referred to the UN question on partnership and stressed that the cooperation should even more strengthen. EU should be a strong partner to UN in all that is intended to be achieved. Both donors are following SDGs and want to support the country in achieving better results. He emphasised the question on the beneficiary capacity. Effort should be made to understand the real input that EU and UN could provide in order not to replace, but strengthen beneficiary's capacity and ability.
- ☞ Ms. Shkrijelj, MLSP Deputy Minister, restated the overall context and development challenges the country is facing. The national authorities, UN agencies, the EU and other international agencies are all looking towards SDGs and achieving the goals. They all should continue working on those challenges and priority areas that is strengthening further the social protection system and services, labour market, child protection, etc. She pointed out the importance of having more and better coordination especially at the level of concrete programmes and projects. In terms of partners involved, all stakeholders participating in the SWG and civil society organizations will continue to be fully consulted and participate in implementation on the priorities and programmes. Social dialogue is very important for the ministry. Steps should be taken further for transferring what had been implemented by international agencies to national institutions as was the case with the UNDP In relation to previous discussion on draft Action Fiches (AF), she added that the issue would be clarified/ discussed with SEA and EUD after the meeting because the instructions were that the drafts should have been submitted by the end of the week and not prior to the meeting.
- ☞ Ms Kirkovski, SEA noted again that draft documents of UN agencies were shared prior to the meeting and encouraged the attendees to provide written comments by Wednesday, 24 June. Comments provided would give a good platform for finalizing the UN Strategic Development Cooperation Framework.
- ☞ Mr. Ademi, MES Minister, highlighted that the ministry needs a support according the strategic response for period 2021-2025 in order to implement reforms and laws. On everything planned for next period, he stressed the need for having coordination of all stakeholders and to strengthen the capacities with ministry and IPA structure, as well to avoid any dilemma on this direction.
- ☞ Ms. Dudziak, UN Resident Coordinator, responded on several comments given by both Ministers and EUD representatives. She agreed on the need for strengthening the coordination and specifically working more once the projects are implemented. She highlighted that the cooperation framework should not be limited to one meeting per year for reporting the achieved results and there was a need to strengthen the monitoring more periodically. That would be raised with the Steering Committee once the modalities of governance are discussed. There was definitely a need for strengthening collaboration among all partners/ donors that prepare their development cooperation framework or working on similar themes and find existing mechanisms to continue the discussions. She agreed with the EUD comment on absorption capacities of the institutions for making collective efforts right



and the donors to be sure that they were efficient in helping the Government partners to be more efficient with the aid.

Ms. Damjanovska, Swiss Embassy informed that also SDC was also in planning period of next cycle starting from 2021-2024. Not surprisingly, same topics of relevance were identified and included. She elaborated that the SDC would move from employment to decent employment, from competitiveness to productivity, and new topics that were not tackled so far, such as digitalization, informal economy and human capital. As well, SDC had had intense cooperation with UN and its system was strong especially with regards to the target groups which were thoroughly analysed; the shift from youth in general to youth not in employment or education or from women in general to women in rural areas or inactive was welcomed.

Ms. Kirkovski, SEA summarized of having few donors presenting their support to the country and it is prerogative for better coordination of donors, at least those participating in SWG. She highlighted the reason for establishment of SWG as a platform for discussion and donor coordination.

Ms. Shalja Plavjanska, UNFPA expressed an honour to have the platform to discuss the topics with relevant national and international partners and highlighted the previous cooperation with Ministers and their staff. She pointed out the limited time and length for achievement of SDG having in mind that the proposed priorities were actually the first stage. When addressing the issues, it was thought on what would have transformational effect. Regarding partnerships for working on priorities, other non-traditional partners should be considered if they are able to influence the Agenda and whose engagement does not cost lots of funds (influencers, persons who can make certain changing behaviour in the society, persons with disabilities, etc.) while delivering changes as a centre of sustainable development agenda for leaving no one behind.

She addressed two questions raised in the chat by HERA representative, as partners of UNFPA in implementation of two strategic priority areas. First comment was related to the role of contraception, as a human right and contributor and impediment for development of individuals especially of women in fulfilling their rights and in having access to education, employment, etc. Second comment was with regard to comprehensive sexuality education which issue was built on national priorities.

Ms. Chemerska, HERA stressed the importance of comprehensive sexuality education, instead of a life skill education, especially having in mind the Government has already made a decision for its piloting. In relation to the strategic priority 1 and CRH services, she pointed out that contraception services should be emphasised because there is huge challenge and there is a need for better policy services. She proposed to stress out contraception in priorities.

Ms. Dudziak, UN Resident Coordinator, responded that all comments would be carefully reviewed and taken in consideration while preparing the documents. She invited all attendees to provide feedback by 30 June. In relation to future steps, she informed that UN shall work on finalization of strategic framework over the summer and in the first meeting of Joint Steering Committee will seek for endorsement of the priorities. Final draft shall be consulted during September and get the approval of documents by the Government in October. Governance mechanisms accompanying strategies for communication, partnership and resource mobilisation and annual work plans would be developed later this year in order to start implementing early in 2021.

Conclusions

MES and MLSP shall send draft Action Fiches to the EUD by end of that day (18 June).

Written comments to the draft Strategic Response 2021-2027 shall be sent to the MLSP and MES by 19 June.

Feedback to the UN Development Cooperation Framework 2021-2025 shall be submitted to the UN Coordination Office or UN agencies by 30 June.

Annexes:

Annex 1	Agenda
Annex 2	Draft IPA III Strategic Response for EESP + Health
Annex 3	Presentation of Draft UN SDCF 21-25 Strategic priorities and outcomes
Annex 3a	Draft UN SDCF 21-25 Strategic priorities and outcomes document
Annex 3b	Draft UNDP CDP 21-25 Summary notes
Annex 3c	Draft UNFPA CDP 21-25 Summary notes
Annex 3d	Draft UNICEF CDP 21-25 Summary notes

Minutes taken by: Gordana Trenkoska, MLSP; Julija Peleva Stojkovska MoES

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