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Drepturilor Copilului și Adopție

1

**BIENNIAL REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE CHILD GUARANTEE**

MARCH 2024

ROMANIA

Ensuring the rights of all children, regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, financial situation, physical disability, birth status, or status of the child or parents, is an obligation incumbent upon every state. However, ensuring effective and full access to these rights for all children, especially those belonging to vulnerable groups, continues to be a challenge, as well as a priority for many responsible public authorities.

The eradication of child poverty and breaking the intergenerational cycle have been the subject of many strategic measures over time. However, the effects of this context on children's well-being have necessitated intensified coordinated efforts, not only at the national level but also at the European level.

The adoption of the Recommendation on the Establishment of the Child Guarantee thus represented a turning point in harmonizing European efforts to support vulnerable children in key intervention areas that address their fundamental rights, such as education, health, or social protection. Ensuring a common European framework of action and coordination in this field will facilitate a unified response to common problems that affect all Member States of the European Union to varying degrees, so that the solutions identified to address them contribute to increasing the welfare of every child.

The first biennial report on the implementation of the child guarantee reflects Romania's institutional efforts to efficiently implement a national action plan built around the needs of the most vulnerable, but also in the spirit of a more child-friendly public apparatus. Leaving no child behind is not only an obligation to be respected but also a duty of honour towards a social category that represents the future of any nation.

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1. CONTEXT

Romania has committed to promoting and supporting a comprehensive approach to poverty, combating inequalities and social injustice by adopting a national strategic framework to support these commitments.

1.1. According to the measures included in the National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee (NAP-CG), one of the quantitative targets assumed is the reduction of the number of children affected by poverty and social exclusion by at least 500,000 children, compared to the baseline value from 2021, which was 1,508,000 children, contributing to the European objective of reducing the number of children affected by this multi-dimensional phenomenon by 5,000,000.

To combat the phenomenon of child poverty and exclusion (0-17 years old), which, similarly to all countries in the European Union, remains the most vulnerable group, NAP-CG continues, through consolidation, the simultaneous approach to both child poverty and child rights, with an emphasis on promoting this approach across all its strategic objectives. Equally, NAP-CG, through integrated measures, aims to reduce the significant disparities between children in rural and urban areas.

The risk of poverty and social exclusion rate among children in Romania was 41.5% in 2022, with the absolute values showing a decrease compared to 2021, specifically 1,496,000 children in 2022 compared to 1,508,000 children in 2021.

Starting from 2022, Romania has planned a comprehensive framework of social policy reform to reduce poverty. In this regard, the implementation of the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for the period 2022-2027 includes measures to combat poverty, ensure the right to social assistance, increase access to general public interest services, stimulate social and economic participation of vulnerable groups, from the perspective of human rights compliance, as well as recovery and resilience of the social services system in the context of special situations such as the COVID-19 epidemic. Additionally, starting from 2023, the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights "Protected Children, Safe Romania" 2023-2027 is being implemented, aiming to ensure, with the involvement of children, the effective realization of their rights, including the most vulnerable, in all areas of life, by fully ensuring access to quality public services. The strategy includes a target to be achieved by the end of 2027, which aims to reduce the number of children affected by poverty and social exclusion by 400,000 children compared to the baseline value from 2019, which was 11,323,000 children.

This initiative is complemented by the simultaneous implementation of measures dedicated to similar objectives, included in other strategic documents regulating other areas of interest, targeting children, at the national level.

Relevant in this regard are the National Strategy on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities "An Equitable Romania" 2022-2027 or the National Strategy on Social Inclusion of Homeless Persons for the period 2022-2027, which intend to increase the level of social inclusion of these individuals by ensuring adequate social protection that meet their needs.

In these conditions, the implementation of the NAP-CG plays an important role in preventing and combating child poverty among children in difficulty. Increasing access to social services, education, health and nutrition, and housing dedicated to children also considers the territorial dimension of poverty and social exclusion.

1.2. Measures of budgetary or legislative reform aimed at combating child poverty and social exclusion are also being implemented or planned for the following period. These measures include, for example, increasing investment in local public social assistance services by:

- Implementing the provisions of Law No. 156/2023 on the organization of activities for preventing the separation of children from their families, which ensures the funding of licensed day centres aimed at preventing the separation of children from their families, organized at the level of communes, towns, and municipalities, from the state budget, in proportion to 50% of the required funds, established based on the number of children registered in the Local Child Observatory and the standard cost for social services approved by Government Decision.
- Approving the draft Law amending and supplementing certain normative acts in the field of social assistance, which provides for the implementation of measures to support expenses for the minimum package of social services through transfers from the state budget, at least 80% of the minimum standard cost. The draft law is currently under parliamentary debate.

Additionally, it is important to mention that the proposals for amending and supplementing the social assistance law of the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity (MLSS) and the Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities (MFYEO) also include the introduction of the minimum social assistance package. Through this package, the social worker within the public social assistance service collaborates with the community nurse, the school counsellor, and, if necessary, with the health mediator and the school mediator, as well as with other specialists, aiming to reduce the risks of poverty and social exclusion.

Other budgetary and legislative reform measures aimed at addressing the poverty and social exclusion of the most vulnerable children and their families also include the implementation of other legislative changes aimed at increasing allowances and benefits linked to the Social Reference Indicator (SRI), which is automatically updated every year on March 1st with the average annual inflation rate of the previous year. Thus, starting from March 1st, 2024, the value of the SRI was increased from 598 lei to 660 lei (a 10.4% increase).

Also in this context, it would be worth mentioning actions that prioritize the launch of calls within the Social Inclusion and Dignity Program (SIDP) 2021-2027, which aims to develop social services at the local level, targeting primarily the most vulnerable areas and categories of population exposed to the risk of poverty and social exclusion, including children.

Legislative measures aimed at increasing children's participation in quality inclusive education, particularly in the development of early childhood education services, include the approval of the Order of the Minister of Education, the Minister of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, the Minister of Labor and Social Solidarity, the Minister of Health, and the Minister of Development, Public Works, and Administration no. 6.424/20.129/2.257/3.976/25/2023 regarding the development of unitary, inclusive, integrated, and quality services for early childhood education, together with its corresponding Annex - Operational Implementation Plan of the measures from the Intersectoral Framework Program for the development of unitary, inclusive, and quality services for early childhood education.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning the initiative of the National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption (NAPCRA), which was also subject to analysis within the Coordination Council, aimed at developing and implementing a mechanism for monitoring the allocation and execution of budgetary funds (primarily European funds) allocated for the implementation of the NAP-CG. This exercise, accompanied by technical assistance from UNICEF Romania, involves: i) validating estimated costs and available sources of funding for NAP-CG measures, ii) developing and implementing a monitoring system for budget allocations and expenditures based on EU procedures and in line with national expenditure reporting, and iii) reporting on fund availability, budget gaps, contracted projects/amounts, and expenditures.

1.3. To facilitate cooperation between different sectors and particularly a horizontal communication, throughout the annual planning process, the Coordination Council for Child Protection and Adoption is also involved in monitoring the implementation of the NAP-CG. The main objective of this inter-institutional body is to facilitate cooperation between institutions and organizations with responsibilities in the field of child rights to achieve national public policy, monitor the implementation of legislation, and make proposals to improve and strengthen collaboration between public authorities involved in child protection and adoption.

This structure, composed of representatives from ministries with responsibilities in the field of child protection, also includes representative of NGOs and UNICEF, with a consultative role, and operates alongside the President of NAPCRA, who is currently designated as the National Coordinator.

The coordination council holds regular semi-annual meetings and quarterly extraordinary meetings to analyse interim results and propose revisions/adjustments to activities for the next quarter.

1.4. Given the high incidence of child poverty in Romania and the difficulties in identifying all children in need, some of the measures included in the NAP-CG are cross-cutting, and a few examples of such results will be presented in the following sections.

Consolidating the skills of professionals from various sectors to address multidimensional issues faced by children affected by poverty, as well as those in rural areas, who are most exposed to the risk of violence, is essential. In this regard, in 2023, several activities aimed at training police officers were conducted. For instance: an online training session on "Preventing

and detecting crimes involving children, vulnerable persons," attended by 39 police officers, 29 training sessions within the "VioGen RoJust" Project, conducted in partnership with 4 non-governmental organizations with experience in preventing and combating domestic violence and respecting human rights, attended by 687 police officers.

Two training sessions were organised at the Schengen Multifunctional Training Centre (SMTTC) on "Preventing torture and inhumane treatment," attended by 22 police officers, and a training session on "Investigating crimes against freedom and sexual integrity with minor victims," attended by 20 police officers.

Furthermore, **the adjustment in 2023**, through Government Decision no. 368/2023, of the amount, conditions, and mechanism for providing **support by the Romanian state to foreign citizens or stateless persons in exceptional situations fled from the conflict area in Ukraine, includes cross-cutting measures of assistance and social inclusion** by correlating financial support with the conditions for temporary protection beneficiaries, as well as those related to adult employment and enrolment of children who meet the conditions to attend pre-university education.

Expanding the provision of integrated community services for vulnerable children, including minor mothers and pregnant women, especially in marginalized and rural communities, is planned through specific interventions of the SIDP: Community-based local development (Day centres/integrated centres - individual social housing will be financed, and new day centres will be built or older ones renovated, depending on the identified community needs) and Supporting rural communities without access or with limited access to social services (Developing primary social services based on the community model in rural communities).

The experience gained in the project implemented by the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, which developed and piloted integrated community services in 126 administrative-territorial units (ATUs), is the basis for extending this model nationally.

In the previous project, 394 community services were established, with 513 specialists from integrated community teams (ICTs) operating within them. The expansion of integrated community service provision is now planned for 2,000 rural communities.

2. TARGET GROUPS

The number and percentage of children affected by poverty or social exclusion, out of the total population, remain high compared to the values recorded at the European level.

In Europe, poverty or social exclusion¹ (AROE) is a priority issue, considering that approximately one in five children is affected by this phenomenon. In Romania, the level is

¹ People are classified as being at risk of poverty or social exclusion if they are poor, materially and socially deprived or live in households with very low work intensity.

much higher: one in two children is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, meaning 1.496 million children. In 2022, it remained at the same level among children, at 41.5% (the AROPE rate), meaning 1,496,000 children.

The rate of material and social deprivation of children provides a concrete picture of the shortcomings they face. In 2022, in Romania, 30.8% of children suffered from severe material and social deprivation.

Children in rural² areas are more exposed to the risk of social exclusion. Approximately half of the children in Romania, namely 48%, live in rural areas. The situation of children in rural areas has not significantly progressed in recent years. Access to medical services, social assistance, or education is problematic for a significant proportion of children in rural areas, a situation exacerbated during the pandemic, especially regarding access to education and the services and benefits associated with school participation. According to a study³ conducted in 2022, 2 out of 10 children say that their family can only, sometimes, provides enough food or never.

For 1 in 5 children, violence at school is present to a large or very large extent. To make ends meet, 52% of rural families bought cheaper food last year or the same food but in smaller quantities (48%). Also due to shortages, almost one in ten rural families withdrew their children from school: more than double compared to 2012 (3%).

In these circumstances, two out of ten children state that their family only provides enough food sometimes or never. 14% of adolescents frequently or always go to bed hungry, and for 9% of them, it is commonplace. One in ten rural children is out of the education system.

Almost one in ten (9%) children from rural areas currently do not attend any educational institution. The education level reflects that of previous generations. 88% of adults in rural areas have completed at most post-secondary education.

Due to hardships, **teenagers' access to education** is limited. 37% of three adolescents miss school sometimes or always because they have to work in the household. The daily average of work is two hours. This, combined with the school schedule, commuting, and homework, greatly burdens teenagers' schedules. 46% of them report fatigue due to work.

Alongside poverty, the lack of attractiveness of schools represents another cause of school dropout in rural areas. Almost half (47%) of adolescents say they never like school or only like it sometimes⁴.

² UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Art. 5: Family environment and supporting parents in a way that supports the development of children's skills; Art. 18: Common responsibilities of parents, support offered to parents and development of support services for children; Art. 26 and Art. 18.3: Social security and child support services and facilities; Art. 27.1-3: Adoption of measures and standards of living, including material assistance and support programs regarding nutrition, housing to ensure the physical, mental, spiritual and moral development of children as well as their social development, reduction of poverty and inequities; SDG 2: fighting hunger; SDG 4: quality education; SDG 6: water and sanitation; SDG 10: reducing inequities.

³ World Vision, Child welfare in rural areas, 2022, București

⁴ World Vision, Child welfare in rural areas, 2022, București

The rights of many children with disabilities are violated, including the right to a decent standard of living. Research⁵ shows that many of these children slip through the net of early disability identification, given that the screening system only includes a limited number of conditions that can lead to disability, and those with partial coverage, without a systematic mechanism for subsequent early identification, neither in the healthcare nor in the educational system. Thus, the needs of these children for enablement and rehabilitation cannot be met.

In Romania, **refugee children from Ukraine**, accompanied or not by their families, accompanied by relatives or acquaintances, who previously benefited from services of the special protection system in the neighbouring country, were in a number of approximately 38,000 at the end of 2023.

The registration of children from Ukraine in the open-source software platform Primero owned by NAPCRA, developed and implemented in partnership with UNICEF and SERA Romania, continued throughout 2023. Thus, in December 2023, there were 33,000 children enrolled in Primero, of which over 50% lived with their parents in foster families, 119 children were in the special protection system, and according to the declarations made by children or relatives, the immediate important aspects were related to access to education (4%), health services (6.5%), safety (1%), and transportation (0.9%). Additionally, a national assessment of needs which the Ukrainian families cannot meet, reveals that the most common needs (74%) relate to payment of the rent and utilities, 54% are related to the medical-check-ups and purchasing medication, while 43% are related to purchase clothing and footwear, and 32% are related to food purchase.

In respect to the phenomenon of **underage mothers in Romania**, which has placed our country in the same problematic situation for many years, there is a slight decrease at the end of 2023. According to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, the number of underage mothers under the age of 15 decreased from 745 in December 2021 to 636 in December 2023. Additionally, the number of underage mothers aged 15-17 decreased from 7,279 in December 2023 to 5,672 in December 2023. According to an analysis on the situation of teenage mothers and pregnant girls under the age of 18, 85% of mothers and pregnant girls under the age of 18 no longer attend school, the majority dropping out before getting pregnant, and one in ten teenage mothers or pregnant girls have never attended school. Additionally, 4 out of 10 pregnant or minor mothers do not access other medical services during pregnancy, except for family doctors, and 80% of them have not used any contraceptive method because they lacked information about their use.

The total number of children in the special protection system has decreased, but the reduction in the number of entries into the system is still insufficient. The total number of children in the special protection system decreased from 57,279 (including 9,811 children with disabilities) in December 2015 to 38,337 (including 7,755 children with disabilities) in December 2023. 73% of the total number of children in the special protection system in December 2023 were placed with relatives/families/people or foster parents. The number of children receiving prevention services increased by 23% during the period 2014-2019, but subsequently decreased, amid the pandemic crisis, to 59,815 in 2023, with prevention services operating under local councils being the most affected.

⁵ Diagnosis of people with disabilities in Romania, World Bank, 2021

The number of children in residential-type services managed by the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (GDSACP) decreased from 17,453 in 2014 to 8,327 in 2023 (-52.3%), with an even stronger downward trend in the case of children with disabilities, whose number decreased by 60% compared to 2014, to 2,883 children in December 2023. However, children with disabilities and those from low-income families, especially Roma families, are still much more exposed to the risk of entering the special protection system. Nearly 20% of children in placement have a disability⁶.

Children of Roma ethnicity are strongly affected by poverty and social exclusion. According to the report conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)⁷, the percentage of Roma children at risk of poverty increased by one percent in 2021 compared to 2016, reaching 79%. Data for the other nine countries involved show no difference between girls and boys, except in Romania, where 83% of Roma girls live in poverty, compared to 75% of Roma boys.

On the other hand, the rate of severe material deprivation among Roma children decreased from 75% in 2016 to 55% in 2021. The percentage of children participating in early education decreased by one percent, reaching 27% in 2021, well below the 79% average of the general population. Romania continues to be among the countries where Roma children are strongly affected by segregation in schools, with the percentage of Roma children learning in schools where the majority of classmates are Roma increasing from 28% to 51%.

Although the percentage of Roma individuals affected by housing deprivation decreased by 13%, reaching 70% in 2021, the overcrowding situation in households worsened, with the percentage of Roma individuals living in overcrowded homes increasing from 76% in 2016 to 87% in 2021. At the same time, there was also a significant decrease of 28% in the percentage of Roma individuals without access to tap water inside the household, reaching 40% in 2021. Although Roma students still face situations related to discrimination and segregation, the percentage of children who would agree to have a Roma classmate has increased from 48.7% in 2013 to 61.8% in 2022, according to a longitudinal sociological research.

3. ROLL-OUT OF SERVICES

In order to reduce poverty and support vulnerable groups, SIDP includes a series of integrated measures aimed at the coordinated application of national and local strategies. It aligns with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and aims to achieve ambitious targets by 2030, such as a 74.7% employment rate and a reduction of 2,532 in poverty (AROP reduction, thousands of people).

⁶ Progress report in the field of child rights protection in Romania, 2018, <https://tdh.ro/sites/default/files/2020-02/Child-Rights-raport-30-de-ani-de-drepturi-ale-copilului-in-Romania.pdf>

⁷ Available at the address: https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2022-roma-survey-2021-main-results2_en.pdf

Priority 1 of the program, called "Community Responsibility in the Urban Environment," is essential for addressing the specific challenges faced by local communities. It aims to support integrated services for the inclusion of children, assistance for the elderly and Roma people in vulnerable situations, as well as services for better inclusion of beneficiaries of social housing.

A significant step towards local development and social inclusion in cities and municipalities with a population of over 20,000 inhabitants has been initiated through the first two stages of the Community-Led Local Development Mechanism (LDCR).

The first stage, initiated in July 2023, under the Social Inclusion and Dignity Program, consists in adapting the Local Action Groups (LAGs) and developing Local Development Strategies (LDSs) according to LDCR requirements, while the second stage consists of submitting LDSs for evaluation and selection. On February 19, 2024, the final list of selected Local Development Strategies for funding was published. Within the Local Development Strategies, special emphasis is placed on the analysis of local needs, conducted by Local Action Groups (LAGs), both in urban and rural areas. The main vulnerable groups, such as the elderly, children, and Roma communities, are identified as priorities. Strategies covering territories with a significant percentage of Roma population will include specific interventions for this community. On March 8, 2024, the call for projects for the third stage was launched, aiming to support Local Action Groups in implementing LDSs, including the launching, evaluation, and selection component of the operations to be implemented in marginalized communities (ZUM) and the functional area related to ZUM.

The financial allocation of €2,884,632 for the first stage and €31,065,263 for the third stage indicates an ambitious approach to supporting local communities and combating poverty.

Furthermore, to support the process of reducing poverty and vulnerable groups towards overcoming social exclusion, in February 2024, within Priority P05 of the SIDP, the Applicant's Guide was launched for consultation. Specific conditions were outlined for multifunctional centers, centers equipped with sports and cultural facilities for children.

The specific actions of the upcoming call for projects aim to fund the construction/modernization/rehabilitation of infrastructure for multifunctional centers, sports facilities, and cultural centers, aimed at vulnerable children at risk of poverty/social exclusion/school dropout. Additionally, funding will support activities within these centers through an integrated approach to lift children out of poverty and improve their access to quality services in the community. The total budget allocated for this call is €111,257,658.00, of which €82,629,947.00 is contribution of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund Plus (FSE+).

Similarly, concrete actions have been carried out by the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equal Opportunities to develop the national network of day services aimed at preventing the separation of children from their families.

In the legislative context, Romania has adopted new legislation exclusively regulating the activities and responsibilities of local authorities responsible for prevention. Under Component 13 - Investment 1 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equal Opportunities will finance 150 day centers, with a final investment

value of €50 million. Following the first call, 92 financing contracts have been concluded. The establishment of these centers represents a significant contribution to strengthening the capacity of local authorities to support families at risk of child separation by facilitating their access to dedicated services tailored to their specific needs and family context.

3.1. Early Childhood Education and Care

According to Article 32, paragraph (4) of the Romanian Constitution, "education within the public system is free, according to the law. The state grants social study scholarships to children and young people from disadvantaged families and those institutionalized, under the conditions laid down by law."

According to the new Pre-University Education Law no. 198/2023, early education includes the first level of pre-university education, namely the pre-preschool level (3 months - 3 years) and the preschool level (3-6 years). However, the Romanian early education system remains fragmented, which particularly affects the quality of services offered and the judicious allocation of these services to meet the expressed needs of communities.

To address this need, the NPA-CG assumes as a measure the Development of Early Education Services (multifunctional centers for children and families, nurseries/family kindergartens, etc.) and the revision of priority enrolment criteria (e.g., including children from single-parent families or families receiving family support allowance) in order to increase the capacity to reach children under 6 years old, with a focus on disadvantaged areas.

To implement this measure from the NPA-CG, the first phase is currently in the implementation stage. This involves the construction, equipping, and operationalization of **110 nurseries**, within Component C15 - Education of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, for which the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection together with the National Investment Company serve as the implementing structure.

The budget allocated for this investment is approximately 230 million euros. In addition to the funds allocated by the NRRP, a 30% over-contracting will be ensured, leading to a total allocated budget of approximately 299 million euros.

The objective of the investment is to increase the capacity of the education system to include 19% of children aged 0-3 in early pre-school education services by 2026, through infrastructure investments, namely the construction of 110 energy-efficient nurseries nationwide, to provide a standard early education service to 5,000 - 10,000 residents.

Within the already launched call for projects, three types of nurseries have been funded as follows: small nurseries - for a maximum of 4 groups/40 children, medium nurseries - for a maximum of 7 groups/70 children, and large nurseries - for a maximum of 11 groups/110 children.

The investments will be completed and operational by December 31, 2025, and at this moment, there are **119 financing contracts** underway under Component 15, totalling 1,488,872,965.37 lei without VAT, representing: 65 small nurseries, 34 medium nurseries, and 20 large nurseries.

So far, one nursery (Fălticeni ATU Nursery) has been completed, while the other projects are in various stages of implementation, with 51 nurseries currently in the execution phase.

Additionally, to implement this measure, it is worth mentioning the "National Program for the Construction of Public or Social Interest Buildings," which includes the "State Educational Units and Institutions" sub-program, carried out by the Ministry of Development, Public Works, and Administration, through the National Investment Company "C.N.I." - S.A., a joint-stock company under the authority of the ministry. Within this sub-program, the following investment objectives are being realized: 83 small nurseries, 31 medium nurseries, and 14 large nurseries.

To achieve the specific objective outlined in the NAP-CG - improving access to inclusive education for children from vulnerable groups: rural areas, children with SEN/disabilities, Roma, and others - and to implement the aforementioned measure, the Early Education Reform Project (PEER) was carried out. This project was co-financed by the Government of Romania and the Council of Europe Development Bank (CEDB), with a value of 129 million euros, implemented from 2009 to December 31, 2023.

Under the PEER project, the following progress has been made: 358 kindergartens have had their construction completed, works for 31 kindergartens are currently in progress, procedures for the remaining works for 10 kindergartens are scheduled to be launched, design work for 3 kindergartens is underway. The project aims to develop school infrastructure by constructing and furnishing 402 new kindergartens. These new facilities are intended to replace kindergartens operating in buildings that are no longer safe for use, buildings subject to restitution, or inadequate spaces for preschool education. Additionally, the project aims to enhance the quality of preschool education by providing teacher training and educational materials. Considering the project's completion deadline in December 2023 and the remaining objectives to be executed, the Ministry of Education initiated efforts in May 2023 to amend the loan agreement with the Ministry of Public Finance. The purpose of this amendment is to extend the project until December 31, 2025, and increase the project budget by approximately 13.44 million euros.

Furthermore, within the framework of the Inclusive and Quality Early Education (IQEE) project, during the 2022-2023 school year, a total of 2,184 preschool teachers from across the country completed the training program. The training was conducted uniformly through the IQEE platform by the three partner universities: Aurel Vlaicu University in Arad, the University of Pitești, and Ștefan cel Mare University in Suceava.

Following a study visit to Reggio Emilia, Italy, in March 2022, facilitated by Reggio Children S.R.L., 42 selected teachers from the project's target group initiated the establishment of 208 Reggio Emilia groups nationwide. They disseminated the knowledge gained at the county level and coordinated activities with children in these groups. Additionally, they developed four thematic brochures on the Reggio Emilia approach (curriculum, child observation and assessment, educational environment, enrolment of children in early education services), which were edited, printed, and distributed by the end of the project (December 2023).

In February 2023, the Ministry of Education launched, as part of milestone 458 of the NRRP, the competitive call for projects for the "Development of complementary early education services." Its purpose is to improve the quality of early education services and enhance participation rates, both at the ante-preschool and preschool levels, by serving up to 20,000 children from disadvantaged groups. The total financial allocation for the call for projects is 103 million euros, and the maximum grant value per project is 250,000 euros (excluding VAT), eligible NRRP value. Each project will aim to establish complementary services with a capacity of a minimum 16 children and a maximum of 50 children. Project budgets will be used for setting up, cleaning, and equipping at least 2 rooms for activities with children; purchasing furniture, equipment, and materials necessary for space arrangement; acquiring teaching materials, food, as well as transportation for children, for a period of at least 12 months; providing information, counselling, and support services for parents/legal representatives/persons in charge of the child. On June 22, 2023, the Ministry of Education published the final list of projects admitted for funding under the call (99 projects admitted for funding). Following the call for projects, which was extended several times, only 99 funding requests were submitted, of which 98 were declared eligible for funding.

3.2. Education and School-Based Activities

In 2023, the implementation of the Early Warning Mechanism in Education (EWME) continued as a vital instrument within Romania's education system, providing a coherent and unified framework for the early identification and monitoring of students at risk of dropping out of school. EWME relies on the real-time collection of relevant data, such as school results, repetition history, absences, and school behaviour, to detect early signals of the risk of early school leaving. This mechanism enables school staff and decision-makers at county and central levels to coordinate, plan, and implement appropriate and immediate measures to mitigate the risks identified at the student, class, and school levels. Through an integrated approach at all levels, EWME facilitates careful monitoring and prompt adjustments to achieve Romania's objectives of reducing early school leaving and aligning with European standards.

The Ministry of Education, as the coordinator of the components related to reforms and/or investments funded through NRRP, organized online training courses for users of the Early Warning Mechanism (EWME) computer tool or the module within the Integrated Information System of Education in Romania (SIIR) for systemic interventions necessary to reduce early school leaving. By the end of September 2023, over 50,000 participants from 6,950 institutions had gone through various phases of the program. Among them, over 45,800, or 91.6%, completed the training program.

Through EWME, concrete efforts are made to prevent school dropout, and the extensive participation in training courses highlights the desire to develop skills and knowledge to effectively address the needs of at-risk students. It is a significant step towards improving the educational system and achieving the objectives of reducing early school leaving, thereby contributing to the formation of a better-educated and inclusive society.

The "Second Chance" program in secondary education, implemented starting from the 2023-2024 school year, is an educational initiative aimed at providing learning opportunities for individuals who have exceeded the age corresponding to the grades in which they should have been enrolled in mainstream education. The methodology applied is designed to support those who have not had the opportunity or have interrupted primary and lower secondary education.

Individuals eligible to participate in the program are those who are at least 4 years older than the age corresponding to the grade in which they should have been enrolled. They must be in one of the following situations: have completed primary education or have completed the grades corresponding to lower secondary education (5th, 6th, 7th grades). Enrolment in the program is done without examination, based on an application providing information about the completed grades, educational pathways, and professional qualifications, in accordance with applicable legislation.

Participants have the option to choose between educational pathways with or without obtaining a professional qualification.

The "Second Chance" program is an important educational initiative, offering the opportunity for continuous education and acquisition of professional skills, regardless of the chosen educational pathway. In this way, society becomes more inclusive, and individuals have the opportunity to improve their quality of life through education and training.

To mitigate the risk of early school leaving by focusing on supporting disadvantaged children in public preschool, primary, and lower secondary education, the Ministry of Education launched the call for "Educational Support for Preschoolers and Disadvantaged Students in Public Preschool, Primary, and Lower Secondary Education" in December 2023, as part of the Inclusion and Social Dignity Program, Priority 10.

To achieve this objective, a total budget of 120,000,000 euros was allocated, of which 108,000,000 euros represent the contribution from the European Union, and 12,000,000 euros represent the national contribution.

The target group of the project consists of: disadvantaged children enrolled in public preschool education who meet the conditions, in July of each year, to receive educational support granted to children from disadvantaged families; disadvantaged children enrolled in public primary education who meet the income criteria established in the National Program for School Supplies, specifically those who are supported by families with a monthly average net income per family member, realized in July of each year, of maximum 50% of the gross minimum wage per country; and disadvantaged children enrolled in public lower secondary education who meet the income criteria established in the National Program for School Supplies, specifically those who are supported by families with a monthly average net income per family member, realized in July of each year, of maximum 50% of the gross minimum wage per country.

The expected results of providing educational support include reducing the rate of severe material deprivation by providing material support - support for preschoolers and students in public education (preschool, primary, lower secondary) from disadvantaged families through

the issuance of electronic social vouchers (vouchers) for the purchase of school supplies and clothing.

In the context of the conclusions resulting from the analysis of developments in school participation in pre-university education, which indicate a trend of relative decline, the call for projects "Adapting Educational Services for Students and Teaching Staff in VTE - Internships for Students" was opened within the EEP in 2023, under Priority 08 - Increasing Accessibility, Attractiveness, and Quality of Vocational and Technical Education.

The necessity of such a call took into account the current economic, legislative, and institutional context, as well as the increasing trend in enrollment rates observed in recent years in vocational education.

Regarding the consolidation of the social package for education aimed at students from at-risk groups, the Ministry of Education continued to implement annual national social programs: Euro 200, High School Money, School Supplies, Scholarships, and the School Program.

The "Euro 200" Program, aimed at stimulating the purchase of computers by providing financial aid based on social criteria to develop students' computer skills, continued in 2023. The allocated budget for 2023 was 1,700,000 lei, and 2,174 students benefited from a financial aid of 200 euros to stimulate the purchase of computers.

At the beginning of each school year, specific school supplies packages are distributed to each class through the "School Supplies" Program. In the 2022-2023 school year, 167,674 students received free school supplies. The expenses from the Ministry of Education's budget amounted to 2,691,721 lei. Starting from the 2023-2024 school year, according to the provisions of Law no. 126/2002 approving Government Emergency Ordinance no. 33/2001 regarding the granting of school supplies, the value of the package was set at 65 lei/package/student for primary education and at 75 lei/package/student for lower secondary education.

The Ministry of Education continued to implement the "High School Money" Program in the 2022-2023 school year. Through this program, financial support was provided to high school students to continue/complete their studies. In the 2022-2023 school year, the number of beneficiaries was 20,509, and the expenses from the Ministry of Education's budget for 2022 amounted to 41,833,369 lei. Starting from the 2023-2024 school year, with the entry into force of Law no. 198/2023 on pre-university education, the program was replaced with other forms of consolidated social intervention.

The professional scholarship was, until the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, a national program aimed at all students attending vocational education, consisting of a monthly financial support of 200 lei. In the 2022-2023 school year, professional scholarships totalling 128,606,431 lei were awarded. By the end of the 2022-2023 school year, differentiated scholarships were awarded to students, amounting to 500 lei for performance scholarships, 200 lei for merit and social assistance scholarships, and 150 lei for study scholarships. In the 2022-2023 school year, the total number of students benefiting from scholarships was 751,551, including 9,493 beneficiaries of performance scholarships, 260,562 beneficiaries of merit scholarships, 92,004 beneficiaries of study scholarships, and 389,492 beneficiaries of social assistance scholarships. For the year 2022, the Ministry of Education allocated a budget of

1,531,891,000 lei for scholarship payments, and 1,605,335,000 lei for the year 2023. Starting from the 2023-2024 school year, in accordance with the provisions of Law no. 198/2023 on pre-university education, with subsequent amendments, the value of these scholarships has increased.

3.3. Healthy Meal Each School Day

Regarding the provision of a healthy meal every school day, in the 2022-2023 school year, the **"Hot Meal"** program was expanded from 350 to 450 schools. Beneficiaries of this program were 178,000 preschoolers and students from public pre-university education, who received a free hot meal or a food package, up to a limit of 15 lei/day/beneficiary. The funding, allocated through local budgets, amounted to 147 million lei in 2022 and 266.51 million lei in 2023.

This was a pilot program aimed at contributing to reducing school dropout rates and ensuring equitable and non-discriminatory access to education for all preschoolers and students in Romania. The selection criteria for educational units within this pilot program took into account socio-economic and geographical disadvantages, as well as the material impossibility of many families to support their children's participation in school activities.

Starting in 2024, the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is implementing the National Healthy Meal Program (NHMP), which represents, from the perspective of measures included in the Child Guarantee, a crucial initiative to ensure access to adequate nutrition for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This initiative follows naturally from the results of the "Hot Meal" pilot program and from concerns for students at risk of academic failure or early school dropout due to unfavourable socio-economic and geographical conditions.

The National Healthy Meal Program is a strong commitment to improving the education and health conditions of students, contributing to increasing inclusivity and reducing school dropout rates, especially in disadvantaged environments.

The program aims to provide daily, free-of-charge, nutritional support consisting of a hot meal or, if not feasible, a food package. The selection of educational units included in the NHMP is based on criteria approved by ministerial order, aiming to reduce the risk of exclusion and school dropout among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The program targets the inclusion of pre-university educational units facing difficult socio-economic and geographical conditions, in an effort to facilitate access to education and prevent school dropout.

Educational units included in the NHMP are selected by school inspectorates based on approved criteria, prioritizing schools with students in socially or geographically vulnerable situations.

The total budget allocated for NHMP for the year 2024 is 1,019,223,000 lei. Program funding comes from the state budget, funds allocated from the state budget revenues, and may be supplemented by local units/administrations. In 2024, **458,833 students from 1,223 schools** will benefit from the NHMP, receiving daily nutritional support worth 15 lei per beneficiary, including value-added tax.

The draft government decision for the allocation of the budget was posted for public debate on the Ministry of Education's website in February 2024.

3.4. Healthcare

The percentage of unmet medical needs remains high in Romania. There are also disparities in access to medical services based on region, ethnicity, age, or income level. Thus, individuals living in rural or small urban areas, those from marginalized communities, and those with low socio-economic status have reduced access to medical care.

An important investment is the rehabilitation, modernization, and equipping of 3,000 primary healthcare cabinets/associations of family doctors with screening, early diagnosis, and monitoring facilities for chronic patients, prioritizing cabinets in rural areas and small urban areas (including marginalized/disadvantaged areas and including areas with a majority Roma population or Roma communities, as applicable). The equipment will include (without being considered an exhaustive list): point-of-care laboratory equipment, medical equipment such as electrocardiographs, ultrasounds, medical furniture, and medical instruments. Funds will also be allocated for building renovation to comply with hygiene-sanitary standards and increase energy efficiency.

Thus, through Component 12 Health Investment 1: Development of pre-hospital medical infrastructure, Specific Investment: I1.1: Family doctor cabinets or associations of primary medical care cabinets under the National Recovery and Resilience Program, the mentioned investment was launched, with a total budget of 888,301,215 lei (excluding VAT), equivalent to 180,450,000 € (excluding VAT).

Additionally, through Component 12 Health Investment 1: Development of pre-hospital medical infrastructure, Specific Investment: I1.4: Integrated Community Centres under the National Recovery and Resilience Program, 200 integrated community centres will be built/rehabilitated and equipped. The investment has a total budget of 195,601,140 lei excluding VAT, equivalent to 40,200,000 € excluding VAT. At the time of preparing this report, the signing of financing contracts is being finalized.

Integrated community centres are spaces where community healthcare personnel, together with specialists from family medicine services, specialty medical services, medical services provided through medical caravans, screening activities, and other activities based on the social and educational needs of beneficiaries, collaborate with specialists from social services, educational services, as well as specialists from other services of various governmental and/or non-governmental organizations that can contribute to addressing the beneficiaries' issues.

Regarding the integrated approach in the case of integrated community services, the Ministry of Health directly ensures, through the Social Inclusion Unit and through the county public health directorates and the Bucharest Municipality public health directorate, technical and methodological coordination, monitoring, evaluation, and control of community healthcare personnel, including personnel who will provide community healthcare services within integrated community teams. At the end of 2023, the Ministry of Health coordinated a total of 1,913 community healthcare assistants, of which 1,753 were funded from the state budget and

160 from the local budget of administrative territorial units, and also a total of 460 health mediators, of which 446 were funded from the state budget and 14 from the local budget of administrative territorial units.

Also in 2023, within the National Program for Health Assessment, Promotion, and Health Education, the Health Assessment and Health Education Subprogram, under the coordination of the National Institute of Public Health – National Centre for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, the following activities were organized and carried out nationwide by county public health directorates - PHD and the Bucharest Municipality public health directorate:

- 13 information-education-communication campaigns were organized addressing priority intervention topics according to the national priority calendar approved by the Ministry of Health. Within these campaigns, a total of 742 events were organized at the local level, benefiting 2,094,764 individuals, and involving 93,873 partners.
- 237 local activities aimed at specific local health priorities were carried out, with a total of 848,199 beneficiaries and 8,072 local partners.
- Community interventions promoting physical activity targeting children, adolescents, and the elderly were implemented, reaching a total of 121,023 beneficiaries.
- 1,786 health promotion interventions were conducted in communities and vulnerable groups, reaching a total of 411,921 beneficiaries from these communities.

Regarding the assessment of the general population's health status, a nutrition assessment of primary school children (6-10 years old) was conducted following the World Health Organization (WHO) methodology, as part of the "European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI)" project. The data are currently being validated and analysed.

Similarly, to ensure surveillance of children's oral health in schools, updated data regarding school dental clinics and staffing from 15 counties and Bucharest Municipality were collected and recorded.

Thus, surveillance data on oral health (examination sheet and questionnaire) were collected from 26 counties (for a study sample of 90 students/county), and monitoring data for the September-November 2023 period were recorded from all authorized and functional school dental clinics in 25 counties and partially in Bucharest Municipality. An analysis of the collected oral health monitoring data from the 2022-2023 school year was conducted.

In 2023, a total of 765,847 preventive and prophylactic medical services were reimbursed for insured individuals aged 0-18, distributed as follows:

- Annual check-up for children aged 4 to 18: 315,681 services
- Check-up at discharge from maternity ward: 51,779 services provided at the child's home
- Check-up at 1 month: 4,859 services provided at the child's home
- Check-up from 2 months to 36 months: 43,661 services
- Check-up at discharge from maternity ward: 2,523 services provided at the clinic
- Check-up at 1 month: 3,612 services provided at the clinic

3.5. Healthy Nutrition

Considering that education on a healthy lifestyle during childhood lays the groundwork for acquiring health-promoting habits that will be practiced throughout one's life, promoting good health for as long as possible, there have been national efforts, even prior to the implementation of the Child Guarantee, to support children in adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Although the family plays an essential role in instilling healthy habits in children, the measures adopted by the public authorities in this field, were aimed to support a complementary approach of this field.

The justification for this option took into account the concrete difficulties highlighted by studies in this field, indicating that children can easily be influenced in the wrong direction due to numerous socio-economic challenges (busy parents spending little time with their children, parents working abroad, significant temptations related to the availability, appearance, and price of highly processed foods and their advertising). Additionally, school-aged children face peer pressure.

In this context, the Ministry of Education, and implicitly educational institutions, played a crucial role, considering that targeted education can be one of the most effective ways to influence students, especially given that children spend a significant part of their day at school/nursery, where interventions can be conducted at the group/class level.

Thus, through Government Decision No. 652/2023, Romania's school program for the period 2023-2029 was approved, and the budget for its implementation in the 2023-2024 school year was established. The aim was to implement measures provided by the new European regulations to ensure Romania's continued participation in the European Union's School Program for the financial exercise period from August 1, 2023, to July 31, 2029. This includes the distribution of fresh fruits and/or vegetables, natural drinking milk and/or dairy products without milk powder additives, as well as bakery products for preschoolers and students.

In this regard, the provision of free fresh fruits and vegetables, milk and dairy products, and bakery products for preschoolers and students in state and private primary and secondary education continued, within a daily value limit per preschooler/student. For the school year 2022-2023, the allocated amount was 562,850,000 lei, while for the school year 2023-2024, it was estimated at 742,617,252 lei, of which 86,525,308 lei represents financial assistance from the European Union.

Therefore, within the framework of the provisions of the Child Guarantee, which pays particular attention to this issue, activities promoting the adoption of health-promoting behaviour regarding healthy eating and physical activity continued in 2023.

These activities included interventions in kindergartens and schools based on the intervention guide for healthy eating and physical activity. According to reports from the relevant institutions, the number of beneficiaries of information-education-communication interventions in schools nationwide was 265,713 students and preschoolers.

3.6. Adequate Housing

The National Housing Strategy, approved by Government Decision No. 842/2022, promotes a vision focused on the involvement of all relevant actors in ensuring and promoting accessible, inclusive, adequate, durable, and resilient housing, which contributes to improving the quality of life.

One of the main targets of the National Housing Strategy is the construction by the end of 2050, of at least 60,000 public housing units, of which a minimum of 40,000 are social housing units.

The issue of informal settlements has been an important topic on the agenda of the Ministry of Development, Public Works, and Administration, as well as local public administration authorities, which have collaborated in the process of identifying informal settlements and collecting information that formed the basis for the publication, in June 2022, of the first Report on Informal Settlements in Romania. The centralization and analysis of the data collected at the level of administrative units highlight the fact that Romania has 393 informal settlements inhabited by 71,965 residents.

Regarding the administrative units where informal settlements exist, out of the 3,181 administrative units, 194 have reported their existence within their territory. Among these, 65% are located in communes (125 administrative units), 20% in towns (38 administrative units), and 16% in municipalities (31 administrative units). Additionally, out of these 62 administrative units, representing 32%, are located in functional urban areas.

In order to improve the capacity of local public administration authorities to plan and implement integrated interventions to improve the living conditions of people living in informal settlements, the Ministry of Development, Public Works, and Administration, in partnership with the World Bank and the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, with the financial support of the Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (DG REFORM) within the European Commission, implemented the Interventions for Informal Settlements in Romania project from 2021 to 2023. Based on the analysis of various situations requiring interventions to improve housing conditions in informal settlements, the project developed a Guide addressed to local public administration authorities, as well as a National Action Plan on Informal Settlements. Additionally, through these initiatives, the measures provided in the National Housing Strategy concerning informal settlements are implemented.

To continue the aforementioned efforts, in 2023, for the harmonization of methodologies provided in the sectoral strategies adopted in Romania, the Ministry of Development, Public Works, and Administration, in partnership with the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, submitted a request for technical support under the DG REFORM call, which was pre-selected for funding, pending approval in March 2024.

In terms of funding, it is worth noting that a series of funds have been made available to local public administration authorities for improving housing conditions for people in marginalized communities, including informal settlements. Among these, investments included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan - Component 10 "Local Fund" can be mentioned. Through this intervention, approximately 4,000 housing units are planned to be built, benefiting residents of these communities.

Through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, Component 5 - Renovation Wave, funding is provided for energy efficiency improvements in multifamily residential buildings (887,500 square meters of energetically renovated surface), as well as for moderately and deeply integrated renovation of multifamily residential buildings (200,000 square meters of integrated renovation surface (energy efficiency and seismic strengthening)).

Other complementary sources of funding that can be mentioned in this context include the Operational Program for Inclusion and Social Dignity, coordinated by the Ministry of Investments and European Projects, through Action 3.1 Social Housing and 3.3 Support for local authorities in regulating the situation of informal settlements (200 informal settlements with regulated legal status).

Similar measures will continue regarding ensuring the right of children to adequate housing. In this regard, the continuation of measures provided in Government Decision 1237/2008 regarding the implementation of the pilot program "Social Housing for Roma Communities" can be mentioned. This program represents an experimental component of the social inclusion program in Romania aimed at improving Roma communities' access to decent housing, in the context of implementing projects for the construction of up to 300 social housing units in the 8 development regions of Romania.

According to publicly available data as of April 30, 2023, a number of 11 investment objectives had been completed, comprising 239 housing units, while funds had already been allocated for increasing the number of housing units in the following period.

At the same time, working meetings between the National Agency for Roma and MDPWA were held regarding the planning of the construction of the remaining 40 housing units until the program's closure and its evaluation.

4. INDICATORS, TARGETS, AND MONITORING

At the European level, the **European Monitoring Framework for the European Child Guarantee** model which underpins this report, includes a set of relevant indicators to compare the progress of all member states. Romania is involved in relevant research efforts and provides quality data to Eurostat, thus having reference values for all indicators included in the framework. The first version of the European Monitoring Framework contains, for almost all indicators, the most recent data. However, NAPCRA, with the support of INS and relevant institutions, provides, in section 4.1 of this report, information on the progress made for some indicators for which more recent data exists, as well as for some relevant proxy indicators.

Moreover, to ensure adequate monitoring and evaluation of the NAP-CG for the implementation of the Child Guarantee, a series of indicators have been established by the responsible institutions for each measure in order to analyse the progress: final outcome indicators, measuring the impact at the level of general and specific objectives, as well as quantitative output and performance indicators, tracking the direct results of interventions. For the final outcome indicators, reference values are established in this reporting exercise, in

section 4.2. For indicators that track the direct results of interventions, considering the very short implementation period available from the approval of the plan, progress made within the measures for which implementation has begun is presented in section 4.3.

The Coordination Council for Child Protection and Adoption, with technical support from UNICEF, is constantly making efforts to develop the monitoring and evaluation framework in accordance with the general objective 7 of the plan. In this regard, important steps have been implemented in the following directions: (i) all indicators included in the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee, as well as in the National Strategy for Child Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights "Protected Children, Safe Romania" 2023-2027, undergo a process of creating indicator fiches, including definitions, calculation and verification methods; (ii) alongside the fiches, the intervention logic of the two strategic documents is analysed, with a plan to be created to support the long-term development of a monitoring and evaluation system and the capacity of the actors involved; (iii) the data flow between institutions at different levels is analysed so that a single monitoring and evaluation system for public policies in the field of child rights protection, based on inter-institutional cooperation, alongside a mechanism for monitoring budget allocations, can be developed; (iv) pre-eminent indicators for monitoring are identified to be included in an index, to be translated into an advanced monitoring and reporting system, such as a dashboard. All these efforts contribute to improving the performance of the monitoring and evaluation system, thus contributing to achieving the general objective 7 assumed by the plan, namely "Built capacity to develop evidence-based policies"

4.1 European Monitoring Framework for the Child Guarantee

For all indicators included in the European Monitoring Framework, Romania has reference values included, separated where feasible, for AROPE and not AROPE. The indicators highlight the significant challenges facing Romania and the profound inequality generated by poverty. For example, in 2021, Romania had the highest share of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion, at 41.5%, and the second highest relative median at risk-of-poverty gap for children in percentage of the AROP threshold in 2022, at 33.1%.

For some indicators, updated values have been identified, showing the evolution of the situation in Romania. For other indicators, updates are reported based on available information, using proxy indicators or other units of measurement.

For the indicator **"share (in percentage) of children under 18 years living in a single-parent household,"** a proxy indicator was used for updating: "Children having one of their parents living outside the household," available on Eurostat. The value for this indicator decreased by one percentage point, from 6.5% in 2020 to 5.5% in 2021.

Additionally, **the number of children in formal family-based care**, as well as those in residential care, has decreased significantly. In 2023, the number of children in family-based care decreased by approximately 8%, to 27,978 from 30,400 in 2021. Similarly, the number of children in residential care decreased by approximately 11%, from 11,629 in 2021 to 10,359 in 2023.

Regarding the indicator "**public expenditure on early childhood education and care (ECEC) per pupil (GDP per capita)**," the available update is in Euro. Thus, the amount allocated per pupil increased slightly, from 1,659.3 euros in 2019 to 1,684.1 euros in 2020.

For the **early school leaving rate** (18-24 years old), although the indicator is calculated at the European level taken into consideration the parents' education level, information on the indicator's evolution in Romania is still presented, broken down by gender and urbanization level. Thus, the share of early school leavers increased by 0.3 percentage points in 2022 compared to 2021, reaching 15.6%, the highest in the European Union. Gender differences are pronounced, with the early school leaving rate decreasing by 0.5% for girls but increasing by 1.1% for boys. Additionally, it decreased in large cities by approximately 0.6%, but increased in rural areas by 1.3 percentage points.

In the case of the **infant mortality rate (deaths under 1 year per 1000 live births)**, there is a slight and consistent increase from 5.2% in 2021 to 5.7% in 2022 and 5.8% in 2023.

Regarding qualitative indicators, **significant progress is observed in early education**. Concerning access to early education, compulsory preschool education has been expanded to include the middle group (4 years old) starting from the 2023-2024 school year, compared to the previous requirement at 5 years old (the senior/big group). Furthermore, children are enrolled at 6 years old in the preparatory school year, which is part of primary education. The gradual expansion of compulsory preschool education will be carried out in accordance with the provisions of Law no. 198/2023 on pre-university education, with subsequent amendments and completions, including the small group, starting from 2030.

In the field of **access to healthcare**, the situation presented by qualitative indicators remains unchanged. All children in Romania benefit from free healthcare assistance through the public health insurance system, regardless of income, and are exempt from contributions.

4.2 Final Outcome Indicators of General Objectives from the NAP-CG

The NAP-CG includes a series of final outcome indicators for which, in this report, reference values are included, where feasible, following the first data collection exercise.

The situation varies at the level of specific objectives, depending on the maturity of the interventions and existing data collection mechanisms. Thus, for General Objectives 2, 3, 4, and 7, data are available. For General Objective 1, data collection is underway, while for Objectives 5 and 6, data collection methods will be established as the implementation process progresses.

In the case of General Objective 2, **the final outcome indicator coincides with an indicator from the European Monitoring Framework**, namely AROPE. The reference value was established for the year 2022, representing the share and number of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion – 41.5% and 1,496,000 children.

For General Objective 3, **two indicators coincide with those included in the European Monitoring Framework**, while one indicator is specific to the NAP-CG. Thus, the reference value for the infant mortality rate was 5.8% in 2023, the mortality rate from external causes for

children aged 5-18 was 8.4% in 2023, and the percentage of children with unmet specialized assistance needs was 4.7% in total and 9.2% for those below 60% of the median disposable income per adult equivalent, at the last data collection conducted for Eurostat in 2021.

In the case of General Objective 4, Romania also aims to monitor **the early school leaving rate, proposing a breakdown by residency areas**. Thus, for 2022, the early school leaving rate was 15.6% overall, of which: 3.9% for large cities, 13.5% for towns and suburbs, and 24.5% for rural areas. In addition to this indicator, the NAP-CG aims to monitor and increase the participation rate in education by residency areas, education levels, and ages. For the 2022-2023 school year, the gross enrolment rate was 70.8%, with important differences depending on breakdowns. The gross enrolment rate is 68.6% for boys and 73.2% for girls. Overall, for early education, there is an enrolment rate of 4.8% in pre-preschool education and 84.4% in preschool education. A significant difference is observed between urban and rural areas, mainly due to the small number of educational institutions in rural areas at different levels of education. In ante pre-preschool education, the gross enrolment rate is 9% in urban areas and 0.6% in rural areas, while in preschool education, the rate is 95.1% in urban areas and 73% in rural areas. The average difference between urban and rural areas at the preschool, primary, and lower secondary levels, where there is a closer distribution of educational institutions, is 24.2%.

For General Objective 7, the total number of indicators proposed in the Action Plan for which data are collected in the period 2023-2030 is 77. In this report, 33 indicators (over 42% of the indicators) for the year 2024 are included, representing the first reporting exercise shortly after the adoption of the plan.

4.3 Outcome Indicators for Monitoring Measures in the NAP-CG

The NAP-CG includes a series of measures with an ambitious number of monitoring indicators. It comprises 77 quantitative and qualitative indicators. Since the NAP-CG was approved in October 2023, implementation is still in its early stages, which is why there is a limited number of indicators for which progress can be reported. Therefore, progress is reported for 33 indicators in this report, both by including values defined exactly according to the NAP-CG as well as by using proxy indicators to provide a better perspective on intermediate progress, and by setting reference values for some indicators that did not have them.

Thus, progress is observed at the level of each general objective. For **General Objective 1**, under Measure 1.1, the "Step Informed and Confidently Towards the Future" campaign was carried out. This was organized by the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equality during September 2023. During this campaign, over 6,000 young beneficiaries of the special protection system, including minor mothers, received all the necessary information regarding the rights they can benefit from according to the current legislation and had the opportunity to express the difficulties they encounter in the process of social integration.

For **Specific Objective 2.1**, the following indicators have recorded changes:

- In 126 administrative-territorial units (UATs), the initial social diagnosis and needs assessment was carried out (Measure 2.1.1), and 394 integrated community services were established (Measure 2.1.3).

- According to data managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity (MLSS), in February 2024, in the Single Electronic Register of Social Services, a total of 466 UATs in rural areas (16.28%) have Public Social Assistance Services (PSAS) providing social services, resulting in at least 16.28% of PSAS in rural areas having at least one social worker.
- At the initiative of MLSS and the MFYEQ, the draft Law amending and supplementing certain normative acts in the field of social assistance (Measure 2.1.6) was elaborated. The draft law was adopted on February 5, 2024, by the Senate, and on February 7, 2024, it was presented to the Standing Bureau of the Chamber of Deputies and forwarded for report to the permanent committees of the Chamber of Deputies.
- Regarding Measure 2.1.8, the following proxy indicators for the "Number of municipalities with informal communities benefiting from specific intervention measures to improve living conditions" could be identified: 239 housing units built for Roma people; 4000 houses are planned to be built through NRRP; Over 1 million square meters of area are planned to be energetically renovated, including 200,000 square meters also strengthened against seismic events; 200 informal settlements are targeted for regulated legal status through interventions to be funded through SIDP.
- 450 school units and 178,000 students benefited from the "Hot Meal in Schools" Program. Since the "Hot Meal in Schools" program is being replaced with the National Healthy Meal Program (NPHM), the following proxy indicators have been identified for Measure 2.1.9: 1223 schools are approved to benefit from the Healthy Meal Program starting in 2024, and 458,833 students from these schools will benefit from the program: regarding Measure 2.1.13, significant changes have been recorded in some indicators: (i) the number of children benefiting from day centres decreased by 27.5% compared to the reference value, reaching 15,285; (ii) the number of children benefiting from recovery centers increased significantly and exceeded the assumed target, with a growth of 68.2%, reaching 12,202 beneficiary children; (iii) there was a 45.4% increase in the number of children benefiting from counselling centres, exceeding the target and reaching 9,376 children; (iv) the number of children and parents benefiting from other day care services, except for day centres, recovery centers, and counselling centers, slightly decreased, with 14,280 children recorded.
- According to data managed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity (MLSS), in 2023, approximately 50,000 families with at least 2 children and 18,000 single-parent families benefited from material support in the form of electronic vouchers (as a proxy indicator for Measure 2.1.14).

In the case of **Specific Objective 2.2**, significant progress can be observed within Measure 2.2.2: (i) the number of children in residential care services decreased by over 33%, reaching 10,359; (ii) the number of children under 7 years old in residential care services decreased by over 30%, reaching 484; (iii) the percentage of children aged 0-17 in family-type care services out of the percentage of children in alternative care services increased from 70% to 73%. Also, within Specific Objective 2.2, Measure 2.2.4., in 2023, 719 children from a migration context benefited from integration programs, provided in accordance with the provisions of Emergency Ordinance no. 44/2004 on the social integration of foreigners who have acquired international protection or a right of residence in Romania.

Within **General Objective 3**, significant progress has been recorded in initiating interventions and continuing efforts for information and monitoring, as follows:

- For Measure 3.1.1: 3000 associations/general practitioner cabinets are included in ongoing projects funded through the NRRP;
- For Measure 3.1.3: 200 centers are selected for construction/rehabilitation and are in the process of signing financing contracts through the NRRP;
- For the indicators "Share of schools implementing health education programmes or carrying out extracurricular health education activities for all grades, number of community – wide health education events" from Measure 3.1.9, a series of proxy indicators have been identified:
 - "Inclusion in the priorities of the National Program 'Different School' of themes dedicated to health education": According to Article 2(2) of the Methodology for organizing the "Different School" Program (OM no. 6479/2023), the priorities of the Ministry of Education for the "Different School" Program are established annually and communicated to county school inspectorates/the Bucharest Municipality School Inspectorate through a note signed by the state secretary for pre-university education. According to the Ministry, in the 2023-2024 school year, the priorities of the National Program "Different School" were established with the aim of contributing to the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for: (i) preventing the consumption of alcohol, drugs, and other psychoactive substances among children and young people; (ii) preventing and reducing acts of verbal, physical, psychological - bullying, emotional, sexual, social, cultural, cybernetic violence among children and young people; (iii) appropriate reactions in emergency situations: accidents, earthquakes, fires, pandemics, etc., including first aid concepts; (iv) preventing and reducing acts of discrimination based on social, economic, or cultural status, nationality, ethnicity, citizenship, weight, disability, age - among children and young people; (v) reducing unhealthy eating habits, sedentary lifestyle, and excessive use of technology.
 - "Promotional activities for adopting a health-promoting behaviour regarding healthy eating and physical activity," with the following achievements: (i) Interventions in kindergartens and schools, with a total of 265,713 students and preschoolers benefiting from the interventions; (ii) Community interventions to promote physical activity, targeting children, adolescents, and the elderly, with a total of 121,023 beneficiaries;
 - Information, education, and communication (IEC) campaigns addressing priority intervention themes according to the national priorities calendar: 13 campaigns reaching a total of 2,094,764 beneficiaries;
 - IEC interventions addressing specific local health priorities: 237 activities reaching a total of 848,199 beneficiaries;
 - Interventions for health promotion in communities and vulnerable groups: 1,786 interventions reaching a total of 411,921 beneficiaries from these communities.
- for Measure 3.1.10: for the year 2023, 765,847 comprehensive health assessment reports have been registered

In the case of **General Objective 4**, relevant actions are being implemented to improve access to education as follows:

- For Measure 4.1.1: 119 new crèche will be built through NRRP, included in ongoing projects, with one nursery completed; 128 new crèche will be constructed through PNCIPS, included in ongoing projects. Additionally, within the project "Development of complementary early childhood education services," 98 projects are eligible for funding.
- For Measure 4.1.3: 1,800 schools fully implement EWME. Moreover, over 50,000 participants from 6,950 institutions have completed various phases of programs, including online training courses for users of the early warning mechanism (EWME) or the module from the Integrated Information System of Education in Romania (SIIR) for systemic interventions needed to reduce early school leaving, of which 45,800 have graduated.
- In the case of Measure 4.1.4, significant progress has been made by increasing the number of school counsellors and reducing the ratio between them and the number of students, from 1/1591 to 1/800.
- For Measure 4.1.5, in the 2022-2023 school year, the number of school mediators was 478.
- For Measure 4.1.7, the following proxy indicators highlight the situation: There are 1,225 classes dedicated to the "Second Chance" program in public and private education, encompassing 20,062 students.
- In the case of Measure 4.2.1, significant progress has been made. Specifically, at the national level, between 2022 and 2023, over 110,000 participants out of approximately 300,500 existing personnel in pre-university education were included in continuous training programs conducted through the projects "Professionalizing the Teaching Career - PROF" and "Relevant Curriculum, Open Education for All - CRED," as well as through teacher training centres.

Regarding **General Objective 5**, for Measure 5.1.1, in 2024, a campaign to raise awareness of the consequences associated with acts of school violence in pre-university education institutions has been launched, titled "Do you know the consequences of your actions? Be informed, choose wisely!"

As for **General Objective 6**, progress has been made in the training of police officers. Specifically, 596 police officers have participated in training sessions covering topics related to the extensive but safe use of digital tools and mechanisms by children.

Last but not least, as mentioned at the beginning of section 4, significant initiatives have been launched under **General Objective 7**. Specifically, the inter-institutional coordination mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of public policies aimed at protecting children's rights is under development, starting with the creation of indicator fiches and the definition of a roadmap for the development of the monitoring and evaluation system. The mechanism for monitoring budget allocations associated with policies and programs aimed at protecting children's rights is also under development, with scenarios being defined at this stage to determine an appropriate approach.

4.4. Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the NAP-CG. In this context, it is worth noting that the NAP-CG includes a structured monitoring and evaluation system composed of: (i) 9 expected outcomes, (ii) 7 general objectives, each with an associated indicator to monitor progress, (iii) 12 specific objectives, and (iv) 52 measures with 77 indicators, each with reference value, target, reporting periodicity, and reporting responsibility.

The NAP-CG also includes two specific measures for strengthening Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, namely Measure 7.1.1: Development and implementation of an inter-institutional coordination mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of public policies aimed at protecting children's rights, and Measure 7.1.2: Development and implementation of a mechanism for monitoring budget allocations provided for child rights policies and programmes.

However, during the last meeting of the Coordination Council, its members analysed the development of a monitoring mechanism that:

- Utilizes the existing system for collecting sectoral data.
- Improves the quality, availability, and comparability of collected data for continuous monitoring and periodic evaluation of Romania's progress in implementing the NAP-CG and fulfilling international obligations, starting from those outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Ensures an up-to-date overview of the situation of children in Romania, to track and present progress in implementing measures and to strengthen evidence-based planning, budgeting, and intervention adjustments.

Until the development and utilization of the mechanism, it should be noted that for this report, individual progress sheets were elaborated with the support of UNICEF Romania and subsequently transmitted to the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, Ministry of Investments and European Projects, and Ministry of Internal Affairs, in their capacity as central authorities responsible for implementing certain measures assumed through the NAP-CG. Additionally, quantitative data was requested from the National Institute of Statistics, as the institution responsible for providing statistical data, based on the European monitoring framework.

5. FINANCING

Although the necessity of adequate allocation of European funds for implementing the measures included in the Child Guarantee is a priority assumed by the Government of Romania since the early stages of drafting the Recommendation, its effects will likely be more visible with the gradual launch of programs.

In the case of Romania, the delays recorded in launching the project calls under the main operational programs are based on a series of objective causes that were primarily generated by the conduct of the pre-Partnership Agreement stages with Romania, a national strategic

document that sets the thematic development objectives and the indicative allocation of European funds for the period 2021-2027.

This was approved at the end of 2022, with the main operational programs of interest for implementing the Guarantee being approved by the European Commission in November 2022 (Health Program - HP), and December 2022 (Inclusion and Social Dignity Program - ISDP and Education and Employment Program - EEP). In 2023, the framework necessary for implementing the programs was elaborated and approved, and the IT application was prepared.

In these circumstances, almost all major project calls for the 2021-2027 programming period began to be launched only at the end of 2023, with their pace expected to intensify throughout 2024 so that quantifiable results of measures financed from European funds allocated to Romania for the 2021-2027 programming period become visible in the coming years.

The value of the calls, as presented above, funded from the ESF+, launched to date or in the consultation stage, amounts to €267,179,947, to which €51,392,159.35 national contribution is added.

6. LESSONS LEARNED AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Although the implementation of specific measures had started earlier, the NAP-CG was approved at the end of 2023, and with the operationalization and monitoring of the plan underway, progressive lessons are being learned, useful in the discussions of the Coordination Council for annual and multi-annual review and reiteration.

However, lessons learned from the development of the NAP-CG, following consultations with various key actors, as well as the experience gained from the actual implementation of public policies and strategies for child rights protection, are reference points for the current process.

Among the main landmarks of the lessons learned, the following can be mentioned: i) the need to ensure children's participation in all stages of implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the NAP-CG; ii) the necessity of establishing a continuous process of inter-sectoral coordination; iii) ensuring the prerequisites for the effective implementation of the objectives of the Child Guarantee at the county and local levels.

Ensuring active and inclusive participation of children in decisions that affect them is both a principle and a specific objective of the NAP-CG, but it also represents the premise for ensuring added value for its effective implementation and achieving the proposed results. Romania's experience, accumulated since the period when Romania held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, (a period during which the initiative to consult children from across the European Union was supported and during which the Bucharest Declaration of Children from the EU (2019) was elaborated with the participation of over 60 children from 16 countries), has become a benchmark in stimulating children's participation in decision-making processes that affect them.

Formal and informal groups of children have subsequently been encouraged to participate in various consultative or decision-making processes, such as, for example, consultation regarding the new school curriculum, where students highlighted issues regarding the practical functioning of mechanisms for participating in school life.

Over 1,500 children from Romania participated in the consultation process for the EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child 2021-2024. Furthermore, the involvement and support of children's participation in the development of the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights "Protected Children, Safe Romania" 2023-2027, ensured the elaboration of a specific objective dedicated to this issue and concrete measures including making policy documents with implications for children's lives accessible in child-friendly formats, as well as the development and use of mechanisms for consulting children in each domain (health, child protection, education, justice).

Involving children in all processes of analysis, monitoring, and reiteration (based on needs) of the NAP-CG ensures the premises:

- Increasing awareness and understanding of the NAP-CG by children - initially through the development and dissemination of informative materials tailored to children (in production of video materials);
- Involving children in the meetings of the Coordination Council and in using the periodic monitoring mechanism of the NAP-CG.

The need to improve inter-sectoral coordination is essential for the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the NAP-CG. While the processes of developing and validating the NAP-CG have promoted and encouraged multi-sectoral participation and contribution, including ministries and authorities responsible for implementing the NAP-CG, civil society representatives, associative structures, etc., inter-sectoral coordination can be greatly improved.

During the working meetings organized in the context of developing the NAP-CG, as well as in the process of collecting data and reporting currently, the coordinating role of NACRPA and the Coordination Council has been essential in ensuring the participation of all key actors and in timely producing the necessary products for the approval of the NAP-CG.

However, inter-sectoral coordination is an exercise that needs to occur outside formal processes as well to support not only the synergy of efforts and the efficient use of resources but also to contribute to ensuring added value through cooperation and collaboration.

In the current reporting process, it has emerged that the main contributors to the implementation of the NAP-CG have access to relevant information from one sector or another through the report itself, and there is no routine process to support inter-sectoral coordination. Improving coordination can lead to a better understanding of the opportunities that can be provided through the synergy of measures with EU funding.

Ensuring the premises for the effective implementation of the objectives of the Child Guarantee at the county and local levels becomes increasingly important for achieving the expected impact. While the overall responsibility for implementing the NAP-CG is

mandated to central-level authorities, many of the measures included in the plan, as well as many of the services that the EU Recommendation urges member states to provide to all children, are under the direct responsibility of local authorities.

Lessons learned from the evaluation of the National Strategy for the Protection of Children's Rights 2014-2020 highlight a series of achievements but also a series of disruptive factors for achieving the objectives of the strategy. Among the barriers highlighted, the role and involvement of local public administration authorities and their partners are defined as crucial.

For this reason, the involvement of local public administration is essential to ensure, on the one hand, the implementation of measures from the NAP-CG and, on the other hand, to implement the principles stemming from the GC Recommendation in local governance procedures. Adequate access to services will become a reality for all children and their families only if the local implementation of the NAP-CG is successful.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Starting from the premise that the future of any nation is represented by its children, Romanian authorities continue their efforts to support ensuring equal and real access to all basic rights and facilities for all children, with a particular focus on those belonging to vulnerable groups.

The entry into force of the provisions of the Recommendation on Establishing the Child Guarantee has led to the adoption of measures aimed at vulnerable children within the National Action Plan, as part of Romania's obligations in this regard.

Ensuring complementarity with the national strategy in the field of child rights protection has been seen as an additional guarantee for achieving national targets in reducing the number of children affected by poverty and social exclusion, by ensuring an institutional framework to facilitate access to adequate health and nutrition programs, reducing school dropout rates, accessing basic social services, and strengthening the participatory role of children in decision-making processes that concern them.

Although adopted with a relative delay due to objective causes such as the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine, as well as repeated administrative or institutional changes, Romania's National Action Plan includes measures whose implementation was not conditioned by the official approval of the plan.

In this regard, mention can be made of activities related to measures adopted to increase the coverage rate in early education units through the construction of new nurseries/kindergartens, ensuring inclusive and quality early education through the continued training of teaching staff in this sector, as well as the continuation of the hot meal program in schools.

The National Program "Healthy Meal" (NPHM), implemented starting from 2024 by the Ministry of Education in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, represents a crucial initiative for ensuring access to proper nutrition for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and can be considered an example of good practice.

This initiative follows **the results of the pilot program "Hot Meal" and arises from the concern for students at risk of academic failure or early school dropout, caused by unfavourable socio-economic and geographical conditions.**

The National Program "Healthy Meal" aims to contribute to improving the education and health conditions of students, thereby enhancing inclusion and reducing school dropout rates, especially in disadvantaged environments.

The program aims to provide daily, free of charge, a food support consisting of a hot meal or, if not possible, a food package.

Abbreviations

APB – Accredited Private Body

AROPE - At-Risk-of-Poverty or Social Exclusion Rate

ATU – Administrative-Territorial Unit

COSI – European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative

EEP – Education and Employment Program

EWME - Early Warning Mechanism in Education

GDSACP – General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection

HP - Health Program

ICT – Integrated Community Team

IQEE - Inclusive and Quality Early Education

LAG – Local Action Group

LDCR - Local Development under Community Responsibility

LDS – Local Development Strategy

MDPWA – Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration

MFYEQ - Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities

MLSS - Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity

NAPCRA – National Authority for the Protection of Children's Rights and Adoption

NAP - CG National Action Plan for the Implementation of the Child Guarantee

NPHM – National Program "Healthy Meal"

NRRP – National Recovery and Resilience Plan

PEER - Project for Early Education Reform

PHD – Public Health Directorate

PSAS – Public Social Assistance Service

SIDP - Social Inclusion and Dignity Program

SIIR - Integrated Information System of Education in Romania

SRI - Social Reference Indicator

VTE – Vocational and Technical Education

WHO – World Health Organization