



SECTOR “EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND SOCIAL POLICY”
Minutes of the XV Plenary Meeting of the Sector Working Group (SWG)
in the areas of education, employment and social inclusion

Venue: Meeting with physical presence in Ceremonial Hall of the Government of Republic of North Macedonia and via ZOOM link.

Date: 21.11.2024, Thursday, 11:00 - 13:30

Meeting moderated by Ms. Ivana Popovska, MES representative.

Meeting organized by Ministry of Education and Science (MES), Ministry of Economy and Labour (MEL) and Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth (MSPDY), in coordination with Ministry for European Affairs (MEA)/ National IPA Coordinator (NIPAC).

Invited 188 representatives, 89 attendees were present (62 with physical presence and 27 with virtual presence).

Opening statements

Ms. Popovska opened the meeting noting on the Draft Agenda shared with e-mail invitation, mentioned minutes of previous SWG meeting and gave the floor to high-level representatives from relevant ministries.

Ms. Ivanovska, State Secretary of MES, noted the work of SWG as most positive examples of cooperation among state institutions, civil society organisations and international partners for creation and implementation of sector policies and a good opportunity to share a few priorities of MES due to promoting national educational system within European educational space. She highlighted the improvement of infrastructure and conditions for school continuation as top priority and noted that 36 capital investments and 40 smaller interventions in school facilities had been implementing. Activities are part of process of optimizing the school network, conducted jointly with UNICEF, as one of most difficult processes being implemented at state level. She mentioned also the support provided by World Bank and local self-governments due to use of available materials and human resources rationally.

MES representative informed on ongoing work for ensuring quality and advanced implementation of plans and programmes, as well on a process closely linked to global educational trends and changes in society. She stressed that MES is committed to introducing a uniform attitude in all schools, whereas possible, as proven to have positive effects. She pointed out that students stay at the school for a longer time period and student’s duration is up to 15 years with a 900 hours’ time limit.

Priorities for improvement of regulatory legislation are linked to an increase of rights and opportunities for students and pupils, but also due to creating a peaceful and harmonious environment whereas there is no place for violence and discrimination on any ground. She noted that six different legislative decisions passed in the publics and MES received about 3,000 constructive and note-taking proposals.

She informed that several draft laws planned to undergo public discussion and further to pass governmental and parliamentary procedures leading to improvements in education system. In regard to digitalization of educational processes and services, she noted procedures would be initiated in this field. Digital platform Eduino is under usage whereas all the rights to education and science through the application of electronic applications are made available.

Due to a reform in gymnasium education, a process was initiated in which teachers and students from higher education are involved. She pointed out that in average, the educational system is well developed and efficient, but the needs are identified for its strengthening. She highlighted that MES relies on the Government initiative to introduce a unilateral order as soon as possible, in order to reduce costs that are incurred by schools and to invest funds for improvement of the infrastructure.

At the end, she expressed a gratitude to all stakeholders supporting the investments and initiatives in educational system, both logistically and financially, and noted continuation of actions, creation and implementation of effective policies.

Mr. Suma, State Secretary of MEL, pointed out that labour market is changing and new technologies, global markets and new forms of work as emerging to participate in projects that support reforms as necessary for sustainable systems for workers and employers. The Government and new Ministry of Economy and Labour in forthcoming period would be devoted to developing and implementing a systematic approach for dealing with problems at domestic market and labour issues, i.e., addressing aspects due to mis-match between supply and demand of labour force.

He highlighted that needs of companies for qualified labour force would be addressed by ensuring implementation of active labour market programmes and measures through the annual operational plans. Opportunities for trainings in real labour conditions for unemployed persons would ensure improvement of their skills and employability, at least in the labour market, and on the other hand, companies to have a qualified workforce.

He noted that the Government would be strongly focused on young people and their employment, with overall goal for enabling conditions to remain in the country. Grants would be offered to young people with significantly higher rates of income, in order to ensure quality of business activities, their study of advanced IT technologies, and to activate them in labour market, as well to provide better conditions for quality, sustainable and decent jobs. Thus, employment of young people and greater competitiveness of workforce would ensure more prosperous development.



As a goal of MEL would be to prepare national economy for a development and growth. Due to recipients of guaranteed minimum assistance focus would be put on implementation of policy actions for reducing their unemployment. Every person from vulnerable groups activated in labour market would be a benefit for both the people and the companies, as well for national economy. He noted that the role of Government would be to create and ensure a balance between economic flexibility and protection of labour rights, to improve system for respecting labour relations, amiable labour disputes and health and safety at work. Thus, the related processes require innovations, consensus and a clear view of application of the principles of social and labour rights. He pointed out that the country has the duty to create a legal framework and a system to respond to challenges of modern times and at the same time ensure the protection of right for every worker.

He highlighted that success in this regard depend on the capabilities of creating synergy between all the parties in national economy (the state, the trade unions and the employers). Only through social dialogue and mutual accountability the vision for a prosperous society might be accomplished and to overcome challenges jointly.

Application of different modalities and the funding and support from EU and other international partners, would play a key role in success of reforms’ implementation. In that context, he stressed the clear goal to build a society that would support economic development and growth, to protect workers’ rights of workers and to provide opportunities for all citizens.

Ms. Kalisi, Chief of Cabinet of MSPDY Minister, highlighted main and strategic commitment of Government to improve economic growth and living standard of citizens. Social policy is tailored to ensure social security, inclusiveness and poverty reduction, especially of most vulnerable categories of citizens, and at the same time, the improvement of living standard for elderly groups of citizens.

She noted that demographic picture in the state impose the need for policy to economically empower citizens and mentioned several key processes in the dynamic areas of social policy focused on improving living conditions of citizens.

Social protection provided through social rights and social services are intended for relevant categories of citizens as a key response improvement of living standard and quality of life. Improvement of social protection system of is planned, both in relation to the rights of social protection, and in relation to expansion and advancement of quality of social services. She informed that about 100 different licensed social services have been delivered at the local level for a large number of vulnerable categories of citizens. MSPDY would continue to support vulnerable groups in times of their vulnerability by entering social protection system, as well support for exiting for their integration into labour market.

She noted that percentage of active labour market participation was 52.1% from workforce at the end of June 2024, meaning human potential in the country was largely unused in conditions where business sector struggles to find quality workforce.

Activation of the socially vulnerable categories of citizens, the lack of work, over active measures and policies for employment, as well as social entrepreneurship, are important factors for reduction of number of recipients of guaranteed minimum assistance and their labour market inclusion, given as a fact that a country is faced with a lack of labour force.

She highlighted data from June 2024 that 22.8% of young people aged between 15 and 29 years were unemployed. Many young people are still not educated, employed or trained. Thus, activities for supporting youth employment in every aspect and youth activation are of great importance. Their inclusion in labour market is beyond the guarantee and new opportunities for them must be opened with Law for youth participation, as well as Youth Strategy 2023-2027.

Expansion of child protection system has an accent for introduction of European Child Protection Guarantee in country, as a major prerequisite and a reform. It would open opportunities for every child to achieve its full potential for a future life. Her note was due to capital investments in pre-school education and care as a significant long-term investment for the children. Until 2028, 25 gradings are foreseen to be opened in order to ensure all children to be included in pre-school education and care. At the same time, it would be beneficial to enhance competencies of professional staff thus contributing to improving the quality of the pre-educational process.

Advancement of pension and disability insurance system would be aimed at improving quality of services, administration of social security and increase of an income for persons with disabilities. Government had conducted a linear increase of pensions for 2,500 denars since September, as well it would be done in March 2025.

In regard to implementation of Strategy for Roma Integration 2022-2030, she highlighted that country expressed a clear strategic commitment for society with equal opportunities for all. Actively, the country had been working on implementation of activities for improvement of access to health, education, housing and ensuring personal documents for Roma community.

Policies related to gender equality and implementation of grass-root activities are key for democratization of country, possible through inclusion of women and men in societal flows. Strategy for fight against gender-based violence is being prepared and new specialized services would be developed for women and children’s victims of gender-based and domestic violence in forthcoming period.

She noted that credible policies, focused on concrete and visible results and jointly implemented and supported, would contribute to achieving the high priority of improving the living standard in the country. Thus, relevant authorities, civil society organizations and development partners should strive for achieving a high-level shared responsibility, optimal use of resources and achieving successful results for citizens.

Mr. Albu, Head of Cooperation in European Union Delegation (EUD), stressed that presence in numbers of participants at the meeting is a clear indication of importance of sectors being discussed leading to development of the country. As the objective of a meeting would be to hear on progress, plans and immediate priorities of polices from relevant authorities, he noted that three areas being in focus of cooperation between EU and North Macedonia. Thus, mutual goal is to make the



society of North Macedonia more resilient, inclusive, prosperous, invest in skills required in labour market, protecting most vulnerable and offering equal opportunities for all.

Firstly, he noted on some positive recent developments with successful reforms introducing guaranteed minimum assistance, labour market activation and investment in new generation of social services, as excellent examples that the country could deliver on its policy commitments and could soften the shocks of global events on its citizens.

However, he stressed that a key challenge in sectors remain to be addressing the labour market challenges. Brain drains of young people, low labour participation, low human capital and skill mismatch, as well as labour market exclusion remain key constraints to inclusive growth.

EU integration process that the country firmly had targeted present a great opportunity. Accession process is based on concept of early integration and early alignment with EU standards, as a good momentum for the country and Macedonian citizens, whereas no one should be left behind principles and guarantees for social rights of citizens should be provided.

More specific about education sector which face numerous challenges, he highlighted results of 2022 PISA that demonstrated that the country would need to make additional efforts to improve its educational system, train qualified teachers and educational professionals, create more the conditions for teaching and learning. This signal would be to expedite reforms in educational sector, namely to adopt long-awaited laws, such as Law on secondary education, Law on vocational education and Law on adult education. He emphasized that new Law on secondary education and revised Law on primary education must imperatively be aligned with new Law on prevention and protection against discrimination. He pointed out on inclusion of full list of bases for discrimination, including gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. Being on EU-pass, North Macedonia is expected to be consistent and not to compromise on basic principles of non-discrimination.

He stressed the encouragement to Government of North Macedonia to continue the reform of inclusive education that started as of 2023-24 school year. First steps of reform in primary education were not easy. Schools, parents, teachers and children would need more support from local and central authorities to make inclusivity a reality. He stressed that reintroduction of special schools could be a clear black slide of reform. All children would need to be enrolled in mainstream schools in line with Law on primary education in force and same model should be replicated in secondary education.

When speaking about youngest, enrolment of children in preschool between 3 and 6 years old remain very low compared to EU target of 95%. In case of Roma children, figures barely reach 4%. He highlighted a critical moment to improve access and quality to early childhood education and care. Reforms would allow early development, better inclusivity, better learning results in schools and a more prosperous society.

He noted on development of human capital within newly planned IPA III program, as well as reform and growth facility. New instrument would support priorities of MES outlined in context of reform agenda. At same time, it would be good to be known planned educational policies for the period to come, as well as support from all sector stakeholders.

Speaking about the use, he noted on a very positive sign and topics of the portfolio of MSPDY, which has a solid strategic and legal framework already in place. However, he pointed out on an urgent need to strengthen use policies.

In regard to National Youth Strategy, as well National Strategy for Mental Health, it would be critical to ensure adequate funding for youth policy and its implementation. Unfortunately, youth policy had not had a specific budget line in State Budget and which constituted a limitation.

As far as the area of employment and labour is concerned, he noted that North Macedonia has been successfully implementing Youth Guarantee. As important note, Government of North Macedonia should allocate sufficient resources and invest in capacity building of staff in Employment Service Agency for a better outreach of youths and persons from vulnerable groups.

In the area of occupational safety and health, State Labour Inspectorate and recently under responsibility of MEL, made significant strides by hiring additional inspectors and conducting numerous training sessions. However, more improvements are needed, especially in area of occupational safety, such as adoption of Action Plan for Safety and Health.

When it comes to social dialogue, he pointed out that enforcement and option of collective agreements in private sector remain weak. In addition, Law on amicable settlement of labour disputes had not been implemented yet.

In order to pursue reforms in sector, he noted as a critical to adopt several laws, such as Law on social entrepreneurship which has been in governmental consultation since December 2023 and finalize long-awaited review of Law on labour relations. He stressed that EU would further support investments in improvement of labour market, employment opportunities and social policy through forthcoming operational programme. He noted that programme could become a game changer, removing barriers for labour market participation, especially for youth and women, creating incentives for labour market participation and improving quality of social services, particularly in underserved areas.

He emphasized a very ambitious reform agenda in sectors of education, employment and social policy. EU and projects funded stand ready to support Macedonian efforts and demand a very necessary process.

When speaking about social policy, he underlined importance to continue deinstitutionalization process. Through IPA assistance, EU supported preparation and adoption of National Deinstitutionalization Strategy and further on are been supporting its implementation. He noted that ensure sufficient resources should be ensued.

By establishing Department for Roma Inclusion. he stressed the efforts of all the colleagues who has been involved in fruitful cooperation in the areas covered.

He pointed out on proper implementation of reforms that would be beneficial for citizens and would retain talents in the country, offer them equal opportunities and thus, contribute to swift economic growth and development. Undoubtedly, he had expressed his thoughts that all ministries recognize main challenges and would be a basis on building of new reforms.



Presentation of immediate priorities and reform actions of the ministries

Ms. Popovska, MES representative, gave an introduction to second session in which representatives from ministries presented running reforms, reflecting on Reform Agenda, current projects and new IPA III programming period.

Ms. Papatolevska, Head of Department in MEL, noted that according Governmental Programme for following period significant priorities are defined.

Firstly, powerful improvement of labour legislation with an aim of achieving the market flexibility and labour right, especially through introduction of flexible forms of work. She noted a need for flexible forms of work as a result from rapid changes in technology and given that the economy must be followed by changes in economic flows. Many processes, especially in IT sector allow work from a distance and flexible working time, which would make traditional forms for work for the elderly not to be applicable. It is undoubted that flexibility of working time and place contribute to a better balance of work between professional and private life of workers and to enlargement of their satisfaction, and in this way directly would affect labour productivity. In addition, such forms of work from the aspect of employers could result in the reduction of labour costs.

Forms of unemployment could also have a huge impact on labour market and on wages that would be limited in traditional employment ratio, as well as on the persons who take care of family members, parents of small children or older persons, which on other hand contribute to problem solving with the lack of unemployment.

MEL is also planning to improve existing mechanism for peaceful resolution of labour disputes. Given the fact that introduction of last significant changes in Law for amicable resolution of labour disputes ten years ago, results are insignificant. In addition, legislation would introduce a Law for a mandatory settlement of amicable labour disputes before ruling in the court, which would contribute to reduction of the items for work discussions. The priority would be carried out with IPA III funds, as well as with technical support from International Labour Organization.

Within the framework of IPA III programmes, MEL would work on improvement of health and safety system at work through a project in an amount of 2.5 million EUR. Among main benefits would be improvement of capacities of relevant institutions, training of Training Centre in State Labour Inspectorate (SLI) and establishment of an integrated system of evidence of accidents and injuries during work and professional illness. As special importance, the intention would be the health and safety of workers to be a fundamental right of employment based on international standards of labour.

Through EU Sociex+ technical assistance instrument, activities had been implemented for a model of legal solution which would enable recognition of freelancers and digital platforms workers from aspect of their access to social insurance system. Implementation of these priorities would carry their own challenges.

Due to introduction of flexible ways of working, trade unions often have resistance to ensure that the changes could lead to greater insecurity for workers, especially due to isolation at workplace and working hours which could often be longer, as well as risk of career development. On other hand, the workers would resist because flexible forms of work are only useful to some workers.

Same had been a case with mechanism for amicable labour disputes on which there is a need for raising awareness, both to workers and employers about advantages that improvement of the system would have for both sides.

Another prerequisite is lack of financial and technical capacities, especially for improvement of system for occupational safety and health of workforce, which would be additional investments in education and in advancement of institutional infrastructure. She highlighted the lack of staff in public sector for implementation of the priority as an additional prerequisite. She pointed out as necessary to change perception of employers and workers for importance and necessity of occupational safety and health, which is a long-term process.

Mr. Frchkovski, Head of Unit in MEL, noted on importance of topics related to employment policy. A middle-term priority was not highlighted due to continuation on activities for reducing unemployment and activation of vulnerable groups of unemployed persons harder to find their place in labour market, as well prevention from unemployment of young people up to 29 years.

Mentioning official data of State Statistical Office (SSO) and other relevant sources, such of ESA, he pointed out of almost double rate number between unemployment rate (15-64) and youth unemployment rate (15-29), i.e., 12.5% compared to 22.8%.

As a challenge, he stressed the need to ensure continuously labour market activation of young persons and vulnerable groups. These activities are provided through measures defined in Annual Operational Plan for Active Labour Market Measures and Employment Services, by which different approaches of inclusion are applied for unemployed persons registered in ESA. Thus, different set of measures and services could be applied to support their direct employment and productivity of companies, i.e., knowledge and skills gained for their greater employability. Some types of trainings provided through measures and services in Operating Plan could be conducted in real labour conditions, i.e., in private sector entities. At same time, companies might invest in training for their future employees. Thus, different types of trainings provided to unemployed persons in order to ensure a qualified labour force would contribute towards developed national economy.

As first country in Western Balkan, the country has adopted Young Guarantee Plan and being implementing Young Guarantee Scheme since 2018. He informed that more than 130,000 young persons were included in Young Guarantee, which encompasses whole set of measures from educational part and active labour market measures and employment services. Also, he highlighted around 43,000 young persons to age of 29 were directly employed through employment services provided ESA.



He informed that during forthcoming year a review would be done in order to assess implementation of Youth Employment Plan in regard to activities successfully and unsuccessfully implemented, reasons for unsuccessfulness, adaptation of existing activities and adding new ones. Initiative would be to plan activities to last a whole year in order to provide active labour market measures and employment services for young unemployed persons. Intention would be to introduce a purposeful line of measures and services through youth organizations, to offer activities for young unemployed persons in order to keep them in a pace and to get them more actively involvement in labour market.

Additionally, plan would be to increase the importance of grants for opening and supporting businesses lead by young persons, and thus, to improve their entrepreneurial skills. In the coming years, activities would be implemented to invest in such skills in order to prepare future youth labour force for high-paying, high-quality and long-term job. As an important measure, young people would be able to experience practical work in duration of six months. Strive is such measures to be implemented efficiently in order to ensure labour market activation of young persons.

Similar actions would be applied for other vulnerable groups at labour market, such as Roma, recipients of guaranteed minimum assistance, unemployed persons with low qualifications or with incomplete primary education. Focus would be on two directions. Limited capacities to include these persons in different trainings occur and consultations with social partners through Economic and Social Council and industrial development zones would be done to find opportunities for their labour market activation through measures and services of operational plan. He noted that in average 500 to 600 recipients of guaranteed minimum assistance are included annually in active labour marker measures and employment services, which is an insufficient number.

As a strategic document, Action Plan for Employment 2024-2027 ensures a solid approach to employment policies. As well, it provided essential background as opportunities, such as dual education which could support young unemployed persons. Another activity would be enforcement of measures to support of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. Thus, support should be tailored to offer more jobs.

Other important goal would be to strengthen capacities of institutions that influence all previous noted activities due to implementation of active labour market measures and employment services, especially of ESA and SLI. He highlighted that unemployed person could be effectively reached through local employment centres.

Scope of all activities of employment policies could effectively have an impact of labour force.

Ms. Kazandjiska, Head of Department in MES, emphasized that in order to improve practices and policies in primary education, a proposal would be to amend Law on primary education. Education is provided primary education intended to implemented in separate continuing programmes and in schools that would have a verification for primary education. In that context, Municipal Primary School “Anton Simeonovich Makarenko” would pass as state school additional activity due to primary education for adults.

In order to address issue of segregation of Roma students and on basis of court decision from Strasbourg, establishment of the National Lawmaker and Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, which would assert direct discrimination, new proposal provision of Law on primary education should be made. Additionally, Article 63 is emphasized as a basis to prevent and bypass physical activity of pupils within the communities.

Amendments of the law would also stipulate that the organisation should treat the pupils with special needs based on a recommendation of International Functionality Classification in terms of their health status. For pupils who study in a modified programme, while the parent or the caretaker, primary school and committee, would appreciate that pupils would study better in primary school with a resource centre and the same could be allowed to study in such a school. She informed that MES would wave a public call for educational assistants in October each year.

MES would continue to work on protection from violence, abuse and bullying of students and pupils through programmes for preventing discrimination, prevention from alcohol, drugs and psychotropic substances. Specifically, procedures that each school must implement to protect pupils from any form of violence and abuse has been approved. For first time, as a provider of services, work position Educational Assistant is introduced. Every municipality would be expected with a decision of municipality council, to ensure establishment of a support centre for students with any kind of obstacles.

She informed that these actions of reforms in primary education are foreseen within Growth Plan 2025-2027 of North Macedonia. Reforms are related to human capital area.

First measure would be reforms supported in primary education due to strengthening of educational system to deal with imbalance of knowledge, enlargement of access to quality education and trainings and improving access to education based on workplace and dual education. Year planned for implementation of these activities would be till June 2026 according which school would have at least one qualified Career Advisor. According to programme for professional orientation of pupils in eighth and ninth grades, Career Advisor should develop a programme for professional orientation of pupils and program should become a part of school year programme. In order to improve competencies of skilled workers, reform measure should also provide quality training for skilled workers who have the opportunity to take care for professional development of pupils. Training would be supported by MES and as one of the possibilities, to provide training through catalogue of accredited trainings for skilled workers.

Second measure would be to ensure efficient, coordinated and inclusive digital transformation of education through integration of skills and creation of new activity. Goal of 95% of trained teachers would be trained for continuous professional development and with a focus on digital and green technologies.

She added that in November 2024, MES had adopted a plan for 2025-2026, in which pupils from first to ninth grade, with two hours per day, would be taught on subject of technical education and computer sciences. Thus, there would be studies for



teachers from seventh to grade, as well as possibility of improving digital skills for all teachers and improvement of national standards for evaluation in primary education.

In regard to circular economy would be enhancement of efficiency through rationalization of network of primary schools and creation of smart primary schools with IT tools, Internet infrastructure and security of operations. She noted that handbook for this measure would be developed till December 2025, when implementation of new methodology for financing of primary education should be enforced for 2026. In addition, presentation had also delivered schedule of a composition with necessary finances for proper application of new formula.

At the end, she informed on third measure due to improvement of conditions in 160 schools foreseen to be implemented till December 2025. 160 primary schools would be equipped with Internet access and IT tools. In 2023, 40 schools were equipped and in 2024, an additional 35 schools. She noted that provision of necessary tools would be done through Budget of the Republic of North Macedonia and project unit of World Bank in MES.

Ms. Kizeska, Head of Department in MES, pointed out that Draft Law on secondary education, special decisions were made regarding career counselling, career counsellor and career counselling team. Draft law would define a way of career counselling and choice by a student of career counsellor in established centre. Further, she informed on 2025 plan in this sector.

An activity for preparation of a sub-legal act in which conditions for career advisor and his competencies would be defined. Additionally, preparation of a career counselling programme for students in high schools, development of electronic career counselling tools, development of a platform, its trial testing and evaluation of electronic test. She informed that training for career advisors would be conducted in five high schools and are considered as state's priority training. One third of trainings would be carried out in 2025 and final round of achievement of indicators would be June 26.

A campaign called “Smart Work and Education”, which started in 2021 and before an announcement of competition for enrolment of students in secondary education in 2021/2022 schooling year, it had been approved on local and regional level and new profiles could be opened, which would be barred from companies and employees of real market. She informed that campaign would continue successfully in forthcoming years and would be implemented in local communities. Its success is visible with number of registered students in vocational education. During 2024, there were two-thirds of total number of enrolled students in vocational education, unlike beginning of a reform when had been the opposite. Trend was to increase number of students in high school vocational education.

She noted that to number of companies involved in dual education, more than 100 companies were involved in dual education in 2024, compared to 2021, when there were only 8 companies. As part of investments by MES due to increasing attractiveness of educational system, as well as additions of scholarships for students enrolled in dual education and for education system for qualifications chosen for qualified labour force. With Draft Law on secondary education, an addition would be of a paid enrolment for students in companies able to carry out practical education.

She highlighted that continuation of successful policy of MES in this regard would be certain that indicators defined Growth Plan 2025-2027 would be achieved in the dynamics expected.

She informed that a plan would be to open two new regional training centres formed in January 2024, as well as though the support of IPA project. Technical specification for equipment had been prepared, development programmes had been developed, training for professionals for validation and inclusion had been implemented, and three regional centers had been established.

According to methodology for selection of vocational schools that could be potential regional centres for vocational education and training, a vocational school had already been selected in one region that would become a regional centre for vocational education and training. She informed that MES commenced with plans for following activities related to potential vocational schools that would become regional centres for vocational education and training.

She noted that validation of informal and informal education which leads to increased competencies of adult population and increased opportunities for employment. Aim of validation would be inclusion of employed persons who could be exposed to risk of becoming unemployed on their age. Validation of informal and informal education would be regulated with draft Law for adult education, informing to be in governmental procedure of its adoption. She informed that eight programs for validation of informal and informal education had already been developed and it would remain to develop an additional eight in 2024-2025. Validation of trainings would begin in regional centres supported by EU projects and ETF.

Draft law on secondary education would have a special focus on digital skills in the institution. It would be focused on annual programme for work of schools to introduce and implement activities that improve digital skills of students and teachers, including interactive learning by using electronic communication.

According draft Law on secondary education, its concept would be adopted including national standards for secondary education in which competencies are determined and which students would have to complete at the end of secondary education. New continuing programmes for high school education would be adopted integrating the European framework for digital competencies. Activity for reviewing programmes in which digital competencies should be integrated would begin in 2025 and she informed that final year for achieving an indicator according by Growth Plan 2025-2027 in human capital area is December 2027. Bearer of the activity would be Bureau for Development of Education (BRO) and there are studies for digital green sciences which would be priority studies of the state. As indicators would be training of 7,000 people from secondary education will 2027.

Ms, Smiljanska, Head of Department in MES, noted on forthcoming period of change in sector of higher education as one of priorities. In order to improve quality of higher education, to promote innovation, to strengthen the relationship between



higher education and industry sector, new bodies had been formed with a key role in implementation of higher education reforms. She informed that one of bodies would be National Coordination Body for Reforms in Higher Education, Science, Research and Development and experts from different fields were nominated by higher education institutions. Their interdisciplinarity and expertise would enable formation of comprehensive strategies that would lead to long-term development of higher education and science sector.

Initiative for reforming educational system and establishment of National body for reforming education, science, research and development is defined in Government's programme for 2024-2028 period, aimed to make a plan through an inclusive process for improvement of quality of higher educational system, science, research and development in country. Body would focus to support higher educational institutions in process of applying changes and advancing overall higher educational and scientific activity.

Needs for amendments to Law on higher education had also been detected. Thus, MES had been establishing a working group with a task to work on preparation of proposal to amend implementation of Law on higher education. Working group held first meeting whereas key aspects of above-mentioned process would be considered to amend and advance implementation of the law.

In addition to National coordination body, National council for higher education and scientific research activity had been operating for three years, since June 2021, working to ensure, assess, develop and improve quality of higher education and scientific research activities in the country. National council had been operating by a set of documents, rules and regulations adopted and applied in practice. As well, National council was working on draft version for amendments to the law, which came from Inter-University Conference. Similarly, changes of activities of National council were intended to finalize proposal of National programme for higher education and proposal of National program for scientific research act, as well intensively working on preparation of a proposal for funding for higher education and proposal for scientific research activity, which should be accepted by Government and Assembly. She emphasized that these are four key documents that should be implemented in implementation of goals for reforming higher education.

In this regard, it would refer to work of Higher education quality agency and without reforms, it could not be achieved without supervision and provision of quality. Therefore, she pointed out on necessity to completely establish a system for providing quality through accreditation department and evaluation department in higher education by such agency. Additionally, she highlighted need for comprehensive digitalization of an agency for its digital transformation of work with an electronic approach for cooperation with higher education institutions in country and with institutions connected with them, with professional organizations, institutions connected at labour market and with student organizations, as well as exchange of information and expertise. It would be expected in introduction of electronic archive of documents that the agency would have.

In addition, she informed that higher education institutions accredited, public and private, had already published reports on quality assurance, in which they reported at least 80% in accordance with standards and requirements for quality assurance compared to European Higher Education Framework.

Ms. Kostovska, Deputy Head of Department and IPA Coordinator in MES, informed on activities being carried out in IPA framework. First, in order to raise efficiency and effectiveness in IPA III programming, MES had decided to change last IPA III allocations (2025, 2026 and 2027) to increase absorption. Starting in August 2024 and in coordination with MEA, MES had prepared a number of action documents. Important criteria for EU/ IPA III are relevance of interventions and technical clarity of proposed activities. Education is a component of four-year plan, i.e., competition and inclusive development based on lessons learned from implementation of IPA II projects and on identified priorities presented at educational conference in September 2024. According to priorities of Reform Agenda, action document for education had been prepared with a specific goal of improving efficiency and inclusiveness of education.

She noted that power to strengthen public policy and legal framework in educational sector, strengthened capacities of responsible persons at all levels in education, improvement of primary education and ensuring educational climate, which should be opened and inclusive for diversity and well-being of students.

She informed that since August 2024, MES had been participating in identifying new priorities for action documents in educational sector due to primary education, secondary education, higher education, adult education and vocational education and training. Draft action document for programming period 2025-2027 was in internal consultation process for relevance assessment within EC services.

Ms. Aslani, Head of Unit in MSPDY, noted on priorities and activities in social protection area of MSPDY. Improvement of social protection system on household level would include all materially unsecured persons through new measures by involving beneficiaries in labour market, access to their families, information about rights and programmes for employment, implementation of actions to alleviate above poverty line, creation of relevant strategic documents, establishment and implementation of programmes and activities for fight against discrimination and inequality, concrete targeted services and new social services.

Through the support of WB project unit, she informed that a body for assessment of disability was under establishment and implementation of a single methodology for an assessment that would be used due to several rights based on pension and disability insurance, rights from social and child protection based on prevention and functionality principles. A significant part of activities would be maintenance of registration of persons with disabilities, which would be collecting all the data for persons with disabilities in a system of assessment, working skills, professional rehabilitation, users of training facilities, and so on. Also, she noted on a priority in this area due to maintenance of centres for professional rehabilitation which was in



progress in order to ensure employability of these persons in labour market, improvement of community-based social services for increased coverage of children and persons with disabilities, access to quality services for children and persons with disabilities and their families and services that would lead an independent life for them.

Due to introduction of modern mechanisms for financing social protection, she pointed out on principle of prioritization of necessary services, balanced geographical distribution and planning from bottom to top, intensifying social agreements with providers of social services, and moreover, for ensuring diversity, quality, sustainability and continuity in services delivered, it would be of utmost importance enhancement of role of municipalities. Provision of social services would be part of gradual implementation of fiscal decentralization of municipalities, strengthening of their role and functioning of regional councils for social protection in regard to process of planning and implementing social policies, creating and implementing social plans and active social councils.

In regard to National Deinstitutionalization Strategy 2018-2027, deinstitutionalization process would continue with its gradual transformation of institutions as part of social protection system. She shared information due to activities being carried out within social protection framework. Ministry has been establishing a network of providers for social services, such as public social protection institutions, other government providers for social services, municipalities, city of Skopje and municipalities in city of Skopje, through concluding administrative agreements and which must be licensed. She informed that a list of 133 licenced providers of social services. Similarly, natural persons already licensed as providers for social services, are part through administrative agreements concluded with municipalities.

She pointed out that Ministry also had been providing funds for implementation of social services and at least once a year, Ministry published public call for social services providers for provision of social services from municipalities, city of Skopje and its municipalities.

She noted that price of social services from social protection is decided by the Minister based on methodology for formation of prices of these services depending on standards and normatives defined. Decision had been reviewed each year and she informed on ongoing process of reviewing decision for 2025.

In course of 2024, Ministry included about 62 administrative agreements with licensed providers of social services and municipalities that provide services through licensed providers of social services. She highlighted that most developed services in social protection system and with highest awareness among users, are social service for help and care in home and personal assistance. 33 administrative agreements with municipalities are being implemented by licensed providers for social service for help and care in home. She informed that 2,073 users had used social service for help and care in home and 880 users used personal assistance. In regard to day-care services for persons with disabilities, 369 users had been using the daily community-based services.

Due to implementation of Action Plan for Deinstitutionalization, Ministry had been working on expansion of social services for supported living within community and gradual transformation of social protection institutions. She informed that in 56 housing units about 255 users had lived through social service for supported living.

In regard to social protection rights, she noted that 33,608 users had been using right to guaranteed minimum assistance and 10,730 users of right to financial assistance. She emphasized that biggest users of cash benefits are those persons using the right for assistance and care from other persons and which they are 56,717 users.

She informed that the support of project units of World Bank development loans, technical assistance would be provided for support for improvement and creation of legal framework and legal acts for ensuring enhanced accessibility to services, indicators for an assessment of possibility of participation, confirmation of prices for social services and improvement of price composition for social service, as well an analysis on possibility for social services to be made commercial.

She also informed on expected EU / IPA support due to support for improvement of quality of social services, development of indicators, measuring tools and enhancement of monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Ms. Cekova, Head of Department in MSPDY, noted a strategic priority of Government and Ministry for creation and implementation of youth policies based on relevant recommendation of European Union and international acts. She recalled on first National Strategy for Youth 2005-2015 introduced by Government in 2005. Second National Strategy 2015-2025 had also covered 10 years. Having in mind contemporary flows beginning of this decade, process for development of new National Youth Strategy 2023-2027 had been prepared though a leading role by previous Agency for Youth and Sport in cooperation with UNDP. In regard to its implementation, Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies had been introduced in 2020.

Thus, relevant strategy would ensure continuity for implementation of strategic goals in eight main areas, such as youth participation, youth work, youth information, entrepreneurship and support for employment, health, culture, education and security. She emphasized on emerging priorities of youth policies for support of entrepreneurship and support for employment. She mentioned the development support provided by EU, OSCE and UN agencies in different areas.

She highlighted a priority for support of employment of young people and noted on continuation and immediate implementation of youth guarantee, although previous Agency for Youth and Sport was not included. Enhancing contacts with young people would be important which would allow young people up to age of 29, who neither in employment, education nor training, to receive a support for their employability and corresponding job offer, to continue their education or to be included in some of active labour market measures and programmes and employment services during a period of 4 months according to their registration as unemployed persons in ESA. She pointed out that young people need to be encouraged and motivated to be active at labour market. Due to increasing youth employment, MSPDY would work with MEL and ESA on further enhancement of activities of Youth Guarantee.



Before beginning of process of preparation of National Youth Strategy 2023-2027, methodology for its preparation and research of youth trends were conducted in January 2022. Whole process of creating the strategy and its implementation were conducted by previous Agency with support of partners, such as UNDP, OSCE, EU and UNFPA and with involvement of all relevant parties. She mentioned the need for monitoring and evaluation of implementation of National Youth Strategy, so in Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, Government had envisaged a preparation of an annual report for its implementation and to be reviewed by National Assembly of Republic of North Macedonia. She informed that such report had not been delivered yet. She pointed out that relevant institutions had not provided reports as inputs, had not provided financial resources for implementation of activities foreseen in strategy and majority of indicators set had not been collected by State Statistical Office (SSO), only those related to labour market activation for young persons aged 15 to 29 years, although such activities had been defined in relevant law.

As well once a year, Government had organized a themed sessions on youth topics. She informed that two discussion sessions have been organized and progress of implementation of activities National Youth Strategy 2023-2027 were discussed.

In last two years of implementation of strategy, 2025-2026, she suggested that Ministry should conduct research on perceptions and trends of youth in order to assess the realization degree of activities of National Youth Strategy 2023-2027. She also informed that external independent evaluation would be planned at the end of strategic period of implementation and its success would be biggest advantage to see progress of towards achievement of indicators. She informed on planned preparation of a tool for monitoring activities of strategy, as well as monitoring the implementation of projects in the area of youth from different stakeholders in the country.

Basic aspect of Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies would be to ensure that youth organizations actively participated, and moreover, young persons in processes of creating youth policies and decision making, as well to ensure preparation and implementation of strategic documents done nationally and locally and information and joint planning of activities related to and for them.

She emphasized that implementation of law could be said not to be at a satisfactory level, but some results might be noted. MSPDY had been conducting a register for youth organization pursuant to law and rulebook. Register has recorded about 130 youth organizations.

In regard to implementation of law at local level, she noted on a need for urgency and dedication of local self-government units. She informed that young persons had been appointed in institutions which it should promote youth policies and youth participation. Position had been introduced in Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies for first time. 80% of state institutions and local self-government units had been appointed.

She also informed that representatives elected in National Assembly of Young People, one of them to be President, had not been formed yet and is not functional. Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies had defined a 0.3% percentage of total state budget to be allocated for implementation of youth policies, on national level, and a 0.1% percentage of budget of local self-government units. She noted budgets allocated for youth policies at national and local level are still insignificant.

Research Centre, introduced with the law, would be made functional through the introduction of Department for Youth and its units in MSPDY, i.e., with new acts of systematization and working positions.

One of priorities of MSPDY and its strategic goal is advancement of youth work, as defined in Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies. She also noted that an occupation standard was adopted - youth worker, a program for post-graduate studies for youth workers was introduced, a rulebook on quality standards for youth centers was adopted, portfolio of youth workers and code of ethics for youth workers, yet youth work is not recognized by the state as a profession, but the work of youth is not recognized by the state as a profession. MSPDY had planned to work on preparation of Law on Youth Work and Young Workers in course of 2025.

At local level, participation of youth was guaranteed through local youth councils, which as representative body of youth in local self-government context. 19 local youth councils, in total 80 municipalities had been established. She noted that local strategies for young people were only drafted in seven municipalities. Local self-government units according relevant law had a responsibility to open at least one youth centre on their territory for implementation of a program for young persons, and thus to ensure improvement of the quality of life of young people. She informed that 8 youth centres had been opened, but office for youth had been opened only in one municipality.

According the latest 2021 census, number of young persons aged 15 to 29 in country were 18% of total population. As a comparison and decreasing the youth population, she noted that this percentage was 24% in 2002. According to various researches, up to the age of 18, young persons spend 11 years in school, but learn as for 7.3 years. Unemployment among young persons is a high 26.7%, i.e., 35.1% among young women. One in four young persons aged 15-24 are not employed, nor in education nor in training. Four out of five young persons believe that they are not adequately involved in decision-making processes. More than half of young persons are thinking of leaving the country. There is highest rate of outflow of highly educated staff of 20%, compared to all countries in the Western Balkans.

Situation with young people are the reason for full realization of National Youth Strategy, implementation of Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies and a series of other activities aimed of improving situation of young people in country and approximating conditions with those of EU member states.

At the end, she noted that Republic of North Macedonia is one of founding countries of Regional Youth Cooperation Office, as part of Berlin Process and supported by EU. Country's participation had been with 138,000 EUR in RYCO budget and with representatives in its management bodies.



Discussion among relevant stakeholders

Mr. Frchkovski, Head of Unit in MEL, raised the issue in regard to introduction of career guidance and noted that not only in secondary education, career guidance should be also introduced in its final years. He also pointed out that parents should be involved for their further educational pathway and policies should ensure opportunities within domestic labour market, with attractable jobs and investment in their qualifications should be taken. Certain aspects of trends should be constantly followed by Bureau for Development and Education (BDE) and State Statistical Office (SSO). He highlighted that career path of a generation should be followed and in certain point of time, such as in secondary education, appropriate guidance could be provided to next educational level. Having such approach, it could be influenced on mismatch at labour market. He also emphasized actions in this regard should contribute toward accomplishment of state priorities defined in National Development Strategy, and thus, supported with concrete activities.

Ms. Kazandjiska, Head of Department in MES, recalled on her presentation whereas programme introduced in 2020 for career guidance of pupils from 8th and 9th grades in each primary school, the professional co-worker should develop a programme for professional orientation of pupils, as part of annual work program of the school. The reform measure had been presented and qualified training had been delivered for professionals which have a competence to work on professional development of pupils. These training has been conducted in coordination of MES and especially in the future, it would receive a status of priority studies organized and conducted by the state.

Mr. Frchkovski, Head of Unit in MEL, also pointed out on a need for having a closer cooperation with local economic and social councils, whereas involvement of local companies could be ensured. A regional development strategy and possibly signed memorandums for cooperation must be taken in account and plans of local companies on what type of professional workers they would require, it would be beneficial for local economies.

Ms. Ivanovska, State Secretary of MES, noted on a suggestion and highlighted that the cooperation should be strengthened among ministries, as well actions should be undertaken due to their responsibilities. She again emphasized that career guidance as professional orientation has been introduced with new Law on primary education. Professional career training in secondary education had been implemented and a career path as an instrument had been introduced. She pointed out on a that a state had not had enough capacity or, in other words, she noted that there had not been greater interest from professionals to do to apply the instrument. Besides having an instrument, a ready-capable employee should be in place, who would sit down and gain trust, but on the other hand, a dedication and trust from parents towards career guidance of their children should be taken in account. She informed that in regard to cooperation with companies, memorandums had been signed with several companies for performing trainings of students. Since 2015-2016 and with a strong focus on dual education, each student had received information where practical trainings could be implemented. She pointed out on unsatisfactory conditions for implementation of practical trainings in schools in terms of equipment.

Ms. Karovska, representative from HERA Health Education and Research Association, greeted all speakers and noted that priorities and reforms in all sectors presented would be require active cooperation and active involvement all ministries. She raised an issue in regard to youth policies and highlighted on an extremely low implementation of related laws, strategies and action plans, and based on this, she asked on a need for prioritizing of certain actions. Additionally, in relation to MES, she pointed out that the comment mentioned from EUD representative should be reconsidered in relation to introduction of principles of anti-discrimination in relevant Law on primary education and Law on secondary education, based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc. As well, she noted that if these principles would not be considered, it might exclude different groups of students. A problem with violence among students in schools should be closely considered and the system should find solutions how to protected them.

Ms. Cekova, Head of Department in MSPDY, recalled that the priority of MSPDY would be implementation of relevant law due to youth participation in youth policies and actions would be undertaken in which the participation of young people would be crucial through support of local self-government units by establishment and functioning of local young councils and young youth centres. Additionally, training for youth participation would be aimed at ensuring planned activities to be put in place competently. She informed that for activities planned within National Youth Strategy had been foreseen with the Budget for 2024-2025. Preparation of new action plan had been envisaged in 2025 which should be developed due to actions in 2026 and 2027. Before its preparation, an analysis on trends and degree of implementation of strategy would be carried out in order to consider its implementation and expectation for forthcoming action plan.

Ms. Ivanovska, State Secretary of MES, pointed out that during preparation of Law on primary education, it was assessed that as a system law, all forms of discrimination are related and there had been enough evidence to be used in other relevant law, when applicable. On other hand, she pointed out the state forbids to have any form of discrimination and violence, especially in schools.

Presentation of the Draft National Action Plan for the Child’s Rights 2024-2028 and the Analysis on the Child Guarantee

Ms. Todorova, Head of Unit in MSPDY, gave briefly an explanation on reasons and needs for National Action Plan for rights of children. Improvement and the consideration of children's rights should be considered as one of most important priorities of every society, which has a civil regulation primarily. Education and upbringings of children in their lives would have all necessary conditions for normal development. Thus, priority of children's rights must be considered as development of the rules of growth as one of main social issues.



For the Government of Republic of North Macedonia, priority would be to respect children's rights, and with a comprehensive multi-sector approach, it would be done to ensure the protection of children's rights. In this regard, Government would address the need to create a new National Action Plan for Children's Rights and formation of a national mechanism for monitoring the application of Convention on the Rights of Children. Proposal for a National Action Plan, drafted for the period 2024 - 2028, would be a multi-sector strategic document developed in a wide participatory process of state institutions and relevant civil organizations. The action plan proposed would be in accordance with all relevant international documents and regulations. Thus, the state would make significant progress in recognizing and protecting the rights of children.

An analysis had shown that the international standards of education should be further applied and efforts should be put on advancement of children's work, access to high quality education and health care, combating violence against children, including child-based and family violence, to be implemented, which affected the welfare and development of children.

In the area of child protection, the National Action Plan would envisage a task of raising public awareness on the child's interest, as well as strengthening of family's resistance through positive parenting practices and skills. As well, the strengthening of capacities of services and institutions for the protection and support of all children in the framework of the adult, social, educational, police and justice system had also been applied.

Special attention to proposed measures and activities are given to the respect and fulfilment of recommendations in accordance with European Child Guarantee, as well based on the analysis made with support from UNICEF. Latest action plan in the country was completed in 2015. She pointed out that with new National Action Plan, a significant improvement would be made in implementation of requirements of the country and to ensure an equal right for children in the society, as well implementation of requirements defined in international documents and standards.

She emphasized that it would be necessary to implement action plan for children's rights which would cover all areas of the Convention, as well as the formation of a national mechanism for monitoring it as the highest statutory body which would have a role in monitoring the work of institutions in the area of protection of children's rights.

She informed that the restoration of methodology for monitoring national action plan is planned to be provided through IPA project. At the end, she emphasized that the benefits of each society depend on its ability to provide the benefits for next generation of children. Thus, the needs of children would be based on decision-making and creation and implementation of policies that would protect and bring the benefits in society.

Ms. Miller, UNICEF representative, provide a quick briefing on the European Child Guarantee. Since 2021, UNICEF had been a partner with European Commission to support planning and piloting of European Child Guarantee in 7 EU member states. More recently, UNICEF had been supporting Western Balkan governments, including North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania, to design and plan for its introduction. European Child Guarantee had been a mechanism developed by the EU to prevent vulnerable children not to have access to basic social services, as well as targeted and specialized services provided in a non-stigmatizing and non-discriminatory manner. It should aim to safeguard most vulnerable children, including those living in poverty, especially children with disabilities, children with migrant backgrounds, those experiencing severe housing deprivation, children in precarious family situations and those from marginalized communities, including Roma.

She noted that the initiative would be about equity, giving a leg up to most vulnerable groups of children who unequally enjoy their rights to universal, such as in education, health care, housing, and protection. Main areas of intervention would be ensuring that all disadvantaged children, especially those from low-income families, children with disabilities, and Roma communities could access free early childhood education and care services, especially to children facing economic and social barriers. Thirdly, free health care, ensuring that all children have access to free quality health care services, including mental health, dental health, and immunization services. Fourth, the importance of healthy nutrition, guaranteeing adequate nutrition, including through free healthy and nutritious meals for disadvantaged children in schools and preschools. Fifth, the integrated family support and child protection services, providing targeted family-centred support and child protection interventions and outreach services. And finally, the adequate housing, ensuring that children and their families would have an access to save and affordable housing.

The mechanism globally, as well applied in all of EU member states, she emphasized that the Intersectoral Working Group, developing the National Plan of Action on Child Rights, would be a key intervention of a plan. As a preliminary step and based on that, UNICEF had supported the detailed analysis to identify key groups of vulnerable children in North Macedonia, to assess their needs, identify challenges facing in accessing services and provide some initial policy recommendations on the implementation of European Child Guarantee. It included a literature review, surveys of parents and caregivers and all public kindergartens, 80% of primary schools, 80% of municipalities, interviews, focus group discussions with stakeholders, and input from the different sector validation groups.

She presented some crucial data and findings. As quite remarkable and shocking she highlighted that 73% of children experienced violent discipline at home, which had been almost three-quarters of children facing some form of violent discipline.

Every third child had been living in poverty.

Half of all children with disability did not transition to secondary school due to lack of support measures, and around 6% or some 20,000 children did not have effective health insurance coverage. In terms of analysis of different bottlenecks in service provision, she informed that a lack of integrated services for vulnerable children was identified, for an example, cooperation between health and protection or other sectors. Poor quality of services was identified that often relate to lack of qualified staff, including in Social Work Centres for, where the majority of employees were not actually social workers and many not qualified to work directly with children and families.



Moreover, a lack of efficient distribution of human and financial sources were identified. Very clearly in the health sector, whereas health institutions are understaffed and unevenly distributed, and have inadequate budgets. And lastly, a tolerance of stigma and discrimination was noted and for example, cases of Roma children who face discrimination when trying to enrol in kindergarten and primary school.

She highlighted that in terms of policy considerations, a set of general and specific policy recommendations were emerging from the analysis and consultation process. Firstly, would include the development of integrated services for most vulnerable children and secondly, addressing some of financial barriers, either through the provision of free services to most vulnerable by adjusting the value of social assistance so that families could afford to access the services. Thirdly, she pointed out on strengthening service providers' capacities, especially to conduct a reach and provide targeted services, including development of programmes for home visits, respite care and other community-based services. Lastly, institutionalizing support mechanisms in policies and budgets would be crucial. Such as, making sure that new primary school funding and secondary school funding formulas were taken into account the additional cost of inclusion of children with disabilities, children from poorest families or Roma children.

In terms of next steps, she recommended that the Government create a multi-sectoral working group on Child Guarantee and a costed National Action Plan for its implementation. She addressed that hopefully the Government would invest in capacity development and resource allocation to ensure adequate capacity and funding to implement the defined service packages that would come through Child Guarantee planning. In this regard, funding could obviously come from Central Budget, from municipal budgets, and even from external funding, including the IPA 3 Human Capital Operational Programme. At the end, the piloting would come up with new service packages and delivery of new approaches in several municipalities. UNICEF would really welcome Government's commitment and enthusiasm about introducing Child Guarantee. She informed on recent media coverage when MSPDY Minister expressed its commitment, as well she welcome the its inclusion in National Action plan as a very positive step.

UNICEF, based on its experience and expertise, are ready to continue to provide technical assistance to support the process. She expressed her believe to be one of best ways to deliver a more systemic and sustainable change for vulnerable children, rather than often to be addressed in a very piecemeal fashion or small projects. As a much more systematic approach, the Government and its partners should prioritize and allocate the funding needed.

Noting on another point of draft National Action Plan, such as the establishment of a multi-sector working group and linked to implementation of the Convention on Rights of Child, she noted as one of priority actions in the plan and addressing a recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2022. She highlighted that specifically it should be given a very broad mandate to monitor and assess the implementation of children's rights and its importance to be placed at highest possible level so that it could coordinate all the sectors, ideally under the office of General Secretariat of Government or in the office of Prime minister.

Ms. Jandrijeska Jovanova, an expert deployed in EU/ IPA project “EU Support for Rule of Law”, informed on the support provided to MSPDY for preparation National Action Plan for Rights of Children 2024-2028, to be in its final stage. The plan had been developed through a wide participatory process, including a large number of institutions and organizations within the working group which was really quite active.

One of most important moments in process of preparing National Action Plan had been the active participation of children. The plan was created with a clear goal to improve the living conditions for children, enabling them to have healthy, safe and happy days. She pointed out on slides on which the work with children were shown and their contribution in development of the plan. The plan would have for a purpose of directly connecting international standards and tools, including access to European Child Guarantee for their well-being, recommendations from Committee on the Rights of the Child and Sustainable Development Goals. During its preparation, the recommendations from the analysis being developed with the support of UNICEF were considered, and in advance for an access to European Child Guarantee. She highlighted that the action plan had been in full compliance with National Development Strategy 2024-2044.

The plan would envision eight areas, and they were determined based on the needs of children, as well aligned with the structure of Convention on the Rights of the Child. These areas would include child poverty, civil rights and freedom of the child, violence against children, family environment and alternative care, children with disabilities, health, education and strengthening state capacities which includes the monitoring of implementation of National Action Plan. She informed that the action plan was designed to provide complementarity and synergy with the existing action plans, in which the measures had been mentioned to protect children's rights. Measures and activities adopted by other action plans and applied to children had not been repeated in order to avoid overlap and to provide effective coordination. National Action Plan would include 40 measures and 141 activities, as well some of them would address the recommendations noted in 2024 EC Progress Report for the country.

As one of the recommendations was that additional efforts are required due to the reduction of child poverty and improvement of social protection. The number of children living in poverty in North Macedonia from its total number in 2020 was 30.3%. She informed on latest data for children, published by SSO in 2024, which had shown that in 2021, the number of children living in poverty had increased to 32.7%. As one of the measures for poverty reduction proposed had been improving the living conditions for children and their families, as well several activities were planned, such as the 15% increase in the height of child protection provided by Law on social protection and Law on children protection.



As the amendments in the relevant law had been adopted and additional activities planned to be implemented, such as, local social plans to be developed with active participation of children who would more intensively express their needs and their families at community level. Thus, the measure for introduction of new services in municipalities is envisaged.

Due to improving the services applied to children without parental care, she informed that activities had been planned in the area of providing support for families for prevention of abandonment of children and support for returning children to their biological families. Measures and activities were proposed to strengthen and expand the network for care homes of families, as well development of new services for the support of children with disability and their families at the local level in all regions.

Other topics covered with action plan had been due to the prevention of problems with children on the street, juvenile marriages, different forms of violence against and between children, giving a special emphasis on prevention from violence.

In regard to education, the measures and activities foreseen would be aimed at improving the quality of education, as well supporting students and their families to prevent students leaving the school. She noted that these activities would address one of the recommendations of Committee on the Rights of Children in 2022, as well recommendation from 2024 EC Progress Report for the country. The action plan would provide measures and activities aimed at increasing the number of children in pre-school facilities, improvement of the support and access of the students to quality education and training, including the provision of continuous education in the educational institutions, strengthening the capacities in pre-school institutions, in primary and in secondary schools, and providing financial support to the children from vulnerable groups.

She emphasized that the European Commission and the Committee for the Rights of Children in their reports in past few years had pointed out lack of a national body responsible for implementing the Convention on the Rights of Children and its faculty protocols, as well as monitoring the protection and implementation on children's rights. In order to address these requirements, the plan had foreseen establishment and functioning of a Commission for the rights of children, which would serve as a mechanism for coordination of implementation of National Action Plan, as well for the monitoring of the Convention on the Rights of Children. In addition, she informed that through the EU project Support for rule of law, a support would be ensured for preparation of an instrument for monitoring the rights of children, which the Commission would further use in its work.

Pursuant to the framework of Paris Principles and the framework of United Nations for Human Rights, as well the experience of establishment of independent bodies for the protection of children's rights, the working group would receive the experts' support. The proposal would be the Commission for the Rights of Children to have a legal basis, which means to be included in the Law on children protection. The Commission should be independent in implementation of tasks defined by the law and to provide financial resources for continuous functioning of the Commission. As a prelude, the rights of children by the Commission had to be addressed through an inter-sectoral approach. The members of the Commission should be elected by public call, based on established criteria, including representatives of relevant institutions, UNICEF and civil organizations working to protect children's rights. The working group and the experts recommended, the Commission to be under competences of the General Secretary of Government.

➤ Conclusions

Ms. Popovska (MES) summarized the conclusions related to:

- SWG reviewed priorities in sectors of education, employment and social policies, tackling the aspects relevant for different target groups.
- Presentations and discussions shown evident need for coherence policies in three sectors and many reforms had been announced, which would require cross-sector cooperation and making joint plans for fulfilment of all reforms.
- Next SWG meeting, as sixteenth, is scheduled to be held in May 2025, when the progress of priorities would be presented and discussed.

Annexes:

Annex 1	Agenda
Annex 2	Presentation of MEL, MES, MSPDY, UNICEF and EU/ IPA “EU Support for Rule of Law”