**Coordination meeting: Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care**

Towards the beginning of the Project under the working title “Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care Project”, supported by the World Bank Loan and Novak Djokovic Foundation, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESD) held the third coordination meeting.

The objectives of the meeting were the review of the key issues raised in discussions with the World Bank team during its September mission focused on Project components 2 and 3 – quality and equity, and the discussion of unresolved issues and consideration of different possibilities for improving the quality of preschool education and care through the Project implementation.

Apart from the MoESD representatives, the meeting was attended by the representatives of professional associations in the area of preschool education and care (Union of ECEC Medical Nurses and Nursery Teachers' Associations of Serbia, Federation of Serbia Preschool Teachers' Associations, Associations of Expert Associates and Associates in ECEC, Expert Team of Principles of ECEC Institutions), the representative of preschool teachers associations in the National Education Council of the Republic of Serbia, the representative of Preschool Psychologists Section of the Serbian Psychological Society, the representatives of World Bank, Novak Djokovic Foundation, UNICEF, Centre for Interactive Pedagogy, Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities, Open Society Foundation, Roma Education Fund, Belgrade and Novi Sad universities (their preschool pedagogy departments and psychology sections), Institute for the Improvement of Education, and Institute for the Education Quality and Evaluation.

The meeting was opened by Ms Anamarija Viček, State Secretary for Pre-University Education, who reminded the participants of the Republic of Serbia’s strategic commitment to supporting the development of the preschool education system and inter-sectoral cooperation in providing additional support to the families and young children.

Gordana Cvetković, Head of Social Inclusion Strategy Group, reminded the meeting participants of the major Project components:

Component 1: Expanding the supply of preschools spaces by opening additional classrooms (throughconstructing new preschool spaces and reconstructing, expanding, upgrading or repurposing the existing local public facilities that can be used for ECEC purposes);

Component 2: Strengthening the quality of inclusive preschool services, primarily aimed at supporting children’s holistic development and well-being, including children from vulnerable backgrounds. It includes supporting implementation of the new preschool curriculum framework, improving pre- and in-service training and preschool staff career paths, and improving preschool services quality evaluation with the view to supporting wellbeing and holistic development of children;

Component 3: Supporting young children and families from vulnerable backgrounds. Beside supporting the increase of quality preschool service coverage, the Project will support children’s well-being in other ways, as well, such as supporting parenting skills in the family and/or local community. This component is focused on children of preschool age (from birth to 6,5 years) and their families and includes: national promotional campaign, national educational children TV programs, programs/activities for families and children from vulnerable backgrounds in the selected municipalities (the recipients of grants to LSGs) and subsidizing LSGs to ensure enrollment of children aged 3 to 5.5 years from vulnerable backgrounds in preschool services free of charge;

Component 4: Project management, technical assistance, and monitoring and evaluation.

Ljljana Marolt, Head of the MoESTD’s Group for preschool education, presented the context and current initiatives in the area of preschool education and care, undertaken in cooperation with partners (Institute for the Improvement of Education, Institute for the Education Quality and Evaluation, UNICEF, IPA, etc.):

• piloting the Draft Preschool Curriculum Framework, and designing scenarios for the national training for new Preschool Curriculum Framework implementation supported by the WB loan;

• developing recommendations for standardizing preschool teachers’ competencies, learning environment and equipment;

• creating preschool education management information system (EMIS);

• developing the network of pre-school practitioners, i.e. the Preschool Assistance Network (PAN);

• improving the quality of framework and procedures for preschool institution evaluation;

• improving the quality of education and care services for children with disabilities – transforming developmental groups and designing models of work with children which include support and inclusion into peer groups.

The focus of the second part of the meeting was on the Project component dealing with approaches to ECEC quality evaluation and the issue of monitoring/evaluating children well-being in order to evaluate the overall project results. Ms Lucy Basset spoke, from the World Bank perspective, of the different options for evaluating quality of ECEC services and children well-being with the view to informed decision-making at the national level.

After the introductory speeches, a constructive discussion was opened on unresolved issues and different possibilities available for improving ECEC quality through Project implementation.

Discussion on the sub-component concerning supporting children and families from vulnerable backgrounds through grants awarded to local communities was opened by the World Bank consultants Ms Zdenka Milivojević and Ms Marijana Jašarević.

In the discussion on this sub-component, the issue of criteria for selection of municipalities was raised (poverty rate, percentage of Roma population, etc., as well as the possiblity of co-financing by LSGs), and chalenges in the legislature concerning the possibilities of devising and sustaining intersectoral programs in a community (competence, monitoring, evaluating, supporting, staffing, financing, etc.) were considered.

At the end of the meeting the participants expressed their pleasure with detailed and operational discussion of the major Project components – quality and equity, with the concluding statement that the Project draft contains even more issues opened to discussion, which must be tried and resolved through continual participating approach and the appreciation of different perspectives of all the stakeholders.